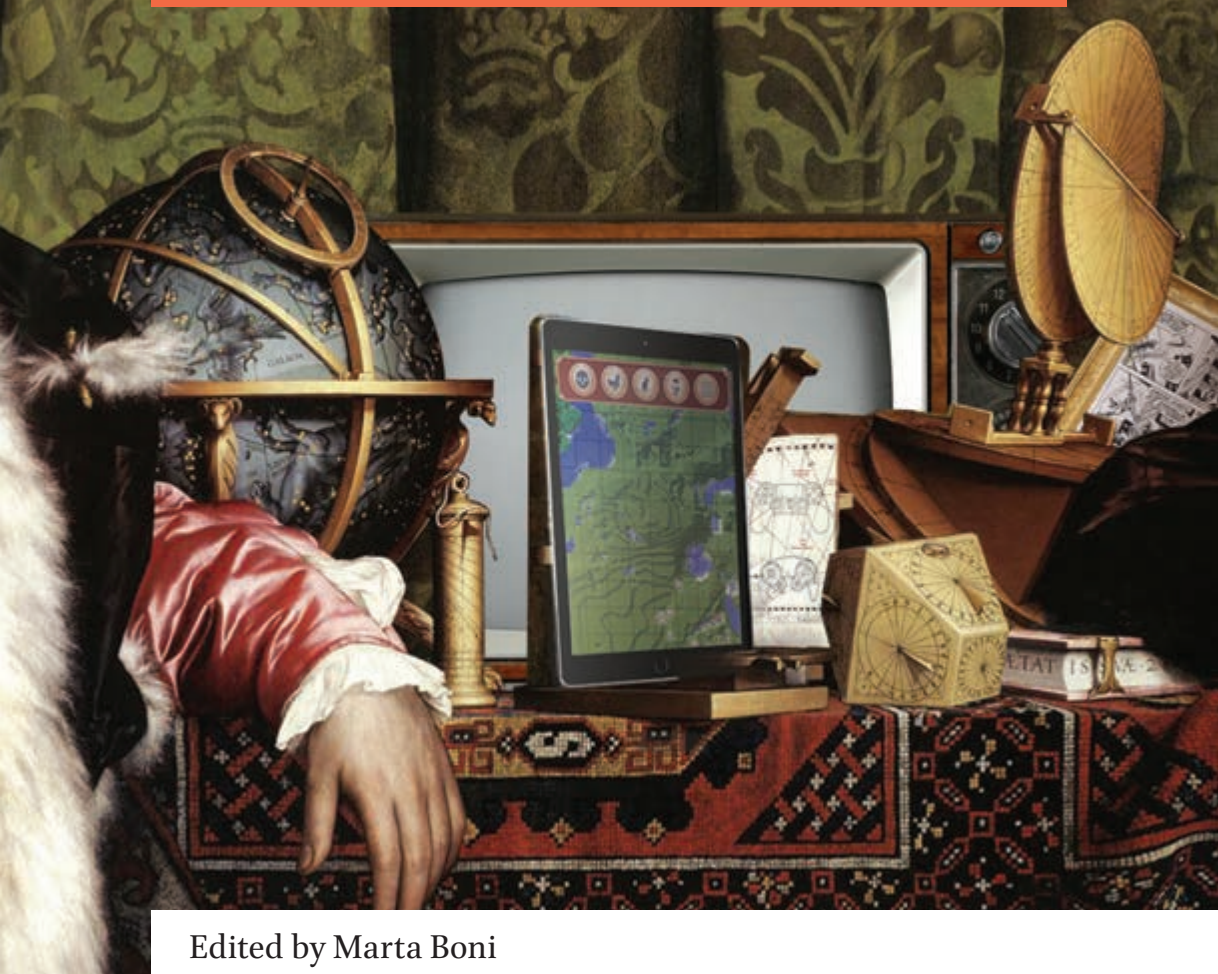


TRANSMEDIA



Edited by Marta Boni

# World Building Transmedia, Fans, Industries

Amsterdam  
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Press

## World Building

# Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence

The book series **Transmedia: Participatory Culture and Media Convergence** provides a platform for cutting-edge research in the field of media studies, with a strong focus on the impact of digitization, globalization, and fan culture. The series is dedicated to publishing the highest-quality monographs (and exceptional edited collections) on the developing social, cultural, and economic practices surrounding media convergence and audience participation. The term 'media convergence' relates to the complex ways in which the production, distribution, and consumption of contemporary media are affected by digitization, while 'participatory culture' refers to the changing relationship between media producers and their audiences.

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# World Building

*Transmedia, Fans, Industries*

*Edited by  
Marta Boni*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Introduction

Worlds, Today

*Marta Boni*

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As the camera rotates, the rings of an astrolabe bearing a sun at its centre appear on the screen. In a brief glimpse, the rings display detailed engravings: scenes of war, dragons defeating an army, the symbols of the Great Houses of Westeros and their animal sigils—a wolf, a stag, a lion, a bear. Then, following the oscillatory movement of the astrolabe, the camera descends onto a map, disclosing castles and temples within cities, towering statues and mountains, and the Wall: all progressively pop up three-dimensionally, bringing into view natural features of earth and ice, and the exquisitely crafted materials of wood, copper, iron, and stone. The opening credits of the adventure-fantasy saga *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011–) are a moveable map, covering the territories in which the series' events take place. Such a map orients the viewer to the changing trajectories of the various characters, evoking the spaces central to the constantly evolving war for the Iron Throne. It visually gathers a complex multitude of dispersed elements. Also, it is a serial map—it changes according to the transformations the fictional world has undergone throughout each season. Its seriality echoes the proliferation of fan-made maps that fill the Internet, which, at times, offer even greater detail and insight than the original.

Mapping practices, and, more specifically, the use of a map as an official paratext—title credits—underline the relevance of space for media content producers and users today. Worlds—as imaginary territories and perennial, collectively built, semiotic realms—are necessary for the understanding of media creation and for the interpretive processes it stimulates. In fact, the tendency to read the contemporary media landscape in terms of fluidity or fragmentation is, by all means, balanced by the growing relevance of aggregation, serialization, and franchising phenomena.

On the one hand, sprawling narratives, maximized customizability, and the increased visibility of sharing practices, including remixes and mash-ups, have come to play a crucial role in media studies. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green researched the spread of media content as it travels across digital networks, where it finds a new home in a multiplicity of sites, often unforeseen by the original creators (Jenkins *et al.* 2013). Francesco Casetti describes how film and television leave their original media to find new screens, new devices, and new uses (2015). However, within this process of expansion, it is still important to draw attention to the horizons of the concept of medium: for example, for Casetti, film as a medium seems to keep its identity in spite of fragmentation, because of its high perceptive intensity or the high cognitive involvement it requires.

On the other hand, this fragmentation is complemented by a ubiquitous tendency toward the gathering of dispersed parts. This is where imaginary worlds stand as a mainstay of media creation. Worlds as artificial constructions are also dependent upon their explorers who, in turn, become world-builders. Today, the creation of official guides, viewers' reactions on Twitter or Facebook, extended critiques on blogs or discussion boards, user-generated topographic maps and infographics all highlight the need to make sense of complex narratives by interacting with them. Transcending individual perspectives and localized exploration possibilities, a world is built by networks of speculations, interpretations, and social uses, thus becoming a shared worldview. Along these lines, Michael Saler (2012) highlights a switch from "imagined" to "imaginary" and then to "virtual" worlds in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period that witnesses new ways for audiences to inhabit immersive realms, for example, with Sherlock Holmes's serial narratives, thus blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction.

*Game of Thrones'* opening credits can be considered a contemporary Achilles' shield. Before a critical battle, Hephaestus, the craftsman of the gods, builds new armor for the strongest warrior, including a wonderfully made shield, that is detailed in one of the most suggestive sequences of the *Iliad* (book XVIII, v. 478-607), where the narration stops in order to give a long description or *ekphrasis* of the artwork. The shield offers a visual representation of the world of the time, organized in concentric circles: Earth, Sea, Sun, and constellations; cities, rituals, and wars; farming, breeding, winemaking, crafts, and dances... the totality of "the real," or a condensed and shared knowledge. The shield, like any fictional map, therefore functions potentially as a "tribal encyclopedia" (Havelock 1963)

that allows participants to extrapolate meaning not only from an imaginary world, but also from their own society.

## Builders, Architects, Explorers

Alternative, fantastic, or futuristic realms and characters that provide an immersive experience have become privileged objects in many fields of research. World building has become a model for rethinking media and, more broadly, storytelling. According to Henry Jenkins:

More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. The world is bigger than the film, bigger even than the franchise—since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the worlds in a variety of directions (Jenkins 2006, p.116).

A quick online search shows the existence of guides for world-builders, such as *Fundamentals of World Building* (Verino 2010), or *The Planet Construction Kit* (Rosenfelder 2010), and the many Reddit threads that detail all the steps necessary for world building. As Mark J.P. Wolf states, building imaginary worlds has always been an intrinsically human activity. Quoting research in the field of psychology, Wolf emphasizes the idea of world building as a staple in children's creative play (see also: the more recent Root-Bernstein 2014). Following the example of J.R.R. Tolkien, Wolf describes imaginary worlds (e.g. mythical worlds, utopias or dystopias, projected or self-made worlds) as “subcreations” or “secondary worlds”, inhabited by their creators and users (2012). Michael Saler shows a more specific shift in world-building practices that become more significant within what he calls a “larger cultural project of the West: that of re-enchanting an allegedly disenchanting world” (2012, 6), giving rise to “new public spheres of imagination” during the *fin de siècle* period (Saler 2012, 17). Such practices have become a transversal tendency, particularly attuned to media creation and consumption activities typical of Western societies. Following the convergence trend and the proliferation of big media corporations in recent years, as well as a more sustained academic interest in pop culture and fan practices, a noteworthy world-building scholarship is currently growing across the globe. Many researchers have started to explore the concept of world building and employ it in narrative theory, stressing the relevance of building practices in storytelling (Ryan

2013, Lavocat 2010, Besson 2015, Alexander 2013, see also the journal *Storyworlds*) or exploring the ontology of fictional characters (Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider 2010). Media specificities are underlined in works within the fieldwork of transmedia storytelling (Dena 2009; Jenkins 2006; Wolf 2012; Ryan and Thon 2014; Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman 2014; Ravy and Forcier 2014; Freeman 2016). Also, world building is traditionally studied in science-fiction literature and film (Saler 2012, Boillat 2014), as well as game studies (Castronova 2005). More recently, the journal *Participations* devoted a special section to world-building practices in fan cultures. Through case studies, the publication also tackles Wolf's distinction between primary and secondary worlds (Proctor and McCulloch 2016).

Taking into account such abundant scholarship, worlds cannot simply be studied as objects, but must be utilized as keys to “unlocking” the contemporary media landscape. The essays collected in this volume offer in-depth investigations of the wide-ranging phenomenon of world building, using various disciplinary approaches and heterogeneous objects. This book's most distinctive contribution is to underline the complicity between worlds and media by taking into account theoretical models, economic and industrial strategies, stylistic elements, and fan uses. Media can be defined here as ever-mutating alliances of technological settings and sociocultural uses, which have to be conceived not only as instruments of world transmission, as in top-down media channels, but also as tools that contribute to the active and participatory building of worlds. When taking up such a challenge, we need to delve deeper into the analysis of theoretical models used to understand world building, both as a practice and as a tool.

In order to interpret the complexity of world-building practices, a transversal approach will be used, able to stress interactions between distant phenomena and to consider their short-term or long-term effects. From an epistemological viewpoint, the larger emergence of world building is linked to a systemic and complex organization of thinking, which is particularly relevant in a time of media fragmentation. According to the French philosopher Edgar Morin, a paradigm of complexity is required when scientific discoveries allow disorder and chaos to emerge. A pathway paved by complex thinking leads to a knowledge of media that is not restricted to “probable” results, and that is capable of following mutations, as well as homeostatic trends: “[a] chaotic process may obey deterministic initial states, but these cannot be known exhaustively, and the interactions developed within this process alter any prevision. Negligible variations have considerable consequences over large time scales” (Morin 2007, 4). Similarly, given the proliferation of narrative and non-narrative chunks of media

content, heterogeneous bricks that constitute complex systems, determinism proves an inadequate approach for understanding such phenomena. Against determinism, a multi-focal, transnational, and interdisciplinary perspective is required in order to establish the relationships between worlds, media, production, and cultures. Worlds will be studied as a way to re-examine media theories, as objects to be understood in their industrial, creative genesis, their formal characteristics, and, finally, as spaces that emerge from the interaction of industry and fandom.

Worlds can be considered forms of knowledge *and* forms of life. On the one hand, complex world building is a common practice in the current media landscape. Scholars build instruments to describe fictional worlds and display their complexity; diegetic spaces, transmedia phenomena, film franchises, and serial narratives are objects of study. Structural questions emerge concerning the longevity and success of an expanding world over time; logical problems appear related to the coexistence of heterogeneous entities when many worlds collide; aesthetic, technological, and cultural issues surface where various authorial practices interact. On the other hand, *worldness* can be thought of as a metaphor or a model; it can be a key to understanding media industries, audiences, and the intertwining of the two. In this case, worlds are springboards and catalysts allowing the formation of certain linguistic and cultural systems typical of the convergence era. A world is a form of life dependent on individuals and, at the same time, an aggregator of communities. Here, the term “world” also evokes a worldview: a way of conceiving and building conventions within a certain time period, according to a specific domain of knowledge and professional labor (see: Becker’s *Art Worlds* 1984). This concept covers technological devices, as well as institutions, ideological apparatuses, and sociocultural organizations, each within its own context. As a canon (think of “Tarantino’s world”), it is dependent upon historical, cultural, and social contexts. What emerges is a system of references, as well as a source for the extraction of material to be transferred into other worlds, particularly when they are shared across cultures and nations.

## Complex Spaces

One of the bases for understanding world-building practices is the idea of a more or less organized sum of scattered parts, as in complex systems. The spatial dimension is particularly relevant for the description of this phenomenon. The concept of space can be found in film theory as an

important correspondent to the notion of time. The unfolding of territories or spaces while reading a novel or watching a film is a compelling experience for participants (Eco 1984); it invites them to forget the medium's materiality and immerse themselves in a different reality. At the inception of film studies, Etienne Souriau coined the term *diegesis*, describing a flexible environment that could contain infinite variations (1953). For this reason, an interrogation of worlds must include the multiple combinations of media forms, along with the effects they produce, consequently encouraging an anti-essentialism and an anti-textualism. In the framework of possible-world theory, Thomas Pavel considers literary texts irreducible to their linguistic dimension (1986). Furthermore, it is more compelling to study "ontological landscapes" that compose "the world view of a given community" (Pavel 1986, 139). In fact, one of the debates at the core of games studies is the analysis of interfaces as structures that are separate from their narratological perspective. For ludologist Jasper Juul, "a game cues the player into imagining its fictional world", demonstrating that the player has the choice between two positions: to see the game as a set of rules or as a set of suggestions. Either can be used to imagine a world (Juul 2005, 1). In such situations, for some scholars, it is less interesting to analyse textual and intertextual borrowings than to identify the boundaries of an overarching "fiction" that englobes more than one novel, comic, game, film, or television show. A concept coming from literary studies, but also useful for transmedial phenomena, transfiction is a tool used to describe situations such as when authors other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Flaubert take characters such as Sherlock Holmes or Emma Bovary out of their original texts and place them into alternative lives, new futures, or unlikely encounters (Saint-Gelais 2011, Ryan 2013). Again, the concept of a space emerges here, allowing various, logical, or even contradictory outcomes: such a virtual space is, in fact, able to incorporate, for the consumer's delight, as many details as the actual world—and more.

If, on the one hand, filmmakers have learned to build more and more tangible worlds; on the other, during the technological progression from VCR, to DVR, TiVo, DVD, and Blu-ray, viewers have been increasingly encouraged to stop, review, and compare details. According to David Bordwell, a film like *Blade Runner*, which came out in 1982, is emblematic of the practice of "layering worlds". Because of its continuities—its "minutiae" and "information overload"—viewers equipped with a VCR were able to observe details dispersed throughout the movie (Bordwell 2006, 58). Visual details, both "functional" and "indicial", to use Roland Barthes's terminology, always contribute to the consistency of a world, helping viewers to familiarize

themselves with it. They “furnish” an environment, as Umberto Eco states in reference to cult texts (Eco 1986, 3). Such details function as “world effects [...] that make the text look like the world—open, heterogeneous, incomplete” (Moretti 1996, 59). Moreover, a world’s sumptuousness provides for the recognition of details as a part of a collective game (Eco 1986, 3, 4, 6). Such details are also the source of a self-reflexive pleasure.

Similarly, a world’s details may erupt beyond the limits of a specific medium. In fact, paratextuality has evolved into a complex process, introducing innovation to the many fields of audiovisual creation, distribution, and reception (Gray 2010). Along with DVD covers, posters, trailers, and traditional thresholds to a text, it is easy to note the upsurge of objects coming from fictional worlds in real life, like Banana Republic’s *Mad Men*-inspired line of clothing. Far from mere ornamentation, such accessories are extractable elements of rich imaginary realms, which establishes their coherence and persistence. Moreover, as foreseen by Janet Murray in her 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, it is now easy to find digital “hyperserial” phenomena that enrich a show’s complexity: websites, social networks, and constellations of online platforms.

Any medium intended as either a set of devices or material channel delivering a specific content, can be thought of as a single chunk participating, among others, in the co-construction of a world. Several terms have been proposed: *transmedia supersystems* (Kinder 1991); *transmedia storytelling* (Jenkins 2006); and *transmedial worlds* (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, see also: Ryan and Thon, 2014, 14-15). Not only has the term transmedia entered the common vernacular of scholars across disciplines (see also: Kinder and McPherson 2014), but the industry is adopting its precepts in various domains. Storytellers produce their own guides (Phillips, 2012, Pratten, 2011, Bernardo, 2011 and 2014), inviting creators to concoct complex worlds displaying several networked bricks. These creations carry with them “an entertainment brand that can grow into a pop icon, a brand whose story world or hero has enough creative potential to power spin-offs and reboots, theme park rides and acres of merchandise” (Bernardo 2014, Introduction, n.p.).

Jenkins famously describes transmedia storytelling through the example of the *Matrix* franchise, in which films, comics, anime, and video games were designed to be part of the same itinerary, often intersecting, yet always providing the viewer with a more complete experience if grasped together:

The Wachowski brothers built a playground where other artists could experiment and fans could explore. For this work, the brothers had to envision the world of *The Matrix* with sufficient consistency that each



instalment is recognizably part of the whole and with enough flexibility that it can be rendered in all of these different styles of representation—from the photorealistic computer animation of *Final Flight of the Osiris* to the blocky graphics of the first *Matrix* web game. (Jenkins 2006, 113)

But such a transmedial creative model is not reducible to the phenomenon of media stacking, nor to the “networking” of narratives, since neither of these is new: both have always engaged readers and consumers in their own right. In fact, Biblical narratives are dispersed across the world, found in stained-glass windows and frescoes, in paintings and performances. Also, popular culture has always been the source of multiple adaptations within comics, novels, film, and television (see, for example: Scolari et al. 2014). Indeed, the relevance of current transmedia storytelling is related to the higher visibility of its components and their interconnections, thus highlighting, again, the relevance of the notion of complexity. Transmedia world building is comparable to the intertwining of many different threads forming a cloth: the sum of each can never be equivalent to their interrelation. As in the hermeneutic circle, we cannot know the parts if we do not know the whole; at the same time, we cannot know the whole if we do not know the parts.

In the transmedia creative model, consumers are granted a main role: they are allowed to explore these complex worlds and are encouraged to add content. Still, transmedia labyrinths are, by definition, bridled. The *Matrix* example is “a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins 2006). Created as an organized and mostly fenced-in playground, its interactivity is designed beforehand and, consequently, users have limited freedom. Interactive practices raise the level of complexity in Alternate Reality Games (ARG), those “games which are not games”, such as the famous *Why So Serious?* (2007) advertising campaign that accompanied the launch of *The Dark Knight*. In innovative, boundary-blurring scavenger hunts, fans had to follow clues found in their hometowns in order to find artifacts from the story. In this case, worlds break the boundaries of fiction and enter the viewer’s reality. Not only are media worlds comparable to heterotopias, or portals to immersive alternative spaces that help a society understand its limits and build its identity (Foucault 1984 [1967]), they can also be understood within the framework of the “hypertopia”, a term coined by Francesco Casetti. According to Casetti, “[w]e no longer move for film; it is now something we acquire, we meet by chance, or we pick out from a range of available products; it is something that offers up a world ready to extend itself everywhere” (Casetti 2015, 148). In fact, fragments of a world overflow in the viewers’ own realms, like when players of an Alternate

Reality Game stumble upon scattered artifacts or clues (fictional worlds, then, truly become “places that one happens upon along the way,” Casetti 2015, 144). Also, such boundary-breaking experiences challenge a world’s identity, exposing it to clashes with divergent uses and, thereby, proving its resilience.

Still, the elements of transmedia storytelling all too often remain part of a designed, top-down experience. Commercial transmedia worlds are often built upon a deterministic vision, and remain contained by “story-telling tyrannical characteristics”, as emphasized by Bordwell (2009). A distinction has to be made between transmedia as artificial machines and worlds as living machines. Concerning complex system theory, Edgar Morin writes:

Von Neumann established the difference between living machines and artificial machines produced by technology: the components of the technical machines, having the good quality of being extremely reliable, go towards their degradation, towards their wear, from the very start of their operation. Whereas the living machine, made up mainly by components far from reliable, degrading proteins—and one understands very well that this lack of reliability of proteins makes it possible to reconstitute them non-stop—is able to be regenerated and repaired; it also goes towards death, but after a process of development. The key of this difference lies in the capacity of self-repair and self-regeneration. The word regeneration is capital here. (Morin 2007,13)

As fan scholars know, the word regeneration is also essential to the *Dr. Who* series, which, as Matt Hills has shown, is a very particular world, able to prove its resilience and to survive, mainly thanks to its fans, for over 50 years. Therefore, another important way to study transmedia involves world building as a result of distinct audience activities: worlds lived in by users, worlds as living machines. Viewers can be thought of as trace generators, whose activity means something for other viewers and can influence their experience.

For Nelson Goodman, “[w]orldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already in hand; the making is remaking” (1978, 6). Fan cultures can be studied as activators of worlds. In his definition of transmedia, Carlos A. Scolari (2009) also includes non-fictional components, such as social network posts, fan art, and discussion boards. Users are explorers as well as map-builders, who provide their own contributions to the expansion of a world, operating alone or together with fan communities.

In a time when digital networks bring about more visibility to fan practices, worlds have become more visible too, stemming from the networks of convergent operations constructed by industries and fans. The notions of grassroots marketers (Jenkins 2006), fanboy auteurs (Scott 2012), transmedia fandom (Stein and Busse 2012), and digital fandom (Booth 2010; 2015) underline a form of world-building complexity very specific to our age: the intertwining of industrial and fan practices. In a media convergence context, derivative practices, textual poaching, participatory culture, and sharing activities can also complement official marketing strategies.

Each media brick (official or fan-made) is a mini-world, a piece contributing to the constitution of a larger entity. Interest in the notion of worlds therefore seems to reside in the need to conceptualize a transcendent substrate, to which each of the texts refers. Media fragments, coming from localized spaces and origins, enter the world bearing the language and the interpretation bestowed by its producer. Eventually, the sum of different uses and interpretations creates a result that exceeds the original work—in size, in shape, and in its intentions and directions—thereby creating a complex world. Some fragments from the periphery manage to join the center, where they are fully integrated and eventually become canon. Often, some fan practices increase in value and visibility, forcing producers to recognize them and include them in the canon. Certainly, this is often accompanied by conflict between grassroots activities and licensed works, as examples of ownership issues from the hybrid contexts of fan fiction demonstrate (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, first a work of *Twilight* fan fiction, then a fictional world of its own, and the platform Amazon Kindle Worlds prove the corporate interest in capitalizing on fan productivity). For these reasons, worlds emerge as both a project and as a result.

Two ways of considering transmedia phenomena are possible: first, mixing business and design stresses the predictability of a world's development; the other highlights semiotic processes that evolve for years after the apparition of a matrix text. The former is inclusive, centripetal, and marked by the need to balance unity and order, typical of storytelling, with users' accessibility. The latter is centrifugal, and open to unpredictable results that exceed and dilate the borders of a system, which, as a result, calls for intersectional instruments in order to grasp how it mutates over time. The study of worlds favors a synergetic and systemic approach to intermedial and transmedial relationships, each with its specificities often functioning as catalyzers. Within this framework, it is impossible to limit the research

to one field of study: according to Morin, complexity is “invisible in the disciplinary division of the real” (Morin 2007, 2). A plurality of perspectives and methodologies should be considered in order to examine how the problem of world building is relevant in various contexts and in various disciplines.

## A Systemic Perspective

In light of such premises, this book aims to understand better worlds as forms of knowledge, as well as forms of life. Essays written by 22 scholars from a variety of fields study world building as a transversal practice contained within the arenas of production, distribution, storytelling, and reception, and the constant negotiations within them. Such a global undertaking is organized around five sections, each containing different contributions and viewpoints that explore the multifarious dimensions of world building: theories, economy, the notion of immersion, the relevance of world building across domains, genres and cultures, and social uses.

The first section, *Theories of World Building*, analyses world building as a key to understanding the media landscape as studied in narratology, philosophy, and art history. The notion is extended in order to cover all its meanings, from its more recent use in transmedia storytelling to the description of cosmogonic projects in contemporary art. In the first chapter, through the example of *Cloud Atlas*, Marie-Laure Ryan studies the cultural phenomenon of transmedia storytelling, analysing the full range of relationships between texts, worlds, and stories. These relationships include a world with many stories, a text (or story) with many worlds, and many different texts of varying media converging within the same world. From the viewpoint of semiotics, Paolo Bertetti studies fantasy/science fiction as a structural and thematic framework for constructing story worlds that cross multiple media. Such solid tools help us to define more clearly the links between structure, genres, and aesthetic features of worlds emerging in today’s landscape, including the analysis of the content of media franchises. Within such a framework of interconnections between worlds, various issues appear. For example, the relationship with complex characters is extremely intricate. Julien Lapointe’s chapter delves more deeply into the research of epistemological tools for understanding characters that cross the boundaries of many words, including ours, like patently non-existing objects, ranging from unicorns and centaurs to round-squares, and Sherlock Holmes. The concept of worlds proves useful

as a conceptual arena, drawing for the work of logics and possible worlds theories. This section on media theories stresses the relevance of worlds as theoretical tools allowing descriptions of overlapping entities and providing examples of practices consisting of aggregating scattered fragments: as a conclusion of this section, from the field of contemporary art, Cristina Baldacci traces the evolution of a world-related mapping phenomenon of knowledge, the “atlas form”. Since Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas*, the atlas is a way to reconsider the organization of contemporary knowledge. The approach of some contemporary artists is described as characterized by a montage of visual fragments: grid arrangement; simultaneous views of the singular and the plural; non-hierarchical relationships among elements; heterogeneity, open structures, intertextuality; and a desire for wholeness.

The second section explores the economic dimensions of world building, as it is devoted to the analysis of the actors, strategies, and tactics (both industrial and grassroots, more and more marked by a tendency towards transmedial proliferation) involved in the building of fictional universes. By incorporating some of the work on franchising and licensing, Matthew Freeman explores the building of The Walt Disney Company transmedia storyworlds during the 1920s and 1930s, a period characterized by the rise of consumer culture in America, and analyses their intertextual, as well as their reflexive, dimensions. Indeed, worlds are not only spaces of narrative elaboration; they are sites shared by media professionals who utilize their resources to form collaborative relationships with one another. Roberta Pearson explores the industrial rules that lie beyond the existence of “floating signifier[s]” (Uricchio and Pearson 1991), such as Sherlock Holmes or Batman, utilizing both legal perspectives and narrative theory. This essay demonstrates how the concept of character, and even the role of the author, is highly elusive, as worlds necessarily “rest upon legal and business practices that create, sustain and protect them”. Yet, it is important to understand that different elements converge and intersect within worlds, but also that they create frictions with one another, in accordance with complex systems theory. From the viewpoint of production studies, Derek Johnson highlights the importance of the concept of media “struggle”. His essay focuses on the practices of media franchising, looks beyond the construction of cohesive and branded narrative spaces, highlighting the struggle between media industries and stakeholders regarding these constructions. In another context, focussing again on media aggregation, the necessity of a solid, cohesive commercial basis for media mix production can be highlighted. Marc Steinberg describes the relevance of the role of Game Master and Platform Producer in Japan, with the example of Kadokawa Books in the

1980s and the 1990s. Here, a world stems from a strong individual project, collaboratively developed across media within a specific industrial system.

Alternatively, different types of worlds' growing can be taken into account: for example, those narratives that are not specifically planned to cross multiple media, but that become significantly sizable worlds thanks to their longevity. Guglielmo Pescatore and Veronica Innocenti tackle the concept of "vast narratives", used to describe television programs characterized by continuous replicability, an open structure, and a permanent expandability. Their developing process employs methods from various disciplines, including television studies and information architecture.

The third section, Immersion, focuses on the intertwining components and forms of imaginary worlds across several domains: media, film, and video games studies, along with sociology. World-building theories and contemporary creation practices are explored, as many elements merge in the construction of filmic worlds. As Justin Horton shows, sound plays a crucial role, providing a degree of realism to an image that would otherwise appear removed from the "real world"—dialogue and sound effects create a more perfect mimetic representation of life. Sound is not simply used in the construction of a single world, but of many worlds, each multiplied and layered on top of one another. World building is then to be considered as a possibility for creators and producers that want to develop a very particular experience for consumers. Some models of imaginary universes can be defined through notions such as immersion, gaming, non-linear storytelling, and interactivity. Mark J.P. Wolf's essay starts with the premise that the experience of imaginary worlds can produce various types of immersion: physical, perceptual, and conceptual. Using the metaphors of absorption, saturation, and overflow, he highlights what lies beyond immersion, studying the effects of each of these stages on a world's audience. Also, he describes how world-makers actively use these processes to enhance the experience of a world, increasing the illusion of completeness and consistency, luring audiences back to their worlds. Pursuing the examination of immersive realms, Bernard Perron analyses the spatial dimension of the experience in transmedia work, namely zombie fiction. He addresses the attraction of spatial constructs that draw individuals, again and again, to a designed complex world. He also considers the intense motivation of moving through space as a character/player, like running through the varied media forms of *Resident Evil* and *The Walking Dead*. In transmedia storytelling, immersion is an ongoing phenomenon that unfolds, mutating, over time, across various sets of experiences. Laurent Di Filippo addresses how immersion manifests itself in gaming by applying Erving Goffman's

“action places” theory to his analysis of a MMORPG (Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Game).

Worldness, intended as a form of knowledge, is also a key to unlocking some of the specificities of different forms and genres found in contemporary media cultures. In the fourth section, *Media as World-Building Devices*, various media and genres characteristic of popular culture are examined through the lens of world building: animation, film franchises, comic books, and science fiction. Examining animation from the perspective of world building, Karen Redrobe (formerly Beckman) maps the contours of the debates about what she calls worlding in cinema and media theory, highlighting why these debates become particularly relevant at specific historical moments. Early theories about animation prove an important field for understanding worldness within the discipline of film studies and they raise crucial questions that are pertinent to the contemporary phenomena that we face today. Expanding the notion of worlds as linguistic and semiotic domains, Victor Fan’s essay describes a key conceptual framework that shapes the debate in Chinese academic studies of media, *yujing*, or linguistic terrain. This term indicates overlapping and, at times mutually contested, linguistic environments that require remediation. Fan addresses this “global gift-exchanging” economy and the need to theorize the role of media in shaping such worlds from an historical, geopolitical, and culturo-linguistic approach.

Another essential notion, convergence, appears as a key term for understanding media as world-building devices. Dru Jeffries analyses Marvel Studios’ *Thor* franchise, showing that today’s convergences—between analog and digital technologies across the entire contemporary media ecology—inform not only the conditions of production, marketing, and distribution of superhero blockbusters, but their narratives as well. Concluding this section, Denis Mellier works on metalepsis in comic books. As he argues, metalepsis strengthens the illusionism and creates an effect of “real presence” in the fictional worlds represented within a narrative. This exposure of narrativity and fictionality appeals strongly to readers in the current media landscape. It could also be considered, retrospectively, as a new departure point to make the notion of immersion, seen in the preceding section, more complex.

Transmedia worlds are forms of life, or spheres of discourse, inhabited by their users. As a result, it is possible to speak from a pragmatic point of view of “cult worlds”, or narrative worlds fashioned by audiences. The last section is centered on appropriations and fan practices, and explores theories and methodologies for the study of audiences in the new media ecology.

The discussion pertaining to the value of metalepsis proves pertinent when describing the relationship between worlds and audiences. Valentina Re studies television series that systematically use metaleptical strategies to mix the worlds of comics, TV, and cinema. Keeping up with the analysis of television series and their audiences, the following chapter examines *Doctor Who*, which first aired in 1963, a very potent example of the intertwining of grassroots and industrial processes. Matt Hills describes it as a “rickety” world: its survival over the years happened almost completely by accident. Despite some tension and friction, fan cultures built it as a space and as a “fan brand”.

Fandom is a cultural practice that builds, maintains, or transforms worlds. It is interesting to understand how some of the defining features of such a cultural practices change over time, being mainly related to technological devices. Such a perspective is offered by Jim Collins, who describes world building by stressing its pragmatic nature, as a taste formation, animated by what he calls a transmediaphilic relationship between cultural value, digital technology, and subjectivity. Finally, Dan Hassler-Forest demonstrates the political potential of world building by addressing the relationship between heteroglossia and power. A fantastic world like Janelle Monáe’s Afrofuturist Wondaland can destabilize absolute distinctions, therefore becoming a weapon capable of questioning the present and speculating about the future.

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In conclusion, the model of worlds covers phenomena across the boundaries of individual media. Some worlds are experimental labyrinths, others result from corporate strategies and industrial struggles aimed at saturating the market. Some, thanks to the accumulation and intertwining of uses and interpretations over time, become sacred monuments or foundational texts of a culture. For literature, Franco Moretti writes about the “world-epic”, describing heterogeneous structures not reducible to coherent masterpieces that reach beyond the sum of their parts, each component interacting with the others on both formal and narrative levels (Moretti 1996). Monumental works like *Faust*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Moby Dick*, and *Ulysses* are all made of an aggregation of episodes and themes situated by collage and juxtaposition, and depend on a process of interpretation over time. In a similar way, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Twilight*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Dr. Who* result from industrial transmedia design and become vast playgrounds for fan activities that are comparable to complex systems. Not only do they include official textual and narrative parts, they also contain heterogeneous material produced by fans.



Consequently, a world cannot be interpreted as the mere sum of individual media bricks, but instead as a life form, determined by a set of texts and their interpretations, superimposed over the years. A multi-layered conception of media history is needed: on the one hand, we have to consider the history of media as a larger container; on the other hand, we must examine it from a microscopical viewpoint, we have to examine the histories of individual worlds within their own evolution. Within this framework, worlds are artificial objects, made by the researcher who looks for repetitions and transforms remote individual phenomena into homogeneous series. This approach suggests “a reversal of the hierarchy between the exception and the series, where the latter becomes—as it were—the true protagonist of cultural life” (Moretti 1999, 150). The unique and the exception, traditionally found in romanticism and modernism, are not helpful here: instead, world building has to be considered as a key to unlock the contemporary landscape through promoting a history of serialized content and transmedia narratives.

The essays reunited in these pages contribute, from very different viewpoints, to tackling such a phenomenon of dispersion and reunion of non-discrete units, a constant process of repetition and innovation. They also commit to shape a growing field of knowledge, the one on world-building practices, by underlining the inextricable link between media and worlds. Offering in-depth analysis of specific concepts or particular case studies, each one of the contributors points out that media are not merely channels that convey messages. The growing “world building trend” that has emerged in media studies in recent years, and that is explored here from different perspectives and approaches, reveals that media truly are complex systems, since they are aggregations of technologies, forms, characters, institutions, and cultures. Within the current, interconnected panorama, they do not only transmit worlds, they become worlds themselves, individually or thanks to their networking. Spread over a transnational dimension, they become spaces of cultural experimentation and interpreters of communities.

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# Section 1

Theories of World Building



# 1. The Aesthetics of Proliferation<sup>1</sup>

*Marie-Laure Ryan*

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter, I will examine the various possible relations between text, world, and story. The cases to be discussed include: many texts that build one world (i.e. transmedia storytelling); a text that presents a world that contains many stories; a text that describes many ontologically distinct worlds, each containing its own story; a text that tells a story that involves many ontologically different worlds, stacked upon one another; a text that tells a story whose ontology comprises different realities, existing side by side; and the creation of a storyworld out of another world, through the borrowing and manipulation of semiotic material that creates this other world. In conclusion, I will ask if “worldness” can be considered a scalar concept, realized to different extents in narrative texts, and what it takes for a narrative to evoke a world to the imagination.

**Keywords:** Narrative proliferation, World vs. Plot, Transmedia, Cognition, Ontology

The theoretical emergence of the concept of world in narratology (storyworlds, fictional worlds), in media studies (transmedia worlds), in philosophy (possible worlds), and in cosmology (“many-worlds” models) has been accompanied, on the creative side, by a practice that I will call “the aesthetics of proliferation”. This aesthetic represents a radical break from the “textualist” schools that dominated literary theory from New Criticism to Deconstruction. With its emphasis on the signifier, at the expense of the signified, textualism regards the literary text as the gate to a meaning that was absolutely unique to it. It follows that the text was the only mode of access to its world; because textualism was reluctant to isolate a narrative level of meaning—a plot—from the global textual world, it implicitly adheres to a strict formula: one text, one world, one story.



The narrative turn that took place in the 80s can be regarded as a reaction to the radical textualism of New Criticism and Deconstruction. Narratology relies on a story/discourse dichotomy that grants equal importance to the signified (represented by story) and the signifier (represented by discourse). Stories are transmitted by texts, but, since they remain inscribed in our mind long after the signifiers have vanished from memory, their nature is much more mental than verbal. If stories can be emancipated from words, instead of the one text—one world—one story idea, one can now have many texts—one world—one story.

As narratology expanded from literature to other disciplines and media, it became more and more reliant on the concept of world. In its current narratological use, “world” is no longer the elusive sum of the meanings conveyed by a text, nor the sum of the ideas of an author, but the very concrete space projected by stories, literally, a “storyworld”. Since storyworlds can be shared by several stories, the emergence of this concept deals another blow to the one text—one world—one story formula. Contemporary culture, whether popular or highbrow, implements the full range of possible relations between texts, worlds, and stories. This proliferation can take several forms:

Narrative proliferation: a world with many stories.

Ontological proliferation: a story with many worlds.

Textual and medial proliferation: many different texts converging around the same world, especially texts of different media.

## Storyworlds

As a prelude to the discussion of the three types of proliferation, I propose to take a closer look at the concept of world. As the Czech narratologist Jirí Koteš observes, the narratological concept of world can be traced back to two lines of ancestry. When we speak of storyworld, the influence comes mainly from cognitive approaches to narrative (Herman 2009), while, when we speak of fictional world, the influence comes from schools and disciplines interested in the ontological status of imaginary entities: philosophy of language, formal semantics, and, more particularly, possible worlds theory (Pavel, Doležal, Ryan 1991).

While the concept of world is intuitively very accessible, it is difficult to sharpen into a useful narratological tool. The nine definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary reveal two dominant themes: world as a *planet* (preferably the planet Earth, but there are also extra-terrestrial worlds),

and world as a *totality of things*, as “everything that exists”. Since storyworlds can encompass interplanetary travel, they are better described by the totality than by the planetary definition. A storyworld is not just the spatial setting where a story takes place, it is a complex spatio-temporal totality that undergoes global changes. Put more simply, a storyworld is an imagined totality that evolves according to the events told in the story. To follow a story means to simulate mentally the changes that take place in the storyworld, using the cues provided by the text.

The concept of storyworld offers a basis for distinguishing two types of narrative elements: *intradiegetic* elements, which exist within the storyworld, and *extradiegetic* elements, which are not literally part of the storyworld, but play a crucial role in its presentation. A good example of the opposition between intradiegetic and extradiegetic is a movie soundtrack. Film theorists have long been aware of the distinction between diegetic music—music that originates inside the storyworld, and is perceived by the characters—and extradiegetic music, which controls the expectations and emotions of the spectator, but does not exist within the storyworld. (See also: Justin Horton’s essay in this book.) In computer games, the storyworld is represented by images and dialogues, but the menus that offer the player a choice of actions, and the statistics that report the player’s level of achievement, are extradiegetic. Playing the game involves a constant movement in and out of the storyworld.

While storyworlds transcend the distinction between fiction and nonfiction (all stories project a storyworld, whether told as true or told as fiction), fictional worlds are constituted by their difference from the real world, a difference that lies in their mode of existence, or ontological status. The main source of inspiration for capturing this ontological status has been the philosophical concept of possible worlds. For possible worlds theory (also known as modal logic), a world is defined over a set of mutually compatible propositions. One way to conceive the mode of existence, or more precisely, the coming-into-being of possible worlds is to associate them with future states of the real world. Out of a common matrix of truth values that defines the world of the present, different future worlds can be created by changing the value of one or more propositions. In accordance with the central tenet of possible worlds theory, which claims that there can be only one actual or real world from a given point of view, one of these worlds will become actual, while the others will remain unrealized possibilities.

Another explanation for the existence of possible worlds situates their origin in an act of the mind, such as imagining, dreaming, hallucinating... or producing fictions. If one applies this conception of possible worlds to

narrative fiction, fictional worlds will be created by the mind of authors for the benefit of audiences. Readers, spectators, or players relocate themselves into these worlds through their imagination, pretending that they are actual (Ryan 1991). In the best cases, this game of pretense results in an experience of immersion in the fictional world.

## Narrative proliferation

In narrative proliferation, multiple stories are told about the same world, so that passing from one story to another does not require ontological relocation. While, in most cases of narrative proliferation, the reader can expand the image constructed during previous visits to the same world and therefore finds herself at home in the storyworld from the very beginning of each new story, I will discuss an example that requires significant cognitive initiation: the novel *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell 2004) and its film adaptation. Both the novel and the film consist of six separate stories, which take place at different times and in different locations. The first one concerns the journey of an American lawyer sailing from the South Pacific back to California in the early nineteenth century; the second one is about a young musician who writes down scores for a famous composer in the 1920s in Belgium (though the film sets the story in England); the third is set in California in the 70s, and tells about a young reporter who investigates a scheme by an energy company to build a dangerously flawed nuclear power plant to boost the oil industry; the fourth follows the misadventures of an elderly, eccentric book publisher who is committed against his will to a nursing home in contemporary England; the fifth tells about a dystopic future society in Seoul, South Korea, where human beings can be cloned, and the clones are used as slaves; and the sixth, set in Hawaii in a very distant future, depicts how mankind has regressed to a primitive state after a mysterious event called The Fall.

From an ontological point of view, *Cloud Atlas* projects a (nearly) unified world. The six stories take place in different places, at different times, and involve different characters, but they do not represent mutually exclusive possibilities. Even though they are not linked to one another by explicit relations of causality, we can imagine that the stories correspond to various moments in the history of the same global world, strung together like the beads of a necklace. The only exception is story 3, which is revealed in story 4 to be a novel and not an account of real events;<sup>2</sup> but, when read for the first time, we take it as factual account and, indeed, the kind of events that it reports could very well happen in the same world as the other stories. The ontological connection of

the stories is hinted at by the dominant themes of the narrative: the repeated claim that “everything is connected” and the presence of an identical birth mark on the shoulder of the main character of each story, which suggests that these characters are reincarnations of the same individual, despite their widely different personalities. In the movie, the theme of reincarnation is reinforced by the fact that the same actors play different roles in different stories, a device that would not be possible in a novel.

An even stronger sign of ontological connection is a system of embedding that locates the text of each story as a material object within the next story. For instance, the text of the first story is the diary of a character named Adam Ewing. The hero of the second story, Robert Frobisher, discovers and reads this manuscript. Frobisher composes a musical work titled “Cloud Atlas” and writes a series of letters to his lover. Both of these media objects fall into the hands of Luisa Rey, the reporter of the third story. And so on until the last story.<sup>3</sup>

While from an ontological perspective all the stories of *Cloud Atlas* belong to the same world, from a cognitive perspective, each story projects its own storyworld. When the readers or spectators pass from one story to the next, they experience a world where nothing is familiar: neither the setting, nor the characters, nor the social environment, and readers must construct the storyworld from an almost blank state (I say almost blank, because we always import some information from our experience of the real world). The organization of the text on the discourse level does little to alleviate the cognitive burden of constructing six different storyworlds. In the novel, the stories are divided into two parts (except for the sixth story), and these parts are presented in the sequence 1-2-3-4-5-6-5-4-3-2-1. This pattern actualizes a structure known in computer science as a stack: the various elements are piled on one another, and they are processed according to the principle “first in, last out”. The stack principle means that, when readers reach level six, they must keep five half-told stories in the back of their mind. Only story six unfolds as an uninterrupted whole. Once story six is completed, it is popped from the stack and the text returns to story five, which is still reasonably fresh in memory. As the text returns to older levels, it becomes more and more difficult for the reader to remember what the story was all about.

It is fortunate that the medium of the book allows readers to return to earlier pages. The spectators of the movie do not have that luxury. In the film, the symmetrical stack structure is replaced with a chaotic organization. The stories are fragmented into many more elements than in the novel, and these fragments, which tend to become shorter and shorter as the film progresses, are presented in a seemingly random order. For spectators who

see the film without having read the novel—and this was my case—, it is very difficult to reconstitute the plot. When I left the theatre, I was totally confused, and the first thing I did when I got home was to look up the Wikipedia article to make sense of the film.

### Ontological proliferation

While the various storyworlds of *Cloud Atlas* differ cognitively, but are logically compossible and could, therefore, be part of the same global world, we find the reverse situation in Tom Tykwer's earlier film, *Run, Lola, Run*. The film represents a genre that David Bordwell (2002) calls "forking path" narratives. These narratives focus on a decision point, out of which several different futures develop depending on the character's deliberate choice of action, or on random coincidence. In *Run Lola Run*, the decision point is a phone call to Lola from her boyfriend, Manni, who has lost a large sum of money he owes to a crime boss. He will face dire consequences if the money is not delivered within 20 minutes. The film explores three forking paths in which Lola tries different courses of action to get the money in time. In the first "run", Lola tries to borrow the money from her father, a banker, but he refuses; then she helps Manni rob a supermarket, but she gets shot and apparently dies. In the second run, she robs her father's bank, but Manni is hit by a car as he runs toward her to get the money. In the third run, Lola wins the money at the casino, but, in the meantime, Manni has recovered the money he lost, so everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

The three worlds that fork out of the common decision point are clearly different from an ontological point of view, since they contain logically incompatible events, but, in all three branches, Manni has the same problem, Lola has the same goal, the setting is constant, and the network of interpersonal relations remains unchanged. As the clock is rewound and a different alternative is explored, the spectator is taken back to a familiar situation and no additional cognitive effort needs to be devoted to the construction of the background.

### Comparing narrative and ontological proliferation

*Cloud Atlas* and *Run, Lola, Run* illustrate two basic forms of proliferation: a world that includes many stories for *Cloud Atlas*, and a story (or text) that includes many worlds for *Run, Lola, Run*. The case of a world with many

stories is found in many different genres and media: for instance, in TV soap operas, which represent the interleaved destinies of many characters and follow multiple plot lines; in novels of magical realism, which often consist of many little stories taking place in the same setting, rather than of a unified narrative arc; or in a film like *Babel*, which presents three different stories, one located in Mexico, another in Morocco, and the third in Japan. The spectator knows that these stories take place in the same world because they present common elements.

Another example of a world with more than one story comes from a structure that may be called non-ontological narrative embedding; in other words, the embedding of a story that refers to the same world as the framing story and extends its representation, rather than transporting the reader into a new world. For instance, in “Sarrasine”, the short story by Balzac that was made famous by Roland Barthes’ *S/Z*, the narrative begins with the description of a lavish reception in the Parisian house of a rich family. Among the guests is a withered old man who awakens the curiosity of a marquise. The narrator tells the story of the old man to the marquise in exchange for a night of love that he does not get in the end, because the marquise is too upset by the tale to keep her promise. Since the embedded and embedding stories refer to the same world, they complement each other and passing from one to the other does not require the crossing of an ontological boundary.

In contrast to “Sarrasine”, works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron*, or *The Arabian Nights* are not worlds with many stories, but rather texts with many worlds. These texts feature a framing story and many embedded ones, told by the characters of the framing story. Insofar as the embedded stories are presented as fictions, they do not refer to the same world as the framing story. For instance, the characters in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” or “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” are not part of the world in which Scheherazade tells stories to the Sultan to postpone her execution and there is no chance that Scheherazade could meet Aladdin, except in a postmodern parody. These examples illustrate the case of ontological proliferation: a text that sends its readers into many other worlds than the primary fictional world, where the embedding story takes place (see: Ryan 1991, chapter 9 on the two types of embedding).

## Textual and medial proliferation

The third type of proliferation—many texts, one world, and, depending on the case, one or many stories—has been with us for a long time in the form

of adaptation, in which, roughly, the same story is told by texts of different media, and, in the form of what Richard Saint-Gelais (2011) calls transfictionality, in which storyworlds are expanded through new stories usually told in the same medium as the original, such as prequels, sequels, midquels, or the story of secondary characters.<sup>4</sup> In both adaptation and transfictionality, the authors are generally different. More recently, a cultural phenomenon known as transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006) has combined these two forms, so that we now have “franchises” such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, or *Lord of the Rings* that include both adaptations and transfictional expansions using any of the media capable of narration, as well as some non-media objects such as T-shirts, Lego sets, and costumes that can be used by fans as “props in games of make-believe” (Walton 1990). The entertainment industry tries to persuade us that, thanks to transmedia, storytelling will never be the same again. Does this mean that transmedia storytelling develops a new narrative aesthetic? Or is it just a marketing ploy? If we regard aesthetic experience as a response to an intentional design,<sup>5</sup> transmedia aesthetics would require a deliberate distribution of narrative content across different media. This is how Henry Jenkins conceives the phenomenon:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels* for the purpose of creating *a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*. Ideally each medium makes its own *unique contribution* to the unfolding of the story. (Italics original) (Jenkins 2007)

For this ideal to be realized, transmedia storytelling should be planned top-down and the user should become familiar, if not with all the documents of the system, at least with a significant number of them, so as to be able to fill in the gaps and to fit them together into a larger picture. The vast majority of transmedia franchises do not, however, develop top-down, but, rather, exploit the success of a single-medium narrative that has already achieved popularity, by offering the public more and more stories that take place in the same storyworld. This is how the franchises of *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and, to a lesser extent, *Star Wars* came into being.<sup>6</sup> Rare are the transmedia projects that are conceived, from the very beginning, as acts of storytelling that involve many media. One of them is *Alpha 0.7*, a German project that augments a short TV series with a number of visual and textual documents available online (Ryan 2013); another is *The Matrix* (Jenkins 2006), which was planned by the Wachowski (then) brothers as a network that encompassed, in addition to the three films,

comics, computer games and short *animé* films. In both of these cases, the transmedia documents are optional peripherals that flesh out the world of a main document, known in the entertainment industry as “Mother Ship”, and many users will limit their exploration of the storyworld to the landscapes that can be seen from this ship. Those who are truly in love with the storyworld will, however, follow links to the peripheral elements to deepen their immersion. The transmedia buildup of *Alpha 0.7* and *The Matrix* does not seem, however, to have significantly contributed to their success: *Alpha 0.7* was a popular failure; as for *The Matrix*, the vast majority of its fans was not aware of the existence of the transmedia peripherals, except, perhaps, for the computer games.

Transmedia franchises may be sprouting like mushrooms (every best-seller seems to generate its own), but the art of orchestrating documents representing various media for a unified narrative experience remains to be mastered. Facebook commentator Brian Clark (2012) may be right when he claims that “there’s never been a big ‘transmedia hit’” (meaning projects conceived as transmedia from the very beginning). Yet, most developers and scholars of transmedia agree on one point: for a narrative idea to lend itself to transmedia treatment, its appeal should not lie in a linear story, because the temporal arc of stories has nothing to gain from fragmentation and dispersion across media (the fans of a story tend to want to stick to the same medium); rather, the narrative idea should reside in its world, because worlds can contain many stories, and they can be described by encyclopedic collections of documents addressing many senses.

### Worlds vs. stories as sources of interest

Narrative aesthetics is traditionally conceived of as the art of creating stories that engage the reader’s interest through effects such as suspense, curiosity, surprise (Sternberg 1992), or through a dramatic contour of rise and fall in tension. All these features are temporal in nature. Yet spatial worldmaking, too long looked down upon as the trademark of lowbrow “genre fiction”, is increasingly being recognized as a legitimate form of art (DiGiovanna 2007; Wolf 2012).

Figure 1 represents a continuum from story-dominant to world-dominant texts. While the texts on the left emphasize story, or plot, they are not completely deprived of world, because the core constituents of stories are events and their participants. Since participants are existents, and since existents are objects with spatial extension, they must exist somewhere.





1.1: Story-dominant vs. world-dominant genres

This means that there must be a world that contains them, but this world may be left largely implicit. Consider E.M. Forster’s example of a plot: “The king died, then the queen died of grief.” If this is a story, it offers little to the imagination. Readers will register the information that something happened in some abstract fictional world, but they will not be tempted to visualize the scene and to fill in the blanks in the story.

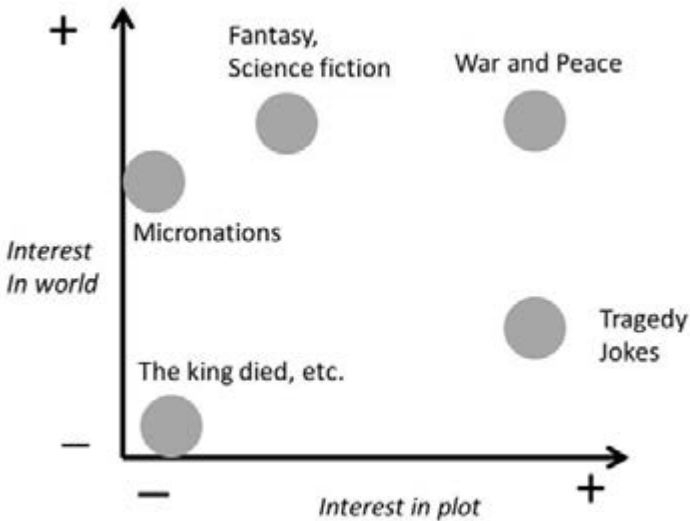
A narrative genre that minimizes world-creation is jokes. Not only are jokes too short to display a rich storyworld, the same joke can be told about different kinds of people: for instance, jokes that used to be told of certain ethnic groups are now told about blondes (assumed to be stupid), and jokes about lawyers are recycled by musicians into conductor jokes. The fact that the butt of certain jokes can be easily transformed from one category of people to another demonstrates that the appeal of these jokes lies in some properties of the story that transcends the particular embodiment of the characters. Another narrative genre that privileges plot over world is tragedy: the genre downplays particular social circumstances to focus on a network of personal relations that could happen anywhere, anytime. This is why Greek tragedy is best performed on a bare stage with no distracting props.

The case of world without story is much more feasible than the case of stories without worlds. A good example is the phenomenon of the micro-nation. The Internet contains many imaginary countries created for the pure pleasure of playing God. They have names like Bergonia and Talossa,<sup>7</sup> and they are brought into being by documents that represent

an encyclopedic sum of knowledge. The creators of these micro-nations can play as many roles as they want: ethnographer, geographer, political scientist, linguist, cartographer, historian, and climatologist. But one role they do not play is that of novelist. Visiting these countries is therefore like reading all the descriptions in a novel and skipping the action parts.

While jokes and tragedy come the closest to the story pole, science fiction and fantasy are the closest genres to the world pole. In these genres, the plot serves as a trail that takes the audience through the storyworld and provides a glimpse into its distinctive natural features and cultural institutions. The greater the distance of a fictional world from ordinary reality, the more the interest of the reader or spectator will be directed toward the world, at the expense of the plot, because the invention of a world that differs from reality is a true feat of the imagination. J.R.R. Tolkien regarded it an act of subcreation that emulates, and therefore pays homage to the creative power of God (Wolf 2012).

The one-dimensional schema of figure 1 is misleading, because it suggests that the more prominent the world, the less interesting the plot, and vice versa, the more indeterminate the world, the more interesting the plot. This is certainly not the case, as we can see from the example of “The king died, then the queen died of grief.” Here, there is hardly any world, but this lack of worldness does not add to the appeal of the plot. The story is



1.2: A two-dimensional version of figure 1

very boring. On the other hand, there are great works of literature—here I think especially of the great novels of the nineteenth century—in which plot and world are both very developed and none takes second seat to the other. To represent this situation, we need a two-dimensional diagram, such as figure 2, in which the y axis represents “worldness” and the x axis represents “plotness” or “tellability”. The values attributed to various works should not be taken as absolute: they represent my own subjective experience. In addition, the contrast between story-dominant and world-dominant narratives can be represented as the set of tendencies shown in illustration 1.3.

|                                      | Plot-dominant narratives  | World-dominant narratives   |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Textual realization                  | One text                  | Many texts                  |
| Medial realization                   | Single medium             | Multiple media              |
| Creative process                     | Individual                | Collaborative               |
| Relation to actual world             | Close (realistic)         | Distant (fantastic)         |
| Representation of world              | Incomplete representation | Strives toward completeness |
| Informational texture                | Thin                      | Dense                       |
| Role of world                        | Container for plot        | Focus of attention          |
| Typical user experience              | First steps in world      | Return to familiar world    |
| Focus                                | What? Who?                | Where?                      |
| Spatio-temporal dominant             | Time                      | Space and place             |
| Preferred paratextual representation | Plot summary              | Encyclopedia                |

1.3: Contrasting tendencies of story-dominant and world-dominant narratives. (World column inspired by DiGiovanna 2007)

## Conclusion

The aesthetics of proliferation may seem, at first sight, to be a truly contemporary phenomenon, a practice inspired in part by the media explosion of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in part by the typically postmodern concern for the diversity of perspectives from which reality can be described. At second sight, however, the aesthetics of proliferation has been with us for a very long time. Do you want multiple stories within a world? Look at the Renaissance epic *Orlando Furioso*, a text that the author, Ariosto, expanded with new episodes and new subplots throughout his lifetime. Do you want multiple worlds within a story? Look at the complex system of embedding of the *Arabian Nights*, or of Baroque novels. Transmedia storytelling? Think

of how the Bible, or Greek myths, have inspired painters, playwrights, poets, and composers for countless generations. In retrospect, it is the supposedly traditional aesthetics of textual autonomy and exclusivity—one text, one world, one story—that seems to be the exception rather than the rule. It is tied to modernism and to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of the nature of literary language.

Yet, there is something distinctively contemporary about *Cloud Atlas*, *Run Lola Run*, and recent projects in transmedia storytelling such as *The Matrix* or *Alpha 0.7*. In older times, proliferation was spontaneous, bottom-up, multi-authored. Stories sprouted branches in many directions, like a rhizome, and storyworlds grew organically. Popular stories inspired transmedia adaptations without having been conceived for this explicit purpose. This remains the case today with the transmedia franchises that exploit the success of a monomedial work, such as the *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* novels, or with most novel-to-film adaptations; but, in addition to content that spreads itself spontaneously,<sup>8</sup> we see more and more forms of proliferation that are programmatic, top-down, and pre-planned by development teams. There is something contrived and deliberately experimental about the proliferation of subworlds and stories in *Cloud Atlas*: they do not arise out of each other nor out of any kind of internal narrative necessity. It is as if the author had decided, “I’ll write a novel with a combination of worlds and stories that has never been done before.” As for transmedia storytelling, it has become a scheme to make people consume more and more media objects and demonstrate their loyalty to the brand. Storytelling becomes a game of how many media can be involved in a project, just as *Cloud Atlas* is a game of how many different worlds and stories can be crammed into a novel and how they can be interlinked.

The proliferation of texts around worlds, of worlds within texts, and of stories within worlds may be as old as narrative itself, but it is only in contemporary culture that it has been systematically explored, and elevated into an aesthetic.

## Notes

1. Some ideas developed in these texts are also found in Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2015. “Texts, Worlds, Stories: Narrative Worlds as Cognitive and Ontological Concept,” In: *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*, edited by Mari Hatavera, Matti Hyvärinen, Maria Mäkelä, and Frans Mäyrä, 13-28. London: Routledge.

2. By contrast, all the other stories mimic non-fictional genres: story 1 is a diary, story 2 a series of letters, story 4 a written autobiography, story 5 responses to an interviewer, and story 6 an oral narrative of personal experience told by the protagonist to his grandson. Stories 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 belong to a first-degree ontological level, while story 3, as a fiction within a fiction, belongs to a second-degree level.
3. If story 3 is a novel, the fact that its heroine, Luisa Rey, can get hold of the letters and musical compositions of Robert Frobisher is a metalepsis, that is, a transgression of ontological boundaries, since fictional characters have no access to the real world. On the other hand, real-world members can read about fictional characters, so it is not a paradox that the fictionally nonfictional protagonist of story 4, Timothy Cavendish, can read the Luisa Rey novels.
4. Transfictionality also includes two other operations: one that changes the storyworld (modification) and one that transposes the story into a different world (transposition). Cf. Doležel, though he does not use the term of transfictionality. I do not discuss these operations here since I restrict my focus to the case of one world, many texts.
5. This formula holds for human-created works of art, but I don't want to exclude the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation of a randomly produced pattern, such as the shape of a rock.
6. I write "to a lesser extent *Star Wars*" because the franchise was conceived from the very beginning as spanning several films.
7. Bergonia resides at <http://www.bergonia.org/>; Talossa at [www.talossa.com](http://www.talossa.com). See: "The Aeric Empire", *New York Times*, <http://www.aericempire.com/nytimes.html>.
8. Cf. Henry Jenkins's concept of "spreadable media", which really means "media that facilitate the spreading of content". See: Jenkins *et al.*, 2013.

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## 2. Building Science-Fiction Worlds

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### Abstract

Fantasy and science fiction are crucial genres for techniques of transmedia storytelling, with notable contemporary examples such as *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Lost*, *Heroes*, etc. What do these genres offer as a structural or thematic framework for constructing storyworlds that cross multiple media? The nature of world-creating in science fiction and fantasy is pivotal, as the creation of detailed worlds that serve as a bedrock for inner (fictional) references is a structural necessity. The paper investigates, from a semiotic point of view, the nature and the modes of composition of science-fiction worlds as “structurally different from the real one” (Eco 1984, 1257), showing the mechanisms of world building, together with the modes of representation and transmission of information.

**Keywords:** Science Fiction, Possible worlds, World-building, Fantasy

Fantasy and science fiction seem to be crucial genres for transmedia storytelling, with notable contemporary examples such as *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, *Lost*, and *Heroes*. What do fantasy and science fiction offer as a structural or thematic framework for constructing storyworlds that cross multiple media? If world building is a key concern of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006), the nature of world creating in these genres is pivotal, and certainly much more evident than in crime, mystery stories, and even horror stories; in science fiction and fantasy, in fact, the creation of detailed settings seems to be a structural necessity.

My contribution focuses on science fiction writing from a semiotic and narratological point of view, with particular reference to studies on possible narrative worlds and on enunciation. First, I will briefly summarize some key aspects of the theory of possible worlds with regard to the science fiction genre; on this basis, I will tackle a definition of science fiction worlds before



investigating more deeply their nature. Finally, I will explore the question of narrative transmission, both in regard to the first elements that allow access to the fictional world and, more generally, in relation to the enunciative modalities of the genre.

## Possible worlds

The notion of *Possible Worlds* has been elaborated in modal logic by philosophers of the analytic school (Kripke, Lewis, Rescher, Hintikka), taking inspiration from the philosophy of Leibniz and, probably, also from science-fiction writers' conception of parallel universes (see: Volli 1978). In modal logic, possible worlds are formal constructs, bare undifferentiated sets that have no structure whatsoever, while, in semiotic and narratological studies, possible worlds have substantive nature, they are "overfurnished sets" (Eco 1978, 27), of which one must know acting individuals and properties that make them different from the real world. Following Umberto Eco:

- (i) A possible world is a *possible state of affairs* expressed by a set of relevant propositions where for every proposition either  $p$  or  $non-p$ ;
  - (ii) as such it outlines a set of possible *individuals* along with their *properties*;
  - (iii) since some of these properties or predicates are actions, a possible world is also a *possible course of events*;
  - (iv) since this course of events is not actual, it must depend on the *propositional attitudes* of somebody;
- in other terms possible worlds are worlds imagined, believed, wished, etcetera. (Eco 1978, 29)

As products of such mental activity, possible worlds are *cultural constructs* in Eco's conception: they have a semiotic and textual nature. They have no ontological existence, unlike the parallel universes described by science-fiction writers, which lie on different planes of reality, but are not less "real" than ours. A possible world is a set of *individuals* (i.e. recognizable entities: characters as well as places and objects, etc.) singled out as bundles of properties (i.e. physical qualities, relations, actions performed, etc.). Thus, we can assume the notion of property as primitive: we can construct different possible worlds by combining a set of properties differently or simply by changing a single property.

In particular, we can create a possible world starting from our "real" world (the so-called *Actual World*, in opposition to *Possible Worlds*) by

altering (i.e. activation or narcotization) even a single property. For example, the possible science-fiction world outlined in *Dying Inside* (1972), a novel by Robert Silverberg, is different from ours because it is inhabited by an individual called David Selig who has the ability to read people's minds; a property, as we know, that is not present in the Actual World. Apart from this, the blanket of information described in the novel can almost completely overlap with the Actual World. However, the text of the novel presents to the reader only a limited number of the propositions and the properties that are predicable of the individual "David Selig", mainly those that are relevant to identify the possible world, while many others that are common to the world of reference (for example, the fact that he has two feet, eats, and speaks English) are taken for granted and not mentioned.

Generally speaking, any possible world overlaps the Actual World to a large degree, while differing from it in some respects. There are obvious reasons of expressive economy for this, but there are also deeper motivations related to the nature of fictional worlds. In fact, fictional worlds are, by their very nature, largely incomplete: "No fictional world could be totally autonomous since it would be impossible for it to outline a maximal and consistent state of affairs by stipulating *ex nihilo* the whole of its individuals and of their property" (Eco 1978, 31).<sup>1</sup> According to Doležel (1989), fictional worlds are inevitably incomplete "small worlds", as incompleteness is a distinctive feature of fictional existence. Every text, in fact, only partially describes its world, from a certain perspective: detail is determined by its usefulness in serving textual strategies. Other scholars underline the "role of the reader" (Eco 1979), who "fills the gaps" of the text, making inferences based on his or her encyclopedic knowledge. In doing so, "readers imagine fictional worlds as the closest possible to Actual World, and they only make changes that are mandated by the text" (Ryan 2013).

For instance, the beginning of the "Editor's Preface" in Clifford Simak's classic novel *City* (1952) mentions Dogs:

These are the stories that the Dogs tell when the fires burn high and the wind is from the north. Then each family circle gathers at the hearthstone and the pups sit silently and listen and when the story's done they ask many questions:

"What is Man?" they'll ask.

Or perhaps: "What is a city?"

Or: "What is a war?"

In this case, the readers will imagine creatures that look like real-world dogs in every respect (and have all their properties) except for the fact that these creatures sit around hearthstones. Ryan (1991) calls this interpretive rule “the principle of minimal departure”; Walton describes it as “the reality principle”.

## Towards a definition of science-fiction worlds

According to possible worlds theorists (Eco 1979; Pavel 1986; Doležel 1998) every fictional text outlines a possible world; this is true not only for science fiction or fantasy narratives, which describe imaginary worlds, but it generally applies to any work of fiction. Eco says that “any work of narrative, even the most realistic, depicts a possible world inasmuch as it presents a population of individuals and a succession of states of the world that do not correspond to those of our everyday experience” (Eco 1984, 1257). From this point of view, there is no fundamental difference between the small fishing village of Aci Trezza depicted in the Italian veristic masterpiece *I Malavoglia* by Giovanni Verga, the Riverworld created by P.J. Farmer, or Tolkien’s middle-earth. However, it is obvious that, in some respects, these three worlds are essentially different. What is it that differentiates between the world of a “realistic” narrative and those described in a science-fiction or fantasy novel? Reworking Robert Scholes’ definition of fantastic literature as “Structural Fabulation”, Eco says that this kind of narrative builds “structurally possible worlds”:

What distinguishes the fantastic narratives from the realistic [...] is the fact that its possible world is structurally different from the real one. I use the term “structural” in a very wide sense. To refer to the cosmological structure as much as to social. (Eco 1984, 1257)

For Eco, science fiction is a particular kind of fantastic literature:

SF exists as an autonomous genre when a counterfactual speculation about a structurally possible world is conducted by extrapolation from certain tendencies in today’s world, which is the very possibility of a “futurizable” world. That is, SF always takes the form of an anticipation and anticipation always takes the form of a conjecture formulated from existing tendencies. (Eco 1984, 1257)

Eco therefore restricts science fiction to the sole narratives of anticipation—in other words, to that kind of science fiction sometimes called “speculative fiction”—that focus on the mechanism of extrapolation, in which such extrapolation can, from time to time, be social, technological, scientific, etc. He defines this kind of fantastic literature in which “a possible world represents a future phase of the world as we have it here and now” (Eco 1984, 1257) as *metachronia* or *metatopia* and distinguishes it from the *allotopia* (where the world is really different from the Actual World, as is the case with fantasy worlds where wizards and fairies exist), the *utopias* (where the possible world exists somewhere, parallel with our own but normally inaccessible to us; “usually—Eco goes on to say—it constitutes a model of the way our real world *ought to be*”) and the *uchronias* (where the parallel world is based on a “*what if*” clause; for example, what would have happened if the Axis forces had won the war, as in Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* [1962]?).

Eco’s typology is certainly ingenious and theoretically well-founded, but his definition of science fiction is rather narrow and abstract, while also failing to account for the variety of the phenomenon, so Eco himself is forced to admit that we can have science fiction works also among the utopias, the uchronias, or the allotopias (as in the case of space operas)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, from a more general point of view, in a logic of possible worlds—as Eco understands it—, it is not sufficient to talk of “structurally possible worlds”, instead, we must specify the particular properties that distinguish a science fiction world from a naturalist or a fantasy one, as well as the rules of construction. In short, we should identify and define a class of property, whose presence or absence in the text defines the world as science-fictional, or fantastic, or realistic. Doležel (1998) does not deal explicitly with science fiction and focuses very little on fantastic literature, but he does nevertheless make some useful distinctions. He poses a distinction at the level of alethic modalities between logically possible worlds and physically (or naturally) possible worlds. In physically possible worlds, there is nothing—nor does anything happen—that violates the alethic conditions of the Actual World (Doležel 1998, 121). On the contrary, fictional worlds that violate the laws of the Actual World are supernatural worlds and physically impossible. Science-fiction worlds (and the individuals that inhabit them, such as extra-terrestrials) belong to naturally possible worlds, as they are physically possible. Doležel believes that using modal criteria of distinction enables us to avoid ontological commitment as well as the problems related to subjective beliefs and the changes in scientific knowledge.

Similar criteria are adopted by Marie-Laure Ryan (1991; 2005), who sketches a complex typology of possible worlds related to fictional genres based on the various relations between Actual World and Fictional Worlds (the so-called “accessibility relations”):

In a broad sense, possibility depends not only on logical principles but also on physical laws and material causality. Following this interpretation, narrative worlds can be classified as realistic [...] or fantastic, depending on whether or not the events they relate could physically occur in the real world. (Ryan 2005, 449)

For Ryan (1991), there are different degrees of accessibility between Actual World (AW) and Fictional Worlds (properly TAW “Textual Actual Worlds”, as defined by Ryan) depending on the different genres. In decreasing order of stringency, the types of accessibility include: identities of properties (when the two worlds are furnished by the same objects and they have the same properties), identity of inventory (when the two worlds are furnished by the same objects and they do not have the same properties), compatibility of inventory (when the fictional world has the same inventory of AW, as well as some native members), as well as chronological, taxonomic, logical, and linguistic compatibility.

With regard to the difference between realism, fantasy, and science fiction, Ryan says that fictional worlds of all these genres can be associated with the Actual World by compatibility of logical and analytical propositions. However, the fantasy worlds (legends, fairy tales, fantastic realism) do not have physical and natural laws compatibility that is maintained in the worlds of science fiction. Science-fiction worlds have physical, logical, analytical, linguistic compatibility with the Actual World, but they do not necessarily have taxonomic compatibility (technical objects are usually different from those of the Actual World, and also natural species could be different); moreover, there is no chronological compatibility. As for Doležel, even for Ryan, the maintenance or not of the natural laws of the Actual World is a main taxonomic criterion.

A clearer description of science-fiction worlds can be achieved by crossing the two parameters: the structural difference (or not) from the Actual World and the correspondence (or not) to its physical and natural laws. To resume: if every fictional text describes a possible world, different in some respect from the actual one, fantastic narratives outline *structurally different* possible worlds. The structural difference may violate the alethic conditions of the Actual World (as in fantasy fiction or in fairy tales, in

which it involves the physical laws of the universe) or not, as is the case with science fiction, in which physically (or naturally) possible worlds are described.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction could enrich Eco's typology. If every fantastic narrative outlines a structurally possible world—in other words, a world structurally different from the actual one—we can distinguish between genres like fantasy or fairy tales, in which the structural difference involves physical laws, and science fiction, in which it does not involve them.<sup>4</sup>

### The nature of science-fiction worlds

The nature of science-fiction worlds therefore closely approximates Darko Suvin's well-known definition of the genre: "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (1979, 60). The *novum*, or cognitive innovation, is a phenomenon or relationship that deviates from the norm of the author and the implied reader's reality. In science-fiction texts, the *novum* is "totalizing" in the sense that it entails a change to the whole universe of the tale (similarly to Eco's structural differences), and is also "hegemonic", because it is so central and significant to determine the world's narrative logic.<sup>5</sup> Concerning the difference between science fiction and fantasy, Suvin says that, in science fiction, the *novum* is cognitively validated, while it is unvalidated in fantasy fiction; "cognitively validated" means that it is "postulated on and validated by Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific method" (Suvin 1979, 64-65) and it follows an accepted scientific logic.<sup>6</sup> In other words, science-fiction worlds do not violate the epistemic foundations commonly accepted by our culture, while the worlds of fantasy invent different foundations.<sup>7</sup>

In possible world logic, we can redefine the *novum* as the whole set of properties that distinguish the possible world ( $W_1$ ) of the story from the Actual World of reference ( $W_0$ ). This definition of the *novum* differs slightly from Suvin's. For Suvin, the *novum* is a single dominant, a single variation of the real world. However, as Csicsery-Ronay has noticed:

The model of a single *novum* is useful for reading narratively simple fictions, such as short stories and novels with relatively simple narrative arcs. [...] However, once fiction crosses a certain threshold of complexity it becomes more difficult to pin down exactly what the *novum* premise is. [...] Once a Science Fiction has several interlayered narrative arcs, *novums*

can become complex, ambiguous, and multiple. (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 62-63)

For example, Philip K. Dick's novel *Ubik* (1969) is based on at least three variants: i) the presence of individuals with parapsychological powers, belonging to organizations that fight each other, who are sometimes powerful enough to change reality and undo events by changing the past, ii) the possibility for civilians to travel to the Moon regularly, iii) the "moratoria", a condition whereby the deceased are kept in a state of "half-life", lost in their inner realities, but still have the ability to communicate with the world of the living. The structural difference of *Ubik's* fictional world arises from the intertwining of these themes.

In effect, we could consider the history of science fiction as a progressive development of the completeness and structural complexity of its fictional worlds. As Wolf noted, the progressive growth in size and detail of imaginary worlds during the 20th century was a general trend, firstly in literature, which remained the primary place in which imaginary worlds were conceived until the middle of the century. From this point of view, J.R.R. Tolkien's imaginary worlds marked a turning point. In particular, the presence of an organic, coherent, complex, and detailed organization of fictional worlds is not a starting point in science-fiction literature, but a goal, which actually seems to emerge fully only in some works of the 1960s. As early as the 1950s, the fictional world of so-called "social science fiction"—focused on the description of future societies in which certain trends of today's world were vividly exaggerated—suffered from oversimplification: the extrapolation, in fact, was generally based on a few elements that become totalizing, such as the power of advertising agencies in F. Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth *The Space Merchants* (1952), or the hegemony of supermarkets in Damon Knight's *Hell's Pavement* (1955).

## The Gates to the Worlds

As we have seen, according to Pavel and Doležel, fictional worlds are incomplete, "small worlds" that largely overlap with the actual one. Thus, many of the elements that form fictional worlds (and even imaginary worlds) are common to the Actual World and, as such, are often not explicitly described in the text. If this is true, in studying the nature of science-fiction and fantasy worlds, we should pay particular attention to the presence of "estranged" elements (Suvin 1979) that characterize these fictional worlds

and that are “not mimetic” of empirical reality. In this regard, the study of *incipit* is of special importance. In fact, if world construction takes place on the basis of clues throughout the whole text, it is usually the beginning that sets the genre conventions and the protocols of reading, marking the difference between the Actual and the Fictional Worlds and allowing the text to establish a non-existent but possible context, an imaginary world: “In most Science Fiction novels the *incipit* has precisely the function of establishing very violently this relationship. Plausibility, concreteness, tangibility of nonexistent; construction of a world that is ‘other’ but just as ‘true’ as the real one” (Volli 1980, 121).

The analysis should therefore be focused on the way in which the elements constituting the *novum* (in Suvin’s terms) occur to the reader, revealing the science-fiction nature of the world described by the text and giving a first characterization of the fictional world that is further developed (or denied) thereafter. Considering the different ways of presenting the structural difference between Actual World and Fictional World to the audience (reader, viewer), a short typology should include at least three types of *incipit* (Volli 1980; Arganese 1987):

1) Initially, the Fictional World is structurally similar (compatible) with the Actual World; then “something” happens that changes the world-defining relation. This is the case with various apocalyptic fictions, like the one used in the movie *The Road* (2009)—the movie based on Cormac McCarthy’s novel. The film opens with a series of shots of a farmhouse garden full of plants and flowers, where a man and a woman are engaged in daily activities. The catastrophe is announced (but not explicitly shown) until the second sequence: at night, indoors, the man feels “something” and turns on all the taps at home; screeching noises and desperate cries in the background can be heard. The third sequence shows the man awakening one morning many years later, in a grey devastated land.

2) The Fictional World is structurally different from the beginning, but this difference is not immediately clear to the viewer or reader due to an information delay and a strategy of gradual revelation of *novum*. This creates a state of ambiguity that continues until an explicit science-fictional element awakens the reader or viewer and makes her reinterpret the information already received from this new perspective. An example is the beginning of Robert Heinlein’s novel *Starship Troopers*, which opens with a reference to a “drop” and a “ship” whose semantic value is ambiguous and can refer both to a current or to an estranged context. The text goes on between an “everyday” interpretation and a “science-fictional” interpretation of fiction for a couple of pages, until the word “ship” is understood to mean “starship”,



with the observation that the ship “stayed in orbit”, and a reference to the sensational gravity endured by soldiers in the “braking” of the ship (Arganese 1987, 20).

3) The Fictional World is structurally different from the beginning and the difference is immediately made explicit thanks to information unrelated to an Actual World encyclopedia, such as in the *Star Wars* opening crawl: “It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire.”

We will call the “first elements” of the world those elements that allow the reader or viewer to recognize the fictional world as science-fictional. The ‘first elements’ of the text are not necessarily the introduction to the fictional nature of the text, especially if the fictional nature is revealed first with elements that do not differ from elements of the Actual World or are charged by a semantic ambiguity that prevents the immediate awareness of their science-fictional nature.<sup>8</sup>

### Giving narrative information

Giving information about the world (the so-called “narrative information”) is certainly one of the major problems in science fiction. In fact, if science-fiction worlds are structurally different from the Actual one, the knowledge that the audience should have to “fill in the gaps” (Wolf 2012) and interpret the texts should also be structurally different. Science-fiction worlds are based on a semantic “absent paradigm” (Angenot 1979) that requires an encyclopedia of reference (i.e. a set of knowledge about the world; Eco 1979) that is not that of the present world shared by the audience. Obviously, the audience can fill in some of the gaps by making proper conjectures based on their knowledge of the Actual World, or by referring to a sort of encyclopedia of genre, as in the case of stereotypes or recurring figures, such as “hyperspace”, that need not be explained time and again, and are usually taken for granted. However, the text should provide a larger number of details in order to establish the new world logic and how it differs from the Actual World.

However, as Angenot notes, literary science fiction and, in particular, that of anticipation tales, avoids explaining every datum systematically, as this would be tedious and inadvisable if not contrary to the “rules” of the genre. Angenot (1979) observes that science-fiction readers proceed from the particular to the general: “he induces from the particular some

imagined, general rules that prolong the author's fantasies and confer on them plausibility. The reader engages in a conjectural reconstruction which 'materializes' the fictional universe" (15). The reason for this actually lies in the peculiar discursive organization of a science-fiction text, that involves narrative information in a complex textual game (Bertetti 1997).

With the exception of some prophecies or literary experiments, narrative texts are usually not told in the future tense, even though they refer to future events. So there are historically two main modes of "telling the future":

- a) The text places an eye witness in the scene, who somehow becomes aware of future events, and reports them at the present moment: it is the typical mode of prophetic texts and some early novels such as *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells (1895).
- b) More often, the text enacts a real enunciational fiction, simulating a situation in which an enunciator belonging to the future addresses an enunciatee also belonging to the future, recounting a series of events that happened in *their* past (near or remote), a past that is always *our* future.

Maintaining the consistency of this fictitious situation of enunciation, which cannot be broken without compromising the referential illusion requires several limitations to the carriage of information. In particular—at least in theory—notions that would be trivial for a fictitious narratee must be avoided. This is the reason why anticipation tales often take the narrative form of a historical novel, travel literature, or Bildungsroman. This, of course, is an ideal model; de facto sf literary texts very often give information that would be redundant on the basis of the simulated enunciation. To some degree, this is generally accepted by the reader, who needs these notions to understand the fictional text.

As Wolf notes, "Audiovisual media such as movies have an advantage when it comes to world-building" (2012, 59), as they can more easily depict a large number of details and have less problems related to the fictional instance. While a literary text has trouble justifying the description of a vehicle that is futuristic for the reader but actually belongs to the everyday reality of fictitious narratee, a film can show it without any problems. However, even in the movies, parts of encyclopaedic information, such as historical details, environmental information etc., cannot be revealed by the images and must be communicated (or suggested) otherwise. But, of course, the problem is less central than in written texts.

## Notes

1. Note that, in Eco's constructivist approach, when we refer to the Actual World, we do not refer directly to the phenomenal world of our experience, but to another cultural construct, that is not different in this respect from fictional worlds: in fact, it would not be possible to compare entities that do not have the same nature.
2. A different attempt to define sf on the basis of a typology of narrative worlds was made by Bandirali and Terrone: recovering Pavel's ontological conception of possible worlds, they say of a *primary ontology* (the real world, traces of which are preserved in the movie) and a *secondary ontology* (the world created by the film, that is real inside the story). In any case, the secondary ontology is always the result of a speech act (the one of the film). Within this theoretical framework, Bandirali and Terrone define sf on the basis of the relationship of transformation between primary and secondary ontology. In sf, this relationship is given in terms of an *ontological extension* (secondary ontology is more extensive than primary, as the inventory of accessible entities is broader) and a *technological intensification* (such extension is due to an *epistemology* and a *technique*, meaning "a system of knowledge and procedures through which thought exercises its control over the world" [Bandirali and Terrone 2008, 19]). This allows us to distinguish sf from other genres, such as the techno-thriller (in which you have a surplus of technology, but no ontological extension) or fantasy tales (in which the technological extension is not related to a technological intensification).
3. Or, at least, if there is a difference, it is postulated on the basis of scientific extrapolation, as in the case of different planets or portions of universe that do not obey normal physical laws, such as the anomaly singularity described in the *Kefahuchi Tract* trilogy by M. John Harrison (2002-2012).
4. This proposal is intended only as a typology of different possible worlds, typical of each specific genre, and not a typology of genres. We believe that the different nature of worlds is not a sufficient condition to define what a genre is: in our opinion, in fact, genres are empirical entities or, better, discursive institutions recognized as such by producing institutions and audiences (Altman 1999); for this reason alone, they have communicative and pragmatic effectiveness (arousing expectations and addressing the work of interpretation). Not to mention that not all literary genres are distinguishable on the basis of the recurring features of their narrative worlds: if it is true for fantasy, sf, or the historical novel, conversely a romance novel, a *Bildungsroman* or a mystery novel can share the same narrative world (or, at least, the same type of world, similar for example to the Actual World), but what sets them apart and defines them are essentially their thematic or narrative structures.
5. This allows us to discriminate sf from other kinds of narratives in which technological or scientific innovations appear as "gadgets" with only a mar-

ginal role in fictional economy (for example, the invention of a new kind of weapon in a James Bond story), but also, as Suvin points out, from poetic metaphors or other literary forms that display new visions of the real, as is the case with Bertold Brecht's "estrangement".

6. This does not mean that sf should be based solely on scientific-technological postulates, but rather on knowledge that is generally respectful of scientific method and an explicit, consistent and immanent explanation of reality.
7. I speak of "epistemic foundations commonly accepted by our culture" because, of course, any distinction between natural and supernatural happenings are based on our beliefs and our encyclopedia of reference (Eco 1979).
8. Unpublished research we have carried out on a number of classic sf novels has shown that these elements are mainly related (in order of frequency) to: I. machinery and technological objects (often means of transport); II. exceptional individuals (monsters, mutants, aliens, etc.); III. locations; IV. other elements, among which: references to future historical events, references or citations of media and literary texts, elements of daily life (sometimes similar but slightly different from those of the Actual World), and references to news items.

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### 3. “He Doesn’t Look Like Sherlock Holmes”

The Truth Value and Existential Status of Fictional Worlds and their Characters

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#### **Abstract**

This chapter seeks to define the existential status and truth-value of fictional characters, with frequent appeals to multiple iterations of Sherlock Holmes as an example. It surveys two rival schools of thought, drawn from metaphysics and possible-world semantics. Alexius Meinong’s “non-existent objects”, i.e. the metaphysical approach, is shown to be qualitatively different from how we think of fictional characters. David Lewis’s “truth in fiction”, derived from counterfactual logic and possible-world semantics, fails to address the particularities of fictional characters as they are represented anew across multiple iterations. By contrast, I advance that fictional characters are best thought of as “quasi-existent”—a stipulated term that conveys how their imagined existence is neither reducible to real-world knowledge nor is the sum of their textual iterations. In conclusion, I suggest how “quasi-existent/existence”, however counterintuitive, may prove productive to future theories of fiction.

**Keywords:** Sherlock Holmes, nonexistent objects, truth in fiction, Meinong, David Lewis

#### **Introduction**

In an interview some years ago, Steven Moffat, co-creator of the BBC series *Sherlock*, declared the following: “I think Robert Downey Jr.’s done a great job of being Sherlock Holmes, but I’m never, ever going to look at him and

believe he actually is Sherlock Holmes. He's too little, and he doesn't look like him" (Leader 2010). It is a response any fan, author, or even general audience member understands. We ascribe attributes to fictional entities and thereafter imagine them as looking and acting in a certain way. Conversely, we establish boundaries and limitations within which we accept a range of varied portrayals. Sherlock Holmes, unlike you or me, can exist in the 21st century, or in Victorian England.<sup>1</sup>

But, in accepting these multiple portrayals, is there any sense in which we think of them as true, or relatively correct? The very idea of a truthful or correct portrayal of Sherlock Holmes seems oxymoronic. Yet the above quote indicates that the truth value of fictional discourse invites greater complexity than the simple declaration that "it's all made up." If that is the case, then questions as to the identity of a fictional character—just *who* is Sherlock Holmes?—cannot be explained just in terms of his having originated within the mind of any single individual or collective authorship.

Such concerns have already been taken up in metaphysics, possible-world semantics, and theories of fiction.<sup>2</sup> However, understanding fictional worlds as possible worlds leaves unanswered the question of what Murray Smith has termed "the saliency of character."<sup>3</sup> Namely: we think of fictional narratives as being about fictional characters. The latter, in turn, become the focus of our attention. It is, more often than not, characters that sustain our interest and orient our experience of fictional worlds. The problem of character construction, and specifically the truth value and existential status of fictional characters, deserves to be treated as a unique problem. The question now becomes: by what unique terms or even theories might one characterize fictional characters, in relation to truth, existence, and/or fictitious worlds? Hopefully, in answering this question, we might tease out the hidden wisdom (or obfuscation) as to what is meant when we say an actor does or does not look like Sherlock Holmes.

There are at least two philosophical answers to this: the first arises from metaphysics; the second, from possible-world semantics. The metaphysical answer is that Sherlock Holmes and, by implication, all fictional characters, are "nonexistent objects": entities that do not exist, but retain nominal and even abstract identities all the same.<sup>4</sup> The answer from possible-world semantics is that fictional characters are a corollary to imagined worlds. Fictional characters are identified as part of fictional worlds, beyond which there is no theoretical need to confer upon them a unique identity (i.e. "nonexistent" or otherwise). Possible-world semantics rejects the metaphysical account, on grounds of intellectual parsimony.



Consequently, I will argue against both accounts. In turn, I advance that fictional characters hold unique identities. These identities are best thought of as “quasi-existent”.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I first consider the theory of nonexistent objects as inadequate to accounts of fictional characters. I thereafter turn to theories of possible worlds and counterfactual logic, only to find them lacking. This, therefore, leads me to the *quasi-existence* of fictional characters, which I defend as argumentatively necessary.

### Meinong: Objects Nonexistent and Quasi-existent

Alexius Meinong’s 1904 essay “The Theory of Objects” attempts nothing short of arguing for the viability of a philosophical discipline, developing its titular theory within metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> This theory advances the counterintuitive notion that there can be nonexistent objects: e.g. round squares and golden mountains. This position derives from the principle of beyond being, or *Aussersein*, which, as Meinong contends, arises from the independence of essence from existence, or *Sosein* from *Sein*: “that which is not in any way external to the Object, but constitutes its proper essence, subsists in its *Sosein*—the *Sosein* attaching to the Object whether the object has being or not” (Meinong 1960, 86). To this, Meinong adds:

Being is not the presupposition under which knowledge finds, as it were, its point of attack; it is itself such a point of attack. Non-being is equally as good a point of attack. Furthermore, in the *Sosein* of each Object, knowledge already finds a field of activity to which it may have access without first answering the question concerning being or non-being, or without answering this question affirmatively. (*ibid.*)

*Aussersein* in turn serves as a substitute for an earlier concept, *Quasisein*, or quasi-being, which Meinong abandoned: “Can being which is in principle unopposed by non-being be called being at all?” (1960, 85). Without entering into the theoretical validity of *aussersein*, I argue that Meinong was premature in jettisoning quasi-being, or preferably quasi-existence, as it enjoys a special relevance to fictional representations. This entails that the characters populating cinematic and other fictions are ultimately of a different type from the logically impossible objects for which Meinong developed his theory of nonexistent objects. I consider why his argument against the logical valence of quasi-being is illegitimate; subsequently,

I indicate why nonexistence cannot be applied to the likes of Sherlock Holmes or Dracula.

The argument that quasi-being can neither be posited as a polar opposite to being or non-being is fallible. It approximates Aristotle's law of the excluded middle, albeit inaccurately: one must affirm or deny something, but cannot half-affirm and/or half-deny it. One must either affirm or deny that Sherlock Holmes is a nonexistent object. Nonetheless, denying that Holmes is a nonexistent object does not commit one to the view that Sherlock Holmes exists: one alternatively might say he subsists.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, when running your finger in some water, you must either affirm or deny that it is cold: denying that it is cold might entail that the water is warm, a temperature that is, in essence, quasi-hot and quasi-cold. Two terms may be antithetical, but this hardly negates intermediary concepts or properties.

More importantly, one cannot conceive of zombies and vampires in the same way one thinks of Meinong's round square and golden mountain. Consider how one Meinong scholar describes these entities:

we make concepts, descriptions, imaginary representations, and so on, that apply or fail to apply to objects, but none of these things we make are the objects themselves. When we imagine a particular object, we are not making it but picking it out of the infinite abundance of *Aussersein* and focusing our attention on it rather than on some other object. (Perszyk 1993, 257-258).

Are we imagining *a* round square, an exemplar of this impossible object, or *any* round square that might correspond to this linguistic utterance (i.e. "round square" as a word)? Putting the matter technically, do our thoughts correspond to attitudes that are *de dicto* (i.e. about what is said) or *de re* (i.e. about the thing)?<sup>8</sup> For Perszyk, they cannot be *de dicto*:

In imagining a golden mountain, one is surely imagining that something is golden and a mountain, and in imagining a round square, one is surely imagining that something is both round and square, at least if this is understood *de dicto*. But if it is understood *de dicto*, it is contentious to say that there is a nonexistent object of the imagining. In *de dicto* attitudes, there need be no object at all, existent or nonexistent, as Russell showed. (258-259)

Turning to the other side of the equation, consider again Perszyk: "Now, if this is not *de dicto*, but *de re*, the claim that if someone thinks of a golden mountain, it can *at best* be something that is thought or imagined to be

golden and a mountain [...] is surely mistaken; it *is* golden and a mountain, if this is *de re*." (259). We therefore return to the paradox of beingless objects—that in Meinong's metaphysics, a round square is an object of sorts, albeit not one which exists, and that we cannot therefore individuate it within any referential capacity.

While round squares and golden mountains cannot be the object of *de re* attitudes, zombies, vampires, Sherlock Holmes, and other fictional characters can. For example, when we speak of James Bond, we usually mean Ian Fleming's creation. We do not mean the real-life ornithologist from whom Fleming derived the name of his secret agent. Hence, our attitude to James Bond is *de re*: we refer to Fleming's Bond, and *not* the ornithologist (or *vice versa*). By contrast, there is no referring the round square, insofar as it is invoked by Meinong, to some alternate namesake. To do so would entail that the round square has varied instantiations, which defeats the very premise that it is nonexistent.

This brings us to the second way fictional characters are not like a round square. Consider the character Dracula, as originated by Bram Stoker. He is more than just an undead individual of protean shape and form who thrives on human blood. In an alternate universe in which there had never been any mention of vampires—by which I mean not just that there were no vampire tales, but that the very term and the concept it implies had not been thought of—"bloodsucking undead individual" would be an eligible candidate for beingless objecthood, alongside round squares, golden mountains, etc. When an ostensibly imaginary object appears within a culturally sanctified representational context, it achieves a different status from "beingless object." The degree to which "round square" or "golden mountain" are enshrined within philosophical discourses moves these two terms closer into the orbit of Fleming's or Stoker's respective creations. Nonetheless, they exemplify an argument, but they are unlikely to operate within a constructed (fictional) universe. On the contrary, we are not meant to imagine the existence of a round square, for example, but to believe in its nonexistence. Conversely, *Hamlet* makes for a rather ineffective tragedy if one reads it as a tract on the nonexistence of a neurasthenic prince. But this raises the question as to the truth value of fictional discourse and the existential status of its characters.

## David Lewis and Counterfactuals

We must now turn to David Lewis, who is worth citing at length on the topic of the truth value of fictional discourse:

Reasoning about truth in fiction is very much like counterfactual reasoning. We make a supposition contrary to fact [...]. But we do not use factual premises altogether freely, since some of them would fall victim to the change that takes us from actuality to the envisaged counterfactual situation. [...] We depart from actuality as far as we must to reach a possible world where the counterfactual supposition comes true (and that might be quite far if the supposition is a fantastic one). (Lewis 1983, 269)

Furthermore, Lewis dismisses the Meinongian approach as unduly complicated. Instead of theorizing about nonexistent objects within the context of fictional narratives, he proposes the concept of "inter-fictional carry-over" (274). By this he means that whatever knowledge one acquires about Sherlock Holmes in an individual story (e.g. he is a brilliant detective, suffers from depression, plays the violin, etc.) then applies to all other fictional iterations of Doyle's creation. Without such a principle, most stories would pose serious challenges to our comprehension:

I have spoken of Conan Doyle's Holmes stories; but many other authors also have written Holmes story. [...] Surely many things are true in these satellite stories [...] because they carry over from Conan Doyle's original Holmes stories. Similarly, if instead of asking what is true in the entire corpus of Conan Doyle's Holmes stories we ask what is true in "The Hound of the Baskervilles," we will doubtless find many things that are true in that story only by virtue of carry-over from Conan Doyle's other Holmes stories. (*ibid.*).

*Inter-fictional carry-over* is useful and ingenious, but it need not stamp out quasi-existence, nor does it address all the thorny issues that quasi-existence ably encompasses.

Let us see in greater detail the logic of counterfactual reasoning, and how it relates to fiction. In either case, while the antecedent may be imagined, at least some of the preconditions for the antecedent ought to have some real-world basis (i.e. in our existing world). A question such as, "Would Shakespeare turn to filmmaking were he alive today?" invites some logical incertitude. To imagine Shakespeare in the picture business today, we would have to suppose a man born in the sixteenth century alive and well in the 21st—either with the assistance of a time machine or the fountain of youth. Arguably: the consideration that within an alternate history Shakespeare might have been born four centuries later is not so easily amenable to the problem at hand. The reasoning here is that William Shakespeare,

the flesh and blood human being responsible for having written several plays and sonnets, was who he was in part because of his genetic/DNA makeup, inherited from his parents. At least within a real-world context, I defer to Saul Kripke on this point.<sup>9</sup> To suppose otherwise would constitute what Lewis has otherwise termed an “impossible antecedent”, meaning a hypothetical reality that “differ[s] from our world in matters of philosophical, mathematical and even logical truth” (1973, 24).

This raises troubling prospects for a broad range of theories on counterfactual reasoning, although the difficulty may be plausibly circumvented. Take Willard V.O. Quine’s famous speculation on how Caesar might have fought if alive during the Korean War.<sup>10</sup> As Marc Lange points out, to suggest that this would be the same Caesar who was a Roman Emperor, and thus must be endowed with immortality, verges on the superfluous: the interest of the counterfactual involves Caesar’s skills as a military tactician, not some hypothetical defiance of mortality. Lange further indicates that the antecedent “If Caesar had fought in Korea” may be “consistent with [natural] law” (1993, 263), despite his commitment to what he has dubbed nomic preservation: that counterfactual reasoning in logic is bound to the laws of nature.<sup>11</sup> If one accepts this, the question remains: How to characterize the representation of Caesar in each and every one of these statements? In turn, if one rejects nomic preservation, as David Lewis does, one must still explain by what logic Caesar is relocated to Korea, circa 1950. No less remarkably, John Halpin invokes the possibility of miracles.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, I offer a simpler account as to how one might entertain the speculation of Caesar fighting in Korea.

Evidently, in the above case, something of the flesh and blood human being of history, Julius Caesar’s biological personhood, is lost. Conversely, as Lange implies, a set of personal characteristics has been abstracted from this biological person and arraigned under a differently defined historical or cultural persona. This is akin to Charles S. Peirce’s precise abstraction.<sup>13</sup> Even if one rejects the latter two declarations, it seems absurd to wonder whether the Caesar in some alternate world who fought in Korea is still the Caesar of our world, albeit born of different parents. Lewis might here invoke his similarity of counterparts theory: Caesar in Korea is a similar counterpart to our Caesar, but not the same man. Without dismissing this stipulation altogether, I draw attention to the fact that our belief in the literal existence of other worlds is premised on Lewis’s insistence, which invites further argumentative quandaries.<sup>14</sup> Returning to our imaginary world where Caesar fought in Korea, we need to envisage the latter as benefiting from some modified version of either subsistence or existence, akin to what happens with the creation of fictional characters.

Lewis contends that what we believe to be true in the world is taken to be true in fiction, unless specified otherwise.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, a necessary condition for one's individual personhood, call it *hereditary dependency*, does not carry over into fiction, and *it is never specified otherwise*. In the BBC series *Sherlock*, the world of the titular detective has been updated so that he lives, not in Victorian England, but in the London of today. Yet, the show's co-creators do not speak of displacing Holmes's entire family lineage roughly a century ahead—despite the fact that his brother Mycroft figures in the series. Rather, it is understood that Sherlock Holmes and his surrounding *dramatis personae* (Watson, Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft, Moriarty, Lestrade, Irene Adler, etc.) have simply been modernized—regardless of whom their imaginary parents might or might not have been.

The chromosomal makeup of fictional characters is equally far removed from their imagined identities, so they can switch gender from fiction to fiction. The most famous case in film history may be when Howard Hawks reimaged Hilary Johnson from *The Front Page* as a woman (cf. *His Girl Friday*, 1940). Recent examples, again in Sherlock Holmes, provide even more radical iterations. The TV series *Elementary* turns John Watson into Joan Watson and, in one spectacular plot twist, recasts Moriarty as a woman who adopts the (diegetically fake) persona of Irene Adler. The counterfactual "what ifs?" guiding this storytelling reinforce the crucial point that characters do not benefit from any genetic/chromosomal stability but still remain who they are as fictional constructs. Narratives of Dracula and Superman often undermine this aforementioned stability even more greatly. *Red Son*, a comic book later adapted into film, conceives of Superman not as the son of Jor-El, hailing from the planet Krypton, but as a descendant of Lex Luthor, sent into the past in a time-travelling capsule from planet Earth. Wes Craven's *Dracula 2000* posits that its lead vampire is no longer Vlad Tepes, but Judas: here we have a case of Stoker's vampire transformed from a different *historical* figure. In both cases—Superman and Dracula—the characters remain who they are meaning that Superman is still understood to be Superman and Dracula is still Dracula, even if they are no longer genetically who they are. Consequently, just *who* they are, and how to speak of this, becomes a capital question.

## Quasi-Existence

To reiterate, and to state the obvious: fictional characters do not literally exist. More importantly, even as imaginary constructs, they lack crucial,

defining properties of existing objects. Chief among these is what I have termed *hereditary dependence*: that one must inevitably take into account her genetic/DNA constitution in individuating human beings. The same does not apply to fictional characters. We at least tacitly assume that they do possess some genetic/DNA constitution. This (presumed, imagined) constitution, however, may change from one textual iteration to another. All the same, Sherlock Holmes is still Sherlock Holmes, whether he is alive today or over a century ago. We tacitly accept these inconsistencies in his (imagined) biological and historical personhood. We equally and habitually do so without stipulating additional interpretive assumptions (e.g. if Sherlock Holmes is living today, and not in the Victorian era, then that means his family lineage must have been equally displaced by over a century).

For these reasons, fictional characters are more than the sum of their properties as evoked in fictional worlds.<sup>16</sup> If this statement holds, accounts of fictional character-hood limited to “truth in fiction” and/or possible worlds are insufficient. Indeed, “truth in fiction” merely states that one knows the properties or distinguishing features of a character on the basis of an initial fictional context. One thereafter applies this knowledge in further contexts. For example, one knows who Sherlock Holmes is in his second literary appearance, *The Sign of Four*, on the basis of how he has been portrayed in his inaugural literary appearance in *A Study in Scarlet*. This is then expanded in possible-world semantics. From Doyle’s Sherlock to the BBC version, one simply has counterfactual alternatives of the same character. In other words, “What if there was a great detective living in London circa 1887?” is replaced by “What if there was a great detective living in London today?” One has stipulated alternate worlds and Sherlock Holmes is simply part and parcel—albeit a central part—of this world.

But, as should be clear, the above proves inadequate. Despite factors such as *hereditary dependence*, Sherlock Holmes always remains Sherlock Holmes, above and beyond the defining specifications of his imagined world (i.e. his imagined, familial provenance). If this seems like, at best, a trifle inconvenient to counterfactual logic and interpretive theory, then consider the range of counterexamples: e.g. characters who explicitly change parents; gender; personhood; even, in at least one adaptation of a Holmes tale, names.<sup>17</sup> They retain a continuous identity across such inconsistencies. Furthermore, this continuous identity and these inconsistencies are never accounted for within the imagined reality of their respective worlds, or the “truth” of their fictitious depictions. Any way one tackles the problem, fictional characters are not reducible to their collective textual iterations and/or their collective imagined worlds. Their aforementioned continuity

and inconsistencies are accounted for in terms of another unifying principle, which I term quasi-existence.

By quasi-existence, I mean that, within their fictional contexts, characters benefit from many, but not all, of the defining characteristics of actual human beings. Unless specified otherwise, they share many of the features of what Murray Smith has termed the "person schema". As such, characters possess physical bodies and consciousness, as well as intentions, affects, and personalities.<sup>18</sup> They additionally, as with real people, have ongoing personal histories: e.g. we know that Sherlock Holmes has faked his death.

At the same time, even within their fictional contexts, they lack crucial defining characteristics of actual human beings. Hence, at any one time, at least a few of their defining characteristics can be subject to significant variation, if not incommensurable change. These pivotal changes do not necessarily undermine the character's fictitious identity. What emerges instead is a composite portrait, which encompasses irreconcilable discrepancies, and which surpasses the truth-claims of their fictitious worlds. They are neither existent in the real world (i.e. as *people*), nor only existent within the delimitations of their fictional contexts (i.e. true by virtue of their inter-fictional carry-over). Rather, they occupy a middle-position that is best designated as *quasi-existent*.

## Conclusion

To summarize, in terms of their imaginary or fictitious existence, fictional characters have been approached in two ways. Firstly, they have been equated with nonexistent objects, a concept derived from the metaphysics of Alexius Meinong. Secondly, they have been posited as corollaries to imagined worlds. Therefore, whatever is true within the evoked world is true of its characters. I have sought to show that neither account is fully satisfying. In terms of how they are individuated, fictional characters cannot be equated with Meinong's nonexistent objects. Minimally, fictional characters subsist within a diegetic universe. They can be the object of reference, whereas nonexistent objects as invoked by Meinong cannot. This leads to David Lewis's rival account of "truth in fiction".

However, the epistemic conditions according to which characters are identified are not entirely given in their evoked worlds. For example, Superman is still Superman, even when he is revealed to be an Earthling and not a Kryptonian. Likewise, Sherlockians watching *His Last Vow* understand that "Charles Augustus Magnussen" is really "Charles Augustus Milverton" (from



Doyle's "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton") despite the change of name.<sup>19</sup> This means that fictional characters derive their continuous identities from more than how they are evoked in possible worlds. Quasi-existence therefore designates characters' imagined existence, above and beyond their multiple appearances and the irreconcilable discrepancies, from one appearance to the next. The term may seem counterintuitive; however, it remains the least unlikely characterization when juxtaposed with the other accounts developed so far.

Conversely, if we can accept quasi-existence as a meaningful concept, then it concisely conveys the existential status of fictional beings. We understand that quasi-existent entities are endowed with several real-life attributes, but may also lack certain defining properties, even within an imagined context. We also understand that quasi-existent beings are more than the sum of their textual iterations and achieve continuity of identity independently of their attendant worlds. Finally, and more importantly, we equally understand that real-life individuals can approach quasi-existent status, when evoked within a make-believe context. Hence, to return to the Caesar-in-Korea thought experiment: Caesar becomes a quasi-existent entity, not unlike a fictional character. Consequently, historical fictions would be seen as constructing characters no less distinct from reality than fictitious individuals who have been invented whole cloth. If so, then the breadth and scope of what is understood by "world" within theories of fiction might intrude much more on our real world<sup>20</sup> than we might have previously imagined.

## Notes

1. I take it as an acceptable generalization that we think of the multiple versions of Sherlock Holmes as all representing the "same" Sherlock Holmes. Meaning: these are alternate versions of one identical fictional character. Exceptions may include when a single narrative or work explicitly flags that there are multiple worlds and versions of what would seem to be the same character (e.g. *Sherlock: The Abominable Bride*). This hinges on the distinction between what may be termed *transworld identity* and *similarity of counterparts* (see, in Lewis: 1973, 36-43; 1983, 266-267; and 1986, 192-220). Roughly speaking, Lewis argues for transworld identity within fictional worlds and for counterpart similarity within (non-fictional) possible worlds. I briefly return to this topic further on.
2. For metaphysics, see: Parsons 1980. For possible world semantics, see: Lewis 1983. For theories of fiction, see: Ryan 1991.
3. See: Smith 1995, 17-39.

4. The argument for *nonexistent objects* is attributed to Alexius Meinong. Meinong was not specifically concerned with theories of fiction. However, subsequent Meinongian scholars have applied his metaphysics to theories of fiction: see Parsons 1980, 49-60 and 175-211; see also Pasniczek 2001. I do not comment directly on these efforts, but indicate instead that fictional characters may be categorically different from nonexistent objects, as invoked by Meinong. If this is so, then it should undermine the prospects for a Meinongian theory of fiction. At the very least, apparent non-sequiturs in methodology would have to be met.
5. In so doing, I also cast my lot with ideal language philosophy. Namely: ordinary language cannot sufficiently account for our experience of the world, such that one must stipulate internally coherent and logically consistent terms. It is my hope that "quasi-existence" will fit the bill as per the existential status of fictional characters.
6. Meinong's work was met with vociferous objections, chiefly from Bertrand Russell (see: Russell 1973, 21-93). In the many years since, Meinong has enjoyed a reappraisal. See, for example: Jacquette 2015, Perszyk 1993, and the essays collected in Griffin and Jacquette 2009. I merely argue that nonexistent objects and fictional characters are ultimately incommensurable entities. I leave aside the intrinsic value of Meinong's original theory.
7. Typically, concrete objects exist, while abstract universals subsist. See: Russell 1997, 100. Likewise, according to one theorist, "Sherlock Holmes" [taken as rigid designator] refers to an abstract object that actually exists" (Contessa 2009, 263). By "rigid designator", one means, as a name, "Sherlock Holmes" refers to one thing, and one thing only (i.e. Doyle's fictional detective). This addresses the problem backwards, however, insofar that the same fictional character can change names from one textual iteration to the next: e.g. Charles Augustus Milverton, in an original story by Conan Doyle ("The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton"), becomes Charles August Magnusen in *Sherlock: His Last Vow*. I return to this problem later in the chapter.
8. "I want to see a Steve McQueen film" may be interpreted differently. For *de dicto*, there would be no discrimination between the nominal actor and director: any film with the name in and of itself (i.e. of what is said) suffices. *De re* presupposes the opposite: either the actor or the director (i.e. of the thing: that whom the name denotes). This is an absurd example, devised for the sake of simplicity. More sophisticated distinctions along these lines have been made.
9. Kripke, 1980, 113. In other respects, my inquiry differs from his: see his theory of fiction (Kripke, 2013, 55-78), which resembles Contessa 2009.
10. The thought experiment is originally attributed to Quine, though I am unaware as to whether he ever published it. David Lewis makes mention of it without citation (1973, 66-67).
11. In fact, while the term is visibly Lange's, his understanding of nomic preservation is but one possible variant, for which he is criticized (Demarest 2012). See also: Lange 2009. I eschew such specification in the present context.

12. Halpin 1991.
13. See: Zeman 1983.
14. See: Lewis 1986. For a sympathetic account of Lewis's modal realism, see: Bricker 2006. For a critique, see Chihana 1998, 76-103. I cannot enter the debate here. Instead, I signal my agreement with Kripke that possible worlds are imagined entities of our devising, that need not command literal belief. See especially: Kripke 1980, 15-20 and 43-44.
15. This is elsewhere phrased as the "principle of minimal departure". See: Ryan 1991, 48-60.
16. It may not even be clear to what extent fictional characters have (imagined) essential properties. One can imagine a retelling of Sherlock Holmes in which he *never* became a famous detective living at 221B Baker Street, but solely devoted his life to beekeeping, away from London. The implication, which cannot be developed here, is that any seemingly defining aspect of a fictional character may be subject to radical change. A character, via her multiple iterations, would be identifiable more in terms of "family resemblances" than by any shortlist of necessary/sufficient conditions. Conceivably, there must also be a tipping point, beyond which the character ceases to be recognizable as such (i.e. Sherlock Holmes can only withstand so many changes—in profession, in character, even in name—beyond which he is transformed into a categorically different character).
17. See: note 7, above, on Charles Augustus Milverton/Magnussen. Consider, also, the case of "Herlock Sholmes", a spoof of Doyle's creation devised by Maurice Leblanc. Imagine a series of "Sholmes" stories that nonetheless recapitulate, blow by blow, the key plot points of Doyle's original stories. Why wouldn't this stand as interventions in the Holmes universe, on par with any number of adaptations and spin-offs? Stipulating a necessary and exclusive link between fictional name and identity (i.e. he cannot be Sherlock Holmes unless he is named Sherlock Holmes) would here seem meagre and doctrinaire.
18. For a fuller account, see: Smith 1995, 20-24. I paraphrase Smith, whose list includes: "a discrete human body"; "self-awareness"; "intentional states"; "emotions"; "persisting attributes." (21).
19. See: notes 7 and 17 above.
20. Of course, this presupposes that there is only one actual world, a view challenged most notably by Goodman 1978. I leave the matter aside, although Goodman's nominalism would not undermine the views set forth here.

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## 4. “Visible World”

### The Atlas as a Visual Form of Knowledge and Narrative Paradigm in Contemporary Art<sup>1</sup>

*Cristina Baldacci*

Boni, Marta (ed.), *World Building. Transmedia, Fans, Industries*. Amsterdam University Press, 2017

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#### Abstract

With his *Bilderatlas* dedicated to Mnemosyne, Aby Warburg anticipated a number of issues that would have arisen in art history only in the second half of the 20th century, such as: giving primacy to visual communication; choosing an anthropological approach that gives value to all images; using a method by which to offer an overview as well as a diachronic look on things well before the advent of the internet. This method, which can be referred to as “atlas-form”, is characterized by certain constant features, e.g. the montage of visual fragments, the grid arrangement, the simultaneous view of the singular and plural, the non-hierarchical relationship among the elements, heterogeneity, the open structure, intertextuality, the desire for wholeness, anachronism. It is therefore an important aesthetic and epistemic apparatus, not just in theory but also in artistic practice, because it allows, as Georges Didi-Huberman has highlighted, a continuous review of history, knowledge, and the world through images. This paper aims to trace the evolution of the atlas form as a way to rethink the organization of contemporary knowledge through some significant case-studies.

**Keywords:** Maps, Atlas, Contemporary Art, Geography, Warburg

Traditionally, an atlas is a systematic collection of maps with which humans have redefined the world. We also know that, even before designating maps and their representations, Atlas was the mythological Titan who, for the ancients, held up the sky. The Flemish geographer Gerhard Kremer

(1512-1594) chose Atlas for the cover of his Renaissance compendium, the first geographical atlas in the modern sense of the term, along with the one by the Flemish Abraham Ortelius (1528-1598).

The geographical atlas as a collection of maps is literally at the fingertips of users as a “handy and consultable” book, as an ordered succession of plates (or images) striving towards completeness (Castro 2011, 165). For, as far as it may be detailed, exhaustive, and updated, an atlas cannot truly be considered complete. As Georges Didi-Huberman observes, the “multiple”, the “diverse”, the “hybrid”, define any type of montage, and therefore a map representation or combination of images. The inclusion of these characteristics leads to the deconstruction of “the ideals of uniqueness, of specificity, of purity, of total knowledge” (Didi-Huberman 2011, 13). This can be extended to all atlases—and not just geographical ones—since an atlas is always structured like a body of plates bearing images that are reproduced or juxtaposed.

In fact, an atlas is not merely a scientific tool, or a sort of “geo-referential data” archive (Pignatti 2011, 7) allowing us to define and understand the world through a series of environmental information and territorial measurements. More so since information, thanks to digital mapping and satellite technology, has grown increasingly precise, accessible, and shareable.<sup>2</sup> “Rational and analytical knowledge” and “creative invention” come together here. This union allows the atlas to be, at the same time, a description-representation and an interpretation-reconfiguration of the world, based on natural as well as social, political, and cultural phenomena.

As Francesco Tedeschi explains in his book on the relationship between contemporary art and geography, geographical knowledge safeguards

a synthesis of humanism and scientific analysis, useful in creating an encyclopedic outlook which isn't and cannot be metaphysical, but which has a holistic connotation, where maps play a role with language and image (Tedeschi 2011, 18).

It is no coincidence that the boom of picture atlases, no longer related just to geography or astronomy, but also to other humanistic disciplines, began with a predilection for encyclopedias dating back to the Enlightenment, reaching its climax as photography became widespread and ultimately replaced printed plates. From the late 1800s, photo atlases intended to organize knowledge gradually grew in number, and involved both old and new fields, such as anatomy, physiognomy, mineralogy, botany, archeology, and ethnography.

Two great thinkers from the early 1900s—Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg—quickly realized the narrative and visual effectiveness of atlases as a montage of images pertaining to a given artistic-cultural tradition. By commenting on one of the first avant-garde photo mapping projects, *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* by August Sander, Benjamin began a far-reaching comparison in 1931 with the atlas as a form of visual knowledge. Sander had mapped German society of the age, at the twilight of the Weimar Republic, dividing it according to classes and professions and solely basing himself on “direct observation” (Benjamin [1931] 1999, 520). For Benjamin, the physiognomic precision with which Sander portrayed faces represented the predominant aspect of his work. In fact, he was convinced that these portraits would quickly take on “unlooked-for topicality” and prove to be not so much a mere “picture book” (*Bilderbuch*) as a “training manual” (*Übungsatlas*).<sup>3</sup>

In 1933, Sander’s project was censured by the nascent Nazi regime, as it was judged to be antithetical to the idealized and mono-racial propagandistic image of the German people that would eventually become one of the deadliest weapons of the Third Reich.<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s, Warburg also adopted the atlas as an epistemic-cognitive tool. His *Bilderatlas* dedicated to *Mnemosyne* was conceived as an instrument that could give him an overall vision of his research, which had enormous range. For years, he had followed the migrations of archetypal images, the *Pathosformeln*, from Antiquity to the Renaissance, in an attempt to single out their survival in contemporary visual fields. That is why his atlas also includes “high” and “low” images he had collected throughout his life, thus representing a Sisyphean attempt to create a model of cultural memory in which, as Benjamin H.D. Buchloh wrote:

Western European humanist thought would once more, perhaps for the last time, recognize its origins and trace its latent continuities into the present, ranging spatially across the confines of European humanist culture and situating itself temporally within the parameters of European history from classical Antiquity to the present. (Buchloh 1999, 122)

Warburg foresaw a series of themes that would surface later on in the 1900s, such as preference for visual communication, or an anthropological approach that gives value to all images, or using, much before the advent of the web, a method that could offer an overall, diachronic view of things.

“The word to the image” (*Zum Bild das Wort*), according to Warburg’s famous saying, means, first of all, to think according to images. The Warburgian *Bilderatlas* was thus “a visual form of knowledge” and “a skilled



form of seeing” (Didi-Huberman 2011, 12), which implies precise qualities, such as montage or re-montage of visual fragments; grid layout; view of the single and the collective, contemporaneously; non-hierarchical rapport between things; heterogeneity; open structure; intertextuality; desire for thoroughness; and anachronisms.

After Warburg, the atlas took shape not only as a theoretical epistemic system but also as an aesthetic form in art practice, to such an extent that it appears to be the tool most used in contemporary art, intended to give new order and meaning to the multitude of materials that make up the vast archive composed by our visual imaginary. Through the atlas, artists weave stories that, as fragmentary as they might be (both in quantity and variety of elements and in the infinite connections the eye of the “reader” is able to establish), offer a broad, composite view of the world and allow us to constantly reconsider stories and knowledge.

The artists who assimilated Warburg’s teachings more than anyone else were those who, during the 1900s, pieced reality back together into personal maps or cosmologies, poised between order and disorder, old and new, memory and oblivion, finite and infinite.<sup>5</sup> For artists, too, atlas plates or maps are tools with which to explore systematically the (inner or outer) world and embark upon journeys somewhere between the real and the fantastical. Besides, as Italo Calvino noted, the same “geographical map, even though it is a static object, presupposes an idea of narrative; it is conceived on the basis of a journey; it is an Odyssey” (Calvino 2014, 19).

Along with space, time is the essential element of the mapping paradigm. That is why Calvino compared a map to a narrative structure that contains both “time as the history of the past” and “time as the future”; whereas, before him, Benjamin had reflected extensively on the possibility of “articulating the space [*Raum*] of life—Bios—graphically in a map” (Benjamin 1979, 295). The *Bios* idea as a particular form of life derived from the Greek Aristotelian tradition of the *polis* also clearly includes both the notion of biological and philosophical time.

Oftentimes, artists who work with the atlas model tend to cover the entire span of their lives or outline worlds as completely as possible, chasing after an unquestionably personal—but therefore thoroughly cultural—utopia with roots in the art of memory and in combinational logics (*ars combinatoria*) in encyclopedism. As Giorgio Mangani skillfully wrote, with modernity “the encyclopedia is transformed, in the esoteric and occultist desire to condense knowledge into limited, systematically ordered images, into maps [...]” Atlas maps and plates are thus transformed, gradually, into “*machine[s] à voir*” (Mangani 1983, 74-75).

Today, one of the most emblematic cases of this newfound desire for completeness is Piero Manzoni who, in 1961, in a gesture poised between the Dadaist and Fluxus movements, erected a monolithic upside-down pedestal or "socle" with a globe resting on top in the remote Danish town of Herning. His *Socle du monde* is perhaps the most evocative and witty contemporary metaphor for an atlas, intended as a titanic bearer and as a portrayal of the world. A few years later, in an equally anti-conformist and playful attitude, Marcel Broodthaers and Alighiero Boetti created their own personal atlases. With *La conquête de l'espace. Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires* (1975), Broodthaers poked fun at the traditional methods of measuring and mapping land, drawing a series of black Lilliputian *silhouettes* in the place of a geographic, historic, and political atlas. The nations, which were individually isolated on the page of a tiny book, were all the same size and arranged alphabetically. They could be distinguished only by the shapes of their borders.

As indicated by the reference to artists and soldiers in the work's secondary title, for Broodthaers the heart of the matter is "the conquest of space", in more than just the geographic sense. The many implications concerning this particular "conquest" have been expounded by Deborah Schultz, who sums up thusly:

For the military it means the conquest of space in terms of land; for artists the conquest of the space within the works and in which their works exist; for astronauts (or Poe perhaps) it implies the "space race"; whilst for poets such as Mallarmé, the conquest concerns poetic space, the relationship between blanks and words, between words and the page, and overcoming the difficulty of writing. (Schultz 2007, 221)

Two years later, the indefatigable mapmaker Alighiero Boetti created a reduced-size atlas, *I mille fiumi più lunghi del mondo* (1977). Unlike Broodthaers, Boetti attempted to conduct a millimetric operation of mapping—lasting about seven years, and with the help of his wife Annemarie Sauzeau—, which, right from the start, was bound to fail. But this is of little importance, because his work is also a linguistic game. His intention was to classify existing rivers, from the biggest to the smallest, which he listed with each one's name and length.

It's a linguistic work, born from the idea of classifications, and based on measurements [...]. Rivers are quite hard to measure. There are many methods of interpretation on the length of rivers. There are temporary,

seasonal rivers, and this makes classifying them difficult; some grow longer while others grow shorter; plus, you have to decide where to measure a river—in the middle, on the sides depending on the right and left turns (Boetti quoted in Di Pietrantonio and Levi 2004, 203).

If rivers and their flow represent a metaphor for human existence across time and space for Boetti, for another Arte Povera artist—Luciano Fabro—the sky becomes the symbol of our “being-in-the-world.” *Cielo: Davanti dietro destra sinistra. Tautologia* (1967-1968) may appear like a realistic photographic reproduction of the “fiftieth part of a star map corresponding to the zero moment of the year nineteen-fifty” (Fabro 1978, 58), but this isn’t the case. It took Fabro six months to recreate the sky, dot by dot. But his map cannot be read, because, in the transcription process, he changed how the symbols were written. This chess-like plate with imaginary, totally subjective portions of the sky is an investigation of time—time spent on the work—and on space—the space the body occupies and measures.

Since it’s a map, it can’t reproduce the sky but only an abstraction of it. If you change the symbols, its abstraction is unintelligible, and only the long work remains. This work creates an image that crosses, that locks the starting point with the finishing point. In front. Behind. Right. Left. These are the concise expressions of those who, in the end, find themselves right inside the image (Fabro 1987, 181).

As part of “auteur geographies”, an expression Omar Calabrese coined when defining the multiple representations of the world on the part of the 20th-century avant-garde artists (and not only)—for whom maps express both a poetical and political position, that is, reclaiming one’s own subjectivity within a work, even when the result appears totally objective (Calabrese 1983, 97)—we may also include the numerous projects involving photo mapping born as conceptual art. In these cases, the commonly used grid layout is a formal and significant characteristic.<sup>6</sup> Among the many small-format projects, as they are for the most part collected in albums or books, it suffices to mention *Svolgere la propria pelle* (1970-1971) by Giuseppe Penone, or *Autobiography* by Sol LeWitt (1980). The former offers a detailed map of the artist’s body, whereas the latter proposes a self-portrait through a sequence of shots of everyday objects from his apartment-studio. If, for LeWitt, objects reflect his personality and lifestyle, for Penone, skin becomes the curtain that divides the Ego from what is other, as well as the surface where the body and the surroundings meet.

Akin to these is *Passport* (1970). Carl Andre conceived this work as a collection of images that reflect him and define his identity as a man and an artist. Moreover, the execution is quite odd. On the pages of his passport, Andre overlaps a series of images photocopied with a rare Xerox color photocopier from the early 1970s. Some are reproductions of his work, while others quote his beloved artists and intellectuals, whose works he makes his own to create "an x-ray of the influences and ghosts that populated his personal Pantheon". "There are all of his musts," as Massimiliano Gioni commented, as he included this work by Andre in his Venetian *Palazzo Enciclopedico*: "The Flemish painters, Bronzino, Rembrandt, concrete poetry [...] *Passport* is a work that, more than others, evokes the idea of an atlas, of a catalogue of images, of an art history that proceeds through fragments and not in a linear fashion" (Gioni quoted in Baldacci 2013, 86-87).

A similarly experimental inclination can also be found in the most famous *Espozizioni in tempo reale* by Franco Vaccari, no. 4, made specifically for the Venice Biennale in 1972. On inauguration day, the artist presented a room that was practically empty, except for a photo booth and a writing in four languages inviting the visitor to leave "a photographic trace" of his passage along the walls. Unexpectedly, the audience enthusiastically accepted the invitation. Numerous viewers joined in the action to such an extent that, as Vaccari narrated, "towards the end of the Biennale the wall on which they glued their photos taken in the Photomatic had about 6000 strips" (Vaccari quoted in Paoli and Zanchetti 2012, 326).

This mosaic of portraits was ideally similar to Sander's photo project, because, despite the difference in form, it also reflected the "face of the times".<sup>7</sup> All in all, Vaccari's participatory act may be considered a physiognomic atlas, but, since it is spontaneous and of a more or less random order, it cannot be considered a strictly typological compendium. On the other hand, the photo works of Bernd and Hilla Becher make up a genuine atlas divided according to type. Among the masters from the so-called "Düsseldorf School", along with Gerhard Richter, the Bechers set a new course in the history of photography by creating an unmistakable style and process.

For almost five decades, the subject of their investigation has been the austere, methodical documentation of industrial landscapes. They started from Germany's countryside—more specifically, the Siegen and Ruhr regions in North Rhine-Westphalia, and subsequently began mapping across Europe and North America. Untiring travelers and reporters, they combed miners' settlements from the late 1800s to early 1900s, carefully studying their forms and styles right before they were demolished. Right from the start, they realized the urgency of their task. This didn't merely

mean classifying industrial archeology, but, rather, archiving memories that would soon be destroyed. Therefore, their goal was, firstly, an important cultural project that educated contemporary visions to a kind of architecture that had been neglected or, for the most part, had never been studied in such an analytical way.

The Bechers' method calls to mind the naturalistic classification of animals, plants, and flowers,<sup>8</sup> which the couple replaced with silos, gasometers, blast furnaces, extraction towers, and water tanks. These subjects were systematically photographed, catalogued, and juxtaposed, according to a criterion that aimed to highlight peculiarities through similarities and differences. Included in these attentive entries are farm homes, which are presented as homogenous, repetitive, geometric constructions.

Their formal research is in keeping with American proto-minimalism and, in particular, with two pioneering photo series archive projects: *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963) by Ed Ruscha and *Homes for America* (1966-1967) by Dan Graham. At that time, the work of Hans Haacke, a German artist who moved to New York in 1965, may also be likened to these investigations, even though his "real-time social systems" (1969-1975)—investigations that, for the most part, culminate in photo reportage—were carried out, as the title itself expresses, in real time and, above all, with a precise, explicit social-political purpose.

In concomitance with these examples, we should also recall the everyday, banal, kitsch visual atlases of Hans-Peter Feldmann. Between the 1960s and 1970s, this artist collected a wide variety of photo images found in newspapers and magazines, albums and private archives, or his own black-and-white pictures, which he then divided according to genre: portraits of people, both individually or collectively (*Mädchen, Familien, Filmstars, Fussballer, Radfahrer*); places or elements of nature (*Bäume, Berge, Hecken, Strassen, Wolken*); and objects (*Krankenwagen, Schuhe, Segelbote, Stühle*).

Unlike the Bechers, but similar to Richter, photography for Feldmann possesses no particular aesthetic-stylistic qualities: it is intentionally unprofessional. The uniqueness of each shot is given by the quantity, rather than the quality, since repetition does not generate addiction or uniformity. Instead, diversity is allowed to emerge.

Another potentially infinite constellation of images is *Atlas* (1962-2013) by Gerhard Richter, which contains roughly 8000 photos, sketches, and collages that the German artist began cataloging right after he left the DDR. This collection was mainly born to satisfy what he calls "my desire for overall order and vision" (Richter quoted in Koldehoff 1999, 19), but also for his need to remember the things and places of his past and his willingness

to document the new path in his life as an artist. As with Warburg, Richter considers collecting and arranging certain images into an atlas as a practical necessity. In *Atlas*, he unites the images he uses as iconographic models for his paintings. But *Atlas* contains so much more, including the projects the artist never realized, souvenirs from trips, and other private photos. This is why it may be considered a *Skizzenbuch*, that is, an album that displays mechanical and objective reproductions of what Richter wants to recall from reality, instead of the drawings with which past artists represented and interpreted the world.

Yet, it would be simplistic to see this as just a ready-made archive. Richter included, above all, amateur photos, pure and direct images, without any artistic worth, which—as he himself underlines—do “not try to do anything but report on a fact” (Richter quoted in Obrist 1995, 23). Therefore, they are also souvenirs that make up an atlas of memories, a map of visual impressions, stimuli, and experiences, which are born as individuals but then, thanks to their day-to-day, ordinary quality, end up becoming the go-between for a specific cultural history. That is why we can affirm that *Atlas* has “two faces” (Baldacci, 2004): it may be seen as an autobiography offering the observer the opportunity to understand Richter’s life and thought process as well as the genesis and evolution of his work; and it may also be interpreted as a kind of historic novel, in which the images make up a dictionary of the collective history of perception.

*Atlas* also has another peculiarity. The images, which are arranged like grids on cardboard, are classified according to painting genres such as portraits, landscapes, cityscapes, brushstroke details (abstraction), still lifes, and historical subjects. In his works on canvas based on these images, Richter aims to re-interpret traditions through contemporaneity: *Atlas* thus becomes a sort of encyclopedic manual covering art history. This twofold purpose—for personal and collective memory—distances Richter’s *Atlas* from the “Große Erzählungen” model (von Bismarck 2002, 116), that is, from vast narrations locked in on themselves that give up on all confrontation with the past by refusing the thought and signification process that drives cultural memory and the atlas genre, likening it to Foucault’s idea of heterotopia, where nearness engages with distance and the visible with the hidden, without hierarchies of importance or duration.

Let us close this short *excursus* on atlases with the Swiss duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss, whose *Visible World* (1987-2001) is explicitly referenced in the title.<sup>9</sup> Their endless collection of slides arranged like a grid on long tables lit from behind ideally places the entire world right in front of our eyes. Thus,

in this case as well, we find the two-fold aspect of the atlas as a visual form of knowledge and as a narrative paradigm. Be it presenting reality as it truly is (journalistic reportage) or recreating it with visions, recollections, bits of information between reality and make-believe (mythopoeic stories), even today narrating stories remains fundamental for artists. The visual atlas, in its many forms (maps, plates, grids), is a symbolic form with which to understand and make others understand the world.

*(Translated from Italian by Emily Ligniti)*

## Notes

1. A former and different version of this essay was published in Italian as part of a monograph by the author. See: Baldacci 2016.
2. The advantages and criticality of digital mapping tools, like Google Maps (and, in particular, Google Street View), and the influence they exert on contemporary aesthetics, have been studied by Andreea Breazu, who writes: “[...] a photographic mapping of the world looks like an eerie materialization of Siegfried Kracauer’s prediction from 1927 that we would one day witness the ‘complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus’ in an archive of photographs, seamlessly tied together, where the navigation is not animated, but sequential, jolting from one photo frame to another while buildings maintain their impenetrability. Google Street View is a photographic imprint of the territory, not a reconstruction with virtual bricks”. (Breazu 2013, 41).
3. In this case, the English translation unfortunately changed Benjamin’s term by replacing “atlas” with “manual”. See: Benjamin 1999, 520.
4. For an analysis of the work and its interpretation by Benjamin, see: Somaini 2012, 288-303; Belting 2013, 197.
5. It is no coincidence that a Warburg-tradition theorist like Didi-Huberman has recently curated an exhibition on atlases. See: Didi-Huberman (ed.), 2010.
6. On the importance maps have among conceptual artists (and not only), Robert Smithson wrote: “From *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum of Ortelius* (1570) to the ‘paint’-clogged maps of Jasper Johns, the map has exercised a fascination over the mind of artists. A cartography of uninhabitable places seems to be developing—complete with decoy diagrams, abstract grid systems made of stone and tape (Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt), and electronic ‘mosaic’ photomaps from NASA. Gallery floors are being turned into collections of parallels and meridians” (Smithson 1996, 92).
7. *Antilz der Zeit* is the title of the first batch of 60 photos of the *People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* published by Sander in 1929.

8. Among the more well-known and similar cases consider, for example, the photo compendia of Ernst Haeckel and Karl Blossfeldt.
9. Fischli and Weiss have made many visual compendia, all different from one another. We can briefly also mention here *Suddenly This Overview* (1981-2006), made up of a multitude of figurines and comic scenes in clay narrating some, more or less, noteworthy episodes of humanity, and *Sonne, Mond und Sterne* (2008), an encyclopedic sequence of advertising cut-outs that, instead of giving a view of nature, reveal the capitalistic system of the contemporary world.

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# Section 2

Economies of World Building



## 5. A World of Disney

### Building a Transmedia Storyworld for Mickey and his Friends

*Matthew Freeman*

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#### **Abstract**

This chapter will explore the building of transmedia storyworlds during the 1920s and 1930s. Incorporating some of the work on franchising and licensing, such as that done by Derek Johnson and Avi Santo (as well as my own work), I will outline some of the ways in which this period—against the backdrop of the rise of consumer culture in the US—led to the corporatisation of transmedia storytelling as an industrial practice. Specifically, using The Walt Disney Company as a case study, I will explore the use of Disney characters as a storyworld across comic strips, cartoons, and merchandise, etc.—outlining some of the key industrial practices of this period as well as the broader cultural influences of the 1920s and 1930s that altogether impacted the rise and popularization of what we now see as transmedia storyworlds.

**Keywords:** Transmedia, Storyworld, Disney, Intertextuality, Immersion

Building fictional worlds has been the preoccupation of media creators for a very long time. As Marie Laure-Ryan (2008) points out, “the ability to create a world—or more precisely the ability to inspire the mental representation of a world—is the primary condition for any text to be considered a narrative.” Media texts do not merely forge stories or characters; they build worlds in the service of forging characters and stories. But that does not explain how imaginary worlds are actually built, particularly in historical contexts far removed from the technological convergences and innovations of the present media environment. What is it that holds storyworlds together across countless texts and media? And how do we know this?

Arguably the most famous imaginary world of the mid-20th century—the fantasy land of Walt Disney’s cartoon creations—is not typically discussed as a “world” at all. We readily think of Mickey Mouse and his girlfriend Minnie, of Pluto and of Donald Duck, and indeed of the relationships between them, but what of the fictional world that surrounds these characters? Disney may be synonymous with those characters—colloquially known as the “Mouse House”—but let us not forget that, in the 1950s, Walt Disney quite literally built an imaginary world that its audience could enter: the magical Disneyland theme park.

This chapter offers a snapshot of how transmedia storyworlds were built during the early- to mid-20th century. Surveying some of the prominent scholarship on consumer culture and media licensing, I will first critically explore some of the key ways in which this period afforded world-building activities as a newly corporatised phenomenon. Specifically, using The Walt Disney Company as a case study, the chapter examines popular Disney characters (like Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Pluto and Donald Duck) as the creation of a transmedia storyworld across comic strips, cartoon shorts, and a theme park. Having outlined some of the key industrial practices as well as some of the broader cultural influences of the period that impacted upon the rise and popularization of what we now see as transmedia storyworlds, I then turn to a more theoretical consideration of Disney, showing how intertextuality and immersion were key to the way in which its storyworld was constructed. I do this via analysis of texts from the 1920s and 1930s and via reference to the construction of the Disneyland theme park in the 1950s, exploring what the park offered as a site of fictional world building.

## The imaginary worlds of consumer culture

World building, according to Henry Jenkins, concerns “the process of designing a fictional universe [...] that is sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story feels like it fits with the others” (2006, 335). For Jenkins, “to fully experience any fictional storyworld, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels [...] to come away with a richer entertainment experience” (2006, 21). In economic terms, then, world building operates on the basis that audiences will gain both a richer and fuller understanding of a fictional storyworld by consuming more and more media texts that narrate adventures from that storyworld. Any attempt to historicize world building must account for consumer culture as a

broad contextual backdrop; in any case, the consumerist ideology ingrained into Jenkins' definition of world building suggests that its industrial history is closely related to the rise of consumer culture.

This rise had meant, as James C. Davis writes, that "the industrial revolution had enabled the manufacturing of more and more goods", and so "the stability of the economy required that demand be manufactured as well" (2007, 1). "Mass production has made mass distribution necessary", asserted department store tycoon Edward Filene in 1927 (Filene 1927, 21). Most broadly, consumer culture was about spreading products further, encouraging consumption so as to keep demand at the same high level as supply at a time when the rise of industry brought more choice for consumers. Media creators learned to conceive of fiction not as single products, but as series of larger narratives that thrived on the building of imaginary worlds.

Perhaps no media form told its stories as threads of a larger storyworld more so than the pulp magazines of the 1910s and 1920s, which exploited adjoining narratives to sustain a high readership. For this reason, many pulp magazines from this period constructed their narratives in ways that saw one character's world joined with that of another, with each of these adjoining characters' stories slowly coming together to form a larger storyworld. The assumption on the part of magazine editors was that readers who responded favourably to one story or character would be more easily persuaded to read a different story featuring a different character—and thus purchase further editions of the same magazine—if both characters were seen to share the same storyworld, linking the exploits of one hero with those of others.

Consider the early work of Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs. In one of his pulp serials called *At the Earth's Core*, published inside *The All-Story* in 1914, Burroughs created a world called Pellucidar, a land inhabited by a species of pterodactyls called Mahars. Later entries in the series featured visits from Tarzan. The crossover narration was in turn reciprocated when, in a later story titled *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*, published in 1916 in *The All-Story*, Tarzan stumbled across the lost civilization discovered in *At the Earth's Core*. Similarly, Burroughs' intention for his first Tarzan sequel, *The Return of Tarzan*, was hence for his hero to "encounter a strange race living in the ruins of a former great city" (Burroughs 1912, 44). Correspondingly, in another of Burroughs' stories called *The Land That Time Forgot*—this time published in *Blue Book Magazine* in 1918—readers were presented with this former great city, here called Caspak, a place inhabited by dinosaurs. Caspak, as was revealed only at the end of this story, bordered the same



jungle as Tarzan's adventures. Burroughs' pulp fictions thus developed themselves into highly intertextual adventures that encouraged repeat consumption.

Intertextual links between media forms also extended across different media. In the late-1930s, *Public Opinion Quarterly* revealed "a complementary relationship between movies and magazines" (Lazarsfeld 1937, 32). The publication concluded that there was "a clear positive relationship between the number of movie houses in a city and the readers of magazines" (*ibid.*). By the 1920s, for instance, the film industry had grown adept at marketing films in accordance with the film story's exposure in other media. Consider the marketing campaign that surrounded the release of *In Old Kentucky*, a silent film produced in 1919 based on the play of the same name. The film's marketing campaign included "a jazz band [that] paraded about town giving concerts before each performance and the stage setting of the original play served as the setting for the [film's] prologue" (*The Film Daily* 1920, 180). Such innovative marketing created an interactive media experience for *In Old Kentucky* that was highly immersive; the fictional storyworld of the film permeated the space of the cinema and even spread into the streets as audiences were steered from the venue of the story's theatre to the cinema. This constituted a kind of immersive transmedia attraction, as the spectatorial spaces of multiple entertainment forms all operated in concert to expand a fictional storyworld both around and across media.

This kind of immersive attraction emerged from the need to spread the mass-produced products of the industrial age. An influx in brand names around the early 20th century had given rise to the licensing of those brands—thus spreading them further across other media. Broadly, licensing refers to a practice of spreading a product or service beyond the confines of one manufacturer, who issues "the rights to manufacture products" under management (Jenkins 2006, 107). In many respects, licensing was the logical response to the rise of consumer culture, for as Avi Santo writes, "as a professional practice, licensing is linked with the development of mass culture industries" (2006, 11). Early forms of licensing included comic-strip characters such as The Yellow Kid and Buster Brown, which were licensed as the faces of consumer products and soon became linked with merchandise such as shoes.

The spread of licensed intellectual property across multiple media was followed by a continued broadening of the fictional storyworlds created in those media, with Disney one of the most prominent of the era. Janet Wasko writes that "from its inception, Disney created strong characters that were marketed in various forms (mostly through films and merchandise)

throughout the world” (2001, 1). The Walt Disney Company was founded in 1923, formed as a producer of animation before diversifying from film production to merchandising, television, and theme parks. Kristin Thompson explains that

when Mickey Mouse rose to stardom late in the [1920s], Walt Disney licensed numerous items on a large scale. For decades Disney’s was the only Hollywood studio that essentially ran on the franchise principle—not only creating tie-ins but also rereleasing his classic animated features regularly ... The merchandising around them remained perpetually current and desirable” (2007, 4).

Even without licensing, the Disney storyworld was constructed in the earliest Mickey Mouse cartoons as a strange yet familiar place. It may be populated characters that operated as the most familiar emblems of the Disney brand, but, as I will now explore, its fictional storyworld was no less significant to building those characters.

### ‘The plausible impossible’

In 1933, the Walt Disney Company released *Mickey’s Gala Premier* into cinemas, already the 58th cartoon short to feature Disney’s iconic Mickey Mouse. In several important ways, this cartoon epitomizes precisely how the Disney storyworld operated during this period, and indeed precisely how this storyworld was built. J.B. Kaufman writes of *Mickey’s Gala Premier*:

In this cartoon all Hollywood, in the form of movie-star caricatures, turns out for the opening of Mickey Mouse’s latest picture. The film-within-a-film (a western bearing a loose resemblance to the 1930 Mickey short *The Cactus Kid*, but augmented with a host of new gags) rolls ‘em into the aisles: stars range from Douglas Fairbanks to Boris Karloff, from Barrymore family to Mae West, are reduced to helpless convulsions of laughter and eagerly cheering Mickey on, are a number of legendary comedians—performers familiar to the audience from decades of vaudeville and two-reel comedies. (Kaufman 2011, 51)

Kaufman also points out that this cartoon ends by revealing that “this show of adulation turns out to be dream” (2011, 51). For Kaufman, *Mickey’s Gala Premier* was but one in a string of Disney cartoons during this era

that marked “a subtle but distinct shift in the balance between fantasy and reality” (2011, 52). Disney’s Mickey Mouse-fronted cartoon shorts were “grounded in [...] the real, physical world [but] moved unmistakably not toward realism but toward a more convincing form of fantasy” (Kaufman 2011, 52). The effect, Kaufman continues, “was one that Disney himself later termed ‘the plausible impossible’” (2011, 52-53)—a boundless amalgamation of the real and the imaginary into a single fictional storyworld where Disney’s characters could roam free. As exemplified by *Mickey’s Gala Premier*, the fictional storyworld on display in these cartoons was one where imaginary creations such as a talking mouse could share the company of the great flesh-and-blood comedians and Hollywood legends of the era. This storyworld was therefore one where real films existed in the same milieu as artificially created ones; films-within-films became dreams-within-dreams amidst a narrativised collapsing of all real/imaginary binaries.

Two distinct if equally related concepts are at work in this process of Disney world building: intertextuality, itself the idea that multiple texts exist and operate in relation to many others, and immersion, a concept that Jenkins defines most simply as “the consumer enter[ing] into the world of the story (e.g. theme parks)” (2009). Let us now examine how these two concepts of intertextuality and immersion informed the creation and expansion of the Disney storyworld across media as a place “grounded in [...] the real, physical world [but] moved unmistakably not toward realism but toward a more convincing form of fantasy” (Kaufman 2011, 52). I shall begin by discussing the role of intertextuality and Disney characters.

## Intertextuality

Fictional characters are one way of understanding how storyworlds are held together. Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman have called for the need to find new analytic categories for deciphering the way in which fictional characters are formed across media, arguing that “it is the case of legendary heroes or of modern serial characters, from Tarzan or Zorro to Harry Potter [...] [that character] forms itself among and through texts [...] [but] never completely enclosed in a single text” (2014, 45). Similarly, Marrone argues that a “character does not live in a single text or in a generic context with no textual links; it rather lives and feeds itself in the intertextual network in which it is constantly being retranslated” (2003, 28). Put simply, a storyworld is built up of characters that cross back and forth across numerous iterations of a storyworld, signalling to audiences that one story belongs in the same

world as another. Today's Marvel Cinematic Universe, with its superheroes like Iron Man, Captain America, Hulk, and Thor all popping up in one another's movies, is a notable recent example. But if character is one way of holding a storyworld together, then it is intertextuality that serves to underpin this process on a textual level.

Julia Kristeva defines intertextuality by suggesting that multiple texts exist and operate in relation to others. Roland Barthes similarly argues that a media text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings [...] blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations" (1977, 48). In other words, in seeing intertextuality as an expansion of story across different texts, as Daniela Caselli (2006, 49) proposes, intertextuality creates a scenario in which the meaning of a story may be built in relation not only to the individual story in question but also in relation to other stories that are invoked in the reading process.

The same principle underpins the world building of early Disney. Martin Rubin has argued that the "tendency toward explicit intertextuality reached its most intense and overt form in the 1930s" (1990). Rubin in fact claims that intertextuality helped to create distinctive cartoon stars precisely via "topical references to popular songs, sayings, movies, plays, radio shows, books, magazines, celebrities, political figures, advertising slogans, etc." (ibid.).

We have already seen how *Mickey's Gala Premier* populated its storyworld with Hollywood stars and comedians, forming intertextual connections with the movie world of those stars' fictional characters. Martin Kornberger ascribes this intertextuality to the "ubiquitous trend began by the rise of mass media" upon the beginnings of consumer culture "to re-mediate the same content across different media. Such intertextuality creates space and allows for linking things in unanticipated ways" (2010, 108). In 1932's *The Klondike Kid*, for example, Mickey is seen attempting to pick up the coins that have been thrown at him during a variety performance, only to realise that one of those objects is not a coin at all but a gob of spit. Famously, Charlie Chaplin performed the same joke in *The Vagabond* sixteen years earlier.

Moreover, intertextual references to figures such as Chaplin served to construct both the Mickey Mouse character and his storyworld. Films such as *The Klondike Kid* presented Mickey in the same silent-comedian category as the likes of Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Mickey was branded with the same outsider status that typified those screen comedians—meaning, as Kaufman notes, that the storyworld itself was often populated with the "tramps, outcasts, unfortunates living on the fringes of society" as well as

the famed stars of the mass media (2010, 53). There was a working-class directive about the screen comedians of the 1930s, a fact that often saw Mickey take on such roles as a hot dog vendor in *The Delivery Boy* (1931) or a construction worker in *Building a Building* (1933). Even *Steamboat Willie* from 1928, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon to be released, was meant as a parody of Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr.* from the same year. The working everyman quality of this era's screen comedians indeed defined Mickey; as far back as 1928's *The Barn Dance*, his objective was to win a date with Minnie Mouse, battling against far more resourceful characters. Such one-upmanship was the result of a further source of intertextuality. According to Ub Iwerks, an animator of Mickey in these early days, "Mickey Mouse was based on the character of Douglas Fairbanks. He was the superhero of his day, always winning, gallant, and swashbuckling" (Iwerks 2001, 54-55). Mickey was effectively a more comedic Zorro or Robin Hood, an exemplar of everyman camaraderie.

But alongside Mickey Mouse were a number of supporting characters from the cartoon films that would feature prominently in ways that served to connect the storyworld across texts while building it in new directions. The Disney storyworld was built up of characters that re-appeared across texts, their role within the narrative re-shuffled. Minnie Mouse has already been mentioned, who shared the screen alongside Mickey since *Steamboat Willie* in 1928. Pluto, originally introduced as Minnie's floppy-eared dog, was first introduced in 1930's *The Picnic*. Pluto was later seen roaming on stage in 1932's *Mickey's Revue*, a cartoon that also introduced the dim-witted Goofy, a further staple of the Disney world, who was seen in the audience of a concert hall ceremony while Mickey and Minnie try to perform a duet. In some cases, secondary characters such as Goofy were turned into the heroes of their own stories; Goofy's first solo cartoon *Goofy and Wilbur* was released in 1939. The same intertextual transition was true for Donald Duck. Having stood alongside Mickey in *Orphan's Benefit* (1934), Donald Duck soon appeared without the aid of Mickey in 1934's *The Wise Little Hen* and in 1936's *Donald and Pluto*, before then leading his own *Don Donald* film in 1937.

This intertextuality extended far beyond the cinema and the continual re-appearance of characters established the likes of Mickey, Minnie, Pluto and Goofy as character brands in and of themselves that could embrace multiple media—including newspaper comic strips. By the early 1930s, newspaper comic strips had evolved from the purely advertising avatars of the earliest years of the 20th century to become actual products instead; that is to say that comic strips contributed, as David Welky observes, to

the “creation [of] the consumer culture” (2008, 80)—owing in large part to the industrial production of mass culture. The *Mickey Mouse* newspaper comic strip began life when the King Feature Syndicate approached Walt Disney with a proposal to license Mickey for use in a comic, first appearing on 13 January 1930. Jason Scott observes that the aforementioned “stable of Disney characters provided the basis for licensing” (Scott 2009, 42); Mickey, Minnie, Pluto, Goofy, and Donald Duck were all licensed under Disney’s partnering and policing of the King Features Syndicate. “Design and artwork was supplied free of charge to licensees to ensure that the images of Mickey Mouse and his friends were consistent with the cartoon film characters who might change, sometimes imperceptibly, from film to film” (Heide and Gilman 1994, 43).

For the comic strip, intertextual references to the real world increasingly gave way to intertextual references to the Disney cartoons themselves; the story events of the *Mickey Mouse* comic strip were typically based on what was going on in the Mickey Mouse cartoons at the time, taking the storyworld in related but expansive directions. For example, the comic began with Goofy as Mickey’s sidekick before Goofy was granted his own newspaper strip. From then on, Mickey and Goofy would cross over into each other’s comic strips, effectively linking both comics as strands of the same larger storyworld. By adding more existents to this larger storyworld and by turning secondary characters into the heroes of their own stories—a strategy formed on the basis of intertextuality and afforded by licensing—Disney was granted “co-ordinated cross-promotion”, leading to a successful and significant development in media world building (Scott 2009, 42).

## Immersion

As I noted earlier, there were two conceptions at work in Disney’s world building, and the second one was the idea of immersion. While intertextuality is about the “links *between* texts, operating in the perception and experience of audiences” (Esser, Bernal-Merino & Smith 2016, 225), immersion concerns the engagement of audiences *around* texts. Building on his earlier definition, Jenkins argues that transmedia storyworlds are themselves based on a balance between immersion and extractability: “In immersion, the consumer enters into the world of the story (e.g. theme parks), while in extractability, the fan takes aspects of the story away with them as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life (e.g.

items from the gift shop)” (2009). To put it another way, world building envisions a balance between fantasy and reality, the imaginary and the real.

This particular emphasis on the shift in the balance between fantasy and reality, as Kaufman noted of *Mickey’s Gala Premier* earlier, is pertinent in Jean Baudrillard’s theorization of the postmodern, which is itself another useful tool for understanding the building of the Disney storyworld at this time (1994). Fittingly, Baudrillard demonstrates his key idea that the postmodern represents a destruction of meaning where binaries such as real/imaginary are abolished via Disneyland, which opened in California in 1955 (1994, 12-14). For Baudrillard, Disneyland encapsulates the collapse of the real and the unreal, allowing guests to relish in a fully immersive imaginary world (1994, 12-14). Paul Grainge discusses how “Disney pioneered the concept of the theme park in the 1950s [...] linking film interests to the development of rides and to associated business concerns in real estate” (2008, 122). Grainge then goes on to explain how

the history of modern entertainment branding is inextricably linked with the Disney Company and its transition in the 1950s from a studio specializing in cartoon animation to a company whose activities would take place within, and in many ways herald, the postwar integration of leisure markets, connecting movie production to developments in television, tourism, theme parks and consumer merchandise (2008, 44).

Disneyland was the symbol of this transition and, by “expanding upon the lucrative character merchandising market that the studio had joined in the early 1930s” (Anderson 1994, 134), Disney created an all-encompassing consumer environment that Walt Disney himself described as “total merchandising” (Anderson 1994, 134). The crucial term “all-encompassing” refers here to the Disneyland theme park’s immersive potential to blur reality into fantasy. Organized around four divisions—Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland, and Tomorrowland—Disneyland allowed audiences not only to simply enter a magical storyworld, but to bend the rules of plausible reality. Disneyland is a place where Mickey’s Toontown, for instance, a cartoony walk-through of Mickey’s home, lies in proximity to Adventureland and to other equally “real” attractions of “fantasy.” In effect, Disneyland became the living embodiment of the plausible impossible—an immersive blend of the real and the imaginary into a single leisure space where audiences could also take aspects of the storyworld back home with them as items of

character-based merchandise that could then be deployed in their everyday lives.

Disneyland's blurring of the real and the imaginary may exemplify Jenkins' principle of immersion vs. extractability, but this theme continued to characterize the textual world of Disney. The earlier outlined *Mickey's Gala Premier* demonstrates this perfectly: the film was a comedic blurring of the real world (where Hollywood stars and comedians exist) and the imaginary world (where they share this world with a talking mouse). Moreover, Kaufman points out that this blurring of real stars with fantasy stars turns out to be a dream at the end of the reel itself adds a further level of blurring—this time between real-life and dream.

But this blurring of real and unreal was not specific to *Mickey's Gala Premier*. In 1929's *Plane Crazy*, Mickey is seen discovering his hero Charles Lindbergh—the real-life aviator and inventor—in a book before attempting to emulate him by building and flying his own airplane. In *The Barnyard Battle*, from the same year, Mickey joins an army of mice dressed like the forces of the Confederate States of America to battle an army of cats dressed in German World War I helmets. The fusion of imaginary logic with real people created a dream-like storyworld where dream logic provided much of the comedy. In *The Chain Gang* (1930), for example, Mickey is a prisoner embarking on a prison break. In one scene, Mickey leaps over a wall, escaping into a swamp before riding away on a horse, but when the horse throws Mickey off a cliff, he falls not to his death but through the roof of the jail and finds himself back in the same prison cell.

This illogical development of the storyworld does not stop with the cartoon shorts. In fact, the boundless scope of the imaginary fused with the real world that epitomized the joy of Disneyland also provided additional ways to build the larger Disney storyworld across media. An example of how this worked was *The Grocery Boy* cartoon in 1932, which saw Mickey reaching for the wrong doorknob; upon opening this particular door, rather than it leading logically to the house's exterior, it instead results in an ironing board falling from the sky, knocking Mickey into another realm. This realm was the home of Goofy's comic strip adventures, marking one of the many occasions that Mickey Mouse crossed into Goofy's solo comic strips. Conceptually, of course, this example echoes both the intertextuality of Burroughs' earlier pulps and the immersive experience of a theme park attraction. Disney's world building was thus ultimately driven by the irrational gags emerging from the intersection of the real and the unreal in an immersive, all-encompassing space where Disney's branded characters and our real-life characters could unite.



## Conclusion

Given its expanse across so many media and decades, The Walt Disney Company is a useful case study for understanding the industrialised practices of world building in the 20th century. According to Scott, “Disney would effectively innovate new forms of repurposing and repackaging” (2009, 43), embodying alternative but complementary approaches to character-centered world building. With Disney controlling all aspects of their character exploitation, even for licensed products, the world building on display in such media products provided substantial opportunities for cross-promotion. In effect, world building came to equal audience building.

It was, of course, the *world* of Disney that audiences flocked to experience following the opening of Disneyland. The same conceptions of intertextuality and an immersive collapse between the real and the imaginary underpinned the world design of Disney’s iconic theme park just as it did on the screen and in comics. The Disney storyworld expanded into an increasingly pervasive public sphere that stretched from the celluloid fantasy of the cinema screen to the constructed reality of the Disneyland theme park. Emerging as “a primal scene of brand synergy” (Grainge 2008, 122), Disneyland defined itself as a place that brought dreams to life. While enjoying the rides available, audiences could defy gravity, moving at vast speeds and in ways that seem to violate what rational logic suggests is possible on Earth. The entire attraction is driven by intertextual representations of space flight, aliens, time travel, and lost dream-worlds—it is an immersive postmodern world limited neither by time, distance, nor size. Just as Mickey was able to leave the realm of his home and magically re-materialize in Goofy’s realm of adventures, effectively crossing from one medium to another in the process, so too are visitors of Disneyland constantly navigating a storyworld that embraces, absorbs, and combines all media.

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## 6. World-Building Logics and Copyright

The Dark Knight and the Great Detective

*Roberta Pearson*

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### Abstract

Derek Johnson says that the term franchise has become “cultural shorthand for understanding the expansion of cultural production across different media and industry sectors”. From this perspective, it makes sense to speak of a Holmes franchise, since texts featuring the character appear across all media and across all industry sectors. However, this franchise differs from others such as Star Wars or Harry Potter because it lacks a central and coordinating holder of the intellectual property. My contribution will explore the implications of Holmes’ copyright status for the production, circulation, and reception of Holmes texts in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will argue that the lack of a guiding corporate hand results in extremely divergent representations of the storyworld and character across different media platforms.

**Keywords:** Narrative, Copyright, Batman, Sherlock Holmes, Fictional worlds

*Estate Of “Sherlock Holmes” Author Loses Case Seeking To Stop Others’ Use Of Character Fan-fictioners, slash-fictioners, pulp-o-philes, rationalists, positivists, Victorians, colonials, imperials, Freudians, Londoners, cokeheads, and crime solvers of the world — rejoice!*  
(Mora 2014)

These BuzzFeed headlines announce that, after protracted legal wrangling, Sherlock Holmes, the 127-year-old fictional detective, had been freed from copyright constraints. From the initiation of plaintiff Leslie Klinger’s

motion for summary judgement against the Conan Doyle Estate in a United States District Court in February 2013 to the United States Supreme Court's refusal to consider the case in November 2014, leading news outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and the BBC, covered the copyright dispute. The character's global ubiquity and popularity motivated this coverage, but so did the dispute's potential implications for the copyright status of other serialized fictional characters. Some saw the plaintiff's success in the case as a broader victory for those maintaining that endlessly extended and rigorously enforced copyright stifles creativity.<sup>1</sup> As Holmes fan fiction-ers and slash fiction-ers rejoiced, so did critics hoping to reform the current US intellectual property regime and fans hoping to free other fictional characters from their legal shackles. But the Holmes copyright case also serves as a forceful reminder to academics that the beloved fictional worlds we study rest upon the legal and business practices that create, sustain, and protect them.

The *ab initio* legal practice is the state's granting of the exclusive ownership of intellectual property (IP) to individuals or corporations; IP consists of copyright, trademark, and patents. The last has no pertinence to fictional worlds. The first two can both be deployed to maintain the exclusive ownership of fictional worlds; copyright protects an entire work for a specified period of time while trademark, which never expires, can protect specific elements of a work such as characters. This chapter focuses on the former since, despite its eventual expiration, it is generally seen as the stronger means of protection (Rosenblatt 2015, 565). IP enables the business practices of franchising and branding that build many popular fictional worlds from *Star Trek* to *Lord of the Rings* to *Harry Potter*. Derek Johnson offers a succinct definition of franchising as "the continuous production of culture from intellectual property resources shared across multiple sites of production" (Johnson 2013, 4). The corporations owning the IP use branding to link these multiple sites of production in the public mind. As Claire Parody says, "the production of an entertainment franchise is coterminously the development and management of a fictional brand' that 'involves the creation of icons, names, concepts, and similar objects of intellectual property[...]" (Parody 2011, 214).

Fictional worlds built around IP are deemed proprietary; some fictional worlds are non-proprietary, or, in other words, are in the public domain (PD). PD is a contested term; I use it here in its narrowest definition, which Elizabeth L. Rosenblatt says "includes only information outside the scope of formal intellectual property protection: [...] [such as] works

of authorship too old to be [...] copyrighted [...]" (2015, 570). PD also refers to works, such as Sherlock Holmes, in which copyright has lapsed. Since the inception of the industrialized production of popular culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, non-proprietary fictional worlds (centered around, for example, folk heroes such as Robin Hood and religious mythologies such as the Norse gods) have expanded in the PD where Sherlock Holmes now joins them. These PD fictional worlds both resemble and differ from proprietary fictional worlds since the presence or absence of a central coordinating rights holder inflects world building. Narrative logics also inflect world building. Since fictional worlds tell stories, they must be understood not only from a legal and business perspective but also from the perspective of narrative theory. Both proprietary and PD fictional worlds depend upon narrative logics to link the various elements of the world together; I argue that fictional worlds can be linked by storyworld, character, or author.

This chapter first discusses the three narrative logics, then constructs a table displaying the intersection of these logics with different copyright conditions. Finally, it analyses two case studies of character-centered fictional worlds, Batman and Sherlock Holmes, to illustrate how copyright accounts for some of the differences between two similar fictional worlds and characters.

## World-Building Logics

In discussing transmedia storytelling, Henry Jenkins observes that

narrative represents simply one kind of transmedia logic which is shaping the contemporary entertainment realm. We might identify a range of others – including branding, spectacle, performance, games, perhaps others – which can operate either independently or may be combined within any given entertainment experience. (Jenkins 2009)

As distinct from Jenkins, I am concerned with narrative and not with the other logics that he enumerates. I am also concerned with world building and not with transmedia storytelling; the former is a necessary condition for but not coterminous with the latter. While we tend to associate world building with multiple texts across multiple media and while my two case studies constitute such expanded fictional worlds, all fictions—of whatever length and in whichever medium—must have



the basic elements of narrative; these include a possible world distinct to some extent from contemporary or historical “reality.” Marie-Laure Ryan says that a narrative text “brings a world to mind (setting) and populates it with intelligent agents (characters). These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), which cause global changes to the narrative world” (Ryan 2004, 337). Ryan identifies two of the three world-building logics listed above, setting, which I call storyworld, and character. Fictional worlds exceeding the confines of one text and sometimes of one medium can be narratively linked by storyworld, character, and author, all of which serve as signposts guiding the consumer from one installment to the next. With many expanded fictional worlds one logic dominates, while the other two play secondary roles: for example, the *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings* worlds are linked by storyworld; the Batman and Sherlock Holmes worlds by character; and *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House* by author.

### 1) Storyworld

Ryan says that an expanded storyworld encompassing multiple texts “must possess invariant features in order to be recognized as the common frame of reference of diverse documents” (Ryan 2013, 383). These invariant features consist of: “1. An inventory of existents comprising (a) species, objects, and social institutions [...] and (b) the cast of individual characters [...] 2. A folklore relating to the existents 3. A space with certain topographic features 4. A set of natural laws 5. A set of social rules and values” (Ryan 2013, 364). There are also variant features: “6. Physical events that bring changes to the existents 7. Mental events that give significance to the physical events” (Ryan 2013, 364). These features serve to specify any expanded storyworld: for example, with regard to social institutions, *Star Trek* has Star Fleet Academy while Harry Potter has Hogwarts; with regard to natural laws, the former has advanced technologies while the latter has magic. The more detailed the inventory of invariant and variant features, the greater the capacity for expansion; as Parody says, world building involves creating “narrative spaces vast in their scope and minute in their detail, wholesale envisionings of millennia of fictional history, and continents of imaginary geography” (Parody 2011, 214). But no matter how expansive the storyworld, the multiple texts composing it are linked together to a greater or lesser extent by the recurrence of the invariant features and the recollection of the variant features. The presence, absence, or modification of the invariant/variant features in individual instantiations of the storyworld signify

the strength or weakness of the links and can lead to debates concerning narrative coherence, consistency, and canonicity.

## 2) Character

While all fictional worlds must have characters, some expanded fictional worlds become identified primarily with a chief protagonist, such as Batman or Sherlock Holmes, who recurs in all narrative installments. Character is a more elusive concept than storyworld; indeed, it is one of the most elusive concepts in narrative theory: characters are constructed by textual semiotic codes but achieve an almost independent existence as a sentient being in a reader or viewer's mind. Says Seymour Chatman: "Too often do we recall fictional characters vividly, yet not a single word of the text in which they came alive; indeed, I venture to say that readers generally remember characters that way" (Chatman 1978, 118-119). However, the perplexing dual nature of fictional characters does not absolve us from trying to identify the semiotic codes which construct them and from which the reader or viewer's mind assembles them. I have previously argued that television characters are constituted from the following components: 1) psychological traits/habitual behaviours; 2) physical traits/appearance; 3) speech patterns; 4) biography; 5) interactions with other characters; and 6) environment, which Ryan refers to as setting.<sup>2</sup> Although conceived with regard to television, these components serve to identify characters in texts of any length or in any medium, although a short story will provide fewer details than a long-form television series and different media will use different semiotic codes to construct the six components and, thus, the character. As is the case with storyworlds, the presence, absence, or modification of the six components signifies the strength or weakness of the links between individual installments and can lead to debates concerning narrative coherence, consistency, and canonicity.

## 3) Author

While all fictional worlds require storyworlds and characters, not all fictional worlds require authors, at least in the sense of a designated individual who created the first instantiation of the world. As Thomas Leitch points out with respect to Robin Hood, "instead of one source for the story of the outlaw's adventures, there are a hundred sources, none of which constitutes a definitive urtext against which derivative

works can be measured” (Leitch 2008, 23). The same holds true for other characters from folklore and myth such as King Arthur and Thor. In many cases, however, a designated individual serves to link together the various narrative installments of a fictional world. According to Michel Foucault, an author’s name “is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others” (Foucault 1977, 123). Matthew Freeman proposes that

this notion of classification, which works to group together a number of texts and differentiate them from others, [can] be taken one step further and [...] broken down into two standards of authorship, or rather two ‘author-functions’ [...] The first standard of authorship concerns the Foucauldian notion that the mere presence of an author’s name on a media text [...] can point audiences across multiple media to other texts that constitute a [fictional world]. We can call this the *market author-function*. The second standard of authorship concerns the way that an author can impose and maintain the description of what does and does not constitute a particular fictional [world][...]. We can call this the *textual author-function*. (Freeman 2015, 71)

I further propose that the textual author function can, in some instances, serve an additional purpose to identify a fictional world comprised of all an author’s works, even when those works are not linked as individual installments of a larger and relatively coherent narrative composed of invariant/variant storyworld features. Dudley Andrew says that

the world of Dickens [...] is larger than the particular rendition of it which we call *Oliver Twist*. It includes versions we call *David Copperfield* and *The Pickwick Papers* too. In fact, it is larger than the sum of novels Dickens wrote, existing as a set of paradigms, a global source from which he could draw” (Andrew 1984, 39).

Others can also draw from this global source, as attested to by the adjective “Dickensian” and the theme park Dickens World, in Chatham, Kent, which takes visitors “back in time to the Victorian England that Charles Dickens knew and wrote about in his novels and short stories”.<sup>3</sup> Although there are neither an adjectival form nor an equivalent real-world theme park for Jane Austen, a fictional Austenland appears in the novel of that name (Hale 2007) and its film adaptation. However, while storyworld and

character are textual attributes of an expanded fictional world, authorship is a paratextual attribute. But, like storyworld and character, it signifies a specific fictional world, in this case, one composed of characters, settings, events, and style seen as characteristic of a particular author's oeuvre. This can also hold true for corporate authors as in the case of Disney's animated features; the company's franchising and branding practices strengthen the textual links forged by a relative degree of consistency with regard to characters, settings, events, and visual style.

### World -Building Logics and Copyright

Storyworld, character, and author underpin fictional world expansion, serving as the primary or secondary narrative logics linking individual installments. But the presence or absence of a rights holder also structures world building. The construction and expansion of fictional worlds needs to be understood with reference to both world-building logics and copyright. These rights can be held by a corporate author, by an individual author, or by no one.

- 1) Corporate author: The urtext(s) originated within a corporation that held the rights to its employees' creations. The copyright takes effect from the date of first publication and expires after a specified period of time.
- 2) Individual author: The urtext(s) were copyrighted by an author who may pass them on as part of her estate. Copyright expires at a specified period of time from the author's death.
- 3) Public domain (no rights holder): The urtext(s) originated before intellectual property laws or have entered the public domain. Authors of works based on PD fictional worlds can acquire copyright to their new creations.

In the first two instances, a rights holder can exercise a greater or lesser degree of control over the expansion of a fictional world; some corporate and individual authors actively exploit world-building logics to forge the strong links that lead to narrative coherence and consistency while others do not. In the case of PD fictional worlds, world-building logics alone determine the strength of the links and thus the degree of narrative coherence and consistency.

The following table cross-tabulates world-building logics with copyright status and provides an illustrative example for each resultant cell.

| Copyright status                               | A) storyworld                                   | B) character        | C) author                            |
|--|---|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1) Individual author                           | 1A) <i>Lord of the Rings</i>                    | 1B) James Bond      | 1C) Edgar Rice Burroughs (disputed)  |
| 2) Corporate author                            | 2A) <i>Star Trek</i>                            | 2B) Batman          | 2C) Franchise branding (e.g. Disney) |
| 3) Public domain from inception                | 3A) Asgaard (Norse mythology)                   | 3B) Robin Hood      | 3C) Shakespeare                      |
| 4) Public domain as result of lapsed copyright | 4A) H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos (disputed) | 4B) Sherlock Holmes | 4C) Dickens                          |

### 6.1 World Building Logics

The table raises the question of which combinations of world-building logics and copyright conditions result in relatively coherent and consistent worlds and which result in relatively less coherent and consistent worlds. In other words, which combinations build the strongest links between individual installments of an expanded fictional world and result in the greatest degree of narrative coherence and consistency? And by what precise criteria do we measure coherence and consistency? Unfortunately, word limitations prohibit expansion upon each of the table's twelve cells to address these issues; I would hope that my fellow scholars may be inspired to provide answers using my examples or other appropriate case studies.

However, I can make three general observations:

- 1) Proprietary fictional worlds such as *Star Trek* and Batman expand like houses, through extensions legally authorized and coordinated by the IP owners, although the result is more frequently Gaudi than Gehry. As I explain in the Batman case study, industrial practices can result in a deliberate degree of incoherence and inconsistency.<sup>4</sup>
- 2) Non-proprietary fictional worlds such as Robin Hood expand like coral reefs through the seemingly spontaneous addition of non-authorized and uncoordinated accretions produced by non-affiliated individuals and corporations.
- 3) Regardless of copyright status, author-centered worlds are almost certainly more diverse than those linked by the other two logics, given their dependence upon a culturally agreed consensus as to the author's distinctive settings, characters, events, and style. Given the complexities of character construction, character-centered worlds are probably more diverse than storyworld-centered worlds. In all

three cases however, a proprietary fictional world tends toward more coherence and consistency than a non-proprietary fictional world governed by the same world-building logic.

The following section expands upon two of the table's cells: 2B) the corporately-authored, character-centered fictional world of Batman and 4B) the PD, character-centered world of Sherlock Holmes. However, for most of his 127 years, Holmes has occupied cell 1B, which means that the comparison is actually between a corporately authored, character-centered world with the IP held by successive corporations and an individually-authored, character-centered world with the IP held by owners whose relative indifference to narrative coherence and consistency and fickle execution of their rights led to coral reef-like rather than house-like expansion.

### The Dark Knight and the Great Detective

Batman first appeared in 1939 in *Detective Comics #27*, a comic book owned by National Publications, which acquired the rights to the character from one of its creators, artist Bob Kane (the other, uncredited creator was ghost-writer Bill Finger). Today, as a result of the many changes of name and of ownership in the intervening decades, DC Comics owns the copyright; it has the judicial standing to sue for infringement and can license external parties to produce derivative works. Since DC Comics is a subsidiary of Time Warner, the parent company can exploit the copyright across the multiple media platforms of its various divisions, subsequently acquiring the copyright to derivative works such as the feature film series. Time Warner has the judicial standing to sue for copyright infringement on these derivative works and can license external parties to produce further derivative works based upon them, such as the television program *Gotham*. Another division of the Time Warner company, Warner Bros., produces the Batman feature films.

Sherlock Holmes first appeared in 1887 in the novel *A Study in Scarlet*, authored by Arthur Conan Doyle and sold to *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. Conan Doyle wrote three more Holmes novels and 56 short stories, the final one appearing in 1927. Upon Conan Doyle's death in 1930, the IP passed first to his older son Denis, then to his younger son Adrian, and finally to his daughter Jean. The UK copyright expired 50 years after the author's death in 1980. The US copyright had briefly been acquired by someone outside the family, but Dame Jean Conan Doyle, exercising the rights afforded her

by US copyright laws, re-acquired them. A year after Dame Jean's death in 1997, with the Conan Doyle Estate (CDE) controlled by nine indirect descendants of the author, the US Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 extended copyright for individually authored works published prior to 1 January 1978 by 20 years to a total of 95 years from their publication. As a result, the CDE's copyright in the last of the ten Sherlock Holmes stories currently under copyright expires in January 2023. But, as a result of the successful complaint against the CDE mentioned at this chapter's outset, the four novels, the remaining 44 short stories, and, thus, the character became PD—although technically only 87 per cent of him, since the character elements introduced in the few remaining stories still under copyright themselves remain under copyright. For example, anyone producing a text featuring Watson's second wife must seek permission from the CDE until 2023.<sup>5</sup>

Conan Doyle himself viewed his immortal creation primarily as a money-spinner, believing that his detective was taking his "mind from better things", his "historical dramas and military adventures" (Pittard 2007, 13). He was thus relatively indifferent to the "fidelity" of Holmes adaptations. When American actor-manager William Gillette, who produced the first Holmes play, cabled Conan Doyle inquiring "May I marry Holmes?"; Conan Doyle cabled back, "You may marry him, murder him, or do anything you like to him" (Eyles 1986, 34). The author exercised no active control over the screen adaptations produced during his lifetime, such as the 1929 *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (Basil Dean) in which the lead character (Clive Brook) has an "in-name-only resemblance to Holmes" (Barnes 2011, 150). His descendants exhibited an even greater desire to exploit the property and an even greater indifference to "fidelity" to their father's work. Conan Doyle biographer Andrew Lycett says that Denis and Adrian were "spendthrift playboys" who viewed their father's estate as a "milch-cow" (Lycett, quoted in Field 2007, 102). Denis agreed that, in making its 1940s film series, Universal Films could "adapt and change [the Doyle] stories to the fullest extent including the right to use the fullest latitude in changing and adapting such stories, their characters, themes and incidents, to translate, rearrange, modernize, add to or take from their literary and/or dramatic material" (Field 2007, 108). Richard Hewett chronicles the ways in which Adrian "imposed exacting requirements" upon the BBC's 1960s adaptations while permitting "the musical *Baker Street* and the Henry Lester-produced film *A Study in Terror* (1966)" to take "substantial liberties with his father's characters" (Hewett 2015, 200). The CDE has displayed a similar lack of interest in "fidelity", licensing adaptations as diverse as the Warner Bros. feature

films; *Sherlock Holmes*; and *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows* directed by Guy Ritchie; the BBC's *Sherlock*; and CBS's *Elementary*.

Throughout Batman's long history of adaptation to other media, from the 1943 film serial and newspaper comic strip to the blockbuster Warner Bros. films, the character has been the property of corporations motivated to protect his long-term profitability even as they exploit the copyright across multiple platforms. Throughout Holmes' long history of adaptation to other media, from the 1899 Gillette play to the blockbuster Warner Bros. films, the character has been the property of individuals, including the author, whose desire for short-term profitability frequently triumphed any yearning toward coherency and consistency in exploiting the copyright across multiple platforms. I hypothesize that these differences in copyright status account for the dissimilar expansion of the two character's fictional worlds since, when reduced to their essential elements, Batman and Holmes appear quite similar.

I argued above that fictional characters are composed of six components: 1) psychological traits/habitual behaviours; 2) physical traits/appearance; 3) speech patterns; 4) biography; 5) interactions with other characters; and 6) environment. With multiple versions of a character in synchronic and diachronic circulation, these components constitute what Ryan refers to as a "common frame of reference of diverse documents" that can maintain consistency across an expanded fictional world. What is the common frame of reference required to construct characters recognizable as Batman and Sherlock Holmes? 76 years on from his origin, Batman remains a character who uses his superb physical abilities (2) and deductive capacities (1) to obsessively fight crime (1) in response to the brutal murder of his parents when he was a child (4). He operates primarily in Gotham City (6), has a recurrent cast of friends, foes, and the police (5) and dresses in an iconographically specific costume of cape, cowl, and Bat-logo (2). 127 years on from his origin, Sherlock Holmes remains a character who uses his superb deductive abilities and occasionally his superb physical abilities to obsessively solve puzzles in order to stave off boredom (1). He operates primarily in large urban centers (usually London, but in one instance New York) (5), has a recurrent cast of friends, foes, and the police and, in some versions, dresses in an iconographically specific costume of deerstalker and Inverness cloak (2).<sup>6</sup>

Both characters also have a very minimal frame of reference that requires the presence of none of the six textual components. While all characters may be said to "escape" their texts by being constituted as sentient individuals in readers' and viewers' minds, some characters,



frequently those at the center of expanded fictional worlds, enact an even greater escape by becoming pervasive cultural icons, known to those who have never encountered a single text in which they appear. In such cases, characters can be identified solely by name; a reference to Sherlock Holmes is sufficient to invoke a great detective and one to Batman a vigilante crime fighter. Sometimes, visual signifiers alone, or what might be termed the character's iconography, constitute sufficient identification; Batman can be reduced to the instantly recognizable Bat signal and Holmes to the equally recognizable deerstalker, magnifying glass, and pipe. These reduced versions of the characters gesture toward the six character components for those who have further knowledge of the characters' fictional worlds, but do not specifically incorporate them. The Bat-logo signals Batman and deerstalker, magnifying glass, and pipe signal Holmes even to someone whose knowledge derives not from any specific textual instantiation but from the characters' cultural ubiquity. Given the minimal nature of their essential components and their further reduction to visual signifiers, the two characters have the potential for almost infinite mutability. William Uricchio and I have argued that Batman is a "floating signifier"; the same is true of Holmes (Pearson and Uricchio 1991). Both have floated free of their original creator(s) and original medium to migrate across media platforms and around the globe, with resultant degrees of divergence and inconsistency in the myriad textual installments that collectively comprise their fictional worlds. But Batman's owners have imposed a relatively greater degree of coherence and consistency upon his fictional world than Holmes' owners have imposed upon his.

For Batman's first half-century, corporate control ensured that the character's multiple incarnations were consecutive and consensual; as the character transformed over time new versions replaced the older versions. Former DC Comics President and Publisher Paul Levitz traces these transformations: the pulp, noir-like original; the child-friendly "lighter in tone" Batman of the 1940s and 1950s; the science-fictional Batman of the 1950s and early 1960s; the 1960s "New Look" Batman of the comics and camp Batman of the ABC television series; the emergence of the Dark Knight Detective in the 1970s comics; and the definitive version of the Dark Knight in Frank Miller's 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (Levitz 2015). The first Batman feature film, Tim Burton's *Batman* presented this version to a larger public.

In the 1980s, corporate strategy changed from consecutive and consensual transformation to the concurrent exploitation of multiple and divergent Batmen across multiple platforms. Writing in 1990, Uricchio

and I detailed the divergent Batmen co-existing with Burton's cinematic interpretation, from cinematic paratexts such as Prince's Bat dance music video to graphic novels such as Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, and concluded that

This moment in the last decade of the twentieth century [...] represents the most divergent set of refractions of the Batman character' as 'newly created Batmen, existing simultaneously with the older Batmen of [...] the comic reprints and back issues, all struggled for recognition and a share of the market (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 207).

We speculated that such fragmentation might threaten the character's continued viability—in other words, that his corporate owners had adopted a risky strategy by not forging strong narrative links across the ever-expanding fictional world.

Writing several years later, Henry Jenkins offered a different interpretation of this crucial moment in the character's history: "Retrospectively, we can see Pearson and Uricchio as describing a moment of transition from continuity to multiplicity" (Jenkins 2009). Jenkins defined multiplicity as "a shift away from focusing primarily on building up continuity within the fictional universe and towards the development of multiple and contradictory versions of the same characters functioning as it were in parallel universes [...]" (Jenkins 2007). Today, multiplicity is the comic industry's prime directive, as the two superpowers, DC and Marvel, frequently reboot their universes and re-configure their heroes in their ongoing effort to retain old readers and attract new ones as well as to extend their valuable IP across multiple platforms. Multiplicity offers consumers new pleasures, as Parody points out.

Re-visionings can be intelligible to franchise consumers as simply facets of an overarching entertainment experience, part of rather than in opposition to engaging with a beloved property. Shifting between 'canons' and narrative realities [...] are often a rewarding form of mastery over a franchise text, not a source of tension [...]" (Parody 2011, 216).

Nonetheless, both DC and Warner Bros. police multiplicity through pronouncements concerning canonicity and the relationships between narrative realities. For example, as the multiple Batmen of 1989 offered readers and viewers divergent visions of the character's past, present, and future, Dennis O'Neil, the Batman comics editor, stated:

- 1) By the way, the BATMAN movie (as well as the BATMAN MOVIE ADAPTATION), IS NOT a part of Batman continuity [...].
- 2) [...] the tale told in BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE is NOT the definitive origin of the Joker. It's simply one of many POSSIBLE origins [...].
- 3) Since it is set about 20 years in the future, BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS is also NOT considered to be a part of normal continuity. It is a POSSIBLE future for Batman, one which may or may not happen. We're NOT saying that it couldn't happen, but it would be a shame to limit the Batman's future to this one story (O'Neil 1989).

This disavowal of the Warner Bros. film appears even in the comic book adaptation written by O'Neil and published by DC. The initial splash page shows a strip of film, bearing key frames drawn from the film, superimposed over a cinema audience. In the first dialogue balloon on the page, an audience member says "It's just a movie, for Heaven's sake" (O'Neil 1989). The back cover also features a filmstrip design with further scenes from the movie. O'Neil said that he intended these film strips to bracket the adaptation and distinguish it from DC's continuity (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 215)

26 years later, DC personnel continue the attempt to police multiplicity, explicitly distinguishing between the large- and small-screen elements of their cinematic universe. DC Comics Chief Creative Officer Geoff Johns has made it clear that neither Superman nor Batman, currently appearing in feature films, will be seen in the television programs, *Arrow* or *The Flash*. Johns said, "It's a separate universe than film so that the filmmakers can tell the story that's best for film, while we explore something different in a different corner of the DC universe. We will not be integrating the film and television universes" (Eisenberg n.d.). *Gotham*, the television program featuring an adolescent Bruce Wayne, which DC licensed the Fox Broadcasting Company to produce, is also separate from the feature film continuity. Kevin Reilly, former chairman of Entertainment for the Fox Broadcasting Company, said that, "Warner Brothers manages the entire franchise and its one of their top global franchises of all. So there will be an awareness of both and we'll have to coordinate when we're in the market place, but the productions are not piggy-backing off one another" (Mac 2014).

Holmes became synchronically divergent even during Conan Doyle's lifetime, with multiple versions of the character in circulation from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Holmes' widespread popularity began with the publication of Conan Doyle's short stories in the UK and US editions of the *Strand Magazine* in 1891. These were illustrated by Sidney Paget, who based his depiction of Holmes upon his brother Walter. But in 1903, the

Holmes stories began appearing in *Collier's* magazine in the US. These were illustrated by Frederic Dorr Steele, who based his depiction of Holmes upon actor William Gillette, who first appeared in the role in 1899. While the Paget illustrations continued to represent Holmes to UK readers, the Steele illustrations became the common reference point for American readers. A similar multiplicity manifested in cinematic adaptations. Four different actors featured in the title role in the Holmes films produced by the Danish Nordisk company between 1908 and 1911, while, at the same time, German and French companies produced films starring yet different actors as the Great Detective. 1914 saw the release of both British and American versions of *A Study in Scarlet*, the former starring James Braughton and the latter Francis Ford. In the pre-World War I period, the Danish, German, French, US, and UK film industries all distributed their products on both sides of the Atlantic, making it probable that audiences in these countries and many others would have seen Holmes embodied by many different actors of many different nationalities in divergent adaptations of Conan Doyle's character.

Just as early 20<sup>th</sup> century audiences experienced multiple and divergent screen versions of the character, so do early 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences. The 2013 Russian television series, set in 19<sup>th</sup> century London, depicts Holmes as a young man in his twenties teamed with a Watson several years older. *Sherlock* updates the character to 21<sup>st</sup> century London and fits him to the BBC's branding strategy of 'original BBC drama'. *Elementary* updates the character to 21<sup>st</sup> century New York City, teams him with a female Watson, and fits him to CBS's procedural dramas branding strategy. The Warner Bros. feature films transform the Great Detective into an action hero at the center of mega-blockbusters. *Mr. Holmes*, starring Ian McKellan, depicts the detective as a 93 year-old suffering from memory loss. These adaptations selectively emphasize and frequently modify different aspects of the character's six constituent elements, while one almost wholly abjures them. *Elementary* strays so far from the urtext that *Sherlock* producer show-runner Stephen Moffat said of it: "They've got three big changes: it's Sherlock Holmes in America, it's Sherlock Holmes updated and it's Sherlock Holmes with a female Watson. I wonder if he's Sherlock Holmes in any sense other than he's called Sherlock Holmes?" (Jeffery 2012). But, as I argued above, the character can indeed be reduced to such a minimal common frame of reference that his name alone suffices to ensure recognition; if a character is called Sherlock Holmes then he is Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes can be young, middle-aged, or old; live in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; reside in London or New York or Sussex; be a recovering drug addict, a high functioning sociopath, or afflicted by Alzheimers; and be

played by Benedict Cumberbatch or Ian McKellan or Jonny Lee Miller or Igor Petrenko or Robert Downey, Jr. But, unlike Batman, no final authority polices Holmes' multiplicity. Those who have read the Conan Doyle canon may turn to it, but many have not; moreover, as argued above, the character has floated free of his urtext. No single individual or corporation has the perceived authority to make conclusive pronouncements concerning canonicity or the relationship of one narrative reality to another. However, occasionally a specific actor's interpretation may gain a form of canonical authority by emerging as the "definitive" Holmes for a generation; Basil Rathbone in the 1940s Universal Films, Jeremy Brett in the 1980s and 1990s Granada television series, and Benedict Cumberbatch in the 21<sup>st</sup> century BBC television series.

Such "canonized" versions of the character may subsequently influence future adaptors and adaptations. Steven Moffatt and Mark Gattis, his *Sherlock* co-creator, have often spoken of their admiration for previous screen Holmes. Said Gattis, "Basil Rathbone was my first and I love those films the most and I love the Jeremy Brett series and lots of other versions" (Lewis 2014). The astute viewer may well spot in *Sherlock* as many references to previous screen adaptations as to the Conan Doyle canon. The dense accretion resulting from more than a century of such intertextuality leads Leitch to conclude that "The Holmes adaptations [...] take as their primary referent not the particular story they are ostensibly adapting [...] but the franchise as a whole" (Leitch 2009, Kindle location 3023). In other words, as I have argued, they take as their primary referent not the individual elements of the fictional world, but the common frame of reference necessary to identify the character that serves to link these various elements together.

## Conclusion

I have argued that fictional worlds are predicated both upon IP and upon world-building logics and used the Batman and Holmes case studies to illustrate how copyright accounts for some of the differences between the fictional worlds of two quite similar characters. In conclusion, I offer two caveats. First, while I have focused here on world-building logics' intersection with copyright, other factors such as country of origin and medium specificity can inflect the structure of both proprietary and PD fictional worlds. Many of the differences between *Sherlock* and *Elementary* can be accounted for by the context of their respective national broadcasting systems, while many of the differences between *Gotham* and the *Batman* feature

films can be accounted for by the different aesthetic and industrial practices of the two media.<sup>7</sup> Second, I began this chapter by speaking of the Holmes copyright case as a victory for those who assert that endlessly extended and rigorously enforced copyright stifles creativity. However, this doesn't necessarily imply that proprietary worlds offer fewer creative opportunities to those who produce them or less satisfaction to those who consume them than PD worlds. Those who create Batman can be just as imaginative and ingenious as those who produce Holmes. As Johnson says, even "closed and proprietary industrial models" entail a "complex and negotiated status of creativity [...]" (Johnson 2013, 14). And their audiences certainly derive just as much pleasure and enjoyment from the Dark Knight's adventures as they do from the Great Detective's.

## Notes

1. For arguments against current IP regimes see, for example: Benkler 2006; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Rosenblatt 2015.
2. For a fuller explanation of the construction of the televisual character see Pearson and Messenger Davies, 2014.
3. <http://www.dickensworld.co.uk>.
4. I am indebted to Matthew Freeman's thesis for the *House* metaphor.
5. For more on the Holmes copyright see Rosenblatt and Pearson 2015.
6. For more on the construction of the Batman character, see: Pearson and Uricchio. For more on the construction of the Holmes character, see: Leitch 2009 and Polasek 2015.
7. See: Pearson 2014.

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## 7. Battleworlds

### The Management of Multiplicity in the Media Industries

*Derek Johnson*

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#### Abstract

While much attention has been paid to the formal and creative challenges of world building in which vast narrative spaces cohere from complex textual designs and transmedia relationships, this chapter looks beyond the construction of cohesive, branded narrative spaces to consider how those spaces, once built, become sites of struggle for stakeholders within the media industries. Worlds are not just spaces of narrative elaboration, but shared sites in and in relation to which media professionals enter into collaborative relationships with one another. In the process of working within the established parameters of a shared world, such producers engage in a process of position taking, engaging in power plays that assert creative authority over the shared realm and making claims to identity, distinction, and legitimacy in hierarchical relationships to one another. By conceptualizing media worlds in the frame of “world sharing”, we can recognize them as significant sites of cultural struggle for media workers laboring in precarious, for-hire economies (Caldwell 2008, Deuze 2007, Mayer 2011).

**Keywords:** World sharing, industry, multiplicity, management, media franchising

In a January 2015 online presentation promoting the newest comic book crossover event from Marvel Comics, Senior Vice President of Publishing Tom Breevort promised an experience intimately tied to the company's longstanding investment in world building. At stake in the new *Secret Wars* would be the fate of the Marvel Universe itself—poised for destruction at worst and reformation at least—as characters, publishers, and readers

confronted and resolved the differences between the competing uses, interpretations, and iterations of Marvel's intellectual property over the past 50 years. Breevort reinforced the idea that the Marvel Universe is no single world, but a "multiverse" of parallel worlds in which familiar characters and stories shared across each have nevertheless taken differentiable shapes. This "cosmology", as Breevort put it, includes not just the narrative continuity shared across most of the company's comic books since the 1960s, but also all the parallel worlds imagined in the course of time-travel storylines, alternative publishing imprints, and adaptations of comics in film and television. Through some science-fiction conceit, the upcoming *Secret Wars* hinges on the collision of these once cosmologically distinguishable worlds and the notion that not all would survive that impact, with shards of different universes competing for existence. From this collision, Breevort promised the formation of a new, hybrid narrative space called Battleworld: "the detritus left over [...] the melting pot in which the new Marvel universe [...] will be fermented." As Editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso added, Battleworld would be "a place where we will be bringing new pieces to the board and taking old pieces off." At the crux of *Secret Wars*, at least as Marvel hyped it, was both a recognition of the multiplicity at the core of Marvel's decades-long world building efforts, and a sense of creative and corporate management of those potentialities, both productive and destructive. In his own attempt to summarize the presentation, the moderator posited: "it's like *Thunderdome*: two universes enter, one leaves" (Secret 2015).

This chapter considers how many, if not most, shared media universes are in some sense industrially managed "battleworlds". As shared, collaboratively authored works that emerge from contemporary media industries' emphasis on branded intellectual property, media worlds have embraced the principle of multiplicity (Ford and Jenkins 2009) to smooth over and enable creative variation across many markets and wide networks of franchised production outlets (Johnson 2013). Yet, the inherent multiplicity of narrative worlds in the context of media franchising does not mean all iterations are equally embraced, supported, or legitimated. Instead, media worlds are subject to industrial logics that regulate and authorize some potentialities (and not others) as viable, valuable, or virtuous. That process admittedly may not be one of open industrial warfare, as a "battleworld" might immediately suggest, but it nonetheless constitutes worlds as sites of struggle and management among different creative traditions, competing stakeholders, and opposing strategies in media industries. In *Media Franchising*, I emphasized "world sharing" over world building in order to

point to the importance of collaboration, multiplicity, and the diversity of uses to which worlds might be put in industrial contexts (*ibid.*, 109). Here, I push world sharing to the point where we might recognize *world management*—industrial “discourses, dispositions, and tactics” (Johnson, Kompare, and Santo 2014) that negotiate divergent uses of worlds and turn them to industrial needs. Media worlds are fields for industry battles waged through management.

To conceptualize world management, this chapter will first distinguish study of worlds in terms of “building” versus “sharing”. I argue that, while world building favors considerations of continuity and authored unity in the construction of media texts, a theory of world sharing encourages us to think in much more detail about negotiated industrial practices in which multiple uses and interests might be situated, opposed, or otherwise related. From there, this chapter locates world management both in the practices of media institutions and in the circumscribed agency (Havens and Lotz 2009) of people within them. Finally, it will consider specific strategies of reimagining and rebooting as part of the industrial management of embattled worlds, asking how the multiverse logics unpinning many contemporary media franchises reflect a *managed multiplicity*. Altogether, this chapter reveals media franchising as a site of struggle and negotiation within the cultural industries, finding that the worlds brought into being by franchising engage, resolve, and ultimately manage those conflicts and tensions.

## From World Building to World Sharing

In the context of media franchising, in which narrative worlds constitute intellectual properties to be shared widely across different communities of production, it is not just the building of worlds, but also the multiplication of worlds that is the order of the day. Henry Jenkins’ earliest definitions of convergence culture recognized that “storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (Jenkins 2006, 116). Later formulations of transmedia storytelling paid greater attention to this logic of “multiplicity” at the levels of creativity and production (Jenkins 2011; Ford and Jenkins 2009). Beyond single artists or centralized authors, creating worlds that could be used multiple times in multiple works across multiple mediums, worlds could be used in different, often competing ways by multiple industries and multiple creators.

World building involves the construction of a text as well as a context for its co-creation. While study of world building might focus on fictional realms like Westeros (*Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire*), the Galactic Empire (*Star Wars*), Middle-earth (*The Lord of the Rings*), or Panem (*The Hunger Games*), it also prompts us to consider the process of their construction by writers, production designers, cinematographers, editors, sound designers, participatory audiences, and more. While investigation of world building has focused at times on its continuity and the ontological wholeness, sometimes fixating on story and narrative concerns, several scholars have nevertheless pointed to the role worlds play as a context for creator and audience engagement. Matt Hills invoked the ontological unity of worlds in invoking “hyperdiegesis” as a quality of textual construction supporting the engagement of fan communities (Hills 2002, 137-138)—a term he revisits in this volume. Mark J.P. Wolf recognizes worlds as dynamic entities that support a multiplicity of authorship he calls “subcreation”, theorizing worlds in terms such as their completeness, capacity for invention, and immersiveness to support transauthorial, subcreative elaboration. As Jeffrey Sconce argues, the complex architecture and elaborate diegetic depth of world building works to calcify narrative formulas in a way that supports extensive, successive experimentation with them. Sconce cites Marvel Comics as a significant progenitor for forms of “conjectural narrative” in television in that depth, familiarity, and continuity of universe allowed the development of numerous “What If?” scenarios in which new, slightly altered and adapted versions of the Marvel world could cohere (Sconce 2004). I too have argued that franchised media worlds serve as “engines” to drive ongoing elaboration in cultural creation, as a context in which future creativity can unfold (Johnson 2013, 141). Overall, these reflections on world building recognize the potential for worlds to support a multiplicity of elaborative interpretation, often suggesting that this multiplicity of cultural production be assessed in significant part according to the world’s systematic capacity for co-creation. World building is thus an extremely useful way to understand the constructs and structures in which shared creativity might unfold.

Nevertheless, a theory of world *sharing* puts multiplicity of creative use—as well as struggles within the industrial context in which worlds circulate—more at the center of our concern. Going beyond the world as a structure for supporting co-creativity or subcreation, a perspective based in world sharing foregrounds everyday negotiation of that structure, particularly as embedded in social relationships and shared but unequal interests in that world across a multiplicity of different contexts. At question

would not be the unity of the world as a system for creation, but, instead, how that multiplicity might be defined by tension, opposition, and a lack of unified authority in that creation. As with all things shared, worlds present a case of negotiation and potential contestation. This is not to say that world sharing would look at co-creative/subcreative cultural production as a free-for-all with no sense of hierarchy; indeed, such a perspective would properly recognize that the terms of world sharing are strictly tied up in differentials of power and authority. As much as textuality and creativity, industry becomes central to a study of world sharing to provide context for these power relations and the terms by which worlds might be shared and subsequently contested.

World sharing and world building are not conceptually at odds in theorizing creativity in contemporary media culture and culture industries. Yet the former perspective turns away from questions of how multiplicity is supported to think more about how that multiplicity in practice renders worlds sites of cultural struggle for creators working in shared institutional relations with one another. How, for example, is power over a shared world negotiated? Who can exert control over a shared world? How? In what ways is shared access and agency in relation to a world differentially determined by gender, age, race, class, sexuality, or other identity markers? What role does ownership play? How do multiple creators navigate their unequal statuses, identities, and agencies? World sharing focuses our attention on the social and industrial negotiation of the tensions and oppositions implied by a multiplicity of different investments in and uses of the same creative context; it directly invokes the potential for cultural struggle by centering the incomplete authority and claim of any one party or institutional force to its creative possibilities.

### **Managed Multiplicity**

As a site of potential tension and struggle, world sharing is carefully managed by the institutions in which it unfolds, as well as by the individual human agents negotiating those institutional contexts. In *Making Media Work*, Derek Kompare, Avi Santo, and I consider management not as the all-powerful strategies of executives and other “suits” atop industry hierarchies, but as a more productive and dispersed set of “discourses, dispositions, and tactics that create meaning, generate value, organize, or otherwise shape media work throughout each moment of production and consumption” (2014, 2). As discourse, management categorizes and organizes knowledge

within the media industries, deployed by workers at the top and bottom of industry hierarchies. Dispositions of management emerge through identities and self-perceptions that confer authority and justify positions within the industry. The tactical nature of management, finally, centers on the interpretation, improvisation, and negotiation of agency within the rules of institutions, where hegemony is negotiated and enacted. As managed in these forms by the media industries, the multiplicity of shared worlds becomes a significant site of struggle over authority, position, and the legibility of power within the practical, day-to-day operations of franchised cultural production.

At the discursive level, world sharing has been organized, made meaningful, and rendered valuable through the production of knowledge about authority within complex, collaborative, co-creative industry structures. Discourses of authorship, for example, play heightened managerial roles in imposing sense, order, and legitimacy on heterogeneous uses and interpretations of shared worlds. Author figures like Ronald D. Moore, executive producer and developer of the reimaged *Battlestar Galactica* television series, legitimize the industrial reuse of franchised properties, marking reinterpretation and reimagination of the world as different and inspired (Johnson 2013). Matt Hills (2013) has shown these discourses of franchise authorship to be a field of struggle, moreover, with those outside the privileged position at the center of shared worlds making their own claims to authority via “counter-discourses”. Discourses like authorship manage which of the multiple uses of the shared world are to be valued, which are to be considered suspect, and why.

The taking of positions in relation to discursively privileged authors simultaneously calls our attention to the dispositions that manage shared worlds. World sharers lay claim to specific identities, beliefs, and ways of experiencing the world in the course of managing positions in relation to that world. Considering the case of Zack Snyder (director of *300*, *Watchmen*, and *Sucker Punch*), Suzanne Scott argues that the performance of “fanboy auteur” personae models appropriate “correct” orientation to franchise co-creation (2013, 442). Snyder and others can deploy their fan identities in interviews and other moments of professional persona building to position themselves as ideally suited for projects that require recreation of an existing franchise (ibid., 445). Such dispositions allow producers to claim authority in the industry (underwritten by, yet in excess of, fan status) while granting power and industrial legitimacy to fan identities that are reverential and respectful. Examining the heavily branded worlds of television production, Denise Mann (2009) stresses how show-runners increasingly perform the

role of brand managers, talking to the press and otherwise building hype for a series (not just writing and producing). Professional authority, in this case, depends on getting out in front of the camera and demonstrating one's organization, vision, overall creative disposition, and business acumen to coordinate production across television, online platforms, video games, and more. The management of world sharing is thus conducted at the level of professional identity and the performance of creative personae that reinforce authorial discourses and justify political economic lines of industrial authority. Disposition shores up the multiple, differential industrial positions from which worlds are shared.

The multiplicity of world sharing is lastly managed on a tactical front in which producers, executives, and other participants in the industrial process of creativity exert circumscribed agency. As examined by both M.J. Clarke and Trevor Elkington, the process of "double approval" might be productively considered as something managed through tactical maneuvers within media industries (Clarke 2013, Elkington 2009). To produce comic books, novels, and video games based on television series, outside publishers most often acquire licenses from television studios, effectively purchasing the right to share the related world. Publishers then contract the creative labor of doing so to for-hire writers and/or production studios. Creators must thus obtain approval for their labor on two levels: they must please the publisher while, at the same time, hoping that the publisher will be able to obtain subsequent approval for the work from the studio. The conditions of corporate ownership over copyrighted worlds are first managed in this instance by contractual practices that prescribe the relationships between studio licensor and publisher licensee, as well as quotidian communication and working relationships between executives in each office (or the lack thereof between licensor and for-hire creator, where lack of direct interaction maintains power imbalances). Second, at the level of production and creative practice, individual world sharers refine techniques to negotiate these constraints while still developing their own creative interests in the shared world. Practices such as "continuity mining" allow producers to share in co-creation of a franchised world in ways more likely to win approval, framing attempts at invention in relation to territory and themes already well explored.

Altogether, this framework of discourse, disposition, and tactic helps us conceptualize the dynamics of world sharing not just as defined by negotiation of tensions within industrial relationships, but also more specifically as a managed multiplicity that shapes and sets limits on the collaboration and co-creation that world sharing might support. Managed multiplicity reveals,



in part, a form of power that produces meaning, organization, identity, and practice within the broader set of creative possibilities enabled by the world.

## Managing Battleworlds

This understanding of world sharing as managed multiplicity in an industrial context need not exclude concerns for media texts, however. Instead, we can consider how dominant creative practices and textual qualities serve managerial functions within industry strategies.

As worlds are shared among numerous production communities and contexts of production within the logics of media franchising, they are inevitably multiplied. The 21<sup>st</sup> century “reimagining” of *Battlestar Galactica* in a form disconnected from the continuity of the original 1978 series, for example, nevertheless involves some use of a shared narrative world, as key characters, events, and settings remain to be reinterpreted in an alternative, updated manner. The push toward a *Battlestar* multiverse, as opposed to maintaining a unified, continuous world, came from a number of factors, including industry desires to reach a different audience with edgier programming and needs for professional, creative, and network distinctions. Yet, as the mobilization of a franchise brand, full separation of one *Battlestar* world from the other would have proven counterproductive. While the decision to recast the Starbuck character as female aimed in part to subvert audience expectations (Kungl 2008), other plot points along the way, such as the second season arrival of Admiral Cain and the *Battlestar Pegasus*, reinforced the persistent connections between the two *Battlestar* worlds. A running theme throughout the series suggested that the characters all played familiar roles in an eternal cycle of repeated action, punctuated by eerie, repeated dialogue such as “all this has happened before, and will happen again”. These elements managed the multiplicity of world sharing by imposing specific relationships between the two television series that shared that world, differentiating them at some times and drawing them closer together at others.

Now that comic book films and other Hollywood blockbuster have grown increasingly invested in world-building strategies long utilized by comics, television and other serialized media, we can see similar tactics managing the multiplied use of shared worlds in the cinema. Hollywood’s embrace of media franchising as a strategic logic drives it toward repetition of the familiar—if not to avoid innovation entirely, to couch innovation in safe, risk-averse frameworks already proven to be marketable. Paradoxically,

media franchising demands that Hollywood produce more of the same while always finding new ways to differentiate that product; *Spider-Man* must lead to more *Spider-Man*, but each film must push, in some way, into unfamiliar territory to distinguish itself from previous entries. The film franchise “reboot” manages this strategic challenge; *Spider-Man* can be occasionally reset to zero to allow both new interpretations and restatement of the familiar. Moreover, as announced in 2015, the reboot practice can be used to move the Spider-Man character from a narrative world produced across multiple films by one studio (Sony) and transplant a new version of him into another ongoing world controlled by a different studio (Marvel) (Sony Pictures 2015).

The managed reboot, like the reimagination, is thus a tactic that allows for careful articulation of the relationship between shared, industrially iterative worlds. While reboots work by launching a new, alternate world within the overall shared universe, Hollywood producers have increasingly embraced “soft” reboots in which they try to have their cake and eat it too—doing something radically different to produce a new version of a world, while positing persistent value and relationship in relation to an old version. While the 2009 *Star Trek* introduced filmgoers to a reimagined, younger version of the *Enterprise* crew, it framed that new interpretation within a convoluted time travel/alternate reality premise initiated in the shared continuity in which all prior *Star Trek* productions had been situated. The villain Nero goes back in time from a point in the original *Star Trek* timeline, changes history, and enables the new film franchise to offer a new take on the world as history unfolds in a new way. At age 77, Leonard Nimoy reprised his role as Spock from the original timeline, effectively passing the torch to the characters inhabiting this new iteration of the world. Managing two iterations of a world by holding them in tension, the film works quite cleverly on an industrial level both to forge ahead with an appeal to the younger audiences courted by Hollywood, and to maintain some service to longtime fans.

*X-Men: Days of Future Past* uses a similar time travel and soft reboot tactic to manage the multiplicity of shared worlds in the context of media franchising. By this seventh film in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s *X-Men* franchise, filmmakers had exhausted many of the most popular characters and events from the comic book world, having killed top tier characters like Jean Grey and Cyclops and already adapted storylines like *The Dark Phoenix Saga*. The participation of many different filmmakers with different visions for the characters also muddled a sense of shared continuity within the world. While a reboot would have allowed Fox flexibility to draw from that material

anew and stave off potential creative or commercial stagnation, such a prospect would carry its own risks. Actors like Hugh Jackman still proved commercially marketable in the role of Wolverine, and the films overall continued to perform well at the box office. At the same time, competition between Fox and Marvel Studios (extending from historical licensing agreements that excluded *X-Men* from the unified “Marvel Cinematic Universe” developed by the latter) would have given a reboot added significance; such a move could be read as failure and inferior ability on Fox’s part, compared to the celebrated and tightly coordinated long-term continuity under construction by Marvel in its films. The soft, managed reboot of *Days of Future Past*, therefore, turned on its own time-travel narrative in order to introduce changes to the world in its past, culminating in a coda in which Jean Grey and Cyclops now live in the future, having experienced a completely different set of (now untold) events that did not lead to their demise. Future *X-Men* films are now free to go back to that new, unwritten past, with 2016’s *Age of Apocalypse* recasting younger versions of Jean Grey and Cyclops; but that new interpretation is framed as part and parcel of a multiverse persistently shared with the original films. While the production of the series has been marked by multiplicity, disjuncture, and divergence on many levels, this plot device manages that complex, uneven industry framework by imposing a new narrative unity.

The 2015 film *Terminator: Genisys* too employs narrative time travel to situate new industry adaptation within the shared world of the original films—just as the 2008 television series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* did. As a narrative trope and tool of world sharing, time travel is a tactic that allows managed reboots to pass the torch from one generation to the next: the shared relationship between two worlds can be clearly organized in relationship to industry goals, audience targeting strategies. Potential tensions and oppositions between worlds in the same franchise universe are managed by framing within the text as well as the legacies, hierarchies, and relationships among them.

Returning to comics, Marvel’s *Secret Wars* crossover, and its invocation of a Battleworld, we see this same time travel/alternate worlds trope smooth over tensions and resolve the “battle” of world sharing in a way that serves a variety of industry interests. The “battleworld” of world sharing, strictly speaking, might be more accurately understood as the institutional contexts in which worlds are shared than the narrative universe that unfolds as creative managers put some pieces in new positions and take others off the table. In this case, we might be able to locate management not just in tactical forms of narrative construction, but also discursive and dispositional

practices surrounding that process. In promising that all its parallel worlds were about to collide in a violent, oppositional way, Marvel's promotional rhetoric turned on a discourse of collective authorship and coordination to impose a sense of institutional order upon that collision, to some degree downplaying or even disavowing the multiplicity that produced so many different iterative worlds in the first place. Despite drawing on the wide use of Marvel properties across markets and histories, Axel Alonso explains, in the *Secret Wars* announcement video, that the story would be "the most coordinated event we've ever done. As everyone knows, we're a big, big universe, a shared universe, and we've done a few events over the years. Every time we were planning an event--through *AXIS*, *Original Sin*, *A vs. X*-- [...] we've had to make decisions based on the fact that we knew *Secret Wars* was headed our way" (Secret 2015). The narrative battle between these worlds, he promises, does not represent any corporate opposition or contestation. Instead, it is positioned as a singular, almost inevitable outcome pursued by the various editors, writers, and artists working on other big events in recent years. Lest all that collective work suggest a potential for disunity, Alonso offers the figure of *Secret Wars* writer Jonathan Hickman to bring cohesion to this industrial world sharing, promising that his vision in the core mini-series event would shape the stories told in crossover titles written by other writers. The multiplicity of industrial creativity invoked by the collision of worlds is thus managed by discourses that reaffirm coordination and unity.

The *Secret Wars* video presentation also provides, on a corporate level, an opportunity for Marvel's publishing division to articulate its value and position in relation to a shared media world. Unsurprisingly, given that the event served to hype the creative output of Marvel's publishing division, Alonso and Brevort emphasize the centrality of the comic book industry to the multiplication of Marvel worlds across a wide range of media channels. While celebrating the savvy of Kevin Feige and other producers building the far more popular and commercially lucrative "Marvel Cinematic Universe", Alonso and Brevort nonetheless take care to emphasize that "it all started on the comic book page" (Secret 2015). While many might assume that *Secret Wars* would remake the Marvel Universe in the image of the Marvel Cinematic Universe to take advantage of the greater cross-promotional opportunities offered to the former by the latter, the publishing division positions itself contrarily in this moment as arbiter over the whole of Marvel's creative output across any and all media, with the moral authority to determine what preceding material was worthy of inclusion in a new Marvel universe and which other "pieces" should be taken off the board. Of course, Marvel publishing is in no position to wipe away the Marvel Cinematic

Universe, but, in positioning itself as having life-and-death powers over the future of worlds created at many different points in time and across different industries, the publishing division claims authority over a much bigger, more complex industry formation. With the 1992 animated *X-Men* television series highlighted as one of the worlds at stake in *Secret Wars* (Lovett 2014), Marvel publishers claim a position of authority even over parallel worlds developed outside of the direct purview of the comics division. Marvel publishing was the alpha from which they all sprang, and the omega that could bring them to a final end. Even if, or perhaps especially because, that same political economic industry power does not exist, *Secret Wars* gave Marvel publishing an opportunity to construct a corporate disposition to legitimize its moral authority over worlds now shared widely in the media industries.

## Conclusion

The Battleworld conceit of *Secret Wars* is only one instance in which the shared worlds of media franchising are held in tension within the narrative itself. Alternate universes, and their convergence with one another, are by no means new to comic books, having served companies like Marvel for decades. *Secret Wars* is not fundamentally different in the respects examined here from *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, *Final Crisis*, *Convergence* or many other DC Comics events that have provided that competing publisher with an opportunity to make violent changes to a shared world in narratively justified ways. Indeed, we are now in a moment in which the alternate universe “what if?” strategies long embraced by comic books and television have become a central part of the cinema as well, with the time-travel-incursion plot becoming a dominant device for Hollywood studios seeking to iterate worlds anew while keeping them situated within a shared continuity and serialized narrative framework. At a narrative level, media franchising is producing meta-commentary about world sharing.

Taking stock of such examples, this chapter has argued that the juxtaposition of worlds we see here works in part to manage conflicts and tensions within the media industries. The “battleworld” of media franchising, in which producers and institutions with different outlooks, goals, and strategies nevertheless all draw on the same creative resources, make world sharing a contested and above all *managed* multiplicity, in terms of both narrative and practice. Shared worlds are battleworlds to the extent that they require negotiation and management of their shared status by the multiple producers and industries that exploit them. By thinking about the

sharing of worlds, not just their building, we recognize the tensions inherent in that practice and the management required to impose order, meaning, and authority on that contested process. Appropriately enough, those struggles may be “secret wars”, with the discourses, dispositions, and tactics deployed to manage multiplicity obscuring the existence of industrial and creative struggles as much as calling our attention to them—particularly in the case of alternate universe time travel reboots that neatly rewrite the narrative past. Yet, by focusing on how multiplicity is managed, we can better understand media franchising and world sharing as the realms of contestation that they are.

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## 8. Platform Producer Meets Game Master

On the Conditions for the Media Mix

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the necessary conditions for the creation of a transmedia franchise. Despite transmedia storytelling manuals' optimistic repetition of the refrain that *all you need is your imagination*, transmedia development requires specific, often precise conditions to occur. This chapter focuses on two of these necessary conditions in particular: conditions or media *a priori* that have been essential to the development of the Japanese media mix from the 1980s onwards. Exploring Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and his associates' creation of transmedia worlds within the Japanese publisher Kadokawa Books during the 1980s and 1990s, this chapter suggests that one of these *a priori* is the development of magazines. A second, strategic or conceptual *a priori* for the media mix during the 1980s is the development of the figure of the creator as game master or producer—something that closely resembles what in Hollywood has more recently be called the transmedia producer. In focusing on these two developments and their industry context in the Japan of the 1980s and 1990s, we arrive at the two the necessary conditions for the contemporary form of the media mix and its creation of transmedia worlds.

**Keywords:** Media mix; Platform producer; Transmedia in Japan; Kadokawa Books; Otsuka Eiji

What are the necessary conditions for transmedia development? What are the medial conditions that support the creation and prolonging of storyworlds? Transmedia storytelling manuals often repeat what they present as a truism: that anyone with an active imagination can create a storyworld. Yet, the conditions under which storyworlds are developed into transmedia



or media mix franchises, and are capitalized on as such, are quite specific (for the sake of economy, we may consider what in Japan is called *media mix* as roughly equivalent to the North American term, transmedia storytelling, with the significant caveat that the media mix is not tied to stories, as it is often developed around characters). This article sets out to explore the media *a priori* for the creation of transmedia worlds through a close examination of a specific case study: Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and his associates' activities within a section of Japanese publisher Kadokawa Books during the 1980s and 1990s.

The media *a priori* for the media mix is, it turns out, the development of magazines. A second strategic or conceptual *a priori* for the media mix during the 1980s is the development of the figure of the creator as game master or producer—something that closely resembles what in Hollywood has more recently be called the transmedia producer.<sup>1</sup> The intersection of media or platform producer and game master reshaped the media mix in 1980s Japan and set the stage for Kadokawa's metamorphosis from a publisher that had taken to releasing films in the 1970s, to a company known for its distribution model of the media mix that crosses multiple platforms, develops tie-ins with book stores and video streaming platforms, and whose activities characterize much of transmedia today. This is the case even as the role played by magazines is supplemented by technological media platforms like e-readers and streaming sites—most notably Niconico Video, one of the most prominent streaming platforms in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

Kadokawa Books is still on the frontlines of these transformations. Having merged in 2014 with Niconico's parent company Dwango, and become first KADOKAWA-Dwango and subsequently renaming itself KADOKAWA (of which Kadokawa Books is now a subsidiary), it is at the forefront of experiments in platform production and media-mix creation. An examination of the earlier moment of magazine creation as platform production offers a vantage point from which to rethink the importance of media platforms to the media mix, as well as to understand the specific history of the media mix in Japan. The framing of the medium of the magazine as itself a platform is a recent rereading of media history by none other than Kadokawa Tsuguhiko himself, who situates magazines and bookstores as earlier incarnations of the digital entities such as iTunes Store and Google Play and YouTube that we call platforms today.<sup>3</sup> In this broader reading of the term, Kadokawa Tsuguhiko recently defined the platform quite simply as “the place where money and people and commodities meet” (Kadokawa 2013, 37).

This broader conception of the platform is part of a reconceptualization of the term within management studies (Eisenmann, Parker, and Van Alstyne 2006), that also finds its way into Google executives Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg's definition of the term in their *How Google Works*: "A platform is, fundamentally, a set of products and services that bring together groups of users and providers to form multisided markets." (Schmidt and Rosenberg 2014, 78-79). That is to say, there is something useful about the rereading of media history in terms of the construction of platforms, as sites where money and people and commodities meet, as a bazaar of sorts that allows for certain activities to take place. If the first aim of this essay is to inquire into the medial conditions for transmedia development, the second main objective is to retell the history of transmedia from the perspective of platform building, with the understanding that platforms need not be digital. As Ian Condry puts it most succinctly, "one can think of platforms not only as mechanical or digital structures of conveyance but also as ways to define and organize our cultural worlds" (Condry 2013, 58).

If the media mix and its history has particular import to the rethinking of the conditions of transmedia in general, it is due, in part, to the central place it occupies in Henry Jenkins' development of transmedia storytelling as theory, within *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins 2006), and in part to the intensity and variety of manners in which media mixes unfold in Japan. It would be an exaggeration to credit Kadokawa with the development of media mix completely; as I argue elsewhere, there are earlier examples of media mix that stretch back to the 1930s, 1950s, and, particularly, with the start of television animation, to the 1960s (Steinberg 2012). Nevertheless, Kadokawa Books has played a key role in the current development of transmedia in Japan and is therefore also a company that we must credit with the development of the conditions for the model of transmedia storytelling that the Wachowskis found in Japan. The Wachowskis later used this model in *The Matrix* and this model served as the fundamental axis for Jenkins' own theorization of the phenomenon. The third objective of this essay, then, will be to offer a more in-depth portrait of a particular era of the development of the media mix within Japan, painting a clearer picture of the development of the Tsuguhiko-style media mix than I was able to do in *Anime's Media Mix*, and doing so in part through the lens of the development of "new media" in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> I should also note that this re-examination of the 1980s as a new media era is inspired by scholarship on the transformation of the television into monitor during that period and the work of Thomas Lamarre and Sheila Murphy in particular. The

proliferation of media around the television set—notably, computer games and videotapes—transforms the media milieu in which television is situated. The new media of the 1980s offered new possibilities for unfolding media mixes, possibilities that were aggressively explored within Kadokawa Books.

Before continuing, a brief overview of Kadokawa Books is in order. Kadokawa Tsuguhiko's father, Kadokawa Gen'yoshi, founded the publishing house in 1945 and dedicated it to the publication of highbrow literary classics and haiku. Upon Gen'yoshi's passing in 1975, he turned the reins over to Tsuguhiko's elder brother, Kadokawa Haruki. Haruki and Tsuguhiko together took the company down the path of media-mix production, albeit with somewhat different techniques, target audiences, and attitudes towards transmedia expansion. Elsewhere, I've noted the sordid family history and the sibling rivalry between the two brothers (Steinberg 2012); for now, let it suffice to note that both brothers' work was essential to the transformation of Kadokawa into a media mix powerhouse. Schematically, Haruki developed what he called the Holy Trinity model of media synergy, characterized by blockbuster or large-scale film production for mass consumption, combined with the re-release of novels and soundtracks. The advertising blitz promoted all three elements of this Trinity at once—film-novel-soundtrack.<sup>5</sup> Tsuguhiko, by contrast, opted for a smaller scale media-mix practice that relies on the fantasy turn in the 1980s, drawing on and learning from the popularity of role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (which provided those at Kadokawa with an important source of training for transmedia world building), and connects with the increasing centrality of video games to popular culture, and the media mix in particular (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015). A major rift between the brothers would develop around 1992-1993, leading Tsuguhiko to quit the company and start his own. Months later, after Haruki was arrested on drug-trafficking charges in 1993, Tsuguhiko returned to take the reins of the company and henceforth treated the company as his own.

In what follows, I shall briefly trace the emergence of this latter model of the media mix, which has since become the backbone of one strand of transmedia practice in Japan—namely, smaller-scale productions that aim for smaller-scale successes among their slightly older target audience.<sup>6</sup> With its deep connection to “new media” of the 1980s such as the VHS and the Famikon (or Nintendo Entertainment System, as it is known in North America), the Tsuguhiko media mix is the bridge between analog and digital transmedia developments. As such, it offers

a glimpse into the way responses to technological and social changes that first became apparent during the 1980s inform the reformations of the media mix with the rise of digital media in the 2000s.<sup>7</sup> Simply put: to unravel the media *a priori* of transmedia storytelling and to build a bridge between media-mix practice and the increasing mediation of cultural content via digital streaming platforms such as Niconico Video, it behooves us to examine some key developments that took place in the 1980s within Kadokawa Books.

### “New Media” and the Magazine Media Mix

Reading through Kadokawa annual internal company reports, one thing becomes strikingly clear: Kadokawa Tsuguhiko was intrigued from very early on by the commercial potential of new technologies. He often discusses what in the 1980s was (already) being called “new media” (*nyū media*) in speeches and essays prepared for these reports, which were distributed at annual company gatherings of employees and business partners, and ostensibly describe the directions the company was taking. As early as 1984, he discusses the potential for electronic books—a format that would only come to fruition in the 2000s and that only became commercially viable towards the end of that decade (Kadokawa 1984, 4). This interest was, by no means, simply a personal hobby; it was closely tied to his managerial vision for the company. As he summarizes in 1984: “New media is new business.”<sup>8</sup> This embrace of new media as new business persisted throughout Kadokawa Tsuguhiko’s career and eventually resulted in the production of an e-book platform, BookWalker, meant to rival Amazon’s Kindle.<sup>9</sup>

But the “new media” that most interested Tsuguhiko in the early 1980s was the television set, or rather, the TV set as it was undergoing its transformation into video monitor by the emergence of the VCR and video game consoles. Consequently, after a long process of incubation, Kadokawa Tsuguhiko founded the weekly magazine *Za Terebijon* (The Television), with the first issue appearing in September 1982.

Here it is worth quoting Kadokawa’s explanation for the founding of Kadokawa Shoten’s first-ever weekly magazine:

It is said that television has entered its third revolution. First the black-and-white television, second the color television. From now, in its third age, it will become possible to use the television set for TV newspapers



8.1: Cover of the first issue of *Za Television*

and for TV calling, and, before this, fiber-optical transmission will exponentially expand the number of channels. As a result of these changes, the TV will shift from what is now an entertainment-centric medium to a more individualized information transmission tool. In the midst of this diversification of media in the near future, *The Television* is certain to become the most important and central magazine. (Kadokawa 1982, 7)

As Kadokawa Tsuguhiko predicts, reflecting existing popular rhetoric about the future of television, television was no longer just a stand-alone medium, but was increasingly becoming part of *new media*, something closer to a computer than a mere television, and an interface to a wider media world. As Kadokawa recalls, “I thought that around the television set a new market was starting, and new possibilities would be opening.”<sup>10</sup>

The impact of this foundation of *The Television* on Kadokawa Shoten’s history is hard to overstate. In company charts and documents (themselves symptomatic of attempts to narrate and re-narrate company history), 1982 is consistently listed as a key year for Kadokawa: the beginning of the “Magazine Era”. In fact, Tsuguhiko had wanted to start a television magazine since the early 1970s. During a visit to the US in 1970, he was thoroughly impressed with the American magazine *TV Guide* (Satō, 80-81), but, when he raised the idea with his Kadokawa associates, they thought it would be impossible to gain the kind of scale needed for such a magazine to succeed. Ten years later, in 1982, he finally founded *The Television*. Tsuguhiko envisioned this as more than simply an information magazine listing the TV schedule; it was meant to be a magazine that engaged the culture and technology around the TV set.<sup>11</sup> This included the culture of the stars who appeared in TV shows, but more important still, it focused on the new technological developments around the TV set: the video cassette recorder and the TV-based video-game system.<sup>12</sup>

The VCR and the video-game system were hardware attachments to the TV set that would transform the television from a reception device for on-air programming to a platform that could accommodate recorded programs played back at a later date, also known as “time-shifting”. It also gave rise to an entirely new market for video cassettes, as well as new models of distribution and aesthetics of both film and animation—straight-to-video film and animation programs (V-cinema and OVA). This was also the first step towards *thinking of the TV set as a platform for entertainment*.<sup>13</sup> The next step would be to build magazine platforms around *The Television*.

## Magazines as Platforms: The Television, Comptiq, New Type, and Marukatsu Famikon

*The Television* was a first experiment in an attempt to capture the increasingly complex media environment that was unfolding in the early 1980s. It was also the place from which two of Kadokawa’s most important magazines for the media mix would emerge: *Comptiq* and *New Type*.

*Comptiq* started as an extra edition of *The Television*, its first issue hitting newsstands in November 1983. The genesis of *Comptiq* started with Kadokawa Tsuguhiko suggesting to Satō Tatsuo (later president of Kadokawa, but still a freelance editor at the time) that he develop a game magazine for the growing PC game market. His reasoning was that, if there could be a magazine for media around the television set, there could also be a magazine around the personal computer.<sup>14</sup> Mimicking *The Television* tagline, “A Book for Having Fun with the TV” (*Terebi to asobu hon*), the tagline for early issues of *Comptiq* was: “A Book for Having Fun with the PC” (*Pasokon to asobu hon*).

If *The Television* was not just about television but also about TV’s wider media culture, *Comptiq* was also not just about games, but about the wider media culture of games, including manga comics. Significantly, it was also the source of the development of new content, including an entirely new literary format. It was in *Comptiq* that one of the key serializations of the 1980s started: *Record of Lodoss War* (*Rōdosu-tō Senki*), a collaborative project by a *Dungeons and Dragons* table-top role-playing game (TRPG) group called “Group SNE” led by Yasuda Hiroshi, and turned into a serial novelization by Mizuno Ryō. The *Lodoss* project started out as a transcript of a TRPG replay. Mizuno’s novel form rewrite of the serialized replay (transcribed in the dialogue form of the game) is seen as one of the origins of what today is called the “light novel”, a genre of juvenile fiction that increasingly dominates book sales in Japan; a genre in which Kadokawa imprints have a 70-80% market share.<sup>15</sup> Hence, *Comptiq* is not only an influential game magazine, but it also became the starting point for one of Kadokawa’s best-selling book formats: the light novel. As Satō Kichinosuke suggests in his company history of Kadokawa, *Comptiq* became a kind of platform that gave birth to some of Kadokawa’s most important contents—*Lodoss* in particular and later *Lucky Star* in the 2000s—a later moment in time when the English tagline for *Comptiq* was, appropriately, “MediaMix Game Magazine”.<sup>16</sup>

The animation magazine *New Type* similarly emerged from *The Television*, with its writers initially drawn from the animation division of the latter (along with Inoue Shin’ichiro, formerly at another anime magazine, *Animekku*, as an associate editor, later a key person in Kadokawa management).<sup>17</sup> *New Type* quickly became one of the most influential anime magazines from the late 1980s to this day, and, like *Comptiq*, a source of new content for Kadokawa media mixes (such as Nagano Gō’s *Five Star Stories*). The first issue appeared in March 1985, timed to coincide with the release of the Kadokawa animated feature, *Kamui no ken* (Satō 2007,

103-104). *Marukatsu Famikon*, the home video game magazine based around the Nintendo NES, debuted soon after, in 1986, and became another key Kadokawa magazine that was both a source for information and a platform for the creation of new content.

These magazines and others like them became the launch pads or platforms both for new media mixes and for the new model of the media mix that Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and his editors Satō Tatsuo and Inoue Shin'ichiro developed in the 1980s. The magazines were important nodes for this new model of the media mix for several reasons. First, they were framed as “information magazines”, which allowed them both to cover other companies’ content, but also to promote Kadokawa’s own content through advertising and special articles. Second, while they began as sites for the comic versions of existing media such as video games, they quickly became hubs for the production of *new* or original content. This content would then be developed across different media forms, resulting in a media mix. Third, closely related to the second point, the content producers who contributed to these magazines had begun to explore a new model of media production that was based around the creation of worlds *before* individual narratives or particular serial installments (whether manga, serial novels, OVA animation, or games). Here is where content producers like Ōtsuka Eiji, Yasuda Hitoshi and Mizuno Ryō, and CLAMP became key. Fourth, the production of this new content took place using a model of the media mix that contrasted sharply with Haruki’s high-risk, high-return model. The media mix promoted by Tsuguhiko at the institutional level and through the magazines was a new model of low-risk, middle-return, aimed towards what would later be called “subcultural” audiences—older teens and young adults who searched for more mature content than that offered by the more mainstream manga magazines of the time—and using new distribution formats like the video tape, as well as new novel imprints such as Sneaker Bunko, which later became famous as the go-to site for the light novel genre. The magazines inserted themselves into the gaps between the major manga magazines of the time that targeted mass audiences, and became key platforms for the production and development of a different model of the media mix.

## Inventing the Game Master

If magazines as platforms form one pillar of the Tsuguhiko media mix, the development of the role of “game master” or transmedia producer is its other



pillar. Mizuno Ryō of *Lodoss* fame would be one such Kadokawa game master; another is found in the figure of Ōtsuka Eiji. Ōtsuka is well-known as a subcultural critic, academic, and author of light novels and light novel-writing guides. While nominally independent, he has consistently worked with Kadokawa-affiliated companies as a freelance manga scriptwriter, novelist, and critic since about 1986. Moreover, Ōtsuka offers an invaluable theoretical exposition of the Tsuguhiko media mix in the well-known collection of essays he wrote in the late 1980s, *Monogatari shōhiron* (“A Theory of Narrative Consumption”).<sup>18</sup>

*A Theory of Narrative Consumption* has had at least three lives, which, in part, follow its multiple re-publications. Ōtsuka was working full-time for Kadokawa Media Office (a subdivision of the publisher under the control of Tsuguhiko and the site of many of the magazine editorial boards) at the time he wrote it and the book should be read in part as a theoretical elaboration of the new media mix structure towards which Tsuguhiko, Ōtsuka, and his close associates at the Media Office were working.<sup>19</sup> It was written, as Ōtsuka later laments, as a kind of “marketing theory for [ad agency] Dentsū and Kadokawa” (Ōtsuka and Azuma 2001 p. 7).<sup>20</sup> This was, indeed, the first life of the book, taken up most ardently by marketing theorists. The book gained a second life in the 2000s by a new generation of theorists. Azuma Hiroki, in particular, resuscitates the book by engaging deeply with arguments made by Ōtsuka a decade or so earlier, even as he develops his own theory of *otaku* consumption (Azuma 2001).

But the book also has a third life: as a critical and crucial example of what American production studies scholar John Caldwell calls “industrial reflexivity”—a kind of *self-theorization of industry practice* (Caldwell 2008). That is, this book offers us a glimpse into the logic behind a model of the media mix that—contrary to Azuma’s thesis about a break in consumption habits—is still very much alive today, arguably at the heart of contemporary media life.<sup>21</sup> At its core, the book is a meditation on the connection between world building and transmedia; it is in this vein that Ōtsuka describes it in his 2012 rewrite of the book.

Ōtsuka’s theory of publishing proposed to develop multiple narrative fragments on the basis of a single “worldview” (Ōtsuka 2007, 244; Ōtsuka and Azuma 2001, 7). This new model of the media mix dovetailed with that in development by Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and would form the theoretical basis for Ōtsuka’s practice as editor and creator of manga- and novel-based media mixes at Kadokawa, starting with his own *Madara* manga, video games, role-playing games and novels (Ōtsuka and Azuma 2001, 7; Ōtsuka 2007, 243). While I have looked closely at the mechanics of what Ōtsuka calls narrative consumption and its relation to the worldview elsewhere (Steinberg 2012), I

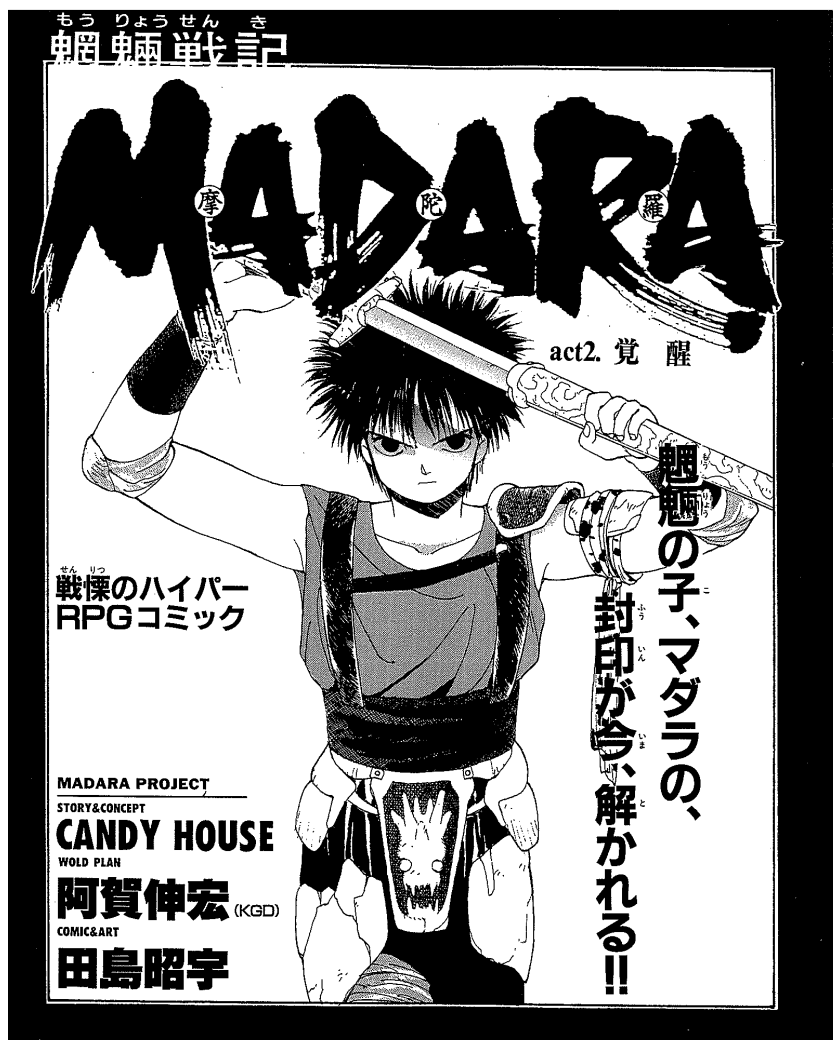
would like to focus here on the relationship between world-building and the position of what Ōtsuka calls the “game master” (*gēmu masutā*) or “narrative controller” (*monogatari no kanrisha*) (Ōtsuka 2001, 35), roughly comparable to more recent propositions in Hollywood about the role of the transmedia producer.<sup>22</sup> As the use of the term “game master” implies, it is also a figure or role influenced by the model of storytelling and play that the table-top RPG *Dungeons and Dragons* brought with it to Japan.

If Kadokawa Tsuguhiko built magazines and operated as a platform producer, the editors and contributors working under Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, such as Ōtsuka, Yasuda, Mizuno, Satō, and others developed a model of content creation based around the building of worlds, and the subsequent unfolding of narratives within the worlds as particular works (manga series, novelizations, on-video animations, etc.). Their medium of choice was, to a degree, inconsequential or, at the very least, secondary to the worlds and settings behind them. They were first and foremost world producers, or game masters, and only secondarily novelists, manga scriptwriters, or game developers. Unlike the Haruki model of the media mix, which invariably started from an original novel, under Tsuguhiko, *the original was the worldview itself*, something that consumers could only access through consuming the various manga, novels, video games, and so on that were based on this worldview. The absence of a single original text and the principle of the worldview were what gave the Tsuguhiko media mix its infinitely serial character.

Although less well remembered than either *Slayers* or *Record of the Lodoss War*, *Madara* offers a useful site for understanding how the Kadokawa Tsuguhiko media mix functioned—because it was an early success of this model (albeit shaped by the even earlier success of *Lodoss*), we see in it the role of the “game master” in orchestrating the unfolding media mix, and because it makes visible the centrality of world building to this media-mix practice. Here, I turn to a brief examination of *Madara* as a model of the Kadokawa Tsuguhiko media mix.

## Producing the Madara Project

*Mōryō senki Madara* (“Demon Chronicles of Madara”), commonly abbreviated to *Madara*, began serialization in Kadokawa’s Famikon/NES magazine *Marukatsu Famikon*, kicking off in the 27 November 1987 issue of the biweekly publication, at editor Satō Tatsuo’s suggestion. *Madara* was unique for being the first original manga in a game magazine, rather than one based on an existing (or forthcoming) game, as was the model until that



8.2: *Madara* from *Marukatsu Famikon*, December 11, 1987 issue

point. This was an era when game publishers typically created tie-in manga serializations as a form of cross-promotion. In practice, this tended to limit creative license and ensure that the rights were held by game publishers; two problems that *Madara*, as an original creation, could sidestep. In this case, rights were not owned by the game publisher, but rather by Kadokawa Books and, in this case, the creator of the manga, Ōtsuka Eiji, who went by the pen name “Candy House”. Ōtsuka (as Candy House) was credited with “Story & Concept” and, in some later issues, as “director” as well.

By this, we should understand Ōtsuka to be not only the creator, but also the producer or director. This was not a mere “manga” it was a *project* from the start. The Madara Project credits appear, with some variation depending on the magazine installment, as follows:

Story & Concept: CANDY HOUSE  
 World Plan: Aga Nobuhiro  
 Art & Comic: Tajima Shou-ji  
 Monster Design: Tsubura Hidetomo  
 Directed by CANDY HOUSE<sup>23</sup>

What does it mean to have a “directed by” credit in a comic series? The credit gestures to the type of role Ōtsuka calls a media mix “producer”, pointing to the importance of having a transmedia approach to authorship itself.<sup>24</sup> Ōtsuka (as Candy House) adopts a producer-like role, managing the proper unfolding of the franchise. At a key moment in his *Theory of Narrative Consumption*, he dubs this producer role that of the “game master”. This seems an apt term, given that it comes from the realm of the TRPG, where the game master is the creator and narrator of the game. This is a significant development in the status of the original author, an early incarnation of what would be the 2010 designation “Transmedia Producer” in Hollywood—although, according to Ōtsuka himself, this conceptualization of the director as producer was itself inspired by the role of George Lucas as producer and visionary world-builder behind the *Star Wars* series.<sup>25</sup> Whether derived from Lucas or not, this world-building credit for a media-mix producer became central to transmedia in practice around Kadokawa magazines in the late 1980s.

*Madara* is a narrative that structurally replicates the tale of the wandering hero on a quest, and (as Ōtsuka points out on many occasions) roughly retells the narrative of Tezuka Osamu’s late 1960s manga *Dororo*: a young man (Madara) born to a king is stripped of his “chakra” and is left to die (Tezuka 2012; Ōtsuka 2013, 48).<sup>26</sup> He is saved, however, and his missing body parts are all replaced by mechanical parts, making him, in essence, a cyborg. Whenever he defeats one of the domineering overlord Emperor Miroku’s minions, he regains one of his stolen chakra. He is accompanied on his travels by a young girl, Kirin, who also possesses mysterious powers, and who aids Madara on his journey. As Ōtsuka himself declares, the work on the narrative level is an example of structural piracy: the repurposing of an existing narrative (*Dororo*), albeit with a new setting—a vaguely central-Asian fantasy world.

The narrative here functions as a lure into the world; if the plot points are not new, the unfolding world was captivating, as were the visual

aesthetics and structure of the manga. *Madara* was created in the model of a role-playing video game, or RPG, popular at the time. As part of the preparation for the serialization of *Madara*, Ōtsuka enlisted game designer Aka Nobuhiro to design the rules for the *Madara* world; hence, the *Madara* world was implicitly rule-based, like the worlds of *Dragon Quest* or *Dungeons and Dragons*. These rules mostly lie in the background of narrative, but the RPG elements of the game come to the fore periodically in the manga (particularly in battle scenes, and “level-ups”). Square inserts with text that simulate the 8-bit Famikon text display found in some games appear within the manga frames. A combination of narrative information on a character and a list of its rank, hit points, karma, and stamina are listed in box inserts, in a pixelated typescript reminiscent of the 8-bit game experience. Particular moves or types of attack specific to a given character are also described in this form, along with the effects such an attack would have. This information was arguably superfluous to the narrative itself. While it was included in the manga magazine serialization, and in the first large-format paperback manga books (first published in August 1989), the subsequent paperback manga release removed the RPG-like inserts.

We can surmise from this removal of the game elements that they did not serve an immediate narrative function. Rather, their importance came from the way they established the intermedial quality of the manga. They made the manga seem as if it was an RPG, even though it wasn't, nor was it even based on one. In this regard, the tagline created for the manga during its serialization is noteworthy: “The Bloodcurdling Hyper RPG Comic” (*Senritsu no haipā RPG komikkku*) (11 December 1987) was its original tagline, and “The Hyper RPG Comic that Feels 100% Like a Game” (*gēmu kankaku 100% no hypā RPG komikkku*) (27 June 1988) one of the most oft-repeated ones. The emphasis on RPG and the game-like is key to the promotion of *Madara* and to its framing as a hybrid narrative-game text.

A further element to note—significant to both the RPG and the Tsuguhiko-style media mix as theorized by Ōtsuka—is the emphasis on the storyworld. Instead of starting with an individual work, Ōtsuka and his collaborators on *Madara* started by creating the world to which the work would belong. Information about the world could itself be marketed or sold as an important resource. Rather than placing the importance on a trinity of products—the book-film-soundtrack of the Haruki media mix—the Tsuguhiko media mix rather put the emphasis on the consumption of the world upon which products were based. The result was that any number of products could be created out of a given world. This was particularly the case with series like *Madara* that operated on the principle of rebirth and

設定集①

### 目

精神も集中できる事により忍術能力が可動する。

1. 遠くの物や、小さな物を見る事ができる。
2. 遠景の人間では見る事ができないが、視覚の角度を見る事ができる。
3. 瞳に塗られている薬品により、暗闇の中でも物を見る事ができる。
4. 閃光を発し、相手の目を眩しくする。
5. 相手の身体を透視できる。
6. 目に掛けて、記憶を受けた場合、一瞬の内にシャッターのような目で目を保護する。

### 肩

両腕の関節、ギミックがはたらく。

1. マスクの裏側、手甲の関節を開放。
2. 腕の関節を解放する装置。
3. 腕がスカーフは裏ガスまで、いろんな種類のガスを自由に開放させる装置。

### 腕

腕の関節、ギミックがはたらく。多量のギミックが内蔵されている。

1. 関節の関節にギミックがはたらく。
2. 腕の関節に自動で出てくる関節のギミックがはたらく。
3. 両手で腕の後ろ側を握り締ると関節の関節がはたらく。
4. 手首の上側から関節の関節がはたらく。
5. 手首ははずれ、握り締める事ができる。
6. 腕の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
7. 腕の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
8. 腕の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
9. 腕の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。

### 脚

脚の関節、ギミックがはたらく。

1. 脚の関節にギミックがはたらく。
2. 脚の関節に自動で出てくる関節のギミックがはたらく。
3. 両手で脚の後ろ側を握り締ると関節の関節がはたらく。
4. 脚の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
5. 脚の関節ははずれ、握り締める事ができる。
6. 脚の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
7. 脚の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
8. 脚の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。
9. 脚の関節から、関節の関節がはたらく。

### 摩陀羅

身体の内ほとんどが、白濁した、鉄の塊のギミックから成っている。それらのギミックは、摩陀羅の能力に依存し、自己の動きを止めているのである。ギミック自体の動作は、ヒュウの動きに依存する。摩陀羅の動きから作られたもので、運動性と信頼性の高い動きを兼ね備えている。併し、遠景の人物と比べると視覚的に、大きな立派な、動きの人間には能力の限界を表現したとしても、限界する事すら不可能に近い。マダラの動きが目的ではなく、彼の能力を解いて、その身体は摩陀羅の身体にも適する。また、特許品からマダラの動き、動いて、1つの身体が使用されており、注目の動きを保持している。

設定集……

精神も集中し、忍を全身に注ぎこめる事により

1. 遠景の人物を見る事ができる。
2. 遠景の人物から視覚を射撃できる。

設定集……

全身を流れる血液が熱帯地にとっては熱い液体である。

○身長 157cm ○体重 34kg

62

8.3: Madara settei from *Marukatsu Famikon*, December 11, 1987 issue

reincarnation.<sup>27</sup> From a production angle, the narrative functions as a lure to the world, and it is through the various serializations that this world is accessed and expanded.

*Madara* was quite explicit about this; at the end of every installment of the comic, there was a “Settings Collection” (*settei-shū*) page: a special information section on main characters, their monster adversaries, or the world. This

page offered a detailed fragment of information about one element of the larger Madara world (*settei* being a substitute term for *sekai* or world; Ōtsuka uses the terms interchangeably in his *A Theory of Narrative Consumption*).

While the serialization was eventually turned into an actual RPG game for the Famikon, and then a direct-to-video anime, the setting pages also enticed readers to create their own narratives. *Madara* thus plugged into the existing culture of amateur comic creation, fostering it further at various stages, with periodic invitations for readers to contribute character designs of monsters, for instance, that would be used in later moments of the manga. Crowd-sourcing the production, and the involvement of an active fan base, were key elements of this version of the media mix. There were even officially published *Madara Official Pirate Editions* (Ōtsuka and Tajima 1991), filled with works culled from those sent in by fans. Ōtsuka describes this as a joke at the time, but it was one that was inspired by the open structure of the *Madara* world, in which the character was described as possessing 108 lives—far too many for Ōtsuka and Tajima to write themselves. Therefore, the very narrative setting was also an open invitation for fans to participate in the writing of the storyworld. *Madara* had what we would call today an “open architecture” that encouraged user-generated contents. Indeed, it very much anticipates the mobilization of fan production (and fan labor) for official releases today. In all of this, Ōtsuka functioned as a project director and producer of the media-mix franchise.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is worth returning here to a figure we started with: Kadokawa Tsuguhiko. What role did Tsuguhiko play? He was certainly not the *auteurist producer* that his older brother Haruki was—he wasn’t someone who intervened in the minutiae of media-mix production. Rather, he was a pioneer of a new kind of figure: the *infrastructure producer*, or what we might call the *platform producer*. Tsuguhiko produced the platforms that became the basis for “content” development by media mix directors/producers like Ōtsuka, Yasuda, and Mizuno. He built the magazine infrastructure and put together the institutional know-how and departments within Kadokawa that would go on to oversee the production of straight to video animation (or OVA), games, and so on. As I noted at the opening of this article, Tsuguhiko retrospectively describes magazines like *Za Television*, *Comptiq*, and *Marukatsu Famikon* as platforms. Having created the conditions necessary for the development of a relatively new form of media mix based around figures like Ōtsuka and

Mizuno, Kadokawa Tsuguhiko's role was as a relatively detached platform producer. In this model, the platform producer builds the media upon which the media mix director depends; the latter in turn builds narrative or content worlds and orchestrates transmedia development.

Of course, it is worth recalling that the emphasis on worlds is not unique to the Japanese media ecology. Indeed, as I noted in passing above, the Hollywood embrace of transmedia in the 2000s is, in some ways, fundamentally indebted to Japan's unfolding media mix—even as key figures of the Japanese media mix such as Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and Ōtsuka point to *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Star Wars* as key inspirations for their own media mix ventures. Transmedia in the North American context and the media mix in Japan are, then, closely intertwined, one building on the other. But as I have shown here, two elements played a fundamental role at a formative moment in the development of the media mix in Japan around Kadokawa in the 1980s: the magazine as platform and the game master as media-agnostic coordinator of the media mix. Together, they were the support and the guidance for the creation of media-mix worlds and, as such, they are also the necessary conditions or media *a priori* for this very particular kind of transmedia development.

## Notes

1. The Producers Guild of America created the new credit, “Transmedia Producer”, in 2010. [http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc\\_nm#transmedia](http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc_nm#transmedia)
2. For useful accounts of Niconico Video, see: Johnson and Nozawa.
3. Author interview with Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, 23 June 2013.
4. The following builds on additional archival research and interviews of key Kadokawa personnel that I incorporated into the expanded, rewritten version of *Anime's Media Mix*, published in Japanese as *Naze Nihon wa “media mikkusu suru kuni” nanoka / Why is Japan a “Media Mixing Nation”?*.
5. For a highly informative account of Kadokawa Haruki's filmmaking activities, see: Zahlten.
6. These can be contrasted with “megahits” such as *Pokémon* or *Yōkai Watch*, which target children as their main audience and aim at mainstream success.
7. For another take on this transition and debates around media convergence, see: Oyama and Lolli 2016.
8. Kadokawa, “Atarashii shuppan wo motomete,” 5.
9. Unlike Kindle there is no hardware version of BookWalker, but the service is available as an app on iOS and Android devices, as well as for computers.
10. Interview with Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, 26 June 2013.
11. Ibidem.



12. Of course, in marking 1982 as the beginning of the magazine era, the Tsuguhiko-era narrations of the company history also efface its earlier forays into monthly magazine production, started by Kadokawa Haruki. Indeed, it's necessary here to recognize that the success of *The Television* is built on the media system Haruki set up. The first hit issues of *The Television* used Kadokawa Haruki Office actresses like Yakushimaru Hiroko—a star at the time—on the cover. Hence, while I distinguish the Haruki-style media mix from the Tsuguhiko-style media mix, the latter benefited from conditions set up by the former.
13. Interview with Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, 26 June 2013.
14. Satō Tatsuo, quoted in “Gēmā wa motto keieisha wo mezasu beki!” (Gamers should aim to be managers!), 12<sup>th</sup> edition, <http://www.4gamer.net/games/999/G999905/20130704001/>.
15. Though Ōtsuka notes that *Lodoss* is only one of several possible origins of the light novel format. See also: Kawasaki and Iikura.
16. Sato, *Subete wa koko kara hajimaru*, 95. *Comptiq* featured the subtitle “MediaMix Game Magazine” from September 2003 to November 2012.
17. Interview with Ōtsuka Eiji, 24 March 2013.
18. This book, originally published in 1989, was expanded and republished in 2001 as *Teihon monogatari shōhiron*, then substantially rewritten and republished again in 2012 as *Monogatari shōhiron kai* (“A Theory of Narrative Consumption, Revisited”).
19. On Ōtsuka's entry into Kadokawa Media Office and the conditions he had already conceived for a more minor type of media mix, see: Ōtsuka 1999, 264-269.
20. Dentsū is the largest advertising agency in Japan and took close note of the theory of narrative consumption Ōtsuka developed.
21. This is how I would read Ōtsuka's rewrite of the book in its most recent version, *Monogatari shōhiron kai*, as a reflection on the conditions of its first era of publication, as they extend into the media world of the present moment.
22. In 2010, the Producers Guild of America created a special new credit: “Transmedia Producer”. See: [http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc\\_nm#transmedia](http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc_nm#transmedia).
23. This credit sequence is taken from the 12 February 1988 issue of *Marukatsu Famikon*.
24. Interview with Ōtsuka Eiji, 24 March 2013. For useful reconsiderations of the role of authorship in the American context, see: Gray and Johnson.
25. Interview with Ōtsuka Eiji, 4 July 2014.
26. Ōtsuka's fascination with structural piracy comes in no small part from the important place of structuralist narratology on his conception of storytelling. In this regard, his own education as an ethnographer coincided with the rather late translation and introduction of Propp in Japan during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which had a profound impact on his sense of storytelling.
27. In the 2000s, the loop narrative would take on this structuring role, enabling similarly spiraling serialization, as in the *Suzumiyu Haruhi*, *Steins; Gate* or *Fate/Stay Night* franchises.

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## 9. Narrative Ecosystems

A Multidisciplinary Approach to Media Worlds<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This chapter presents the model of “narrative ecosystems”, examining their specific features: they are inhabited by narrative forms, characters, and viewers that get modified through space and time; they are interconnected structures; they tend to reach and maintain a certain degree of equilibrium (stability, balance), orchestrating a persistent world that persists beyond the small screen and that modifies itself in dynamic ways according to developmental paradigms often unforeseen; they are non-procedural systems, not determined by a syntagmatic sequence of functions, but by declarative elements that describe the reference environment, making the narrative material a narrative universe that might be traveled over by the user in unprecedented ways; they are formed by an abiotic component (the media environment) and by a biotic component (the narrative forms). Inhabiting a narrative ecosystem is a distributed and diversified experience that generates participation. Traditional tools for the narrative analysis (semiotics, narratology, etc.) are no longer suitable for such new serial forms. Other disciplines, such as information architecture may offer useful interpretative tools.

**Keywords:** Narrative Ecosystems, Vast Narratives, Resilience, Narrative Prediction, Contemporary Television

### Introduction

This paper aims to propose an original approach to the investigation of vast audiovisual narratives, namely TV series, according to a new theoretical perspective that we label the “narrative ecosystem”. With the term “vast

narratives”, we refer, in the first place, to contemporary US TV shows that, according to Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, are characterized by the need to maintain an “ongoing structure with narrative consistency and thematic coherence throughout large numbers of episodes and sometimes seasons” (2009, 4). Our proposal is to study vast narratives through the narrative ecosystem paradigm, a model that encompasses a cross-disciplinary approach to TV studies. In the past 20 years, TV serial dramas, particularly those from the US, have enjoyed great success among viewers worldwide and have stimulated considerable critical attention from media scholars.

It is evident today that traditional narrative formulas have gone through a process of mutation and hybridization, gaining strong elements of temporal progression and narrative development that were missing in previous formulas. Therefore, contemporary TV resists the risk of narrative atrophy by creating a diegetic world in which changes at all levels—of the characters, scenes, and narrative techniques—are continuously sought, as well as valued and celebrated, by fans. TV series have anomalous features as far as their narrative progression is concerned: they are “abnormal” objects, which overflow in time and space. They last for many years and are, moreover, able to branch out across different media, as per the model of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006), thereby generating other texts in different media environments. This capacity to overflow across the media landscape is the result of a mutation: we are dealing with objects that are no longer self-conclusive and finished texts, but instead have become long-lasting transmedia phenomena. We are referring, in particular, to the fact that TV series have become very elaborate as far as their transmedia extensions are concerned. In this respect, transmedia extensions may, of course, “broaden the timeline of the aired material, as happens when we rely on comics to fill in back story or play out the long term ramifications of the depicted events (see for example the use of animation in the build-up to *The Dark Knight* or *The Matrix Reloaded*)” (Jenkins 2009). But, more than this, they also require a strong investment of time and energy in order to collect all the spread narrative pieces and to assemble them into a meaningful whole. Finally, contemporary TV series are also long-lasting phenomena by virtue of all the possibilities offered by new modes of production, distribution, and consumption, as has happened in cases such as *The Killing* and *Arrested Development*, shows cancelled by their networks and later revived by Netflix.

We propose a new interpretative model: the narrative ecosystem. We believe this is a response to the need for a dynamic model that represents

vast narratives, accounting for the interactions of agents, changes, and evolutions. Production and management studies intertwined with cultural studies (Johnson 2013) are already going in the direction we support. Our theoretical proposal thus aims to encompass this approach with a diachronic view of the media objects as well as with a method to predict the evolution of a specific TV show. This last goal still needs work and effort in order to figure out a predictive model that might be useful to the media industry. In this paper, in order to address this absence, we have started to draw together some theoretical observations based on ecological selection and evolution patterns, which we present below.

### Something Borrowed, Something New...

What makes contemporary TV serial narratives so innovative and engaging for the viewer? First of all, contemporary TV series offer viewers an entire universe rather than a single story. Consider, for instance, what happened with *Heroes* and with the ARG (Alternate Reality Game) *Heroes 360° Experience*, or with the *Lost Experience*—an ARG played by fans during the second season of *Lost* in the UK, and in the interval between the end of the second season and the beginning of the third in the US. These are clear examples of an extension of the series' narrative along several digital (but also physical) platforms (see: Evans 2011; Clarke 2013).

Contemporary TV series' narratives no longer have a single center of irradiation but, rather, tend to develop along different roads; therefore, the traditional tools of narrative analysis, which once considered the story as having an oriented and targeted (if complex and labyrinthine)<sup>2</sup> direction, are no longer able to give a full account of new forms of TV series narration. Indeed, compared to traditional concepts of story and text, contemporary TV series enact some significant changes.

First of all, there is a relevant switch from textual forms to *modular content*. A distinctive feature of high concept audiovisual productions is its modular structure, which means that content may be parceled out and replicated in different recreational or entertainment contexts, allowing fragmentation, displacement, and diversification of use. Many contemporary TV series can be labeled as *high concept*,<sup>3</sup> that is to say, as objects that are recognizable, well-defined, and have an iconic look. High-concept TV narratives often adopt multilinear narratives that inspire additional narration via other media. Contemporary series are made of narrative matrices, developed on multiple platforms independently from what happens on TV,

yet they are nonetheless influenced by the atmosphere and ambience of the source series. These objects become true long sellers and are subject to re-styling for each season as they take the form of a complex constellation of products, grouped around a single brand.

The second change is the shift from oriented forms of storytelling to *universes in expansion*. TV serial narratives have achieved exceptional duration—with products lasting for many seasons—and persistence among audiences—whose engagement and commitment to a series can last for years. We can think, for instance, of the British series *Doctor Who*, first begun in 1963, cancelled in 1989, revamped in 2005 and still in production with a total, for now, of 26 seasons and more than 800 episodes. A text like *Doctor Who* is a very good example of an object that can last for years, even with some leaps here and there, and that demands of its audience a constant dedication in order to keep it alive, as is also demonstrated by all the ancillary products that contribute to the composition of the narrative ecosystem (see: Hill's "Traversing the "Whoniverse": *Doctor Who's* Hyperdiegesis and Transmedia Discontinuity/Diachrony" in this volume). Although long narrative arcs and audience engagement are also typical of soap operas, the contemporary productions we are interested in have a high degree of narrative complexity that differentiates them from soap operas. We can also observe that the features just described seem to be typical of the US and UK productions, while the Italian TV industry, for instance, is subject to different rules and modes of production as well as to different narrative structures.

In the contemporary mediascape, textual structures have changed substantially. Expanding universes are durable, textured, and full of rich relationships among characters, the diegetic world, and the audience (Carini 2010). In short, they are universes that are inhabitable. Some contemporary series allow the viewer to have an active role in the process of construction and development of the narrative universe. For example, Julie Plec, creator of *The Vampire Diaries* said to have worked on a new narrative thread on the show following protests spread on social networks by many fans calling for further details on some blind spots in the narrative. Fans' contribution to the series' development can also be found in the realm of unofficial paratextual productions, such as fan fictions, fan art, and so on. In such cases, some of the stories written by the fans and published on fan-fiction websites have, for example, the function of filling in the gaps left by the original screenplays, enriching the characters with nuances and otherwise unexpressed emotional implications, while others tend to establish romantic relationships between characters who are only briefly



mentioned in the show. The active participation of the viewers and the impact of the narration on the real world are further demonstrated, for instance, by the proliferation of Twitter accounts of characters from the series, including both official accounts associated with the network and unofficial ones managed by fans themselves.

A third, important change is the passage from story to user experience. Contemporary TV series, as mentioned, consist of a multiplicity of narrative elements. Alongside the weekly episodes designed for television viewing, we also find a multitude of material (e.g. webisodes, mobisodes, recaps) more typical of transmedia storytelling, which allows the user easier access to complex story universes. Modular content puts the viewer in a new position in relation to the series: the viewer needs to orient herself within the highly complex architecture of this production, among the large amount of information constantly provided. In order to enhance this orientation process, all the media objects that belong to the same narrative universe act as interfaces between the viewer and the bulk of sometimes unmanageable narrative material accumulated by these productions. Therefore, the weekly episodes allow viewers to connect and pass through the expanding narrative universe. Narrative elements are able to fulfill an important function of placemaking: they help the viewers reduce confusion and favor their entry, exit, and return to complex and layered narrative universes of different spaces that exist within diegetic, physical, and digital space (Resmini and Rosati 2011). Viewers must be capable of moving within the narrative paths and to link one narrative element to another. Although the series is made up of recurring situations and, despite the standardization of its universe, it develops different morphologies that are not completely predictable. As such, the configuration of the narrative universe is a negotiating process between the use (fruition, experience, and production) and the project (screenplay, media delivery, and marketing).

The fourth switch is the important change from texts to interfaces. Viewing a TV series no longer concludes when the weekly episode has been viewed; instead, it has become a long-term process that largely ignores the typical temporal patterning of these texts (i.e. one episode per week aired in a predetermined time slot). The weekly episode is only the starting point for the viewer's engagement, since she is increasingly called on to interact with the series in an intense and rich participatory activity. As Francesco Casetti underlines, there is a wide spectrum of practices activated by viewers that makes "the spectator a true performer, someone who constructs his own viewing conditions, bringing himself to bear directly upon them" (Casetti 2015, 189). The textual objects that build up the series universe (episodes,

but also webisodes, mobisodes, or recaps) act as interfaces that allow the viewer to navigate a highly complex architecture, modulating the viewer's relationship with the series' universe and acting as the design tools of a narrative experience.

A relevant case is the use of temporal disturbances in *Lost* (flashbacks, flash-forwards, flash-sideways), which are more than just tools for modeling the narrative material since they, in fact, have a strong impact on the configuration of the audience experience. Through these temporal disturbances, the user experiences processes of fragmentation and of reconstruction, both of the narrative material and of the series' temporal flow. TV watching becomes the vehicle of plural, more complex meanings. The show expands beyond its borders (the weekly episode) and is the result of a composite constellation of texts, including spin-offs, comic books, show-inspired novels, websites (amateur or not), and video games that create environments and characters that allow the fans to role-play. Watching a TV series becomes a distributed and diversified experience, which often leads audience members to go back and forth between the physical and the digital, generating participation and stimulating further consumption. It is something closer to living in the world of the program, rather than simply following a storyline.

## The Narrative Ecosystem

As we have mentioned, our focus is on audiovisual texts that have a modular structure. These texts can be serialized and (re-)used in different contexts and at different times, according to customized schedules.<sup>4</sup> The texts can be assembled in communities of viewers who share an interest towards them. Nowadays, dominant narrative forms are characterized by increasing interactivity, opening up more and more space and autonomy to a new kind of active user. A vast narrative represents an evolution of "story", that is to say, an ongoing and intricately developed storyline, with many characters and multiple settings (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2009). Many contemporary TV series are the result of an ecosystemic design, in which a general model is developed in advance as an evolutionary system with a high degree of consistency among all its components. We can therefore move from the idea of "text" to that of the "narrative ecosystem", a system bearing a specific set of characteristics that can be defined as follows:

- Narrative ecosystems are open systems, inhabited by stories and characters that change through time and space, in which changes of setting, character, and even temporality are specific traits of TV series;
- They are interconnected structures: sequels and prequels, reboots, spin-off, and crossovers are all in a dialogic relationship with each other (Innocenti and Pescatore 2008);
- They tend to reach and maintain balance over time, producing a sustained and persistent universe that lasts outside the space of the screen, while being modified according to unpredictable lines of development;
- They are not determined by a syntagmatic sequence of functions, but rather by elements that describe environments, characters and relationships, letting the viewer travel through the narrative universe;
- They are made up of an abiotic component (the media context) and a biotic component (the narrative structure). The narrative material is alive, undergoing processes of competition, adaptation, change, modification, etc.; while the abiotic component is provided by the media landscape in which the TV series is included. That media landscape is shaped by the economic and cultural structure of specific nations (Hilmes 2013).

As this outline indicates, TV series are therefore open systems; they are comparable to natural environments, resilient in both time and space, and they combine and integrate narratives, characters, and users in a specific media space. In a narrative ecosystem, producers and viewers share the responsibility for the series' evolution. As far as the producers are concerned, they create predictions based on the results of the TV series in terms of ratings and the number of viewers—this is the top-down approach. This data provides orientation toward investments and resource allocation, such as marketing campaigns, scheduling, target definition, and advertising revenues (Ferguson 2008, 156-160). Fans also make previsions (the bottom-up approach), since they act as a community held together by a shared interest in the life, duration, and resilience of TV series.<sup>5</sup>

Ecosystems tend to reach and maintain a certain balance over time, orchestrating a sustained and stable universe. The system is in equilibrium when it is consistent and resilient. It is consistent when it is capable of suiting the purposes, contexts, and people for whom it was designed (*internal consistency*) and when it can maintain the same logic and recognizability

within the different media, environments, and times in which it acts (*external consistency*). It is resilient when it is capable of shaping and adapting itself for different users, needs, and experiential strategies. Resilience indicates the ability of the system to react to changes (overall radical or unexpected changes) and re-establish its equilibrium. Historically, TV series have been built on long-running narratives, and have had a strong degree of consistency and persistence. They are also resilient because they can survive various perturbations; both external ones—such as changes in programming slots, a decline in ratings, varying audiences, or exceptional events (for example, the writers' strike that lasted 100 days between 2007 and 2008)—as well as internal ones—like radical changes in the cast, the defection of actors, and spoiling phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary TV series, as we pointed out above, are no longer simple textual objects, they are instead the result of an ecosystemic design, in which a general model is developed in advance as an evolutionary system with a high degree of consistency between all its components. Moreover, insofar as they are *non-procedural systems*, narrative ecosystems turn the narrative material into a universe in which the viewer can travel, and in which the experience can be randomly reconfigured. As part of an ecosystem, the weekly episode is just one of the potential entry points that allow the viewer to become immersed in the narrative. Access to the series' narrative universe does not necessarily have to happen through the weekly episode aired on TV, but might be, instead, stimulated by other narratives that are linked to the TV series and supported by other media, such as viral videos, mobisodes, or comic books, as it might happen with *The Walking Dead* or the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Finally, all these features stress the relational nature of transmedia convergent systems, as well as their complex character and propensity to propagate themselves. It also suggests its complementary tendencies of splitting, appropriation, or re-appropriation. In order to function, a cross-media narrative ecosystem has to be sufficiently resilient to allow potentially infinite propagations, interpolations, and spin-offs. Here, we can perceive the dialectic between order and disorder, balance and chaos that is typical to complex systems (Gandolfi 1999; Bocchi and Ceruti 2007; Morin 2011). In other words, it reflects the manifold tensions between project and practice, internal and external processes, constraints and allowances. The set of hypotheses proposed here allows us to go beyond the aporia of textuality/fruition. Moreover, the shift of perspective on narrative ecosystems makes space for the study of media products as *artifacts* that, like many others, inhabit our world,

furnishing and extending it according to a cumulative logic of unpredictable directions.

In the final section of this chapter, we will focus on the relevance of vast narratives in contemporary media production and, in particular, on the possibility of predicting the life of vast narratives through a set of criteria.<sup>7</sup> This research is still in an early stage and we recognize that our approach still lacks a method for predictive work in the field of TV serial narratives, or at least a model of development. Such an advance in our research would be significant in that it would push the ecosystemic model from an analytical dimension to a more operative one, allowing scholars to understand the dynamics of an ecosystem from a predictive point of view. In the hope of approaching this goal, we will outline some theoretical foundations, drawing on ecological selection and evolution patterns in nature that might be helpful in building a computational method of narrative prediction in our field of interest.

### **The Selection Process in a Narrative Ecosystem**

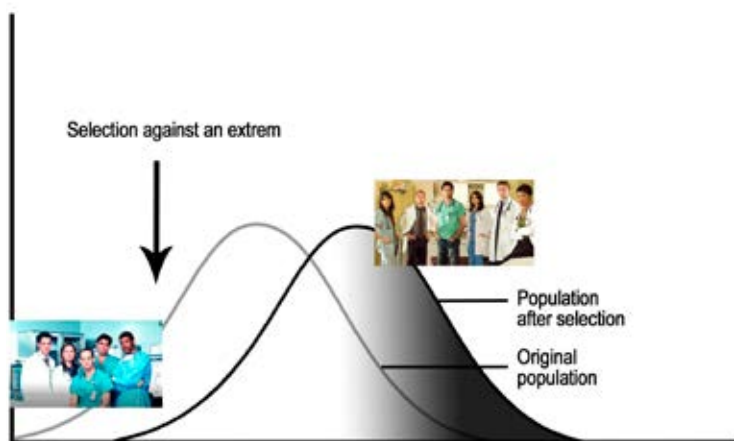
With the purpose of understanding how narrative ecosystems evolve according to specific environmental pressures, we shall first draw on the notion of ecological selection (Smith and Smith 2003). Ecological selection applies to the individuals of a population and has to do with their ability to adapt, survive, and breed. In our case, focusing on single storyworlds rather than on the overall television landscape, we shall apply this notion to the characters of a narrative ecosystem. While in natural ecosystems the environment exerts selection over population, in the case of TV series it is the producer that forces adaptation between a TV show and its audience, by modifying the narrative according to the tastes and demands of the audience in order to maximize ratings and revenues. As ecological niches exert the selection pressures that push populations in various directions, one species could give rise to diversity within the same population. In particular, accounting for directional changes of a specific trait, natural selection can be classified in three major categories: stabilizing, directional, and diversifying selection. We apply these same categories to the distribution of characters, focusing on the way producers select them. Producers can insert new characters and exclude or modify the role of old ones in order to improve the series' performance and profitability. We have observed that patterns of selection in TV series are based on the three selection models detected in a natural ecosystem.

- *Stabilizing selection*: diversity decreases and the population tends to stabilize on a particular trait value—the stronger one. Graphically, we can see that the two extremes are selected against, favoring the intermediate variants. One of the most evident cases of this selection model is the medical drama *House MD*. As the series continues, the character of Dr. Gregory House proves to be the most appreciated by the audience. Its basic features and attitude are therefore boosted by producers, resulting in a peak of the curve that decreases the relevance of the other characters throughout its eight seasons. On the one hand, this behavior might increase the TV series’ appeal; on the other hand, it might cause instability, ultimately decreasing the resilience of the system. A slight misalignment between the producers’ behavior and the audiences’ taste can negatively affect TV shows’ performance. In the case of *House MD*, in fact, after first focusing on the character of Greg House, there was a comeback and reintroduction of old characters that had been removed for a while.



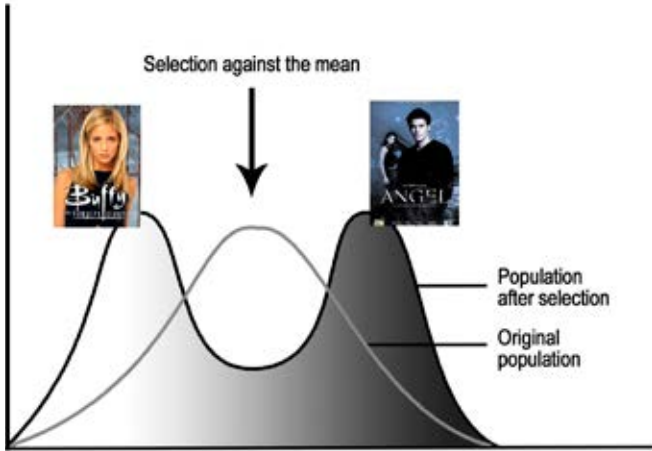
- *Directional selection*: only one extreme of the trait distribution is selected, resulting in a shift of the curve peak to the other extreme. This phenomenon often occurs under environmental changes. Similarly, in narrative ecosystems, changes and upheavals can affect the ecosystem itself, which consequently needs to endure and to adapt to the new environment, often selecting new strong features to focus on. An evident case comes again from the field of medical dramas. In *E.R.*, for instance, we can see how this directional selection has been carried out for fifteen seasons, leading to a complete change in

the set of characters. Indeed, *E.R.* operates a setting that allows for the removal and introduction of characters and storylines according to internal or external needs: a decline in ratings, the defection of actors, or exceptional events. This leads to constant shifts from one narrative focus to another, which drives the creation and stabilization of new peaks. When changes come from contingent reasons, then the shift itself can be the cause of a bad alignment between the tastes or demands of the audience and the series' narrative structure. This behavior can also be adopted by the producers in order to fix misalignments between the narrative set and audience tastes and demands, especially when the audience composition changes.



- *Diversifying selection*: both extremes are selected at the expense of intermediate values. Graphically, the result is a two-peaked curve in which the variance of the trait increases and the population is divided into two different groups. Diversifying selection can affect narrative ecosystems as well, creating two different narrative peaks inside the same universe that eventually results in the creation of a new one. This situation can give rise to spin-offs, shows derived from already existing works and focusing on a certain character or set of characters. Among many others, this happens for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off *Angel*. Though the two worlds are separated by spatial boundaries—they indeed are two different shows—crossovers are allowed and often employed. This behavior is adopted in order to extend commercial airtime, thus maximizing revenues. There might be a downside to this practice; for instance,

the risk that the character, taken outside its original environment, does not stimulate the same audience interest and reaction that it did in its previous context.



### Evolution Patterns in a Narrative Ecosystem

Broadening the focus of our analysis to the overall television landscape, we will now consider the evolutionary patterns of TV shows considered as part of media markets and niches (Dimmick 2002). According to this perspective, we have observed that there are two models of evolution that can be applied to narrative ecosystems.

- *Convergent evolution* refers to different species that, though inhabiting different niches and remaining fundamentally different from one another, become more similar in structure and function over time. In the television industry, this kind of evolution accounts for the contemporary trend of duplication: given different markets based on different kind of production and targets, producers tend to align their programming in order to carve up the majority-taste audience (Doyle 2002). This evolution process is enacted by the exploitation of specific properties that could be profitable. Most recently, for instance, the trend of shows dealing with supernatural subjects has proven to be pervasive in the US TV environment, from broadcast television (e.g. *Supernatural*, *Grimm*, *The Vampire Diaries*) to basic and premium cable (*Teen Wolf*, *Bitten*, *True Blood*). This evolution



process makes genres that are apparently distant from one another converge into a single product. It is the case of *Grimm*, which is basically a procedural/cop-drama, and of *Teen Wolf*, which is basically a teen drama. Both shows become aligned through a boosting of particular features and through the hybridization of genres, thus appealing to a broader audience. Though these series maintain different basic features related to the productive background to which they belong (FCC regulation, business models, target audience, etc.), they nevertheless tend to align with each other over time, replicating the most successful trends—for instance, the stress on both romantic and horror situations.

- Divergent evolution occurs whenever, within the same ecological niche and species, diversity arises. In our case, we can see how a broadcaster operating within one particular market tends to diversify its offer in order to cover all of its possible subsets. For instance, The CW was created by CBS and Time Warner in order to provide a channel that was strongly oriented to a teen audience. At its inception, the channel's focus was mainly on teen drama (*Gilmore Girls*, *7th Heaven*), but now it offers a wide variety of programming, ranging from science fiction (*The Tomorrow People*, *The 100*) to drama/romance (*Gossip Girl*, *The Carrie Diaries*) and supernatural (*The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals*). The channel's programming maintains a strong teenage-oriented profile; nevertheless, it has evolved through a diversification enacted by stressing both genres and hybridization.

## Conclusions

This chapter has sought, first of all, to offer evidence of some limits of the traditional approaches to the study of TV serial narratives—for instance, those derived from the semiotic and narratological tradition—and to propose an alternative approach to these complex productions. Serialization configures a composite environment that we defined as an ecosystem, with the ability to spread and change in space and time. With such a perspective, the single element of a series (the weekly episode) works as an interface, an entry point to the whole, complex environment in which the whole narrative universe of the series is included. As a consequence, it is necessary to hybridize the tools that are traditionally adopted within the field of media studies with others that are more suited to face complex

phenomena, and, thus, to provide an accurate analysis of environments and ecosystems instead of isolated artifacts. Thus, what we have tried to do is to direct our attention to disciplines that are adjacent to media studies, such as information architecture, but also to draw on notions derived from ecology and natural sciences.

In particular, we think that a fundamental principle is that of resilience, that is to say, the capacity of a system to adapt to changes while reacting in order to re-establish its equilibrium. Resilience offers a crucial key not only for understanding the design of convergent systems but also for defining their economic value. In such ecosystems, value shifts from the single artifact (a single text) to the larger totality (the entire ecosystem). That means, in turn, that it is preferable to sacrifice local details and local precision for a better global experience than vice versa. The experience of such ecosystems is a process and a transit across time and space; thus, the more the system allows both users and producers to shape and re-shape the ecosystem itself, with potentially infinite variations, the more it will be capable to grow and spread. The top-down, hierarchical models of the broadcasting industry are therefore inadequate approaches to media ecosystems, because they treat each channel separately. As ecosystems are not just a sum of items (products, channels, times of distributions), both the design and the value processes should embrace a global perspective.

Some phenomena very similar to serial narration and media convergence are now taking place in many other fields, such as industrial design, services design, and marketing. It is therefore desirable to promote a joint study of these phenomena at the intersection of the various fields of analysis: we need meta-models that are able to explain a convergence process that (even with some diverse nuances) affects many of our everyday experiences transversally.

What we have so far outlined is a theoretical framework that accounts for certain processes and changes in narrative ecosystems by drawing on ecological selection and evolution. It is a qualitative examination that points out some possible developmental directions and carries a heuristic value and predictive possibilities. Although characters are just one element of the overall ecosystem, we decided to focus here on this specific element. This choice can be considered an acceptable simplification, in that it highlights processes related to modifying agents (the characters can actually alter the narrative). There are evidently several other elements within the ecosystem that could be taken into consideration; for instance, a study on audience taste would be as relevant as a study of characters.

In the case of natural ecosystems, the selection and evolution processes concern populations, which represent statistically significant numbers of individuals sharing the same traits. For this reason, it is relatively simple to elaborate and to evaluate these processes in statistical terms. In the case of narrative ecosystems, on the other hand, selection and evolution concern a substantially limited number of individuals that are usually extremely different from one another and may not share the same traits whatsoever. In other words, each series, group of characters, or even a single character can represent a population on its own. This implies that a statistical analysis of the process might not work properly, because we have to deal with a group of individuals who are extremely heterogeneous and cannot be assimilated from an analytical point of view.

We should also keep in mind that, in the case of TV series, we are dealing with artificial selection and evolution: as we have seen, the changes are production-driven and are mainly based on interpretations of the selective pressure exerted by the environment. Therefore, the producers make choices based on available data, trying to maximize the efficiency of the series (i.e. its fitness within its environment). However, efficiency is not the only parameter to take into consideration. In fact, as we have seen, to increase efficiency might result in a lack of balance, a decrease of the resilience of the system, as well as a deterioration of its dynamic abilities.

For all these reasons, we deem it necessary to elaborate individual-based or action-based models that account for the behaviors of a single element of the system and that, combined with significant data concerning the narrative ecosystem itself (ratings, panels, surveys, etc.), ultimately allow us to evaluate their outcomes. A viable model should, on the one hand, be able to improve the quantity and quality of data. On the other, it should offer “What ifs,” that is to say, simulations in relation to possible choices (for instance, what might happen to the ratings if the producers make the two leading characters break up?).<sup>8</sup>

Given that we consider TV series a social group (made up of characters and situations), part of the work that we are currently carrying out concerns keeping up with study of those characters. Though we can adopt social research tools in order to study this social group, we cannot apply some qualitative and quantitative methods since we are not able, for instance, to interview the characters. Thus, what we are trying to do now is to consider the social relations among characters through the methods offered by social network analysis; methods that, unlike other models of analysis, do not need direct interactions with the subjects.<sup>9</sup> We expect to obtain a reconstruction

of the social relations between characters, in order to understand the various positions they occupy, as well as their various degrees of relevance in the narrative ecosystem's organization. By basing our assumptions on the analysis of the interactions of characters, we are attempting to understand the properties of the social network (centrality, betweenness, closeness, etc.) as a basis for making forecasts on series development.

What we have ultimately tried to underline in this chapter is that media products are not "statements" or "texts" anymore: they are artifacts that, like many others, inhabit our world, furnishing and extending it in unpredictable directions according to a cumulative logic. As soon as we recognize that some media productions can be considered proper ecosystems, then our entire experience of the surrounding reality that is affected by this change. Nowadays, we are dealing with a composite and complex reality, rather than with a naturalized, iconic, and reproductive one, in which media images and the information flow become tools for everyday life and a relevant part of our life experience.

## Notes

1. This article is the result of joint and collaborative work that the two authors have been undertaking since 2010. It is also partially based on two articles Pescatore, Innocenti 2012 and Pescatore, Innocenti, Brembilla 2014.
2. On this matter, see Ryan in this book and especially the paragraph titled *Narrative Proliferation*, in which Ryan explains how in the same narrative world many different stories can live together and be told about that world. Stories are subject to fragmentation, divided into many elements and, in the specific case Ryan analyses, fragments "tend to become shorter and shorter [...], are presented in a seemingly random order."
3. The concept is used in film studies (Wyatt 1994). We applied the idea of high concept to TV series in our book (2008).
4. Recently, we have witnessed relevant changes in this matter. For instance, the debate on binge-watching exploded when Netflix started releasing episodes of its serial programming simultaneously. See, among others: Poniewozik 2012; Pagels 2012; West 2014.
5. See, for instance: a section of the website *Italiansubs.net*, specifically dedicated to this topic: <http://www.italiansubs.net/forum/greys-anatomy/totomorto-season-11/>.
6. The concepts of consistency and resilience applied to TV series have been explored in Innocenti, Pescatore, and Rosati (forthcoming).
7. Our approach has proven to be quite effective in the analysis of TV serial products. Since 2010, when we first proposed the definition of narrative

- ecosystems and started our work in this field, we have organized two international conferences dedicated to this topic (*Media Mutations 3. Narrative ecosystems: environment, tools and models*, Bologna, 24-25 May 2011 and *Media Mutations 4. Narrative ecosystems: flows, transformations, social uses*, Bologna, 22-23 May 2012); we have edited a book collection and we have published several papers on national and international peer-reviewed journals.
8. An interesting approach that has some similarities with our reflections is included in Moretti, who makes “a little attempt at quantitative stylistics, examining some strategies by which titles point to specific genres” (2009, 136). Moretti’s attempt is interesting to us since it seems to remark the necessity of implementing quantitative methods and computational tools for the humanities and, in particular, in the fields of film and television studies.
  9. This work is carried out through the use of the software Ucinet.

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# Section 3

Immersion



# 10. The Building and Blurring of Worlds

Sound, Space, and Complex Narrative Cinema

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## Abstract

Sound plays a crucial role in the construction of cinematic worlds by evoking spaces beyond the edges of the frame. In this essay, I examine the relationship between sound and image as it relates to offscreen space in more or less conventional narratives before turning my attention to a complex example, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010). Rather than one cinematic world, this film offers us as many as five, and sound—both at a formal and a narrative level—mediates them all. I demonstrate how the sound design in *Inception* not only helps to build its cinematic worlds but also to blur the boundaries between them.

**Keywords:** Sound; Cinematic Space; Puzzle Films; Narrative Complexity; *Inception*

There has been, in recent years, a pronounced shift within Media Studies away from the more time-honored concerns of plot, character, and action and towards “world,” reflecting a number of intersecting factors, among them, the increasing prevalence of transmedial narratives that feature a common universe but that “unfold across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins 2006, 334); the renewed popularity of science-fiction and fantasy, genres often noted for vast imaginary worlds and intricate mythologies (Thompson 2008); and the impact of computers on how we engage with and understand narratives and media alike (Murray 1998; Kinder 2002; Manovich 2002; Bordwell 2006; Cameron 2008). Whereas stories tend toward narrative economy by offering only information that is crucial to the plot, worlds brim over with textual detail that contributes a verisimilitude

that “absorbs” or “immerses” the reader, gamer, or viewer in them (Wolf 2012).

But what does a world sound like, and what role, if any, does sound play in its construction? Sound, like “world,” cuts across genre and medium, turning up in a diverse array of forms both new and old, from radio and television to video games and new media art installations. This remarkable heterogeneity of sound in media, however, prohibits a thorough consideration of its various incarnations in the space of a single essay. Therefore, in what follows, I will limit my focus to the context of film and how sound contributes, in ways that often escape notice, to the spectator’s mental representation of imaginary worlds and, often, to her seeming “integration” or “immersion” into them. Sound is especially well suited to this latter point, as Frances Dyson notes:

[S]ound is the immersive medium par excellence. Three-dimensional, interactive, and synesthetic, perceived in the here and now of an embodied space, sound returns to the listener the very same qualities that media mediates: that feeling of being here and now, of experiencing oneself as engulfed, enveloped, absorbed, enmeshed, in short, immersed in an environment. (Dyson 2009, 4)

But our mapping and immersion in cinematic space through sound is generally a function of hearing sounds that belongs to the world of the film. What are we to make, then, of music, noises, and speech that seem to hover around the screen, at a remove from the onscreen world? Such indeterminate sounds tend to evade the intellect or cast doubt on one’s visual certainty: after all, seeing is believing, as the saying goes.

In this chapter, I will consider first the ways in which sound aids in the construction of worlds in the minds of spectators, especially its evocation of *offscreen space*, which suggests parts of the world that lie outside the frame of our immediate visual apprehension. Second, I turn my attention to surround-sound technologies and how they “place” the spectator in the film world by collapsing the distance between it and the movie theater or one’s living room. Lastly, in the essay’s final third, I offer a brief analysis of *Inception* (Nolan 2010), a “complex” film that explicitly thematizes the processes of world building and that integrates sound in intriguing ways into its elaborate plot machinations. That is to say, *Inception* creates not simply a world, but *worlds*—plural—, using sound as a conduit between them.

## Scenographic Space and the Mental Construction of Cinematic Worlds

How does the cinema construct and then place a viewer in its world? Most commercial fiction filmmaking around the globe is modelled, at least in part, on the Hollywood system of continuity, which first organizes and edits disparate shots together to create the suggestion of seamless space and time, while carefully prompting the spectator to make certain inferences and hypotheses about this cinematic world. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson explain, cinematic continuity is a representational system based on various perspectival traditions as well as a narrational system. The continuity system, they explain, “turns a remarkably coherent spatial system into the vehicle for narrative causality” as “the viewer [...] meets the film halfway and completes the illusion of seeing an integral fictional space” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 59). According to their study, this system was standardized by 1917, more than a decade before the coming of synchronized sound. Therefore, for the time being, we shall look to how films build worlds *visually* before turning our attention to sound and how it complements and, at times, complicates the seeming coherence of cinematic worlds.

At its core, the Hollywood-style system of continuity is a set of devices that, when combined, unify scenographic space and time while simultaneously effacing the evidence of its own constructedness—covering its own tracks, if you will. The result is a highly contrived yet seemingly natural presentation “organized for the spectator” who is “[kept] [...] at the center of every image” (Andrew 1976, 147). One such device is the establishing shot, which, in many ways, anchors the entire system. An establishing shot is a long or medium-long shot that, as the name implies, establishes the locale of the scene and, most often, the position of characters relative to one another within it. From this base shot, filmmakers may “cut in” to closer framings.

Two principles guide these cuts: the first, which relates to a film’s narrative logic, is motivation; that is, the closer shot reveals some aspect of the scene that is pertinent to the story and that might not be readily apparent from the wider view. The second principle is what is broadly known as “matching.” One such type is the “match-on-action,” wherein a movement begun in one shot is continued in the next shot, reassuring viewers that both shots are continuous with one another and that, even though there has been a visual cut, the time and place remain consistent. The human eye tends to gravitate towards motion, and this perceptual predilection works to “hide” the cut. Another common matching convention is the “eyeline

match,” wherein we see a character glance over to something offscreen and then, in the subsequent shot, we see what she sees (though most commonly not from her “optical point of view”). Crucially, the space revealed may be of something present in the establishing shot *or* of a bordering space that the viewer has not yet seen. Extending the logic of the eyeline match is the shot/reverse shot, in which the viewpoint alternates between two figures. In each case, the changes in angle are not random; rather, they are motivated by a character’s look. These devices incrementally reveal parts of the imaginary world of the film (its “diegesis”), but only in a fragmentary way.<sup>1</sup>

The viewer’s task is to take these partial views and reconstruct them into an abstract mental image, a “cognitive map,” of a unified whole. But there are other ways in which films visually suggest spaces that are never shown directly. Noël Burch argues that there are, in fact, two distinct types of cinematic space: that which is in the frame—what he calls “concrete space”—and that which is outside it or “imaginary”. Doorways, for example, are a common means by which imaginary space is suggested beyond the concrete. If a character enters or exits a scene via a door situated on either side of the frame, then it follows that the filmic world stretches beyond that which is currently visible (Burch 1981, 17). Such an evocation of space is put to remarkably effective use in Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931). In its first sequence, we see young Elsie (Inge Landgut) bouncing a ball when she encounters Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre), a child serial killer who lures the young girl into his clutches with the purchase of a balloon. In one shot, we see Elsie and Beckert together before they exit the frame. Moments later, the film’s construction implies the girl’s death in two consecutive shots: first, at a previously unseen wooded location, the ball that belonged to Elsie rolls into the frame from offscreen right; and second, a shot of the balloon hung in the lattice of power lines before the wind carries it away and out of the frame to the left. The movements of objects associated with Elsie into and out of the frame here imply not only a larger world than what the screen can contain, but also, poignantly, a movement from visibility to invisibility, presence to absence, and life to death.

It bears repeating that each of the aforementioned approaches to offscreen space is conveyed visually. The question that remains is how film sound accomplishes a similar task. Evoking offscreen space, however, was not the first impulse for filmmakers early in the transition era. Rather, dialogue, even more than music and noises, ruled the day. After all, the silent cinema was never, in fact, silent, as it was often accompanied by live music, narrators, and sound effects produced in the auditorium itself (Altman 2004, 193-194). This is why sync-sound films came to be known as “talkies” rather than, say, “soundies.”

But the introduction of dialogue inaugurated its own set of challenges. First, was the concern over always visualizing the speaker, for to hear a voice absent a visualized source has been, throughout history, a source of a certain anxiety. The “disembodied voice”, as it is often called, is frequently aligned with the supernatural or otherworldly, from the voice of god to ghostly hauntings (Chion 1999, 23-26; Connor 2000, 410; Kane 2014, 150). Thus, early in the transition era, practitioners felt compelled to pair the sound of a voice with an image of the speaker’s moving lips. Secondly, this practice was abetted by the technological limitations such as microphones of limited range and cameras housed in heavy soundproof booths that masked their noisy operation. Combined, these two tendencies worked to constrain both the movement of actors and the ability to cut within the scene.

Over time, filmmakers discovered that audiences were far more adaptable to the interplay of sound and image that they might have initially assumed, and recording technology (and technician ingenuity) soon overcame these initial limitations. The lesson: sound and image, though synchronized, need not necessarily be “redundant”: the image is not duty-bound to show what the soundtrack says, and vice versa. Filmmakers thus began to exploit offscreen sounds to their advantage. One crucial innovation was the “voice-off,” wherein a character not seen in the shot can nevertheless be heard. Thus, much like the eyeline match with unseen objects or characters, the voice-off convention depends on viewer inferences about areas offscreen. Take the first few shots of *Erin Brockovich* (Soderbergh, 2000), wherein sound precedes the images by several seconds. Over a black screen, we hear a male voice pose a question to a female who answers back. When the image appears, we see only the titular character (Julia Roberts). One infers quickly that the situation is a job interview, but, for nearly the first minute of the film, the interviewer goes unseen, his voice and the movement of his arms in the bottom left corner of the screen are all that indicate his presence and the as-yet unrevealed remainder of the office. Here, sound provides a larger degree of spatial information about the film’s world than does the image. Such is the power of the voice-off, a device that Mary Ann Doane argues

deepens the diegesis, gives it an extent which exceeds that of the image, and thus supports the claim that there is space in the fictional world which the camera does not register. [...] The voice-off is a sound which is first and foremost in the service of the film’s construction of space and only indirectly in the service of the image. It validates both what the screen reveals of the diegesis and what it conceals. (Doane 1980, 40)



Per Doane, the voice-off is as much a matter of spatial construction as it is of anxiety over bodily coherence. But Doane's theorization makes the aural building of the diegetic world entirely a function of voice, neglecting music and noise, a position that reflects what Michel Chion calls "voco- and verbocentrism" (Chion 1994, 4), his terms for the tendency of critics, filmmakers, scholars, and viewers to privilege speech over and above other aspects of film sound. Chion provides a counterexample: during interior scenes in *The Sacrifice* (Tarkovsky, 1986), birds outside are continuously heard despite them never being visualized or otherwise discussed by the characters. These "territory sounds", as he calls them, suggest unrepresented exterior spaces at the same time that they "fill in" or enrich the image with hints of a fully realized world (Chion, 1994, 124). A more narratively pertinent example can be found in the aforementioned *M*, when Beckert realizes he is at risk through hearing the sound of sirens in the distance. In a sound film, the converging police needn't necessarily be shown, but are merely suggested.

A guiding assumption to this point has been that the sounds we hear while watching a film are diegetic, that they are *in* and *of* the onscreen world. This is not always the case, however. We will consider *nondiegetic sound* in a later section. In the meantime, we shall turn away from how sound aids in the viewer's mental construction of space to how it seemingly places her in the filmic world.

## Sound Technology and Immersion

In many cases, film sound not only suggests a world but also immerses us in it. But in order to understand how, we must first attend briefly to the history of film sound technology. With few exceptions, from the 1920s to well into the 1970s, sync-sound films were presented monophonically, with the sound issuing from a single loudspeaker (or "channel") placed behind the screen at its horizontal center (Kerins 2010, 329). Within the representational logic of the cinema, even if a sound occurs offscreen—a gunshot, say—in mono presentation it actually reaches the viewer from straight on. No matter from where the sound is implied to originate within the film world, it always emits from the screen. The viewer therefore must ignore this incongruity in order to make the cinematic illusion cohere. Our mental representation of space is thus flexible enough to account for the disparity, willfully ignoring it so as to ensure the consistency of the imaginary space (Altman 1980, 71).

Dolby Stereo, which was introduced in the mid-1970s, quickly supplanted mono as the standard for the film sound for over two decades and utilized four distinct channels: three (left, center, right) at the screen and one “surround” loudspeaker situated away from the screen. The result, according to Chion, was that “The space of the film [was] no longer confined to the screen [and] became the entire auditorium”—what he calls the “superfield” (Chion 1994, 151). This development is a crucial one, for it makes manifest “a reversal of cinematic hierarchy”:

where historically it has been the responsibility of the *image* to explain the soundtrack by visually confirming the sources of sounds, it is not the *soundtrack* that provides the context of the image. [...] Expanding beyond the edges of the frame, the sonic world literally becomes *bigger* than the image, which reveals only a small fraction of the [diegetic] world. [...] The soundtrack now assumes the task of guiding the audience and creating a coherent narrative space. (Kerins 2010, 86, emphasis in original)

According to Chion, the surround channel of Dolby Stereo anchors space through the stable presentation of ambient sound, erasing, in many cases, the need for an establishing shot.

Mark Kerins argues, though, that the superfield is less apt a characterization of Digital Surround Sound (DSS), which grew to prominence in the 1990s. Though there are several proprietary loudspeaker configurations with DSS, they all share, at minimum, what is called a 5.1 arrangement: three front channels (left, center, right), two surround channels (left and right), and a low-frequency channel that operates at one-tenth the range of the other loudspeakers (thus the .1) and that is responsible for producing bass-y, low-end notes that often are palpably *felt* as much as *heard*, eliciting “the very physical sensation of being *at* an earth-shaking event” (ibid, 330, 134, emphasis in original). Kerins modifies Chion’s term with his own—the “ultrafield”—that accounts for the tendency of DSS sound designers to “constantly shift sounds around the multi-channel environment”. The ultrafield, writes Kerins,

seeks not to provide a *continuous* aural environment, but rather to *continuously* provide an *accurate* spatial environment where aural and visual space match. In short, the ultrafield is the three-dimensional sonic environment of the digital world, continuously reoriented to match the camera’s visual perspective.<sup>2</sup> (ibid, 92, emphasis in original)

When we speak of “immersion” and cinema, we have to account not simply for the world it presents visually but also sonically. Moreover, we must also be attentive to the technologies used to design *and* exhibit a particular film. That is to say, the degree or kind of aural immersion on offer in Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989), a movie from the Dolby Stereo era, is quite different from a DSS-era film like *Taken* (Morel, 2008). Furthermore, we must not presume ideal conditions for every viewer: many films still carry a Dolby Stereo track in addition to their surround track for theaters that are not equipped with cutting-edge sound systems. Similarly, a viewer watching a DSS film at home on the puny speakers of a stereo television or through earbuds attached to a laptop will not experience the same sort of immersion as one in a multiplex environment. The question is thus not so much what one hears, but also from where, and in what sort of space.

### **The Elsewhere and the Otherworldly: Nondiegetic Sound**

To this point, we have examined the various ways in which films structure space first with images, then with sounds. With regard to the latter, however, we have largely limited our discussion to sounds *of* and *in* the filmic world. But what are we to make of sounds that originate elsewhere?

A key distinction must first be drawn between diegetic and nondiegetic sounds. Diegetic sounds originate in the world of the film, and they may be divided into two categories: external and internal. External diegetic sounds belong to the world of the film and are audible to the characters within them. In the famous scene in *When Harry Met Sally...* (Reiner 1989) when Sally (Meg Ryan) loudly fakes an orgasm during lunch at a busy New York City diner, all parties hear it, to great comedic effect. This contrasts with internal diegetic sounds, which might best be thought of as entirely interior, heard only “in the head” of a single character (and, of course, the viewer). Films with a running interior monologue such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Maguire 2001) are built upon this internal diegetic principle.

In contrast, nondiegetic sounds are heard only by the viewer and not by the inhabitants of the film world, and music is perhaps its most immediately recognized form. For example, as the Stallone character runs up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art at the end of the training montage in *Rocky* (Avildsen 1976), no one would presume that he hears the theme music that we do. The song is thus intended “for” the viewer, priming her emotionally with its triumphant refrain. Yet the matter of music’s relation to the diegesis is not so cut-and-dried, for it frequently slides between these two levels, often

unobtrusively. In the conclusion of Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (Linklater 1993), for instance, Mitch (Wiley Wiggins) listens to Foghat's "Slow Ride" via headphones, which we initially hear as muddled and thin but that gradually grows louder and fuller before carrying over into the next scene, which takes place in an entirely different location. The music is no longer "sourced" within the world of the film, having become entirely nondiegetic.

But if this music does not belong to the world of the film, from whence does it come? Nondiegetic sound emerges from an uncertain place, a *somewhere else* beyond the film world that exists alongside it, a co-existence of planes, if you will. Nondiegetic sounds, then, are not merely "off" (i.e., not visualized), but "over," at a remove from the film's world, yet seemingly encompassing it. A perhaps familiar nondiegetic device is the voiceover, which Sarah Kozloff helpfully contrasts with the previously discussed voice-off:

"Over" actually implies more than mere screen-absence ["voice-off"]; ... [V]oice-over is distinguishable by the fact that one could not display the speaker by adjusting the camera's position in the pictured story space; instead, the voice comes from another time and space. (Kozloff 1989, 3, emphasis in original)

For Pascal Bonitzer, the voiceover's elsewhere "represents a power [...] from a place which is absolutely *other* (from that inscribed in the image-track)—absolutely other and *absolutely undertermined*" (Bonitzer 1980, 133-134, emphasis in original). Bonitzer is here referring to the particular case of documentary voiceover, where the unseen, interpreting narrator's indeterminacy carries the weight of divine certainty. Yet, with fiction films, this is not always the case. Some voiceovers come with a clear narrative frame, such as in *Stand By Me*, where the primary story of young Gordie (Will Wheaton) and his friends' search for the corpse of a missing boy is narrated by his adult self (Richard Dreyfuss), whom we see in the film's bookended sections recollecting these same events as he prepares to pen his memoir. More complex deployments of the device also exist: famously, in *Sunset Blvd.* (Wilder 1950), a dead man narrates the story of his murder from beyond the grave, while in *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1991), a child not yet born provides the voiceover. *The Thin Red Line* (Malick 1998) utilizes voiceovers from four characters, and it is even difficult at times to discern which is speaking, hence throwing into question exactly how the sentiments expressed are to be interpreted (Millington). Moreover, it is hard to tell whether what we hear is in fact a voiceover or a momentary lapse into internal diegetic sound (i.e. a character's thoughts as they are happening

within the time and place of the diegesis). Such is the potentially slippery terrain of the voiceover specifically and of nondiegetic sound generally.

For our purposes, we can say that when it comes to world building, sound functions to imply spaces beyond the frame, yes, but also realms beyond the primary world.<sup>3</sup> Thought of in this way, sound may be deployed in such a way as to build not simply a world, but *worlds*— plural. In fact, filmmakers increasingly mine the possibilities of sound to build intricate, multiplicitous worlds, especially in the terrain of “complex” narrative cinema, to which we now turn our attention.

### Complex Films, Complex Worlds

We have seen how sound builds worlds in films that more or less fit within a classical paradigm: traditional, Aristotelian stories that are organized and presented in accord with Hollywood conventions. However, the 1990s saw a trend towards narrative complexity in cinema that has since been labelled “puzzle films” (Buckland 2009), “mind-game movies” (Elsaesser 2008), or “delirium cinema” (Pisters 2012, 40). Said to depart gleefully from classical norms of straightforward narrative progression in an effort to perplex spectators through an “embrace of nonlinearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality [...], [t]hese films are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences” (Buckland 2009, 6).

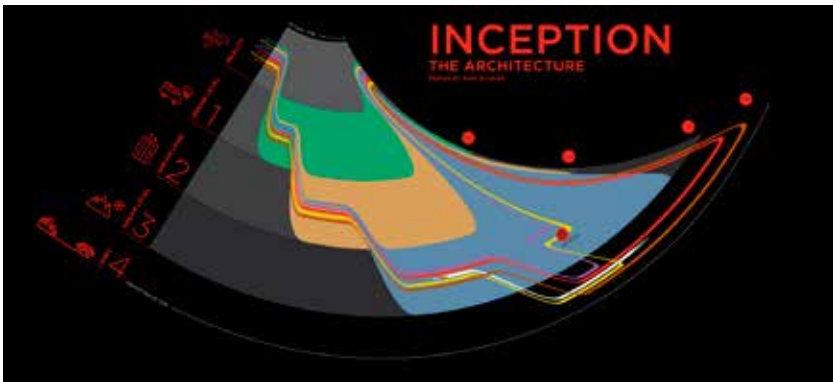
An example of such narrative complexity is *Inception*, a cinematic Gordian Knot if ever there was one. What’s most intriguing about the film, given the context of the present essay, is that it *thematizes* in quite literal fashion the act of world building. Moreover, sound—both diegetic and nondiegetic—plays a critical and polyvalent role within this Baroque structure, resulting in a densely layered sound design that mirrors that of the film’s nested dream worlds.

The plot is set in motion when Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), an “extractor” paid to steal ideas from the minds of sleeping victims through a process he calls “shared dreaming”, is hired to do the opposite: to *instill* an idea into someone’s mind. Unlike more straightforward dream theft, inception requires far greater access to the mark’s subconscious, thereby necessitating not one dream world for them to share, but three. The film thus adopts a multi-tiered, dream-within-a-dream structure, as Cobb and his team delve deep into the mind of their victim, Fischer (Cillian Murphy), to plant the notion for him to break apart and sell his dying father’s empire, a move that would benefit Saito (Ken Watanabe), who is, not coincidentally, Cobb’s employer.



10.1: A dreamworld Paris folded in on itself in *Inception* (Warner Bros.)

In order for this scheme to be successful, each of the dream levels must be sufficiently replete with detail and texture so as not to tip off Fischer of their falsity. Enter Ariadne (Ellen Page), a brilliant architecture student tasked with constructing worlds both rich and plausible that will serve as the staging ground for the group’s deception of Fischer. But Ariadne is new to the notion of “shared dreaming” and requires direction from Cobb, a tutorial that forms one of the film’s most spectacular set pieces. He follows Ariadne as she walks through a Paris-set dream world, the first of her own design. There, she reimagines not only the topography of the cityscape on the fly, with bridges and doors morphing and materializing around her as she moves about the imaginary terrain, but also the physical laws by which the world operates. For instance, she literally folds Paris upon itself at one



10.2: A fan-made infographic charting the complex dream-within-a-dream structure of *Inception* (Rick Slusher)

point, bending one half of it onto the other. *Inception* is thus an imaginary world that offers a self-referential commentary on the act of world building and, indeed, upon its own construction, adding yet another layer to the film's Russian Doll structure.

As Ariadne investigates the contours of this Paris of her own making, she remarks, "I thought the dream space would be all about the visual, but it's more about the feel of it." This is an astute point, for the entire ruse hinges not on the eye, but on the ear and on bodily sensation. That is to say, in order to execute a three-tiered dream, the team must rely on heavy sedation. The tricky part, however, is waking up. To that end, Yusuf (Dileep Rao), a chemist, formulates a powerful tranquilizer that leaves "inner ear function unimpaired". Why the ear? First, the apparatus of the inner ear—called in anatomical terms a "labyrinth," a delicious coincidence in the current context of narrative complexity—is a key component of the body's vestibular system, which contributes to one's sense of balance, spatial orientation, and proprioception (one's sense of one's own body during movement). Thus, even when deeply asleep, the dreamers will be susceptible to the real-world sensation of falling, activated by fierce jolts or being toppled over in a chair—what Cobb and company dub a "kick". But, in order to successfully remove the team from the nested dream world, the kick must occur in both the real world and in each dream level. To pull this off, the group relies on a piece of music, Edith Piaf's "Non, Je ne regrette rien" as a means of synchronizing the dream worlds and their dilated temporality with the real-world kick. Put differently, the multiple kicks are timed to a song that, despite the dreamers' intense sedation, they *continue to hear* via headphones. And the kick does not merely wake the sleeper; it also causes the dream world(s) to collapse. Such is the case in the film's final kick, wherein Ariadne falls backwards in the fourth (unplanned) dream level before cascading in reverse through each of the other levels, which shatter and disassemble with her impact. The ear, therefore, as both an organ for hearing and for bodily comportment, is central to the film's nested structure and how it makes (and then unmakes) its multiple worlds.

This nesting, in fact, transpires at the nondiegetic level as well. In a revelation that caused quite a stir amongst the film's fans shortly after its release, one perceptive viewer noted that the deep, brass-y leitmotif in Hans Zimmer's score actually corresponds to the horn intro of Piaf's tune—what Zimmer described after the fact as his score's "DNA" (Michaels 2009, n.p.)—if slowed down and protracted (Whitehead 2010, n.p.), a clever nod to the temporal expansion that occurs at each dream level. This note, which shifts between diegetic and nondiegetic in ways that might not be

at first apparent, is fundamental not only to the construction of the film's score but is also the means by which its elaborately built worlds are bound together.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the discourse surrounding narrative worlds has focused on immersion as a function of their sheer expansiveness and their abundance of textual detail. But, rather than the frequently deployed horizontal spatial metaphors of “vastness” and “extensiveness,” I propose that we might also think of complexity in terms of verticality. Indeed, this is the very architecture of the sound film: an image of a world laid over with sounds that correspond to that world, but also nondiegetic sounds suggestive of an elsewhere—or multiple elsewherees—that envelops or is layered upon the primary world. Indeed, at the level of its narrative construction, *Inception* explicitly tackles the idea of worlds within worlds. But, cunningly, so too does its aural design, which traffics in nondiegetic sound's tendency towards indeterminacy and its ability to layer and move among ever more worlds.

### Sound: World Bridging as World Building

The question pondered in this essay—what is the role of sound in the building of cinematic worlds?—has demanded a multipronged answer, one that touches on film conventions of spatial organization, both visual and aural, and the historical development thereof; the role of offscreen space in the viewer's mental construction of a coherent imaginary world; and how changes in film sound technology complement this cognitive image with an immersive, physical experience of this space. However, immersion and the aural evocation of offscreen space are most often functions of diegetic sound, the sounds in and of the story world. What are we to make of nondiegetic sounds that are temporally or spatially separated from the visualized world and that its inhabitants cannot hear? In many cases, nondiegetic sound bears no “existential” relation to the story world, belonging instead to the film's “discourse.” Yet, in others, it suggests a realm, a time, or a place that is affiliated with but distinct from the “primary” world onscreen. Sound maintains a privileged connection to these indeterminate spaces, often moving subtly into and out of the diegesis, passing between realms. Thus, a film need not necessarily go to the lengths *Inception* does to be “complex,” nor does it require a world as vast as Middle-earth, nor must it parcel out its narrative across multiple media platforms, for the relations of sound to image are sufficiently intricate in and of themselves.



## Notes

1. The notion of diegesis originates with Plato and Aristotle and was first imported into film theory with the “filmology” movement that emerged in the 1940s. See: Souriau, 1951. See also: Introduction.
2. Several scholars have noted this break with (or modification of) traditional continuity editing, especially with regard to action films from the 1990s onward, but few apart from Kerins have integrated sound into their account of how or why the spatial organization of contemporary cinema has undergone this shift. See: Bordwell, 2002; Stork, 2011; Shaviro, 2010 and 2012.
3. By sounds of the “primary world”, I mean those that are unambiguously sourced within the diegesis and not “over” or “aside” it. Thus, my usage differs from Mark J.P. Wolf’s notion of “Primary World” as the physical surroundings of the viewer, reader, or gamer that tend to be “displaced” by the secondary, imaginary world when she is “absorbed” in a narrative. See: Wolf’s essay elsewhere in this collection.
4. This is, of course, not the only extratextual reference to Piaf in the film, as Cobb’s wife is played by Marion Cotillard, who in fact played Piaf in 2007’s *La Vie en Rose* (Dahan).

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## 11. Beyond Immersion

### Absorption, Saturation, and Overflow in the Building of Imaginary Worlds

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#### **Abstract**

While much has been written about “immersion”, it is only the first step in the experiencing of an imaginary world. This paper explores the experience by going further into the process, with the additional liquid metaphors of absorption, saturation, and overflow, and examines not only the effects that each of these processes or stages has on the world’s audience, but also how world makers actively use them to enhance the experience of a world, increasing the illusions of completeness and consistency, and cause audiences to keep returning to their worlds.

**Keywords:** Immersion; Absorption; Saturation; Overflow; Imaginary worlds; Transmedia; Reception; Audience experience

The Media Studies meaning of the word “immersion” is new enough that it does not even appear in the Second Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* that appeared in 1989, yet much has been written about immersion since then (for example, Ryan, 2001; Rose, 2012; and Arsenaault, 2005, 50-52). Overall, there seem to be three types of immersion, which we could refer to as physical immersion (like a theme-park ride); perceptual immersion (like a movie); and conceptual immersion (like a novel). Imaginary worlds, which provide places for the audience to go vicariously, greatly aid the act of conceptual immersion and give us some of the best examples of immersion. Yet, when one considers the process of experiencing an imaginary world, as well as the process that goes into the building of one, what we call “immersion” is really only the first step in the experience. An audience may become immersed in an imaginary world, but, unless it is built with care,

they may have little desire to stay there, learn more about it, or return later. Builders of imaginary worlds, then, must consider what happens beyond immersion, and we can identify three more such stages in the audience's experience. In keeping with the water metaphor found in "immersion", I will refer to these stages as "absorption", "saturation", and "overflow", which I have already written about elsewhere (Wolf, 2012).

The term "absorption" has already been applied to audience experience; in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan divides "absorption in the act of reading" into four degrees: concentration, imaginative involvement, entrancement, and addiction (Ryan, 2001, 98-99). As I will use the term here, absorption is a two-way process, unlike immersion. In one sense, the user's attention and imagination is absorbed or "pulled into" the world; one willingly opens a book, watches a screen, interacts with a game world, and so forth; we find ourselves "entering" the imaginary world. At the same time, however, the audience also "absorbs" the imaginary world as well, bringing it into mind, learning or recalling its places, characters, events, and so on, constructing (or reconstructing) the world within their imagination the same way that that memory brings forth people, events, and objects when their names are mentioned. As we are absorbed into a world, we are able to mentally leave, or at least block out, our physical surroundings, to some degree, because details of the secondary world displace those of the Primary World while we are engaged with it. As psychologist Norman Holland describes it:

We humans have a finite amount of attention or "psychic energy." Attention is a way of focusing that limited energy on what matters. If we concentrate on one thing, an important thing, we pay less attention to other things. Those other things become unconscious (or, more accurately, 'preconscious' in Freud's term). If we use more energy and excitation in one prefrontal function, following the play or story, we have less energy available for other prefrontal functions, like paying attention to our bodies or to the [Primary] world around that play or story (Holland 2009, 48).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, to ensure that absorption will follow immersion, world builders must introduce their worlds with the right balance of familiarity and strangeness, drawing audiences in with invention while not changing so many defaults that confusion or even alienation occurs. Glimpses of a world's infrastructures, though they may be tantalizing, must still present a coherent picture, and should also convey a sense of the world's underlying logic, so as to set up some framework into which the audience can mentally begin placing

world information as they learn it. A mental model of the world forms in their mind, as the world is absorbed by the audience.

The absorption process can continue in subsequent visits to a world, as new information is encountered and added to what the audience already knows. Unresolved narrative threads and incomplete infrastructures, together with the enigmas that arise in each, may entice the audience to return, and each return visit can result in a greater time, effort, and even financial investment in a world, giving further reasons for visits to continue. On each subsequent visit, the audience will have to call to mind world data that they have learned in order to pick up where they left off, similar to the way a computer program has to load before it can be run, allowing absorption to continue each time a visit is made.

For larger worlds with a greater number of world data, absorption can continue until there are so many world data that one's mind struggles to contain them all, with new information threatening to crowd out older data. This state, of having taken in as much world data as one's mind can hold, we might refer to as *saturation*. Saturation, then, is the pleasurable goal of conceptual immersion; the occupying of the audience's full attention, concentration, and imagination, often with more detail, nuances, and subtleties than can be held in mind all at once. For example, the second edition of Tolkien's posthumously-published book *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1977) includes an "Index of Names" listing 788 entries for all the characters, places, titles, and terms used in the book. To make matters even more difficult, certain characters have multiple names; Túrin, for example, is also known as Neithan, Gorthol, Agarwaen, Mormegil, Thurin, Wildman of the Woods, and Turambar, and several names are shared by more than one character, place, or thing; for example, Celeborn, Elemmirë, Gelmir, Gorgoroth, Lórien, Minas Tirith, Míriel, and Nimloth all refer to more than one person or place. And Tolkien's names almost always carry meaning as well; after the "Index of Names" is an appendix entitled "Elements in Quenya and Sindarin Names" that lists 180 root words and their meanings, from which the majority of the 788 entries in the "Index of Names" are formed (thus, different names for the same character will have different meanings, which in turn reflect the person or people who gave the character a particular name). Many of the book's characters are also related in elaborate family trees and these relationships often play an important role in the stories. For example, not only is Galadriel Elrond's mother-in-law, and thus Arwen's grandmother, but Arwen's parents are actually first cousins thrice-removed. Even the names of the various groups of Elves indicate their history and relationship to other groups and their experiences as a people.

The events of *The Silmarillion* span several thousand years and various events are alluded to long after they have occurred or are foretold long before they occur, requiring the reader to remember a good deal in order to understand the events and the connections and motivations behind them. *The Silmarillion*, in turn, acts as a backdrop and backstory for *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954-1955), which frequently alludes to its material and, in a sense, is *The Silmarillion's* climax and conclusion. For example, Aragorn is distantly related to Beren, whose romance with Lúthien mirrors Aragorn's romance with Arwen; and Aragorn is also the heir of Isildur, whose weakness and fate he hopes will not match his own. While one can read and enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* without having read *The Silmarillion*, knowledge of *The Silmarillion* adds to the story's depth and nuance, enhancing the reader's pleasure and understanding.

While Tolkien's Arda, the world of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, was created by a single author (although his son Christopher helped with the maps), today's transmedial, transauthorial franchises are built by dozens of authors, and comprise hundreds of works in various media, and the number of world data in these worlds can become incredibly unwieldy. For example, on 20 July 2012, Leland Y. Chee, Lucasfilm's keeper of the *Star Wars* franchise bible known as the Holocron, reported that it contained a total of 55,000 entries, including over 2100 different types of vehicles, 2900 species, 5300 planets, and 19,000 characters (Chee 2012). Some of these bibles are produced even before a world debuts, like the 350-page *Pandorapedia* compiled by a team of experts for James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009). Show bibles are also commonly used for television shows set in imaginary worlds, like *Battlestar Galactica*, or *Dark Skies*, or *Star Trek: Voyager* (often, samples of these bibles can easily be found by searching the Internet).

Saturation can affect one's experience of an imaginary world in other ways as well. In many video games, especially those of the adventure game genre, players must be able to remember a wealth of details about the game's imaginary world in order to put together its backstory and solve puzzles, both of which are often needed to win the game. The worlds of the largest massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), with their vast territories, millions of player-characters, and ongoing events, are too large for any player to know in their entirety, allowing even the most hardcore players to achieve saturation. The amount of detail and information, which overwhelms the audience, imitates the vast amount of Primary World information that cannot be mastered or held in mind all at once.

What happens when world data continues to be added after the point of saturation? To continue our liquid metaphors, this is the point at which



*overflow* occurs. An overflow beyond the point of saturation is necessary if the world is to be kept alive in the audience's imagination. If the world is too small, the audience may feel that they know all there is to know, and consider the world exhausted, feeling there is nothing more to be obtained from it. A world with an overflow beyond saturation, however, can never be held in the mind in its entirety; something will always be left out. What remains in the audience's mind then, is always changing, as lower levels of detail are forgotten and later re-experienced and reimagined when they are encountered again. For example, someone can read Tolkien's works in grade school, high school, college, and later; and with each re-reading, the reader will notice new things, make new connections, and reimagine events and characters due to the reader's own changed level of maturity and experience.

While this can also occur with smaller works that do not reach the same levels of saturation or overflow, it is those that do that provide more interesting re-visioning, as forgotten details return in new imagined forms, and new configurations of detail and information inhabit the reader's mind. Even in the case of visual media like film and television, in which images and sounds are concrete and fixed, the way we imagine the unseen parts of the world may change with each viewing. We may ask different questions and focus on different aspects that we had not previously considered, resulting in a different experience insofar as our speculation and imagination is concerned. These differences arise due to the way we complete narrative and world gestalten, which also depends on our own previous experience.

Thus, builders of imaginary worlds can use the stage of overflow to perpetuate their worlds in the minds of the audience, and bring them back for the challenge of trying to contain it all, to make new connections, and new conceptualizations that reveal new ways of thinking about a world. In order to control what happens during the overflow stage, world builders need to consider what exactly is occurring during it.

So what exactly becomes lost when overflow occurs? At first glance, it may seem that new information displaces old information, and that the oldest data are the ones to be forgotten first. But the significance of various details differs greatly, and not everything is granted equal importance by the audience. It might then seem that the least significant details are the ones that are forgotten, things tangential to the main storylines, or details on the fringes of world infrastructures which appear infrequently or have very little role in the world's events. But here, too, the significance of details is something that is guessed at by the audience, who may misread their significance, or even be deliberately misled by the author as to what is

significant and what is not. An example of such misdirection can be found in murder mysteries, where clues are often planted in such a way as to seem extraneous or inconspicuous, and only later is their significance revealed. Sometimes details take on more significance as a world grows, even for an author; for example, the magic ring that Bilbo finds in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 1937) becomes a central part of *The Lord of the Rings*, though it was not intended as such from the start.

Story and world details are not so much lost as combined with other data into hierarchical units through which a world is represented, through a process known in psychology as “chunking”. In *Thought and Choice in Chess* (de Groot 1946), chess psychologist Adriaan D. de Groot wrote about how chess masters conceptualized and memorized positions differently than ordinary players, grouping the pieces together into larger units that are meaningful wholes. The process of grouping elements together in order to deal with more of them in one’s working memory was later termed “chunking” by George A. Miller in 1956, and the process has been written about in psychological literature since then (Miller 1956, 81-97). Chunking involves grouping lower-level objects or details into higher-level “chunks”, enabling the user to hold more in working memory, and also facilitating storage and recall as well. Examples would be grouping numbers or letters together into larger units for memorization, or configurations of pieces on a chessboard, or even stars into constellations. In the case of narratives found in novels, the divisions between chunks are already suggested by the author by the way the story is divided into chapters, since these breaks often give coherency to the events contained within a particular chapter.

When applied to a world, chunking will most likely involving grouping details within world infrastructures, such as maps, timelines, languages, cultures, and so on, combining them into a chunk with a higher place in an infrastructure hierarchy. Characters may be grouped with the families or institutions they are part of, buildings with the cities they are in, foreign words with the languages they belong to, and so on. For example, even though they are all introduced by name, most people will probably not remember the names of all twelve dwarves in *The Hobbit*, but will instead think of them as Thorin’s company. Characters may be grouped into the peoples they belong to, and likewise, we may have an image of a land like Mordor, Gondor, Narnia, or Islandia, even if we do not remember all the geographical features they contain. Whether it occurs consciously or unconsciously, chunking causes the audience to analyse a world and determine how to group its elements, and the more elements that are combined into a chunk, the richer those chunks, and the world overall, will seem.

Builders of worlds, then, can use overflow to their advantage for different purposes. First, overflow can promote chunking and enrich the audience's experience, engaging the audience in the act of organizing, categorizing, and combining the world information that they encounter, similar to the completion of a world's gestalt. Just as visual gestalten allow one to complete an image from partial visual information, world gestalten involve piecing together data and clues that allow the audience to extrapolate world infrastructures and speculate on questions that world information does not answer directly. Chunking combines elements together as well, and though it need not include the same filling-in process, the higher-level element that results from the process may seem more complete than the collection of elements that make up the chunk, since connections will be made despite missing pieces that would have otherwise been a part of the same chunk.

Second, overflow encourages audiences to make return visits, during which they can re-experience and re-conceptualize a world, improving their understanding and mental image of it; the pleasurable challenge of trying to hold everything in mind is something one finds often among fans, as discussions of small details, and the respect given experts in Internet forums, can attest. Great amounts of detail allow one to change one's focus on subsequent readings or viewings, and each one can refine one's mental image of a world. For example, reading *The Lord of the Rings* as a child, young adult, and older adult will likely produce somewhat different conceptions of Middle-earth at each reading; not because the text has changed, but because the reader has.

Finally, overflow allows authors to hide data temporarily (as in the murder mystery example above) and also to hide what we might call *aggregate implausibilities*, those inconsistencies that are only noticeable when a range of different data are brought together and compared, even though each datum, taken separately, is plausible by itself.<sup>1</sup> The fact that overflow also encourages multiple readings or viewings means that these inconsistencies or mistakes are also more likely to be discovered, but, quite often, audiences seem to enjoy finding them, though only if they are so well-hidden that finding them makes one feel as though one has achieved a certain level of mastery over the text or world. These mistakes, then, become fodder for trivia games or fan-forum Internet discussions, wherein participants not only use knowledge of these errors to show their mastery of a text or world, but also try to explain away such inconsistencies through the application of other world knowledge, an act that, perhaps, can be explained by the fact that one does not want to feel that a world that one has invested so much

time and effort in is not as consistent as one would like it to be, which would damage the illusion that one has worked so hard to preserve and enlarge.

If overflow continues as chunking occurs, higher and higher levels of chunking will be encouraged. This does not, however, simplify a story or a world, since chunks are constantly disassembled and reassembled as new information reconfigures the relationship between existing chunks. With large amounts of world material, audiences can choose between many different ways of chunking material. They may connect their own narrative threads, following characters' lives through a series of works, or the history of a location, or chains of causes and effects that stretch across multiple narratives set in the same world. World builders have often used this as a reason to develop new parts of a world, and they may even be influenced by which parts of a world seem to inspire the most interest in their audience. For example, Boba Fett began as a relatively minor character in *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, but the enigmatic character found great popularity among fans, resulting in his backstory being given in *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* and his being retconned<sup>2</sup> into *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*.

The desire to gather large amounts of world information and chunk them into ever-greater understanding and more complete mental images of a world can partly explain the popularity of non-narrative ancillary works like dictionaries, encyclopedias, glossaries, technical manuals, and other reference works based solely on a world and its information. While, to the outsider, such works might seem tedious at best and be criticized for being heaps of made-up data and details that have little or nothing to do with the real world, to the person saturated with an imaginary world, they can be seen as the answers to questions and verifications of speculations, that provide a way for the audience to measure the accuracy of their own guesses about a world, as well as further information and glimpses of a world not provided in any previous works. World builders who attain this level of interest in their worlds within their audiences have even more options for releasing world information, allowing them to round out their worlds in areas that they might otherwise not have been able to, for example, in the development of languages, geography, technical information, or other data that would be difficult to include within a story. Such practices also encourage transmedia world building, which provides multiple venues for world information and narratives, and the range of different media windows through that a world is seen helps to make the world seem more real, more like the Primary World (our world), which is often experienced through multiple media.

The related phenomena of immersion, absorption, saturation, and overflow, then, help to explain the process of the experience of an imaginary world and consideration of how they operate can aid world builders who wish to maximize their effects. Plenty of popular worlds already provide examples of successful world building that leaves fans hungry for additional world data, no matter in what form it is released. Some of these have been around for decades and grown so enormous, that it seems inconceivable that anyone, even with a lifetime of study, could master all the details that they contain. Such imaginary worlds, then, are the largest and most complex entities ever conceived by the human imagination, and it is no wonder that so much time is spent in contemplating and visiting them.

## Notes

1. An example of an aggregate implausibility appears on page 47 of my book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, which has to do with Bilbo and Gollum being able to understand each other's language, despite the differences in their cultures and the passage of time.
2. Occasionally, franchise creators will [...] go back and alter earlier works to make them consistent with later ones, a process now referred to as "retroactive continuity" or "retcon" (see also: Wolf, 2012, 46).

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## About the author

Mark J. P. Wolf is Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at Concordia University Wisconsin. He has a B.A. (1990) in Film Production and an M.A. (1992) and Ph.D. (1995) in Critical Studies from the School of Cinema/Television (now renamed the School of Cinematic Arts) at the University of Southern California. His books include *Abstracting Reality: Art, Communication, and Cognition in the Digital Age* (2000), *The Medium of the Video Game* (2001), *Virtual Morality: Morals, Ethics, and New Media* (2003), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003), *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond* (2007), *Myst and Riven: The World of the D'ni* (2011), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (2008), *Before the Crash: An Anthology of Early Video Game History* (2012), the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming* (2012), *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (2014), *LEGO Studies:*

*Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon* (2014), *Video Games Around the World* (2015), the four-volume *Video Games and Gaming Culture* (2016), *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology* (forthcoming), *Video Games FAQ* (forthcoming), *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (forthcoming), *The Routledge Companion to Media Technology and Obsolescence* (forthcoming), and two novels for which his agent is looking for a publisher. He is also founder and co-editor of the Landmark Video Game book series from University of Michigan Press. He has been invited to speak in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Second Life, and is on the advisory boards of Videotopia and the International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations, and on several editorial boards including those of Games and Culture, The Journal of E-media Studies, and Mechademia: An Annual Forum for Anime, Manga and The Fan Arts. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife Diane and his sons Michael, Christian, and Francis.

## 12. Zombie Escape and Survival Plans

Mapping the Transmedial World of the Dead

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### Abstract

This essay reflects on the notion of space in the world building of zombie fiction. Running in particular through the *Resident Evil* (1996-present, initially a video game) and *The Walking Dead* (2003-present, initially a comic book) franchises, it will analyse the ways spaces and places are represented and designed, as well as the (player) characters' behaviors these spaces and places motivate. More precisely, in order to underscore the questions of survival and of horror, it will focus on enclosed and contested spaces or, in other words, on the concept of the fortress and of the seminal notion of the labyrinth.

**Keywords:** *Zombie, Video game, TV series, Comic book, Film, The Walking Dead, Resident Evil*

It is commonly recognized that, in the mid-90s, “zombies were saved from triviality in popular culture and made frightening again, this time by video games” (McIntosh 2008, 11). What’s more, as Shawn McIntosh stated just after acknowledging the importance of the tenth art, “In many ways, in fact, they were and are ideally suited to the video game environment” (ibid.). If one considers the notion of “environment” not in the sense of a system on which a computer program runs, but instead as the combination of external physical conditions that affect and influence the growth, development, and survival of organisms; as the surroundings in which people carry on a particular activity; and as the state of being envired, McIntosh could not have been more correct.

While zombies are seen as the Everymonsters that might appear in many variations of the same narrative schema, and while the interactive nature



of the video game indisputably engages the protagonists in direct confrontations with the undead, one should not forget that Capcom's *Resident Evil* (1996) was a literal game changer by welcoming the player, through a now-famous line during loading screens, to "the *world* of survival horror" (my emphasis) and thereby drawing attention to the spatial dimension of the experience. Thus, this essay will reflect on the notion of space in the world building of zombie fiction. Running in particular through the *Resident Evil* (1996-present, initially a video game) and *The Walking Dead* (2003-present, initially a comic book) franchises, it will analyse the ways spaces and places are represented and designed, as well as the (player) characters' behaviors these spaces and places motivate. More precisely, in order to underscore the questions of survival and of horror, it will focus on enclosed and contested spaces or, in other words, on the concept of the fortress and of the seminal notion of the labyrinth.

## Undead Worldness

With video games, comics, films, TV series, novelizations, and novels—novels that this essay will not examine—, *Resident Evil* and *The Walking Dead* have come to be associated with the notion of transmedial world building. There is actually a zombie "world" or, better still, a "worldness" to these fictions (and many others following the same generic conventions). As Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca have explained:

What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the "worldness" (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world's worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 409).

Henry Jenkins has continued to explore this convergent cultural creation. So often quoted, he states: "More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (Jenkins 2006, 114), citing examples that point, among others, towards the walking dead:

Different franchises follow their own logic: some such as the *X-Men* (2000) movies, develop the world in their first instalment and then allow the

sequels to unfold different stories set within that world; others, such as the *Alien* (1979) films or George Romero's *Living Dead* (1968) cycle, introduce new aspects of the world with each new instalment, so that more energy gets put into mapping the world than inhabiting it (ibid.).

Actually, the post-apocalyptic zombie universe is difficult to inhabit. And its current "worldness" originates from *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero's 1968 film has been defined by Jean-Baptiste Thoret as a "matrix film":

a film that inspires, that stirs the imagination, which produces a desire to connect. Different from the remake, and different as well from single quotes or references to previous works, the matrix film contains a number of motifs, situations or images that will be reused, transformed (*anamorphosés*) and reworked in other films (Thoret 2001, 144, freely translated).

As we know, by dissociating the zombie from the Haitian folklore, *Night of the Living Dead* established the "rules" or "basics" of the modern zombie. Rather than slaves under the spell of an evil master using some Vodou practices of the Caribbean, the dead now slowly, freely, and instinctively walk the earth with the purpose of eating and/or infecting the living; and they can only be killed by destroying the brain. Such evil deeds have well and truly established a narrative schema: "Many of the zombie movies of the 1970s have a plot similar to *Night's*: a small group of people are trapped in a remote location and have to fight off numbers of slow-moving zombies who want to eat them" (McIntosh 2008, 9). Although the new ghoul behavior remains the decisive change to the early zombie tropes, another modification is possibly less highlighted but equally significant to the matrix of the zombie film.

### **Holding Onto the Enclosed Space as Long as Possible**

In *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), set in Haiti, Murder Legendre, the zombie master played by Béla Lugosi, inhabits a bastion on a cliff. As described by Kyle Bishop:

Deep in the bowels of his seaside fortress, an army of zombies operates the machines of production, cranking a massive grinder by hand and transporting a seemingly endless supply of sugar cane to the mouth of the mill. This scene in *White Zombie* emulates a similarly pejorative depiction

of the factory as in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), where seemingly mindless workers run the relentless machines with no apparent thought for their own lives and safety (Bishop 2010, 78).

In *Night of the Living Dead*, although they are in this first iteration afraid of fire, the mindless flesh eaters don't think about their own safety when they strike their prey either. Above all, they have switched role and place: they don't work on the inside and don't guard the fortress; they are assailing it from the outside, as well as from the inside, when humans turn into voracious cannibals. The rural Pennsylvania home where the survivors end up requires adaptations. Bishop explains: "Ben immediately begins a radical home renovation to convert the farmhouse quickly into a makeshift fortress. Visual ties to *The Birds* and *Last Man on Earth* are obvious; Ben uses rough tools to attack and incapacitate the zombies, he systematically tosses the bodies outside, and he starts dismantling furniture to board up the doors and windows" (ibid., p.116). Whereas the shopping mall of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) will likewise be secured with materials at hand, the underground bunker of *Day of the Dead* (1985), the ultra-modern city of *Land of the Dead* (1995) as well as the hidden panic room at the end of *Diary of the Dead* (2007) are fortifications specially designed to protect people.

The first *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) deftly combines both versions of the fortress. Built in the Arklay Mountains, the Spencer Mansion where the Special Tactics and Rescue Service (S.T.A.R.S.) Alpha Team takes refuge at the beginning of the game in search of the Bravo Team is not what it first appears to be. It is "in fact the Arklay Research Facility, where Umbrella was conducting experiments for biological warfare, culminating with the T-Virus. The unpredictable biological accident was to envelop all of Raccoon City in an inescapable nightmare" (Capcom 2006, 248). Consequently, Jill Valentine (or Chris Redfield) has to access the building and breach its defensive structures in order to find her or his way to escape it. Their investigation establishes the common journey of the (player) characters: first getting in, then getting out in order to survive; otherwise, the investigated spaces become death traps. The briefing of *A Resident Evil Story: Dangerous Secrets* in the first comic book (Kris Oprisko, Ted Adams and Carlos D'Anda, WildStorm, 1998) recounts these events. The team of paramilitary commandos descending to the Umbrella underground genetic research facility called "The Hive" during the first movie (*Resident Evil*, Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002) makes the same trip, and not everyone comes out alive. The zombies of *Resident Evil* and the others creatures infected by the virus are also the products of *White Zombie* and *Night of the Living Dead*. They

are in the fortress insofar as they were the employees (i.e. the slaves of the Umbrella Corporation); Jill emphasizes this truth to Albert Wesker towards the end of the game: “So, you are a slave of Umbrella now, along with these virus monsters.” But it does not matter whether they are inside or outside the space; they respect the Romerian living dead behavior matrix and impulsively walk toward the player character even though they’ll be killed (see, for instance: Perron 2017). In the end, or in the beginning if we look at the origin of the havoc, it’s because one of the zombies got outside the walls of the research laboratories that the virus has spread and infected the population of Raccoon City.

The threat of a full-scale humanitarian disaster is difficult to control and to keep within limits. Regardless of the means, the growing horde of the living dead will invariably walk or crawl toward the human hideouts, will continuously push against the boundaries before eventually succeeding to invade the secured spaces (many times facilitated by the unwise behaviors of survivors or the hostile attempts of takeover by other parties). Bordered by rivers and an electric fence, even the well-guarded Fiddler’s Green of *Land of the Dead* will suffer such a fate and have its inhabitants horribly eaten. That is why, referring to *Night of the Living Dead*, Matthew Weise derives from these unavoidable breaches another key pattern:

As barricades are overwhelmed, survivors fall back to individual rooms, relying more on weapons. This concept of the “shrinking fortress” is a mainstay of the subgenre, finding expression in virtually every zombie film, whether on a small scale as in *Shaun of the Dead* (a pub) [Edgar Wright, 2004] or on an epic scale as in *Land of the Dead* (an entire city) (Weise 2009, 253).

Weise then explains how the first *Resident Evil* could not express this concept because the rooms of the Mansion were distinct spaces crossed only by the player character.

The player always knew they were safe when they reached a door, since doors were inaccessible to zombies. Furthermore, the nature of how the load screens worked made doors magical safe zones. Even with a small horde of zombies blocking a doorway the player could still escape at the touch of a button as long as they were able to touch the door (ibid., 255).

Quite rightly, however, Weise underlines in one endnote that *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) “manages to re-create the shrinking fortress mechanics

of *Night of the Living Dead* with fantastic fidelity” (Ibid., 265 n. 28). In a remote rural region of Europe, Leon S. Kennedy searches for Ashley Graham, captive daughter of the President of the United States, while being constantly assaulted by local villagers (more infected than living dead). In many locations, and especially during the first two chapters, he is able to enter the farmhouses and push furniture like bookcases and storage cabinets in front of doors and windows. This will only delay or slow down the invasion. For instance, the cabin where Leon, Luis, and Ashley barricade themselves in chapter 2-2 is attacked from everywhere, even from the second floor, accessed by ladder. Since there is no place to fall back, Leon and Luis must kill 40 enemies before the horde suddenly gives up and let them live, temporarily.

From a world-building perspective, the *Walking Dead* franchise is actually about mapping the world of the undead. That world is indeed dotted with fortresses, not shrinking as much as breached and overcome ones, rendering the fight useless and leading the characters to flight. From the beginning of the story in the comic books, the survival of Rick Grimes and the various survivors regrouped around him is a matter of space. The characters realize in the first issues that they can't live out in the open or in outdoor environments because the zombies can approach and strike from any direction. As Frédéric Maheux notes after making a reference to Max Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead* (2003):

This pragmatic approach to space underscores two basic narrative forms for the zombie narrative: a sedentary form, where the survivors fortify a place and camp there, and a nomadic form, where the survivors have to travel from point A to point B (or simply keep moving). (Maheux 2015 189, freely translated)

In issue eight (Robert Kirman and Charlie Adlard, Image Comics, May 2004), the Wiltshire Estates are the first secure fenced domain that the characters encounter and in which they briefly settle down. They are soon swarmed by a horde of hungry dead residents because they had unwisely neglected to inspect the neighbourhood; a mistake they will never repeat. The group ends up at Hershel Greene's farm. This is also the case for Lee Everett and Clementine in the initial episode of Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (April 24, 2012). Both in the comic and in the game, the newcomers are rapidly kicked out by Hershel following deadly incidents involving his family members and zombies (they only remain for three issues in the comic

book; i.e. issues ten, eleven, and twelve of July, August, and September 2004). Things do not happen this way in the TV series. Compared to the rhythm of the comic book, in which the story is cut into short issues and quick narrative arcs, and to the video game in which the exploration of the farm is limited and therefore lasts only a brief time (the exploration of space being one of the distinctive features of the video game), Rick and his companions spend the entire second season there (AMC, 2011-2012). The series makes the most of its sedentary setting and particularly well-developed characters by infusing the narrative with additional pathos. As Bishop observes:

What makes the series such an important contribution to the zombie canon [...] is how *The Walking Dead* ups the ante on screen horror by making the characters so well developed, likable, and imperilled. Although the zombies obviously function as catalysts for the show's physical action and apocalyptic story line, the core of *The Walking Dead* addresses the essential concerns of dramatic pathos: the struggles, losses, and emotional traumas experienced by the human protagonists. (Bishop 2011, 9-10)

The first task of the protagonists is, indeed, to try to make their surroundings safe. As well as this is achieved, they will nonetheless be overwhelmed by a horde of walkers during the final episode. Once again, the space becomes uninhabitable; they must move on.

Both the thirteenth issue of the comic book (October 2004) and the first episode of the third season of the TV series (AMC, 14 October 2012) bring the group to an actual stronghold: a prison, literally an enclosed space meant to keep some in while keeping others out. To seek such sites is a recommendation from Max Brooks' survival manual dealing with the potentiality of a zombie attack:

In Class 3 outbreaks [a hue crisis], private homes and even public structures prove insufficient to support human life. Eventually, the people inside will have either suffered the eventual degradation of their defenses, or simply run out of supplies. What is needed in a severe outbreak is a nearly impregnable structure with all the facilities of a self-sustaining biosphere. What is needed is a fortress. (Brooks 2003, 87)

Owing to the exceptional sturdiness of its fence, the clan is indeed able to inhabit the prison for quite a long time, allowing them to begin planning a new life (36 comic issues from October 2004 to April 2008, and the whole third TV series season and half of the fourth one). As mentioned above, the

fences are eventually breached, though not initially by the walking dead, but, rather, by human enemies. The barricaded parking lot of the motor inn in the third episode of Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (28 August 2012) is similarly breached because of a bandit offensive. The fact remains that, in order to survive, as is the case in more recent storylines, the protagonists must live behind walls, such as those of the Alexandria Safe-Zone (first appearance in issue 69, January 2010, and the eleventh episode of the fifth season of the TV series; 22 February 2015), the Hilltop Colony (first appearance in issue 94, February 2012) and "The Kingdom" community (first appearance in issue 108, March 2013). In Telltale's *The Walking Dead: Season Two*, the hardware store William Carver's group uses as a refuge and base of operations (mainly in episode three, AMC, 13 May 2014) is similarly isolated.

Given the importance of the concept of the fortress, *Plants vs. Zombies* (George Fan and PopCap Games, 2009) may well be the zombie video game *par excellence*. Indeed, it simplifies the dominant trajectory of zombies into a straight line of attack, while the sole goal of the human survivors is to defend their "tower". By combining the mechanics of first person shooter, survival horror, tower defence, role-playing, and open-world games, *7 Days to Die* (The Fun Pimps, 2016) accentuates these survival and horror themes.

### Navigating the Contested Space as Carefully as Possible

In order to contain the epidemic, the Umbrella Corporation erects a wall around Raccoon City at the beginning of *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Alexander Witt, 2004). As opposed to the survivors of *The Walking Dead*, who enter the prison by choice, the townspeople are imprisoned without their consent due to the quarantine. They are trapped in an especially unsafe area. This seclusion goes against an important survival tip of Brooks:

AVOID URBAN AREAS: No matter what your chances for survival are during an infestation, they will undoubtedly drop by 50 if not 75 percent when traversing an urban area. The simple fact is that a place inhabited by more living will have more dead. The more buildings present, the more places to be ambushed. These buildings also decrease your field of vision. Hard cement surfaces, unlike soft ground, do nothing to muffle footsteps. Add to that the chances of simply knocking something over, tripping over debris, or crunching over broken glass, and you have a recipe for a very noisy trip. Also, [...], the possibility of being trapped, cornered,

or otherwise surrounded in an urban area is infinitely greater than it is in any wilderness setting. (Brooks 2003, 100)

Insofar as the movie was inspired by *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998), *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom, 1999), and *Resident Evil: Code: Veronica* (Capcom, 2000), it built on the ways these games were designed. In fact, to refer to McIntosh's comment quoted in the introduction, the video games truly enhance the environment of zombie postapocalyptic fiction. Once more, we must emphasize their spatial dimensions.

Rooting the video game in architecture, landscape painting, sculpture, gardening, and amusement-park design, Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire see it as a spatial art:

Game worlds are totally constructed environments. Everything there was put on the screen for some purpose—shaping the game play or contributing to the mood and atmosphere or encouraging performance, playfulness, competition, or collaboration. If games tell stories, they do so by organizing spatial features. If games stage combat, then players learn to scan their environments for competitive advantages. Game designers create immersive worlds with embedded rules and relationships among objects that enable dynamic experiences. (Jenkins and Squire 2002, 65)

Above all, they single out one fundamental motif: “Stripped to their simplest elements, the earliest digital games consisted of little more than contested spaces. Picture Pac-Man gobbling his way through a simple maze and trying to avoid getting caught by ghosts. As game technology improves, the potential for creating complex and compelling spaces seems unlimited” (ibid.). The reference to *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) is especially relevant and the reading proposed by Chaim Gingolde expands on the forces at work and at play:

Spatially speaking, Pac-Man's maze helps to structure the game's dynamics and drama. Power pellets are tucked away in the corners, making them hard-to-reach treats. As an arena, the maze forces the ghosts, Pac-Man and the pellets into constant contact, releasing a focused and continuous drama. The maze is also a recognizable puzzle form, which motivates the player to move through it. Tactically, the Pac-Man maze has multiple meanings: it is both an obstacle to acquiring food and escaping ghosts and a means to trap and outwit those ghosts. Each maze also functions as a level to complete, breaking the game up into discrete dramatic units. (Gingolde 2007, 79)



Once enclosed by the wall, the city of *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* becomes a giant Pac-Man-like maze. It is thus not a big step to compare the zombies to the ghosts, the various guns and ammunitions found to the power pellets and the (player) characters to the Pac-Man. The gameplay and drama involve moving through the labyrinth to get the pellets, namely the documents and items scattered all around; in the video games, some of these items—such as keys, crests, masks, emblems, plates or handles—are necessary to end a “level” or a chapter, to get access to new locations, and to pursue the investigation.

The many events that make up the main plot of the *Resident Evil* franchise revolve around the top-secret activities of the Umbrella Corporation and its paramilitary organization. The storylines as developed across media involve the discovery of classified information, the uncovering of malicious activities responsible for the zombie outbreak, and attempts to eliminate the threat of bioterrorism. The war has gone global: *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009) is set in Africa; *Resident Evil 6* (Capcom, 2012) covers the United States, China, Edonia, and the deep sea of the Northern Atlantic; *Resident Evil: Retribution* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2012) goes to Japan and Russia; the last three issues of the comic book *Resident Evil: Fire and Ice* (Kris Oprisko, Ted Adams, Lee Bermejo and Shawn Crystal, WildStorm, February to May 2001) alternately take place in Mexico and Alaska; the outbreak in the five issues of the manga *Resident Evil: Marhawa Desire* (Capcom and Noaki Serizawa, Éditions Kurosama, 2012-2014) is situated near Singapore; and the action of the first issue of *Resident Evil: Volume Two* (Ricardo Sanchez, and Kevin Sharpe, WildStorm, May 2009) even takes place in outer space. The various members of the S.T.A.R.S. Alpha and Bravo Teams, of the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance, or of the U.S Secret service, as well as their relatives or allies, are all involved in and committed to this mission. The film series is centered on a character not present in the games: Alice (played by Milla Jovovich). While this former security operative of the Umbrella Corporation suffers from amnesia in the first installment, she slowly discovers that she is infected by the T-Virus, but, moreover, that she is bonding with it, a condition that gives her special abilities. Her journey into and through the storyworld is based on revenge and on saving humankind.

From Raccoon City in *Resident Evil 2* and *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom, 1999), to the Spencer Mansion and its surroundings in *Resident Evil*, and to the foreign Umbrella facility and island in *Resident Evil: Code: Veronica*, the labyrinth is the common spatial motif. According to the study of Clara Fernández-Vara,

Physically, labyrinths and mazes are bounded spaces to be traversed; their main purpose is to delay the walker [in the general sense and not as a kind of walking dead] as he goes from point A to point B. This delay can be achieved by extending the distance between those two points, tracing meandering paths or branching those paths and forcing the walker to guess the correct one. Confusion and disorientation are also ways to obstruct the path to the exit. (Fernández-Vara 2007, 74)

The first *Resident Evil* games are known for their backtracking, for the player character's need to bring specific objects back to a place already visited in order to proceed to new parts of the environment or, because the player character can only carry a limited number of items at a time, to the location of item boxes where useful objects can be stored. In order to orient oneself, the exploration and re-exploration is aided by a "Map" function that can be accessed from the status screen: "Select this option to view the rooms and areas you have already visited. This feature helps you keep track of where you need to go" (*Resident Evil's* instruction guide). Nonetheless, as Alfred Korzybski famously stated, "A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness" (Korzybski 2000, 58). The map does not actually represent the genuine horrific playground, inasmuch as it doesn't display the "biohazard" (the original release title in Japan). The "world of survival horror" is a tangible space contested by the (rarely solitary) zombie. In the games, the comic books and the movies, the characters must be ever-cautious. They generally explore the corridors and rooms with their gun raised and ready to shoot; their safety relies on purging literal death threats.

Reiterating an analysis I make elsewhere about video games (Perron 2017), I'll recall that the zombie is a "definer of space": "If the corridor is tight enough, then the zombie becomes an actual wall of the corridor. If the zombie traps the player in a dead end, then the narrow space becomes increasingly narrower. The zombie in this situation becomes a shambling, clawing, biting barrier" (Totten 2012). Stressing that the player character needs to "survive the space", Maheux notes that "The videoludic zombies in *Resident Evil* occupy a spatial barrier role. They are more than enemies to be destroyed; they are traps that limit exploration by the player" (Maheux 2015, 195, freely translated). Jill or Chris might be safe when they reach a door in *Resident Evil*, but they do not know what's on the other side. At the very beginning of *Resident Evil 2*, Claire or Leon is forced to face three zombies suddenly pushing open a wire-mesh fence because the back alley of the Gun Shop turns out to be a dead end. The spatial presence of the living dead is

central in the other media too. The Alpha and Bravo Teams are, for instance, ambushed by the living dead in the jungle in the second issue of *Resident Evil: Volume Two*. Because the maintenance tunnels of the Hive are flooded by a huge wave of zombies, Alice and the remaining group members of the first movie must walk on the overhead pipes to escape. Examples like these are as legion as the walking dead.

The prison of *The Walking Dead* is undoubtedly a huge labyrinth, not inhabited at its center by a solitary Minotaur (rather, in the original story, it's four inmates who are initially found in the cafeteria), but by roamers locked in various rooms (the guards opened the cells as the situation deteriorated). The labyrinth must be claimed from the undead. In both the comic and the TV series, the group settles down near the exit. Yet, the maze is—literally and metaphorically—made darker in the television adaptation; the contrast between the bright outdoors and the gloomy interior is salient. It must be explored with flashlights. As there are multiple entrances to the prison, it is traversed repeatedly with great peril and not without casualties. It is in one of its corridors, littered with zombie corpses, that Glen finds a disturbed Rick after the death of Lori. The transmedial story of *The Walking Dead* certainly relates to the sedentary form of the zombie narrative, as the survivors attempt to find and settle in a secure haven. Nevertheless, insofar as such a sanctuary is hard to locate and, as we have seen, to keep and defend, *The Walking Dead* also relies much on the nomadic narrative form. The sudden departure from the prison after the offensive of the Governor's troops splits and spreads the group across the area. They must keep moving to stay alive and to eventually reunite. In the video game, the young Clementine, Telltale's new main character, playable in the second season (2013-2014), embarks on a long and seemingly endless journey after leaving her home at the beginning of this storyline. In his study of the zombie invasion in the video game space, Maheux uses the distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari between two types of space: "In striated space, one closes off a surface and 'allocates' it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks; in the smooth, one 'distributes' oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings (*logos* and *nomos*)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 481). Maheux then explains that the space of *Resident Evil* is striated, separated in rooms and doors (intervals and breaks) and that the open world of a game like *Dead Island* (Techland, 2011) is a smooth and open space. In that case, Maheux shows, "zombies are more obstacles based on time rather than space. The player knows that to get to any destination, he will face an infinite number of creatures" (Maheux 2015, 198). As a result, the wilds are

no less a contested space than the maze. The nomads must remain just as cautious as the settlers. An encounter with one or many zombies in the fields and forest is a constant possibility, a fact made painfully clear on numerous hikes nearby and between temporary homes. The characters must always secure a camp and install some kind of alarm around it. The predator might not be smart, but the humans are still the prey. And no matter how many flesh eaters are killed, there will always be others coming. The growing horde walking towards Hershel's farm in the opening scene of the last episode of the second season of the TV series *The Walking Dead* (18 March 2012) strikingly expresses this.

### Razing Everything in Their Path to the Ground

The *Resident Evil* and *The Walking Dead* franchises have been and are still highly popular. They are, without a doubt, compelling environments that can be explored across media. Ultimately, they lean on the paradox of the living dead, of being at once alive and dead. Although the franchises create worlds, the created places and locations are, whatever the media, to be destroyed. In fact, to reverse Jenkins's assertion quoted at the beginning of this essay and to underline once more the ins and outs of these apocalyptic fictions, it is precisely because the zombie worlds are so difficult to inhabit that energy is put into mapping them. No matter when the survivors stop moving and where they settle down, the flesh eaters will keep coming to overwhelm them mindless intent. The invasion remains definite and total. As SWAT team officer Peter Washington (played by Ken Foree) asserts in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978): "When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth." We could then say: "When there's no more room in one medium the dead will walk another one."

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## 13. MMORPG as Locally Realized Worlds of Action

*Laurent Di Filippo*

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the question of concrete realizations of imaginary worlds as situated worlds. As a case study, the author bases his reflections on *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventure*, an MMORPG based on the adventure of Conan the barbarian, the character created by Robert E. Howard in the 1930s. The author of the paper uses Erving Goffman's theory of game and the notions of "locally realized world" and "membrane" to address this situated production. He then discusses the place of the player and the relations to the representations in the game as a vicarious experience and a distance implied by playful practices. By crossing several works of Erving Goffman, the author shows that immersion in gaming worlds is the product of both being absorbed in the action and maintaining a distance with it in order to be at the same time an actor and a spectator of the action.

**Keywords:** MMORPG, Action, Immersion, Transmedial World, Conan

While younger than other forms of expression, video games have gained much popularity in the last few decades. They are now often part of broad multi-platform commercial strategies and, thereby, offer specific actualizations of fictional worlds that appear on various media (as also seen in the previous chapter).

Within the framework of the recent "world" trend in media studies (Ryan and Thon 2014, 1), I suggest to consider another point of entry to the study of "worlds", borrowing thoughts from the sociologist Erving Goffman and crossing perspectives about games and world building. This work aims to show how a game can be a specific actualization of a world in



an interactionist sociological sense and what place it has in a transmedia environment. As a case study, I will take *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)<sup>1</sup> developed by the Norwegian company Funcom.<sup>2</sup> This game is based on the stories about Conan, the famous barbarian invented by the Texan author Robert E. Howard, one of the founding fathers of the fantasy genre (Besson 2007, 100; Parsons 2015, 58).

The chapter is organized in three progressive steps. First, taking game as an example, I will characterize a medium as a particular manifestation of a fictional world which I call a *locally realized world* and propose another path to study the limits of a gaming situation. Second, I will study the specificities of games as places of action. Third, I will show how the preceding developments lead to the question of immersion. In my conclusion, I will extend my reflections to a broader research question about permanence and change.

## Imaginary worlds and situated worlds

*Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* is an MMORPG based on Robert E. Howard's work. The game is not merely a copy but rather an adaptation of the author's texts. This simple idea points out a twofold characteristic of the game as existing at the same time in relation with older cultural material and as a specific actualization and expression of this material. Its world is reinterpreted to give the players an experience which is different from reading the texts. In more theoretical terms, studying games associated with a network of productions raises issues concerning the balance between "convergence" and "fragmentation" (Ludes 2008, 10) or "convergence" and "divergence" (Ryan and Thon 2014, 3). Broadly stated, it is part of a reflection about unity and diversity, or permanence and change, within media franchises. Questions that arise can be formulated as such: should one consider that the world one experiences through various media productions of a franchise is always the same? And, if not, what relations and differences exist between those productions?

One first needs to define the notion of "world" in a gaming situation to understand, from an interactionist point of view, what an MMORPG such as *Age of Conan* represents as part of a transmedia franchise. The definition of "world" can vary greatly in social sciences and in the humanities. All uses of the word are not compatible, but, instead, they offer various angles for studying social and human phenomena depending on the academic discipline and the scientific interests of researchers.<sup>3</sup> In literature and media

studies, “imaginary worlds” are often considered as “secondary worlds” built by individuals living in the “primary world”. In his recent book, Mark J.P. Wolf sees each medium as a window opening onto a secondary world (Wolf 2012, 248). This implies worlds existing beyond the medium that presents them. A similar idea of distinction is also present in T.L. Taylor’s work, when she says that players “play between worlds”, which means “playing back, and forth, across the boundaries of the game world, and the ‘real’ or nonliteral game space” (Taylor 2006, 17). Thereby, Taylor takes over the divide between online and offline world.

The main difficulty with these theories is that they set apart the primary and the secondary worlds as they oppose the real and the imaginary worlds, sometimes labelled as a distinction between “real” and “virtual” or “game” and “ordinary life”. In my opinion, however, this conception does not help to understand some characteristics of Man in the anthropological and sociological sense. One can wonder how real a fictional world is as it has concrete material manifestations and is the result of production and reception activities. How can we consider the reality of the experience of a fiction?

### Transmedial worlds and world-building activities

Robert E. Howard’s short stories about Conan appeared in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in the first half of the 1930s. Those stories were later re-published in books, anthologies, and nowadays on the Internet. Other authors followed his works and wrote stories about Conan. Numerous productions like comics, games, and films, relate to the franchise (Bertetti 2014). Each production expresses resources that are part of a broader set that forms the “imaginary world” of Conan and allows one to apprehend this world in specific mediated forms. Recently, *Paradox Entertainment* has bought the rights to the Conan trademark, ensuring a degree of coherence between products.<sup>4</sup> It can then be labelled as transmedia exploitation. Paolo Bertetti has recently suggested to study productions of the Conan franchise from a character-centered approach instead of a world-centered approach. Nevertheless, the recent collection of novels from the *Age of Conan* collection, which feature other heroes, and the MMORPG, which borrows many elements from them, participate in developing the Hyborian world beyond the famous barbaric character’s original incarnation.

As Christy Dena (2009, 16) has shown, definitions of transmedia vary. Unlike Henry Jenkins, who favors additivity of content upon redundancy in

transmedia franchise (Jenkins 2006, 98), Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca see adaptations as possible processes of transmedia construction. They argue that “transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 1).<sup>5</sup> A transmedial world lies in the mental construction of the actors and not in its material entity (see also: Klastrup and Tosca 2012, 48; Klastrup and Tosca 2014, 297). If their idea of abstract construction helps to understand some mental subjective processes, their work can be completed by an analysis of local actualizations of resources that compose what they call the “repertoire” of such a transmedial world. For example, Howard’s writings present several countries and kingdoms that are part of Conan’s world repertoire, but only some of them will be used within the MMORPG.

Goffman’s theories about games should help to define such local actualizations more thoroughly. In his book *Encounters*, dedicated to the study of “focused interaction”, he proposes to analyse social situations and the implication of actors. In the first essay, called “Fun in Games”, he refers to Gregory Bateson’s analysis of play as a “frame” of mind that participates in constructing the meaning of a situation (Bateson 1955; Goffman 1961, 20).<sup>6</sup> The sociologist also mentions Kurt Riezler (1941) who analyses what is meant by “merely playing” in order to understand how people differentiate play and seriousness. According to Riezler, the answer lies in the “horizon” of the activity, which is the limit of possible consequences. Therefore, individuals will not build causal relations with broader life when they “merely play” (Riezler 1941, 517), and “the game is a little cosmos of its own” (Riezler 1941, 505). Goffman follows Riezler when saying that “games, then, are world-building activities” and applies this idea to all possible social situations (1961, 27). Each gathering of people creates “a world of meaning” (Goffman 1961, 27) in which people act according to the relevance of the situation. He defines the order of an encounter as “a locally realized world of roles and events” that “cuts the participants off from many externally based matters that might have been given relevance, but allows a few of these external matters to enter the interaction world as an official part of it” (Goffman 1961, 30).

Goffman’s idea of a world here is therefore not the same as the world of literary studies. Saying that Robert E. Howard’s Hyborian Age as well as Tolkien’s Middle-earth are imaginary worlds does not lean on the same definition of the polysemic notion of world as saying that a card game is a “world of role and events” as Goffman uses this notion; that is to say: a specific situation providing a meaningful context to the identities and actions of the participants. Nevertheless, his work should help to characterize

the relation established between social actors and specific expressions of a fictional universe.

## Locally realized worlds

Goffman argues that a sense of reality emerges from the meaning given to the elements that are parts of a situation. This process participates in constructing *realized resources* that he defines as “locally realizable events and roles” based on the material that is available at hand for the actors (Goffman 1961, 28).

In an MMORPG, characters (playable or non-playable), areas, landscapes, monsters, objects, the interface, and all elements, activities, and processes are realized resources as long as they are relevant to the situation at hand. Let’s just take one example: *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*’ timeline follows the novel *The Hour of the Dragon*, in which Conan is the king of Aquilonia. In the game, player-characters can meet this main figure in the castle of Tarantia, the capital of Aquilonia. A researcher can study this character as a “realized resource” in order to analyse various processes, such as his visual and audio representations, his role in various quests, his relations to other characters, how players can interact with him, etc.

Following Goffman, I therefore propose to call the actualization of a particular world during a situation a *locally realized world*. This concept includes acts of production, the materiality of the media, and its receptions. Stressing the difference between “imaginary worlds” and “realized worlds” allows us to reflect upon *expressed resources*. Each manifestation of the world must then be considered through the way it *expresses* the imaginary world, makes it tangible and opens it to interpretation. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon talk about “*represented worlds*” that are “sites of creative activity in which cultures elaborate their collective social imaginary” (Ryan and Thon 2014, 19), thus questioning the link between imagination and its concrete manifestations. Playing is therefore not the only way of experiencing *locally realized worlds*. The work of game developers also constitutes realized actions of the game production process. In a broad sense, researchers should look at how expressed resources match the relevance of various situations depending on the social actors’ activities. The situation also defines the data that researchers are able to gather for their study by making them observable.

Moreover, the locally realized world is not just a fixed occurrence, but part of a dynamic process. When a player-character becomes stronger,

some situations, like fighting enemies, become easier for him or her. Being a first-level beginner or a high-level experienced character does not involve the same resources. Changes also occur at the level of the product: contents, such as new territories or quests, are added through updates; game mechanisms change; seasonal events occur. There is an evolution through time and locally realized worlds should be considered more specific than the game in general.

### **Limits of the realized world and transmedia: membrane and transformation rules**

The “local” aspect of realized worlds questions the definition of the limits of a social situation. Discussions about the boundaries of games in video games studies have often (perhaps too often?) been based on the works of Johan Huizinga (1951) and Roger Caillois (1958) and on the notion of “magic circle” that the former is supposed to have forged in his book *Homo Ludens* (Copier 2009). As Eric Zimmerman (2012) explains, this misconception is due to an interpretation of his own book *Rules of Play*, written with Katie Salen (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Scholars too often agitate the “strawman” of the magic circle to counter the idea that a game is separated from the rest of the world,<sup>7</sup> even if Huizinga himself underlined that a game has a function for the community in which it is played. Play should then not be considered as fully separated from the rest of the world, but instead, as having a specific place among other activities (Di Filippo 2014).

Erving Goffman offers another starting point to study the limits of a situation and its relations to other social activities. The Canadian sociologist proposes to talk about a membrane and explains his choice: “In order to think more easily in these organic terms, an organic metaphor might be attempted. A living cell usually has a cell wall, a membrane, which cuts the cell from components in its external milieu, ensuring a selective relation between them and the internal composition of the cell” (Goffman 1961, 65). Using this metaphor, he argues that each interaction situation has its specific relevance and internal consistency and is at the same time in relation with a broader context. This duality must be kept in mind when studying social interactions. Taken as such, social situations have to be understood through the links that they build with other social activities. As he argues, “the dynamics of an encounter will be tied to the functioning of the boundary-maintaining mechanisms that cut the encounter off selectively from the wider world” (Goffman 1961, 66).<sup>8</sup>

In her article about pervasive games, Eva Nieuwdorp (2005, 6-7) proposes to shift from the idea of “magic circle” to Goffman’s conception of “membrane”, stressing three main elements in his theory: rules of irrelevance, transformation rules, and realized resources. These three elements help set a frame “around a spate of immediate events” (Goffman 1961, 20), as Vinciane Zabban (2011, 14) points out.<sup>9</sup> In *Synthetic Worlds*, Edward Castronova (Castronova 2005, 147, 159) also uses the metaphor of a “porous” membrane to talk about the limits of the games, without quoting Goffman or addressing the question of the transformations that occur when a resource is actualized in the game.<sup>10</sup>

Goffman also presents two sorts of “boundary-maintaining mechanisms”: “rules of irrelevance” (Goffman 1961, 19) and “transformation rules” (Goffman 1961, 29). The first set of rules can be defined as “the selective disregard of all practices and objects that normally have a meaningful place in the life world domain, but which are not in keeping with the cultural conventions that apply to the world of the game” (Nieuwdorp 2005, 7). For example, the physical strength of a player is not relevant to play *Age of Conan*, but does matter when moving a flat. The second set of rules expresses the fact that individuals adapt resources to match the relevance of the situation: “the transformation rules of an encounter describe the fate of any property as a constituent of internal order” (Goffman 1961, 33). Elements of the texts written by Howard about Conan, such as characters, landscapes, and monsters, are adapted visually in the MMORPG to appear on the computer screen. Rules of irrelevance and transformation rules are two faces of the displacement of resources typical of world-building phenomena, as “during the move from one medium to another, forms of mediation may be lost or gained, causing the material of a story or world to be changed” (Wolf 2012, 250).

Both sets of rules define continuities and changes between locally realized worlds and set the ground for a transmedial world. Transformed realized resources are the basis for the recognition of those worlds. Such a mental construction is made of all connections that individuals build between realized worlds. Where those relations are absent, gaps can still be filled by interpretation (Wolf 2012, 51). The re-enactment of a scene from Howard’s short story *The Frost-Giant’s Daughter* as a quest in the MMORPG can be taken as an example. Ymir’s daughter Atali appears on a battlefield and lures the “player-character”<sup>m</sup> (Di Filippo 2012) into the same ambush as Conan in the short story: she will have to fight against two frost-giants before Atali finally disappears. The player-character takes the place of Conan in the narrative structure and becomes the hero.

Putting the player-character at the centre of the story is a transformation rule that defines a specificity of the MMORPG. More importance is given to the user. Intertextuality, articulated with a shift of point of view from reader to player, reveals how the designers intend to bring the consumer to experience the world and the adventures of Conan. Designers also call on the player's knowledge of the short story to understand the references. Mark J.P. Wolf has already proposed four types of transformations within the frame of transmedial expansion: Description, Visualization, Auralization, Interactivation/de-interactivation (2012, 250-264). In an MMORPG like *Age of Conan*, these rules must not be taken separately, but one has to take into account their articulation: a frost-giant is adapted from a textual source into a visual form, the encounter with such a being produces sound effects, and the "player-character" (PC) interacts with it, often through fighting.

To complete the understanding of such phenomena, we need to take a more radical interactionist point of view than Goffman does. The sociologist still opposes a situation like gaming to the "wider world". But the wider world is also made up of social interactions: working, being at the gym, shopping, going out... All constitute a wide range of situations that have to be distinguished from one another. Reading a Conan story certainly relates more to the construction of the imaginary world of the MMORPG than eating dinner, but the latter may participate in defining a temporal schedule in the player's agenda. A mealtime can therefore be considered as sociologically relevant in a study about game practices and time schedule organization.

The metadiscourse about the productions also contributes to bridging various locally realized worlds and to the constitution of a feeling of continuity between them. Paratext and commercial discourse (all information around the game, such as advertising, information on the official and unofficial websites, the name on the box, and the login screen) can be considered locally realized resources in a situation of informing, advertising, or promotion. In 2005, Funcom announced *Age of Conan*, a project based on Robert E. Howard's stories.<sup>12</sup> Before the game was launched, the commercial discourse already participated in defining a future gaming situation. Despite the fact that numerous elements in the game are borrowed from works of his continuators, like John Maddox Roberts among others, only Robert E. Howard is generally mentioned. The reputation of the original creator and faithfulness to his work are used to promote the game and give a feeling of continuity between works considered as canonical, the writings of Howard, and later adaptations, like those of his continuators.

## The game world as a place of action

### Action and uncertainty

*Age of Conan* was first presented as an “Online Action Role Player Game”.<sup>13</sup> This category is often used for games that are more dynamic and combat-oriented than turn-based RPG<sup>14</sup> and relates to Conan’s world being presented as very brutal, dark and mature compared to other fantasy settings. Gaute Godager, the first game director, said in an interview: “For if it’s one thing which is true about Conan is that it is no ordinary fairytale, but a brutal, lustful, lush and sinful universe made by grown-ups, for grown-ups.”<sup>15</sup> Action and violence are then related and seem to be at the heart of the game.

Erving Goffman addresses the question of “action” in his essay “Where the action is” (Goffman 1967). He observes that the term “action” appeared in the American society in a “non-Parsonian sense” (Goffman 1967, 149). Parson defines action as structures and processes that help to form meaningful intentions and implement them, which means that everything that people do is then considered as an action (Handler 2012, 182). By contrast, Goffman’s use of the term rather refers to an opposition between situations where there is action and situations where there is none. As Richard Handler (Handler 2012, 181) explains, this essay is first of all “about the meaning of the term *action* in the American society” and highlights “his use of native terms as analytic terms” (Handler 2012, 188). Goffman’s work is then an analysis of the social organization of society through the use of a linguistic category that we also find in the naming of the game genre.

His text highlights sociological problems about decision-making and choice in situations of high uncertainty where information is lacking. According to him, “wheresoever action is found, chance-taking is sure to be” (Goffman 1967, 149) and “for chanciness to be present, the individual must ensure he is in a position (or be forced into one) to let go of his hold and control the situation, to make, in Schelling’s sense, a commitment. No commitment, no chance-taking” (Goffman 1967, 152). Thomas C. Schelling (1960) borrows Morgenstern and Von Neumann’s game theory in order to understand international geopolitical affairs. Goffman met and worked with the economist and thus “strengthened his understanding of game theoretic accounts of human behaviour” (Fine and Manning 2003, 36).<sup>16</sup> His analysis leads him to propose that “action is to be found wherever the individual knowingly takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable” (Goffman 1967, 194). He opposes it to “uneventful moments” which



“have been defined as moments that are not consequentially problematic. They tend to be dull and unexciting” (Goffman 1967, 174). “Places of action”, as he calls them, offer to experience situations of uncertainty and “fatefulness”.

### Fatefulness and vicarious experience

Goffman included many kinds of activities during which uncertainty occurs, like games, casinos, but also movies in a vicarious way. Video games were not yet as popular as they are today, but they fit in his description as they offer chance-taking and commitment. Games in general can be considered more action-oriented than other media, like movies or books. One does not roll dice when reading Howard’s short stories to know if Conan will kill his enemy or not. But in an MMORPG such as *Age of Conan*, randomness mechanisms are at the center of the gameplay.

According to Goffman, society has curtailed fatefulness, in a heroic and dutiful sense, from civilian life; that is to say, society has taken away from people the possibilities to show their character, as moral quality and values (Goffman 1967, 193). As a consequence, places where it is possible to confront uncertainty in a “vicarious” way to reaffirm one’s character appear to compensate for this loss.<sup>17</sup> In places of action, “the individual brings into himself the role of performer and the role of spectator; he is the one who engages in the action, yet he is the one who is unlikely to be permanently affected by it” (Goffman 1967, 198). Riezler’s idea of “merely play” as an inconsequential activity appears again. An MMORPG like *Age of Conan* offers numerous possibilities to make commitments, to let go of his hold and to take a chance: combat, raiding parties, looting, PVP sessions, etc. At the same time, the player will never be hurt physically like the character, nor will she die. Nevertheless, players invest time, dedication, and emotions into the activity and they act in accordance to the gaming situation. The involvement in the situation is therefore entirely real.

Places of action are real in the sense that they offer situations during which individuals can express and define qualities that cannot be shown otherwise, leading to the question of social organization:

Whatever the reasons why we consume vicarious fatefulness, the social function of doing so is clear. Honorable men in their scenes of fatefulness are made safely available to all of us to identify with whenever we turn from our real worlds. Through this identification the code of

conduct affirmed in fateful activities—a code too costly or too difficult to maintain in full in daily life—can be clarified and reasserted. A frame of reference is secured for judging daily acts, without having to pay its penalties. (Goffman 1967, 266)

Individuals can grasp a bit of the feeling of uncertainty that is sufficient to reactivate social values:

Looking for where the action is, one arrives at a romantic division of the world. On one side are the safe and silent places, the home, the well-regulated role in business, industry, and the professions; on the other are all those activities that generate expression, requiring the individual to lay himself on the line and place himself in jeopardy during a passing moment. It is from this contrast that we fashion nearly all our commercial fantasies. (Goffman 1967, 268)

Places of action offer a “commercialized *vicarious* experience” (Goffman 1967, 262), since “commercialization [...] brings the final mingling of fantasy and action” (Goffman 1967, 269). Cultural industries’ productions compensate the loss of expressive ways for action and social values. Consuming fiction is not considered as separate from the rest of life, but as a specific expression of social representations.

*Age of Conan* is depicted as a dark, violent, and mature game and therefore expresses ideas about darkness and violence. The finishing moves, when a player-character makes a critical hit and kills an enemy, illustrate this idea. The killing is more violent than regular hits, like tearing the enemy’s head off with bare hands, happens in a movie-like *mise-en-scène* and blood is spread on the screen<sup>18</sup>. In such video games, the values are not always those of the “honorable men” of Goffman’s time, but games still convey social values and allow expressions that are forbidden in other kind of situations. In a sense, gameplay is a way of expressing a certain code of conduct that is not allowed elsewhere.

In return, the values expressed in fictional situations interrogate moral values and codes of conduct in our societies by taking into account the frame in which they are expressed. That is why, contrary to what Jessica Langer says about otherness and stereotypes which “continue to proliferate within online discourse” (Langer 2008, 101), one must always study such expression according to the transformation rules occurring between various situations, which set a frame around them and which individuals are mostly well aware of.

## Action, “worldness,” space and time

A look at the game’s implementation of geographies and territories shows that MMORPGs are built to bring action to the players and ties our study to the notion of world: “one of the key elements of virtual worlds is the ‘worldness’ or spaces they create for participants” (Consalvo 2011, 330). Nevertheless, those terms are “metaphors” that seem to “fit our new experiences” linked to the idea of “cyberspace” (Consalvo 2011, 330). In other words, game worlds are representations that induce the idea of a world.

Defending a ludological approach, Espen Aarseth said about *World of Warcraft*’s world that “in Azeroth [...] the distances are surprisingly small, indicative of the fact that this is in fact no fictional world, but rather a *functional and playable* gameworld, built for ease of navigation” and adds “Azeroth is about playability. Tolkien’s world is not designed for play, and fictional travel time can contain gaps where readers are spared the boredom of the main character putting one foot in front of another for days or months without much else happening” (Aarseth 2008, 118). In other words, *WoW* proposes situations of chance-taking and action, but limits uneventful moments.

*Age of Conan* is an adaptation of a series of texts in which the world is a pre-cataclysmic version of Earth. Robert E. Howard drew a map of the Hyborian Age superimposed on a map of Europe. His world would be several millions of square kilometres large, which is impossible to render in a game such as *Age of Conan*. A selection was made, and only small portions of the world are represented as three-dimensional spaces. Those regions concentrate the action of the game: quests, monsters, dungeons, etc. Other places presented in different Conan productions are absent.<sup>19</sup> This limitation confirms the idea of a *locally realized* version of the world of Conan and, in Aarseth’s sense, *Age of Conan* is therefore “functional and playable”.

Moreover, the game is what designers and players call “instanced”: territories are separated from one another, long travel times between regions are replaced by loading screens, and regions can be replicated when the number of players is too high in order to avoid the game to slow down.

Rhetorically, to call something a world is to give it a privileged status as a self-contained, autonomous entity. As we have seen, the “world” in *World of Warcraft* is not a proper world, or even a fictional one, but a “world” in the theme park or zoo sense, a conglomerate or parkland quilt of connected playgrounds built around a common theme. (Aarseth 2008, 121)

This description could also fit *Age of Conan* as available territories are made to propose action to the players. But we have to disagree on the fact that “in multiplayer games, space-time cannot be individually flexible, but is, in fact, objective and continuous. The players form an in-game community of social, localized agents, and this living structure cannot be overruled by the temporal lacunas and spatial montages common in works of fiction” (Aarseth 2008, 118). As *Age of Conan* illustrates, there are ellipses and loading pages during travelling time for some players, while others stay in one region, maybe fighting or chatting. Then, contrary to what Aarseth says about *World of Warcraft*, the experience of space and time in *Age of Conan* is subjective and individually flexible.

## Immersion

According to Frank Rose (2011, 8), people want to be immersed to make their own story. But the use of that metaphor conveys the idea of entering another world. As Marie-Laure Ryan says, discourses about technologies and virtual reality created “a hype fuelled by the hope that the computer could physically transport us into alternate realities” (Ryan 2006, 634).

Goffman’s “Fun in Games” and “Where the action is” offer two different points of view about immersion. In the first, Goffman says that “euphoria arises when persons can spontaneously maintain the authorized transformation rules” (1961, 66). The mental state of being focused is crucial and that is how “being absorbed” occurs (Goffman 1961, 69-70). In the second, he argues that some distance is established between individuals and the situation that is represented. They never fully confront fatefulness, but nevertheless, “vicarious experience re-establishes our connection to values concerning character” (Goffman 1967, 268). Despite the fact that the relation to fatefulness is indirect and mediated, it is sufficient to reassert a code of conduct and values.

On the one hand, Goffman argues in favor of the attachment to the rules of transformation. Participants have to accept the reality of the situation, even if it is fictional. On the other hand, he argues in favour of non-consequential participation. The two points of view are not opposed, as they do not apply to the same dimension of the situation. Both are about boundary-maintaining mechanisms. The first is about cutting oneself from external disturbances because “incidents” can cause “flooding out” (Goffman 1961, 45-60). The second is about keeping a safe distance from fatefulness. Immersion can then be understood in terms of boundary-maintaining processes that necessitate focusing without risking any danger for the player.

Nevertheless, these ideas deserve some critique. Players take part in diversified situations when playing the same game hundreds, even thousands of hours. MMORPGs offer various activities like quests, player versus player fighting (PvP), crafting, high-level raiding, etc. These activities do not demand the same kind of involvement. High-level raiding often requires more concentration than gathering resources for crafting. Yet, both types of playing are part of the game. Players can sometimes be deeply focused on the action, without losing sight of the fact that they are playing a fictional game, sometimes they are more relaxed. Researchers should then take into account the various types of activities and the experience of players facing different situations. The notion of immersion alone is not relevant enough to address the relations that individuals have when interacting with a medium or other people during a game situation.

Furthermore, Kurt Riezler noticed a kind of detachment that play induces when one defines a situation as merely playing (Riezler 1941, 506-507). However, he notes that not everyone adopts the same attitude toward a game. A football champion can take a match very seriously because it is part of his professional career. According to Riezler, “playful attitude” means detachment from the consequences. Therefore, games and ordinary life define a kind of social organization, but they do not imply a corresponding playful or serious attitude, as someone can take a game seriously or ordinary life as not serious at all.

Following another lead, one could use the concepts that Mark J.P. Wolf suggests in his chapter in this book: “absorption”, in order to understand how social actors seize elements of imaginary world; “saturation”, as a limit of the amount of information that someone can grasp, and “overflow”, which symbolizes the fact that when the amount of information is too high, individuals tend to group them in a process of “chunking”. Such concepts could be used in order to study how knowledge about an imaginary world at the same time is spread and varies among people depending on their individual experiences.

## **Conclusion: permanence, change, and media studies**

The preceding discussions lead to more general reflections about permanence and change, which join up with questions about determinism and freedom. Goffman was neither a structuralist, nor a radical interactionist, as he explains in his presidential address (Goffman 1983). According to him, meaning is not fully imposed by larger social structures, but emerges

from the order of the situation (Rawls 1987; Rawls 1988). Studying relations between media and locally realized worlds of a franchise has shown that the order is never solely the result of the situation. It is based on previous expressions that provide resources that will be transformed, following rules of irrelevance and transformation rules, in order to match a new relevance. One should complete Goffman's views by saying that the internal meaning is not fully constituted by the interaction, but emerges during a specific situation by its internal order *and* the relations constructed with other situations taken in a broader context. Some structures and systems of relations (Wolf 2012, 153-197) are similar among various manifestations and support the abstractions that are necessary to build a continuity between them. At the same time, "rules of irrelevance" and "transformation rules" bring change into the situation.

Video games and, as places of action, MMORPGs more specifically, have a specific place in transmedia franchising. They offer possibilities to confront fatality and uncertainty and to experience an imaginary world from an active place, as they allow players to be actors and spectators at the same time. In that sense, negotiating the boundaries of an imaginary world when playing does not involve the same mechanisms of immersion as other media and researchers should therefore focus on the ways in which imaginary worlds are always locally realized. Therefore, transmedia franchises and multi-platform world building offer relevant case studies in order to address questions about permanence and change in culture. They constitute new objects while renewing concerns about old questions that still deserve interest from researchers.

## Notes

1. MMORPG is a genre of multiplayer video games in which a large number of players, hundreds or even thousands, play simultaneously on servers across the Internet. Researchers have stressed the ideas of shared space and persistence of the world, meaning that servers are usually available 24/7 (Consalvo 2011, 326).
2. The length of this chapter does not allow me to make an extensive description of the gathered data. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that this text is based on an two-year long ethnography of *Age of Conan*, between 2010 and 2012, and is part of an on-going PhD thesis.
3. From the philosophy of "possible worlds" (Ryan 2006; Wolf 2012, 17) to empirical "social worlds" as Howard S. Becker presented in his study about "art worlds", one can find the "world of daily life" of sociological phenomeno-

- logy (Schütz 1962, 208), “fantastic worlds” (Rabkin 1979), and “other worlds” (Timmerman 1983, 49) of fantasy literature, “game worlds” (Taylor 2006, 151), “virtual worlds” (Consalvo 2011, 326; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012) or “synthetic worlds” (Castronova 2005) to talk about digital games; “storyworlds” (Ryan and Thon 2014) when it comes to narratology, just to name a few examples that can be relevant for us.
4. Personal interview with Joakim Zetterberg. Some of the stories of REH are now in the public domain and are not the property of Paradox Entertainment.
  5. The whole definition is: “Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a trans-medial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the ‘worldness’ (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world’s worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004).
  6. The disparity of Goffman’s work does not always make continuity between his texts obvious (Smith 2006, 5). Nevertheless, this essay provides examples for his article “The neglected situation” (Goffman 1964, 135) and lays the foundations for his famous book *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1974). The idea of transformation in the geometrical sense appear in both texts and leads him to the idea of “keying” (Goffman 1961, 33; Goffman 1974, 40-82).
  7. One recent example of such misuse of Huizinga’s work is Mia Consalvo’s article “There is no magic circle” (Consalvo 2009).
  8. Some years later, in his book *Interaction Rituals*, he defines a conversation interaction with the same terms: “a little social system with its own boundary-maintaining tendencies” (Goffman 1967, 113).
  9. Unfortunately, neither Nieuwdorp nor Zabban take into account Riezler’s influence on Goffman.
  10. In an endnote, he thanks F. Randall Farmer for suggesting the term (Castronova 2005, 301).
  11. In a MMORPG, a player-character is the entity based on the association between a player and its character.
  12. <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20050420005393/en/Funcom-Announces-Age-Conan---Hyborian-Adventures#.VMtIly6KJsc>. Accessed 30 January 2015.
  13. <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20050420005393/en/Funcom-Announces-Age-Conan---Hyborian-Adventures#.VM5UwC6KJsc>. Accessed 1 February 2015.
  14. A turn-based RPG is a Role Playing Game in which players take turns while playing, by opposition with real-time games where players play simultaneously.
  15. Gaute Godager, *Interview Tothegame.com*, published 4 May 2006. <http://www.tothegame.com/interview.asp?gameid=2318>. Accessed 22 July 2014.

16. This influence is also remarkable in the essays published two years later in his book *Strategic interaction* (Goffman 1969), which is considered as the most oriented toward the rational actors model of his works.
17. In his book about world building, Mark J.P. Wolf also present fictional world as offering a “vicarious experience” (Wolf 2012, 28).
18. The game also has less cartoonesque graphics than other games, like *World of Warcraft*, and some explicit sexual content is present.
19. They are not completely absent as they appear on the *ingame* map, but they are not present as three-dimensional environments.

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# Section 4

Media as World-Building Devices



## 14. The Worries of the World(s)

Cartoons and Cinema

*Karen Redrobe (formerly Beckman)*

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### Abstract

In recent years, Cinema and Media Studies scholars have hotly debated animation's connection to "the world"; its capacity to fabricate "worlds"; as well as the relationship between singular and plural conceptions of this concept. The problems of worlding in animation are further complicated by parallel debates about what we mean by the term "animation" to begin with. Suzanne Buchan, Paul Wells, and Maureen Furniss, among others, have made clear that this broad term encompasses a wide variety of media practices. Though these may share movement as a common denominator, they differ profoundly from each other. At the same time as these scholars call for greater attention to specific media practices (e.g. for distinctions between 2D and 3D animation, or hand-drawn and computer animation), other scholars, including Lev Manovich and Alan Cholodenko, have argued instead that animation should be further generalized to encompass *all* cinema as an umbrella term. In the course of this essay, I will attempt not only to map the contours of cinema and media theory's animated debates about worlding, but also why the stakes of these debates become particularly prevalent at specific historical moments.

**Keywords:** Child's world, Alternative Reality, Political Imagination, Plasmaticness, Play

### The Problem of "Animation"

In the last few years, Cinema and Media Studies scholars have hotly debated animation's connection to and investment in the physical world and lived reality (related but not synonymous terms). At stake, in part, is the political,

aesthetic, and affective significance of this form's fabricated and sometimes imaginary worlds, as well as the relationship between singular and plural conceptions of the very idea of "world."

Yet, within a longer history of the study of moving images, many scholars have tended to ignore animation as an inconsequential, even childish, area of practice. Writing in 1982 of early film animation, Donald Crafton suggests, "Film distributors (and alas, until recently, film collectors) tended to regard these cartoons as material better suited for the dustbin than for any other repository. More recently, film scholars have tended to ignore early animation or to condemn it to the domain of film-buffism" (Crafton 1982, 4-5).

What exactly do we even mean by "animation"? A better understanding of this notion could also highlight the complexity of the relationship of animation and worlds. As Suzanne Buchan points out, "animation is an imprecise, fuzzy catchall that heaps an enormous and historically far-reaching, artistically diverse body of work into one pot" (Buchan 2014, 113). The term is rarely clear, and yet Steve Reinke argues that "some of the most interesting writers on animation provide, at best, partial or inconsistent definitions of animation" (Reinke 2005, 9). Some theorists, including Alan Cholodenko and Lev Manovich, have productively asserted "animation" as an umbrella term that embraces all forms of cinema. More recently, Tom Gunning has attempted to bring some nuance to this all-encompassing gesture by suggesting that we "bisect our term *animation* into two related but separable meanings" (Gunning 2014, 40). He posits "animation"<sup>1</sup> as referring to "the technical production of motion from the rapid succession of discontinuous frames, shared by all cinematic moving images." By contrast, "animation"<sup>2</sup> refers to "moving images that have been made to move, rather than movement automatically captured through continuous-motion picture photography" (ibid., 40). In this second form of animation, there is, Gunning argues, greater room for experiences of play, fascination, and wonder that are rooted in "a fundamental manipulation of time" (ibid., 41). It is also in this second form that we get a stronger sense of a world that *has been animated*, rather than of a world whose movement has been recorded and reproduced.

Further complicating the logistical challenge of grappling with animation's world-making capacities, animator George Griffin reminds us that in addition to incorporating and hybridizing many different media practices, animators also exhibit their work in a variety of venues. The "worlds" in which we find animation include the cinema, television, online, the art gallery, public space, and "urban forbidden zones" (Griffin 2013, 289). Increasingly, to live in the contemporary world means engaging that world—whether

we like it or not—with and through animation. It is, as Buchan argues, pervasive: “As screens become part of everyday life—phones, laptops, pads, and future technologies to come—animation will increasingly influence our understanding of how we see and experience the world visually” (Buchan 2013, 1).

Even within a more defined realm such as “cinematic animation”—and Donald Crafton singles out Emile Cohl and Winsor McCay as figures who took animation beyond mere special effects and “whimsical divertissement” into a definitively cinematic world—there is still a wide variety of alternative, and often hybrid modes (Crafton 1982, 9, 60-61). “Animation” cannot belong to a single history because the term simply invokes too broad an array of media, technologies, venues, and uses. Yet, while it may be impossible to tell a definitive story about how world making happens in animation because animation creates, invokes, and adapts worlds in a wide variety of ways, there are moments in the history of animation when the stakes became particularly high concerning animation’s ability to make, change, or record the world.

### War of the Worlds: Political Utopianism, Play, and the Plasmatic Image

In the wake of World War II, in which participants on all sides made use of animation for propaganda purposes, some film critics reflecting on the politics of the image viewed the relationship between animation and live-action cinema as something akin to a war of the worlds. In the early 1990s, for example, French film critic Serge Daney (1944-1992) reflects on his personal film history and recalls:

Captivated by cinema, I didn’t need—as well—to be seduced. No need either for baby talk. As a child I had never seen *any* Disney movies [...] Worse: for me, animated movies would always be something other than cinema. Even worse: animated movies would always be a bit the enemy. No “beautiful image,” especially drawn, would match the emotion—fear and trembling—in front of *recorded* things. (Daney [1992] 2004)<sup>1</sup>

In Stanley Cavell’s influential meditation on the nature of cinema’s relation to the physical world, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, the American philosopher again privileges the recorded over the drawn image.<sup>2</sup> First published in 1971, this book defines cinema as “a succession



of automatic world projections” (Cavell 1979, 167). For Cavell, cinematic projections differ from the world itself primarily for temporal reasons. Through viewing the projections of a past world, he suggests, film spectators can heighten their awareness of the existence of a world that exists always and necessarily beyond the self. After asking, “What does the silver screen screen?” he responds, “It screens me from the world it holds—that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me—that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality” (ibid., 24).

Three years after this book’s publication, Alexander Sesonske published a response to *The World Viewed* that asked where Walt Disney’s projected animated worlds might fit into Cavell’s theory of cinema. The short answer is that, for Cavell, they don’t really, but, in a lengthy postscript added to the 1979 (expanded) reprint of the book, Cavell attempts to explain why this is the case. He declares that the region of animated cartoons “has nothing to do with projections of the real world” (ibid., 167).<sup>3</sup> While he acknowledges that there is “no general problem of achieving conviction in such a world” (ibid., 169), he notes that, because there seem to be “no real *laws* at all” in the world of animation and because cartoon characters seem to “avoid, or deny, *the* metaphysical facts of human beings” (ibid., 171), cartoons cannot convince viewers that they have arisen, as Cavell suggests real “movies” do, “from *below* the world” (ibid., 170, 39).<sup>4</sup> While movies are, in an ontological sense, of the world, animated cartoons are merely in it.

Therefore, although Cavell allows that cartoons “are successions of animated world projections”, he rejects outright Sesonske’s suggestion that Hollywood films and cartoons are “not that different” (ibid., 173). At most, Cavell allows that cartoons constitute “a child’s world” that “remains an ineluctable substratum of our own, and subject to deliberate or unlooked for eruption” (ibid., 169). Although, as the book’s title suggests, Cavell is interested in the relationship of movies to a world that he understands as singular in nature, this brief moment, an animated moment, shows Cavell acknowledging a human subject that moves in and through different worlds, or perhaps that distinct worlds move in and through the human subject. For film theorists, animation seems to render these movements between worlds more visible and more available to consciousness.

In the period between the first and second world wars, film and media theorists in Europe explored the idea that cartoons might catalyze or affect change in the so-called “real world”, in part because of their ability to highlight the traffic between the shared space of the audience and individual spectators’ inner worlds.<sup>5</sup> World War I had tempered much of the previous

century's belief in technological utopias. Yet, for some media theorists in the late 1920s and early 1930s, cartoon animation's multiple renderings of the world (or worlds), its penchant for metamorphosis, and the playful attitude it tended to induce in spectators of "animation"<sup>2</sup> still appeared to have the potential to foster viewers' openness to alternative ways of structuring the world. Animation, some argued, and cartoon animation in particular, has the potential to cultivate the political imagination of mass audiences through its acts of comic invention; its endless stretching and squashing of time, space and bodies; and its creation of characters that function as collective dream spaces. Such utopian and, at times, revolutionary claims regarding animation's ability to remake the world did not arise randomly. They occurred in specific historical circumstances, often in desperate conditions of extreme poverty and violence where bodies, the physical landscapes they inhabit, and the laws that governed both, were being threatened, destroyed, and technologically rebuilt.

Animators can suck viewers into alternative realities that often foreground, then mess with, perceived boundaries between form and formlessness, life and death, human and non-human, possible and impossible, the world(s) we know and the ones we don't. In our own time, we might think, for example, of Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, which both depict children's ability to access magical spirit worlds that are largely unavailable to the films' adult characters; or Peter Lord and Nick Park's *Chicken Run*, in which a group of chickens refuse the fate assigned to them by humans and become politically active, which, queer theorist Jack Halberstam suggests, offers no less than "a Gramscian structure of counterhegemony engineered by organic (chicken) intellectuals" (Halberstam 2011, 32). While the political possibilities Halberstam finds in *Chicken Run* largely concern narrative structure, character, and plot resolution rather than anything specific about animation aesthetics, many of the earlier utopian discussions about animation's world-changing capacities focus on particular audiovisual aesthetic experiments that often predate and even resist the use of animation for feature-length narrative films.

Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* represents a punctuation point in this early debate about cartoon animation's radical potential. While earlier forms of animation had been notable primarily for their celebration of freedom from fixed form, after *Snow White*, Esther Leslie suggests, feature-length animated films:

reinstitute the laws of perspective and gravity, and lead a fight against flatness, while producing traditional dramaturgical characters. They

no longer appear to explode the world with the surrealist and analytic dynamite of the optical unconscious.... They distance themselves from the art of the avant-garde, which takes fragmentation and disintegration into its law of form, making clear how constructed not only it is but also the social world—ripe for transformation. (Leslie 2002, 121-1)<sup>6</sup>

Prior to this move toward realism and away from experimental forms, however, radical media theorists frequently thought *through* early cartoons, which they saw as having affinities with the experimental and abstract work of modernist artists.<sup>7</sup> Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century theorists focused less on changes at the narrative level than on the visual prevalence of mutating forms, as well as on the relationship of those visual forms to soundtracks. They considered the perceptual impact of animated “eye-music” that altered audiences’ relation to the world by scrambling the traditional organization of sensory perception and blurring the distinction between sound and image.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of experiments made animation prone to being aligned with revolutionary politics and social visions of total transformation.

At times, there was a tension between animators working with modernist abstraction and those working within more narratively oriented paradigms. Walter Ruttmann, a pioneer of abstract animation, for example, asked of Lotte Reiniger’s cut-out fairytale, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, “What has this to do with 1923?” (Leslie 2002, 27). Yet the genres to which narratively oriented animators have been frequently drawn, such as the fairytale and the folktale, tend to underscore the kind of formal audiovisual surprises we find in non-narrative works, as when the fate or physical form of characters alters in unexpected and seemingly impossible ways. A similar resonance exists between the pioneers of animation and film slapstick. Crafton, for example, discusses both Walt Disney’s admiration of Buster Keaton and Keaton’s admiration of Winsor McCay, noting that for many early filmmakers, Keaton included, McCay’s animated film *Gertie* had done nothing less than “revealed the possibility of the medium” (Crafton 1982, 297 and 134).<sup>9</sup>

In the early 20th century, as the architectural theorist Anthony Vidler has pointed out, a growing awareness of inner or psychological space impacted how people saw, experienced, and depicted the physical world. Animation plays a complex role in the way modern people moved between the world ‘outside’ themselves and a world that was newly and increasingly designated as “within”. Animators like McCay both reflect and contribute to this changing sense of the interaction between the world and the self, at times depicting territories that seemed to have been physically shaped by the projection of interior landscapes.<sup>10</sup> As the new phenomenon of “shell

shock” had demonstrated, these interior landscapes had also been shaped by the technologically enhanced destruction of World War I. Animation both responded to and was part of the modern war machine. Propaganda filmmakers, for example, had pioneered the strange temporality of the animated map in World War I, creating speculative views of the world designed to sway public opinion about the war by visualizing both projected victories and enemy invasions. Animation had thus become a vehicle for mass audiences and intellectuals alike to grapple with and learn to inhabit a changed world.

### **Walter Benjamin's Foreign Bodies: Animated Dreams and Nightmares**

In an unpublished fragment written in 1931, the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin finds in Mickey Mouse a figure who renders visible how the war had changed the place of the body in the world. Although humor and play are both important aspects of Benjamin's understanding of how animation shapes the worlds we inhabit, the tone of this fragment is undeniably grim.<sup>11</sup> In a world in which technological advances had first blown away limbs and then replaced them with mechanical prosthetics, Benjamin writes, “Property relations in Mickey Mouse cartoons: here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen.” “In these films”, he continues, “mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.” He ends the fragment by asserting, “So the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it a misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them” (Benjamin 1931, 545). But how exactly does the public either prepare to survive the civilized world or recognize itself through a cartoon mouse?

Miriam Hansen, the most perceptive commentator on Benjamin's media writings, is helpful here, pointing out that “if this somewhat counterintuitive conclusion is to make sense, it has to be understood not as a matter of representational verisimilitude but rather as referring to the films' lending expression to salient aspects of modern experience through hyperbolic humor, kinetic rhythms, and plasmatic fantasy” (Hansen 2012, 170).<sup>12</sup> Benjamin resists the temptation to retreat into a pre-modern fantasy of a redemptive and technologically uncontaminated natural world, instead finding in Mickey Mouse a dialectical figure in which to discover both the destructive element of modern life and the mode of surviving it. Hansen explains that,

for Benjamin, “the Mickey Mouse films engage technology not as an external force, in a literal or formal rendering of ‘mechanization,’ but as a hidden figure: they hyperbolize the historical imbrication of nature and technology through humor and parody” (ibid., 174). She continues, “While mechanically produced, the miracles of the animated cartoon seem improvised out of the bodies and objects on the screen, in a freewheeling exchange between animate and inanimate worlds” (ibid., 174).

While some film and media theorists fetishize the differences between animation and live-action films, Hansen suggests that “Benjamin bypasses the hierarchy of live-action over animated film fostered by Hollywood” (ibid, p. 175). For him, she argues, the bodies of Mickey Mouse and the screen actor are *both* examples of moving images that complicate our understanding of the relationship between human beings and things within the modern world. Reading across a variety of texts by Benjamin, Hansen draws comparisons between the functions of the screen actor, the cartoon character, and the strange characters in Franz Kafka’s writing for whom the body itself becomes the “most forgotten alien territory” (ibid., 177). She suggests that, for Benjamin, these examples both allegorically render the alienating conditions of life under modernity visible, and present a utopian possibility for surviving the paradoxical condition of the self as itself a foreign world.

Benjamin most explicitly theorizes how the utopian aspect of Mickey Mouse might work in the first version of his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility”, composed in 1935 in Paris and then revised for publication in 1936. His position here is clearly speculative, a maneuver on the part of a writer who would see fewer and fewer options in the face of fascist violence. This narrowing would eventually result in his leaving the world through suicide in 1938. Play, long important to Benjamin, and closely related to both animation and slapstick in its world-making and world-bending possibilities, takes on a heavy charge in the artwork essay. In 1928, Benjamin had already suggested a number of important functions of play in relation to the possibility for a human subject to be in the world. Repetitious play with things, Benjamin suggests, enables the subject to “gain possession of ourselves”, to “transcend ourselves in love and enter into the life and the often alien rhythm of another human being”, and finally, to transform “a shattering experience into habit” through its repetition (Benjamin 1928, SW 2.1, 117-121; 120).

Turning his attention to film, Benjamin saw the film camera as a technology that both renders visible “hidden details in familiar objects” and “manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of play [*Spielraum*]”. Through it, he claims, “we first discover the optical unconscious” (Benjamin

1935, 30). Crucially, Benjamin posits that via this optical unconscious that the onscreen image makes available, “the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by the collective perception of the audience”; and Mickey Mouse emerges alongside the onscreen actor as a figure of “collective dream” (ibid., 31). Just as play provided early training for entering into the alien world of another through love, so, he claimed, cartoon audiences might somehow meet in the shared dream of Mickey Mouse’s drawn body in ways that could redeem the world. Benjamin even went so far as to suggest that cartoon violence might therapeutically prevent real violence when he argued that the “forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses” (ibid., 31). But as Hansen points out, by this point in history, Benjamin “was well aware of how close the Disney subject could come to the spirit of fascism” (Hansen 2012, 181).<sup>13</sup> He also understood how unpredictable the effects of laughter could be, yet he chose anyway to argue for, or perhaps simply to hope for, the world-saving power of comedy and cartoons alike: “Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis” (Benjamin 1935, 31).

Benjamin understood that animation, like the repetitions of play and habit, contained the possibility of both happiness and horror, and that it potentially reinforced in subjects an acceptance of violence as inevitable (see: Benjamin 1936, SW 3: 99-133; 130, n. 30). There has been a critical tendency to turn Benjamin into a naïve, cartoon-loving caricature of himself in contrast to the less optimistic position articulated by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2011), that “Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs.” But, as Hansen suggests, it is more accurate to maintain their “conflicting perspectives in a stereoscopic view”, not least because all three thinkers saw the function of cartoons in the world changing as cartoons themselves evolved (Hansen 2012, 163).

Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, acknowledge that cartoons “were once exponents of fantasy against rationalism”, allowing “justice to be done to the animals and things electrified by their technology, by granting the mutilated beings a second life” ([1944] 2011, 1023), while Benjamin recognizes by 1936 “how easily fascism takes over ‘revolutionary’ innovations in this field too”—so much so that he chooses to revise his essay, removing much of the utopian material about Mickey Mouse in the process (Benjamin 1936, SW 3: 99-133; 130, n. 30). In hindsight, Benjamin’s early invocation of Mickey Mouse as a collective dream might seem unrealistic and escapist, yet his diary entries from 1938 make clear not only that his dream-world

brought little escape, but also that, in his dreams as much as in his waking life, he explored the conditions of being and suffering in a world made present through the interconnectedness of sound, drawn images, writing, the land, and the biological body. Here it is worth noting that, as Kirsten Ostherr has demonstrated, since at least the late 1920s, this biological body was not distinct from but constructed by and understood through a hybrid medical moving-image practice that combined hand-drawn animations of cross-sections, live-action film footage of living bodies, stop-motion animation of cadavers undergoing dissection, and textual labels (Ostherr 2013, 58-61). On 6 March 1938, following a dream in which he had remarked aloud that he “probably wouldn’t live much longer”, Benjamin records,

I’ve been suffering greatly from the noise in my room. Last night, my dream recorded this. I found myself standing in front of a map and, simultaneously, standing in the landscape which it depicted. The landscape was terrifyingly dreary and bare; I couldn’t have said whether its desolation was that of a rocky wasteland or that of an empty gray ground populated only by capital letters. These letters writhed and curved on their terrain as if following mountain ranges; the words they formed were approximately equidistant from one another. I knew or learned that I was in the labyrinth of my auditory canal. But the map was, at the same time, a map of hell (Benjamin 1938, SW 3: 335-6).

There is a critical tendency to discuss animation’s relation to the world in terms of mimesis and realism, yet this frame persistently returns us to the same question of how effectively animation recreates a world that pre-dates it, and this time line may be limited in what it can reveal about how lived worlds are made. Benjamin’s diary entry here offers a view of the world coming into human consciousness through the intertwining of dreams, perception, matter and thought. As graphic images and words become entangled with the physical earth on which we stand and the body with which we do the standing, the world makes itself felt.

### Sergei Eisenstein and the Quest for Freedom

Hansen sees similarities between Benjamin’s somewhat excessive response to Mickey Mouse and “[Sergei] Eisenstein’s obsession with Disney’s fire imagery in *The Moth and the Flame*” (Hansen 2012, 180). For both writers, animation becomes a conceptual vehicle for rejecting a notion of the world

as fixed and fully made. The formal traits of Disney's animation provide a scaffolding that enables the imagination and articulation of the possibility of radical change. Writing a few years later than Benjamin, in 1940-1941, Eisenstein's writing on Disney also emerges in fragmentary form at this moment when his status as a filmmaker under Stalin was most uncertain.

In 1940, the year Eisenstein began writing about Disney, he was working primarily on a production of Wagner's *Die Walküre* at the Bolshoi Opera and it is clear that his writing on animation is inflected by this operatic context.<sup>14</sup> Echoing Benjamin's earlier utopian writing about cartoons, Eisenstein discovers in the fluid form of Disney's drawn animated characters an ecstasy and lack of stability, shared by fire and music, that he describes as "a sensing and experiencing of the primal 'omnipotence'—the element of 'coming into being'—the 'plasmaticness' of existence, from which *everything* can arise" (Eisenstein 1988, 46). For Eisenstein, drawing on Heraclitus, Hegel, and Lenin, animation's resonance with fire and ecstasy puts it in a category of phenomena that capture primal experiences of "coming into being"—including the coming into being of the world itself—experiences that at once exceed the capacity of the image and yearn to be captured. "Thus", Eisenstein argues, "there will be phenomena with poly-formic capabilities." In a fragment that turns to Engels, Eisenstein sees to underscore that this dynamism is not separate from a physical world understood as a finite thing but is instead an integral but fluid component of "the unity of the whole system of the world" (*ibid.*, 47). Eisenstein grapples with the seemingly irresistible "attractiveness" of this "plasmaticness", a quality through which a "being of a definite form" is "capable of assuming any form" (*ibid.*, 21). In part because his writing on animation appears in the form of fragments rather than a completed text, Eisenstein is perhaps too easily associated (both positively and negatively) by contemporary critics with an oversimplified view of animation's ability to realize freedom in the world through formal play alone.

Yet, in response to the question of who would be attracted to the flame's endless mutability of form, Eisenstein answers, "He, of course, who more than anyone else, lacks its fascinating traits: and foremost—freedom of movement, freedom of transformation, freedom of the elements" (*ibid.*, 30). He goes on to note that "a passion for fire", an element completely intertwined with drawn animation in this essay, "is characteristic for regressive conditions and is so well-known in psychiatry, that there even exists a special euphonious term for it—'pyromania'" (*ibid.*, 31). In recent years, scholars have returned with renewed interest in Eisenstein's theory of the plasmatic as they attempt to understand the overlooked importance of fluid forms to film history in the age of the "digital morph".<sup>15</sup> But these



returns frequently highlight the utopian dimensions of Eisenstein's writing on mobile forms without noting his insistence that the attraction of such forms emerges only in times and places where constraints on freedom have all but extinguished life itself.<sup>16</sup> Though he mentions modern America and eighteenth century Japan as examples of repressive contexts, his own attraction to these forms implies that the Soviet Union under Stalin is not exempt from his critique:

In a country and social order with such a mercilessly standardized and mechanically measured existence, which is difficult to call life, the sight of such "omnipotence" (that is, the ability to "become whatever you wish"), cannot but hold a sharp degree of attractiveness. This is as true for the United States as it is for the petrified canons of world-outlook, art and philosophy of eighteenth-century Japan. (*ibid.*, 21)

Eisenstein pursues with interest the aesthetic possibilities of these protean forms, including their ability to bring about new correspondences between sound and image (*ibid.*, 64-66), and to access a "pre-logical" part of the psyche that is capable of overriding logical objections to "belief" in these omnipotent creatures and the worlds to which they belong. He writes, for example,

We *know* that they are... drawings and not living beings. We *know* that they are... projections of drawings on a screen. We *know* that they are... "miracles" and tricks of technology, that such beings don't really exist. But at the same time: We *sense* them as alive. We *sense* them as moving, as active. We *sense* them as existing and even thinking! (*ibid.*, 55)

There is a wonder and ecstasy that Disney's animations inspire in Eisenstein, even as he recognizes that, during the war, they "become utilitarian—*instructionally technical*" (*ibid.*, 65). Yet, for him, the spectator's attraction to the plasmatic remains rooted in "the world around the author—an inhuman world", a world of social constraint (*ibid.*, 10).<sup>17</sup>

### **Imperfect Tense: Animation in the Age of the Anthropocene**

Writing in 1948, in the wake of World War II, French film critic André Bazin celebrates those writers and filmmakers whose personal style within a work did not alter the "chemical composition" of "the facts" of the physical, material world that he conceptualizes (as Cavell would later do) in terms of "the law of

gravity". Within this postwar context, animation's capacity to build worlds might come to seem like interference with the "fact" of the world, or even deception, but, as I have argued elsewhere, it is important not only to read such Bazinian moments in the historically specific context of World War II propaganda, but also to recall Bazin's wonder at and interest in the worlds that Walt Disney conjured up (Beckman 2014, 177-197). The "image fact" is central to Bazin's sense of an ethical postwar cinema. The human constitutes one, but only one of these "facts" in the world, and for Bazin, the human view of things is held in check by the presence of a whole other material reality within a film: "Man himself is just one fact among others, to whom no pride of place should be given *a priori*" (Bazin 2005, 31). Yet, almost 70 years later, some scientists suggest a change in the relationship between the human "fact" and the geological materiality of the world. While the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences still subscribes to the idea that we are currently in the Holocene, a geological epoch of warmth that began 11,700 years ago after the last ice age, in 2000, there is increasing interest in the suggestion of atmospheric chemist Paul Cruzen and others that we are now in the age of the Anthropocene, in which humans function as a geological force (Stromberg 2013).<sup>18</sup>

Does animation still play a role, as it did in the 1930s, in collective efforts to imagine how we might contain our self-generated forces of destruction? The realm of animated data provides one interesting example of the reemergence of a salvational mode of image-making. Within the environmental context, we might look at the HeadsUP! Project, founded by digital media artist Peggy Weil, which invites designers to visualize critical global issues for display on a 19,000 square foot digital signboard in New York's Times Square. In 2012, for example, designer Richard Vijgen developed an animated map that drew data from the GRACE (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment) mission to visualize the alarming rate of changing ground water levels worldwide.<sup>19</sup> While these animations can seem like direct appeals from the belly of the earth to human vision, these images emerge out of, and therefore also assert, what Lisa Parks has called "vertical power", reflecting the uneven distribution of privacy, as well as of access to data about everything from fluctuating natural resources to migrating bodies.<sup>20</sup>

While Cavell and Bazin treasured the cinematic image for its projection of a world-that-has-been at a specific time and place, animated data images often condense and systematize continuous pasts into legible patterns that can become the basis for future predictions about the world. Animation has the capacity to evoke something akin to the imperfect tense by visualizing experiences that shape our sense of the world because they repeat

continuously. In its ability to convey the routine time and actions that often undergird structural forms of violence that, in their repetitions, fail to meet the criteria of the newsworthy event, animation has the potential to disrupt what Arielle Azoulay describes as the “general pattern of being on the verge of catastrophe,” a pattern to which we tend to be indifferent as long as death itself itself is held at bay (Azoulay 2008, 69). Although for Cavell, it is ultimately the cartoon character’s invulnerability to death that renders animation not of this world, there is a resonance between the worst of our world and the absence of death that desperately requires more animated thought and action.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of the importance of animation to European filmmakers in the postwar period, particularly the French filmmakers Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, see: Karen Beckman, “Animating the Cinéfilms”. Sada Niang highlights the “shortsightedness” of the marginalization of Moustapha Alasane from postcolonial African film history. Niang draws attention to Alasane’s use of animation for political satire in films such as *Bon Voyage Sim* (1966), noting the exemplary nature of these films in relation to the FEPACI Charter. See: *Nationalist African Cinema*, 91-104, especially 94-95.
2. Cavell builds on the work of the German art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) and French film critic André Bazin (1918-1958) among others.
3. While “cinematic animation” is often considered to be something like the opposite of photo-based, live-action cinema, Tom Gunning follows D. N. Rodowick in pointing out that “animating drawings in classical animation involves photographing them onto a filmstrip”, going on to add that “Even animation that employs drawing and painting directly on the filmstrip, often called *cameraless animation* [...] commonly involves the making of a projection print through photographic processes. Thus, at the minimum, most animation requires photography as a means of mechanical reproduction.” See: Gunning, p. 37-38.
4. Although there are great difference between the attitudes of Donald Crafton and Stanley Cavell to animation’s relation to the world and world making, the two meet, I think, around this idea of what Cavell calls “conviction” and Crafton calls “belief”.
5. For a discussion of how early Disney shaped early theories of film realism and possible worlds in Japan, see: Lamarre.
6. Leslie also points out that *Snow White* initiates a moment of transformation in the world of animation production, causing Disney to “massify production”, open a “24-hour factory of distraction production”, and adapt “Fordist methods”.

7. Donald Crafton provides one of the best histories of early animation in *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982.
8. Early pioneers of “visual music” or “eye music” include Bruno Corra, Arnaldo Ginna, Bernhard Diebold, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, and Viking Eggeling. Important later figures include Len Lye, Norman McLaren, and the Whitney Brothers. See: Raphaël Bassan, “Cinema and Abstraction: From Bruno Corra to Hugo Verlinde,” *Senses of Cinema* (December 2011): <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/cinema-and-abstraction-from-bruno-corra-to-hugo-verlinde/>; Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 47; Robert Russett and Cecile Starr, *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*, revised edition (New York: Da Capo, 1976): 32-71, 163-177; and the Center for Visual Music: <http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org>.
9. Scott Bukatman also notes the unruly affinities among comic strips, cartoons, and slapstick comedy. See: Bukatman, 3, 26, 40, and chapter 4.
10. For a discussion of Anthony Vidler’s study of “warped space” and its relevance to changing modes of spatial representation in animation, see: Telotte, chapter 2, especially 48-50. For a discussion of McCay’s subjective and objective drawn worlds, see: Bukatman, chapter 1.
11. Although Mickey Mouse made his first proper screen appearances in *Steamboat Willie* (1928) and *Plane Crazy* (1929), Crafton points out that this animated star, who began life as Mortimer Mouse, is only one of a series of “similar-looking rodents [who] had romped through the 1920s animated films drawn by Terry, Messmer, Nolan, and Disney himself”. Crafton, 295.
12. Elsewhere Hansen describes the audience’s self-recognition in Mickey as being rooted in the cartoon’s ‘graphic evocation of recognizable elements of modern experience’, 201.
13. Esther Leslie discusses the relationship between Walt Disney and Leni Riefenstahl in Leslie 2002, 123-157.
14. Jay Leyda notes that Eisenstein often turned to “theoretical work that did not depend on administrative approval” at those moments when attempts to advance film projects were frustrated by the Soviet film industry. See: Leyda, 1983, 360.
15. The new significance of morphing to visual culture is highlighted in Sobchack, ed. 2000.
16. Rosalind Krauss represents one exception to this trend. She notes that, “Disney’s ‘plasmaticness’ may [...] not be a twentieth-century version of the phenomenon of fire or the primitive idea of animism but, instead, an analogue of the principle of universal equivalence that reigns at the heart of capital.” While Krauss shares and develops Eisenstein’s sense of the negative dimensions of the plasmatic, she may also underestimate Eisenstein’s own awareness of this in his writing. See: Krauss 2005, 108.
17. On the dialectical nature of the plasmatic, see also: Bukatman 2012, 21.
18. Stromberg 2013 points out that those scientists who subscribe to this idea debate this epoch’s starting point.

19. This video can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/42607107>. Sarah C. Rich provides a detailed discussion of the project in "Groundwater, Gravity, and Graphic Design," <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/groundwater-gravity-and-graphic-design-92023106/>. For Chris Poulson's animation of the GRACE data for the National Drought Mitigation Center, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nddXeGhZmbk&feature=youtu.be>. For a detailed discussion of the technology used to measure the groundwater changes, see: Riebeek 2012.
20. See: Parks 2013; see also: Parks, forthcoming; see also: Kaplan, Loyer, and Clayton Daniels 2013, 418.

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## 15. Linguistic Terrain and World Time

### Chinese Media Theories and Their World Imaginations

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#### **Abstract**

Media as an instrument of world (re)making has been the focus of critical discourses on media in China since the 1940s. As Haun Saussy argues, Euro-American colonial and, later on, global discourses since the mid-nineteenth century have often constructed “China” and the “World” as two imaginary poles that are fundamentally different in concepts of historical temporality, geopolitical spatiality, and culturo-linguistic subjectivity. In this light, how media could mediate the relationship between these two imaginary poles becomes a crucial question in many theoretical discussions. In recent years, a key conceptual framework that shapes the debate in Chinese academic studies of media is “*yujing*” (linguistic terrain): an imagination of the world today as a global economy of gift exchange, which consists of overlapping and, at times, mutually contesting linguistic environments that require remediation. Interestingly, between 1942 and 1945, media theorist Sun Mingjing proposed a temporal model of studying world media by considering international mediation as a gradual process of constructing a sense of world rhythm called *shijie shi* (world time). In this chapter, I conduct a comparative reading of these two modes of Chinese media theory: one on spatiality and the other on temporality. I argue that these two models are symptomatic of a semicolonial and, later on, postcolonial, desire to rewrite the imaginary gap between “China” and the “World.”

**Keywords:** Chinese media theory, Sun Mingjing, Media and world order, Sino-Japanese War and Media, *Yujing* or linguistic terrain

As seen in the previous chapters, contemporary media offers an assemblage of interconnected and interactive sites in which new imaginations

and alternative notions of the world are proposed, fabricated, and negotiated. It also re-configures the epistemological space(s) in which the idea of *a* world could be conceived or understood. Besides the fictional level, media, as technics, directly reconfigures the relationship between human beings and the world. This world, as a set of spatiotemporal coordinates, redefines what it means to be human (Stiegler 1998 [1994], 29-42). According to Heidegger (1996 [1953], 79), for example, human beings distinguish themselves from animals as the former become aware of death and the time it takes for one to die. Meanwhile, the divide between humanity and divinity is often understood as one between temporality/mortality and atemporality/immortality (Agamben 2004, 11-12; Stiegler 1998 [1994], 191). In this sense, human beings are often considered to stand for *nomos* (order) as opposed to *phusis* (nature—divine or animal) (Agamben, 2004, 11-12). However, as Bernard Stiegler (1998 [1994], 194-195) argues, the anticipation of death comes hand-in-hand with the human need to produce in order to survive (as opposed to the divine for whom sustenance is always provided). In this sense, the invention of tools and technology and the awareness of temporality—together with society, gender difference, and class—all emerge at the same time as attributes of humanity. Yet, the very concept of human beings as technical beings had not been widely acknowledged until recent years, as social media and personalized computing technology (e.g. the smartphone) began to make us aware that we are not operators of technology. Rather, we are constituted by technology itself.

This chapter seeks to examine the concept of media as a world-building device, with the theoretical discourses developed in China as our case study. I treat *media* (in its singular form) not as a set or network of media (plural), but as a technological, social, ideological, economic, and discursive apparatus that constitutes, informs, and mediates our mode of existence. Despite the fact that these theories emerged out of the specific sociopolitical conditions of China, they actively reexamine the role media plays in world making through a cross-cultural semantic field between Euro-America and China. These theories also address the question of how technology redefines the relationship between human beings and time, an aporia scrutinized by European philosophers including Gilbert Simondon (2015 [1958]), Bernard Stiegler (1998 [1994]), Peter Sloterdijk (2004, 40-44), and Brian Massumi (2009, 36-45).

Media as an instrument of world making has been the focus of critical debates in China since the 1940s. Between 1942 and 1945, fleeing the Japanese occupation of Nanjing (Nanking), the Department of Film and

Radio of Nanking University evacuated to the wartime capital Chengdu (Chengtu) (Bao 2015, 298; Zhang 1990, 56). With sponsorship from the US military, its Head of Department Sun Mingjing (1911-1992) led a research team to investigate what he called *dianhua jiaoyu* (“electrified education”). Such research sought to use *meijie* (“media”) including film, television, radio, telegraph, chronometer, train, airplane, and a computer-like technology called *dianhua jiyi* (“electrified memory”) to break through enemy lines and to reconfigure the relationship between human beings and the world (Du 1943, 1-4; Guan 1942, 20; Sun 1943a, cover page; Sun 1943c, 4-6). For Sun, these forms of media offer new ways for human beings to understand themselves and their geopolitical relationships based on technology (Sun 1943d, back cover).

Reconstructing the world based on a renewed understanding of human beings as technical beings has never been a uniquely Chinese project. However, the specific semi-colonial conditions in Republican China (1911-1949) and its postcolonial aftermath have inspired generations of Chinese intellectuals to reimagine the international order. In such a new order, China as a nation-state could become a full member of the global community (Brownell 1995, 44-45; Kang 2005 [1901], 1-2; Liang 2003 [1902-1906], 53-63; Schwartz 1964, 15; Yan 1895, 1; Xu 2008, 1-2 and 12-24). In the 1940s, for Sun (1942, 2-9; 1943a, 3; 1943b, 15; 1943c, 4-6; 1943d, back cover) and his cohort Li Xiaofang (1943, 5-9), the world would be best reconceptualized as a spatiotemporal configuration in which modernity and power (*puissance*) would no longer lie in the hands of the Euro-American nation states only. Rather, they would be equally shared by all humans as political *lives*. In other words, such a reconfigured world would be best understood as a set of spatiotemporal coordinates that actively redefine human *lives* as technical beings. Such an idea persists in Chinese scholarly discourse today in the form of a new keyword, *yujing* (“linguistic terrain”): an imagination of the world as a global economy of gift exchange (Ding and Wu 2009; Li 2009). In such an economy, human lives function as technical beings that construct mutually contested linguistic environments that require sociopolitical remediation (He, Ma, and Zhou, ed. 2008). Both media theories, I argue, are symptomatic of an understanding of media and its power of world making as a logocentric operation, which, despite its ability to overcome geopolitical differences, oddly maintains our ethnographic distances. Such an ethnocentric and logocentric view has been informed by a belief in colonial, postcolonial, and nationalistic discourses, which all configure “China” as an ethnographic and linguistic *difference* from the “West” (Saussy 2007, 145-71).

## Mass Mobilization and Technical Beings

In the 1940s, Sun Mingjing proposed a model of transmedia world building by conceiving of media as an instrument of mass mobilization. In December 1937, after the fall of Nanking into the hands of the Japanese army, the ruling Guomindang (Kuomintang, KMT, or Nationalist Party) evacuated the capital to Chongqing (Chungking) in southwest China. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the University of Minnesota and the US military helped set up the Department of Film and Radio at Nanking University (Bao 2015, 296-299). For Sun (1942, 2-9), the government had a political and ethical obligation to use media to instill a national consciousness into the sentient bodies of the bio-political lives it managed. This seemingly straightforward effort to turn media into an apparatus of wartime propaganda, I argue, had the effect of redefining human beings as technical beings. According to this theory, as information is constantly generated, shared, and mediated synchronously across different locations, the world as a technical assemblage has the power to overcome geopolitical differences (Li 1943, 5-9). Meanwhile, human beings are not operators, but technical beings constituted by the technical assemblage.

Sun's most substantial text on media theory was published on 15 September 1942 in his academic journal *Dianying yu boyin* [Film and Radio]: "Dianying yu dongyuan minzhong" [Film and mobilization of the masses]. Sun's writing must be understood in the context of KMT's official policy on cinema as an educational tool since the mid-1920s. In 1926, the KMT faction led by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek, 1887-1975) was in exile in Guangzhou (Canton). Meanwhile, the rest of the country was divided into regions governed by local warlords or colonial authorities. Before Chiang launched a full-scale Northern Expedition (1926-1928) to unify the Eastern seaboard, the KMT established the Zhongyang xuanchuan bu (Central Department of Propaganda), which aimed at nationalizing the film industry. This idea was inspired by the political writings of Chen Gongbo (Ch'en Kung-po, 1892-1946). Chen believed that, in order to fight against imperialism, the Chinese nation should be reconfigured as a production machine. In this machine, biological lives should be trained and educated as *guomin* (nationals), who are best understood as technical components (Chen 1967 [1928], 39-66; Fan 2015, 44-47; Johnson 2008, 83-156; Zanasi 2000, 125-158).

In 1929, Chiang's faction of the KMT established its government in Nanking. In order to reconstitute Chinese cinema as an instrument of national education, it invited a delegation of experts from L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa to offer experience and advice. Under the leadership of Chen

Lifu (Li-fu Ch'en, 1900-2001), a system of governmental committees was set up to oversee the production, distribution, censorship, exportation, and importation of films. Meanwhile, Beijing (Peking)-based theater owner Luo Mingyou (Lo Ming-yau, 1902-1967) initiated a merger among his own Huabei (Hwapeh or North China) Film Company, the Minxin (China Sun) Motion Picture Company, and other studios into the Lianhua Film Company (United Photoplay Service or UPS) (Fan 2014, 44-47; Johnson 2008, 112; "Lianhua" 1935, 12-18; Zhong 2007, 60-64). When the KMT government moved to Chungking, it once again tried to consolidate its control over film productions by building the Zhongguo dianying zhipianchang (China Film Studio). It also encouraged researchers from Peking, Shanghai, and Nanking to conduct research in film and other media in the new capital (Su, Wang, Xiong, Yan, and Zhang 2009, 43-46). The immediate objective of such research was to foster an effective means of sharing information and a sense of political solidarity with the United States. It also sought to consolidate KMT's control over the province of Xikang (Sikang, now part of Sichuan) or the Tibetan region of Kham, which was crucial for the India-Burma-China theater (Chen 2016).

In "Film and Mobilization of the Masses", Sun (1942, 2) argues that media "introduces a *yinxiang*" to the readers or viewers from the written word to film and television, so that "facts can be represented, thoughts can be conveyed, and affects can be expressed". The word *yinxiang* is usually translated as impression, but is better understood as an imprint. In other words, the most fundamental function of the media is to introduce an imprint on the human brain. For Sun, reading requires a reader to translate written words into sound, which, in turn, stimulates the brain to conjure up an impression of reality. Meanwhile, the radio can transmit sound directly to a listener's sensorium, which allows them to transfer their audio sensation to a visual impression. Moving even further, cinema and television surpass these two "old" media by allowing the human brain to perceive an imprint of reality directly (Sun 1942, 2).

For Sun, because a viewer can perceive an imprint of reality, they are able to withhold this impression not only as a piece of visual information, but also as a sensorial memory. Filmmakers should therefore take advantage of the fact that the impression of a lived experience lends authenticity to the image (Sun 1942, 3-5). In sum, Sun believes that film and television can directly graft an imprint of reality onto a viewer's sensorium, so that it can stay within the body as a physical memory (Sun 1942, 5). His media theory suggests that governmental authority should take advantage of audiovisual media to instill a consciousness into the bio-political lives it manages. Both

Bao Weihong (2015, 197-98) and I (Fan 2015, 186-87) argued, respectively, that such a concept of media came from a series of theoretical interventions in China in the 1920s and 1930s, which proposed that the cinema and other media were best understood as affective apparatuses. In fact, this idea resonates with the theoretical discussion by Walter Benjamin (2006 [1936], 3: 107-108), which was circulated among Chinese intellectuals via the Kyoto school of philosophy (Fan 2015, 86; Hansen 2004, 23-24; LaMarre 2010, 72-90). For Sun, the transmission of the imprint from the mediating body (the film strip or the televisual signal) to the viewer enables the physical body to authenticate an image. As a result, the viewer's consciousness could generate critical thoughts and direct cognitive responses to the image as an authentic experience.

The idea that the media is able to directly instill or reconfigure human consciousness suggests that human beings are not simply operators and users of media. Rather, they are technical beings constituted by the media. If so, the world as a set of spatiotemporal coordinates is not configured as *phusis*. Instead, it constitutes and is in turn constituted, by technicity (Stiegler 1998 [1994], 9-10). On 11 November 1943, physicist Li Xiaofang published an open letter to Sun Mingjing in *Film and Radio*. In this letter, Li argues that the most fundamental problem in media studies is the concept of time. In the first part of his essay, Li expounds the geographical definitions and properties of time. Then, in the second part, he offers a detailed calculation of the time difference between Washington D.C. and Chungking and the time it takes for a long-wave radio signal to travel between them. In the end, he suggests a vigorously calibrated timetable for the Chinese and US governments to use long-wave technology to transmit information and news to and from the war fronts. For our purpose, the interesting point of this essay is not the scientific explication, but the new worldview it suggests. For Li, the world is best redefined as a manifestation of technical time, as technology enables information and affects to be transmitted, shared, and mediated synchronously by technical beings across distant locations. As a result, new technical communities can be formed, which will trespass national and other geopolitical boundaries (Li 1943, 5-9).

During the Pacific War (1941-1945), the KMT government enjoyed a short window of time during which the United States treated China as its equal. This inspired Li to rethink how media could enable its users to maintain and manage this new world order:

For a philosopher, time is a natural phenomenon. For a scientist, it is the fourth dimension. Most common people find these ideas difficult to

grasp, and even specialists find them puzzling. From a practical perspective, we can tentatively put aside these transcendental theories. Once we do that, the concept of time is not hard to understand. Time is, above all, an abstract concept. It is usually measured by means of studying a movement: the movement of a clock's pendulum, the movement of the stars opposite Jupiter, or the movement of the flow of water in a water clock. What makes time unimaginable to people is the fact that it also drives the stillness and silence of our universe. Once movement is absent, it becomes difficult for us to measure time. (Li 1943, 5)

Our reliance on using movement to measure time, for Li, has the effect of spatializing time and all our inter-communal relationships. For Li, we should understand the travelling of a long-wave radio signal not in terms of space. Instead, it travels through, and therefore connects, a passage of time. The spatial difference between Washington D.C. and Chungking is, for Li, a temporal displacement. Therefore, media researchers should invent new devices to redress this displacement, and eventually reach a point at which the two cities can share information and political affects synchronically (Li 1943, 9). In other words, for Li, affective differences among various technical beings—or more properly, technical bodies—are the results of temporal differences. In this sense, by overcoming temporal differences, future technology will be able to achieve a sense of commonality among those technical beings that share a mode of existence in a synchronic *mediate* (Stiegler 1998 [1994], 109).

Li's open letter has reached a point at which world building is no longer conceived in logocentric and ethnocentric terms. Yet, in response to Li's open letter, Sun rearticulates this idea in a way that ethnographic differences are reintroduced:

After the war, even if we stay home, we will have unsolicited visitors coming from thousands of miles away from us. We may be called by our own interests or by the need of maintaining international justice to faraway countries. We may travel to remote regions to work, experience life, or entertain ourselves [...] we need to open new paths for other people to understand us, and likewise, we need to understand other people completely. We can then progress with the rest of the world and get used to this new environment. (Sun 1943a, cover page).

For Sun, the media has the ability to overcome temporal differences so that affective and geopolitical barriers could be renegotiated. However, these

new technical beings are ethnologically divided in a fundamental sense, as they come from different cultural communities that require “understanding” via technical mediation. Implicit in Sun’s ethnological argument is the idea that media ultimately *overcomes* culturo-linguistic differences. It does so by directly reconstituting the new technical beings’ sensoria. In this sense, language is not considered a technique that is a result of mediation. Rather, it is considered a biological predicate that requires mediation.

### Linguistic Terrain

In other words, Sun’s understanding of media is ultimately confined to the epistemic space that defines *China* as an ethnographic and linguistic difference from the *West*. Such an epistemic space, ironically, is inherited by the national discourse today, which constantly asserts China’s exceptionalism as a means to construct and reaffirm its culturo-political identity. This idea is articulated in the current conceptual framework in Chinese media studies: *yujing* (“linguistic terrain”). At first glance, the term *yujing* can be roughly understood as the linguistic, cultural, social, and political environments (Ding and Wu, eds. 2009; Li 2009). It is therefore similar to the Euro-American term “discourse.” Nonetheless, while the concept of a discourse presupposes an established linguistic topos among those parties who are engaged in a discussion, the idea of a linguistic terrain presumes the need of translation in the communication process.

Moreover, by considering a linguistic system as a terrain, relationships between linguistic and cultural formations are re-displaced in spatial terms. For example, ever since Fredric Jameson’s visit to China in 1987, many Chinese scholars have considered Euro-American modernity and Chinese postmodernity as two linguistic terrains. For them, China had never attained modernity, but is now entering a process of becoming already-modern (Dirlik and Zhang, eds. 1997). These two temporal concepts, being modern and becoming already-modern, are remapped as a spatial relationship that mirrors the imaginary poles between Western modernity and Chinese para-modernity (Hey 2008, 113-32). The media is therefore expected to remediate the gap between these two spatialized temporalities.

The term “linguistic terrain” is derived from the anthropological studies of Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942) of the Kula ring, an institution of trading and gift-exchange in the French-colonial Trobriand (now the Kiriwina) islands. The notion was initially conceived when Malinowski (1920, 97-105) wrote his seminal article “Kula: The Circulating Exchange



of Valuables in the Archipelagos of Eastern New Guinea” for the magazine *Man*. The question at stake is: How could Malinowski, a European man, communicate with the “natives” when there was no linguistic commonality among them? Malinowski’s answer is: via their linguistic context. On the surface, a linguistic context is the syntactical context that precedes and succeeds an utterance, often translated into Chinese as *shangxia wen* (“upper and lower clauses”). It can also be extended to the use of facial and bodily gestures that help the addressee understand what they have failed to comprehend verbally.

A linguistic terrain is therefore never a self-enclosed system of signification, as Ferdinand de Saussure would have suggested. Rather, it is closer to Charles Sanders Peirce’s understanding of a sign: it refers to an object via a representamen or mental image (Silverman 1983, 3-53). For Saussure, a sign is composed of a signifier (sound), which is associated with a signified (acoustic image). However, the sign as a whole—that is, the way the sound and the acoustic image are associated with each other—depends on a system of differences that makes up language itself (Saussure 2014 [1916], 97-113). The Saussurian model can be potentially difficult for one to theorize how two linguistic systems “cross-breed” in a process of translation, especially when such a process requires the translator to understand how these two linguistic systems come to indicate two comparable mental objects. As Lydia Liu (2004, 12-13) argues, Sino-European translation during the nineteenth and early 20th centuries was best understood as a process that threw together two signs that meant different things into a super-sign, a third sign that both included and exceeded the original signs. Such a super-sign created a juridical, political, or even cultural world order that was, and still is, always occupied by multiple world views.

This representamen, for Malinowski, can constitute a linguistic terrain of its own. For example, in the reading of a seemingly unified text by means of its upper and lower clauses, a text can be divided into four texts: (1) a readerly text (the actual spoken or written text); (2) a readable text (parts of a passage that can be deciphered by the reader); (3) an absented text (textual gaps that the reader must infer from the readable text); and (4) a writerly text (the resulting text understood by the reader) (Barthes 1994 [1974], 4-6). This process should be familiar to Japanese readers who wish to decipher a classical Chinese text. They would first read the *kanji* (“Chinese characters”) common between classical Chinese and modern Japanese. After that, they would infer the meaning of the textual gaps in order to make sense of those syntactical structures and paradigmatic choices that seem awkward to them.

Mediation is therefore understood as a process of *kua yujing* (“crossing linguistic terrains”), which corresponds to the meaning of the Chinese term *meijie* (“media”). The word can be traced back to the “Zhang Xingcheng zhuan” [Biography of Zhang Xingcheng] in the *Jiu Tang shu* [Old books of Tang, Liu Xu]. It means “through the intervention of a go-between” (Liu 1975 [941-45]). The term puts the emphasis on the act of intervention, which produces a synergy that would otherwise be missing if the two parties were to act alone. The media therefore sutures discrete linguistic terrains by retranslating their shared values and reconstructing textual gaps when the process of translation fails. As a result, a *third* semantic field is produced.

Furthermore, Malinowski considers the process of mediation a process of gift-exchange, which demarcates the social, cultural, and political boundaries between speakers. For Malinowski (1920, 99-100), *vaygu'a* (“valuables”) that carry no “surreptitious value other than a certain reconfirmation of a bond between members of a community who are of the same social status” are being transacted in this process of gift exchange. This also has the effect of distinguishing the inside and outside of a community by negotiating the boundary between those who can partake of the process of gift exchange and those who are excluded from it. These valuables are therefore traded not for their utilitarian values, but for the purpose of stimulating “a desire for wealth, for ownership”. For Malinowski (1920, 103-105), these valuables circulate in the trading ring as tokens for expressing communal needs, sexual desires, friendship, and social recognition.

Malinowski’s study of the Kula ring inspired many critical responses, most notably from Marcel Mauss (2000 [1925]), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987 [1950]), and Jacques Derrida (1992 [1991]). Annette Weiner (1992), upon a closer study of the *vaygu'a* trade, argues that the trading of these valuables conveys a bundle of rights that are being transferred between traders. Made by women, they are part of a circulation of women as tokens of kinship and bonding between men. In this sense, negotiation between linguistic terrains is conducted for the purpose of maintaining a circulation of desire among members of the ruling class. In so doing, they establish a social hierarchy between those who hold the authority to trade and those who are reduced to a status of being traded (e.g. women).

On the positive side, the term *yujing* communicates a hope that contemporary media, through both verbal and nonverbal interventions, can circumvent the linguistic differences between geopolitically separated communities. On the negative side, it simply indicates that these differences need to be acknowledged—and, to some extent, maintained—in order to reaffirm our existing international order and hierarchy of power. In this

negative interpretation, mutual understanding can be understood as a social consensus that is achieved through the intervention of state or corporate power. For example, our social media (e.g. Facebook, Youtube, Tudou, and Weibo) do not open up a fully democratized process of mediation. Rather, they facilitate a process of gift exchange that would consolidate our existing sense of social spaces and in-group affiliations. They also maintain distances between media communities that are separated physically by their verbal languages, cultural values, and political conditions. In the end, they operate on a belief in a presumably unbridgeable semantic gap between these media communities, that is supposed to instantiate the imagined incommensurability between *China* and the *World*.

## Conclusion

Technology, therefore, has inspired generations of Chinese media researchers to reimagine the world as a technical assemblage. In this technological mediate, human lives are configured as technical beings that could potentially trespass the geopolitical hierarchy constituted by Euro-American colonialism. Li Xiaofang's idea of rebuilding the world in terms of temporal technicity offers a renewed understanding of the relationship between China and the World. Nonetheless, by rearticulating Li's idea in ethnocentric and logocentric terms, Sun Mingjing implicitly maintains that ethnological and linguistic differences are fundamental to *being human*. As long as media are designed and operated in order to overcome such differences, human lives as technical bodies would never be considered ethnologically or linguistically equal. In fact, as China and the United States began to share technology, they were understood as having the rights to manage those communities who were left behind by this technological connection. Meanwhile, by re-spatializing linguistic, cultural, social, and political formations as linguistic terrains, the *yujing* model reaffirms the colonial imagination of the world order. In this model, a trading ring carefully regulated by the ruling authorities—be that governmental or corporate—work together to construct a new linguistic topos, which has the effect of reconsolidating the existing hierarchy of political power with China as a new pole of world authority. Today, the PRC government is still negotiating the same set of conflicting beliefs, that China and the United States are considered to be on the same temporal plane, yet the imaginary incommensurability between China and the World requires state intervention to protect those linguistic terrains understood as specific to the Chinese nation. In other

words, the emergence and proliferation of *new* forms of media may bring hope that interregional inequity could be addressed. However, as long as media theory remains logocentric and ethnocentric, human beings are ultimately imagined as operators of media, whose ethnological and linguistic differences would never be reconfigured or removed. In this sense, human beings are not the operators of media; rather, they are slaves to the geopolitical technicity that operates them.

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## 16. The Worlds Align

Media Convergence and Complementary Storyworlds in  
Marvel's *Thor: The Dark World*

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### Abstract

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is the most ambitious experiment in cinematic world building to date. The MCU is like other blockbuster adaptations in that it adapts preexisting narrative material, but it is also distinct insofar as it doesn't adapt a finite story featuring a stable set of characters. What is being adapted from Marvel Comics is not stories but rather an approach to world building. The MCU embraces a logic of *transfictionality*, defined as an intertextual relation that "uses the source text's setting and/or inhabitants *as if they existed independently*" (Saint-Gelais 2005, 612). The comics are positioned as complementary to yet diegetically separate from the films. Convergences between these complementary storyworlds reward fans' knowledge and encourages multiple close viewings of the films.

**Keywords:** Marvel; Media convergence; Storyworlds; Thor; Transfictionality.

*"Every 5000 years the worlds align perfectly, and we call this the Convergence.  
During this time, the borders between worlds become blurred."*

– Thor, in *Thor: The Dark World*

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), as represented in an ongoing series of live-action films produced by Marvel Studios beginning in 2008, is the most ambitious and influential experiment in cinematic world building to date. The MCU is similar to other blockbuster series, like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, and *Harry Potter*, in that it adapts material that previously



existed in another medium (in this case, comic books are the primary source of inspiration, though Marvel characters had been transmedial for decades before their cinematic incarnations). All of these franchises also take advantage of media convergence in order to spread their brands across multiple platforms, thereby appealing to the broadest possible audience. But the MCU is also significantly distinct from these properties insofar as it doesn't adapt a finite story revolving around a stable set of characters. Where the *Harry Potter* films adapted the *story* told in J.K. Rowling's novels, the MCU adapts the ongoing *storyworld* created over decades of Marvel Comics publishing. Specific narratives may be loosely adapted (e.g. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* borrows its title and certain narrative elements from the comics storyline of the same name), but, in general, the stories told within the MCU are original. As the MCU progresses with each film, the stories differ more and more from their comic book inspirations in order to jibe with the world as established in previous films: for example, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* Tony Stark and Bruce Banner invent the artificial intelligence Ultron instead of Hank Pym, partly because the latter had not yet been introduced in the MCU.

What is really being adapted from comics, then, is ultimately not stories at all but rather an approach to world building and media franchising. One of the goals of this chapter is to explicate the precise nature of the relationship between the MCU and its comics counterpart and what makes it unique in cinematic culture.<sup>1</sup> This relationship is not adequately explained by the traditional logics of adaptation or transmedia storytelling alone; rather, the Marvel Cinematic Universe primarily embraces a logic of *transfictionality*, which Richard Saint-Gelais has defined as an intertextual relation that "neither quotes nor acknowledges its sources. Instead, it uses the source text's setting and/or inhabitants *as if they existed independently*" (2005, 612). The Marvel Comics Universe is thereby positioned as both complementary to and diegetically separate from the films. The resulting convergences between these complementary storyworlds, combined with the interactivity built into serialization as a narrative mode, rewards fans' "insider" knowledge of the Marvel Comics Universe and encourages multiple and close viewings of the films themselves, particularly in their home video versions.

Consideration of the entire MCU is beyond the scope of a single chapter. While *The Avengers* is arguably the key text of the MCU to date, serving as the convergence point for its four previously established character-centric franchises (*Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger*), *Thor: The Dark World* is a more productive case study for unpacking the company's position regarding media convergence. More so

than any other installment in Marvel's ongoing experiment in serialized filmmaking to date, *The Dark World* both enacts and embodies the key elements of the studio's transfictional strategy. More than merely demonstrating processes related to media convergence, *The Dark World* turns said processes *into* narrative, demonstrating a high degree of industrial self-reflexivity. Before looking at that film specifically, however, it's necessary to define the key concepts as they pertain to Marvel Studios.

### Marvel, Thor, and Transfictionality

As defined by Saint-Gelais, transfictionality refers to instances in which “two (or more) texts [...] share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds” (2005, 612). Some additional clarification, however, is required to differentiate this from other manifestations of intertextuality, like adaptation. In sharp contrast to the model of transmedia storytelling proposed by Henry Jenkins, in which narrative pieces that are deliberately spread across different texts and media can be assembled to form a unified story (2006, 95-96), transfictional texts thwart attempts at intertextual coherence. When read in conjunction with one another, contradictions are evident: try as one might, the jigsaw pieces don't fit together. What distinguishes transfictional relationships from adaptations or other kinds of intertextual links between texts is that their storyworlds must be both related *and* incompatible (Dena 2014, 487). Saint-Gelais introduces the example of Sherlock Holmes, whose popularity (and public domain copyright status) has resulted in a character that appears in multiple incompatible storyworlds related to each other only by his presence. Each iteration—regardless of author or medium—shares and participates in the broader transfictional entity that encompasses multiple iterations of the character without the narrative burden of being “canonical”.<sup>2</sup> Saint-Gelais offers that “The solution here may be to consider transfictional versions as counterparts, i.e., as inhabitants of distinct possible worlds, bearing close relationship to their original, even though it might seem counter-intuitive to assign original and version to separate worlds” (2005, 612).

Thor is a transfictional character, perhaps to an even greater extent than any other Marvel character. Prior to his transformation into a superhero, he had appeared in centuries' worth of mythology stemming from various cultures. His debut in Marvel's *Journey into Mystery* #83 (August 1962) constituted a pop-cultural appropriation of Norse mythology, modified to fit the conventions of the superhero genre: notable additions included a

“mild-mannered” alter-ego and the ability to fly. Otherwise, the comic book version of Thor bore many similarities to various mythological versions and increasingly so as the story progressed: the comics eventually eliminated Thor’s human secret identity and love interest in order to more closely resemble Norse mythology (Arnold 2011, 157). The version of Thor “created by” Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Marvel Comics is heavily indebted to previous mythological versions, but still sufficiently distinct as to constitute a transfictional counterpart. Norse mythology is thus *related* to these comics by virtue of Thor’s presence in both; but they are also *incompatible* because a reader can’t simply use mythology as the Marvel Thor’s backstory, though they will inevitably find some overlapping elements. The appropriate stance to assume as a reader is to use the mythological Thor as a pool of *potential* knowledge that may or may not apply to Marvel’s Thor: in other words, to treat them as complementary storyworlds.<sup>3</sup>

This also describes the relationship between the MCU and its comics counterpart. Knowledge of comic book canon allows viewers to make hypotheses about what might happen next in the film universe. While recent trends in adaptation studies suggest that the source material/adaptation dyad should be understood laterally rather than hierarchically (Hutcheon 2006, 169), in this case, the primacy of the comics is a significant part of the MCU’s world-building strategy. Not only would the Cinematic Universe not exist without the prior existence of the Comics Universe, but the idea of the viewer’s (potential) prior knowledge of the latter seems to be a key component of how Marvel Studios films address their viewers. In particular, unexplained or background phenomena—often referred to as “Easter eggs” in this context—represent clues as to the future direction of the story. This is more complicated than foreshadowing, since the expectations set up in this way are both ambiguous and unreliable. For instance, the appearance of an unnamed purple alien in the middle of *The Avengers*’ credits sequence has almost no narrative value without recourse to the comics’ complementary storyworld, which tells us his name (Thanos) and goal (to destroy the universe using the Infinity Gauntlet, which grants its wearer godlike powers). Viewers thus hypothesize that the MCU is building towards a version of story. Subsequent events in the MCU—Thanos’ failed attempt to possess an Infinity Stone in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the announcement of the two-part *The Avengers: Infinity War* to be released in 2018 and 2019—provide additional support to this hypothesis. Another example is the MCU’s version of The Mandarin, an Iron Man villain first foreshadowed by the presence of an Afghani terrorist organization called the Ten Rings (a transformation of the comic book Mandarin’s ten power rings) in *Iron Man*. *Iron Man 3* finally

saw the introduction of this super-villain to the MCU as the viral video-producing leader of the Ten Rings. The marketing of the film, especially when combined with viewers' extratextual knowledge of the comic book character, proved to be an elaborate misdirect: a plot twist at the end of the film's second act reveals the cinematic Mandarin to be a washed-up actor working under the instruction of the film's true villain. In both cases, the large body of Marvel Comics acts as a pool of potential knowledge about the MCU that viewers are expected to draw from in order to contextualize otherwise unexplainable narrative material or to anticipate future visits to the serialized storyworld. Serialization as a narrative mode also encourages repeated exposure to texts as viewers or readers await the next installment; the time between entries is filled up by acts of rewatching, hypothesizing, interpreting, and a "sense of interactive production between creator and reader" (Gardner 2012, 60). The transfictional relationship between Marvel's complementary storyworlds provides much of the fodder for these activities as viewers acquire and exchange knowledge about comic book continuity and how it might manifest in the MCU.

Though this essay focuses on Marvel Studios, transfictional world building—that is, world building characterized by the creative transformation of and continued engagement with another preexisting storyworld—is a popular, if often unacknowledged, narrative strategy. *Star Trek* is an excellent example of a franchise reboot that uses the existing continuity established in the 1960s television series as a complementary storyworld, allowing savvy viewers to make informed guesses about the narrative direction while also being surprised by changes to canon. Television superhero series like *Smallville* and *Gotham* thrive on making references to the complementary storyworlds of films and comics featuring DC Comics characters and delight in delaying or challenging the expectations that result from having knowledge thereof.

Nevertheless, Marvel Studios remains unique for its unprecedented scope, spanning seven individual franchises (including *The Avengers*) across twelve films between 2008 and 2015, with an additional five franchises and ten films scheduled for release between 2016 and 2020. It is based on this impressive output that Matthias Stork claims that the MCU

is primarily a cinematic creation, and not a transmedia construction. While the films were designed to cultivate the Marvel brand and open revenue streams in other (media) outlets, establishing an economically inflected trans-film structure, they did not create any explicit transmedia narratives (Stork 2014, 85).

This is not strictly true; while the cinematic texts are certainly distinct from the comic book canon, the MCU does embrace transmedia storytelling in combination with its transfictional world building. For instance, Marvel publishes comics that function as “preludes” to MCU films (e.g. *Thor: The Dark World Prelude*); they include short films on home-video releases that tell narratives peripheral to the features (e.g. *Hail to the King*, an *Iron Man 3* spin-off included on *The Dark World’s* Blu-ray); they broadcast weekly television series that allow for weekly engagement with the MCU (e.g. *Agents of SHIELD*); and they produce additional serialized television series that are released to Netflix (e.g. *Daredevil*).<sup>4</sup> Marvel Studios thus mobilizes media convergence in complex ways, such that their storyworld cannot be fully understood using the frameworks of adaptation, transmedia storytelling, or even transfictional world building in isolation: indeed, theirs is the ultimate crossover. An analysis of *Thor: The Dark World* will demonstrate the degree to which Marvel is invested in convergence as a touchstone of their cinematic world-building strategy.

### What is the Convergence?

In media studies, convergence is defined as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006, 2). In *Thor: The Dark World*, the same term—albeit with a capital “C”—is used to refer to the moment at which the nine realms align, enabling individuals to travel between worlds or, as the villainous Malekith plots, to destroy the entire universe in one fell swoop. The terminological overlap suggests that the film is thinking through some of the potential consequences of digital convergence, while also articulating Marvel Studios’ approach to world -building within this media environment. According to Nicholas Rombes, this kind of self-reflexivity is a recurring tendency of digital cinema. He writes,

It is paradoxical how completely the tables have turned: for now it is film theory which has become domesticated, safe and predictable, while digital cinema makes possible new and potentially radical ways of storytelling, and introduces interface systems [e.g. DVD] that suggest a form of theory and critique (Rombes 2009, 13).

More concretely, he describes how films like *Scream* and *Bubble* have contributed to the mainstreaming of film theory, with their self-deconstructing narratives and, more broadly speaking, the proliferation of behind-the-scenes footage that attends digital cinema (such as that found on DVDs). *Thor: The Dark World* engages in these same practices, doing for media convergence what *Scream* did for the genre conventions of the slasher film: turning media theory into narrative action.

Since *The Dark World* is less obvious in its appropriation and narrativization of theory than *Scream*, the best way to proceed is to demonstrate how various aspects of media convergence manifest in the film one by one. A logical place to start is with the film's convergence of science and magic, which is first made explicit in *Thor*: as the eponymous protagonist explains to scientist Jane Foster, "Your ancestors called it magic, but you call it science. I come from a land where they are one and the same." As a world-building effort, this is necessary in order to expand the physical laws of the MCU as established in previous entries like *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, both of which feature scientists that become superheroes through a combination of advanced technology and medical experimentation. Magic doesn't seem to exist in that world, but the introduction of *Thor* necessitates a reconceptualization of the shared storyworld's physical laws that are inclusive of magic, or, rather, that understand magic as an advanced form of science. In *The Dark World*, Jane plays an important role as the audience surrogate, travelling to the foreign world of Asgard and attempting to understand their magic in terms of her own scientific knowledge. A brief verbal dispute between her and an Asgardian healer about the designation given to a piece of technology—"Does a 'soul forge' transfer molecular energy from one place to another?" she asks—explicitly aligns the magical technology with its Earth equivalent, which Jane identifies as a quantum field generator.

The convergence of science and magic has long been a cornerstone of the superhero genre—Richard Reynolds writes that "the depiction of science as magic is crucial to the way in which the superhero comic mythologizes certain aspects of the society it addresses" (1994, 16)—but it takes on additional significance in a cinematic context. The distinctions between a "scientific" documentary-style approach to filming the world and a "magical" approach to playing with and transforming the world through film were most sharply felt in the wake of cinema's emergence, the figureheads of each approach being *cinematographe* inventors the Lumière brothers and magician Georges Méliès, respectively. While film historians have devoted considerable efforts to nuancing this simplistic narrative, the science/magic binary has returned with a vengeance in the digital

era. As Laura Mulvey notes using language very relevant to the present discussion, “The convergence between the arts of reality and the arts of deception that brought about the birth of the cinema in 1895 prefigures the convergence between the cinema machine and digital technology” (2006, 34). Digital superhero cinema is an amalgamation of the arts of reality and of deception: the science of the Lumières and the magic of Méliès becomes the technology of Iron Man and the magic of Thor, which are ultimately “one and the same” in digital cinema.

This points directly to the MCU’s primary intervention in contemporary Hollywood: the convergence of discrete, character-based franchises into a unified “mega-franchise” first hinted at by Nick Fury after the credits of *Iron Man* (“You’re part a larger universe, Mr. Stark...”) and later realized in *The Avengers*. Stork describes the MCU’s franchising strategy thusly:

Per Marvel’s superhero movie logic, character properties in genre fare are to be featured synergistically, as part of a larger franchise experiment within Hollywood. [...] *The Avengers* is essentially the brand icon of Marvel’s cinematic universe and, as such, the final stage of the company’s endeavor to reframe the aesthetic, economic, and industrial dynamics of the superhero genre. (2014, 78-79)

As a post-*Avengers* installment in the MCU, *Thor: The Dark World* makes numerous references to the crossover event, reminding viewers that this is not only a sequel to *Thor* but to *The Avengers* as well. Narratively speaking, this occurs quite naturally, since the key characters are all affected by actions that took place in that film: for example, Dr. Selvig has gone insane after being mentally possessed by Loki; Loki is imprisoned on Asgard after his attempt to conquer Earth; Thor is uninterested in ruling Asgard because he feels a responsibility to Earth and the Avengers; Jane punches Loki “for New York”, a reference to *The Avengers*’ climatic “Battle of New York”; and Loki briefly shapeshifts into Captain America to irritate Thor. This is characteristic of Marvel Studios post-*Avengers*: similarly, *Iron Man 3*’s narrative is motivated primarily by the protagonist’s struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder after *The Avengers*.

As stated earlier, the Convergence is also a key component of the film’s narrative in general: it provides the ticking clock against which all the characters must race, whether to execute the villainous plot or to prevent its success. During the Convergence, the nine realms—Asgard, Earth/Midgard, and seven others—come into alignment with each other, similar to an eclipse. When this occurs, various physical anomalies occur, including gravitational

irregularities and the random appearance of portals between worlds. As Jane puts it, “The walls between worlds will be almost non-existent. [...] The very fabric of reality is going to be torn apart.” The Convergence isn’t something that anybody orchestrates or deliberately brings into being: it is merely something that happens, a natural occurrence whose effects can be taken advantage of for either good or ill. If we read the Convergence as a metaphor for media convergence, it might seem as though the film’s conceptualization of media falls into the trap of media theory and history identified by Lisa Gitelman in *Always Already New*: “Naturalizing, essentializing, or ceding agency to media is something that happens at a lexical level every time anyone says ‘the media’ in English, as if media were a unified natural entity, like the wind” (2006, 2). *The Dark World’s* Convergence can be understood in precisely these terms, but the Aether is the film’s analogue for media, insofar as it is what must be harnessed and deployed during the Convergence in order to produce the desired effects. Media and convergence aren’t the same thing: convergence is a state of affairs that has come into being because of overlapping technologies and particular audience practices, while what we choose to do with media within that environment is a matter of individual, collective, or corporate agency.

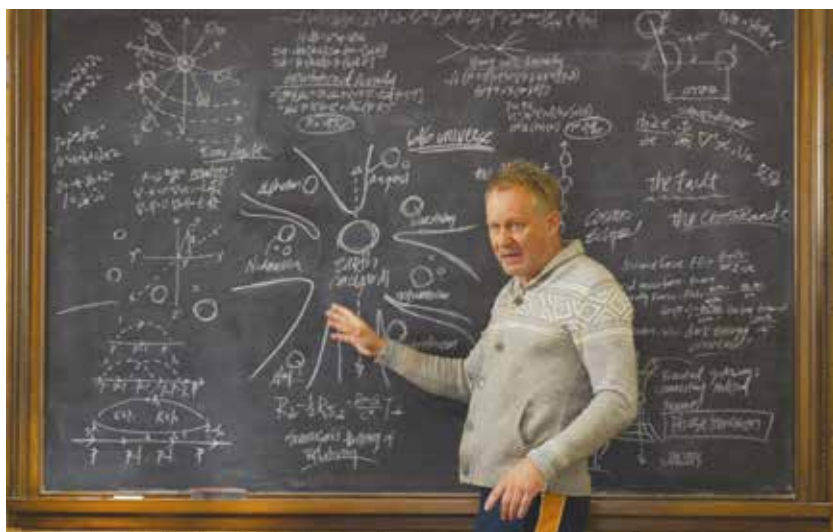
If there is a commentary on convergence to be found in *Thor: The Dark World*, however, it surely lies in one particular consequence of the Convergence: the ability to travel between worlds. While travelling between media is properly the domain of transmedia storytelling, travelling between storyworlds is something that is done primarily by transfictional characters, of which Thor is a prime example. Thus, perhaps the film has something to say regarding Marvel Studios’ preferred strategy for executing such transfictional leaps. In the film, the Convergence doesn’t merely facilitate movement between worlds, but erases the walls that separate and distinguish them from one another. This Alignment of worlds is not a “good” or “bad” thing on its own—both Heimdall and Dr. Selvig call it “beautiful”—but this erasure of distinctions between worlds *is* represented as something that can have dire consequences. By extension, media convergence is portrayed as something with great potential—especially for viewers, which is the subject position from which Heimdall speaks of the Convergence’s beauty—but that also needs to be tightly controlled.

Derek Johnson has argued that the successful transmedial marketing of comic book characters requires “the elimination of difference between the comic and audiovisual versions of its character properties” (2007, 67). For MCU films, however, this couldn’t be further from the case.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in order to remain comprehensible, transfictional characters like Thor



and the storyworlds they inhabit need to remain clearly distinct from other competing versions and worlds. The tendency toward transmedia narratives in convergence culture can make the boundaries between these multiple storyworlds unclear, but transfictionality depends upon the continued existence rather than erasure of those boundaries. Moreover, the hypothesizing, close watching (and re-watching), and communal knowledge sharing discussed earlier as cornerstones of the MCU's serialized narrative strategy are facilitated by these boundaries; without them, the MCU becomes another exercise in adaptation or transmedia storytelling, or risks requiring a chalkboard full of complicated diagrams, connections, and flow charts—such as that devised by Selvig in this film—in order to follow its narrative.

Indeed, this chalkboard directly parodies what the MCU could become if its storyworld were to align with Marvel Comics. This is signalled explicitly by the appearance of the words “616-universe” on the chalkboard, which refers specifically to the primary storyworld (known as “Earth-616”) within which most Marvel Comics take place. While the chalkboard—like MCU films in general—is replete with “insider” references that fans seek out and assign meaning to, this reference stands out because it refers not to the diegetic content of Marvel Comics but rather to the storyworld of the comics as a whole.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, it doesn't call on viewers to hypothesize about the future direction of the narrative but rather to reflect on the relationship



16.1: *Thor: The Dark World*

between these two distinct storyworlds. In this context, the implication seems clear enough: *The Dark World* equates the convergence of these two storyworlds with the destruction of the nine realms, which is precisely the fate that the transfictional hero fights to prevent.

### Easter Eggs, Home Viewing, and a Superhero Cinema of Complexity

The “insider” references found on the aforementioned chalkboard are examples of “Easter eggs”: small details hidden within a text for the purpose of being found by eagle-eyed viewers. Easter eggs are “usually associated with video games” (Nooney 2014, 165), though they can also be found on DVDs, leading to hidden bonus features “to which those less ambitious or less familiar with computer gaming will not be privy” (Klinger 2006, 79–80). There’s also precedent for discussing messages hidden within the text itself—like the scrawling on Selvig’s chalkboard—as Easter eggs. Referring specifically to this type, Ross Hockrow instructs filmmakers that “Easter eggs make your film more valuable. Call them gifts that keep on giving—and reward repeat viewers with them” (2013, 99). Digital filmmaking and home-viewing seems to have encouraged filmmakers to increasingly insert such messages into their films, resulting in what Graeme Harper has dubbed the “cinema of complexity”, a defining feature of which is the necessity of repeat viewings:

Whereas to watch a film more than once was, in the past, mostly the domain of cult-film fandom, or was merely repetitive, DVD introduced the idea that traditional mono-directional, or sequential, cinema was just one component of the moving-image experience, and that repeat watching was not only acceptable but was almost required. Rather than a film having one life it might, in fact, have many. (Harper 2005, 97)

Though sales of DVD and Blu-ray are on a seemingly irreversible downward trajectory since the wide-scale adoption of streaming services like Netflix, Marvel Studios’ use of home video continues to fit the model outlined by Harper in 2005. More specifically, *The Dark World’s* Blu-ray encourages viewers to conceive of the MCU as a discrete and unified storyworld, separate (though related) to that of the Marvel Comics. In short, the strategies that define Marvel’s approach to filmmaking are also evident in their films’ post-theatrical afterlives.

Jonathan Gray writes that “paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them” (Gray 2010, 6). DVDs are an excellent case study for this phenomenon, insofar as they include the film itself but with the “added value” of additional material, including scenes deleted from the final cut, documentaries about how the film’s production, commentaries that allow filmmakers to address viewers directly, and so on. All of this material can contribute to the viewer’s understanding of a film; indeed, many have written about the power of DVD supplemental material to influence audiences’ understanding of films, emphasizing a desired interpretation while closing off others.<sup>7</sup> How Marvel Studios’ films like *Thor: The Dark World* are packaged for home consumption can thus provide some insight on how the company wants their films to be understood. Gray claims that “DVDs fully illustrate how multimedia corporations can employ networks of paratextuality to brand their products and increase the salience and depth of their meanings across the synergistic spectrum” (2010, 102). In the case of *Thor: The Dark World*, the Blu-ray largely serves to reinforce the scope of the MCU, positioning the film itself as a single episode in a much larger story.

When a viewer puts *Thor: The Dark World* into his/her Blu-ray player, she must first select her preferred language (for the menu options). Once this simple action has been completed, the animated Marvel Studios logo and fanfare plays automatically, contextualizing everything to follow as a product of Marvel Studios. After this, two advertisements play automatically: first is the theatrical trailer for *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, which follows *The Dark World* in the MCU chronology; second is a promo for “Phase One” of Marvel Studios’ cinematic output, which begins with *Iron Man* and culminates in *The Avengers*. The latter ad emphasizes the positive critical reception of each film and the “unprecedented” risk of crossing over multiple franchises, establishing Marvel Studios as a purveyor of high quality and ambitious entertainment. Thus, before the viewer has even had the opportunity to press play, she has already been given a primer on *The Dark World*’s place within a larger serialized narrative, an opportunity to reflect on the groundbreaking nature of Marvel’s world-building experiment, and a tease for its imminent next installment. These paratexts make it impossible for a viewer armed with this Blu-ray to approach the film as a self-contained narrative.

The selection of bonus material offered on the disc further emphasizes the interconnectedness of the MCU. The primary bonus feature is a short film titled *All Hail the King* that functions as a sequel to *Iron Man 3*. The

short elaborates on the events of that film, connecting the red herring “Mandarin” of *Iron Man 3* to the Ten Rings initially mentioned in *Iron Man* and teasing the existence of a Mandarin that would more closely resemble the original comic book version. The short thus backtracks to some extent on *Iron Man 3*’s refutation of the comics’ Mandarin in a way that encourages fans to anticipate a (potential) future appearance by the villain in the MCU. The disc also features an “exclusive look” at the then-upcoming *Winter Soldier*. Though these features relate more directly to Iron Man and Captain America than Thor, their presence on *The Dark World* home-video release functions to place the film in its chronological place after *Iron Man 3* and before *The Winter Soldier* in the larger MCU narrative.

Other features are more typical of a Hollywood blockbuster home-video release, including a short gag reel, deleted scenes, music featurette, a cast and crew audio commentary, and a 30-minute documentary about the relationship between Thor and his antagonist brother Loki. What’s surprising about these, however, is the lack of attention given to the film’s comic book roots. Aside from a small handful of references to superficial visual similarities between certain characters and their comic book versions, the focus is entirely on the cinematic universe as a discrete entity. When the comic book references contained in the film are unpacked, a transfictional stance is proposed. In the audio commentary, for instance, producer Kevin Feige explains what Marvel hopes to achieve in the scenes they hide after the credits in each of their films:

The best of the Marvel tags, for us, can do two things: it can tie up loose ends from the movie you’ve just watched, and it can set up something to come in the Marvel mythology [...] So people who know who Nick Fury is [in the comics] can get excited [at the end of *Iron Man*] but people who have no idea who he was but knew who Sam Jackson was would be curious and would want to know. In the same way we hope some people will know this is the Collector [in the post-credits tag in *Thor: The Dark World*], most people will simply know it’s Benicio Del Toro and do “What the heck is this, and where the heck is he?” and be curious enough to seek out those answers.<sup>8</sup>

This search for knowledge first leads viewers to Marvel Comics; as described earlier, the gap between serialized releases forces curious viewers to hypothesize about future MCU releases based primarily on knowledge of its complementary storyworld. Only later, after *Guardians of the Galaxy*

is released, can viewers test those hypotheses against the film itself. Of course, that film will then provide more tantalizing hints about future possibilities in the MCU and the cycle of serialization repeats *ad infinitum*.

Today's convergences—between analog and digital technologies across the entire contemporary media landscape—inform not only the conditions of production, marketing, and distribution of superhero blockbusters but, at least in the case of *Thor: The Dark World*, but their narratives as well. Marvel Studios has achieved unprecedented commercial success by connecting their franchises in a long-form serialized narrative that plays out within a single coherent storyworld. In this regard, *Thor: The Dark World* is merely emblematic of Marvel Studios' output, another cog in its increasingly complex narrative machine; what makes it unique and valuable as a case study is its self-reflexivity regarding the role of media convergence in franchised storytelling. Though the conceptual frameworks of adaptation and transmedia storytelling continue to inform how audiences and critics overwhelmingly conceive of such works,<sup>9</sup> transfictionality and the concept of complementary storyworlds are both more accurate and more useful in describing and understanding the relationships between the worlds of contemporary superhero films and their comic book counterparts and the ways in which audiences navigate them.

## Notes

1. The influence of the MCU on other film studios, however, may render its uniqueness short-lived. Film blogs and trade publications regularly report on various studios' attempts to transform their existing properties into "shared universes", including Universal's bid for a "Monster-verse" (beginning with *Dracula Untold*).
2. See: Roberta Pearson's chapter in this volume, which fleshes out Saint-Gelais' example of Sherlock Holmes.
3. In her contribution to this volume, Marie-Laure Ryan associates transfictionality with the expansion of a single storyworld through additional texts (e.g. adaptations, sequels, and the like). In my case study, however, the character rather than the storyworld acts as the central organizing principle connecting separate storyworlds through a transfictional relation.
4. These Netflix series follow the model of franchise convergence previously established by the MCU: four individual series will introduce the characters separately, followed by a fifth series in which they team up, Avengers-style. These will also be released between 2015 and 2020. See: <http://deadline.com/2013/11/disney-netflix-marvel-series-629696/> (accessed 29 January 2015).

5. For instance, as of this writing, the Thor of the Marvel Comics Universe is a woman, which is easily distinct from the MCU version and totally contrary to the process of homogenization across different media described by Johnson. See: [http://marvel.com/news/comics/22875/marvel\\_proudly\\_presents\\_thor](http://marvel.com/news/comics/22875/marvel_proudly_presents_thor) (accessed 5 August 2015).
6. The other key references here are to “The Fault” and “The Crossroads”, which hint at comics characters forthcoming to the MCU (namely Doctor Strange and the Inhumans).
7. Brookey and Westerfelhaus’s article about the *Fight Club* DVD’s seeming attempt to discourage queer readings of the film is emblematic of this trend.
8. Transcription from the Blu-ray’s audio commentary.
9. For instance, in the Afterword to the essay collection *Superhero Synergies*, Andreas Raucher writes that recent superhero movies like *The Avengers* take part in “media convergence, creating synergies like transmedia storytelling and concepts of world building that result in the adaptation of comic book narratives into story and game worlds across a variety of media channels” (2014, 239).

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## 17. World Building and Metafiction in Contemporary Comic Books

Metalepsis and Figurative Process of Graphic Fiction

*Denis Mellier*

Boni, Marta (ed.), *World Building. Transmedia, Fans, Industries*. Amsterdam University Press, 2017

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### Abstract

Since Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* (1987), the process of world building within fictional worlds seems to be openly represented in a large number of comics. Developed in highly complex games of inclusion and metalepsis (Genette, 2004) and far from being a repellent detachment set-up, this exposure of narrativity and fictionality represents a strong appeal for readers. Highly reflexive and metafictional comics have developed today into a wide practice of "metacomics" (Baurin, 2012) that shapes the stories, the graphic identity of characters or specific worlds, and the reading itself. It's not only postmodern patterns that are at stake (irony, self-consciousness, fictional ontology, awareness among the superheroes, quotations, or hyper-referentiality), but the use of comics' visual discourses to build a graphic motionless way of world building. It will be necessary to examine this topic not only within the scope of comics, but in the relationship that comics have with other media (literary fictions, films and video games) within a culture of convergence (Jenkins, 2008), or of "*maillage intermédial*" (Gaudreault, 2008).

**Keywords:** Metafiction, Metalepsis, Reflexivity, *The Unwritten*, *Deadpool*, *City of Glass*

In his recent book *Cinéma, machine à mondes*, Alain Boillat develops a world-building approach to cinema stressing, especially in science-fiction, post-apocalyptic fictions or metacinema, the importance of worlds and world-building. The particular attraction and pleasure of this type of

films would be based upon the representations themselves of these plural worlds. The visual actualization and the conflicts in interpretation between those worlds would form the basis of their fiction rather than strictly narrative dynamics, plotting and characters (Boillat 2014). This last formula should be used cautiously, because it does not mean that there are no narrative, dramatic events nor action in movies like *The Matrix*, *Dark City*, *Pleasantville*, or *Truman Show*. There occurs a change in proportion in which worlds cease to be considered as the background for narrative actions and transformations. The mundane paradigm implies that this cinematic dimension of plotting and actions is drawn out of the presentation of worlds (at least two worlds: what Boillat calls “bimundane”), probing the ontological differences between them and, obviously, in the predominant dystopical and dysphorical structures of their narratives, dramatizing the mere conflict or antagonism between them. Commenting upon the two versions of *Total Recall* (Verhoeven 1990; Wiseman 2012), Boillat writes that the two movies “proceed from a similar procedure that makes the question of mundane organization the very object that the hero is seeking for” (Boillat 2014, 236). Conflicts or spectacular shifts of worlds can be presented as contextual non-problematical data — like the formal rule of a game or a constraint in poetics and fictionality — or, they can lead to a manner of inevitable reflexive process questioning the composition of worlds within fiction but also questioning the very image of the media itself considered as a building process.

The process of world building within fictional worlds has been widely thematized in comic books, since Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1987), a famously reflexive piece of work. It is not only a matter of quality, singularity, and originality of the world invented and presented within one fiction: comics offer a vast wide range of properties, strange compositions of contexts, or stunning effects depending on the alternative realities that fictional worlds can expose, depending either on the imagination of the writer or on the graphic forms given by the artist. Comics often deal with the plurality of worlds through which characters, and particularly superheroes, are drawn to travel. They often narrate difficult, painful, or violent situations superheroes experience when they are launched in alternative and threatening spaces and worlds. In a diametrically opposed movement, they tell stories of invasions from outer or parallel worlds into a conventionalized fictional reality. But the word “world” covers a rather large variety of meanings, from determined technical uses (philosophy, mathematics, or physics) to sheer metaphorical acceptations. That term incorporates several different questions that contribute to the shaping of the imaginary contents of fictional

thematizations. Let us then quickly examine three examples of those uses in comic books: the shift of formulaic elements that produces a significant revisionist version of a famous character; a whole alternative universe or a clear reboot of the entire world of characters; and a sophisticated narrative thematization of the very idea of world making itself.

What if Superman had not landed in America but in the Soviet Union to become the superhero of the People's Revolution? Would it, consequently, turn Lex Luthor into an American icon? Such uchronian revisionism of cultural imagination by means of its main hero constitutes the storyline of *Superman: Red Son* (Millar, Johnson, Plunkett, 2003). The graphic novel's political allegory of the antagonism of worlds is here expressed through an ideological inversion of an iconic myth: graphic coherence and consistency of worlds (communist Russia and dystopian America) are attributed to the two antagonistic blocks that the comic depicts. By shifting imaginary values from one world to another, *Red Son* does not only deal with the ironic use of the most iconic American superhero of all, but the skillful overturn of its uchronian perspective aims at having the reader question the fictional set of values he holds and the forms of representations its own visual culture carries.

More radical in its approach than reboots or crossovers, the process in comic collections like *DC's Alternate* or *Marvel's Ultimate*, consists of creating elaborate alternate versions of worlds and to move well-established and favorite characters into completely new fictional surroundings. As is the case in Mike Mignola's retro-futuristic steampunk *Batman by Gaslight* (1989), superheroes are then sent back in time, sometimes even without a causal explanation of any particular plot twist, like time machines for example, to rationalize their move in space, time, or dimension. They can simply be placed in some generic set of constraints, imaginary topics, or fictional conventions thus presented as "worlds": in the *Marvel Zombies* comic book series, the home-grown superheroes, from Spider-Man to the Silver Surfer, Hulk or Iron Man, are turned into zombies after they have landed in what is described in the paratext as "a parallel earth". Now superheroes are badly in need of food after they have eaten the whole world's population in less than three hours (Kirkman & Philips 2006). Strongly distinct from or similar to their regular world, the second and parallel version therefore stands for the metaphor of fiction itself, and its figures will not only play on singularities or similitudes between the old original world and the new surprising one according to a more or less radical plot regime. The very means by which one accesses that world stands for an explicit and meaningful self-representation of fiction: gates, hazes, blurred surfaces, halos, slits, mazes, clouds, holes, pits, or any other graphic expression of

crossings, limits, and porosity. With its strong Lovecraftian intertextuality, the comic book series *Locke & Key* (Hill & Rodriguez, 2008) offers brilliant typological variations on such figures.

Another example of such an extension of thematized world building in contemporary comics can be found in *Black Science* (Remender, Scalera, & White, 2014), whose narrative concept rests upon constant and uncontrolled shifts, experienced by the characters, inside a potential infinity of worlds. In several layers of the Infiniverse — another exploitation of the fictional potential of the multiverse or pluriverse — the discontinuity of environments created by the science fiction storyline then emphasizes a dramatic continuity of the main character's story. The main character is tortured by a personal drama in guilt, grief, and responsibility that carries on through the multiple layers of worlds, like in a self-reflexive science-fiction road movie running in a plurality of fictional worlds.

A vast display of nuanced and pertinent examples of worlds and specific thematizations of world building can be easily found in mainstream or independent comic book *corpora*, both being deeply nourished by genres that profusely supply imaginary worlds, like science fiction, superheroes, horror, or fantasy. But, as singular or autonomous as they may appear in their narratives, all those different thematizations open onto another level of representational and discursive effects. Representing two worlds within one fiction consequently leads to a reflexive surface on which the production of fiction itself and its relationship to reference are clearly symbolized and thus questioned. Such fictions inevitably draw attention to themselves by showing world building as a fictional and narrative process. It develops itself in highly complex games of inclusion and of crossing of borders between different types of worlds. Far from a repelling device, this exposure of narrativity and fictionality henceforth represents a strong appeal for readers. Highly reflexive and metafictional comics have today developed into a wider genre of *metacomics* that shapes the stories, the graphic identity of characters or specific worlds, and the act of reading itself. Not only are postmodern patterns at stake (irony, self-consciousness, fictional ontological awareness among the superheroes, quotations, or hyper-referentiality), but the use of comics' visual discourses to develop a motionless graphic expression of world building.

About books, films, or comics, and even in the context of ludic and non-exclusively-narrative fiction such as in video games, it is common to name and to consider the contexts in which the actions of characters or gamers' avatars take place as "worlds". The time and space — but also topography, architecture, climate, history, the list of inhabitants according to various degrees of coherence, consistence or completeness, and, in some cases,

even languages — compose what theory and poetics call *diegesis*. But when watching movies like *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, or *TRON*, or when reading comics like *Wormwood*, *The Authority*, *Fables*, *Academy Umbrella*, or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, readers quite pragmatically call the diegetical content of fiction a world. We particularly need to name it so when the fictional world represents in itself the co-existence of several different worlds. But the term “world” is not only used on that semantic level of utterances; it can also account for unusual communications between levels of contents that are distinct in our current experience.

The term “world” allows us to describe formal distinctions about the semiotics of the media, about the narrative process, and the conception of fiction as they are developed in the graphic and sequential composition of the comics. The diegetic properties of any particular world that were briefly listed above may seem both peculiar and specific: all the characteristics that help to shape fictional worlds belong to a highly reflexive and metageneric (Jameson 2007) pop culture. It is made of ironical pastiche, convergence of images, films, fictions. Pop culture can be keen on complex constructions and relies on erudite quotations taken from a rhizomatic culture, borrowing as much to fandom as to academic references. Whether they belong to the superhero genre or not, insofar as the scenarios of many comics in contemporary pop culture represent several worlds within the frame of their fiction, readers have become increasingly familiar with a type of narrative that thematizes *mundanity* (Boillat 2014), that is to say, the question of worlds *in* fiction (and not necessarily of fictions *as* worlds).

Since *Watchmen*, the reflexive tendencies in comics seem to have widely spread beyond the boundaries of authors and publishers of independent comics. Metacomics (Baurin 2012) are no exception in the current production of the comicdom. Therefore, comics do not only openly discuss their forms and contents, but they tend to assume that they henceforth deal with an explicit yet abstract and complex game. Such a reflexive game should not be taken as an axiological exception calling for higher forms of comic books; it consists, on the contrary, of a common basis of cultural motives largely appreciated by contemporary audiences. That mundane game in reflexivity is made of crossings of borders, presents alternative and parallel spaces and times and offers self-engendering layers of *metadiegesis*. That game develops itself on all the fictional potential of plurality of universes, exploiting the vertigos of the specular effects of inclusions, derived from Leibnitz’s monadology all the way to the pop recycling of contemporary physics. In that respect, the theory of the pluriverse is way easier to understand in Marvel and DC or in science fiction than in mathematical

formalizations. If one may find the string theory a little abstract, thanks to the final scene of *Interstellar*, we can now picture it quite clearly as a pluriverse accessible behind a bookshelf in the hero's daughter's bedroom. But when it is fictionality itself that self-consciously becomes the very topic of fiction, something different, such as the metaphorical use of the term "world" to indicate estrangement in space, time, or dimension is at stake: it is henceforth an ontological difference that is represented and an ontological frontier that is openly crossed.

Because fictions can thus be described as a succession of worlds built with their specificities, from a minimal mimetic gap to strongly autonomous and anti-mimetic universes, therefore, in a reflexive mode, fictional worlds can openly show the process of fiction and represent various auctorial conceptions and pragmatic relationships to fictions. When we are confronted with the representation of relationships within a fictional world that are antagonistic, or at least problematic, between one world considered as fictional and another that includes the former, then this type of narrative belongs to metafiction. In literature, cinema, or comics, each time the accessibility of these two worlds is a critical issue for the characters, and the crossing of such a border a possibility in his relationship to the worlds, then we are experiencing fiction through a metafictional perspective.

The term "metafiction" derives from the field of literary criticism and it describes at least two aspects of self-representations of fictional properties within novels. The first focuses on the question of fictionality itself, of its boundaries or frontiers between different topographies of fictional worlds or artefacts; for example, and to put it in Genette's terms, "the world from which the story is told, and the world that is told in the story" (1972, 245). We need look no further than Borges's *Fictions* to find clear examples of metafictional constructions and figures, possibilities, or scenarios. A second aspect implied by metafictional texts derives from this Borgesian origin: because of its expansion in contemporary fiction, metafiction stands for a body of historically determined works. From the 1970s to the generalization of its discourses in pop culture today — to put it bluntly, from John Barth to Stephen King's *The Dark Half* and Fellini's *Otto e Mezzo* to Wes Craven's metahorror films — metafiction may appear as a protean genre. Consequently, metafiction is characterized by a certain set of generic forms, processes, and figures, as well as certain privileged types of narratives or plots (such as historiographic metafiction, travelogues, epistolary novels, anti-detective stories, or postmodern Gothic works). Such a description has been widely developed in the postmodern literary theory of the novel, using notions such as self-consciousness or reflexivity, irony and parody,

generalized intertextuality, and metagenericity (see: Waugh 1984, Hutcheon 1988, McHale 1987, and Jameson 2007).

When describing fictional games in ontological confusion and the blurring of borders between categories, Genette refers to a famous passage by Borges in *Enquêtes*, in which the latter plays as far as possible with the paradoxical reflexivity of representation and its object, between the map and the territory, the reader and the character (1972, 176). As fascinating as Borges's formula can appear, and even if Genette quotes him here in a pleasant manner, it refers to a fictional predicament by its very nature. We may rather prefer to listen to René Girard's reminder: "worrying about the fact that reality and fiction may be muddled amounts to still being in fiction, to disregard that everything here IS fiction" (Girard 1976, 6).

Whatever its critical characterizations are, metafiction is still thought to stumble on logical and ontological frames rather than on a paradox: whether above or outside fiction, metafiction is still a fiction. It remains nothing more than a fiction, a fiction doubled, a duplicated figure of fiction revealing to the reader at least two worlds that are not supposed to come into contact or collide without the fictional erasure of the ontological frames that define their difference in status. Where else than in fiction could this blurring of frontiers be represented with their ontological consequences? Metafiction consists in turning such a possibility into a plot and in shaping series of worlds and their relationships according to it.

*The Unwritten* (Carey & Gross, 2009) does not only belong to metafictional texts because this comic develops a complex metaliterary game between several interwoven levels of narratives and fictions: in the context of the graphic novel, the game remains the same old reflexive discourse known as *mise en abyme* from paintings to theatre, from novels to movies. The metafictionality in *The Unwritten* derives from the fact that the frontier between an extrafictional world and an intra- (or meta-)fictional one is graphically materialized as a limit—a formal figure that is crossed. Thus, metafiction comes with the fact that the porosity of this limit helps shape the secondary world as essentially different from the first while remaining accessible: for instance, World War II Germany is represented in gray while the characters of the extradiegetic level are in color. Finally, the ontological and mundane differences need to find their own formal way to be expressed by the media: an image from the first level literally passing through another image of the second one, when the colored characters pass through the German soldier or the inn's wall.

This example shows that the heterogeneity of space on which the metaliterary discourse of *The Unwritten* relies is not expressed through

an iconic heterogeneity of various media textures or forms, as it is the case in movies like *Mary Poppins* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Gross's drawings do not seek an expressive difference between levels of fiction and thus present, within the same frame, the agents of continuity (similar techniques in drawing) and the metafictional effect of discontinuity and heterogeneity. The colors and drawn figures of crossing both play the part of symbolizing the game on ontology and forms within the story. What forms can graphic discourse give to fiction, to its limit and to its porosity? Such semantics of colors is a specific visual means and can be used, for example, as an iconic operator of transmedia, partaking in the *maillage intermédial* (Gaudreault 2008) typical of contemporary fictional culture. Such a transmedial process makes comics a heterogenous cultural text pervaded by contents of other fictions, such as the transfictional dimension of intertextuality in steampunk fiction.

A highly reflexive comics like *Deadpool* abounds in transmedial and metafictional motives: after too planturous a meal, (*Night of the Living Dead*, Bunn & Rosanas, 2014) Deadpool wakes from a long nap to find himself in a gray zombiefied world that is a graphic version of George Romero's engendering of original fiction. From Max Brooks's survival techniques (*The Zombie Survival Guide*, 2003) to the patterns of *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002), *30 Days of Night* (Templesmith & Niles, 2003) or *The Walking Dead* (Kirkman, Moore & Adlard, 2003), the common topics of zombie fiction are reenacted in Deadpool's adventure. The convergence between cinematic and graphic fictions is determined here by an iconic and reflexive use of colors similar to a movie like *Pleasantville*. Even if the values of colors are simple to decipher, the use of fiction and the transmedial mode of metafiction they imply nonetheless rely on a certain abstraction in the way the reader can use that world.

It is not the technical quality of the drawing that is discussed here nor the virtuosity with which an artist has the ability to produce the highest degree of mimetic performance in the production of a world, no more than the strongly asserted idiosyncrasy of a particular graphic style. In that sense, stylization combined with an increasing figural autonomy, gained over a dominant narrative process, constitutes the very possibility of graphic metafictional discourses.

In stories in which metafiction problematizes inclusion and border crossings between fiction and the character's reality, formal simplicity or semantic explicitness works strongly interwoven with rather abstract notions that question the media and its fictionality. Their compatibility shows that, once more, the old cornerstone of axiomatics that long shaped the



reception of high and low cultures by opposing distanciation and emotional participation needs to be ceaselessly discussed questioned reconsidered. That is, not only in general and cultural terms but on a textual level, and particularly though analysis of the coherence and the homothety of forms and meaning in the comics themselves. That need for a close reading of process and figures avoids reducing the singularity of graphic style and visual answers to fictional literary or verbal metadiscourses. Consequently, it leads us to wonder what could be a specific graphic metafiction that would not be simple transposition, adaptation, or even *transécriture* (Gaudreault and Groensteen 1998) derived from another media form. Visual explicitness and abstraction make up the ground for figural emancipation and formal world autonomy. That opposition between explicitness and abstraction seems to work in quite a similar way as the one between critical distance — passed down from a now remote Brechtian heritage— and pathetic participation — today, in a more sophisticated fictional phrasing, what is called “immersion” (Schaeffer 1999, 179). Both dimensions are supposed to be contradictory when they are actually pairing together in contemporary pragmatic reception of intermedia pop culture.

Let us consider a critically renowned metafictional work, like Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985), the first part of his *New York Trilogy*. In chapter 10, a character named Paul Auster asks Daniel Quinn, a former writer embedded under a false identity in a detective story that he fails to cope with, just before they part and in order to keep in touch: “Are you in the book?” This metaleptic pun sends the poor character back in the original world that he had left during that metafictional parenthesis. During that chapter, both the fictional writer (Quinn) and the metafictional one (Paul Auster, the Paul Auster within the book authored by Paul Auster—the one, according to the author’s own terms, that “is and isn’t Paul Auster”) have discussed literature, reading and writing, and *Don Quixote* (the mother of all metafiction, way before Borges and Nabokov). The writer has shown off in front of Daniel, the amateur detective, his wonderful wife (Siri) and son (another Daniel): so many ways to openly represent the crossing of fictional boundaries. Figures offer representations of its metadiscourse to fiction: here the figure is a play on words, a figure of speech in ambiguity. In film, such constructions, surprises, and slips in narrative or discursive levels can be enacted just on with simple shot/reverse shot editing, for example. But what is the formal process through which comics or graphic novels can express the porousness of frontiers, the doubling of worlds within a world?

We need to take aside the various and common figures related to reflexive strategies or *mises en abyme*: the comic-within-the-comic, the artist’s

hands drawing landscapes and characters, jumping over the frames or the voice of the screenwriter commenting upon his creation through his characters' ironic lines. What would be a graphic way to express the ironic question that the metacharacter (Auster) asks the Quinn — the character trapped within the boundaries of fiction and the opacity of his detective's investigation — before sending him back to his own segregated ontological level? How can the comic's language and structure figure this process of inclusion in its own formal ways?

In Karasik and Mazzucchelli's graphic adaptation of Auster's novel (2005), the pun is apparently lost or cast away, yet keeping it would have sounded perfectly suitable in the dialogue to keep it as a direct quotation from the novel, or even through some sort of symbolization of the fictional nature of Quinn confronted by his metafictional producer in writing. Having to choose between too literate a process and one that is too figurative, the graphic expression would lose the *transécriture* dynamics that allows the shift from one semiotic system to another. Here, the metafictional meeting of Auster and Quinn calls for a specific form addressing its figure to the graphic dimension of the media, and not only to the general category of fiction shared both by Auster's novel and its adaptation as a comic. A figurative network spreads over several pages (78-89) exploring a proper graphic question about the engendering of writing and of fiction: the opening frame of page 88 is a hand holding a pen in a writing position on a white and empty background, the word "yes" appearing in a phylactery. The appearance of Auster opening the door of his flat, in the next frame, allows us to understand that the former is a close-up of Auster's hand and pen, but seen from Quinn's point of view. In a symmetrical effect, the last frame on the next right page again shows Auster's hand, holding the same pen, but this time with his palm facing up. Set on a horizontal line of frames, the two panels proceed from a more visually associative effect rather than a syntactically coordinated one. "I'm a writer", says the phylactery. The penultimate panel on the last strip of page 89 forms a diagonal line with the panel with Auster's palm facing up, and it displays a typewriter on a similarly empty white background. The caption says: "Quinn told him the whole story", written in the recognizable characters of a typewriter. Over the next ten pages, several panels regularly use blank white backgrounds, not necessarily because of close-ups or subjective focalizations. They work as stylized intensifications of the content over the context, they play the figure over the narrative, finding their own expressive way over the abundant verbal metadiscourse assumed by Auster in his Don Quixote's lecture.

We cannot find any strict equivalent of the pun that would explicitly show the metafictional irony played on Quinn: the question “Are in you in the book?” provides a colloquial contraction of “phonebook”. But, as soon as Quinn has left Auster, he starts running down a very precisely drawn Brooklyn street until the angle moves to a view from below in the fourth panel, thereby erasing the setting to leave the frame blank and white again. The next panel presents the following caption: “He has been sent back so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine.” Quinn runs across a larger panel, only a rather thick and short black line under his feet indicating the ground. Here, we find again this visual process of reduction to blankness in order to express reflexive motives: although the drawings may seem simple and bare, Karasik and Mazzucchelli’s work is extremely precise in the framing, in the play on the depicted settings and the abstracted ones, in the size and position of the panels in the strip, and in the use of single and double pages.

This example shows how the metafictional communication between worlds and ontological levels succeeds in finding a graphic form that expresses both the questions raised in Auster’s novel about books, fiction, authorship and readership, and their shift in specificity towards another media.

Metafiction is therefore not so much fiction squared as it is a representation of a fiction included within another fiction: in comics, going from one level to another is symbolized by visual and formal boundaries that characters have to cross. Surprise, scandal, breakthrough, incongruity, whatever metaphor one could pick to comment upon the meaning and the effect of that crossing, such an ontological transgression of limits rests upon a figure known in poetry, literature, and cinema, as *metalepsis* (Genette 1972 and 2004, Pier and Schaeffer 2005, Kukkonen and Klimek 2011). We do know for sure that comics are powerful *metaleptic machines* (Ryan 2004), challenging the boundaries between worlds in uncanny, frightening, or comic effects, and Genette more specifically evokes one of discordance or incongruity. But, when a figure is so widely spread in intermedial cultural texts, its effects and meanings end up being contrived, its disturbing potential is likely to have lost its edge and henceforth only consists of new formulaic patterns and neo-stereotypes in popular fictions (Mellier 2001). As rejoicing as the radical project of *Deadpool kills the Marvel Universe* may sound and as exciting as its prominent transfictionality and its whirlpool of references may appear, one might not find the metaleptic device of the last page up to the game. The comic book closes on a digest of reflexive conventions, from self-commentaries on their own enunciative engendering by the authors to

Deadpool's direct address to the reader, half as an aside, half as what seems like a pose for the camera.

Again, metalepsis is a figurative mechanism based on simple and abstract impulses, two aspects that are not necessarily antagonistic or contradictory. Metalepsis is a spectacular and highly noticeable figure, whether the fiction wants to stress the violence of the crossing or the momentary confusion between worlds, but it is a claim for an anti-mimetic and more autonomous fictional construction of worlds. In this respect, by playing on the boundaries between worlds, metalepsis uses the Chinese box of its specular inclusions as well as the narrative possibilities to go back and forth between them, in a spectacularly attractive but sophisticated way. Metalepsis is often used in cinema theory as a way to challenge Hollywood's realistic conventions, its genre categories, and the process of fictional immersion on which the power of its attraction is supposedly based. It appears that, in contemporary comics, metalepsis is so abundantly present as a trope as well as a plotting tool that it cannot any longer be considered as an infraction or a breaking of a given pact or generic convention in fiction or in narrative.

Do metacomics (Baurin 2012) imply a specific type of reading experience and a particular type of reader? Or have metacomics become the norm in contemporary transmedial and transfictional culture? If the postmodern reader is an ironic deconstructionist and a sampler, what, then, would the contemporary comics reader find as a consequence of his hyper- and transmedial consumption in his ability to straightforwardly play with highly autoreferential worlds? How does this reader use them when comics expose their fictionality and consequently redefine the standards of fictional belief and mimesis according various versions of worlds? As autonomous or autotelic a fictional world may be, it implies a formal, if not ontological, distinction at least with its outside (i.e. the world that is outside itself, the world from which this fictional world is read, seen, and enjoyed). The relationships between our actual world and any fictional world, as soon as they are thematized into a graphic form, materialize fiction as an inclusion. In that sense, graphic fiction always tends to work as a diagram or a figure of fictional and narrative relationships, shaping limits, offering its readers the objectification of boundaries. The superhero ethos relies upon a paradigmatic expression of conflicts, just as the mundane oppositions described by Boillat concerning his own cinematic corpus are based upon a dystopian paradigm: broadened to the status of a contemporary imaginary of metalepsis, the figure still persists in its depiction of dualities in comics, ceaselessly inventing possibilities to renew the formal, graphic, aesthetic, visual language of the media.

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# Section 5

Appropriations and Fan Practices





## 18. The Monster at the End of This Book

Metalepsis, Fandom, and World Making in Contemporary TV Series

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### Abstract

This chapter aims to analyze world-making practices in transmedia narratives and how viewers are engaged in these practices through the discussion of two narrative strategies, namely *trompe-l'œil* and *metalepsis*, as they are used in the TV show *Supernatural* (The WB/The CW 2005-present) and in the works produced by its fan base. My paper will be structured into three parts: first, I will provide a definition of the above mentioned strategies, including their main effects; second, I will discuss how the relationships between the use of these strategies, the participatory or networked culture of fandom and world-making practices can be interpreted and analyzed; and finally, I will focus on the case of the TV series *Supernatural*.

**Keywords:** Metalepsis; Worldmaking; Fandom; *Supernatural*

### Introduction: the activity of world-making

“Every TV series creates a world”, write Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni in their Introduction to the book *Arredo di serie*. “Of course, this is a quality that great literature, theater, and cinema share. However, in TV shows this ability to build worlds is, so to speak, amplified” (Grasso and Scaglioni 2009, 7).<sup>1</sup> In addition to being related to serial and long-term storytelling devices that enable the development of increasingly complex and detailed narrative worlds, this *amplification* of TV series’ world-building activity appears as one of the main features of the contemporary media landscape and can be explained on the basis of various interconnected factors.

First, this amplification can be related to the possibility of developing narrative arcs and expanding narrative universes across multiple different media platforms (from novels, graphic novels, or comics to video games, from hoax websites to Alternate Reality Games and Role Playing Games), a possibility extensively discussed by Henry Jenkins (2006) through the well-known concept of *transmedia storytelling*. Second, the amplification of the world-building activity can be related to the notion of *narrative complexity* that Jason Mittell discusses as the new paradigm of television storytelling and that, of course, “was enabled by, and helped transform, the industrial, technological, and reception contexts of television in the 1990s and 2000s” (Mittell 2015, 30):

Videogames, blogs, online role-playing sites, Twitter, fan websites and other digital technologies enable viewers to extend their participation in these rich story worlds beyond the one-way flow of traditional television viewing, extending the universes of complex narrative creations such as *Buffy's* Sunnydale or *The Simpsons' Springfield* into fully interactive and participatory realms. (Mittell 2015, 35)

Finally, the extended narrative environments of contemporary media production have been described through the idea of the *narrative ecosystem*: “According to this perspective, TV serial narratives are [...] open systems, comparable to natural environments, resilient in both time and space, combining and integrating narratives, characters and users, in a particular media space” (Pescatore, Innocenti and Brembilla 2014, 1-2).

Before being used to characterize contemporary vast audiovisual narratives, this idea of an amplified *diegesis*, or storyworld, was frequently used to define the formal aspects of *cult texts*. In his book *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills included the concept of *hyperdiegesis* into the “family resemblances” of cult texts, together with *auteurism* and *endlessly deferred narrative*. According to Hills, a hyperdiegesis can be defined as

The creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension [...]. The hyperdiegetic world may, as Jenkins (1992) notes, reward re-reading due to its richness and depth, but its role is, I would suggest, also one of stimulating creative speculation and providing a trusted environment for affective play. Particular genres or modes may be best suited to the maintenance of endlessly deferred narrative and hyperdiegesis. The predominance of science fiction, horror, fantasy,

comedy and camp texts within cult forms is far from accidental. (Hills 2002, 104)<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Matt Hills has returned<sup>3</sup> to his original concept in order to consider how it can be related to transmedia narratives and, most of all, to extend the textual and spatial perspectives and define hyperdiegesis as a “reading strategy” that develops diachronically and by which fans participate in the creation of a narrative world and interact with canon and official production.

Without directly mentioning hyperdiegesis, Umberto Eco already stressed the importance of rich and detailed narrative worlds with respect to cult texts in the 1980s. In his popular essay on the cult status of *Casablanca*,<sup>4</sup> Eco underlines that, to be transformed into a cult object, a work “must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan’s private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize each other a shared expertise” (Eco 1986, 198).<sup>5</sup>

Today, Eco’s reflections about how narrative components are used in everyday life can be extended beyond the realm of quizzes and trivia games. As Thomas Elsaesser underlines in relation to what he labeled “mind-game films”, *taking the depicted world as real* has become one of the main “rules of the game” that organize multiple forms of relationship between the viewer and the film, or narrative world: “No more ‘representation’, no insistence on ‘cultural constructions’: the discussions take for granted the ability to live in fictional or rather virtual worlds” (Elsaesser 2009, 30). Fan sites and forums “either ignore the fictional contract and treat the film as an extension of real life, to which factual information is relevant, or they tend to use the film as the start of a database, to which all sorts of other data—trivia, fine detail, esoteric knowledge—can be added, collected, and shared” (Elsaesser 2009, 35).

The multiple ways in which fans incorporate narrative worlds into their everyday worlds can be interpreted as world-making practices. We could say that the narrative world is taken as real in the sense that it is relevant to everyday life and plays a key role in the construction of identities, values, relationships, tastes, and visions, or “versions”, of the world. The last concept goes beyond a simplistic opposition between the real world and the fictional ones. In the framework of Nelson Goodman’s constructivism, which must be kept clearly separated from possible-worlds theory in literary studies, “we are not speaking in terms of multiple possible alternatives to a single

actual world but of multiple actual worlds” (Goodman 1978, 2). According to Goodman, the need to talk about multiple actual worlds depends upon the fact that “we are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than a world or of worlds” (Goodman 1978, 3). Of course, these “ways of describing” are numerous and highly varied, and they include versions and visions produced in the sciences, in novels and paintings, as well as in our perceptions as shaped by situations, interests, and past experiences: “worlds are made by making such versions with words, numerals, pictures, sounds or other symbols of any kind in any medium” (Goodman 1978, 94). What is particularly interesting for the purposes of my analysis is the importance that Goodman gives to the role of fiction in world-making activities:

The arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology. [...] Works of fiction in literature and their counterparts in other arts [...] play a prominent role in worldmaking: our worlds are no more a heritage from scientists, biographers, and historians than from novelists, playwrights and painters. (Goodman 1978, 102-103)

In this chapter, I will analyze world-making practices in transmedia narratives and how viewers are engaged in these practices through the discussion of two narrative strategies, namely *trompe-l'œil* and *metalepsis*, as they are used in the TV show *Supernatural*<sup>6</sup> and in the works produced by its fan base. My chapter is divided into three parts: first, I will provide a definition of the above mentioned strategies, including their main effects; second, I will discuss how the relationships between the use of these strategies, the participatory or networked culture of fandom (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013) and world-making practices can be interpreted and analyzed; and finally, I will focus on the TV series *Supernatural*.

## 1. Metalepsis and *trompe-l'œil*

According to Mittell, complex storytelling or, more specifically, complex TV tends to transform “many viewers into amateur narratologists”. While they are not unique to complex TV, storytelling devices such as alterations in chronology, multiple points of view, ambiguous voice-over, or breaks of

the fourth wall are used in complex narratives with uncommon frequency and regularity, and are signaled with subtlety and delay, so the “viewer’s engagement” is “focused on both diegetic pleasure and formal awareness” (Mittell 2015, 53).

Although Mittell does not explicitly mention them, among the storytelling devices used within complex narratives we can also find metalepsis and *trompe-l’œil*, which were originally defined in one of the pivotal texts about narratology, Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*. Based on Genette’s explanation of the phenomenon, Werner Wolf defines metalepsis as “a usually intentional paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto-)logically distinct (sub)worlds and/or levels” (Wolf 2005, 91). Such transgressions can take place from the metadiegetic to the diegetic levels—as in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*,<sup>7</sup> in which a character moves from the movie to Cecilia’s “real” world—or the other way round—as in *Pleasantville*,<sup>8</sup> in which teenagers David and Jennifer move from their “real” world to the fictional world of David’s favorite sitcom (the TV show and the movie sharing the same title).

Starting from this general definition, more specific forms of metalepsis have been discussed.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of my analysis, I will only mention the distinction between ontological and rhetorical metalepsis and the case of intertextual metalepsis. As Karin Kukkonen sums up, “ontological metalepsis occurs when a character, author or narrator are relocated across the boundary of the fictional world [or narrative level]” (Kukkonen 2011, 2),<sup>10</sup> as in the case of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*; “rhetorical metalepsis, when they only glance or address each other across this boundary” (Kukkonen 2011, 2), as in the beginning of *Stranger than Fiction*,<sup>11</sup> when the main character is able to hear the voice of the narrator of his own story.

Furthermore, “a different kind of boundary has been identified in studies of metalepsis: that between different fictional worlds. [...] Fictional worlds have boundaries which distinguish them from the real world and from each other” (Kukkonen 2011, 6) and, of course, these boundaries—as well as the boundaries between different parallel universes or alternate realities within a single narrative—can be broken or confused. It must be noted that this kind of transgression, which has been defined as “intertextual metalepsis” (Wagner 2002) and can be found, for instance, in fictional crossovers, does not belong to the original definition of metalepsis provided by Genette. In fact, according to Genette, metalepsis can occur only between hierarchical levels, and not across parallel levels, such as alternate realities, or different storyworlds. In other words, metalepsis in Genette’s theory is a “vertical” rather than “horizontal” phenomenon.

Metalepsis can produce two main, interrelated effects.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, the transgression of narrative levels or fictional worlds may compromise the suspension of disbelief and break (or unveil) the fictional pact, generating a sense of oddity and of playful complicity; on the other hand, when the narrative levels are confused and the reality depicted within a narrative collapses, characters, as well as readers or viewers, are forced to question the distinction between fiction and reality and, more significantly, to interrogate the status of the worlds they inhabit, with a profound sense of *ontological vertigo*. As Genette points out:

All these games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep, in defiance of verisimilitude—a *boundary that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells. Whence the uneasiness Borges so well put his finger on: “Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, than we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious.” The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative. (Genette 1980, 236)

This sense of ontological vertigo can also be related to another narrative strategy, defined by Brian McHale as *trompe-l'œil*. “Postmodernist texts”, writes McHale,

tend to encourage *trompe-l'œil*, deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world. Typically, such deliberate “mystification” is followed by “demystification”, in which the true ontological status of the supposed “reality” is revealed and the entire ontological structure of the text consequently laid bare. (McHale 1987, 115-116)<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the case of metalepsis, after an initial act of “mystification”, *trompe-l'œil* tends to reinforce the reality status of the diegetic level, which becomes “more true” due to the comparison to a fictitious, metadiegetic level. Nevertheless, when two or more cases of *trompe-l'œil* are combined, the resulting effect is very close to that produced by metalepsis: the distinction between fiction and reality tends to become confused and increasingly problematic.

## 2. Metalepsis, trompe-l'œil, and fan culture

In the contemporary context of convergence, I would like to suggest that transmedia storytelling and participatory culture, metalepsis, and *trompe-l'œil* may produce a third, fundamental effect. More precisely, they can create *an impression of real presence* of the fictional worlds represented within a narrative. In doing so, they encourage and foster transmedia expansions based on the contamination between reality and fiction (for instance, Alternate Reality Games) on the one hand; on the other hand, they interact with fandom based on the implicit rule that “the world depicted is taken as real”. If a character presented as fictional can access the “real” world (as in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*) or if “real” characters can enter a fictional world (as in *Pleasantville*), why can't we, the readers or spectators, pretend to access a fictional world, or allow the characters to enter our “real” world?

This further effect is not only additional to the others, but also in contrast with the first, insofar as it seems to imply that metalepsis does not break or unveil the fictional pact so much as it consolidates it. From the reader's point of view, the fictional pact could be formulated as follows: *I know this is not true, but I pretend to believe that it is*. Rhetorical metalepsis tends to interfere with the second part of the sentence: *How can I, the reader, pretend to believe that this is true if you, the narrator, keep on addressing me and reminding me that you are telling a story?* Ontological metalepsis tends to interfere with the first part of the sentence: *Am I, the reader, really sure that this is not real...? And can I be sure that the world I inhabit is the real one?*

My hypothesis is that, for both ontological and rhetorical metalepsis, this new effect is produced *outside the fictional pact*. In other words, the fictional world becomes true as soon as I take it for real and use it in my everyday life (i.e. in my everyday activity of “making worlds by making versions”) and everyday social interactions with other fans. Thus, the third effect of metalepsis (creating an impression of real presence of the fictional worlds depicted within a narrative) is in tune with the properties that, starting from Eco's observations about *Casablanca*, are generally attributed to cult texts.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of explicitly connecting metalepsis to fan culture is not new and has already been discussed in Tisha Turk's essay on the use of metaleptic strategies in fan works, especially in fan fiction and fan videos<sup>15</sup> within the wider context of participatory culture. “Most media fans”, writes Turk, “would not use or recognize the term ‘metalepsis’, but they are familiar with the concept of crossing diegetic or textual boundaries. [...] Participatory culture is inherently, if metaphorically, metaleptic; the transgressive



impulse that it represents is being effectively mainstreamed” (Turk 2011, 96–100). Turk’s analysis focuses on a vid titled *I Put You There*:<sup>16</sup> through an explicit violation of the boundary between “reality” and fiction, the video ironically stages the culmination of the dream about an impossible love between a fan girl (whose world—“reality”—is represented in animation) and Giles, a character from the TV series *Buffy*.<sup>17</sup> Let us now try to extend the scope of Tisha Turk’s reflections and discuss possible interactions between metalepsis in contemporary popular narratives such as TV series (and specifically in *Supernatural*) and metalepsis in fan works.

### 3. The case of *Supernatural*

*Supernatural* tells the story of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who have devoted their lives to hunt demons, monsters, and other supernatural creatures. The series was first broadcast in 2005 on The Warner Bros Television Network and, since 2006, on its successor The CW Television Network. Season 12 premiered on 13 October 2016.

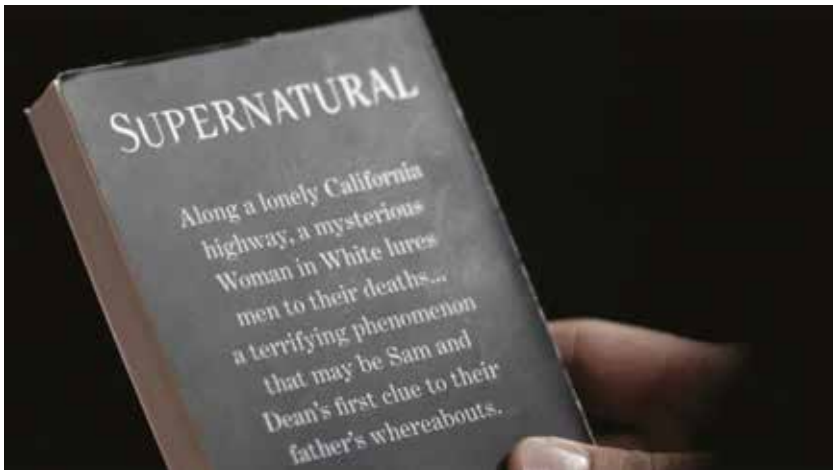
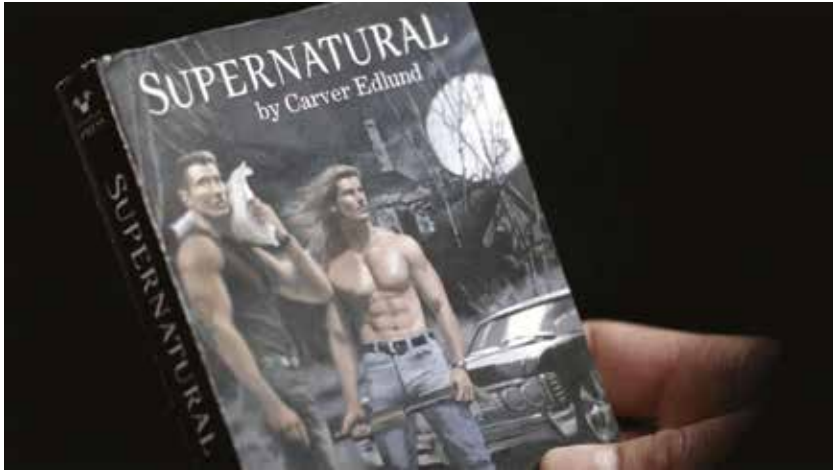
*Supernatural* is a particularly interesting case study for many reasons. The first is that the show has an impressive and very active fan base, despite the fact that the network did not invest many resources in its promotion. The specificity of *Supernatural* becomes particularly evident if we compare it to other popular TV series such as *Lost*.<sup>18</sup> As Laura Felschow points out: “The cult fans of *Lost* were offered overt invitations to participate with the text via an official message board, interactive podcasts, hidden Easter eggs, alternate reality games, mobisodes, and other extras.” On the contrary, “*Supernatural* fans [...] were offered the text of the series’ episodes and little else. [...] The fans of *Supernatural* came to the show without a strong invitation to participate. The program grew into a cult hit on its own steam” (Felschow 2010). Many factors, of course, contributed to the development of *Supernatural* fandom: the multiple genre frames activated (especially horror, fantasy, family melodrama, the road movie, comedy, and the Bildungsroman); the topics and values raised by the narrative (friendship, family, loyalty, altruism, religion); the intertextual references that enrich the series with quotations and homages; the increasingly sophisticated interaction between the running plot and the anthology plot (according to Mittell, one of the distinctive features of complex TV), resulting in a progressive development of the psychology of the main characters, Sam and Dean Winchester. As show-runner Eric Kripke points out:

What we set out in the beginning to obtain is a really self-contained universe in which fans can come and go, and the rules and progressions are consistent. So just as in all other good universes, you can find new ways to expand and explore other corners of that universe [...] and the fact that the fans are actually doing that is a good sign. I love it and I welcome it. I wanted to create a universe where we welcome others to come and play.<sup>19</sup>

Another reason why *Supernatural* is an outstanding case study is because it has “drawn attention to its fandom, and its fic, within the show itself” (Tosenberger 2010). In fact, as Catherine Tosenberger points out, “in seasons 4 and 5, riding a wave of increased ratings and visibility, *Supernatural* started depicting, within the diegesis of the show, the activities of its fandom.” On the one hand, this textual (and diegetic) embodiment of the fandom is related to a wider metatextual and self-reflexive inclination of the TV series, which has made a distinctive feature of such “meta episodes”<sup>20</sup> (including quotations, references to the reality of production included in the diegesis,<sup>21</sup> or more general procedures that unveil the narrative construction of the fictional world).

On the other hand, such an embodiment coincides with the use of metaleptic strategies that, while entailing a self-reflexive dimension, can be distinguished from other metatextual strategies. This overt address to fans, together with forms of metalepsis, appears in the episode titled “The Monster at the End of This Book.”<sup>22</sup> The title itself stands as a sign of metalepsis. Before being an episode of *Supernatural*, *The Monster at the End of This Book* was the name of a children’s picture book based on the TV series *Sesame Street* starring the popular character Grover (Stone 1971). The book is entirely constructed on rhetorical metalepsis and takes the form of a transgression between the diegetic and extradiegetic levels, since Grover (the diegetic main character) pretends to be able to directly interact with the reader (or extradiegetic narratee). After learning that there is a monster at the end of the book, Grover begs the reader to stop turning the pages to avoid meeting the monster: “Listen, I have an idea. If you do not turn any pages, we will never get to the end of this book. [...] So please do not turn the page.” When he realizes that the reader ignores him (“You turned the page!”), Grover invents more and more complicated obstacles, such as nailing the pages or building a wall between one page and the next one; of course, nothing can prevent the reader from proceeding and, at the end, we discover that the monster is Grover himself: “Well, look at that! This is the end of the book and the only one here is... Me. I, lovable, furry old Grover am the Monster at the end of this book.”

How is this story reinterpreted in the *Supernatural* episode? While investigating in a comic shop, Sam and Dean are shocked to discover a series of books



18.1 and 18.2: *Supernatural* 4x18, *The Monster at the End of This Book*

titled “Supernatural” that documents their lives over the past four years and has a massive online fandom.<sup>23</sup> After proving their profound knowledge of the novels (that is, of their own lives, and of the TV series) to the publisher, they succeed in meeting the writer, Carver Edlund (pen name of Chuck Shurley); we learn that the stories come to him in visions because he is a prophet and that his books will one day be known as the Winchester Gospels.

At a closer glance, we immediately realize that the episode is marked by a sort of radical *mise en abyme*, rather than metalepsis: an embedded tale, the literary saga of “Supernatural”, coincides exactly with the embedding tale (the TV series *Supernatural*), which, in turn, represents a world given

as real (the everyday life of the Winchester brothers). Yet, even if there is no actual transgression between the two levels, metalepsis marks the episode in the form of a blend, or transgressive fusion, between the diegetic and the metadiegetic worlds and, consequently, between what is represented as “reality” and what is represented as fiction. There is a complete and paradoxical identification between reality and fiction, and the vertiginous uneasiness felt by the brothers as they discover that they also are characters of a book seems indeed to actualize the “unacceptable” hypothesis suggested by Genette: “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative” (Genette 1980, 236). Furthermore, this paradoxical identity makes the boundary between the two domains porous, permeable, or even completely indistinguishable: the writer is a prophet, every fictional word he writes is bound to happen in reality, and so the Winchester brothers are allowed to pick up information from the fiction in order to try to change the course of events in the real world.

The relationship between metalepsis and fandom also marks the beginning of season five. In the first episode (*Sympathy for the Devil*), we meet Becky Rosen, a huge fan of the “Supernatural” novels. While she is writing a piece of fan fiction,<sup>24</sup> the writer of the books, Carver Edlund, contacts her and she does not hesitate to express her unconditional devotion. The dialogue that follows is quite illuminating:

Chuck: I need you to get a message to Sam and Dean. Okay?

Becky: Look, Mr. Edlund... Yes, I'm a fan, but I really don't appreciate being mocked. I know that Supernatural's just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and reality.

Chuck: Becky, it's all real.

Becky: I knew it!

As we can see, *Supernatural* directly addresses the new “rules of the game” discussed by Elsaesser, and delights in the extraordinary ontological implications of having one of the basic rules of fandom (i.e. taking the world depicted as real, go beyond the transformative and creative practices and personal relationships in online communities).

Season five also offers the best-known and, so to speak, most literal case of ontological and intertextual metalepsis.<sup>25</sup> The episode “Changing Channels” mysteriously starts, *ex abrupto*, with an explicitly artificial setting that can easily be linked to a sitcom style—likewise, to the sitcom style



18.3, 18.4, 18.5: *Supernatural* 5x08, *Changing Channels*

can also be related the clear parody of the main traits of the protagonists (such as Dean's reputation as a playboy). After an opening-title sequence that mimics those of sitcoms from the 1980s, we go back to the ordinary world of *Supernatural* through a *trompe-l'œil*: in fact, the first image given as diegetic is immediately revealed as metadiegetic, since it is related to a hospital show that Dean is watching on TV, titled "Dr. Sexy, MD"—clearly a parody of *Grey's Anatomy*<sup>26</sup>.

Then a new investigation starts, but as soon as the brothers understand that they are dealing with a trickster, they find themselves literally trapped (or relocated, in a metaleptic sense) in a series of different TV shows: first the hospital show "Dr. Sexy" and subsequently a Japanese game show, a commercial for genital herpes treatment,<sup>27</sup> the sitcom again, and a procedural cop show that clearly mimics *CSI: Miami*. When we are finally persuaded that we are back at the diegetic level, we must realize that the diegetic is once more metadiegetic: we are now trapped in the TV show *Knight Rider* and Sam has been transformed into the car.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects about "Changing Channels" is that the metaleptic experiment had already been proposed by fans more than a year before the episode's broadcast.<sup>29</sup> In May 2008,<sup>30</sup> vidder Sarah House, known in the community as Ash48, posted the vid *Channel Hopping*<sup>31</sup> on YouTube, which begins with the familiar image of Dean sitting on the couch, drinking beer, and watching TV. When Dean changes the channel, brief clips from well-known TV shows (such as *Stargy & Hutch*, *ER*, *Knight Rider*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Friends*)



18.6: *Supernatural* 5x08, *Changing Channels*

start to follow one another, separated by the “reverse shot” of Sam and Dean in the role of spectators. The clips are clearly identified by their original leitmotif and are composed visually of short sequences or shots taken from *Supernatural*, so that Sam and Dean are comically relocated into a series of more or less unfamiliar fictional worlds.

Almost two years later, after the experience of “Changing Channels”, Ash48 created a second metaleptic vid titled *Channel Surfing*. Her only comment was: “Sam and Dean watch more TV.”<sup>32</sup> The vid celebrates the “Supernatural” literary saga featured in the episode “The Monster at the End of This Book”; it also extensively quotes from the canon of “Changing Channels” and relocates the Winchester brothers to new and varied fictional universes: from *Dexter*<sup>33</sup> to *Lost*, from *CSI: Miami* to *Nip/Tuck*<sup>34</sup> and *Gilmore Girls*.<sup>35</sup> With her vid, Ash48 fulfills, so to speak, the paradoxical desire expressed by Dean in the ending of “Changing Channels”: “Well I’ll tell you one thing. Right about now I wish I was back in a TV show.”

## Concluding remarks

The ability to build worlds, which is common to all the arts (from cinema to painting, from theater to literature), appears as “amplified” in contemporary TV shows and, more generally speaking, in the contemporary convergent and participatory culture. This amplification, which encourages and is enabled by multi-platform narratives and vast narrative ecosystems, can be effectively described through the notions of “hyperdiegesis” or “narrative complexity” and can be usefully put in relation to fandom practices.

In this respect, metalepsis and *trompe-l’œil* can be profitably included among complex storytelling devices and play a significant role in the creation of transmedia expansions that blur the distinction between reality and fiction, as well as in the relationship between fandom and serial narratives. In fact, as far as it is used as a narrative strategy both in the core audiovisual product (such as the TV show *Supernatural*) and in the fan works (such as the vids *Channel Hopping* and *Channel Surfing*), metalepsis can productively interact with the rule that “the world depicted is taken as real”—or, in other words, that the movie, or the TV show, are treated as real life.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to ironically unveiling or breaking the fictional pact and/or creating a profound sense of “ontological vertigo”, metalepsis is able to operate outside the fictional contract and to produce an effect of real presence of the worlds represented within a narrative. In this sense, metalepsis both encourages and expresses the multiple ways in which fans incorporate

narrative worlds into the everyday world or, more precisely, how fans use fictional worlds in their common life—in their everyday activity of making worlds by making versions. In this respect, it would be interesting to discuss further the connection between metalepsis and the rule of “taking the world depicted as real” in light of Francesco Casetti’s idea of relocated cinema as an “hypertopic art”:

If the darkened movie theater implied that I would literally go to the cinema, in these new environments it is as if the cinema comes to me. Moreover, if, in the movie theater, cinema allowed us to travel to other worlds, in these new environments it makes these worlds available wherever I happen to be, placing them in my hand, so to speak. [...] We can summarize this new situation by saying that we find ourselves not before heterotopias—that is, as Michel Foucault has explained, spaces with points of passage toward different dimensions—but rather before hypertopias, points that attract and absorb other ones into themselves. The early cinema, with its ability to strike the spectator viscerally rather than absorbing him into the narration, already experimented with the hypertopia. Today, relocated cinema can move more freely in this direction. (Casetti 2015: 12)<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

1. My translation.
2. In Hills’ words, “‘endlessly deferred narrative’ is [...] distinct from the decentred narrative non-resolution of soap operas, which always continue to pose a number of questions, none of particular priority or significance, even while (temporarily) resolving elements of ongoing stories. The cult form, by contrast, typically focuses its endlessly deferred narrative around a singular question or related set of questions. This ‘endlessly deferred narrative’ typically lends the cult programme both its encapsulated identity and its title; consider, for example *The Prisoner* [...] and *The Hitch-hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*” (Hills 2002, 101).
3. Matt Hills, “Traversing the ‘Whoniverse’: *Doctor Who*’s Hyperdiegesis and Transmedia Discontinuity/Diachrony,” *infra*.
4. *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz (1942; Milano: Warner home video, 2008), Blu-ray disc.
5. This is not the only requirement to transform a narrative into a cult object. According to Eco, we must also consider the possibility of breaking, dislocating, and unhinging it as well as of detecting in it “intertextual archetypes”.
6. *Supernatural*, *The WB/The CW*, 2005-present.



7. *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, directed by Woody Allen (1985; Milano: Twentieth Century Fox home entertainment, 2008), DVD.
8. *Pleasantville*, directed by Gary Ross (1998; Milano: Medusa video, 1999), DVD.
9. See, for instance: Pier and Schaeffer (eds.) 2005; Kukkonen and Klimek (eds.) 2011; Re 2012; Cinquegrani and Re 2014; Pier 2014.
10. With respect to the definition provided by Kukkonen, it is worth specifying that the relationship between reality and fiction is not intrinsic to metalepsis, but becomes relevant when a level (generally diegetic) is given as *real* and another level (generally metadiegetic) is given as *fictional* (as happens in most cases). A further specification concerns the extradiegetic level, which must not be confused with reality, even if the real reader or viewer has the perception to be referred to when the extradiegetic narratee is addressed (as it happens, for instance, every time that a character looks into the camera).
11. *Stranger than Fiction*, directed by Marc Forster (2006; Milano: Sony Pictures home entertainment, 2007), DVD.
12. Of course, we need to keep in mind that “there is no essential effect in metalepsis—only effects that arise out of the larger narrative contexts.” Cf. Kukkonen 2011, 12.
13. The idea of *trompe-l'œil* takes up Genette's notion of “pseudo-diegetic”: “A less audacious figure, but one we can connect to metalepsis, consists of telling as if it were diegetic (as if it were at the same narrative level as its context) something that has nevertheless been presented as (or can easily be guessed to be) metadiegetic in its principle” (Genette 1980, 236).
14. According to Sara Gwenllian-Jones, for instance, “successful fictional worlds [...] create an impression of spatial presence and of a solid geography, of gravity, height, distance, terrain, climate, and so on” (Gwenllian-Jones 2004, 83-84). While not referring to the concept of metalepsis, Gwenllian-Jones further discusses this impression of spatial presence through the concept of virtual reality: “The concept of virtual reality supposes the possibility of immersion in a fictional cosmology. It entails a spatial and populated dimension that supports narrative potential and affords users a strong sense of presence within the narrative world. In cult television series, such cosmologies are grounded in, without being limited to, primary narratives conveyed through image and sound (dialogue, sound effects, and the ambience of nondiegetic music). [...] Their fictional worlds are therefore vast and/or dense with detail and are further augmented by officially produced secondary texts (episode guides, novelizations, comics, computer games, and, in some instances, spin-off series and films) and fan-produced tertiary texts (fan fiction, fan art, cultural criticism, scratch videos, Web sites, screensavers, and so on)” (Gwenllian-Jones 2004, 87).
15. “Vidding is a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music” (Coppa 2008).

16. <http://vidders.net/video/i-put-you-there-1>. Accessed 15 June 2016.
17. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, The WB/UPN, 1997-2003.
18. *Lost*, ABC, 2004-2010.
19. Quoted in Zubernis and Larsen 2014.
20. See: the entry on the Super-wiki, [http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Meta\\_Episodes](http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Meta_Episodes). Accessed 15 June 2016. For further information about the wiki of *Supernatural*, see: Wilkinson 2010. For a broader account of metafiction as a “protean genre” see: Denis Mellier, “World Building and Metafiction in Contemporary Comic Books: Metalepsis and Figurative Process,” *infra*.
21. This is the meaning of “meta episodes” on the wiki.
22. It must be noted that hints at the reality of the production, intertextual references, time loops, and varied forms of “relocation” within parallel universes, alternate realities or different time-space continuum start to appear from the second season. The appearance of parallel universes and alternate realities is particularly important in relation to the dimension of cult. Sara Gwenllian-Jones, for instance, identifies “portal formats” among the narrative formats that characterize cult TV series: “Series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Stargate SG-1* maintain a stable, contained setting at one level of reality but furnish within it some mechanism that opens the localized world onto an alternate reality” (Gwenllian-Jones 2004, 90). According to Massimo Scaglioni (2006), the “portal format” used in *Buffy* plays a fundamental role in the relationship between the TV show and its fandom. Moreover, in *Supernatural* there are at least two previous episodes related to metalepsis. The first (1x17), titled *Hell House*, implies metalepsis through the figure of Tulpa, which is the physical materialization (in everyday reality) of a fictional entity: in some particular cases, “taking as real” makes something to become real. The second episode (3x10), *Dream a Little Dream of Me*, proposes the metalepsis made popular by *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), with the tragic consequences produced by the unexpected permeability between the dream world and the “real” world. Finally, it is worth specifying that, even if in this chapter we will focus on seasons 4 and 5, cases of metalepsis and meta- or intertextual games keep on characterizing the show: let us think about the popular episode *The French Mistake* (6x15), reworked in the vid *The Meta Song: The French Mistake* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o5LQm9\\_ooc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o5LQm9_ooc). Accessed 15 June 2016), the dissemination of meta episodes in season 8 (8x08 *Hunter Heroic*, 8x11 *LARP and the Real Girl*, 8x20 *Pac-Man Fever*, 8x21 *The Great Escapist*) and the explicit episode *Meta Fiction* in season 9 (9x18).
23. Including Sam girls, Dean girls and also Slash fiction: “The term slash or slash fiction refers to fan fiction in which two characters of the same sex are written in a sexual relationship”; cf. <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Slash>. Moreover, “since the beginning of the show, some

- fans have had a strong allegiance to either Sam or Dean”; cf. [http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Dean\\_Girls](http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Dean_Girls) and [http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Sam\\_Girls](http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Sam_Girls). Accessed 15 June 2016.
24. More precisely, a “Wincest fic”. “Wincest is the term commonly used to describe fanfiction (or other fanworks) that depict or assume a romantic or sexual (i.e. Slash) relationship between Sam and Dean Winchester. It is one of the most popular pairings in the *Supernatural* fandom, along with Destiel or Dean/Castiel”; cf. <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Wincest>. Accessed 15 June 2016. With respect to the interaction between narrative strategies and fandom, it must also be noted that “only three days after the episode’s airing, a *LiveJournal* user called Samlicker81 posted a completed version of Becky’s story—now called ‘Burning Desires’—to a Wincest fanfic community on *LiveJournal*” (Wilkinson 2014).
  25. Identified and discussed, for instance, by Fuchs 2012.
  26. *Grey’s Anatomy, ABC, 2005-present*.
  27. This is also a parody of a real commercial for Valtrex.
  28. An entity that fans have called “Sampala”.
  29. The episode aired on 5 November 2009.
  30. Thus, even before *The Monster at the End of the Book*, aired on 2 April 2009.
  31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzQPbleK-GM>. Accessed 15 June 2016.
  32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7wPQsXVwfo>. Accessed 15 June 2016.
  33. *Dexter, Showtime, 2006-2013*.
  34. *Nip/Tuck, FX, 2003-2010*.
  35. *Gilmore Girls*, The WB/The CW, 2000-2007. The actor Jared Padalecki, who plays Sam in *Supernatural*, played a character called Dean in *Gilmore Girls*. Both the series (see: the episode *Hollywood Babylon*, 2x18) and fans (who have renamed “The Brothers Dean” the Winchester brothers, also distinguishing between “Cute!Dean” and “Hot!Dean”) have made fun of this double performance. Cf. [http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=The\\_Brothers\\_Dean](http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=The_Brothers_Dean). Accessed 15 June 2016.
  36. Far from being limited to TV shows, the interaction between metalepsis and the new rule of “taking the world depicted as real” can be easily extended to films, and especially “mind-game films” (Elsaesser 2009). It is sufficient to think of the case of *Inception*, in which metalepsis appears both as a storytelling device in the movie (sometimes in the form of *trompe-l’œil*) and as a strategic component in the promotional campaign—as it emerges from the posters (“Thought theft is real,” they threateningly announce), the absolutely credible instruction manual of the absolutely fictional PASIV (Portable Automated Somnacin IntraVenous) device (<http://www.pasivdevice.org>; accessed 15 June 2016) and the mobile app, which promises to transport “*Inception The Movie* straight into your life” (<http://inceptiontheapp.com>; accessed 15 June 2016).
  37. See also: Introduction.

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## 19. Traversing the “Whoniverse”

*Doctor Who’s Hyperdiegesis and Transmedia Discontinuity/Diachrony*

*Matt Hills*

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### Abstract

This chapter argues that the world building of long-running media franchises cannot be seen purely as a matter of textual attributes and instead partly emerges over time as a result of fans’ reading strategies. Taking *Doctor Who* (BBC TV, 1963—) as a case study, it is suggested here that fans and official producers have co-created the ‘Whoniverse’ across decades—not simply because small numbers of privileged fans have become producers/writers/showrunners, but also because fan interpretations have been diachronically recognized within the program’s canon. *Doctor Who* has been marked by textual discontinuity, but fan audiences have playfully reconstructed its diegetic contradictions into coherent accounts of the Whoniverse. As such, fan practices have helped to generate and to conserve an integrated transmedial world.

**Keywords:** *Doctor Who*, fandom, hyperdiegesis, transmedia

In this chapter, I’ll return to a concept I introduced in *Fan Cultures* (Hills 2002, 137), considering how it can inform debates surrounding transmedia and world building. That concept is “hyperdiegesis”:

a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen [...] within the text, but which [...] appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension [...] stimulating creative speculation and providing a trusted environment for affective play. (Hills 2002, 137—8)



I used this term to think about how cult texts offer up hyperdiegetic realms for their fans to learn about, become immersed in, and playfully transform, whether by playing trivia games, consuming episode guides, or writing fan fiction. I suggested that a combination of topophilic detail and coherence/ extensibility act as incitements to fan creativity and affect. However, as Elizabeth Evans has noted, “transmedia storytelling offers an expansion of [...] Hills’ theory of [...] hyperdiegesis” (Evans 2011, 28). This is because, increasingly, rather than narrative gaps being left for fans to speculate over, “the moments that are missing from the source text [can] become manifest [...] as the narrative world stretches across [...] platforms” (ibid, 29).

I will examine a case study in order to complicate my earlier definition of “hyperdiegesis”, one that encompasses key industrial shifts in discourses of transmedia world building, as well as involving different generations of fans, producers, and producer-fans. My focus will be on the BBC science fiction TV series *Doctor Who* (1963—1989, 1996, 2005—), and the gradual, discontinuous creation of what has become known as the “Whoniverse”.

There are two main arguments I want to pursue. First, that a focus on the “aspirations” of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2014, 244) is often too quick to assume that world building should be equated with narrative continuity and coherence. “Transmedia discontinuity” (Hassler-Forest 2014, 103) can itself be a significant factor in shaping producer-fan interactions and extending hyperdiegetic worlds. Second, theories of transmedia worldbuilding have also over-emphasized spatiality (Fast 2012, 313). Perhaps appropriately for an analysis of *Doctor Who*—a show in which the title character is a “Time Lord” from Gallifrey who can travel in time and space thanks to his TARDIS, an extraordinary vessel disguised as a 1960s UK Police Box—I want to focus on the issue of temporality in relation to world building. This will enable me to consider how fans and official producers have significantly co-created the “Whoniverse” from the 1960s to today, both via fans occupying vital production roles and through interactions between the institutions of fandom and production (i.e. informal and formal economies of *Who*’s creation) (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 39). First, though, I will consider how the narrative universe of *Doctor Who* has been—and continues to be—a far from coherent “hyperdiegesis”.

## World Building and Discontinuity

Although the term was used in *Doctor Who—A Celebration* (Haining 1983, 169), the “Whoniverse” referred to then-televised episodes as well as *Doctor*

*Who*'s producers and fan clubs. More recently, the “Whoniverse” has meant the show's overarching diegetic universe, following the model of other pop-cultural “-verses” (Cochran 2015, 160).

However, the Whoniverse has never been marked by consistency (Perryman 2008). As many different production teams have worked on the series over the years, operating in differing industrial contexts, the show has displayed many “contradictions (failing to respect the core consistency audiences expect within a franchise)” (Jenkins 2006, 105). A number of infamous discrepancies include the “UNIT dating” conundrum, which is that lack of clarity concerning which years, or even decades, certain third Doctor (Jon Pertwee) stories are set in; the genesis of the Daleks, which presents incompatible accounts of the creatures' history; the creation of the Cybermen, who appear to have hailed from two home planets; and the Doctor's alien, “half-human”, or human nature, which alters according to whether one is watching the BBC TV series, the BBC/Fox TV Movie from 1996, or the two 1960s Dalek movies (1965 and 1966). As Piers Britton puts it, if this is a hyperdiegesis, then it is a “failure”, repeatedly breaching “its own internal continuity [...] due to [...] sheer [...] duration and proliferation” (Britton 2011, 17). And Colin Harvey similarly notes that although

key storyworld elements of the *Doctor Who* universe—the eccentric protagonist [...], his ability to regenerate, the fact that [...] the TARDIS is bigger on the inside—have accrued over decades to become iconic signifiers of the “Whoniverse,” [...] so have multiple diegetic contradictions and dissonances, within the programme itself but also within multiple other media. (Harvey 2015, 185)

Rather than such “diegetic contradictions and dissonances” somehow being contingent or accidental, Felan Parker argues that the “construction and maintenance of franchise canon is an active, dynamic and multiple process that belies the complete *lack* of consistency or consensus inherent in its own construction” (2013, 158). That is, transmedia and “transfictional” consistency (across media and across a single medium, e.g. TV episodes) need to be produced via industrial paratexts and discourses; they do not necessarily inhere in official media texts. Acknowledging this possibility, Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes between forms of transmedial and transfictional “expansion” that can be “world-preserving” (i.e. the narrative world is expanded upon without contradictions or continuity errors) and “modification” that, instead, fractures processes of world building into “related but different worlds” or worlds that “overlap” with prior continuity

while also differing in problematic ways (Ryan 2013, n.p.). Yet, both Parker and Ryan view transmedial/transfictional coherence as a matter of industrial discourses or practices: neither fully addresses the extent to which fans may themselves discursively convert “modifications” into “expansions”, rather than these analytical categories somehow remaining objectively rooted in “canonical” textual strategies.

Nor does the Whoniverse settle into any newfound full coherence in its most recent BBC Wales’ incarnations. Neil Perryman has discussed continuity disagreements between the BBC online game “Blood of the Cybermen” and the series five (2010) episode “The Pandorica Opens”, noting that some fans were pragmatic in their response to contradictions regarding whether or not companion Amy Pond (Karen Gillan) had encountered the Cybermen: “[T]hey [“Blood of the Cybermen” and “The Pandorica Opens”] clearly don’t fit! Moffat admits he sometimes just says yes to stuff [because] he’s actually focused on the TV product” (an anonymised fan quoted in Perryman 2014, 239).

Continuity problems haven’t just emerged between BBC Wales’ *Doctor Who* and its transmedia extensions; such issues have also afflicted spin-offs such as *Torchwood* (Perryman 2008, 31), as well as surfacing intra-textually in relation to the program’s own (narrative) history. Show-runner Steven Moffat has engaged in audacious narrative gambits such as “rebooting” the entire Whoniverse as well as introducing versions of companion Clara Oswald (Jenna Coleman) throughout the Doctor’s timeline (Hills 2015a, 8). The former development perplexed many fans and, in his critical analysis of series five, Frank Collins observes that “‘The Big Bang’ promulgates a slightly altered *Doctor Who* universe, perhaps one that is so subtly changed that we may never completely grasp the reality of it or, indeed, the full meaning of this” (Collins 2010, 239). Clara’s omnipresence throughout the Doctor’s past also raised the question of how the Time Lord could not have known who she was, with one fan commentator describing the character as a “Continuity Nightmare Child” due to the contradictions and uncertainties that her dissemination (or not) throughout the Doctor’s timeline created:

Of course, with the fresh set of regenerations bestowed upon the Doctor at the end of *The Time of the Doctor*, the events of *The Name of the Doctor* never actually happened, and Clara, therefore, does not enter the Doctor’s timestream ...Is anyone else’s brain dribbling out of their ears? (Elliott 2014, 334—335)

In each of these cases, Moffat appears to be less concerned with engineering a fully coherent Whoniverse than with creating shock effects that are suited

to respective season finales. Or, to put it another way, his focus is on the impact of specific story resolutions rather than on the overall coherence and narrative integration of *Doctor Who*'s longer history. This may help to construct finale episodes as "event" TV, but it also demonstrates the tension between serialized narrative reveals or "modifications" and transmedia storytelling construed as narrative "expansion" (Ryan, online). At the same time, though, Moffat aligns his work on *Who* with discourses of art and authorship (Chapman 2013, 277), introducing new narrative possibilities that the show has never explored before, whether this involves the Doctor travelling back through his own past adventures ("The Big Bang") or Clara hurtling into his timeline ("The Name of the Doctor"). Rather than merely identifying and then reproducing "rules" of the Whoniverse, Moffat's work as show-runner has often operated transgressively, precisely in order to surprise fans and destabilize their assumptions and established knowledge. Thus, the Time War is undone in "The Day of the Doctor" (2013), as well as a new version of the Doctor, the War Doctor (John Hurt), being introduced.

Moffat is, as a highly knowledgeable fan himself, interested in shaping novel forms of *Who* that subvert or complicate fan lore—not least of which has been his (sub)textual sexualization of the character—rather than integrating material into received wisdom and received back-stories. Just as science fiction involves imagining a "novum"—something changed in the norms of culture or the current knowledge of science—Moffat has insistently developed a "fan-cultural novum" by reimagining the possibilities of *Doctor Who*. World building, in this case, does not mean iterating more of the same—or simply adding to a stockpile of narrative facts or lists—it means deliberately defamiliarizing "*fan culturally acquired logics of continuity and characterization*" (Hills 2015a, 9).

This adoption of world building "discontinuity" therefore gives long-term fans "unexpected variations on familiar narratives", such as a mayfly Doctor or a contemporary companion being introduced into canonical events like the first Doctor (William Hartnell) leaving Gallifrey (Hassler-Forest 2014, 103). But its playful, innovative engagement with fan cultural capital also works to comply "with the [...] narrative conventions of Quality TV" (ibid.) by stressing authorial agency, novelty, and complexity over fan-culturally (and transmedially) normative shackles of established continuity (Mittell 2015, 265).

It is tempting to analytically carve the Whoniverse's discontinuities into different eras and industrial practices, with much classic *Doctor Who* offering "an expansion of the fictional world" via tie-ins, merchandising, and adaptations, but without "integration [...] [with] the television programme" (Evans 2011, 23). By contrast, we could suggest that BBC Wales' *Who* displays

“a shift in transmedia practice” (ibid.) whereby narrative integration across media platforms and merchandising is greatly enhanced, even if errors are made and even while discontinuity (or neo-continuity) is embraced as an aesthetic, authorial principle. Yet, such a binary position—of old/new *Who*, or an older “licensing system” versus contemporary transmedia discourses (Jenkins 2006, 105)—can’t discern specific differences within “new *Who*” as well as longer-term similarities across the program’s history. Particular events in the cultural career of BBC Wales’ *Doctor Who*, such as 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations in 2013, have reconfigured how world-building coherence is self-reflexively drawn on and displayed. In the webisode prequel “Night of the Doctor” and anniversary special “Day of the Doctor”, what Roberta Pearson and Maire Messenger Davies term “extended seriality” (2014, 128) was deployed as a kind of celebratory stunt (see, also: Valentina Re’s chapter in this volume). “Extended seriality” involves crafting explicit connections across otherwise distant, detached moments in a long-running franchise; here, the Whoniverse was unusually stitched together into what fan critics Brian J. Robb and Paul Simpson describe as a “superlative unification of classic- and new-era *Doctor Who* in [...] a single, unbroken narrative” (2015, 309). Not only were all the Doctors united in saving their home planet, but “Night of the Doctor” also featured the eighth Doctor, Paul McGann, regenerating into a new body, thus presenting long-term fans with a missing link in the overarching Whoniverse—something they had waited to see for many years, and a hyperdiegetic event that integrated the 1996 TV Movie into BBC Wales’ *Who*. To see this heightened hyperdiegetic, transmedia integration merely as part of a wider industry shift would be to miss its particular status as a “gift” to fandom (Hills 2015b, 41) and as an anniversary “milestone moment” (Holdsworth 2011, 36).

The binary of licensing discontinuity versus transmedia coherence also assumes that fandom always desires canonical narrative coherence or integration. But inconsistencies across different production teams or eras of *Doctor Who* can facilitate creative fan retconning (“retroactive continuity”), as well as what Paul Booth calls “narractivity” (2010, 105) in which “fans assimilate individual units of narrative knowledge and, as a community, re-enact and reform them in new ways” (ibid., 104). Continuity errors facilitate fan debate and enable fans’ attempts to fill in gaps or smooth over contradictions (Jenkins 1992, 102—103). Such errors also mean that fans can treat a rickety hyperdiegesis as a series of possibilities whereby continuity can be “gleaned” from available options by discounting some and prioritizing others (Garvey 2013, p. 47—48). Such textual gleaning also makes hyperdiegesis “neutrosemic”—that is, rather than fans simply

accepting strictures of canon, they can demarcate which continuity they favor. As Dan Hassler-Forest has pointed out, this proffers a

flexible type of transmedia practice [and] increases the franchise's commodity value dramatically because it allows for numerous entry points [...] [However,] this transmedia strategy in which continuity and discontinuity exist side by side is always in danger of proliferating in ways that are perceived as inauthentic and [...] unattractive to [...] established audiences. (2014, 104)

Although there may be a danger of specific incarnations being viewed as "inauthentic" *Who* by fans—whether this is a half-human 1990s Doctor or an entirely human 1960s version in the Dalek movies—such fan evaluations remain open to revision over time. Cornel Sandvoss positions neutrosemia as a narcissistic act of self-reflection in which fans embrace versions of a fan object that mirrors their prior sense of self (2005, 126). Likewise, Timothy Corrigan argues that the "art of world-making' builds [...] knowledges [...] [in] relatively closed communities who, in a sense, perform only themselves [...]. Within contemporary cultures of fandoms, world-building [...] and contemporary appropriative activities [...] describe a spirit of an age defined by [...] digital narcissism" (2015, 55).

Yet, these invocations of narcissism underplay the extent to which navigating transmedia discontinuity, as a fan and in order to actively shape a preferred and coherent continuity, is a dynamic process involving multiple factions of a fan community. Thus, *contra* Sandvoss, one is not locked into a mirroring relationship between text and self, but is instead involved in engaging dialogically with fan sub-communities. And *contra* Corrigan, neither is one enclosed by a community performing only itself—quite to the contrary, gleaning hyperdiegetic continuity out of discontinuity means interacting with other fans, and other factions, who have differently evaluated *Doctor Who's* merchandising, spin-offs, tie-in novels, and audios. Such "narrativity" hence persists in a variety of ways, rather than "old" *Who* merely frustrating fans focused on continuity and "new" post-2005 *Who* straightforwardly rewarding fannish interests. Since BBC Wales' *Doctor Who* itself acts as a hyperdiegetic continuation of the series cancelled in 1989, then all preceding versions of the show remain in play in fan debate rather than being definitively over-written—this, too, makes it very difficult to separate different eras or industry discourses of transmedia, since all the strata in *Who's* hyperdiegetic development can be relevant to fandom's "transmedia memory" (Harvey 2015, 182). All variations of the Whoniverse

remain open to fans' gleaning for continuity in a "game" of interpretation (Parkin and Pearson 2012, 23).

This state of affairs—in which *Doctor Who* has been and continues to be, marked by hyperdiegetic discontinuity—raises the issue of just how important fan practices have been to its world building. In the following section, I will argue that, over time, the Whoniverse has been significantly co-created by fans and official producers. World building implies a temporal dimension, as audiences are introduced to additional details of a narrative, and as creators elaborate upon a narrative universe. But such temporality also means that world building can be collaborative, unfolding between professional and fan "creators" and, hence, becoming a matter of pro-am (professional-amateur) "world-sharing" as well as being distributed across different production teams (Johnson 2013, 109). Indeed, world building can also traverse generational time, as fans become media professionals in their own right.

## World Building and Diachrony

When I introduced the notion of hyperdiegesis in *Fan Cultures*, I viewed this as a textual attribute, "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen [...] within the text" (Hills 2002, 137). The difficulty of viewing narrative spaces in this way is that such a textualist perspective neglects audiences' "narrativity" (Booth 2010, 105) and the extent to which, as Henry Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture*, world building is "bigger even than the franchise—since fan speculation and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions" (2006, 114). Even here, though, Jenkins places fans' contributions to world building "outside" the franchise (i.e. as non-canonical and happening elsewhere, beyond primary textual confines as a kind of "meta-text") (Jenkins, 1992, 98). Mark J.P. Wolf, in *Building Imaginary Worlds*, makes a related assumption:

Fans who are serious about contributing canonical material to a world can become employees or freelancers, or in some cases, even the torchbearers assigned to continue a world (as is the case with lifelong *Doctor Who* fan Steven Moffat [...]). However [...] the majority of them are on the lower end of the hierarchies of authorship. (2012, 280)

Again, this suggests that the majority of fan contributions to world building occur as non-canon, exceptions to this rule happening only when fans enter

the official production process as media professionals, whether working as “torchbearers” (i.e. showrunners in positions of textual authority) or as “freelancers” (i.e. as tie-in authors subordinated to franchise guidelines; see: Clarke 2013, 79 and 85; Johnson 2013, 150). There is a type of pro-am “world-sharing among creative workers and communities” here (Johnson 2013, 109), but it is one in which fan contributions to world building tend to be recognized and accrue forms of authority, only on the basis of showrunner-fandom or other varieties of professionalized fan status.

Set against such accounts, I want to suggest that viewing *Doctor Who*’s hyperdiegesis as textual—and, hence, as locked into canonical narrative universes—means neglecting the extent to which formal (producer) and informal (fan) economies surrounding the show can interact over time, and not only via the mediating lenses of professionalized or corporately “enfranchised” fandom (ibid., 229). Hyperdiegesis can, instead, operate *as a reading strategy*, and, hence, as a way of narratively reading-for-coherence that is produced through fanworks in ways that then, potentially, feed back into official production. It is thus important to move from an excessively textualist view of hyperdiegesis to one that acknowledges the accumulative and diachronic significance of fan paratexts (Jenkins 1992, 98—107; Gray 2010, 162—163 and 2015, 232). Indeed, Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas’s work sets out a series of ways in which the interdependency of formal and informal media economies can be recognized:

*functions, effects and controls* [...] provide a way of thinking about the boundaries and linkages between formality and informality, across multiple dimensions. *Functions* are ways that informal elements get used within a formal media market. [...] *Effects* describe what may happen to a particular media economy [...] when informal elements are incorporated into formal systems over time. *Controls* are ways of managing, organizing or understanding informality. (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 30)

Work in fan/production studies has typically focused on the “controls” side of this equation, suggesting that informal practices such as fan tourism—where fans travel on pilgrimages to visit filming locations and sacralized sites linked to their beloved media texts—can be mimicked via “convergent incorporation” into corporate settings such as the “*Doctor Who* Experience” (Booth 2015, 120—121). In this case, *Doctor Who* fans’ interest in visiting locations linked to the show’s production in Cardiff is co-opted by a commercially-run BBC Worldwide exhibition and “walk-through” interactive mock-up of the program’s hyperdiegetic world, both of which are located



in Cardiff Bay, adjacent to the Roath Lock studios where *Who* is filmed. Similarly, fan creativity can be incorporated into industrial models via “consumer enfranchisement” (Johnson 2013, 230); Amazon’s “Kindle Worlds” initiative offers one example of this process, though *Doctor Who* is not one of its authorized franchises. Here, relations between fans and producers are policed from both sides (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Hadas and Shifman 2013, 288): producers effectively delimit how fans should be creative, and fans have little choice other than to assent to the rules of the game if they want to participate. The BBC’s 2015 “Mission Dalek” competition represented a *Who* example of this “consumer enfranchisement”, with UK fans being invited to use “rights-cleared assets” (i.e. authorized programme clips) to make and submit their own 90-second digital adventures.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of “functions,” rather different relationships between the informal and formal can be discerned in relation to *Who*’s hyperdiegesis, such as superfan Ian Levine working on the 1980s programme as an (uncredited) advisor to the programme’s then-producer John Nathan-Turner, in order that the show’s history could be accurately honored (in actuality, this did not completely avoid continuity errors being made). In terms of “effects,” *Doctor Who* began to significantly incorporate informal elements into its formal economy during the so-called “wilderness years” when the program was off-air. As Miles Booy has argued:

In 1975, when the [*Doctor Who*] Appreciation Society was formed, the show, its fans and its spin-off products were discrete entities with few sustained points of connection. Fandom—such as it was—was invisible to the general public and merchandising was mostly aimed at schoolchildren. [...] In the 1990s, in the absence of a television programme [...] the three once-distinct areas of “show”, merchandise and fandom [...] merged completely. (Booy 2012, 2)

If, by “the early years of the new millennium, fans had completely taken over all official merchandise lines” (ibid., 171), then this would also set the stage for fans who had previously written original spin-off novels and built up TV experience to migrate into the official TV production at senior levels. One end result of this, or “effect” in Lobato and Thomas’s terms, was that BBC Wales’ *Doctor Who* acted as a kind of “fanbrand” (Hills 2010, 66 and 2014, 110), incorporating high levels of fan knowledge and fan-cultural awareness along with industry/BBC norms of “360 degree commissioning” and transmedia practice. Indeed, it would be reasonable to argue that the move to a more integrated transmedia *Doctor Who*—albeit simultaneously

marked by continuity errors and by parallel, discontinuous audio and comic strip versions of the series—was itself over-determined, drawing as much on fannish readings-for-hyperdiegesis as on industry developments.

These developments in fan-producer relations also illuminate the need for a diachronic approach to hyperdiegesis and its emergence through formal-informal interactions, rather than addressing such world building synchronically as an intra-textual formation or a matter of encyclopedic fan wikis. Adopting a diachronic view of world building means being able to consider how taxonomies of transmedia storytelling, for example, may not only act as different options, but may also work sequentially as ways in which fans can gradually move “between *peripheral* and *central* forms of power” in terms of (trans)media production (Fast 2012, 324). Colin B. Harvey’s tripartite schema of detached, devolved, and directed transmedia storytelling (2015, 187—189), for example, captures some fans’ career moves from unofficial and fan-targeted world building (e.g. the Faction Paradox novels that link into BBC Books’ *Doctor Who* New Adventures without using copyrighted characters) to licensed but uneasily non-canonical or officially over-writable world building (e.g. Big Finish audios that may not be recognized in televised *Who*) and then to strictly controlled transmedia extensions integrated into a canonical hyperdiegesis. Rather than simply existing as alternatives, the history of relations between *Who* fandom and official production has been one of movement between these modes, with “devolved” hyperdiegetic extension sometimes acting as an intermediary position between “detached” fan fiction and fully canonical or “directed” productivity.

Only a limited number of fans are able to successfully pursue a career path from “detached” to “directed” world-building, but this does not mean that “rank and file” fandom has no relationship to canonical world-building in the Whoniverse. In fact, the end-title credit for the show’s lead character was altered from “Doctor Who” to “The Doctor” in 1982 when producer John Nathan Turner acknowledged fan advice, only reverting to “Doctor Who” in 2005. This latter change was presumably a result of show-runner-fan Russell T. Davies wanting to avoid the new show being seen as overtly fannish, as well as harking back to the program’s origins and the more casual, non-fan audience’s recollection of the title character being “Doctor Who”. It was only when life-long fan David Tennant took on the title role, after *Who* had again become a huge industry-recognized success, that the fan authenticity and fan cultural capital of “The Doctor” was officially, paratextually restored as an end-credit. Each shift to “The Doctor” was not a way of policing or controlling fans’ informal practices; it was, rather, *a recognition effect* within

the canonical TV programme of the accumulated density of (fan-culturally normative) paratexts that understood the character to be “the Doctor”, as well as fans’ hyperdiegetic speculations over the titles of renegade Time Lords such as the Master and the Doctor. Such interactions between informal and formal understandings of the Whoniverse are not merely about fans becoming professionalized and working in/on the program itself—they are also a matter of fan talk, interpretation, and writing, over time, accruing a weight of collective validity.

Fannish reading-for-hyperdiegesis is markedly evident in fan publications such as *Ahistory* (Parkin and Pearson 2012) and *Lost in Time and Space: An Unofficial Guide to the Uncharted Journeys of Doctor Who* (Elliott 2014). Where the former aims to compile a sequential timeline of all events in the Whoniverse, reconciling contradictory or “failed” hyperdiegetic elements, the latter compiles all of the Doctor’s adventures that have been referred to canonically without actually being depicted. A mass of conflicting information is thus organized chronologically by Lance Parkin and Lars Pearson, while Matthew J. Elliott treats often throwaway remarks (providing humor in their original narrative contexts, or demonstrating the Doctor to be an incorrigible name-dropper) as a further source of coherent world building to be catalogued and thematically grouped together. In each instance, these fan practices work more as *world projecting* rather than world building—that is, they desire and project a consistent, coherent hyperdiegesis that is very much not given canonically. By projecting the Whoniverse, expert fan paratexts work to anticipate and co-create the show’s expansive narrative world through a form of “distributed expertise” (Banks 2013, 114). Such “collaborative creativity aims to bring into focus the multiplicity of modes of production [...] Whose creativity is valued; whose is recognized and within which spheres?” (Condry 2013, 206). This co-creation does not deny the powerful institutional and creative roles performed by official producers, but it remains possible—even while noting that this is not a “genuinely ‘participatory culture’” of absolute equals (Fast 2012, 319)—to map the variety of ways in which informal fan practices of world projecting and formal production practices of world building become diachronically intertwined and interconnected nonetheless. Studying similar processes in relation to anime, Ian Condry has written of the “soul” of anime as a matter of collaborative creativity and “collective energy” (2013, 111). While observing that the term “soul” here may carry “possibly problematic connotations” (ibid., 205), Condry continues to insist on it “as a kind of energy that arises [...] out of collective action” (ibid., 30).

Yet the notion of a "soul" to world building, emerging through collective fan interpretations and projections of coherence, may be more than "problematic". It threatens to displace any critical reading of world building with ineffable religiosity, despite the fact that "[c]apitalist valorization [...] depends on the development of worlds" (Steinberg 2012, 183). Indeed, Marc Steinberg draws on Maurizio Lazzarato's work to argue "that contemporary capitalism is characterized not so much by the creation of products but by the creation of worlds" (ibid.). In such an argument, it is not that "the difference between a brand community member [...] and a fan [...] seem[s] moot" (Kozinets 2014, 171), but rather that these positions are actively made to coincide due to processes of "convergent incorporation" (Booth 2015, 103). But again, to see this only as a matter of industrial processes aiming to control informal fan activities means missing the ways that, diachronically, formal-informal interdependencies arise.

Colin Harvey argues that "transmedia memory" can "constitute [...] a conflict between fans who want to remember elements [...] of a franchise's diegesis and the intentions of IP holders who would rather 'non-remember' specific elements" (2015, 97). But this conflict can work in more complex ways: in relation to the Whoniverse, it was a dominant section of fandom who sought to "non-remember" and dismiss the discontinuity of the eighth Doctor's half-human status in the TV Movie (1996), thereby restoring overarching narrative coherence. This fan conflict (with other factions of fandom, devolved transmedia producers and TV producers) was itself recognized and validated in *Doctor Who's* canon when show-runner-fans Russell T. Davies and Steven Moffat ignored the Doctor's contentious semi-humanity in the show's return, as well as in Paul McGann's return to the role, in which his Doctor describes himself straightforwardly as a "Time Lord". Thus, "non-memory" can migrate from fans' world projecting to the canonical world building carried out by successive production teams, working to exnominate (if not exterminate) inconsistencies that emerged via the creative regeneration or reimagination of the franchise by prior producers. Some auteurist discontinuities are diachronically embraced by fandom and appreciated after the fact (Gallifrey's radical reinvention in "The Deadly Assassin" in 1976 proved to be one such case), whereas others are consigned to fannish and canonical "non-memory" over time. Rather than "world-sharing" across different production teams and across formal-informal interactions, "producers and communities within media franchising [...] make claims to creative identity [...] In making these claims to creativity, moreover, these producers often pursue textual strategies of difference" (Johnson 2013, 151). But not all such claims, and all such

differences or discontinuities, are carried forward: in some cases, there is in fact a kind of *world blocking*, as previous creative reinventions are dropped, edited out, and non-remembered. In such cases, fans are not coincident with members of a brand community, as their conflictual “non-memory” can be a way of seeking to deny unwanted canonical twists and developments that are viewed as very much going in “the wrong direction” (Fast 2012, 319).

To conclude, the Whoniverse has been marked by “transmedia discontinuity”, and this is something that persists in its current incarnations. However, such discontinuity—linked to an array of versions of *Doctor Who* whose canonical status is unclear—means that fans can select which continuities they favor, as well as carry out activities of world projecting in the form of debating textual evidence. Such discontinuity cannot solely be aligned with fan frustrations over “inauthentic” *Who*—it is rooted in the program’s history, and facilitates fan creativity while condensing together what are otherwise assumed to be different models of transmedia practice. Discontinuity emerges, perhaps unexpectedly, via the work of show-runner-fans, especially Steven Moffat’s shaping of a “fan-cultural novum” that challenges established fan lore in ways aligned with auteurist discourse.

The Whoniverse also needs to be considered diachronically. It has no singular “big bang”; it has coalesced over time, with the Doctor’s home planet first being named as Gallifrey in 1969, despite the program beginning in 1963. Importantly, the Whoniverse has also emerged diachronically as a result of interactions and relations between fandom and official production; as Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman have noted, “transmedia storytelling has been not only a narrative practice but also a social one across a range of historical moments” (Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman 2014, 75). Fans’ meta-textual world projecting has led to reconfigured world building within *Doctor Who*’s canon, even down to the naming of the lead character. Fan constructions of a coherent Whoniverse have also been mediated via what Colin Harvey terms “devolved” transmedia storytelling, as well as through strategic “non-memory”, such as the eighth Doctor’s half-human nature latterly being ignored by show-runner-fans.

Although world building may sometimes be assumed to be a matter of (transmedia) narrative integration and coherence, this chapter has argued that vast world building can flourish, over many years, while such criteria aren’t observed. Fans have co-created the Whoniverse in ways that are not merely “controlled” by official producers but are also diachronically recognized within the program’s canon. As such, narratologically separating

out transfictional/transmedia “modifications” of a diegetic world and “expansions” of that world (Ryan 2013, n.p.)—in which the former fracture world building coherence and the latter preserve a singular transmedial world—fails to perceive how fan audiences can themselves manage contradictory textual “modifications” and reconstruct them, over time, as “expansions” of the Whoniverse. Seriality and transmediality are fundamentally interwoven here, with fan practices helping to generate and conserve a transmedial world in the face of serialized textual differences, dissonances, and contradictions (often occurring across different production teams in a very long-running show such as *Doctor Who*). Hyperdiegesis, I have argued—*contra* my prior use of the term—is not just a textual attribute inciting fan affects/speculations. Rather, it is the medium *and* the outcome of *Doctor Who* fans’ world-projecting activities.

## Note

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1RwGn6j1rHGRJKjwzBFm25t/mission-dalek-competition-uk-residents-only>.

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- 'The Deadly Assassin' (1976 *Doctor Who* story) dr: David Maloney, wr: Robert Holmes, BBC TV.
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- 'The Pandorica Opens' (2010 *Doctor Who* episode) dr: Toby Haynes, wr: Steven Moffat, BBC Wales.
- 'The Time of the Doctor' (2013 *Doctor Who* episode) dr: Jamie Payne, wr: Steven Moffat, BBC Wales.
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### About the author

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## 20. Transmediaphilia, World Building, and the Pleasures of the Personal Digital Archive

*Jim Collins*

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### Abstract

In this paper, I'll begin by tracing the historical context for world building as enactment of fandom, primarily by constructing an arc between the golden age of cinephilia and the current state of transmediaphilia. How do both of these taste ideologies depend on the acquisition of a certain kind of media literacy, subcultural affiliation, and modes of both accessing and reconfiguring popular archives made up of the accumulation of textual universes formerly considered to be disposable entertainment? Once I've established the most productive points of contact, I'll focus on the impact of portable digital devices as breeder-reactors of world building due the inherently transmediated nature of the devices themselves and the play-listing mentality of the popular archivists who use them.

**Keywords:** Transmediation; World building; Digital devices; Individual fan; Digital subjectivity

Within the past decade, narratives universes as different as Marvel superheroes and Jane Austen have become worlds that you *do something with*, functioning not just as especially satisfying fictional realms that offer a unique set of delights but as instigations for further expansion and extension. One could argue this was anticipated by the intertextuality that was such a prominent feature of the postmodern narratives of the 1980s that made it so abundantly clear that the edges of textual universes were far more permeable than previously imagined and escaping those strictures generated a new kind of entertainment value. While the generic hybridity

of films such as *Blade Runner*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Near Dark* may have been fueled by an exuberant determination to appropriate and extend narrative universes, it was conducted by pedigreed creative artists like Ridley Scott, David Lynch, and Kathryn Bigelow. There was *Blade Runner* but no *BladeRunnerland* that was extended in carefully coordinated and equally robust uncoordinated ways. The *appropriation franchise*, as it were has been extended to conglomerates, as well as amateur fans, and a whole spectrum of world builders in between. Just as the extravagant intertextuality of postmodern narratives of the 1980s signaled a new phase in the history of popular storytelling that seemed to call out for media theory that could account for that expanded narrativity, the frenetic narrative world building of contemporary popular culture needs to be accounted for by new forms of media theory that might get a handle on the interplay between textuality and digital technology, and between curatorship and subjectivity.

So then how do we build a theory of world building as a form of narrativity that generates such robust new forms of cultural pleasure? In his book *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J. P. Wolf argues that imaginary worlds differ from traditional media entities in that,

they are often transnarrative and transmedial in form, encompassing books, films, games, video, websites and even reference works like dictionaries, glossaries, atlases, encyclopedias and more. Stories written by different authors can be set in the same world, so imaginary worlds can be transauthorial as well. Worlds that extend and expand across multiple media are now common and a world might even become a brand name or a franchise, with new stories, locations, and characters continually being added. (Wolf 2012, 3)

In this article, I want to build on Wolf's account of the structuration of those worlds by focusing on what animates that world building and where it *takes place*. More specifically, I investigate world building as a taste formation shaped by forms of *transmediaphilia* that are turned into built environments within the digital devices of individual fans. That inquiry necessarily involves a consideration of how "storage" has become a form of self-expression and identity formation a matter of assemblage.

I'd like to start with a tableau shot, namely one that provides us with a paradigmatic visualization of world building of the traditional sort that I'll then use as a point of departure for the examining of that animates world building within digital devices. The scene occurs late in Michael Chabon's novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), a Pulitzer Prize-winning

literary novel that is also an exercise in elaborate world building since that novel is so self-consciously built out of bits from the superhero comic books that Chabon has been obsessed with since childhood. The novel follows the lives of two Jewish cousins who become major figures in the rise of the Golden Age of the comic book, a Czech artist named Joe Kavalier and an American-born writer named Sam Clay. They enjoy great success with their featured character “The Escapist”, an anti-fascist superhero who combines characteristics of Captain America, Batman, The Phantom, and The Scarlet Pimpernel. Chabon fills the novel with references to Jack Kirby, Will Eisner, Stan Lee, Jim Steranko, Joe Schuster, and Jerry Siegel, all of whom circulate through this fictional universe as contemporaries of Kavalier and Clay. When Chabon’s narrator reflects directly on the genesis of Superman, he says, “The writer, Jerome Siegel had forged, through the smelting intensity of his fanatical love and compendious knowledge of the pulps and their antecedents, a magical alloy of several previous characters and archetypes from Samson to Doc Savage,” (Chabon 2000, 77).

The novel culminates with a kind of tableau shot that is the pure distillation of world building as an ever more sophisticated exercise in “textual smelting” in which narrative alloys generate only more narrative alloys. Joe Kavalier embarks on what will become his magnum opus, a 2,256 page “comic book novel” entitled *The Golem*. As Kavalier writes this masterpiece, he immerses himself in an archive he has assembled, literally surrounding himself with stacks of complete runs of Captain America, Classics Illustrated and dozens of other comics. Out of the massive comics library that he’s collected and curated, he manages to turn his own graphic novel into a “means of self-expression as potent as a Cole Porter tune in the hands of a Lester Young.” (ibid., 577).

While the novel and its various inspirations are already engaged in a kind of transmediated relationship, Chabon’s determination to create an actual comic book based on the adventures of The Escapist takes that transmediation a step further by turning the fictional Escapist comic book within his novel into a *real* Escapist comic book published by Dark Horse comics beginning in 2004, drawn by legends such as Howard Chaykin, Will Eisner, and William Sienkiewicz. Most interestingly, all of these additional adventures share the same conceit—that The Escapist actually was a *real* Golden Age Comic book now being resurrected, complete with elaborately fictionalized publication information that takes as a given that the meta-fictional comic book invented by Chabon was an actual comic book published in the 1940s, which later inspired *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. Here, we have narrative world building created at warp speed, imagining layers of

sedimentations of previous Escapist narratives some actually written and/or drawn, but most of them completely imaginary.

This image of Joe Cavalier in epicenter of all this world building, feverishly “smelting” a graphic novel out of the stacks of comics surrounding him is a perfect visualization of both the archive where his world building takes place and the process by which he extends and expands his megametaverse. Everything is predicated on Joe’s role as a curator and his fan knowledge becomes a built environment. Here the *mise-en-scène* envisions not just world building, but the taste culture that animates it. Everything is predicated on the arrangement of the archive. Joe’s narrative world building is driven by his obsessive love for the comics, which is thoroughly intertwined with his vast knowledge of them as a singular form of visual narrative. As such, his singular obsession with the comics bears a strong resemblance to cinephilia, a point Chabon makes repeatedly throughout the novel but nowhere more explicitly than when Joe goes to see *Citizen Kane* and realizes that a popular visual entertainment can become a form of genuine artistic expression.

The invocation of cinephilia is not surprising since it was the first and most successful taste formation committed to spinning disposable entertainment into gold based on the precise calibration of fan obsession. But how does it relate to the transmediaphilia I refer to in the title of this article? Constructing an arc between classical cinephilia and contemporary transmediaphilia is, admittedly, a rather bizarre, counter-intuitive move since even Wikipedia tells us that world building first emerged in the science fiction writers workshops in the 1970s, not the *Cinémathèque Française* in the 1950s. If we prefer to start the history of world building with the rise of media conglomeration, the relevance of cinephilia seems even more dubious since the films that function as high concept tent-poles within that business model are generally thought to be anything but art cinema. Even if one was determined, for some perverse need, to do a comparative analysis of these two philias, it would be far easier to see them as fundamentally contradictory phenomena and be done with it—cinephilia, after all, was expressed by celebrating one medium above all others and relishing its singularity, a point made most succinctly by Susan Sontag:

Cinephilia—the name of a very specific kind of love that cinema inspired. Each art breeds its fanatics. The love that cinema inspired was special. It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art form unlike any other. Cinema had apostles. (It was like religion). Cinema was a crusade. [...] You fell in love not just with actors but with cinema itself. (Sontag 1996, 135)

The opening scene of Bertolucci's film *The Dreamers* visualizes this same love of cinema itself, the same need to make pilgrimages to sacred places such as the Cinémathèque française to congregate, because congregating became a way of consecrating the value of the fan ritual. This would seem to be anything but the relentless migratory behavior required by transmediation in which the movement *across* multiple media is what generates maximum pleasure and travel to pilgrimage sites outside of your laptop seems somehow medieval. Cinephilia fetishized the uniqueness of the auteur's vision; transmediaphilia privileges the only elasticity of the category of authorship. To make matters worse, cinephilia and transmediaphilia are often set, implicitly or explicitly, on either side of the great digital media divide, which adds a generational conflict to that mix.

So then what is the point of trying to construct some kind of historical arc that connects them? What can we learn about world building as form of passionate fandom that seems to have consigned cinephilia to media antiquity? I want to pursue this comparative analysis because it allows us to develop a far more precise understanding of the cultural value of media fandom and the worlds built out of those articulations of popular taste. I know full well that the very choice of the term as shared category for these two philias is itself a fraught rhetorical move since the golden age of cinephilia had come and gone before the advent of what is generally thought to be *fandom*, and the affiliation with like-minded souls at cinematic pilgrimage sites was exercise in what was thought to be a highly cerebral form of cultural appreciation, anything but the mere enthusiasm usually associated with fandom. In her essay "Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies, and Sherlockians", Roberta Pearson argues that "fan" is a problematic term for what she calls the adherents of high culture because they tend consider themselves anything but mere fans (2007). Despite that resistance, I want to use the term fan for comparative purposes because it allows us to make finer distinctions about what animates contemporary world building and how *use value of media knowledge* changes over time.

Both cinephilia and transmediaphilia are enactments of fandom that involve a complicated interplay between narrativity, personal taste, and social affiliation. In each case, world building depends on a reservoir of accumulated narratives subject to endless re-narrativization, whether that reservoir be the films of auteur directors or franchise heroes. Those narratives form what we might now call a database (a term I'll return to later). But the database of narratives is inseparable from the mechanisms of cultural evaluation—taste *always* stays in the picture. Cinephilia was a pivotal development in the history of the use value of media knowledge

because it required a specialized literacy to enact one's fandom. By generating its own evaluative criteria to distinguish fine films from mere movies, it gave value to work of certain auteurs but, at the same time, it bestowed value on the specialized group of viewers who were properly initiated. In other words, it was a theory of authorship that came with its own implicit theory of fandom. The co-dependent relationship of the personal vision of the director and the expansive cinematic literacy of the cinephile viewer within a new media culture it required was articulated by Alexandre Astruc in his legendary "Caméra Stylo" essay first published in 1948.

It must be understood that up to now the cinema has been nothing more than a show. This is due to the basic fact that all films are projected in an auditorium. But with the development of 16mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector, will go to a local bookstore and hire films written on any subject. (Astruc [1948] 1968, 12).

Cinephilia, then, was the other half of an enlightened exchange that depended on a reservoir of films but was never a matter of merely watching. It was an exercise of connoisseurship that generated cultural value for a certain way of seeing and a subculture of viewers who could *talk the talk* and participate in its rituals. This need to turn specialized knowledge into performativity became a kind of world building that began to redraw the distinctions between passionate fan and creative artist. Constructing an auteurist signature was itself a form of critical world building in which the latent was made manifest in the form of *oeuvre* constructed as much by the cinephile as by the auteur. The metaphor Peter Wollen uses to describe auteurism epitomizes this relationship. According to Wollen, the auteur's films are like a series of dreams read symptomatically by the cinephile critic who builds a unified cinematic universe out of those fragments. The director constructs the films, but the cinephile constructs the *oeuvre*, which is itself a world built out of film narratives and taste distinctions derived from cinematic literacy.

The fluidity of the relationship between cinephile fan and auteur defined the career arc of a variety of New Wave and Film School Generation directors. In Godard's *À bout de souffle* the characters circulate in a fictional universe that overlaps with Jean Pierre Melville's film *Bob Le Flambeur*. In *The Dreamers*, Bertolucci fashions a world out of Godard's *Bande à part* when his characters decide to recreate the famous run through the Louvre scene from the latter, and Bertolucci creates a hybrid cinematic world by cross-cutting between Godard's characters and his own characters racing



along the same course. Perhaps the most vivid example of the cinephilia as a process of world building on film is the Jack Rabbit Slims sequence in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Vincent Vega cruises through a retro-diner fabricated entirely out of citations to Tarantino's favorite films, songs, and television series. The cinephile archive becomes narrative location, taste as custom-built textuality.

While it is tempting to argue that Godard, Bertolucci, and Tarantino were fan-boy auteurs long before Josh Whedon and J.J. Abrams, I'd rather use these example for other purposes (see: Scott on the concept of fan-boy auteur). First, it allows us to sharpen our distinctions between world building and transmediation since *À bout de souffle*, *Dreamers*, and *Pulp Fiction* are all instances of elaborate world building that aren't especially transmedial. One could argue that Jack Rabbit Slims sequence moves in the direction of transmediation insofar as the built archive includes television and pop music as well as favorite movies, but there is no metaverse with multiple points of entry.

Another key point needs to be made about Jack Rabbit Slims, however, that projects us solidly into contemporary digital culture. Tarantino's personal archive of cinematic pleasure anticipates exactly the kind of world building that fans engage in on their digital devices. Anybody with a digital device has the capability to construct their own transmediated version of Jack Rabbit Slims. Transmediation, by definition, occurs across different media and therefore depends on the multiplication of screens, but digital devices such as smart tablets and e-readers have vastly expanded the number of people who engage in transmediation on a regular basis. The multiple functionality of the device makes world building of the traditional variety infinitely easier if that world is built of MP3 files and websites and, as such, the Apple iPad or Kindle Fire could just as easily be called Additive Comprehension Express. What I mean by multiple functionality is the way in the smart device is simultaneously playback screen, personal archive, and portal to the internet. These are the screens on which transmediation *takes place* first by reconfiguring the relationship between media by making them all appear on the same playback screen. The screen on which I watch *Sherlock* or *Parade's End*, is the same screen on which I read my e-book edition of either one and both form part of the personal digital libraries that sit inside that screen. When novels, films, television programs, and songs are all files downloadable from the same sites, all playback-able on the same portable devices, they are all different incarnations of the same screen culture.

Digital devices aren't just the newest delivery system for standard forms media entertainment. Their co-presence on the same playback screens, in

the same personal digital archives become a new supra-medium in which watching, reading, listening, and surfing the net are all subsumable to the pleasure of playlisting. I use the term playlisting here to refer not just to lists of songs one might compose but as a *mentalité*, a way of constructing a more or less coherent personal identity cut to the exact measure of our personal cultural obsessions we assemble in our digital archives. In this context, world building becomes as a kind of self-assemblage in and through the archives behind that screen and the websites we visit. To return to the image of Joe Kavalier as master curator immersed in his own archive made out of the stacks of his favorite comics, transmediaphile world builders are immersed in remarkably comparable archives, virtual but nonetheless vital, surrounded by carefully curated private libraries of their various cultural obsessions.

This self-fashioning out of the archives of cultural obsession requires a rigorous conception of the individual fan—exactly what has been largely ignored by fan studies that has privileged forms of fandom defined exclusively in terms of social networks. That there have been very few attempts to grapple with the notion of the individual fan within the field of fan studies is, to a certain extent understandable-- individual fans don't generate texts that can be easily analysed in the form of websites or fanfics, nor do they congregate in easily observable, media-magnet phenomena such as Comic Con. Another contributing factor to this general avoidance of the individual fan is that any attempts to come to terms with the individual fan inevitably risks returning to the halcyon days of "Screen Theory" when the monolithic category of "the Spectator" was a standard feature of rigorous film analysis. Doing fan studies depended on pluralizing that category and audience scholarship's devotion to actual audiences made any theorizing about an individual viewer seem at best obsolete and, at worst, entirely counter-productive to the project of determining what audiences actually do with popular texts.

While these factors may explain the avoidance of the individual fan, they don't make it a non-issue, and the inability to talk about fans outside of social networks remains one of the most troublesome blind spots of contemporary fan studies. That blind-spot grows ever more enormous if we consider fans equipped with digital devices, devices that function as portals to internet sites that are the bedrock of social media fandom, but also private digital archives filled with private collections endlessly curated by individual fans who relish both the robustly *social* and intensely *solitary* pleasures afforded by their personal cultural obsessions on one and the same device. If we begin with the premise that fan pleasure is a

vital animating factor in shaping the world building that takes the form of digital built environments inside those devices, then we can't ignore what individual fans do when *left to their own devices*.

The need to focus on the individual fan is an argument rarely made in fan studies but it is stated in a compelling way by Matt Hills in his article, "Patterns of Surprise: The 'Aleatory Object' in Psychoanalytic Ethnography and Cyclical Fandom" (2005). In his essay, Hills details the ethnographic fan research he did as part of a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board in the United Kingdom. He focuses specifically on one subject, Shaun, whose multiple, cyclical obsessions are the basis of Hill's essay. In doing these interviews with Shaun, Hills makes a number of crucial discoveries about the individual subject fan

Shaun's account stresses transmedia consumption as a matter of course. His monthly ritual of online browsing and selection is very much defined and discussed as self-directed, despite occurring in line with the industrialization routinization of his pay dates. It is as if Shaun has established the rules of this activity for himself, not as part of any fan community or group; the periodic rite of searching for fan objects therefore is to secure Shaun's distinctive individuality both in terms of his varied content and through the very form of his selection process. (Hills 2005, 819)

Hills characterizes Shaun in reference to Colin Campbell's term "modern autonomous imaginative hedonism". I have argued elsewhere that Campbell's notion of "Romantic consumerism" is especially relevant to contemporary processes of identity formation since he argues that modern consumerism depends to a very great extent on the Romantic conception of artistic creation expanded to include audience as well as artist (Collins 2012). While he acknowledges the traditional wisdom-- that it was the Romantics who laid the foundation for the Modernist dismissal of consumer culture through their insistence on the singularity of artistic genius as prerequisite of *genuine* culture-- he is also struck by the fact that this theory of artistic creation,

places almost as much emphasis upon the re-creative' abilities of the reader as upon the original creative faculties of the poet [...] The reader is also, in that sense, assumed to be a creative artist, capable of conjuring up images which have the power to 'move' him [...] Romanticism provided that philosophy of 'recreation' necessary for a dynamic consumerism: a philosophy that legitimates the search for pleasure as good in itself. (Campbell 1987, 189)

This Romantic consumer as recreative artist whose medium of personal expression is selective acquisition anticipates the curatorial pleasures enjoyed in multi-media libraries contained within the digital device, all of which furnish its user with an arsenal of such Romantic acquisitions, all shaped by logic of self-narrative. Most importantly, it is predicated on a form of world building that may be informed by social networks but nevertheless must, by necessity, be committed to the singularity of that selective acquisition since the novelty of self under construction is but determines the projection of *aura* onto anything that enters that built environment. Hills makes the essential point that,

while there are numerous conditions involved in the formation of identity, many people continue to feel that who they are or want to be is bound up with what they value and where they find expressive quality that stirs them in things they can speak of, and things that seem to fly beyond the confines of what they can say, even as they feel them very strongly. (Hills 2005, 816)

This notion of self-definition in terms of what one values drives the construction of a scene like Jack Rabbit Slims in *Pulp Fiction* and makes it such a pristine example of world building fabricated out of personal taste distinctions in music, television, and film. The transmediated on-line selections of Shaun and millions of other fans like him, may be made up MP3 and PDF files but they form a digitally built environment just as surely fabricated out of taste distinctions used to fashion a sense of self as any scene in a Tarantino's film. As such, one could argue that Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* could be particularly useful way of characterizing this process but with some essential caveats. For my purposes, the most useful dimension of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* is the way he which he envisions it as a process that allows for subjective improvisation within a system of constraints,

As a dynamic system of dispositions that interact with one another, it has, as such, a generative capacity: it is a structured principle of invention, similar to a generative grammar able to produce an infinite number of new sentences according to determinate patterns and within determinate limits. The habitus is a generative grammar *but it is not an inborn generative grammar* as in Chomsky's tradition which is related to the Cartesian tradition. It is the principle of invention, a principle of improvisation. The habitus generates inventions and improvisations but within limits. (Bourdieu 2002, 30)

This definition of *habitus* could function just as easily as a succinct account of the relationship between iTunes and the smart tablet in the hands of its user. The vast file reservoirs at iTunes and Amazon and the acquisition and curatorial processes needed to navigate them form a generative grammar of pure cultural distinction turned into click choices that allow for infinite improvisation within the libraries located in individual archives. This is where that generative grammar becomes a dynamic process of self-constitution, where file reservoir as database becomes the personalized library formed by the interplay between of title selection and personal lived experience. As such, the device incorporates the tensions between objective and subjective that are embedded within the notion of disposition. One could, of course, contend that the device as a disposition is fostered by the logic of digital downloading that is so near and dear to the heart of iTunes and Amazon-- downloading isn't buying, its self-constitution, the digital version of the diary or scrapbook—but it remains a generative grammar without speech acts until we begin to load our devices with the cultural choices that are treated as forms of self-expression. The personal doesn't hold the Amazon library (it holds the link to that library) but it contains *your* library, improvised out of a massive but nevertheless limited range of choices, at which it becomes very tempting to think the iPad or the iPhone as iHabitus.

Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as disposition made manifest as a dynamic process through the improvisations on a generative grammar may be useful in describing the logic of downloading but we still need a more precise sense of the factors that actually shape the construction of the digital archive. Hills also entertains the idea that habitus may be a useful foundation for characterizing the self in terms of selective acquisition but concludes that

The Bourdieuan habitus allows us to analyze forms of generative unity across seemingly diverse fan objects, but it does not convincingly exhaust analysis where fan objects are felt to express authentic personal identity... To neglect psycho-dynamic and cultural individualizing structural aspects of fan experience in favor of metanarratives such as textual poaching, enduring fandom, or Bourdieuan habitus-based interpretations means reducing the diversity of empirical fan activities with academic, general theoretical taxonomies and representations. It also means discounting (as purely or only ideological) the way that some media fan consumers may use their fandom's to express a sense of personal identity, going beyond subcultural and other social/sociological markers. (Hills 2005, 819)

While I share Hills' reservations about Bourdieu's *habitus* model, I believe this sense of personal identity that exceeds social markers can only be theorized effectively by coupling Bourdieu's notion of generative dispositions with a theory of the subject that defines all identity formation as a dynamic, additive process of self-construction. The work of Nikolas Rose could hardly be more relevant to our understanding of world building in this context because he makes heterogeneous assemblage so central to identity formation and the curatorial/creative activity that flows from it. In his seminal study *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (2009), Rose traces the history of subjectivity and argues convincingly that in the contemporary period the self has come to be defined in terms of how we assemble ourselves.

Overarching all of their differences, contemporary techniques of subjectification operate through assembling together, in a whole variety of locales, an interminably hermeneutic and subjective relation to oneself [...]. In all of the diverse machinations of being, in all of these heterogeneous assemblages, a number of themes recur: choice, fulfillment, self-discovery, self-realization. Contemporary practices of subjectification, that is to say, put into play a being who must be attached to a project of identity and to a secular project of "life-style", in which life and its contingences become meaningful to the extent that they can be construed as a product of personal choice. (Rose 1998, 195)

Rose's operative concept of the self is indebted to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a rhizomatic self but he also incorporates Emile Benveniste's work on the subject-creating properties of language that allow individuals to constitute themselves in language by virtue of the fact that each speaker sets herself up a subject by referring to herself as 'I' in their discourse. For Benveniste, pronominal forms are empty signs that become full when individual speakers take them up and posit themselves as subject. But Rose is quick to insist that the subjectifying properties of language are never merely a matter of pronouns. He reframes Benveniste's conception of self-constitution in the act of enunciation in terms of Foucault's *enunciative modalities*, arguing that the language system in which we express our subjectivity is always a regime of language in which speech acts are configured into discursive practices. Rose makes an especially intriguing move by connecting the subjectifying properties of language to the creation of *self-narratives* as defined by Mary and Kenneth Gergen. According to Rose,

Memory is itself assembled [...] One's memory of oneself as a being with a psychological biography, a line of development of emotion, intellect, will, desire, is produced through family photograph albums, the ritual repetition of stories, the actual or "virtual" dossier of school reports, and the like, the accumulation of artifacts, and the attachment of image, sense, and value to them, and so forth. (ibid., 180)

One might add to that *so forth*, cultural artifacts in the form of MP3 and PDF files one assembles with the private digital archive of the smart tablet that can become the family album or personal scrapbook, truly a virtual dossier of the self as constellation of accumulated signs invested with meaning.

The relevance of the subjectifying properties of language and the concept of *self-narrative* to the world building that is done within the digital device can hardly be overestimated. The file choices are, in effect, the empty pronominal signs that are filled, quite exuberantly, by individuals who construct their subjectivity in the act of downloading and, more importantly, in the acts of curatorial arrangement which converts those file choices into self-narrative, thereby attaching image, word, music to personal cultural memory. To conclude, digital devices foster two kinds of transmedial world building that are both enactments of media fandom. As portals to the internet, they encourage socially networked forms of fandom that are flamboyantly collaborative—as private archives, they give shape to the most intimate permutations of identity formation. Their multi-functionality makes them highly efficient *navigational* tools that allow access the multiple points of entry of narrative metaverses practically simultaneously on the same screen, which has undoubtedly accelerated to expansion of world building as a form of popular narrativity. But they also enable a *curatorial* mode of transmediation in which we build worlds out of our cultural obsessions within the archives that sit behind those screens. To return to the mission statement of this book, if spectators have become explorers and, in turn, world builders, we have to explore how digital devices generate a unique set of pleasures in reference to their own self-assemblage, and therefore become, to paraphrase Sontag, a kind of world-builder... *unlike any other*.

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## 21. The Politics of World Building

Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist WondaLand

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### Abstract

This essay approaches world building from a political point of view, arguing that the way in which imaginary and immersive transmedia storyworlds are constructed in fantastic genres reflects a fundamentally political position. In the context of 1970s countercultures and emerging identity politics, the cultural movement of Afrofuturism provided black artists with a way of reversing the racist bias so prevalent in science-fiction and fantasy narratives. In the 21st century, Janelle Monáe is an artist who has reinvigorated this movement with a series of albums, music videos, and stage performances that adopt the cultural logic of transmedia world building, but do so in a way that challenges the traditional ontological structure of such secondary worlds. By combining Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia with Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude, this essay argues that Monáe's work represents an important challenge to the white-centric traditions of world building, even if her success simultaneously must rely in part on the cultural logic of neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** science fiction, world building, Afrofuturism, transmedia, Janelle Monáe, Mikhail Bakhtin

World building has become the name of the game in commercial science-fiction and fantasy franchises. As digital convergence continues to blur the boundaries between media and as multiple forms of participatory culture proliferate, the focus in fantastic fiction has shifted ever more strongly from linear storytelling to the development of coherent, recognizable, and ostentatiously branded storyworlds. While there is hardly anything novel about the commercial franchising of successful characters and narrative

environments, the hegemonic appropriation and commodification of world-building practices from fantasy and science-fiction traditions has come to typify the age of the global media conglomerate, from the Disney-owned Marvel Cinematic Universe to HBO's cross-media juggernaut *Game of Thrones*. Most of these popular imaginary worlds offer mappable and therefore "knowable" environments, with a strong focus on the kind of consistency and coherence that pleases fan cultures, while also thriving commercially as part of the larger political economy in which these multiple texts circulate as branded commodities (Johnson 2013, 6-7).

In this context of imaginary worlds that are both commercial properties and sites of audience participation, the need for forms of world building that are politically productive grows ever larger. Janelle Monáe's work offers a provocative example of just this kind of process. The prodigiously talented singer, dancer, songwriter, producer, arranger, painter, and futurist has produced a body of work over the course of the past six years that is remarkable for its range, its technical proficiency, its musical eclecticism, and its unique take on the concept of world building. As a musician working with sf tropes, her world building is far more loosely organized than the fantastic worlds in media that are more preoccupied by narrative. Her concept albums, music videos, and stage performances contain recognizable narrative elements, but they also remain open to a wide variety of possible readings, while individual tracks can take on different meanings outside the context of an album. Monáe's work has attracted a great deal of attention from critics and scholars, not only because of the role she has played in the revival of Afrofuturism (see: English and Kim 2013), but also because her socially conscious perspective has been enthusiastically embraced by leftists of all stripes for its progressive ideals.

The main question I will engage with in this chapter is whether Monáe's work does indeed offer the kind of transgressive potential that her many fans have so eagerly identified in it. After first establishing the inherently political aspects of world building, I will describe how Afrofuturism has expanded the political potential of fantastic storyworlds through black artists' appropriation of sf tropes. While the Afrofuturist movement peaked in the 1970s, in the context of multiple social, cultural, and political movements that challenged the assumptions of "dominant ideology", 21st-century neoliberalism poses a new set of challenges for artists attempting to resist or subvert hegemonic capitalist culture. I will examine Monáe's "neo-Afrofuturist" project from this political perspective, using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" to help describe how the unstable and decentered nature of her "sonic fiction" (Eshun 2003, 288) creates worlds that operate by a different logic than that of narrative subcreation.

But while Mon e's pop art may, on the one hand, be read as one of the dangerous "possible worlds" (Gilbert 2014, 192) that can help us imagine worlds outside of capitalism, it simultaneously fits the cultural logic of neoliberalism with uncanny precision. The remarkable flexibility of her posthuman persona certainly destabilizes and decenters the basic coordinates of her imaginary world, but this very process perfectly complements the context in which her work circulates in commodity form. By claiming a space within globally popular entertainment culture, Mon e's transmedia work productively navigates the critical tension between hegemonic corporate franchises and the subversive practices associated with a resistant culture of appropriation.

In our post-democratic societies of control, organized through rhizomatic circuits of biopolitical power (*ibid.*, 1-4), "we need to create weapons that are not merely destructive but are themselves a form of constituent power, weapons capable of constructing democracy and defeating the armies of Empire" (Hardt and Negri 2005, 347). The question is: how to develop and deploy fantastic world building as just such a weapon? While most major storyworlds in fantasy and sf have quite obvious anti-capitalist elements, the narratives typically strive to contain and delimit them. At the same time, processes of commercial branding and franchising further reinforce this unstable but largely effective inoculation. For, although the "textual poaching" associated with fan fiction and other forms of audience participation has done much to destabilize and subvert this dynamic (see also: Matt Hills' chapter in this volume), such activities have become, in many ways, even more marginal than they were before the 21st-century mainstreaming of post-genre fantastic fiction. Or, to put it more accurately, fans' individual creative acts of subversion have become increasingly irrelevant as the media industries' business model has shifted from a logic of exposure to one of "long-tail engagement" (Napoli 2011, 15) that better fits our digital environment of constant immersion in connective networks (see: Van Dijck 2013; Rose 2011).

Mark J.P. Wolf's study of imaginary worlds takes as its point of departure Tolkien's concept of "subcreation", which Wolf views as an inseparable combination of process and product resulting in the development of a fictitious "Secondary World" (2012, 24). The "secondariness" of this imaginary environment is a question of degree rather than of absolute separation, depending on the ways in which certain familiar defaults are transformed into imaginary alternatives: "Fictional worlds can be placed along a spectrum based on the amount of subcreation present, and what we might call the 'secondariness' of a story's world then becomes a matter of degree,

varying with the strength of the connection to the Primary World” (ibid., 25). Wolf then offers an impressively detailed historical overview of many types of imaginary worlds, with varying levels of subcreation, each of which is, to some degree, separated from the ways in which the “Primary World” is commonly represented. Wolf’s definition of world building clearly relies on the assumption of an unambiguous distinction between what constitutes a “realistic” representation of a diegetic world and a fictional environment that defamiliarizes its audience from realistic defaults by altering a number of these coordinates.

Navigating imaginary worlds thus becomes a primarily epistemological endeavor: the audience’s knowledge of a supposedly unified and coherent “primary” reality is required to establish the crucial degree of secondariness that Wolf defines as central to world building. This notion has obvious similarities to Darko Suvin’s classic definition of cognition as the defining characteristic of sf, describing both the genre’s aesthetics and its political values based on the “cognitive dissonance” it creates in relation to one’s knowledge of historical reality. Missing from Wolf’s theorization of world building are its profoundly ontological and political implications: the ways in which the dialectical tension between Primary and Secondary Worlds can serve to destabilize absolute distinctions between past and future, subject and object, history and myth. As Mark Fisher has argued, it is precisely in this ontological dimension of imaginary worlds that we may find “that there are futures beyond postmodernity’s terminal time” (2013, 53) that can be expanded, negotiated, and explored from a political perspective.

Besides this explicit deviation from realist narrative conventions, which is widely shared by large portions of genre fiction, a second crucial feature of subcreation identified by Wolf is that of scale. World-building franchises are typically developed not only across multiple texts, but most commonly also involve multiple media. For example, the world building that followed the release of *Star Wars* was as much the result of the production of toys, video games, television broadcasts, comic books, novelizations, and role-playing games as it was the mere process of producing filmed sequels. This proliferation of world-building activities transforms not only the nature of any individual fictional narrative and its associated sets of practices, values, and markets; it also destabilizes the prevailing discourses of individual authorship, especially once the audience starts contributing actively to the development of the imaginary world (see Brooker 2002).

A helpful concept to explain more clearly the political implications of world-building is Mikhail Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia”: a term meant to indicate

the coexistence of multiple varieties within a single signifying system, destabilizing any central conception of “unity” or single meaning (1981, 263). Bakhtin initially applied the concept to the novel as a literary form made up of radical and uncontainable difference, in contrast to scientific discourse or religious dogma, which he described as “authoritative” in the sense that the reader must yield to a single “centripetal” meaning. The cultural and political role of the novel—or, by extension, any other modern work of art—should be to draw the very concept of the authoritative into question by foregrounding its own hybrid nature and consequent “centrifugal” multiplicity of meaning.

This concept is especially helpful when we turn our attention to transmedia world building as a practice that is defined by this very tension between the authoritative desire to unify on the one hand and the hybrid, constructed nature of “heteroglot” utterances on the other. Most of the energy deployed by writers, producers, and critics in relation to world building has been directed towards the centripetal notion of the “authoritative”: the ways in which imaginary worlds become mappable, measurable, and navigable spaces with coherent chronologies, characters, and events, even when they cross over into other media. Frequently measured by the yardstick of “fidelity”, transmedia adaptations like Tolkien’s world of Middle-earth or the *Star Wars* franchise have established elaborate narrative canons that identify clearly which texts are considered part of the “real” imaginary world and that are discarded by the storyworlds’ “authoritative” center.

This desire for coherence and measurability in world building has been central to most academic work on the topic as well, even when it takes into account not only the profusion of these narratives across media, but also the contributions made by active audiences through fan fiction and mash-up culture. Jonathan Gray’s *Show Sold Separately* (2010), for instance, rightfully emphasizes the importance of peripheral paratexts such as trailers, spoilers, and other intertexts that John Fiske described as “secondary” and “tertiary” (1987, 117-126). But Gray’s focus on the narrative coherence across media consistently privileges texts that add to the development of an authoritative storyworld in a constructive and systematically organized manner. Gray strongly favors fan-created material that contributes to the narrative’s thematic coherence, such as a mash-up video that “invites viewers to contemplate [a] character” by adding “the time and reflective space [...] that the films never truly provide” (2010, 156). By contrast, Gray dismisses the paratextual existence of a “Gotham City pizza” in relation to the film *The Dark Knight* as a “mere marketing tool” whose sole function is to “signal the size of the film” (p. 209-210).

This exclusive focus on narrative and aesthetic coherence has far-reaching political implications. The desire to create, navigate, or otherwise engage with an imaginary world that is stable and coherent expresses a desire to understand what Wolf describes as the Primary World in similar terms. By contrast, a centrifugal approach shifts our focus to an environment defined by multiplicity, transformation, fluidity, and irresolvable internal contradictions. Such a form of world building rejects post-Enlightenment foundations organized around a metaphysics of presence in favor of what Iris Marion Young has described as a “politics of difference” (2010, 229)—a model that applies Jacques Derrida’s critique of the subject as grounded in difference from an imagined “other” to a sociopolitical framework based on radical diversity and constant (internal and external) forms of negotiation and mediation. If we therefore wish to discover existing cultural practices that productively employ the critical potential of imaginary worlds, we must turn away from fantastic franchises informed primarily by the “authoritative” discourses of centripetal narrative traditions and start exploring the more radical heteroglossia of world-building practices whose form of organization is itself more explicitly centrifugal.

### Afrofuturism and “Hauntological” World Building

While the paradigmatic imaginary worlds of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* have resulted in a generic tendency in fantasy and sf towards politically reactionary forms of cultural nostalgia, technocratic notions of progress, or combinations of both, more progressive alternatives have emerged that have taken world building in productive new directions. One such phenomenon has been the modest but influential revival of Afrofuturism, the cultural movement that emerged among black artists, authors, and musicians in the 1960s and 1970s as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture” (Dery 1994, 736). The Afrofuturist project took it upon itself to appropriate sf imagery, which had been overwhelmingly white in its mainstream cultural representations, and use it to reimagine a past as well as a future in which people of color played central rather than marginal roles. From the elaborate mythology articulated by avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra to the spectacular stage shows of 1970s bands like Parliament-Funkadelic, and Earth, Wind and Fire, Afrofuturist culture has adopted and expanded upon many familiar sf tropes.

Afrofuturism opened up a perspective on world building that fits Derrida's "hauntological" model of an infinitely confused and deeply ambiguous sense of historicity (1994, 10), demanding to be interpreted as an attempt to "assemble counter memories that contest the historical archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity" (Eshun, 2003, 288). Rather than constructing a narrative world that stood apart from a single shared "Primary World", Afrofuturism instead deployed concepts and iconography from fantastic genres to fracture the metaphysical model that has privileged one form of identity over another. By reversing the existing hierarchy, Afrofuturist art intervened in sf's long-standing tradition of presenting color-blind futures that were "concocted by whites and excluded people of color as full subjects" (Bould 2007, 177), while, at the same time, using forms that challenge Western culture's focus on narrative conventions like closure, linear causality, and teleological organization.

When compared to a more conventional sf franchise like *Star Trek*, Afrofuturism as a world-building practice is fundamentally similar in its desire to question the present by speculating about the future. Roddenberry's utopian vision of humanity's future has been heralded for its incorporation of ethnic and cultural diversity, but it remains a storyworld "based on a thoroughly Western vision of the importance of material wealth and technological modernization" (Booker 2008, 198). Afrofuturism rejects this incorporation of racial minorities into a larger framework of liberal capitalist humanism, offering instead a radical re-envisioning of the past in which this central dynamic is reversed. This alternative framework is strengthened by its inherently centrifugal form: while *Star Trek*, like most sf storyworlds, has been driven throughout its history by narrative media like episodic television drama, cinema, and literature, musicians have been the primary guiding force for the multiple "sonic fictions" of Afrofuturism (see: Eshun 1998). Because of this, the funky, groove-driven musical forms within which Afrofuturist discourse was articulated and circulated were as destabilizing as the speculative pasts and futures it expressed.

### Entering WondaLand: Janelle Monáe's world building

While the cultural work of Afrofuturists has survived in several forms within mainstream pop music, in which its subversive influence is noticeable in places as unlikely as the *oeuvre* of Michael Jackson (see: Steinskog 2015), its usefulness for world building as a cultural form that facilitates political



imagination requires a more inclusive framework. The difference between Janelle Monáe's work and most phallogentric forms of Afrofuturism is the very distinction Gilbert makes between "formations which only constitute defensive enclaves and those which seek to widen their sphere of activity" (2014, 198). Unlike the "Afrocentric, masculinist, and messianic overtones" of George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic collective (English and Kim 2013, 220), Monáe's collection of on- and off-stage android and human personas is as much post-gender as it is posthuman, playfully walking the tightrope of celebrity culture and performativity.

Her ongoing series of concept albums, together with her "emotion pictures", stage performances, and media appearances offer a new, more radical perspective on world building that builds on Afrofuturism as much as it does on 21st-century convergence culture and post-genre fantastic fiction. While certain elements across these media cohere loosely into narrative patterns and recognizable structures, these strands are interwoven with many others that frustrate any attempt to separate fictional characters, locations, and futures from a Primary World that insistently infects them. In this sense, Monáe's WondaLand, both as a description of a central location within her imaginary world and as the name of her Atlanta-based artist collective, resonates strongly with Lewis Carroll's Secondary World, in which Alice is never sure what she is going to be from one minute to another, and in which the question "Who in the world am I?" constantly frustrates our desire for any sense of "authoritative" stability.

The story Monáe tells in her work is elliptical and endlessly ambiguous, evading straightforward storytelling and instead constantly embellishing its imaginary world with new ideas, clues, and puzzles that are spread out across various media. The lavishly illustrated booklet that accompanies the "Special Edition" of Monáe's first official release, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), includes a primer on the artist's imaginary world and its central character, Monáe's android alter ego Cindi Mayweather. When read together with the booklet illustrations, liner notes, the elaborate "official short film" for the track "Many Moons" and the singer's many interviews on the project, her imaginary world seems to take shape along familiar, easily recognizable patterns: a post-apocalyptic dystopian future ruled by "evil Wolfmasters", an oppressed class of androids exploited by an oppressive upper class, and a heroic android protagonist whose programming includes a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul.

By appropriating a wide variety of familiar tropes from sf, Monáe's first transmedia project establishes a basic narrative situation, but one that merely serves as an entrance point into an imaginary world of competing

allegorical patterns. Neither the lyrical content nor the elaborate music video offers any kind of narrative resolution, as Cindi is last seen in a disembodied “cyberpurgatory” state. Instead, her central figure of the android as an oppressed worker class of “othered” bodies relates back not only to the Afrodiasporic trauma of slavery and institutionalized racism, but also provides a remarkably flexible and slippery signifier that opens up any number of identification processes along lines of gender, sexuality, class, and religion: “androids are the ultimate exploitable ‘other,’ a human-like being who does not need to be afforded the rights of humanity” (Brandt 2014). Unlike the general tendency in hip-hop music, pan-Africanism, and many other strands of black culture to insist on “keeping it real” by rejecting whiteness and “adhering to the standards of the ‘black community’” (Rambsy 2013, 205), Monáe’s posthuman android points instead to the socially constructed nature of identity.

While the central narrative of Cindi Mayweather has hardly progressed on the two albums, five “emotion pictures”, and countless live performances, the scope of Monáe’s imaginary world has continued to expand, as has her sustained use of this remarkably fluid android alter ego. In the liner notes accompanying her 2010 album *The ArchAndroid*, we learn that Monáe is, in fact, a time-traveler from the year 2719 whose stolen DNA was used for the creation of Cindi Mayweather. In interviews, she has embellished this idea further, explaining that there is a hidden “time traveling machine” in her adopted city of Atlanta, through which many influential black musicians have passed, herself and hip-hop duo Outkast included (Lester 2014). This playful, self-reflexive, and thoroughly fluid relationship to her main character and alter ego demonstrates not only her authorial claim upon her imaginary world, but also the constant negotiations this requires: by deliberately blurring the lines between her many “selves,” it becomes impossible to separate her Secondary World of Wolfmasters, androids, bounty hunters, and “robo-zillionaires” from our own Primary historical environment.

Monáe’s world building therefore resonates productively with Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia: the interweaving of perspectives, constantly shifting back and forth between her own contemporary persona and her 28th-century alter ego, creates a paradoxical tension between past, present, and future in which definitions of identity and lines of causality continuously break down. Having absorbed Afrofuturism’s chronopolitical take on fantastic fiction’s cognition and estrangement, Monáe short-circuits the authoritative and centripetal systems that impose any number of boundaries: not only those between her science-fictional Secondary World and a more

“Primary” universe, but any form of limitation on the individual as part of a larger totality informed by power. This seemingly infinite multiplicity of references to other texts and personas obviously includes not only her embodiment of “the best memories of the last fifty years of black musical performance”, but also spins elastically “from David Bowie’s high-concept theatrics to Prince’s loose-spined, funky splits and squeals [...] to Grace Jones’s coolly imperious robot” (Royster 2013, 187).

But this world-building strategy based on heteroglossia and radical eclecticism does not result in any breakdown of meaning. Instead, both the fictional WondaLand described in verse on *The ArchAndroid*, the dreamlike “world inside/where dreamers meet each other”, and the actual WondaLand Arts Society, the Atlanta-based collective of which Monáe’s projects are among the most visible products, strengthen and reinforce one another. On her website, in interviews, and in the credits for her albums and music videos, the artist consistently emphasizes not only her own membership of the WondaLand collective, but also the fact that her work is the result of collaborative participation rather than purely individual accomplishment. The most utopian element in her imaginary world thus also connects back directly to a real-world counterpart that is similarly inclusive in its aspirations. At the same time, the heteroglossia of her storyworld is more than just a multiplicity of voices and styles contained therein: it is also the heterogeneous end product of a fully collaborative process undertaken by a functioning artist collective.

As tempting as it is to exaggerate the ideological implications of Monáe’s socially conscious world building, she also clearly owes much of her success to her compatibility with the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism. Her desire to make her alter ego Cindi Mayweather an all-purpose stand-in for those suffering oppression simultaneously runs the risk of separating this critique from any specific power formation or set of social relations. While the progressive values she articulates in terms of race and gender come through loud and clear, her oblique perspective on capitalism is far more ambivalent. The attention and expense that goes into the production, packaging, and marketing of her albums demonstrates the kind of commodity fetishism that facilitates her successful circulation as a commercial pop icon. This is aided immeasurably by her impressive abilities not only as a musician and performer, but as brand manager of her public persona: her trademark tuxedo and pompadour are convenient and stable signifiers that function effectively as commercial selling points, and are featured with great regularity on the covers of fashion and lifestyle magazines.

While Monáe is always careful to present herself as a rebellious outsider from a working-class background, her comments about her own role as a celebrity within popular culture do not in any way criticize the capitalist system itself:

I also wanted to own something: I've always had this thought of owning my own label, of being in charge of my words, my art, everything you hear. My goal wasn't to be the most famous person overnight—it was to make music on my own terms, develop myself and understand if my words were necessary to young people like myself and to make my family proud. (quoted in Shepherd 2013)

Her words demonstrate the careful cultivation of her own public persona as “independent” and “alternative” rather than the product of some global entertainment conglomerate. She has indeed been remarkably successful at projecting this image; even though she is signed to Sean “Diddy” Combs’ Bad Boy Records, itself a subsidiary of media conglomerate Universal Music Group, swooning journalists and academics have repeatedly pointed out that she has nevertheless managed to retain full creative freedom as an independent artist.

While Monáe’s progressive values and independent-mindedness may have had radical and subversive implications in the past, neoliberal capitalism has proved to be more than a little hospitable to this brand of identity politics. As many critics by this time have pointed out, “‘alternative’ and ‘independent’ don’t designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream” (Fisher 2009, 9). Slavoj Žižek has also argued repeatedly that there is no such thing as a “capitalist worldview” (2013, 55): capitalism can absorb and contain any movement aimed against it, including feminism and the civil rights movements, with very little effort—as long as the existing economic and political systems remain unchallenged. Therefore, even if Monáe’s work were more explicitly anti-capitalist in its content, this too would matter little within an industry run by capitalists more than happy—as Lenin famously quipped—to sell us the rope with which we would hang them.

While these contradictions obviously diminish some of the more exaggerated claims concerning Monáe’s semi-messianic image, her unique approach to world building together with the inclusive spirit of her neo-Afrofuturist vocabulary still puts her at the forefront of politically productive popular artists working in fantastic genres. While incorporating Afrofuturism’s critical and subversive response to fantastic fiction’s tendency towards

racist and white-centric storyworlds, her world building mobilizes not only an imaginative form that can challenge and question these traditions, but can also engage with them joyfully and productively. Her immaculately produced, highly accessible, and commercially viable music is not only a collection of branded commodities, but also an explicit celebration of “non-productive” human activity. By placing her contagious call to dance, enjoyment, and creative collaboration in a storyworld that frames these things as acts of political resistance, her music becomes an act of defiance within neoliberalism’s “relentless capture and control of time and experience” (Crary 2013, 40). While popular culture will quite obviously never change the political organization of post-democratic neoliberal capitalism by itself, it can still contribute to the vital work of imagining alternative futures without simultaneously repressing the very problems it would dissolve (Jameson, 2005, 265).

On its website, the WondaLand Arts Society expounds its fundamental belief in “something futuristic and ancient that we call WISM”, a force made up of Love, Sex, Wisdom, Magic, and Wonder. This mantra resonates not only with the various cultural movements from the post- 1968 moment of emerging countercultures and progressive politics, but also with 21st-century radical politics and its insistence on love and hopefulness as vital political forces. While moving beyond the essentialist humanism and technocratic frameworks of traditional sf, Monáe’s project can be read in alignment with Hardt and Negri’s utopian description of “multitudinous energies” alongside their adoption of Spinoza’s description of joy:

The path of joy is constantly to open new possibilities, to expand our field of imagination, our abilities to feel and be affected, our capacities for action and passion. In Spinoza’s thought, in fact, there is a correspondence between our power to affect (our mind’s power to think and our body’s power to act) and our power to be affected. The greater our mind’s ability to think, the greater its capacity to be affected by the ideas of others; the greater our body’s ability to act, the greater its capacity to be affected by other bodies. And we have greater power to think and to act, Spinoza explains, the more we interact and create common relations with others. Joy, in other words, is really the result of joyful encounters with others, encounters that increase our powers, and the institution of these encounters such that they last and repeat. (Hardt and Negri 2009, 379)

While the affective experience of joy is clearly one of the primary goals of Janelle Monáe’s blissfully eclectic neo-Afrofuturist soul music, the

inclusiveness of her approach to style, genre, and identity does indeed seem to facilitate and even organize exactly this kind of “joyful encounters with others”. There may be nothing inherently political in the momentary communal release of infectious dance music, but, when experienced in the context of her unstable imaginary world, it can provide an entrance point towards more radical political perspectives. Both her imaginary world-building practices and their real-life community-building counterparts meanwhile give structural shape to “the institution of these encounters such that they last and repeat”, even in their supposedly low-impact pop-cultural forms. In this sense at least, her work does contribute in its own modest way to the development of forms, narratives, and identity formations that help us think beyond the confines of capitalist realism and neoliberalism’s purely instrumental ontology.

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