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No Story Is an Island: Storyworlds Across Media

- **Storyworlds Across Media. International conference organised by the Trans-medial Narration Workgroup of the Research Unit Media Convergence at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, June 30 – July 2, 2011.**

»All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language [...] No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.«¹ The way John Donne (1572–1631) described the complex interrelations between all humankind and the individual's involvement with various branches of the tree of life almost 400 years ago bears striking resemblance to what is commonly known as transmediality: Apart from the idea of a shared author, whose existence seems contested anyway, contemporary transmedia storytelling functions along the lines of constant referencing, stories or storylines being remade, rewritten, rearranged, characters being reborn across media. Hence, no story is an island, entire of itself; every bit of information is a piece of the storyworld, a part of the grand transmedial narrative...

In response to the increasing interest in transmedial narrative phenomena, from June 30 to July 2 2011, the interdisciplinary Transmedial Narration Workgroup of the Research Unit Media Convergence (Mainz) invited scholars from around the globe to discuss benchmarks and possibilities of an interdisciplinary, transmedial narratology.² Organised by Marie-Laure Ryan, Karl N. Renner, and Jan-Noël Thon, the conference took place at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz and concluded Ryan's two-semester fellowship with the Gutenberg-Forschungskolleg (GFK).

In her introductory talk on »Storyworlds Across Media«, **Marie-Laure Ryan** (Boulder/Mainz) approached the two central concepts of the conference – storyworlds and medium – from a variety of perspectives, asking for transdisciplinary tolerance and pledging participants to the translational work ahead, as there is hardly one definition of medium/media valid for all disciplines, thus also definitions of storyworlds might differ. As a starting point, however, Ryan outlined the premises of a media-conscious narratology, combining semiotic, technological and cultural dimensions of narrative (media) communication. With regard to the concept of the storyworld – defined as a »container« for an inventory of story-existents, story-space with geographic features, as well as physical and social laws and values – she proposed the following theorem: »Stories can be realised in different media. Stories build storyworlds. Media are characterised by distinct expressive resources and give rise to distinct behaviours.« Storyworlds, Ryan concluded, are shaped by the properties that define individual media and, thus, different media necessarily produce distinct, albeit possibly overlapping, storyworlds from the same source material. However, while the three axioms of her theorem remained uncontested throughout the conference, the possibility of *a* storyworld – as opposed to storyworlds – across media was critically and repeatedly raised in talks and discussions.

Following the introduction, the programme was divided into seven thematic sections, addressing general issues of *Transmedial Worlds*, *Transmedial Storytelling*, and *Transmedial Con-*

cepts during the first two days and more specific approaches to *Visual Storytelling*, *Multimodal Storytelling*, *Interactive Storytelling*, and *Spatial Storytelling* on day two and three.

1. Transmedial Worlds

In their talk »*A Game of Thrones: Transmedial Worlds, Fandom, and Social Gaming*« which opened the first panel session on *Transmedial Worlds*, **Lisbeth Klastrup** and **Susana Tosca** (Copenhagen) examined recipients' motivations to engage in different features of HBO's transmedial campaign for the novel (1996) turned TV series (2011) *A Game of Thrones*, involving alternate reality games and interactive online features. Comprising previous works of both speakers, Klastrup and Tosca said that the book as well as the TV-series were the central starting points for entering the *Westeros*-universe, while interactive components were mostly seen as ephemeral extensions, playing on the recipients' memories and knowledge, thus supporting their level of world embodiment. However, from a commercial standpoint the high degree of online interaction also backfired, as contrary to the producers' intentions, people lost interest in the online activities, as soon as video clips that were posted as rewards for completing little tasks became available on Youtube.

With his double-expertise as an academic and a writer of fiction, **Colin B. Harvey** (London/Bournemouth) took a perspective from the inside of transmedia story production, mapping »*A Taxonomy of Transmedia Storytelling*« based on the tendency of story producers as well as recipients to deploy, erase or alter aspects of the story. As Klastrup and Tosca, Harvey further highlighted the role of collective memory in worldbuilding processes. In a sample analysis of the disparate story branches and media brands involved in the case of *Dr. Who*, he showed that legal licensing agreements are essential to the degrees of congruence and discrepancy – or »amnesia« – amongst transmedial storyworlds referring to the same source material.

In a talk on »*The Developing Storyworld of H. P. Lovecraft*«, **Van Leavenworth** (Umeå) demonstrated that Lovecraft's works hold two mythical concepts that appeal to his followers who have not only developed a number of textual, audio-visual and interactive fictions but also integrated elements of his stories into obscure cults: the loss of control or »cosmic fear« and humanity's inability to understand cosmic knowledge. Apparently, these universal human concerns adapt well to different uses and invite recipients to engage in the spiritual and transcendent body of thought that is attributed to the author's name and persona. Hence, Leavenworth, as the previous speakers, put Ryan's criteria of consistency and media-exclusiveness of the storyworld up for debate.

2. Transmedial Storytelling

Jason Mittell (Middlebury/Göttingen) opened the second section, *Transmedial Storytelling*, with his talk on »*Strategies of Storytelling in Transmedia Television*«. Mittell proposed that different transmedial strategies in current TV series also meet different sorts of expectations from their audiences: On the one hand, the expansionist, centrifugal approach of *Lost*'s interactive bonus features provides trailheads for further information hunting and addresses the »forensic fans'« need to partake in the storyworld by investigating the over-complex, at times even contradicting mythological content of the series. On the other hand, *Breaking Bad*'s centripetal approach concentrates on character-information that is consistent with the series but does not add essential details to the understanding of the series' storylines.

Maria L. Leavenworth's (Umeå) contribution »Transmedial Narration and Good and Evil Vampires« was also concerned with canonicity and consistency but approached the issues from a fan fiction angle. She stressed that in the production and reception of fan fiction(s), the prior (canonic) fiction and the later (fan) fiction resonate together in both the new text and the old one. Fan fictions imagine alternate storylines or character traits based on the original stories and their worlds, adding possible, yet unrealised versions of story elements to an ›archontic« (Derencho) text's archival memory.³

Re-animating Roland Barthes' 1966-distinction of ›kernels« as obligatory story events that guarantee a story's coherence, and ›satellites« that serve to embellish the basic plot constructed from the kernels,⁴ **Andreas Rauscher** (Mainz) followed up on prevalent criticism of Henry Jenkin's holistic understanding of transmedial artworks. He approached »Transmedia Storytelling as Ludo-Narrative-Patchwork«, where users as well as adventurous producers engage in ludonarrative practices and, by defining ephemeral satellite structures as their starting points, change their status to kernels in a new galaxy of (multiple) stories.

Most of Thursday's talks thus shared an interest in at least one of the following two central issues, often addressing both and pointing at their interdependencies: (1) Foregrounding a variety of ways in which actual recipients – or, what appeared to be the preferred term: users – react to and work with transmedial stories, speakers discussed different dimensions of successful transmedia storytelling. (2) The dimension of collective and individual memory also offered interesting perspectives, fueling critical discussions of the claimed consistency, congruence and exclusiveness of storyworlds given their potential for collaborative, interactive storytelling and worldbuilding processes highlighted by several speakers.

3. Transmedial Concepts

Friday morning's session on *Transmedial Concepts* opened with a contribution on »Fictionality across Media: Transmedial Concepts of Fictionality« by **Frank Zipfel** (Mainz) who, exploring the grounds on which different kinds of artworks and media phenomena are linked to the concept of fictionality, discussed the premises of an institutional, transmedial theory of fiction.

In »Mediality and Mediation: The Role of the Narrator in Transmedial Narratology«, **J. Alexander Bareis** (Lund) was concerned with the role of the narrator as a mediating agency in different media. Following up on Zipfel's talk, Bareis also focused on questions of fictionality, the generation of fictional truths, and unreliable narration.

The conference's co-organiser **Jan-Noël Thon** (Hamburg/Mainz) highlighted the representation of subjectivity as one of the contested, yet most productive topics of narratology in his talk »Subjectivity across Media: On Transmedial Strategies of Subjective Representation«. While emphasising the complexity of consciousness representation that is by no means limited to spatial and perceptual perspective(s), Thon proposed a typology of visual markers of perceptual subjectivity in three different media – film, graphic novel and computer game – that, in his view, albeit transmedially sharing similar forms of representing subjectivity, should also be treated with regard to their differing, medium-specific realisations and functions.

4. Visual Storytelling

Fundamental questions of (practically) rendering and (theoretically) approaching narrativity in the pictorial arts were at the centre of the second panel of the day: *Visual Storytelling*. In »Painting as a Challenge to Narrative Discourse Analysis: The Visual Art of Rabindranath Tagore«, **Patrick C. Hogan** (Connecticut) extended the traditional concept of the implied author, applying it (1) to the paintings of Indian artist Rabindranath Tagore and (2) not only to individual works of art but to a range of his pictures and poetry, thus introducing a transmedial concept of canonical implied authorship that serves as a contextual background for narrative sense-making.

Contextual knowledge as the main factor in pictorial narrative was also stressed by **Gyöngyvér Horváth** (Budapest). Analysing Carlo Crivelli's *Annunciation with Saint Emidius* (1486), her talk on »Narrative Ramification: A Visual Response to Transmedial Narration« focused on the revision of an (ur-)storyline depicted in the painting by contemporary actualisation and the addition of alien characters, intervening with the original biblical content, thus creating a layered, »ramified« narrative.

In between both talks, **Werner Wolf** (Graz) showed that contextual triggers, as stressed by Hogan and Horváth, are but some of several framings of narrative. His talk on »Initial Framings of Narrative in Literature and the Pictorial Arts«, however, suggested that compared to prototypical literary framings of narrative, context, intramedial clues and content gain essential importance in the process of recognising narrativity or narrative potential in static, solely visual material. Wolf's reminder that visual narration to a large degree relies on implicit clues and (sometimes inaccessible) contextual knowledge also brought up another recurring question: where to locate these narratives and narrativity in general – in the artworks themselves or in the individual recipients sense-making strategies?

5. Multimodal Storytelling

Returning to sequential narratives, **Jared Gardner** (Ohio/Mainz) opened the panel session on *Multimodal Storytelling*. In his talk on »Graphic Narrative and New Media Convergence«, Gardner outlined a historio-critical perspective on multimodal storytelling in graphic and film narratives to approach the progressing convergence of comics and cinema. He argued that today's film industry had returned to the multimodality the classical Hollywood system left behind in the early 20th century by reintroducing interactive and simultaneous forms of reception, essential to comics and graphic novels. However, while traces of the comic form seem to be found everywhere in today's multimedia world, Gardner doubted the viability of existing experiments to faithfully adapt the medium to the digital age.

Next, **Wolfgang Hallet** (Gießen) discussed »The Rise of the Multimodal Novel: Generic Change and Its Narratological Implications«. Recent shifts from exclusively verbal to multimedial and multigeneric narration, to Hallet, constitute the rise of a new sub-genre, the multimodal novel. The inclusion of non-verbal elements into the text of a novel serves different functions, such as the representation of perception or spatial orientation, and needs to be accounted for by literary theory and narratology.

Finally, **Jeff Thoss** (Graz) took media convergence up another notch when, in »Media Rivalry Updated: The Case of Scott Pilgrim«, he explained that both the comic book series of the

same title (2004–2010) and the film *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* (2010) deny their actual mediality to engage in a competition of simulating yet another medium – the video game.

In a sense, academic ›media rivalry‹ as medium-specific expertise left its productive traces throughout talks and discussions during the second conference day. While especially Zipfel and Thon approached transmediality from an overarching angle, other contributors stressed specifics of one or several media in the transmedial context (Bareis, Hogan, Wolf, Horváth, Hallet) or, as Gardner and Thoss, took a medium-specific perspective to utilise its analytic value across media. It became clear that the ›media-conscious narratology‹ (Ryan) participants were vouching for cannot be achieved without an interdisciplinary and collaborative discourse, open to discussing and welcoming supposedly alien ideas. However, more than once throughout the whole conference the necessity of new terminology was questioned, implicating that at times it might also be advisable to go back to established concepts.

6. Interactive Storytelling

Saturday morning, **Jesper Juul** (Copenhagen/New York) explored ›The Paradox of Interactive Tragedy: Can a Video Game Have an Unhappy Ending?‹ using concepts of conflicting immediate and aesthetic desire that exist simultaneously. While the desire to avoid failure in playing and help the protagonist to succeed in the storyworld is essential to gameplay, the aesthetic desire may as well require a main character to suffer and also help to accept the player's own failure for the sake of an aesthetic gaming experience. Game tragedy, thus, is not an impossibility, but offers a new realm of possibilities.

With ›It's Not a Lake. It's an Ocean. *Alan Wake*, (Meta-)Transmedia Storytelling, and (Meta-)Media-Convergence‹, **Michael Fuchs** (Graz) returned to questions of media convergence. In his analysis of the computer game *Alan Wake*, he showed that by incorporating and remediating different media, both in the game itself as well as through ancillary texts, *Alan Wake* reflects on our contemporary converging media culture.

Bringing the conference full circle, **Marco Caracciolo** (Bologna) was more concerned with the user's side of *Interactive Storytelling*, focusing again on multidimensional mnemonic reception processes. Combining Monika Fludernik's concept of ›experientiality‹ with John Searle's idea of the ›background‹ from an enactivist perspective,⁵ in ›Those Insane Dream Sequences: Distorted Experience in Literature and Video Games‹ he introduced the ›experiential background‹ that recipients of all media draw on to understand the characters' experiences. In close readings of an excerpt from William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and a dream sequence from the video game *Max Payne 2*, he showed that through disruptions of the medium-specific strategies for narrative presentation, recipients are cued not only into attributing a distorted experience to the character, but also into having a kind of distorted experience themselves.

7. Spatial Storytelling

In ›Storytelling in Performance: A Historical Perspective‹, **Elke Huwiler** (Amsterdam) answered the plight that in drama theory narratology is still little accepted and undertheorised by adapting the concepts of storyworld and storytelling to the needs of analysing historical medieval theatre. Stage space, presentational space and fictional places, conjunct with the social reality of a performance, inflict sense-making processes in the drama. Historical reconstruc-

tions of the spatial arrangements, in some cases, are the only way to come by narrative junctures that, while not being explicitly mentioned in the text, become an integral part of the narration.

With a talk on »Spatial Aspects of Narrative in Augmented Reality Environments«, **Erwin Feyersinger** (Innsbruck) closed the conference's last panel on *Spatial Storytelling*, which was cut short by the unfortunate last minute cancellation of **April G. Wei's** (Hong Kong) talk. Feyersinger took the participants on a virtual tour through the realms of augmented realities, highlighting the spectrum from practical, e.g. military, medical or educational applications to artistic and pop-cultural experiments. Although the narrative input in most hybrid environments is minimal, he argued, narratives can still individually be constructed from the multisensory environment, triggering contextual narrative information. The conference thus closed on the notion that the framing of a storyworld, at least in some cases, may be a mere invitation to make narrative sense even of the ›real‹ environment they blend in with.

8. Résumé

In their closing remarks, the conference organisers highlighted arising theoretical and terminological challenges with regard to new and converging media that many talks had touched upon: While Ryan said that she was looking forward to an updated discussion, defining the meaning of medium across disciplines in the face of digital technologies, she emphasised the need for transmedial concepts as discussed throughout the conference that remain valid in spite of technological developments. Among the problems that remain to be discussed in more detail, Renner and Ryan named the integration of non-fictional narration and storyworlds and the economic dimensions of transmediality. Another field that was surprisingly left untouched in Mainz were transnational and transcultural aspects of transmedia storytelling that are an integral part of our converging media culture(s). In summary, however, even though theoretical starting points and terminology were heterogeneous at times, the conference raised hope for the collaborative project of a media-conscious narratology the organisers had asked for. No story is an island, entire of itself – and neither is the single research project.

Videos of the conference talks and discussions can be found online at <http://www.storyworlds.de/>.

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Notes

¹ John Donne, *The Works of John Donne, D. D. Dean of St. Paul's 1621–1631: With a Memoir of his Life*, Vol. III, ed. Henry Alford, London 1839, 574–575.

² For an introduction to transdisciplinary and transmedial interests of narratology cf. e.g. David Herman/Manfred Jahn/Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London 2005. For a review see: Sandra Heinen, Bestandsaufnahmen der Erzähltheorie. (Review of: David Herman/Manfred Jahn/Marie-Laure Ryan [eds.], *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London/New York: Routledge 2005; James Phelan/Peter J. Rabinowitz [eds.], *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005.), *JLTonline* (18.10.2007), <http://www.jltonline.de/index.php/reviews/article/view/22/172> (15.11.2011).

³ Cf. Gail Derencho, ›Archontic Literature‹, or, A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction, in: Karen Hellekson/Kristina Busse (eds.): *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Jefferson, NC 2006, 71–78.

⁴ Cf. Roland Barthes, Introduction à l'Analyse Structurale des Récits, *Communications* 8 (1966), 1–27.

⁵ Cf. Monika Fludernik, *Towards a ›Natural‹ Narratology*, London/New York, NY 1996; John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge, MA 1992.

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