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## Screen Narrative in the Digital Era

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**THE KEY DEBATES**

Mutations and Appropriations in  
**European Film Studies**

# STORIES

**Ian Christie and  
Annie van den Oever (eds.)**

**7**

**Amsterdam  
University  
Press**



## Stories

**The Key Debates**

Mutations and Appropriations in European Film Studies

*Series Editors*

Ian Christie, Dominique Chateau, José Moure, Annie van den Oever

# Stories

Screen Narrative in the Digital Era

Edited by  
Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever

Amsterdam University Press

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# Editorial

The original aim of the *Key Debates* series was to revisit the concepts, and indeed controversies, that have shaped the field of film studies. Our intention was twofold: to clarify what was initially at stake in the founding texts, and to shed light on lines of transmission and reinterpretation in what remains a hybrid field of study, which has “appropriated” and thus modified much of what it uses. The six volumes published to date take different approaches to this central mission, reviewing how early film theory adopted and developed literary theories of “strangeness” (*ostrannennie*); shifting concepts of subjectivity engendered by film; the variety of ways in which film audiences have been conceived; the persistence of debate around film as a technology; the newly energized debate regarding feminist approaches to film and television; and an up-to-date discussion of display technologies and screen use in the digital era.

We are delighted to announce that the coeditor of the volume on *Screens*, José Moure, has become a *Key Debates* series editor from Volume 7 onward. When we launched this book series in 2010, after a phase of preparation which began in 2006, we felt that as scholarship in the history of film theory developed, there was a need to revisit many long-standing assumptions, particularly in light of the changes in media devices and viewing practices. Further volumes are now in preparation, as we recognize that pervasive digital media have not made the concepts and debates to which film initially gave rise, redundant. On the contrary, there seems to be a greater need than ever to clarify and refocus fundamental issues, such as stories and storytelling in the present volume, in the context of our contemporary media environment.

London / Paris / Amsterdam / Groningen

Ian Christie, Dominique Chateau, José Moure, Annie van den Oever



# Acknowledgments

*Stories* is not a book that is organized around a single thesis – apart from the assertion that stories are a major concern for film and media scholars, whether approached in terms of philosophy, aesthetics, narrative theory, cognitive studies, transmedia storytelling and convergence theory, complex narration, historical poetics, metahermeneutics, or the industry's or the practitioner's perspective on storytelling. Throughout this book, there is an emphasis on critical concepts, methods, and debates. *Stories* deliberately includes contributions by film and media experts working in very different ways on a wide range of storytelling-related issues, and it does so in the spirit of the series, *The Key Debates*, in which it marks the start of a third phase of unique transnational cooperation, centrally between the Netherlands, France, and the UK. The series has already supported a number of stimulating symposia and workshops in all three countries, and produced six collections, *Ostrannenie* (2010), *Subjectivity* (2011), *Audiences* (2012), *Technē/Technology* (2014), *Feminisms* (2015), and *Screens* (2016).

The series, like this particular book, owes much to Dominique Chateau and José Moure and the ongoing discussions between the series editors of the topics debated in this series. One of the real challenges of this project has been bringing together an international group of scholars from a variety of countries, who speak different languages and come from different cultural and (inter)disciplinary backgrounds. Once again, the real pleasure was seeing all the different inputs coming together, challenging and occasionally contradicting one another, yet eventually achieving a sense of coherence. Therefore, we wish to express our sincere gratitude to the contributors to this book and to the members of the Editorial Board for their enthusiastic support and generous intellectual contributions to our series. For their contributions to this book, we sincerely thank Vincent Amiel, Jan Baetens, Dominique Chateau, John Ellis, Miklós Kiss, Eric de Kuyper, Sandra Laugier, Luke McKernan, José Moure, Roger Odin, Melanie Schiller, Steven Willemsen, and Robert Ziegler. Additionally, we wish to thank Martin Lefebvre for his generous sharing of knowledge about Christian Metz; and Naòmi Morgan, for her translations from the French.

Most of the Editorial Board members were already present at the very first meeting which helped to shape the series and move us ahead. We once again wish to thank Francesco Casetti, Laurent Creton, Jane Gaines, Frank Kessler, András Bálint Kovács, Eric de Kuyper, Laura Mulvey, Roger Odin,

Patricia Pisters, Emile Poppe, Pere Salabert, Heide Schlüpmann, Vivian Sobchack, and Janet Staiger.

Our thanks are due to Amsterdam University Press for its supportive enthusiasm in every phase of this series, from its infancy to becoming an international project, with this our seventh book and two forthcoming titles in preparation. In addition to thanking all the authors who responded to a tight deadline, acknowledgment is due to the Commissioning Editor of Media and Communication at AUP, Maryse Elliott, who provided us with extremely generous support.

The project also has depended on generous funding from Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne and the University of Groningen, without which it would not have been possible. We also thank Giovanna Fossati, Head Curator of EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, for hosting *The Key Debates* workshops in Eye and in the New Collection Centre together with the series editors.

Finally, we would like to pay tribute to copy editor Wendy Stone, and to Viola ten Hoorn, without whose dedication neither this series nor this book would have existed, and to acknowledge the vital continuing support and patience of Chantal Nicolaes, Chief Editor at AUP.

Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever  
London / Amsterdam, Spring 2018.

# 1. Screen Narrative in the Digital Era

*Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever*

Wordless storytelling is natural. The imagetic representation of sequences of brain events, which occurs in brains simpler than ours, is the stuff of which stories are made.

– Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (2000, 188)

“Stories” are inescapably central to modern media discourse, not only in traditionally narrative entertainment media, such as television, cinema, and theater, but also in social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, blogging), and “new media” (online gaming, VR). Furthermore, telling or having “a story” is widely deemed essential in advertising, commerce, and social life. Not surprisingly, teaching and coaching in storytelling has become a major industry. “Creative writing” courses are heavily subscribed and advice is ubiquitous.

Storytelling was clearly of major importance in the development of cinema and television, as well as new forms of printed and graphic media, during the early twentieth century. But even if these media were new (or, more accurately, new inflections of existing screen and print forms), storytelling is as old and universal as any sense of consciousness, according to the neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio. He further suggests that the “natural pre-verbal occurrence of storytelling” may be why drama and later written narratives emerged, “and why a good part of humanity is currently hooked on movie theatres and television screens” (Damasio 2000, 188). For Damasio, echoing what Hugo Münsterberg (1916) claimed just over a century ago, “movies are the closest external representation of the prevailing storytelling that goes on in our minds” (188).<sup>1</sup> However, in trying to account for “the making of core consciousness,” his concern is less with the mind/cinema analogy than locating storytelling in an evolutionary sequence that starts with “mapping,” which “probably begins relatively early both in terms of evolution and in terms of the complexity of the neural structures required to create narratives” (189). He therefore concludes that “telling stories precedes language, since it is in fact a condition for language, and it is based not just in the cerebral cortex but elsewhere in the brain” (189).

But if it is a precondition for language itself, then a more developed storytelling ability is also a defining feature of what we call “culture.” In his

landmark book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 89) formally defined culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [wo]men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” However, he also defined it more succinctly as “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> Gaining a perspective on the present or the immediate is always difficult. Therefore, we might wonder whether the contemporary preoccupation with “stories” marks an intensification of what has long been latent in our culture, or whether it signals a new direction, perhaps comparable to the surge of concern with “media” in the 1960s. At any rate, it is an obvious priority for the *Key Debates* series. In this volume, we prioritize new phenomena in the field (complex narration, puzzle films, transmedia storytelling), trying to identify the “key issues” amid the vast amount of discussion and analysis on the topic, while also indicating what seem to be the most promising paths in research.

## From the Archive

The major motivating question behind this latest book in our series is: Has storytelling – or story-following – changed decisively, either during the era of “cinema” or, perhaps more pertinently, in the postcinema era of digital and interactive media? We find ourselves wondering about the relationship between “story” as a term used in everyday as well as academic discourse. Does all narrative form deal with what we would call “stories?” And, indeed, does overuse of the term “story” devalue or detract meaning from what we would formerly have called a story? While creating the book (as we would say in storytelling mode), we had in mind two key moments in conceptualizing the nature of “story”: one a “delayed” essay by Walter Benjamin, and the other a somewhat neglected essay by Christian Metz.

Like much of Benjamin’s work, “The Storyteller” was written in the 1930s, but only reached its wider audience in an English translation presented by Hannah Arendt in 1969.<sup>3</sup> In it, Benjamin lamented the end of the oral era and the loss of storytelling as a social and fundamentally communal practice within the oral tradition.<sup>4</sup> He defined storytelling as a participatory art, led by a skilled storyteller whose social function was defined by his or her community. Listening to a story in such a context meant taking part by actively responding to the questions and gestures of the storyteller, in what Benjamin considered a two-way communication rather than a monologue. This “culture of participation” – as it would be called today if we take the

discussions of current transmedia-storytelling practices as a model – was central to Benjamin's text.

What gave this practice of storytelling its most basic authority? For Benjamin, stories were cultural phenomena with a specifically social function. They did not simply derive from the need to share interesting experiences with a community, but a more deeply felt human need: to provide real-life examples of coping with the mystery of human reality. Hence, one did not just listen to a storyteller: *one received advice*. This is one of the crucial statements in "The Storyteller." If storytellers *always* offered advice, the question must be: Is there still room for this social practice in the modern world (of the 1930s)?

Benjamin's answer was negative. With some nostalgia, he observed that socially driven storytelling practices rooted in the oral tradition were coming to an end for various reasons.<sup>5</sup> He identified the most basic as a change in the communicability of experience itself and, most importantly, of the experience of death. What used to be an experience of the community had disappeared from public life: the waiting, the soft talking, the walking in and out of the house for the days it took to die, people suddenly coming together to say farewell to the dying person. This social practice was described in the famous 1886 novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy, when it was already slowly disappearing, together with storytelling as a social practice. If we wonder why there is such a keen interest in Benjamin's text among scholars today,<sup>6</sup> we must acknowledge not only its nostalgia but also its evocation of communities "telling stories to each other."

The trend that has provoked renewed interest in Benjamin's essay could be described as pointing away from criticism and interpretation, hermeneutics, the medium-specificity of narratives and formal narrative structure, toward stories as reflections of experience, as affecting experience, creating absorption in the storyworld. These shifts also seem to be reflected in renewed attention to the work of Christian Metz, one of the founding figures of modern film theory. Metz has been represented in various ways, but only recently as a phenomenologist. He wrote about *Narratif* (with a capital N) in a 1966 essay which addressed stories and storytelling as general phenomena, writing of the *fundamental anthropological gesture of storytelling* from an explicitly phenomenological perspective (Chateau and Lefebvre 2014, 23-28).<sup>7</sup> His primary question was: Which qualities do *all* narratives likely possess in order to be recognized as such?

His answer did not attract much attention, probably because the emergent study of narratology did not need the input of this sort of phenomenology

– especially since, in this text, Metz was not seeking the specific sense or phenomenological qualities of cinematic or literary narratives. His aim was to explore and clarify the preconditions that make the project of a Semiology of Narrative possible. As narratology was embarking on an analysis of signification at the time, this would first require a parsing of the world in terms of sense: the “naive,” presemiological, “lived” sense of what a narrative is. In line with Metz’s famous “impression of reality,” Narrative was termed the “impression of narrative.” With these reflections, Metz pointed to what precedes and makes possible narratology as the study of narrative in cinema – its phenomenological condition of possibility. We can “scientifically” study narrative because we already have a nonscientific sense of what narrative “is,” of its qualities.

There have been other significant story-related transitions taking shape in the digital era, which digital technologies have helped to create. In particular, the twenty-first-century display devices and new screen technologies – tablets, watches, glasses, wearables – all typically used by individuals, intimately and repetitively, creating large cohorts of well-trained users in the process. Several new practices of use have sprung from these. Above all, there is the film viewer shifting between devices to watch multiple images; and all these devices invite viewers to become *possessive* of the film image, to become *possessive* viewers, a term coined by Laura Mulvey in 2006.<sup>8</sup> By manipulating their smart devices, they take control over the image, manipulate the story flow, return to moments of special interest, touch the image, enlarge it, and so on. What does this do to their role as viewers, to their knowledge of film, or stories told on film?

## Storytelling on Demand

Jason Mittell (2006) famously stated that narrative complexity became the norm on American multichannel television from the 1990s onward. “Quality television” became an option for networks such as HBO, aiming at a section of the audience solely invested in high-quality entertainment. Mittell argues that the popularity of such television series has helped create a new mode of *active* and *reflexive* viewer engagement. Ultimately, the film industry was also to profit from the new narrative skills viewers acquired over the years, mainly by binge-watching “on demand” and narratively complex television series, often for many hours each week, if not daily. Most viewers will have spent more time watching complex television than complex films. Thus, the “training” effects of television have tended to be evident. Not surprisingly,



cinema has been affected by the long-term impact of television series on viewers, as it has been by the effects of video and computer gaming.

Many films made for the cinema from the 1990s onward tell stories which are “complex.” Examples include *WILD AT HEART* (1990), *PULP FICTION* (1994), *THE USUAL SUSPECTS* (1995), *THE MATRIX* (1999), *THE SIXTH SENSE* (1999), *MEMENTO* (2000), *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* (2001), *ADAPTATION* (2002), *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND* (2004), and *INCEPTION* (2010). These films have “embraced a *game aesthetic*, inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies,” as Mittell wrote in his seminal article “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television” (2006, 36). His explanation was that “narratively complex programs” which were “constructed without fear for temporary confusion for viewers,”<sup>9</sup> may have triggered a sense of “temporary disorientation and confusion” in viewers, but they also provoked, and allowed “viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement” (38). In the end, these complex programs turned viewers into what Mittell described as “amateur narratologists” (38).

This process was supported by fan cultures which would have been impossible in terms of scale, speed, and intensity without social media. Fans found ways of reaching out to one another on global fan blogs; and having sophisticated discussions regarding the tricks and twists used in their favorite series. Other phenomena that have affected storytelling practices today include: fan cultures nourishing the narratologist in viewers who end up knowing as much about story structures and techniques as scholars, if not more; fan cultures being nurtured by television’s writing teams or more often by its producers; fans shifting from being solely consumers to becoming occasional producers, as “prosumers”; and some fans going from creating forms of cross-media communication about their favorite storyworlds to using sophisticated storytelling methods themselves, diverting from and adding to popular stories online in what has been referred to, since 2003, as transmedia storytelling (see Chapter 6).

Amateur narratologists are fans who like to be challenged and tested – by the complex narrative forms that can be explained by professional narratologists, such as the notoriously confusing form of *metalepsis*, discussed by John Pier in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* (2013), and now regularly found in mainstream, industry-produced films such as *THE MATRIX* and *INCEPTION*. This phenomenon implies that not only do audiences understand such puzzling complexities, they obviously appreciate them, as fan sites testify (and as Kiss and Willemsen explore in Chapter 4).

## About the Book

In the first part of the book, *Theory in Contemporary Contexts: Reassessing Key Questions*, Jan Baetens poses key questions regarding visual and literary forms of storytelling. His investigation of “Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative” leads him to conclude that given the diversity and inequality of stories, a “global,” *cross-medial* approach to stories and storytelling is problematic. He also argues that, although graphic narrative (as in graphic novels) is not a field that has the same cultural and economic importance as cinema, it offers a significant opportunity. Given the diversity of the field and the quick changes that characterize it, it can serve as a useful echo chamber for ideas and hypotheses to test in the broader fields of film studies and storytelling in general. Against this background, Baetens proposes the study of graphic storytelling as a key domain in the larger field of cultural narratology, of which film studies is a subfield.

In the third chapter, on iconographic storytelling, Vincent Amiel deals with visual figurative thought: a system of meaning specific to images, which owes nothing to the logic of writing. He starts by acknowledging that normally iconographic and narrative systems are placed in opposition to one another, as if specific qualities inherent to the very principle of the image would be unable to enter the storytelling process. The heart of the chapter consists of an in-depth discussion of combinations of images which, though inscribed in the unfolding process of a film, nevertheless suggest discontinuity and a different logic of articulation. In his discussion of this logic, which is very different from classical narrative, Amiel shows how, by way of collage, overlay, inlay, or objectification, such offset images *complicate* the flow of films, and generate networks, ridges, or narrative systems that deliberately confuse the course of the film. In what is a plea for the study of the relations between images which are part of a nonlinear, iconographic logic, Amiel analyzes such combinations of images which establish a dialogue on the screen, outside of the conventional rules of successive presentation.

The fourth chapter examines a set of phenomena grouped together under the label of “complex narratives.” These emerged from the mid-1990s onward in popular cinema and in serial television, and have continued to increase in prominence and popularity ever since. Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen present a valuable overview of the field, before offering an alternative analysis of the various *experiences* of narrative complexity in contemporary cinema, asking the question: Why would an experience of confusion triggered by puzzle films be gratifying? This involves a reconceptualization of story and storytelling complexity in film from a

cognitive perspective. Next, they analyze how different types of complex movies evoke different kinds of cognitive puzzlement in their viewers. Interestingly, they maintain that feeling “challenged” by complex movies is more important to fans than solving the puzzles presented in films which dare to confuse viewers, boldly leaving much interpretive and analytical work to their cognitive and interpretive competences. The challenge appears to be gratifying, and leaves room for many kinds of creative, intellectual, analytical, and interpretive skills and processes. This, in a mainstream context, is novel. Kiss and Willemsen argue that impossible puzzle films can best be seen as the product of an era that is saturated with both media and narratives. In such a context, films that are cognitively challenging and intellectually intriguing are considered attractive by viewers accustomed to the increasing amounts of mediation, narrativity, and complication in popular fiction.

“Storification”; Or, What Do We Want Psychology and Physiology to Tell Us about Screen Stories?” offers a reflection on the two immediate contexts from which this volume springs. One, as noted above, is the omnipresence of “story” as a *vade mecum* in contemporary culture and society. The other is the promise held out by two new sciences, evolutionary biology and neurobiology (cognitive psychology or physiology), to address the most fundamental mainsprings of our relationship to stories. How is it that, as a species, we alone are innately attuned to storytelling? – a question that Brian Boyd set out to explore in his *On the Origin of Stories* (2009). And what is the cognitive apparatus that enables us to make and attend to stories in many media? The work of Torben Grodal has sought to bring film within the orbit of evolutionary biology; while David Bordwell has pursued issues of how we interpret filmic narrative across a rich series of books, articles, and blogs, with exemplary attention to researchable case studies. While both of these remain contentious to some degree, and have indeed deliberately courted controversy on occasions, they remain essential reference points as we contemplate the future of scholarship on screen stories.

In her chapter on “Transmedia Storytelling: New Practices and Audiences,” Melanie Schiller argues that transmedia storytelling is driven by media users and fans with an increasing desire for transmedia experiences. The phenomenon fits into the broader context of a growing popularity of user-generated content and fan productions. Although fostered by the industries, it is actively contributed to by media-savvy fans creating extensions to popular stories such as HARRY POTTER (2001-2011) or THE MATRIX (1999-2003). Schiller notes that all this is typically marked by a flow of content across multiple media platforms, and that for a proper understanding of these

new practices of storytelling, it is important to distinguish them from media adaptations or remediations which are unidirectional movements from one medium (book) to another (theater). She shows that transmedia storytelling is much broader: it involves the expansion of a story through storytelling activities of participating fans contributing to the story's universe in a range of different semiotic systems and historical media practices, all of which enhance the construction of the overall transmedia storyworld.

In PART II, *History and Analyses*, José Moure reflects on the type of story told in a range of films from Michelangelo Antonioni. More particularly, he shows in an in-depth analysis of a series of his films – from *CRONACA DI UN AMORE* (1950) to *IDENTIFICAZIONE DI UNA DONNA* (1982) – that Antonioni was drawn to telling *stories without an end* or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to speak of them as stories *with endless endings* which spiral down like a staircase in a dream, without ever allowing audiences to reach the end. These stories resolve in indecisiveness, as Moure argues. In as far as Antonioni's films are constructed, characteristically, around a feeling of loss, and plotted along erratic, dissolving trajectories which efface or displace the initial emptiness without filling it, their stories are emblematic of a certain kind of European art cinema in a specific era.

Dominique Chateau devotes a chapter to the analysis of David Lynch's much-admired 2017 television series *TWIN PEAKS 3*, what might have been considered the apotheosis of complex narrativity on American television, for all its virtuosity and challenges to viewers. Chateau opens his chapter with praise by Matt Fowler deeming *TWIN PEAKS 3*, much like Chateau, “the most perfect and uncanny audiovisual product” ever made: “a true artistic force that challenged just about every storytelling convention we know.” Chateau argues that *TWIN PEAKS 3* is unapologetically and objectively “strange” given its double use of *doppelgänger* figures, its genre hybridity, its endless list of dream cues, the hypnotic use of slowness, and dream thoughts shifting between significant and insignificant details (if ever there was such a thing in the Freudian “dreamwork”). Chateau analyzes *TWIN PEAKS 3* not as a film about dreams but as a “film that dreams,” as he puts it. By way of a conclusion, he proposes to look at David Lynch's “18-hour movie” – not a series, according to Lynch – as strange in a certain way: everyday, yet grotesquely distorted, thus emphasizing the ambiguous relationship between strangeness and the familiar.

Finally, in this section, the philosopher, Sandra Laugier, considers the “moral relevance” of such popular series as *GAME OF THRONES* (2011- ). Based on her regular columns in the French newspaper *Libération*, this chapter draws a parallel between the position of the American philosopher,

Stanley Cavell, who has written extensively about classic Hollywood cinema as “moral education,” and Laugier’s own view on the moral relevance of contemporary TV. For Cavell, the educational value of popular culture is not anecdotal, but defines what we understand by “popular” and “culture.” Laugier finds the same significance in the popular series of today, such as *THE WALKING DEAD* (2010- ) and above all *GAME OF THRONES*, which she defines as “polyphonic,” containing as they do many singular expressions, arguments, and debates, and creating for their loyal viewers “a moral atmosphere.” Against those who would see such series as merely escapist, Laugier argues that they represent “an *empowerment* of the audience, who are able by virtue of their experience and preferences to reach their own judgment.” Since the radical turn that US series took in the 1990s with *ER* (1994-2009) and *THE WEST WING* (1999-2006), she argues that viewers have been initiated into “new forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabularies that are not made explicit, without any heavy-handed guidance or explanation, as there was in earlier productions.” As a public philosopher, concerned with ethics in the modern world, Laugier believes that it is the “new narrativity” of such series that makes for their moral relevance. And against those who would decry the alleged sexism of *GAME OF THRONES*, she insists that it “releases or reveals women’s capacity for action, for the populations of the South and slaves, as liberated by the Khaleesi ... democracy is coming.” Indeed, she claims, “it is women, at least as much as men, who represent [a new] form of perfectionist aristocracy: Catelyn, Brienne, Arya, Yara, and of course the Khaleesi.” Laugier writes as a series enthusiast, as a fan, claiming that *GAME OF THRONES* is, in fact, more realistic than historical fiction, finding “its realism in proximity to the human, and its emotional strength in humanity and the modest heroism of characters doomed to death.”

PART III, *Discussions*, is devoted to questions about new forms of storytelling prompted by developments in mainstream television and the everyday ubiquity of smartphone use respectively. In the first discussion, television producer and television scholar John Ellis reflects on new phenomena in storytelling practices in television today. As the author of *Visible Fictions* (1982) and other books on mainstream television between the 1960s and 1980s, he famously described watching TV as a very specific activity for viewers, comparable to “working through,” as in psychoanalysis. However, we ask whether this is still true of watching television today. Do networks still allow their viewers to “work through” the themes which trouble and concern them today and, if so, what types of stories are needed to facilitate such a process? As a former television producer, now actively involved in researching past practices of television technique, John Ellis is ideally

positioned to discuss the levels of investment in production values demanded by Quality TV, and the narrative complexity and character development (particularly of secondary characters) that serial space allows.

Roger Odin's chapter, "The Single Shot, Narrativity, and Creativity in the Space of Everyday Communication" continues the exploration begun in his contribution to an earlier volume, *Audiences*, in which he outlined a theory of the significance of mobile cameraphones marking a new stage in the status of "film language," whereby it has become independent of cinema and of films *per se*, as simply a means of communication (Odin 2012, 169). Here, Odin takes the common figure of a continuous mobile image, or "tracking shot," to explore "what happens when nothing is happening" in live communication via cameraphones. In such a continuous image, he notes, "a process of *narrativization* is often introduced," and it is this that makes his chapter a valuable addition to the phenomenology of mobile communications. His detailed account of a Skype call between a young couple and grandparents who are abroad irresistibly recalls an illustration that appeared in *Punch* in 1878, in which a Victorian couple was shown communicating from London with their children in Ceylon by means of "telephonoscope."<sup>10</sup> This anticipation of what we know as Skype was prompted by the launch of Edison's Phonograph, an early landmark in the nineteenth-century communications revolution. Odin's account of this aspect of our everyday reality demonstrates how "narration passes through a combination of different devices; and it really seems to be a new way of telling or showing." It is, he suggests, yet another example of our ability to "live creatively," in the phrase used by the influential psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott.

PART IV of the book is devoted to a group of reflections on *practicalities*, each of which also has a personal dimension. Stories are created, adapted, and reworked by professionals within the film and television industries, and two of these chapters take the form of dialogues between the editors and practitioners, aiming to tap into their practical experience of shaping stories in the contemporary media world, while the other represents a blogger's perspective on a unique recent experiment in British television.

This section opens with the Dutch writer and filmmaker, Eric de Kuyper, recalling his experiences of collaborating with the well-known Belgian filmmaker and his longstanding friend, Chantal Akerman, who took her own life in October 2015. De Kuyper describes their approach to Proust's celebrated novel-sequence *À la recherche du temps perdu*, widely regarded as essentially "unadaptable," which resulted in Akerman's film *LA CAPTIVE* (2000). He describes his friend, already famous at the age of 25 for the uncompromising *JEANNE DIELMAN*, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080

BRUXELLES (1975), as an obsessive reader, who drew him to reading Proust. When they embarked on the adaptation, he was curious to discover how she would approach Proust's complex and labyrinthine novel, with its large cast of characters, rich evocation of a period and society and, above all, its intricate plot. He was soon to discover that she was neither fascinated by Proust's complexity nor the plot. In general, she thought of the film story as characters in specific situations and characters in different locations, De Kuiper says, and in this case, her focus was fully on the theme of "jealousy in a love affair" and the story of Marcel and Albertine. In retrospect, what they ended up doing was *reworking* Proust for LA CAPTIVE: to fit her vision of what a film by her should be about.

Ian Christie reflects on the history of "extending" and adapting literary texts by way of introduction to Luke McKernan's study of the BBC series DICKENSIAN. A prolific blogger specializing in aspects of early cinema (as well as a curator at the British Library), McKernan is the coeditor of a standard reference work on the many screen adaptations of Shakespeare, as well as a guide to "Victorian filmmaking," hence his interest in Tony Jordan's 2015 series is understandable. Jordan has been a pivotal figure in British popular television over three decades, scripting the major BBC soap opera EASTENDERS (1985- ) and creating such innovative series as LIFE ON MARS (2007). With DICKENSIAN, he created a "fully realized alternative world" composed of characters and partial storylines drawn from the novels of Charles Dickens. Extracting episodes from the novels, which first appeared in serial form, like much nineteenth-century fiction, was already a common practice in Dickens's lifetime – he himself gave dramatized readings on both sides of the Atlantic. And Dickens would become one of the most frequently adapted sources for both early cinema and television. But as McKernan argues, DICKENSIAN attempted something more ambitious: creating a synthesized *single* narrative composed of identifiable fragments from otherwise separate "storyworlds." Although attracting much attention, and considerable praise, the series fell victim to a common fate in contemporary long-form screen fiction: it was not recommissioned, although, of course, it remains accessible in nonbroadcast formats.

The importance of music in screen storytelling can hardly be underestimated, and was often discussed during the preparation of this volume. Yet, rather than commission a chapter analyzing current trends in film or television composition, we asked the conductor Robert Ziegler, who works with live orchestral concerts as well as soundtrack recording, for his thoughts about the practice of musical accompaniment today. The dialogue with Ziegler led to a brief discussion of the work of Carter Burwell who, as Ziegler

notes, is very good at explaining what he does as a film composer. On his work for *THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI* (2017), Burwell notes that as the story and the relationships develop, “[Mildred’s] themes intertwine until, by the last couple of reels, they’re barely recognizable.” In many ways, this kind of analysis could be applied to film music at almost any moment during the last hundred years. But as a sign of the times, Burwell (et al. 2013) is also actively interested in discovering what neuroscience can reveal about the unconscious part that music plays in our narrative absorption.

The potential of the cognitive sciences to explain much more about what is involved in our familiar practices of story-making, story-following, and story-sharing has been recognized since the beginning of this century. As long ago as 2003, David Herman’s collection, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, identified “a crossroads where cognitive and social psychology, linguistics, literary theory, and [...] ‘cognitive narratology’ intersect” (Herman 2003). Whether the fissiparous community of screen scholars is convinced of this direction remains debatable. But we hope that the present volume reflects at least some of the most promising current and future sites of activity.

## Notes

1. In *Audiences* (Christie 2012), the psychologist, Tim Smith, referred to Münsterberg’s belief that films “externalized the audience’s inner world” (172).
2. In his essay about Balinese cockfighting, Geertz summarized the significance of a story as “a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves” (1973, 448). For a large-scale application of Geertz’s idea to the field of film studies, see *Stories We Tell Ourselves* (2009), online at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-opening-our-eyes-stories-we-tell-ourselves-report-2006.pdf>.
3. Hannah Arendt selected the essay for *Illuminations*, a volume of Benjamin’s essays, with a now classic essay by Arendt about Benjamin’s life in dark times. Typically, his essays expressed a deep affinity with Kafka, Baudelaire, Proust, Leskov (the central figure in “The Storyteller”), and Brecht.
4. In yet another seminal text springing from this dark period in history, these changes were also discussed, although in terms of representation: see *Mimesis* (Auerbach 2003). Auerbach started working on this book in the mid-1930s, yet *Mimesis* was only published in 1946, a mere decade after “The Storyteller.”
5. However, Benjamin saw relics of the tradition in some storytellers in the modern era, including Leskov.



6. “The Storyteller” (like “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility”) has been discussed intensively over the decades in the German-speaking countries, yet long receiving considerably less attention in the Anglo-American, even if Arendt’s essay did raise attention for Benjamin and this essay in the 1970s. Recently, however, this essay attracted fresh attention in, for instance, an elaborate reflection by Charles May (2014).
7. We are grateful for the input of Dominique Chateau and Martin Lefebvre and in the following paragraph we draw on their reflections and conversation on the topic. See also their reflection on Metz and Phenomenology (Chateau and Lefebvre 2014). They argued that “Remarques” grew out of a moment in Metz’s thinking when his phenomenological “considerations for sense” intersected with the “semiological considerations or conditions for signification.” The first section of their essay is entitled “Semiology as Phenomenology or Phenomenology as Semiology.”
8. Laura Mulvey (2006) devoted a whole chapter to the characteristics of this type of viewer, born in the age of video and developing quite quickly in the age of smart technologies. As she expressed, Mulvey took inspiration from Raymond Bellour’s reflections on the changing viewing conditions available to the film viewer.
9. To his many examples also belong: LOST, ALIAS, VERONICA MARS, THE X-FILES, DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES, and TWIN PEAKS. Mittell argues that viewers watch such programs, “at least in part to try to crack each program’s central enigmas – look at any online fan forum to see evidence of such sleuths at work” (2006, 38).
10. This cartoon, drawn by Gerald Du Maurier, is reproduced at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telephonoscope#/media/File:Telephonoscope.jpg>

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# PART I

Theory in Contemporary Contexts

Reassessing Key Questions



## 2. Stories and Storytelling in the Era of Graphic Narrative

*Jan Baetens*

### Diversity and Inequality of Stories

As claimed by Roland Barthes, one of the founding fathers of modern narratology, stories are universal and can be told in all media:

There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. [...] Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies [...] there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative. (1975, 237)

However, if all stories are equal, some are more equal than others and, in some cases, the difference between stories – whether they are worth studying or not, prestigious or despised, heavily promoted or ignored, canonized or kept at the margins as mere entertainment – has to do with issues of medium and medium-specificity. Although a number of things have changed, words are still judged as being more suitable for storytelling than just images, which are typically suited to description and the representation of fixed objects – see the long posterity of Lessing's *Laocoön* (1776) and the still-raging debates on the respective qualities of the action-oriented verbal sequences and family resemblance between visual simultaneity and immobile subjects. Moreover, within the field of visual storytelling, imposed by the spread of mobile images or the combination of words and images in multiple panels and series, certain media and image types continue to face strong resistance, either because they are considered hybrid and therefore “impure” or because cultural gatekeepers define them as lowbrow, if not utterly vulgar. Once again, much has changed in this regard. It would be absurd to claim, for instance, that cinema is a less interesting or adequate medium than literature since it mixes words and images or because it is deeply rooted in the world of commerce and the culture industries (currently, we all accept that cinema has “remediated” literature [Bolter and Grusin 1999]). But these changes in status are far from complete. Think, for instance, of

the continuing scorn of the photo novel (Baetens 2017), a medium that still suffers from its historical links with melodrama and patriarchal biases against women's and girls' magazines (Gibson 2015).

On the other hand, the universal character of storytelling and story structures does not mean that narrative is always seen through a positive lens. From an aesthetic and cultural-historical point of view, many modernist movements have criticized the normalizing and stultifying effects of narrative, allegedly harmful to all that Modernism should be about, namely the progressive disclosure of the material infrastructure of the medium – color and flatness in painting (Greenberg 1940), the productive play of the verbal signifier in literature (Ricardou 1978), or montage and projection in (analog) cinema (Krauss 2000), among other examples. From a social and political point of view, the use of storytelling techniques has been associated with manipulation and propaganda (Faye 1972; Salmon [2007] 2017). However, its problematic aspects also appear in the theoretical debates on the reduction of narrative methodologies to a mere toolbox, which is subject to all kinds of commercial uses and abuses (Baroni 2017). Once again, it is important to stress that most recent research has abandoned all extremist and one-sided refusals of storytelling as such. While Lev Manovich (2000) could still claim the supersession of narrative structures of classic, that is verbal culture, by the database logic of digital culture, Hayles (2007) rapidly defended a more ecumenical approach of narrative and nonnarrative as being inevitably and inextricably linked. In addition, an author such as Andrei Molotiu (2009), who has been instrumental in the foregrounding of abstraction in comics, has never denied the possibility of giving narrative meanings to apparently nonnarrative forms and structures. However, the resistance to storytelling – or at least toward certain forms thereof – cannot be reduced to twentieth-century Modernism. All historians of the (realistic) novel stress the initially poor reputation of this type of narrative, which was not seen in the beginning as a culturally legitimate challenger of older and often much less narrative types of literature (for a broad historical discussion of this debate, see Auerbach [1933] 2016).

It is against this double backdrop – that of the competition between forms and media of storytelling on the one hand and the not always unchallenged position of storytelling as an art form on the other – that I wish to address the role and place of “graphic narrative” in contemporary narrative. The stakes of such a discussion are not only *intra-medial*, that is aiming at highlighting the medium-specific features of the “graphic narrative” field, but also *intermedial*, that is comparative, as is the case with film studies. More specifically, the study of “graphic narrative” can strengthen and broaden a

wide range of ongoing debates in film scholarship which, on the one hand, deal with the status of genre fiction (which is a very different type of fiction than what is meant by the concept of fiction when it is not customized with the help of a genre label), the medium-specific attitudes toward the global move toward digitization (which, in the field of “graphic narrative” discloses interesting forms of resistance), and, more generally, the place of narrative itself (which is far from being natural or self-evident in some of the cutting-edge types of “graphic narrative,” where anti-narrative stances are less marginal than those in cinema).

### Graphic Narrative in the Expanded Field

In recent discussions the notion of “graphic narrative” is no longer a term that refers to “vividly and visually explicit” narrative, which can be performed by purely verbal means as well, but an umbrella term that designates the narrative use of sequentially arranged photographs or drawings, often supported or enhanced by captions, speech bubbles, and other verbal elements (for practical reasons, I will focus here on a specific type of graphic narrative, i.e., that of *comics* and *graphic novels*).<sup>1</sup> Today, graphic narrative in general, and comics and graphic novels in particular, have become ubiquitous, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. They are not only omnipresent (and commercially successful) but also increasingly accepted as a culturally valuable form of storytelling.

It is commonly assumed that the opening of literature and literary studies to comics and graphic novels is a typically postmodern phenomenon, which firstly has to do with the continuous hybridization of media and art forms (and since comics and graphic novels generally combine words and images, they are perfect candidates for this kind of hybridization) and, secondly, the progressive dismantling of the frontiers between high and low art (and the merger of literature, a traditional high art, and comics and graphic novels, a developing form of low art is an appropriate example of this tendency). Obviously, the impact of these evolutions cannot be denied. However, there is more at stake in the emergence of comics and graphic novels as literary forms, more precisely as acceptable forms of literary storytelling (i.e., stories one can buy in a regular bookshop, teach in high schools and colleges, take as the object of an academic publication, and, eventually, institutionalize as the core of new university programs and careers).

The vital reason for such success is not only the postmodern character of graphic narratives but also the fact that they represent an answer to a

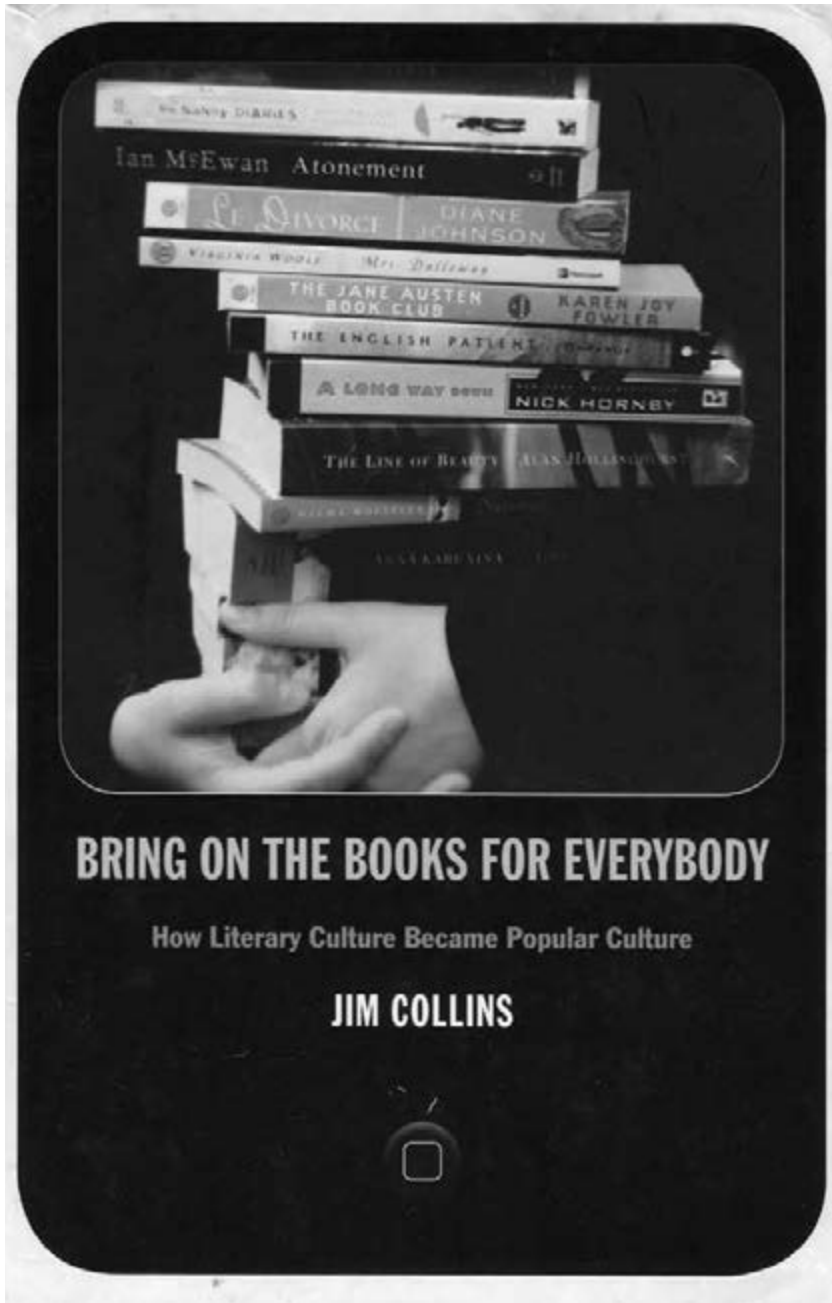


Fig. 2.1: Cover of Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (2010).



specific historical problem: that of the gradual vanishing of storytelling in more highbrow forms of literature around 1980 and thus the mismatch between supply and demand, that is between what literature was offering to the larger audience and the expectations of the latter which were no longer met by the former. In other words, if the public continued to look for models and examples that told readers how to shape their lives, how to behave in society in a responsible and satisfying way, and how to work on personal taste and individual development – all crucial incentives for the larger consumption of literary narratives – modern literature had become increasingly reluctant to cater to these needs, to which it preferred an esthetically more radical yet socially more narrow exploration of its own characteristics (Marx 2005). Jim Collins, a sharp observer of the social reactions to this shift, has described the effects of the gap between general readers and modern writers as well as between these readers and academically trained professional critics. Since the preferences of the latter no longer reflected those of the audience and its deep-rooted longing for self-cultivation and social interaction through cultural practices, new types of gatekeepers and collective involvement in reading appeared, as demonstrated by the tremendous success of Oprah Winfrey and other middlebrow tastemakers such as Martha Stewart who proved capable of offering, in a user-friendly way, what a liberal arts education, overspecialized and dramatically turned toward theoretical sophistry were no longer providing: affordable models and best practices for building a good life (Collins 2010).

Since the social need for “relevant,” that is socially and personally “useful,” storytelling is no longer supplied by certain forms of literature (in this case, contemporary literature, taking on board the high-modernist critique of narrative and its desire to turn realistic narrative into pure art), the public turns either to other forms of literary storytelling, regardless of the artistic value of its products (romance readers do not care about the lack of prestige of the genre) or to nonliterary forms, such as movies in the first place, and comics and graphic novels, which take the place that high art literary storytelling was no longer willing (or smart enough) to occupy around 1990. The rise of the graphic narrative as a literary form can therefore not be reduced to internal changes of the medium, as epitomized by the emergence of the “graphic novel” label during the 1980s (with 1986 as a pivotal year, with the simultaneous appearance of the first installments of Frank Miller’s *Batman*, *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore and Gibbons’ *Watchmen*, both “recycled” as graphic novels one year later, and the first volume of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, whose serialization had started in 1980). The graphic narrative’s success outside the field of comics, where it first appeared in



Fig.2.2: Cover of the first issue of (*A Suivre*).

the early nineteenth century, cannot be separated from a larger demand for storytelling in print. That (serious) comics really aimed at being read as a literary form, is a claim that is shared by all defenders of the graphic novel, such as Will Eisner, whose *A Contract with God* (1978) was explicitly framed and marketed as a serious fiction for readers who no longer had the time to read long novels, and Jean-Paul Mougín, the founding editor of *A Suivre* (1978-1997), whose opening manifesto in the first issue of the

magazine foregrounded “l’irruption sauvage de la bande dessinée dans la littérature” (the bold entrance of literature into comics [1978, 3]). Mougin militantly quoted as his major models the genre of the adventure novel and the work of R.L. Stevenson, that is, forms of literature that are dramatically narrative as well as highly popular but not necessarily highbrow.

The almost organic encounter between literature and graphic narrative can also help to explain the intriguing question that is raised by Bart Beaty in various publications (Beaty 2012; Beaty and Woo 2016): Why are comics<sup>2</sup> a medium that, after all, gives more importance to the visual than the verbal, considered literature rather than a new form of narrative visual art? Beaty’s main argument with the regard to the mutual misunderstandings, if not open hostility, between the world of comics and that of art, is of course a key element in the debate (Frey and Baetens 2018). However, it is no less important to stress the warm welcome given to graphic narratives in the field of literature, which partially solves the deep status issues with which comics and graphic novels were, and still are, struggling.

The graphic narrative case is therefore an excellent illustration of the cultural and historical embeddedness of any storytelling practice. Stories may be universal and ubiquitous, but their diverse forms are not equal: their social status is different, as is the degree of acceptance of storytelling in different fields. Moreover, these forms compete with one another at moments of change, which also generate internal changes within each form. In the next paragraph, I will focus on the most crucial changes in the domain of graphic narrative, namely the split or tension between comics and graphic novels.

## Graphic Storytelling and Genre Issues

The rapid institutionalization of graphic narrative as a fully fledged literary narrative form has had many consequences for the treatment of story and storytelling. It produced a remarkable debate on the internal unity of the field, which opposed two nearly incompatible stances. On the one hand, the promoters of traditional comics refused to fully acknowledge the specificity and autonomous position of a new trend in graphic storytelling, namely the graphic novel, a type of comic that its defenders considered, quite on the contrary, as something completely different from traditional comics.

The distinction between these two visions is not purely technical. True, the distinction between both types seems rather easy to establish: comics are for kids, while graphic novels target an adult audience; comics are most

often printed in comic books and sold in newsstands, while graphic novels are available in real bookshops; comics are generally made collectively by teams of artists hired to closely follow an editorial line and style, while graphic novels are mostly made by individual authors, who often position themselves as “auteurs” (in the technical sense coined by French film theory) and who are in charge of both the writing and drawing of the story; comics are almost always serial stories, which continue as long as the public is eager to buy them, while graphic novels tend to be stand-alones, which require the author to reinvent him- or herself at each new publication; comics are cultural-industrial products which have to have a recognizable house style and content, while graphic novels are supposed to experiment with style as well as content; comics have to obey a strict publication format (size, number of pages, serialization rhythm), while graphic novels may have various formats and publication types, and so on. Yet, in spite of these blatant technical and material differences, the distinction between comics and graphic novels remains open to debate, not only with regard to drawing techniques and publication formats but also at the level of storytelling practices. First of all, for socio-political reasons, the appearance of the graphic novel, which is often perceived as a quality label given to separate “good” from “bad” comics, is considered a vicious and politically suspect maneuver to exclude comics from the more prestigious domains of literature or art, if not as an even more deceptive operation to save these domains from what is key to low-art, namely the vitality and vulgarity of mass culture as well as its direct relationship with actualities and socio-political issues. According to these critics, the graphic novel is less an attempt to upgrade comics than an exercise in muzzling what makes popular culture so unacceptable to high art and elite culture (Pizzino 2016). According to those who maintain the unity of the field, many comics are actually doing what graphic novels claim to do, whereas many graphic novels fail to maintain the socio-political relevance of much lowbrow culture.

Yet the socio-political dimension of this debate cannot be severed from a properly theoretical and aesthetical debate on the question of storytelling. As a matter of fact, the conflict between comics and graphic novels reproduces, in more ways than one, the art-historical and literary debate between traditional works of art, where storytelling remains the key feature of any creation and consumption, and modernist or modernizing art, where the focus shifts from the narrative and figurative dimension to something else (pure form, the documentary, political commitment, for example). More precisely, the “upscale” resistance to “vulgar” narrative (here, I am rephrasing the terminology of those who oppose the cultural and aesthetic

claims of the graphic novel within the larger field of the graphic narrative) relies on two major mechanisms.

Firstly, many graphic novels prefer to highlight what makes them so different from comics by rejecting what is often considered to be the basic feature of popular storytelling: target-oriented plots, high-speed action, heroic figures, thematic exaggerations, formulaic style, and all kinds of visual and narrative standardization. Graphic novels, on the other hand, tend to focus on anti-heroes; emphasize the absence of action to the point of utter boredom; and systematically underscore repetition, boredom, and uneventfulness, both thematically and visually (Schneider 2016). In their most extreme form, these graphic novels turn into “abstract” works, which no longer have any visible presence of action, setting or character (Molotiu 2009). This anti-narrative stance clearly echoes the typically modernist trend toward replacing the traditionally dominant pole of temporal structures by the newly hegemonic aspect of visuality within literature (Frank [1945] 1991; Mitchell 1980).

Secondly, the perhaps overstated difference between (generally overtly) narrative comics and (sometimes covertly) anti-narrative graphic novels, also takes the more nuanced, yet culturally no less significant form, of the difference between *genre fiction* and *fiction in general*. Whereas most comics stick closely to genre conventions – and thus belong to the field of genre fiction – graphic novels try to avoid all genres that fall prey to this kind of thematic and stylistic streamlining. Graphic novels either “deconstruct” existing formulaic genres, such as most exemplarily the “funny animals” genre reused by Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, or they explore new genres that were never within reach of comics, such as the autobiography (preferably linked with the issues of trauma and disability, often with a strong class, sex and gender dimension), both in its direct and auto-fictional variants, on the one hand, and the documentary (as seen in graphic journalism and graphic biographies, for instance) on the other. The success of these new genre experiments, most of which are perfectly compatible with the tendency toward decreased narrativity, is such that critical voices have underlined the formulaic turn of much of these nonnarrative antinarratives:

Two ideas that have poisoned a cross section of contemporary writing in general have also, to some extent, seeped into comics. One is the sentimental memoir (a first-person story that explains why the author is in the right and why his or her pain and sadness are worse than yours). The other is the toxic maxim “write what you know”: the idea that, even in fiction, an author’s imagination has to be directly limited by his or her

personal experience. The rise of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comic books brought these ideas into play in comics and opened up the question as to how cartoonists might best represent their own experience. (Wolk 2007, 203)

Therefore, storytelling is both the solution and the problem with regard to the transition from comics to graphic novels in the field of graphic narrative. On the one hand, the refusal of old genres of comic storytelling (all typically *genre fiction* formats: adventure, fantasy, science-fiction, horror) as well as the more general attempt to escape the constraints of action-driven storytelling, help the graphic novel bring to the fore uncharted territories, subjects, themes, and characters. On the other hand, this shift is not deprived of new stereotypes, some of which, as Wolk's quotation cunningly suggests, are dictated by the artistic superego of the newly emerged pseudoliterary form. In an attempt to be taken seriously as real literature, graphic novels copy the most directly available writing techniques – those taught in countless creative writing classes – and therefore even more easily fall prey to all kinds of clichés “real” literature would try to escape.

The combination of new ambitions and old forms also becomes very clear in the graphic novel's attitude toward a fundamental technological feature of contemporary storytelling, namely digitization.

## New Stories, Old Media

Seen as a *narrative* form, rather than as a form of (virtually nonnarrative) visual art, graphic narrative is also part of a specific cultural industry, particularly that of the publishing business. It is, therefore, logical that it follows the major trends of this business, which can be summarized along three lines, and which rapidly prove to be quite close to what can be observed in the film industry. Firstly, there is the increasing commercialization of publishing, where the traditional role of the publisher as cultural gatekeeper is taken over by the financial interests of noncultural stakeholders that claim a high return on investment (Thompson 2012; Schiffrin 2000). As a result of this evolution, the split between commercial trade publishing and old-school independent publishing has become abyssal (however, even commercial trade publishing is becoming increasingly dependent on other players in the field, such as the distribution system – think of Amazon, the largest bookseller in the world). Secondly, there is the absorption of trade publishing in multimedia consortia and the necessity to develop new content – or to



Fig. 2.3: Cover of Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire* (2011).

redesign old content – in various media and on different platforms in order to achieve supplementary benefits (Brouillette 2014; Murray 2013). In its simplest form, this tendency translates into the commercial obligation to

adapt a work in other media (and, thus, to sell and resell as many times as possible the copyrights related to it). Mass culture is not only intermedial; it is also a type of culture that inevitably migrates from one medium to another (often with amazing and exciting results). In its more recent and comprehensive form, this tendency toward medial variation takes the form of transmedia storytelling, a term that refers to the systematic dispersion of fiction “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” (Jenkins 2007). Thirdly, the entire publishing industry has taken a digital turn that radically dissociates what was inextricably linked in the traditional book format: content and host medium (Thompson 2012).

Graphic narrative illustrates these three tendencies very well. Moreover, each of them powerfully reflects the tension – indeed so well-known in the film industry, where the financial stakes are incomparably much higher – between the cultural-industrial strand exemplified not only by many comics, but also by some graphic novels, and the more independent, “do it yourself” approach of many graphic novels and some comics. It would be absurd to believe that there is a seamless match between comics and the trade publishing industry – currently DC (Warner Bros/Time Warner) and Marvel (Disney) – on the one hand and graphic novels and independent or self-publishing<sup>3</sup> – in the Anglo-Saxon field mainly Fantagraphics (Seattle) and Drawn and Quarterly (Montreal) – on the other. Everybody knows the stereotypical antagonism between the stereotyped vision of the sweatshop industry of the comic book in its Golden and Silver Age, as famously described by the artists themselves (Eisner [1985] 2008) and the slightly romanticized reinterpretation of this industry by their novelist-historians (Chabon 2000). However, the Taylorized production line of these works was far from stealing creative freedom and, to a certain degree, managerial control from those whom David Hesmondhalgh (2002) called “symbol creators” (for an example in the comics field, see Hatfield 2011; various examples on film and television are given by Hesmondhalgh).

More generally speaking, the comics industry has repeatedly been uncritically opposed to the alleged complete freedom of authors in the graphic novel field, where commercial constraints are no less present. If the *comix* underground movement of the late 1960s can be seen as the forerunner of the (American) graphic novel, one should not forget that the same authors are now publishing with major companies such as Pantheon, a Knopf Doubleday imprint. Similar observations could be made on the tendency toward adaptation and transmedialization, which have become almost default options in the comics industry, but which remain rather exceptional



in the graphic novel field. However, it would be a mistake to think that this evolution is new or even recent in the comics field (for an example of comics marketing and cross-medial adaptation and appropriation in the nineteenth century, see Sabin 2003; for an overview of the interaction between comics and cinema, see among many others, Boillat 2010) or that independent artists systematically refrain from adaptations or even going transmedial. While it is true that most authors certainly do refrain from it (it suffices to think of Spiegelman's repeated refusal to authorize a film version of *Maus*), typically independent authors such as Robert Crumb or Daniel Clowes are not afraid of collaborating with Hollywood. It should also be stressed that the tendency toward intermedialization (i.e., the combination of several media within a single work) is much stronger in the graphic novel industry than in the comics field. The combination and hybridization of photography and drawing is incomparably more frequently used in graphic novels than in comics (Pedri 2017). It is not absurd or exaggerated to suppose that there may be a link with the relative absence of cross-medial adaptations. Since graphic novels are less frequently adapted for the screen, the dialogue with other types of media – an inescapable feature of all contemporary graphic narrative – is not “outsourced” to the film industry, but included in the creative work itself.

However, the most interesting tensions and differences can be observed at the level of digitization, which continues to be strongly rejected by most graphic novelists, whereas nowadays, the comics industry is offering most of its products in electronic formats as well. The resistance to digitization is not only due to nostalgia and the fetishism of paper and ink (for the author) and the touch and feel of the book (for the reader), but also the actual making, printing, distributing, and consuming of graphic narratives, which entails countless digital steps and aspects. Neither is it due to the less satisfying results of some digital comics, which often poorly replicate on-screen the visual affordances of the page and the book, nor to the relative slowness of the emergence of digitally born comics (Crucifix and Dozo 2018). Instead, the most fundamental obstacle is the everlasting influence of a proper narrative mechanism, namely the idea that storytelling on-screen is in the very first place a matter of “clicking through” from screen to screen. Most influentially voiced by Scott McCloud (2000), this idea was probably inspired by the 1990s hegemony of the concept of *hypertext fiction*; that is, a genre of electronic literature, characterized by the use of hypertext links that provide a new context for nonlinearity in literature and reader interaction. At the moment of the first systematic attempts to establish digital graphic narratives, hypertext fiction was the new Promised Land and its prestige definitely influenced the way in which creators imagined

the new digital graphic narratives to come. Not unlike hypertext fiction, which has almost disappeared from the field of literary creation, the “clicking through” mechanism proved to be a dead end, and one can easily understand why. The foregrounding of the panel-to-panel (or, in this case, the screen-to-screen) transition as the driving force of narrative progress tends to exclusively highlight the *linear* aspects of graphic storytelling and minimize the second great dimension of graphic storytelling, namely the exploration of the simultaneous presence of images and visual elements within a certain frame (which, in the case of graphic storytelling, is generally a *multiframe*: one-panel pages are exceptional, and even then one has to take into account the echoes between the two pages of the spread). In comics, the importance of linear panel-to-panel transition is often much stronger than that of the nonlinear copresence of all elements on the page or the double spread. It is not uncommon for graphic novels to work the other way round, foregrounding the singularities of the mosaic-page rather than the features of its single panels or images. Hence, the differences between both types of storytelling – the one that focuses on linear unfolding and the other that underlines the simultaneous presence of different visual items or units – in a digital environment that still tries to prioritize the “clicking through” button and which, for that reason, seems more open to comics’ linearity than the combination of linearity and simultaneity typical of the graphic novel. One can, however, presume that things will change very rapidly once graphic narrators have superseded the “clicking through” default option.

To conclude, I would like to stress once again that graphic narrative, which has now become a major player in the field of narrative in print, is not a phenomenon that can be explained in literary or artistic terms alone. As suggested by the past, present, and future of this cultural form, which has emerged as comics in the margins of the cultural system before being reshaped alongside the growing opposition between comics and graphic novels once it started participating in the field of culturally legitimate storytelling, in analog as well as in digital forms, graphic storytelling is a multilayered process in which technical, aesthetic, historical, and ideological dimensions are inextricably intertwined. The most interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the study on graphic narrative is that a “global,” that is, a cross-medial and linear approach to stories and storytelling, is highly problematic. The study of graphic storytelling suggests that stories do not always evolve in the same direction in various media and genres and that even without each medium and genre, it makes sense to pay attention to individual cases, local contexts, and certain forms of anachronisms. Furthermore, it is important to note that this is a lesson that may apply to film studies as well. It is true

that graphic narrative is not a field that has the same cultural and economic importance as cinema, but the diversity of the field and the rapid, though not always sustainable, changes that characterize it can serve as a modest but useful echo chamber for ideas and hypotheses that are tested in the broader field of film studies and storytelling in general. From this point of view, graphic storytelling deserves to be studied as a key domain in the larger field of cultural narratology (with film studies as a specific subfield).

## Notes

1. The term “graphic narrative” may be somewhat misleading for non-specialists, but it is becoming increasingly popular as an alternative to terms such as “comics” and “graphic novels,” which cover more specialized forms of the general field of graphic literature (Baetens and Frey 2015). There are, of course, many other forms of visual narrative such as, for instance, narrative *illustrations*, as in the multimodal novel (Hallet 2009), not to mention the various kinds of narrative that rely on *mobile* images. However, in what follows, “graphic narrative” will refer exclusively to works in print in which a story unfolds with the help of drawings, regardless of whether or not these drawings are accompanied by verbal elements. The emphasis on drawings, rather than on pictures, is both pragmatically and theoretically motivated. In spite of the many convergences between these two forms of graphic narrative, both subtypes are also characterized by many differences. Similar remarks apply to the hybridized forms of drawn and photographic narratives, which tend to raise very specific questions that are not necessarily of vital importance for the current discussion.
2. As in his other publications, Beatty is focusing less on graphic novels than on comics, an attitude that reflects a polemic to be discussed below, but which does not impact the discussion on literature versus visual arts too much.
3. A highly nuanced approach is all the more necessary since self-publishing is being increasingly promoted by major distributors such as Amazon, who uses it as a tool to weaken the position of traditional publishers.

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### 3. Rediscovering Iconographic Storytelling

*Vincent Amiel*

Carlo Severi (2007) has rightly observed that, over a history much longer than that of cinema, both combinations of images and composed images have constituted another way of constructing meaning as complex, rich, and often just as narrative as combinations of letters or sound. This is what is often referred to today as “visual thought” or, as Francastel (1967) puts it, “figurative thought.” It is a system of meaning specific to images, or their association, which owes nothing to the logic of writing. This form of thought has no need to be absorbed or circumvented by the same media which offer the largest choice of different images, with all their combinations and declinations.

It is true that the speed of projection, and thus of the persistence of images, remains an unavoidable condition of their effect; and we would have a hard time trying to compare film sequences with those of written or spoken text. However, long ago, cinema discovered ways of breaking the flow and finding a figurative diversity capable of producing links and networks other than those of written continuity. Thus, in the same way that there exists in certain forms of writing a graphic, or even an iconic dimension that affects or modifies meaning, cinema has many ways of dealing with images which offer a range of possibilities to create meaning (Schapiro 1970; Barthes 1970).

If we wish to avoid the totalitarianism of linear and chronological articulation, we can focus on two characteristics that contemporary screens have revived: the spatial configuration of images in relation to one another and the diversity of their forms.

Today, one of the first consequences of the widespread use of personal screens has been the new experience of the spatial arrangement of screens and their frames. On computer or mobile phone screens, images and frames are moved, interlocked, and zoomed in or out according to the viewer’s will. Thus, the images and frames interact with each other. An algorithmic logic, which takes on some of the autonomous, self-consistent characteristics of fiction, allows images to appear, and to modify, transform or follow one another, thus turning upside-down our habit of distinguishing the frame from the background. Here, I am referring to the so-called “cookies”

that pop up for advertising or informational purposes. Images appear and confront one another – at least according to the order and hierarchy of perception – but they also dissolve into one another, quickly becoming oblivious of their own frame. On touch screens, the void around figures and signs is not considered a part of the image, but as a useful area able to be filled up. The very notion of “background” disappears, as in the use of the term “wallpaper” for screen background (in French, *fond d’écran*). This is not part of the image related to the foreground, but is an autonomous, indifferent space, a neutral surface on which multiple icons appear. Thus, the image loses all characteristics of a framed whole that it has acquired during the classical tradition.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, it has returned to the way Schapiro described images in the Middle Ages: “the frame belongs to the viewer’s space more than the illusory, three-dimensional one that nests within its limits” (1970, 12). This inscription of several frames on one screen, of several images that can be seen at the same time, may be considered archaic. Lately, however, we have grown accustomed to it, and so quickly that one wonders whether cinema had ever renounced it. Evidently, it had not and, in a way, cinema has remained a privileged vehicle for it. But the inscription process displayed itself discreetly, marginally, as though sucked into the accelerating flux of images and their singular meanings. We are interested here in such combinations of images: images inscribed in the unfolding process of a film but which, for the duration of a shot or a sequence, suggest discontinuity or a different logic of articulation, thus establishing links that hardly relate to classical narrative logic.

## Four Examples

Here, we shall consider images that a film marks as alien, resisting the narrative flow to which they belong. Furthermore, we shall focus on their interplay. For instance, they create a competition between the points of view associated with them at the time of their appearance, between the strength of their significance as well as their degree of representation. These characteristics make them different from one another, causing them to clash and separate from the flow in which they are supposedly integrated. There are four such types:

- The first type includes multiple images on the same screen. While these were once arranged in quarters or chequered in the era of silent cinema, they are currently presented in what is commonly referred to as *split*



*screen*. Thus, three or four images can be placed next to one another on the same screen, but at different speeds and for different durations. “Split screen” makes simultaneity both effective and possible (“meanwhile ...”). Different points of view are able to coexist (“leaning, one could have seen ...”). In addition, however, there can be unlikely conjunctions of different realities, whose correspondence may, at first, seem odd. These first types are the most frequent,<sup>2</sup> but they are also the least specific, since they could easily be replaced by a traditional editing structure which has consecutive scenes or shots signifying simultaneity – one of the common functions of insert shots. The third example is more interesting, because it does not follow a cause-and-effect logic, and is not part of the narrative flow. It involves such plastic elements as colors, rhythms, and types of image. An early example would be the famous pillow battle in the dormitory, in Abel Gance’s *NAPOLÉON* (1927).

- Such images do not merely share the screen, but can be superimposed on it. This overlaying technique was often used by Gance and other experimental filmmakers of the 1920s. Two, three, or more overlays of images are visible to the viewer. While it is sometimes difficult or even impossible to distinguish one layer of image from another, the principle remains explicit. The final shot of Anthony Perkins in Alfred Hitchcock’s *PSYCHO* (1960) uses this process in a peculiar way: it superimposes the face of the son on the mother’s and relies on the viewer to consciously combine the two images. It is the same with green- or blue-screen chroma-key special effects, which substitute a different background for a figure photographed against a solid color.<sup>3</sup> Instead of remaining undetectable, as they normally do, these can make one aware of the hybrid quality of the shots in question. Caroline Renouard has brilliantly demonstrated how this is done in *L’ANGLAISE ET LE DUC* (2010). Eric Rohmer makes two eras interact with one another by superimposing two types of images in the same shot (Renouard 2012, 410-419).
- The third form of image association involves explicit *inlays*, meaning that these are not used to achieve a *trompe-l’oeil* effect. I am referring to widely used effects that video has multiplied, first on television and then on cinema and computer screens. These inlays consist of “windows” within a mother-image, a window in which a different action takes place and another reality is shown. Examples include the inlays opening during television news programs, which the French television artist Jean-Christophe Averty has turned into a playful game. Referred to as “icons” on computers and mobile phones, they allow one to proceed from one layer of content to another. Such inlays allow for intellectual

trajectories, classification, comparison and removal: in other words, more than merely following a story. The process was seldom used in films until it was developed by video; now it offers the opportunity to create complex links between images by articulating, for instance, the relative status of encompassing and inlaid images, hence of primary and secondary events.

- Finally, there are images that establish yet another level of difference from their neighbors: object-images that form part of the diegesis, book covers, posters, television or film screens, and paintings. Filmmakers, such as Godard, Hitchcock, and Rohmer, have consciously multiplied the articulation of these images within the shots of their films. Between the explicit meaning of these images and their potential connection with others lie the most obvious difference and articulation of visual thought from conventional narration that we are trying to distinguish. A poster on a wall may be connected with a social or dramatic context; scenes watched on television may feed into the story in which a character is involved. These are simple narrative links that contribute to the linear and contextual reading of a film. However, if a painting or any other type of object-image is related to the story in a more complex way and is free from a strictly directional vision, this is typically an example of what such images can produce.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the object-image, first identified as being part of a set, is legitimized as well as erased by the diegetic realism; it then becomes an inlaid entity which is able to establish complex correspondences with the rest of the film, through its meaning, plot relevance, or any of its formal elements.

Therefore, by way of collage, overlay, inlay, or objectification, offset images complicate the flow of films, generating networks, ridges, or narrative systems that deliberately confuse the course of the film. They are indeed offset because of the way they appear, their specific forms, and “medial” situation; the element of mediation, one might say, which they allow to appear and which constitutes them. By way of a simple effect due to usage – which is actually intrinsic to the very notion of image – it is when they multiply within a single frame that they actually reveal their nature as images; when their succession does not, in any way, affect the transparency of their representation.

This auto-eidetic dimension of the image should not be minimized: it is by departing from the apparent evidence of its mimetic storytelling that cinema is able to escape prevailing narrative habits. The power of realism is such that, since the beginnings of cinema, its effectiveness has a stunning effect. A deliberate deviation, an explicit shift is necessary for another logic

of meaning to appear – or to insinuate itself in a more discreet way. Within the apparent movement of elements of the diegesis, which immediately establishes the possibility and necessity of a story, it is essential to create a visible rupture, not only in the form, but also in the system of images.

### An Iconographic System?

It is common to place the iconographic and narrative systems in opposition to one another, as though specific qualities inherent to the very principle of the image were unable to merge with the storytelling process. The opposition, however is false because, for the most part, it focuses on *one* image, in other words, a single moment or situation within the flow that is inherent to narration. The two opposing systems generate another classic polarity: description and narration. No quality inherent to the image is at stake here, unless one considers the image as unavoidably static – which cinema itself contradicts. Thus, if one considers a plurality of images in space and time, it is legitimate to wonder how they can make sense when taken out of the story, or how they can make sense as a narrative. If, indeed, there is such a thing as an iconographic system, it is not opposed to a narrative or any other discursive or demonstrative system. An iconographic system would be contrasted with a vocal, linear, one-level system, as is mostly the case with the written system. In other words, image is not to be opposed to narrative, but to time-regulated narrative. In oral and written traditions, ephemerality and fluidity regulate the economy of story and its reception: thus, it is necessary to find stable points within it. The notion of “narrative identity” (*identité narrative*) proposed by Paul Ricoeur (1985) refers to oral (or written) narrative resisting its own mechanism. It establishes the narrative’s need to maintain some kind of permanence within the never-ending transformation generated by temporality. However, this reflection about identity would not occur if there was no transformation, no constant fading of shapes and figures. What is precisely impossible as far as the image and cinema are concerned is the capacity to maintain the successive stages of a story in some kind of timeless simultaneity. Split screen and superimposition allow for the copresence of two realities, not separated by any chronological gap. According to this schema, simultaneous images convey some kind of timelessness, a lack of succession, the disappearance of temporal order. And if there is memory, causal explanation, or time-shift (all cinematic processes that are common in classic cinema), these constitute specific cases established by the screenplay and are expressed through conventional

effects (dissolve, iris, etc.), which exploit the intrinsic properties of the image. The frequency of their occurrence (like, for instance, the obsolete *topos* of dissolving on somebody's face to imply memories) cannot hide this particular character: coexisting images merely accidentally imply time-shift.

What the image is able to dispose of is what Pierre Bergounoux (2016) refers to as "rational storytelling," which he defines as being bound by some conventional rules: the fixed identity of characters; the spatio-temporal orientation of the universe in which they move; and strict observance of the causality principle.

Bergounoux contrasts "rational storytelling" with children's storytelling, or "the text of dreams"; but also with mythological narratives or the first great primitive stories, such as *Gilgamesh*, which are totally free of such rules. This is obviously very close to Carlo Severi's observations on visual thought in nonwritten traditions.

Such visual thought literally disorganizes the narrative, by refusing the rationality invoked by Bergounoux, which relies completely on temporal linearity. Strict causal articulation and maintenance of the same conditions disappear when temporal flow is replaced by a chequerboard of random movement. This is what happens when different evolutions, a-chronological situations and independent rhythms coexist in one image as revealed by the history of art in tympana and altarpieces. The image is not necessarily organized around a story that imposes an unequivocal unfolding. According to Ricoeur, it maintains "discordance" while the narrative project builds up "concordance." It is not that the image has banished time or ignored the story, but rather that it has multiplied them. Within the image, one can find dramatic scenes that are both dependant on and independent of one another. Thus, image is not Story (*récit*), even though it is constituted by stories that establish meaningful links. It is not Story because the only unity it confers on the discordance is a formal one; it does not integrate:

the quality of narrative intelligence (which consists in) incorporating discordance into concordance, with the effect of surprise playing a part in generating meaning; the consequence is that, afterwards, the fable seems probable, or even necessary. (Ricoeur 1992, 472)

Nevertheless, it enables these stories to co-exist, maintains each story's autonomy and keeps them from scattering. A kind of unity is achieved because they coexist in one frame, on one support, in one space, and are able to be taken in simultaneously at a glance by the viewer. This is why copresence on the screen is so important; the spatial link it establishes

balances the movement generated by the projection of images: a concordance through becoming (*par le devenir*).

What Ricoeur refers to as “narrative identity” maintains a single identity through the story’s continuity in spite of occasional discordance. The process is at work in film because of its very movement, but it is negated, or at the very least unbalanced due to coexistence on the screen. When a window is opened in a John Ford film, or when a superimposition appears in Truffaut, it is another image, perhaps narrating something subordinated to time; but, most of all, it is another meaning relationship that appears to the viewer. In the overlay of two images, in the embedding of one frame within a shot, it is the determination of each image that disappears, though not completely, creating a new potential. The correspondences of one image to another can, of course, be secured by the story – integrated by concordance – as reminder, premonition; but, most of all, they can introduce something radically different.

## Random Connections

Spatializing the links between images means relieving them of their temporal conditioning, freeing them from strict graphic-narrative conformity. This means not only allowing them to escape a strict determination of their layout and reception, but also simultaneously establish between them original sensory effects. These can belong to two orders, namely discourse and inner flow (or, to use William James’s term, “stream of consciousness”). The point is not to follow the objective and apparent evolution of persons and objects, but to suggest by the relation between two images, a different movement, which could be that of discursive thought, external to phenomena, or of intuitive inner thought.

When Hitchcock puts a print of *Susanna and the Elders* on a wall (in *PSYCHO*) or when Arnaud Desplechin makes his main character describe *The Arnolfini Portrait* (in *LES FANTÔMES D’ISMAEL*, 2017), we can feel these paintings’ presence, making a formal link with the films, comparing the plots or structures of the two image systems, and so illuminating the films through these connections. On the other hand, when in *PSYCHO*, the skull of Norman Bates’s mother is superimposed on her son’s face, or when an infinite desert landscape appears in a window in *THE SEARCHERS* (1956), it is by intuition, through an intimate understanding of the object, that a new, supplementary meaning appears. There are so many discordant elements within the primary story, which constitutes a succession of events, that

neither the Fordian landscape nor the Hitchcockian disturbed personality belong to any chronological order. However, we recognize that they are neither foreign to the story nor secondary to the work as a whole: they are the very substance and flesh thereof, beyond any need for explanation. Born of the relations between images, they are as free from time as from conventional realism.<sup>5</sup>

But they do belong to the story; in fact, they constitute it. By introducing a timeless element, they open up a field of possibilities. The mechanics of cause and effect no longer apply, since spatial cohabitation generates an all-round potentiality.<sup>6</sup> The spatialization of images is therefore not *against* the story, nor *around* it. It is the story itself that gains a new dimension: characters can change their situation and, in time, their status. For instance, a daughter can experience what her mother has experienced, the dead can go on living, and timelines can cross one another. The open frames (*cadres ouverts*) in Tarkovsky's or Parajanov's images point to an eternity within a finite world; Wenders's video monitors in *TOKYO-GA* (1985) suggest the possibility of a universal nomadism. Times collide, causalities disappear, and identities dissolve.

For all that, the simultaneity of images, which is achieved by avoiding consecutive presentation, and offering the possibility of storytelling unconstrained by succession, allows something that perhaps was hidden in the editing process to appear in broad daylight. When images establish a dialogue on the same screen, they show how relative and conventional this succession is, as well as how legitimate it is to consider the relations between images in a nonlinear logic. It implies that it would be well-founded to envisage the links between images in a nonlinear logic. Then a new conception of storytelling appears.

## Notes

1. "The edge (the physical edge of the panel and the represented edge in painted architecture) is the active limit of the representation; thus, it acquires the function that it will have in classical painting, assuring and confirming the inner autonomy of representation from the outside world (even if it has to be doubled by a material frame)" (Arasse 2010, 66-67; translation Ian Christie). See also Stoichita: "The frame separates the image from what is not image" (1999, 53; translation Ian Christie).
2. As in the famous *The THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR* (Norman Jewison, 1968) or in *THE GRIFTERS* (Stephen Frears, 1990), or in almost any film by Brian De Palma.

3. Digital chroma-key has replaced the background substitution which used to be provided by matte processes.
4. Michael Haneke's films, such as *BENNY'S VIDEO* (1992) and *FUNNY GAMES* (1997), use television screens in a way typical of these articulations. One can also refer to the essays of Vancheri (2013, 2015).
5. Some descriptions in Flaubert are of such an order: extraneous to the narrative, but still constituting it.
6. This could be compared with Gilles Deleuze's "*images-cristal*," as having similar characteristics.

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## 4. Wallowing in Dissonance

### The Attractiveness of Impossible Puzzle Films<sup>1</sup>

*Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen*

If you're not confused, you're not paying attention.

– Tom Peters

There has been no shortage of attention in film studies regarding the current trend of complex stories and storytelling. Discussing the increasing prominence of perplexing narrative forms both in popular cinema and serialized television, which appears to have emerged from the mid-1990s onward, scholars have spoken of “complex narratives” (e.g., Staiger 2006; Simons 2008; Mittell 2015), “puzzle films” (Panek 2006; Buckland 2009, 2014a), “mind-game films” (Elsaesser 2009, 2017) and “modular” (Cameron 2008), “mind-tricking” (Klecker 2013), or “multiform” narratives (Campora 2014). These diverse labels have been used to cover not only a wide range of films (from cult hits and mainstream blockbusters to international and historical art cinema), but have also been accompanied by a variety of approaches. Scholars have used narratological approaches to provide typologies and taxonomies of various complex films, have examined the (film-)philosophical implications of these new narratives, or have focused on the cultural, sociological, industrial, technological, or media-archaeological contexts from which the trend has emerged.

In our monograph, *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*, we proposed yet another angle, aiming for an in-depth understanding of the *effects* and *experiences* of narrative complexity in contemporary cinema. We offered a “cognitive reconceptualisation” of story and storytelling complexity in film by analyzing how different types of complex movies evoke different kinds and degrees of *cognitive puzzlement* in their viewers, leading to various viewing effects and experiences. Our inquiry led us to further questions, such as what kinds of interpretive responses complex film narratives evoke and encourage, and how different films have used different modes and degrees of complexity (from moderately complex “puzzle” and “twist” films to highly disruptive and excessively complex story structures, in both popular film and art cinema). This approach singled out a distinct set of movies that we labeled

“impossible puzzle films”: popular films that evoke pervasively confusing viewing experiences, undermining narrative comprehension by means of various complicating storytelling techniques and the eliciting of dissonant cognitions (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 59). We argued that films, such as *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* (2001), *PRIMER* (2004), *TRIANGLE* (2009), or *ARRIVAL* (2016) feature notable degrees of narrative confusion, and employ (counter) strategies by means of which they strive to keep viewers interested and immersed in their stories’ challenges and mysteries.

When trying to understand the nature of the viewing experiences that complex narratives such as impossible puzzle films provide, one question lurks constantly around the corner: Why would anyone be interested in confusing stories? After all, why would viewers spend hours attempting to solve potentially unsolvable puzzles? What pleasure could we take in fictional stories that are manifestly designed to be excessively complex?

In the following excerpt from the final chapter of our book, we freely ponder this question: What makes highly complex stories attractive or at least engaging for (some) viewers? It is not our aim to provide definitive answers. Thinking about complex film narratives’ potential for engagement or attractiveness implies other important issues that can be rather thorny (such as why people engage with art and fiction in the first place). Queries of this kind also generally resist easy or univocal explanations. Moreover, what people draw from these particular films is likely to vary significantly according to their individual film and media literacy, personal history, preferences, competences, and attitudes. Undoubtedly, there is also a significant number of viewers who do not like this type of cinema, or with whom perplexing stories simply do not resonate at all. Nevertheless, these caveats do not make the question irrelevant – on the contrary, understanding what draws some people to complex stories is a fundamental part of understanding these films themselves, both in terms of the viewing experiences of those who watch them, and as a phenomenon in contemporary audiovisual culture. Therefore, to open up the discussion and disclose further perspectives, we will devote this contribution to contemplating the possible *attractiveness of complexity*, inspired and informed by the observations we have made in our earlier studies on cinematic narrative complexity (Willemsen 2018; Ros and Kiss 2018; Kiss and Willemsen 2017; Willemsen and Kiss 2017; Coëgnarts et al. 2016; Kiss 2012, 2013). It is an attempt to look beyond our usual theoretical frameworks, loosening the scientific rigor, and taking a stance that is, admittedly, a speculative one.

Most of the popular “puzzle films” found in contemporary cinema can, in many ways, still be said to provide the type of gratifications that are

commonly attributed to classical narrative film. From a cognitive and affective perspective, Nitzan Ben Shaul characterizes the attractiveness of classical narrative cinema as follows:

It seems that the challenging of the viewers' cognitive faculties in a manner that satisfyingly lets them construct out of the movies' compelling audiovisual flow a coherent story that leads to closure, along with the attendant arousal, regulation, and control of tension, mostly through suspense strategies, are the *sine qua non* components that account for the popularity of movies. (2012, 25)

But whereas many popular “puzzle films” restrict their complexity to moderate and motivated forms (Willemsen and Kiss 2017, 5), encouraging and, ultimately, rewarding viewers' intensified narrativization efforts with an attainable solution or comprehension (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 56), our previous theorizing also proposed that other films such as the ones that we have called “impossible puzzle films” offer a more excessive complexity that frustrates viewers' narrativizing efforts more strongly, and are thus likely to offer different viewing pleasures. It is reasonable to assume that the more complex and confusing a film's narrative, the less its enjoyment will correspond to the qualities usually associated with conventionally realist and canonical “classical narratives” (e.g., immersion, identification, empathy, the arousal of emotions, and the satisfaction of closure). Films that present “impossible puzzles,” apparently deny viewers much of this satisfaction. Although films, such as *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* or *DONNIE DARKO* (2001) still involve classical narrative patterns and engaging affects, such as suspense and tension, they do not allow viewers clear-cut solutions to well-framed problems, and often deny narrative closure. Rather, impossible puzzle films are dissonant, ambiguous and open-ended, and may even leave viewers searching for the story; some even appear not to allow the construction of any coherent narrative chain of events. Simply put, these films are *confusing* – a state of mind that, arguably, most people under most circumstances would prefer to avoid. However, what appears to be an undesirable sensation in real life might be an appealing experience in mediated art; impossible puzzle films, just like perplexing and dissonant art films (think of postwar modernist art cinema), have attracted a considerable audience and critical acclaim. The question as to what underlies the fascination with such films thus becomes a rather intriguing one; it seems that complexity in a story can also entail a distinct appeal of its own. While working on our book, we accumulated some ideas and hunches for potential reasons for the

attractiveness of cognitively dissonant and highly complex stories. Below, we will share eight of these ideas in the form of *explorative hypotheses*. No rigid factuality should be ascribed to these – they are not “claims” as such; rather, we hope that our reader will feel invited to think along, to bring in his or her own knowledge and experiences, and to reflect further on the possible pleasures and functions of this particular type of cinematic story.

## Hermeneutic Play and Interpretive Multiplicity

One unique aspect of engaging with highly complex or impossible puzzle narratives could lie in the peculiar meaning-making activities that they allow. In a previous discussion of the possible interpretive responses to dissonant stories, we noted that they can evoke what we call *hermeneutic play* through repeated frame-switching (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 130-139). Impossible puzzle films do not allow a single interpretive resolution to achieve full closure; rather, they appear to be designed to keep viewers in a loop of sense-making. In so doing, they evoke a perpetual sense of “cognitive dissonance”<sup>2</sup> that encourages an enduring search for a satisfying resolution or a clear meaningfulness. This invites viewers to repeatedly try out different interpretations, frames of knowledge, analytical strategies, and critical competences, without necessarily settling on a single outcome. This prolonged interpretive quest, we hypothesize, can maintain a distinct *interpretive multiplicity* that viewers may appreciate for various reasons.

First of all, this lack of closure and interpretive hierarchy may be deemed *liberating*. In terms of engaging with fiction, impossible puzzle films offer an appealing alternative to the closed, teleological cause-and-effect logic of classical film narratives.<sup>3</sup> They refuse to adhere to the singular logic and typical closure that characterizes the vast majority of classical narratives with which contemporary audiovisual culture is saturated. Highly complex stories that challenge (but do not entirely break with) this familiar mode of classical narration may thus simply be attractive for their novelty, offering a refreshing variation on the very common ways of engaging with fiction, or even self-reflexive “metafictional” pleasures. More broadly speaking, viewers may also appreciate these films’ resistance to sense and meaning-making as a triumph over reason and order at large. For instance, one frequently heard argument is that highly complex film narratives form a critique of the Enlightenment values that determine much of the modern scientific worldview (e.g., Panek 2006, 67). A work’s noncompliance with being rationally contained can be appreciated as liberation from modern Western scientism, or from the

cultural dominance of qualities, such as objectivity, logic, clarity, purposefulness, predictability, agency, and explanation. In addition, viewers may value complex classical narratives for their emancipation of alternative qualities, such as subjectivity, irregularity, contingency, unpredictability, uncertainties, pathologies, and ambiguity. Indeed, such alternative value-attributions need not be exclusive to “highbrow” art cinema. Furthermore, some individuals may simply take pleasure in being overwhelmed by an artwork that surpasses reason and cerebral comprehension. One may simply enjoy the sensation of *perplexity* that such stories evoke, finding pleasure in the dazed states of nonunderstanding, or in feeling the affective, nonconceptual sensations afforded by a narrative that eludes cerebral comprehension. Arguably, the quality of open-endedness in interpretation is generally also something that is appreciated in our cultural apprehension of artworks. After all, artworks that cannot be contained or exhausted in a single reading are generally held in high esteem (in many forms of art criticism, or in the canons) where such interpretive multistability is often considered an artistic asset that signals a work’s depth or durability.

Secondly, viewers may also connect these qualities of interpretive multiplicity to *mimetic expressivity* – that is, they may see the complexity as mirroring aspects of the world in which we live, or the ways in which we experience it. Some critics have argued that complex, unsolvable narratives reflect the decentralized or diffuse postmodern culture, or the complexity of contemporary socioeconomic problems.<sup>4</sup> It is assumed that there are viewers who feel that artworks that evoke high complexity, dissonance, or ambiguity as an effect (instead of merely depicting these conditions in their stories) do a better job at representing the inherent complexity or ambiguity of the human condition or the world around us. Moreover, films, such as *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* or *ENEMY* (2013) may likewise be appreciated for the reason that they do justice to the complexities of the human mind, finding ways of representing the (anti)logic of dreams or the subconscious strata of the human psyche. In this sense, impossible and unresolvable puzzles may be attributed mimetic functions that can be characterized as rather existential. Jan Alber eloquently phrases such a position when pondering the appeal of “unnatural” fiction (physically, logically, or humanly impossible stories) that resists meaning-making:

At the end of the day, all examples of unnaturalness can be read as saying something about us and the world we live in. [...] For me the unnatural addresses one fundamental aspect of our being in the world: the lack of order and meaning and the difficulties of coming to terms with this

lack. [...] The unnatural [...] reminds us of the fact that we are never fully in control of things: represented impossibilities challenge the search for order and meaning in a radical way. At the same time, however, it is of course our human predicament not just to stare into this abyss but also to try to come to terms with it. (2016, 36-37)

This also points toward a third possible component behind the attractiveness of this type of hermeneutic play, namely *training a real-world skill* for dealing with interpretive multiplicity. If the everyday world is complex and characterized by a lack of clear order and meaning, then it follows that dealing with the multiplicity and multistability of different meanings forms a key aspect of dealing with that world. In connecting strategies formulated for fictional complexity to the ability to cope with real-world complexity, Ien Ang has called for the nurturing of a kind of “cultural intelligence”:

Finding a language to understand [...] complexities – that is, to describe the specific ways in which things are “complex and contradictory” [...] – is a necessary step to generate the cultural intelligence with which to formulate “solutions” in terms of strategic, flexible, emergent, non-simplistic simplifications, rather than the reductionist and mechanistic thinking (informed by positivism) which still dominates much policy-making and problem-solving. (2011, 788-789)

Artworks can exercise our ability to cope with complex situations in real life by presenting complex stories or by foregrounding formal-structural complexity that requires viewers to juggle multiple, simultaneously reasonable interpretive options. The tendency of impossible puzzle films to withhold closure and unambiguous meaning can also be seen in this light. These films may, for instance, train viewers in what Reuven Tsur has labeled *negative capability*. Tsur quotes Keats to characterize negative capability as a competence “of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (1975, 776). This stands in opposition to what Tsur calls the “quest for certitude”: the urge to distill singular, unambiguous meaning from an artwork and reach interpretive closure. These notions form two poles in a spectrum, ranging from the appreciation of fixedness and certitude to the valuing of lingering ambiguity and interpretive multiplicity. One may assume that a viewer’s position on this spectrum will be determined by personal attributes and dispositions (cf. an individual’s psychological “need for closure” – see Webster and Kruglanski 1994), and that this position is relevant in the degree to which one enjoys or values

ambiguous artworks. Nonetheless, it can be hypothesized that repeated exposure to narrative artworks that highlight interpretive multistability may serve to train everyday “negative capability.” By altering the shortcuts in an individual’s meaning-making routines, repeated exposure to interpretive multiplicity may make him or her less prone to readily seeking interpretive closure.

Lastly, even if complex films do not necessarily form “cognitive playgrounds” in which viewers can train and test the meaning-making skills demanded by an increasingly complex world, then they can still be said to simply entertain skills that viewers already possess. That is, complex stories can trigger the use of certain interpretive and analytical mental competences, which viewers may enjoy exercising simply for their own sake. Following Liesbeth Korthals Altes, we could call this aesthetic pleasure *Funktionslust*. According to her, there seems to be a:

pleasure and interest our minds seem to take in *complexity itself*, admittedly in different degrees. This pleasure seems akin to what the German psychologist Karl Bühler called *Funktionslust*. This eloquent term refers to the pleasure taken in exercising a mental or bodily function (Bühler 1965, 157). Such function-oriented pleasure can be observed in repetitive movements in animal and child play but also in adult behaviour, from a good physical workout to riddles or crosswords that engage the pleasure of puzzling and pattern-seeking minds. (2014, 23; our emphases)

An impossible narrative puzzle may provide viewers with a similar pleasure by entertaining their *Funktionslust* in repeatedly utilizing their analytical and interpretive abilities. Complexity of narrative form, Korthals Altes notes, is particularly likely to become the target of such enjoyment, as “the pleasure we may take in our skillfulness in understanding intricate form may also appear like the *Funktionslust* of puzzling and pattern-seeking minds” (2014, 131). To a degree, however, this could of course be said of aesthetic and narrative engagement in general. The idea that emerges here is akin to a more general Kantian view of aesthetics, also popular among cognitive theorists of art, which assumes that part of the gratification of art lies in the fact that it affords a free play of our cognitive-perceptual and imaginative abilities in the absence of direct purposefulness. As David Bordwell notes:

In our culture, aesthetic activity deploys such [everyday cognitive] skills for nonpractical ends. In experiencing art, instead of focusing on the pragmatic results of perception, we turn our attention to the very process

itself. What is nonconscious in everyday mental life becomes consciously attended to. Our schemata get shaped, stretched, and transgressed; a delay in hypothesis-confirmation can be prolonged for its own sake. And like all psychological activities, aesthetic activity has long-range effects. Art may reinforce, or modify, or even assault our normal perceptual-cognitive repertoire. (1985, 32)

In this respect, too, impossible puzzle films can be seen as having rather unique reflexive functions. Through their problematization of narrative construction, as well as through their interpretive challenges, these films can have viewers experience and reflect on their cognitive involvement in narrative construction or, more generally, on different sense-making processes (perceptual, narrative, interpretive). Engaged viewers' repeated attempts to come to terms with the inherent dissonances of these stories may afford a gratifying *Funktionslust* in the pattern-seeking and other puzzle-solving activities of their hermeneutic play.

### Orientation, Navigation, and Mapping

Besides affording hermeneutic play, impossible puzzle films may also challenge other everyday cognitive skills and activities. One idea we wish to propose is that impossible puzzle films could provide special (embodied-) cognitive experiences by *challenging one's real-life skills of orientation and navigation*. Our hypothesis is that the pressure that such challenges exert on these skills might be a source of an enhanced viewer engagement. This first requires some explanation about the general function of orientation and navigation in relation to narrative fiction.

Elsewhere, we argued that real-life skills pertaining to everyday, embodied orientation and navigation are relevant to the processes involved in comprehending narrative structures (see Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 91-103; or Kiss 2013, 2015). Following previous accounts of embodied psychological and narrative continuity (Slors 1998; Menary 2008), we drew a link between the abilities of real-world orientation and navigation and analytical skills of plot segmentation in narrative comprehension.<sup>5</sup> We hypothesized that viewers use basic spatial schemas in "mapping" narrative plot structures, for instance, through the mental projection of image schemas, or by mapping one's own familiar action patterns onto the experiential paths of the fictional characters. This claim considers the idea that viewers and readers "map" a story to be more than just a metaphor and that "mapping" is therefore



not tied to strictly topographic dimensions.<sup>6</sup> For instance, when viewers follow and trace stories by means of narrative plotting, mapping can involve spatial visualizations of temporal relations among events (by placing them on a mental timeline). Arguably, readers and viewers are willing to invest cognitive resources into creating mental models of narrative maps if their investment presumably contributes to their comprehension of a story. The challenges of (impossible) puzzle films seem to provide a cognitive playground that particularly encourages such mapping activity in one's narrative orientation.

Similar to real-world navigation, in fictional worlds, the absence of a clear reference point can lead to disorientation. This reference point can be characterized as the *deictic center*. In everyday navigation, the deictic center refers to the embodied ego-reference point from which we navigate space and monitor time (establishing dimensions, such as front, back, up, down, or before and after). When extended to narrative, the notion denotes our constructions of "where we are" in the story, referring to the constructed spatiotemporal coordinates of "here and now." In any narrative text or film, this deictic center is an essential feature of storytelling and the starting point from which we can make inferences about the film's narrative and visual markers (or a written text's grammatical indications) concerning the when, where, and who of the story.

In constructing a narrative plot, the deictic center positions the characters relative to the spatiotemporal progression of the storyline, advancing along with the unfolding narrative. This allows viewers to determine "where they are" in the story, and enables them to determine not only the "here and now" but also, for instance, what is a flashback to earlier or flash forward to upcoming events. In most narratives, the deictic center is communicated clearly, providing a backbone for the smooth integration of narrative information: we know where we are in a story and can map flashbacks, flash forwards, changes of scenes, and ellipses in relation to that point in space and time. In impossible puzzle films, however, determining a clear deictic center may become problematic, or even prove virtually impossible, as the result of palpable dissonances between cognitions or sheer lack of order. This is particularly evident with narratives that present impossible storyworlds such as parallel universe stories (that obscure the spatiotemporal hierarchy among their multiple realities), and/or use complex nonchronological storytelling structures, particularly loops (which can severely destabilize a clear determination of the "here and now" or the "beginning and end"). We hypothesize that impossible puzzle films can disorient viewers by either *denying* the designation of a clear deictic center, or by asking them to map the story from *multiple* deictic centers.

As for the first option, many impossible puzzle films challenge orientation by hiding or obscuring the deictic center, leaving a high degree of uncertainty about the status of narrative information. It may, for instance, be left unclear as to whether scenes belong to the past, present, or future, or are a part of someone's hallucinations or dreams about the past, present, or future. One may, for instance, think of the extensive sections in *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* in which the film delves into a mysterious variety of uncanny scenes and storylines (including those of the Hollywood director, his casting and the mobsters, the nightmare story at the Winkie's diner, the cowboy, the hitman, as well as the ongoing story of Betty and Rita). While the film spirals into these different nonchronologically organized and ambiguously focalized story paths, it becomes increasingly difficult for a viewer to establish how events relate to one another, or how scenes might be connected – either spatially, temporally, causally, or as a network. The film does not follow a single character who could have provided a navigable reference point through the succession of different scenes and settings; nor does *MULHOLLAND DRIVE* include other clear spatial or temporal markers by which events could be readily placed in relation to one another. Moreover, the few recurring characters, such as Betty and Rita, who could embody a focal(izing) center point around which these events revolve, seem to have slippery identities as well, which further riddles the story with contradictions and incoherency. As the film progresses, this continuous lack of a clear center of orientation, from which the story's dimensions could be mapped (for example, as past or present, or as a dream or reality) frustrates the engaged viewer's attempts to do so. The strategy of making a deictic reference point permanently elusive is arguably paramount to *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*'s complex effects and, along with the film's highly uncanny and estranging film style, leads to a palpable sense of disorientation.

With regard to the second option, impossible puzzle films frequently present multiple (sometimes contradictory or paradoxical) deictic centers from which the plot needs to be mapped. This is particularly apparent in narratives that feature time loops and/or duplicating characters, as in *PRIMER*, *TRIANGLE*, *TIMECRIMES* (2007), *MIRAQ* (2006), or *REALITY* (2014). In the convoluted time-travel logic of *PRIMER*, for instance, the multiplying – and, for the viewer, often indistinguishable – versions of the protagonists destabilize our ability to map the past, present, and future, because these versions all form different, simultaneously existing deictic centers which are active at different points on the film's timeline. As various incarnations of the protagonists coexist within a single looping structure, the film's spatiotemporal markers become increasingly dislocated.

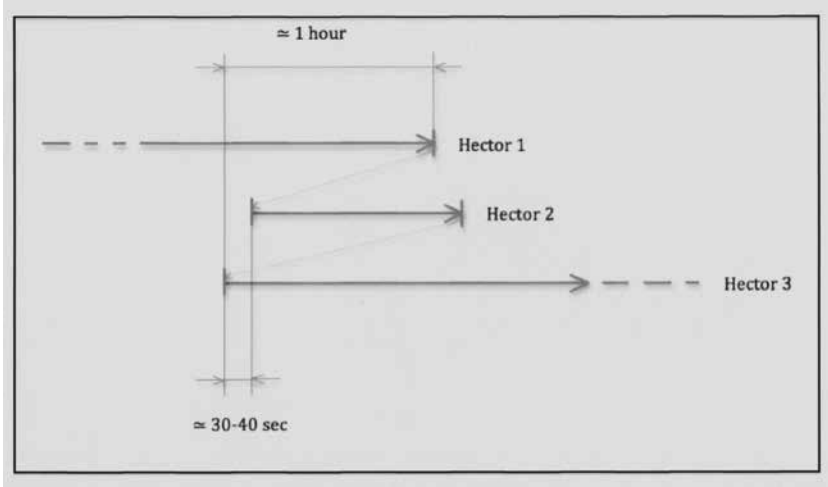


Fig. 4.1: Plot map of Nacho Vigalondo's *TIMECRIMES* (2007), drawn by Miklós Kiss.

The effect of an intensified need for orientation in complex story comprehension can also be observed in viewers' attempts to *graphically map* such plots. Drawing physical maps can function as a kind of "prosthetic extension" of viewers' mental work. A physical map can unburden limited cognitive resources and working memory when coping with complex stories and plots. Visual maps of narratives might also reveal neglected clues, new semantic fields, overlooked relations and patterns, and other forms of internal logic, which otherwise could have escaped one's awareness (for example, the plot map of *TIMECRIMES* reveals a simple structure behind the complex experience – Fig. 4.1).<sup>7</sup>

We would not claim that these films' challenging of deeply engrained skills of orientation and navigation is attractive in itself. However, such complexifying narrative tactics can be seen as invitational strategies that encourage heightened viewer activity, and thereby even manage to pull some viewers into playing along with the puzzle-solving games of navigational challenge, and mentally or even graphically mapping the intricate plot at hand, as the abundance of available online plot maps of complex films demonstrates. Inspiring such augmented analytical and interpretive activities, movies, especially of the complex kind, often provide models for such mapping practices themselves: from Robert Zemeckis's *BACK TO THE FUTURE PART II* (1989) through Mennan Yapo's *PREMONITION* (2007) to *TIMECRIMES*, many films present pensive characters chalking diagrams or grabbing pen and paper (see Fig. 4.2 to 4.4, respectively).



Fig. 4.2: Drawing on a blackboard, Doctor Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) explains the consequences of time travel in Robert Zemeckis's *BACK TO THE FUTURE PART II* (1989).



Fig. 4.3: In Mennan Yapo's *PREMONITION* (2007) Linda Hanson (Sandra Bullock) draws a calendar to be able to reconstruct a week she experiences in a nonchronological order.



Fig. 4.4: A quick sketch that reveals the simple idea behind a complex film experience in Nacho Vigalondo's *TIMECRIMES* (2007), drawn by El Joven (played by Vigalondo himself).

## Game Logic and the Fascination with Failure

Another hypothesis to explain the popularity of contemporary puzzle films can be sought in the comparison between their viewing experiences and the *logic* of videogames. According to Jason Mittell, many contemporary complex narratives:

require the audience to learn the particular rules of a film to comprehend its narrative; movies like *THE SIXTH SENSE*, *PULP FICTION*, *MEMENTO*, *THE USUAL SUSPECTS*, *ADAPTATION*, *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*, and *RUN LOLA RUN* have all embraced a game aesthetic, inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies. But crucially, the goal of these puzzle films is not to solve the mysteries ahead of time; rather, we want to be competent enough to follow their narrative strategies but still relish in the pleasures of being manipulated successfully. (2006, 37-38)

Similarly, Elliot Panek notes that:

An element of non-filmic interactive storytelling exists in these [puzzle] films. Younger audiences that are increasingly comfortable with the burgeoning interactive medium of video games may find puzzle narratives appealing for this reason. It is not enough to say that these characters are mentally unstable and that when the narration diverges from the classical mode, it is merely reflecting their fractured look on life. We seem to seek the nature of the instability even when we realize we are watching a psychological puzzle film, and take pleasure in trying to figure out the rules of the narration that presents the story to us. (2006, 87)

According to Warren Buckland, the narrative logic of contemporary puzzle films can be traced to the emerging logic of new media, specifically of videogames (see his analysis of Duncan Jones's 2011 film *SOURCE CODE* in Buckland 2014b, 185-197). For him, the influence can be observed in puzzle films' promise of "reliable rules" – a characteristic that is central to the logic of videogames (Gottschalk 1995):

These rules, which are reliable in that they are systematic and unambiguous [...] constitute the video game's environment, or location, which is not restrained by the laws of the physical world. The game user can experience video pleasure primarily by attempting to master these rules – that is,

decipher the game's logic. Moreover, the desire to attain mastery makes video games addictive, which at times can lead to the user's total absorption into the game's rules and environment. (Buckland 2014b, 187)

Although we believe a fundamental caution should be maintained with regard to claims crossing over from different media (film is, after all, still a noninteractive medium according to most definitions of interactivity), Mittell's, Panek's and Buckland's observations offer an interesting angle. Indeed, we would agree that in highly complex films, viewers do not simply experience complexity and dissonance, but are also often inclined to try to understand the underlying logic thereof – in Panek's words, to “seek the nature of the instability.” In many cases, this does indeed involve attempts to discern a set of logical rules in the narration – rules that the viewer could ultimately master. However, as previously noted, impossible puzzle films do not seem to offer the “reward” usually associated either with puzzle films or with games (in the forms of a revealing twist, resolution or outcome, or in the reaching of a new level). Some films do not simply delay the viewer's access to the rules and logic that govern their narration, but sometimes even fully deny viewers such logic. Nonetheless, this does not need to make the game-logic analogy invalid for these films. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, we observed that complex stories such as impossible puzzle films often seem designed to keep viewers inclined to search for a logic to their stories, employing various (post)classical storytelling strategies that encourage such “classical” narrative engagement (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 163-182). Viewers may therefore still find in these films the “promise of reliable rules” that Gottschalk and Buckland observe in games and cinematic puzzles. Secondly, it seems that failure forms an intrinsic, even pleasurable part of any gaming activity. As impossible puzzle films often evoke in viewers unsuccessful attempts to grasp their stories and story logic, a certain sense of “failure” also seems to characterize their experiences. An explanation for the appeal of such viewing effects could be found in humans' seemingly paradoxical fascination with failure. Regarding impossible fictional worlds, Umberto Eco already identified such appeal as “the pleasure of our logical and perceptual defeat” ([1990] 1994, 77). But what is pleasurable about a cognitive and perceptual defeat? In his book on videogames (tellingly titled *The Art of Failure*), Danish ludologist, Jesper Juul, points out the initially somewhat counterintuitive fact that “players prefer games in which they fail” (2013, 2). Drawing from his own experience, Juul notes that “I dislike failing in games, but I dislike *not* failing even more” (2). By means of some elegantly simple experiments, Juul demonstrates the importance of failure

and feelings of inadequacy in the context of videogames. He observes that “players who completed the game without failing gave it a *lower* rating than those who failed at least once” (35), and that “players rated the game significantly higher when they felt responsible for failure than when they did not” (53-54).

Juul’s observations seem to rhyme with the psychological workings of impossible puzzle films. Comparable to how a game “promises us that we can remedy the problem if we keep playing” (7), impossible puzzle films may beguile viewers with a similar promise, as their highly complex (but seemingly logical) narration continuously encourages viewers to rationalize and narrativize the illogical. The prospect of the potential intelligibility of these films inspires viewers to keep trying to overcome their felt inadequacy – which, as Juul notes with regard to games, is “an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place” (7). By arousing a sense of inadequacy, impossible puzzle films seem to trigger a similar motivational bias: viewers may feel that their competence or intelligence is being challenged in cracking the puzzle, and therefore give in to the urge to overcome “their” failure through recurring attempts at problem solving. To capture this recurring aspect of the process in gaming, Juul (2013, 60) introduces a model of the *failure-improvement cycle* of videogame play. The cycle consists of four steps: (1) a new goal is introduced; (2) failure presents the player as inadequate; (3) the player searches for the cause of the failure and improves; and (4) the player is no longer inadequate; he or she has new skills. A similar mechanism seems to be active in impossible puzzle film viewing, with the key difference being that the required “improvement” may not be satisfyingly reached. Rather, viewers’ ongoing lack of understanding and constant feeling of inadequacy may become a driving force that keeps them invested in comprehending the story, and, eventually, might contribute to their evaluating the experience as engaging. In sum, this hypothesis assumes that the engaging potential of impossible puzzle films is partly managed by strategies that continuously challenge viewers’ feeling of competence, which can contribute to the framing of the failure in achieving full comprehension as a fascinating experience.

### **Effort Justification**

Related to our fascination with failure, another possible reason for the attraction of confusing and cognitively demanding narrative experiences could be sought in the psychological principle of *effort justification*. In social

psychology, effort justification is understood as an everyday cognitive dissonance-reduction strategy – a mode of changing the value of existing cognitions. Simply put, the principle states that people tend to evaluate an outcome, reached goal, or completed task as being more valuable when this outcome has cost them more effort to achieve. It has been suggested that this principle is active in many different social and behavioral patterns. It can, for example, help to explain phenomena such as hazing and initiation rituals: by having to go through hardships or having to make an effort to be allowed into a social group, an individual is likely to value this membership more highly, as he or she has to justify the effort made (attaching a higher value to the outcome reduces the dissonance with regard to the more unpleasant aspects of the experience). Drawing on Leon Festinger's original theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), a classic study by Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills (1959) connected varying amounts of effort to evaluative judgments. Aronson and Mills hypothesized that the effort justification mechanism could be effective in any basic set of conditions regarding effort and evaluation: "For example, one would expect persons who travel a great distance to see a motion picture to be more impressed with it than those who see the same picture at a neighborhood theater" (1959, 177).

Cognitive scientist, Jim Davies (2014), extends the principle of effort justification to the realm of meaning-making. For him, discerned meaning becomes more valuable if it is attained through substantial cognitive effort. According to Davies, the pleasure of puzzles can also be related to this principle; after all, "[w]ith puzzles, the audience gets to appreciate so many things: the initial incongruity, the pleasure of knowing the solution, the pride of having discovered it themselves, and an increased value of the found solution due to idea effort justification" (2014, 143).

But how does this translate to an impossible puzzle? What is the mental payoff of the perpetually challenging experience that impossible puzzle films sometimes provide? It is apparent that the narrative comprehension of these films demands significantly more cognitive efforts than most classical stories or "ordinary" puzzle films (which provide or allow a relatively easy access to a coherent and logical solution to their conundrum). As elsewhere noted (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 104-139), impossible puzzle films allow cognitive operations and interpretive strategies that can compensate for viewers' fruitless efforts to find a coherent and logical solution. We would therefore hypothesize that Aronson and Mills's "suffering-leading-to-liking" thesis (Gerard and Mathewson 1966) can play a role in the appreciation of more pervasively complex films as well: attributing a positive judgment to these films' rich affordances might tame the experienced dissonance with



regard to the effort made. Simply put, one could presume that the general principle of effort justification still holds true for films that do not necessarily offer narrative closure or a satisfying resolution. According to this, the appeal of impossible puzzle films may stem from these films' offered *analytical and interpretive richness*, the intensified *inspiration for forensic activities* their puzzles call forth, and from viewers' general *respect for a highly challenging experience* that seems to outsmart them. These hypotheses could make for an interesting subject in terms of further empirical investigations.

### Diegetization of Decoupling

According to cultural cognitivist, Barend van Heusden, the appeal of cognitively dissonant narrative art comes from the amplification of a very general human disposition – one that characterizes practically all our real-life and mediated narrative experiences (Van Heusden 2009; and personal correspondence). He reasons that cognitively dissonant scenarios make us *reexperience* the act of *decoupling*, which is not only an integral part of our cognition but also a core aspect of the general human condition.

As Merlin Donald has argued (1991, 2006), through the evolutionarily increased capacities of working memory, humans have become capable of decoupling memory from actuality:

Donald equates the origins of modern humans to a transition from episodic to mimetic cultures, or the transition from lives that are bounded to the immediacy of experience to lives that are lived not only in the present but also in the simulation or representation of this experience. (Rochat [2001] 2004, 73)

In this sense, the act of decoupling is the source of human imagination: being able to “decouple” from the actuality of our here-and-now experience enables us to simulate, represent, or even fantasize about alternative versions of our reality. Following this train of thought, decoupling allows mimesis, whereas “art is an inevitable by-product of mimesis” (Donald 2006, 14). Hence, as a result of the cognitive evolution of the human species and its developed capacity for decoupling, the nature of culture and the experience of mimetic art fundamentally bear elements of dissonance. This means that there is a fundamental, deep-seated (yet unconscious and rarely reflected) conflict between our actual and imagined experience: between the “here and now” of actual perception (the reality context of reading or viewing,

that is, our reality as real readers and viewers) and the “there and then” virtual domain of narrative immersion (the diegetic world and its fictive population, which form the destination of our absorption and embodied identification). This “cognitive dissonance” is a result of the transfer from our real-life existence to the mediated art experience.<sup>8</sup>

If art is the mimetic imitation of an experience through representation by mediated simulation, then “metarepresentation” is a reflection on art’s mimetic representation. Certain metarepresentational cinematic strategies may highlight the cognitive dissonance inherent to the experience of artistic representation. Films can thematize and manifest the act of decoupling through narrative diegetization of this very fundamental dissonance. A notable example of this is provided by the abundance of character duplications in impossible puzzle films. Character splitting, doubling, and multiplication provide powerful instances of the diegetization of decoupling’s inherent dissonance. Looping narratives’ character multiplications – such as in Roman Polanski’s *THE TENANT* (1976), Smith’s *TRIANGLE*, Vigalondo’s *TIMECRIMES*, the Spierig brothers’ *PREDESTINATION* (2014), or Lynch’s *LOST HIGHWAY* – allow us to literally reexperience the underlying dissonance between our double presence of “here and now” and immersed “being there,” which can be seen as a subtle addition to these films’ attractiveness (beyond, and in case of Polanski’s film, prior to the more obvious effects of digital lossless copying, video games’ multiple lives, social media avatars, and other distinctly contemporary reasons that scholars and critics have attributed to the character-doubling “trend”).<sup>9</sup>

### **Fascination with Infinity**

Certain impossible puzzle films owe part of their attraction to the arousal of what seems to be a deeply rooted human fascination with infinity. Whether encountered via mathematics or geometry, cosmology, or theology, the idea of endlessness seems to exert a strong curiosity, detectable throughout Western cultural history and the arts (Maor 1987). Like mathematicians, visual artists have repeatedly attempted to capture infinity in an aesthetic form, for instance through endlessly looping patterns (comparable to the famous steps by Lionel and Roger Penrose [1958] – Fig. 4.5) or recursive *mise-en-abymes* (a picture of a picture in a picture in a picture – suggesting multiplication *ad infinitum*). Some impossible puzzle films similarly suggest “infinity,” presenting narrative versions of infinite loops (for example, *TRIANGLE* and *TIMECRIMES*) or endless narrative *mise-en-abymes* through

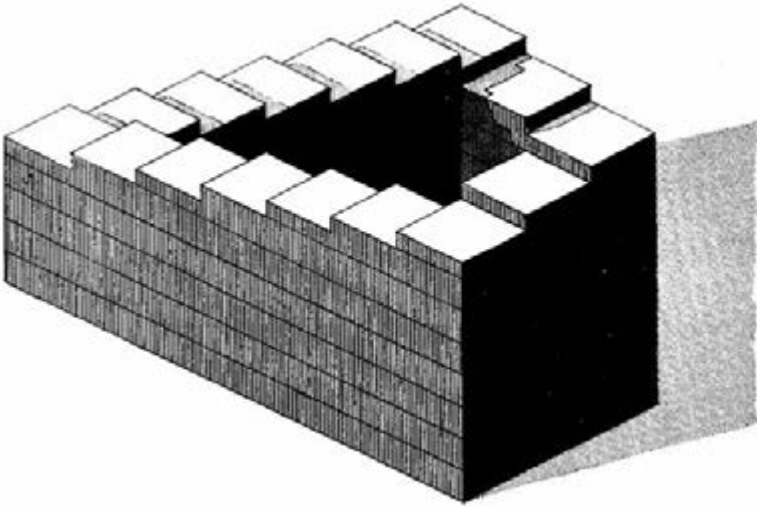


Fig. 4.5: The impossible loop of *Penrose Steps* by Lionel and Roger Penrose (1958).

embedded metalepses (for example, *REALITY* and *SYNECDOCHE*, NEW YORK, 2008). These peculiar “endless” narrative structures seem to exert a curious fascination.

Why is it that pondering “the infinite” is prone to evoking reactions of wonder or bewilderment? In a 1994 paper, psychologist, Ruma Falk, discusses how infinity seems to be “infinitely challenging to the human mind” (35). She notes that “people’s intellectual attempts to cope with the puzzles posed by the infinite have been interwoven with a wide spectrum of emotional responses” (35). According to her, these emotions and fascinations are essentially triggered by the human inability to cope with the “disturbing contradictions” that endlessness entails (36). This inability, Falk argues, is grounded in two particular cognitive moves – neither of which is compatible with our habitual strategies of reasoning. Firstly, in order to grasp infinity, one needs to practice “the ability to *suppress* our imagination, at least the visual part of it” (54). This entails a conscious detachment from everyday experience and knowledge, common sense and the habitual formation of mental imagery, all of which imply (and depend upon) finiteness in the world around us. Therefore, coming to terms with infinity demands the challenge of “*unlearning* of old truisms” about the laws and dimensions of the world in which we live (53). Secondly, according to Falk, the infinite will always remain an abstraction – a concept that is beyond the reach of human experience and intuition, and that is best explained by scientific conceptualization. Like quantum mechanics, infinity proves very difficult to comprehend in

terms of the realm of everyday experience, yet its workings can ultimately be understood through (scientific) argumentation and description. Falk illustrates this by referring to examples of so-called “super-task problems,” borrowed from mathematical and psychological experiments: she asserts that as long as one tries to reconcile puzzles about the infinite rationally and commonsensically, they will elicit “bizarre conclusions” (55). Hence, Falk argues:

No real-life experiment can ever model the infinite. [...] Paradoxically, one needs a kind of (non-visual) vision that can accept the unimaginable. The key to abstract thought is its detachment, not only from sensory perception, but even from imagery. Dissociation from familiar aspects of reality and from strongly held beliefs may enable human understanding to surpass intuition. (1994, 37, 54)

Arguably, infinity derives its fascinating aesthetic potential from this challenging of familiar aspects of our (beliefs about) reality. Illustrations such as the Penroses’ infinite steps or Escher’s paradox loops (such as his 1959-1960 lithograph *Ascending and Descending*) are examples of attempts “to capture infinity in a ‘closed’ composition” (Schattschneider [1990] 2005, 241).<sup>10</sup> We have compared the narrative structures of impossible puzzle films to depictions such as Escher’s (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 86-91), noting how these films also make the seemingly impossible perceptually and conceptually available. Some impossible puzzle films (not all, it must be noted) play with narrative mechanisms that suggest “infinite” outcomes. Films such as *TRIANGLE* or *THE TENANT* present stories that turn into endless loops without beginnings or endings; *REALITY* constructs a *mise-en-abyme* in which different story levels are contained in one another, offering a continuous paradox; and *SYNECDOCHE, NEW YORK* plays with another kind of *mise-en-abyme*, one that is implied through a constantly duplicating simulacrum: as protagonist Caden wants to direct a play that honestly and realistically captures his real, mundane life, he finds that his play must also include him making the play, which then needs to include a play about him making that play – a logic that ultimately points toward a potentially infinite recursion of plays within plays within plays.

These examples all use circular structures and recursive multiplications as narrative devices to suggest endlessly looping or duplicating diegetic realities. Although such storyworlds exert a strong sense of “impossibility,” they are, at the same time, presented as coherent, “inhabitable” and, up to a point, imaginable. In their totality, however, potentially “infinite” story patterns

such as these indeed entail, as Falk noted, “disturbing contradictions” – or, we would say, “dissonant cognitions”: they clash with common sense, reason, and everyday experiential evidence. It seems that the challenge of coming to terms with the infinite pushes the limits of our embodied and situated cognition – which is not surprising, considering that our cognition emerges in, and is directed at, a seemingly “finite” world (as our lived environment is characterized by apparent physical boundaries and limitations). The way in which infinity surpasses these everyday intuitions and defies our imagination may therefore be experienced as engaging, uncanny, enthralling, or simply surprising. Some impossible puzzle films play on this effect, suggesting infinity to further fuel the fascination that viewers find in the narrative acrobatics and cognitive challenge of metalepses, loops, and other intricately multiplying story patterns.

### Destabilized Ontological Certainties

Metalepses in narrative fiction collapse fictional boundaries among embedded narrative frames. While our fascination with infinity can be triggered by simulating the possibility of endless multiplication of embedded levels in a story (that is, stories within stories), metaleptic transgressions work by breaking the boundaries between story levels, often playing with the odd option of extending the fictional to the real (for example, real writers appearing in their fictional stories). Complex films and impossible puzzle films, we hypothesize, often seem to use such “ontological metalepses” to arouse uncanny, potentially intriguing emotional and intellectual effects.

Contemporary complex films frequently employ ontological metalepses to present fictional transgressions between their diegetic and embedded hypodiegetic story levels. Examples may include Marc Forster’s *STRANGER THAN FICTION* (2006), in which Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) becomes aware that he is a fictional character in a still-developing book of an author, with whom he even shares the narrative level; or Spike Jonze’s *ADAPTATION* (2002), where the film’s real screenplay writer, Charlie Kaufman, writes himself into his film script, which becomes the film that the viewer is watching. A compelling literary case is provided by Julio Cortázar’s 1962 short story *The Continuity of Parks*, wherein the protagonist appears to be threatened by a character *from* a book he is reading.

Due to the logic that such porous narrative structures allow, ontological metalepses may have the potential to awaken in readers or viewers a certain “sense of logical unease” (Eco 1979, 234). Stories such as Cortázar’s collapse

very basic ontological boundaries – not only between different story layers, but also between fictional and real-life levels of the experienced fiction and experiencing context. As for the latter, the “ontologically threatening” potential of metalepsis was acknowledged already in the theorizing of Gérard Genette ([1972] 1980, 236). Genette quoted Jorge Luis Borges – himself a master of narrative metalepses – who, being fascinated by such deep ontological uncertainties, noted that “if the characters in a story can be readers or viewers, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious” ([1960] 1964, 46). According to this, an ontological metalepsis might “amount to a double catharsis, a *representational* and an *existential* one” (Meister 2003; our emphases).

Impossible puzzle films, with their tangled complexity and ambiguous hierarchies among different levels and multiple plots, are especially prone to arousing a certain ontological uncertainty in viewers. These films frequently play with vague or transgressed boundaries between dream and reality, fiction and real life, or telling and told. In a rare but registered effect, ontological metalepses might even lead to a psychologically identified disorder that is tellingly called the Truman Syndrome (Fusar-Poli et al. 2008), in which the patient suffers from a delusion that his or her life is part of a fictional story, staged as a play or reality show and controlled by unseen powers.<sup>11</sup> Although we would not want to claim that impossible puzzle films’ narrative tactics instill such degrees of psychological (truly existential) anxiety in their viewers, it is reasonable to assert that some playful metalepses are able to set in motion the idea (and subsequent feelings) of ontological uncertainty, adding to the fascination and perhaps appreciation of their ambiguous, paradoxical, and dissonant experience while maintaining their stories’ stubborn mysteries.

Take, for instance, *ADAPTATION*’s playful destabilization of its viewers’ ontological positions and assumptions. The story revolves around a fictionalized version of the actual screenplay writer, Charlie Kaufman. It shows Kaufman’s (Nicolas Cage) struggle to adapt a book, and his decision to write a film about this struggle, which turns out to be the film we are watching. Director, Jonze, and screenwriter, Kaufman, not only play with these transgressions within the film’s narrative levels (writer/written), but further utilize the destabilizing potential of their metalepsis by allowing the fiction to “leak” into the film’s paratextual and actual contexts: for example, *ADAPTATION*’s credits mention Charlie Kaufman’s fictional brother from the film, Donald Kaufman (also played by Nicolas Cage), as a cowriter of the film’s real screenplay.<sup>12</sup> Also, the film further plays with its own reality status by including scenes about the making of Jonze and Kaufman’s previous

movie, *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH* (1999), as part of *ADAPTATION*'s fiction. Such strategies not only obfuscate the relation between the adapted and adaptation in the film, but also undercut viewers' "uppermost" controlling position regarding the fictional and the real. This involvement of the viewer through an ultimate metaleptic pop can be seen as a device that heightens this kind of cinema's engaging capacity, making viewers part of the film's complex game.

### Eudaimonic Motivations and Intrinsic Needs

Above, we characterized the attractiveness of confusing stories as somewhat "paradoxical." Similar to the well-known *sadness-paradox* in art and media studies which says that people willingly engage with artworks that evoke negative emotions, such as sadness, that they would normally avoid, one encounters what resembles a "*confusion-paradox*": it seems that in narrative art and fiction, the negative valence of being confused can be considered enjoyable. However, as we hope to have demonstrated, highly complex movies are also capable of engaging and fascinating viewers in a variety of ways. How, then, should this "paradox of the confusion-paradox" be resolved?

One way of escaping the confusion-paradox is by emphasizing the so-called *eudaimonic motivations* that viewers may have for engaging with fiction. In addressing the issue of negative emotions in art, media psychologists, Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur A. Raney, have argued that "people consume media entertainment in the pursuit of pleasure and amusement (*hedonic motivations*) and as part of their general need to search for and ponder life's meaning, truths, and purposes – motivations that we characterize as '*eudaimonic*'" (2011, 985; our emphases). Indeed, the attraction to highly complex stories becomes less paradoxical if one drops the (arguably erroneous) assumption that the engagement with fiction should be conceived of as only "hedonically" motivated – that is, strictly in terms of bringing "entertaining pleasure." Most of the hypotheses developed in this chapter concern cognitive and interpretive reflections that are better characterized as driven by eudaimonic motivations (reflection, truth-seeking, or self-development) than as strictly hedonically motivated. However, postulating a distinction between "hedonic" and "eudaimonic" drives still implies a basic difference between "fun" and "meaningful" experiences that seems problematic. After all, can hedonic pleasures not be found in the gratification of eudaimonic concerns as well?

Having the same dilemma, Ron Tamborini and his colleagues (2010) suggested that it would be better to approach eudaimonic motivations for

media consumption in relation to the satisfaction of people's intrinsic needs. In conceptualizing these "intrinsic needs," the researchers used Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's *self-determination theory* (1985). This seminal theoretical model assumes three basic psychological needs in individuals, namely *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*:

autonomy [is] a sense of volition or willingness when doing a task (Deci and Ryan 2000); competence [is] a need for challenge and feelings of effectance (Deci 1975); and relatedness [is] a need to feel connected with others (Ryan and Deci 2001). (Tamborini et al. 2010, 761)

While working with experiments involving a videogame, the researchers confirmed the role of these needs in relation to media consumption. Yet they also noted that there is "no basis to believe that our definition of enjoyment as the satisfaction of needs is limited to video games" (771). Therefore, our final hypothesis concerns the enjoyment and engagement of impossible puzzle films in light of these intrinsic psychological needs. We would suggest that the attractiveness of complex films should not be seen as strictly hedonic (pleasurable or entertaining) or merely eudaimonic reflections (pondering life's complexities or achieving personal development), but should be understood as appealing to viewers' psychological intrinsic needs. For some people, impossible puzzle films may resonate with their need for autonomy (as the interpretive freedom and playfulness of these films leave a relatively high amount of choice and authority to the individual viewer), or may be a means to establish *relatedness* (for instance, through collective forensic fan activities, or the social rewards of sharing of interpretations, plot maps, or explanatory videos online). Yet the key concept in terms of the enjoyment of impossible puzzle films seems to lie in the notion of *competence*. On the basis of the above hypotheses and arguments, we contend that highly complex films – by challenging and entertaining a variety of cognitive, analytical, and interpretive skills – engage viewers by appealing to their intrinsic need for competence and effectance.<sup>13</sup> Whether it is about finding an interpretation that works, grasping a story's intricate mechanisms, dealing with ontological uncertainties, or mapping a plot, enjoying these films usually entails engaging in simulated challenges that playfully (and safely) address viewers' need to feel competent and skilled.<sup>14</sup> As Jason Mittell noted, viewers of complex narratives "relish in the pleasures of being manipulated" but, ultimately, "want to be competent enough to follow their narrative strategies" (2006, 38). The urge to "keep up" with a complex story arguably tickles viewers' self-esteem and engages their potential for effectance.



In conclusion to our study, we would propose that feeling “challenged” by complex movies may be more important than solving their puzzles. In this light, the success of impossible puzzle films can be seen as the result of a narrative audacity that takes its viewers’ “empowered” positions into consideration; these films dare to enduringly confuse viewers, and boldly leave large chunks of the interpretive and analytical work up to their cognitive and interpretive competences. The narrative and psychological pressures on viewers to resolve dissonances and achieve comprehension make room for all kinds of creative, intellectual, analytical, and interpretive skills and processes. This, especially in a mainstream context, is quite novel, but, as the trend proves, not inconceivable. Surely, our proposition presupposes viewers’ resonance with this kind of cinema, and entails that varying degrees of competency (in terms of film and media literacy) will form a key factor in terms of their varying enjoyment of such highly complex films. In this sense, impossible puzzle films may be seen as the product of a specific moment in our media- and narrative-saturated time. Films such as these are able to cognitively challenge and intellectually intrigue a number of viewers who may have already grown accustomed to ever-increasing amounts and forms of mediacy, narratives, and complication – whether in popular fiction or in culture at large. Cinematic versions of impossible puzzles thereby seem to reflect the larger cultural shifts behind their emergence: not only do they appeal to a deep-seated human hunger to solve puzzles, they also embrace our life’s complexities, providing enigmatic journeys into the impossible.

## Notes

1. This contribution is an edited excerpt from the final chapter of the monograph *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 183-207). We wish to express our gratitude to Edinburgh University Press for granting us permission to use this reprint.
2. This use of “cognitive dissonance” is not to be confused with this term’s established sociopsychological meaning, which refers to the effect of inconsistencies in an individual’s behaviors or beliefs in real-world situations (e.g., Cooper 2007; Stone 1999) and has also been used to describe, for example attitudes toward fictional characters or situations (e.g., Caracciolo 2013; Van der Pol 2013). Although our use of the term “cognitive dissonance” in narrative comprehension shares some similarities with the cognitive core of Leon Festinger’s original theory (1957, 31, 13) and its suggestion of how dissonances between cognitions elicit a pressure to resolve or deal with

- the conflict, there are also significant differences (e.g., between fictional and real-world situations, or between values and logical beliefs). A more elaborate discussion of these differences and overlaps was included in our original study (Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 67-70).
3. See also Nitzan Ben Shaul's analysis (2012) of how many classical narrative films induce a certain "close-mindedness" in viewers, whereas some films do allow them the distinct pleasure of entertaining their ability for "optional thinking," for instance by offering alternative narrative paths among which viewers can choose or imagine different possibilities.
  4. For instance, cultural philosopher, Thijs Lijster (2014), proposes such a view on the historical development of the detective/mystery genre. According to Lijster, the detective fiction evolved from the celebration of Enlightenment values and scientific reason (cf. Sherlock Holmes's ever-successful use of deductive logic and inference-making) to a genre riddled with paranoia, labyrinth-like enigmas and mysteries that can no longer be solved or understood by a single detective (cf. *INHERENT VICE*, Paul Thomas Anderson, 2014). Moreover, the detectives themselves became increasingly unreliable, questionable, and flawed throughout twentieth-century fiction. For Lijster, these shifts mirror the state of the (post)modern condition from which the stories originate, such as the increasing cultural complexity and socio-economic decentralization of our times.
  5. For theoretical arguments (Johnson [1987] 1990; Slors 1998; Menary 2008) and neuroscientific proofs (Gallese and Lakoff 2005), consult the previously published article (Kiss 2013).
  6. As for such topographic mapping, because "[p]eople read for the plot and not for the map" (Ryan 2003, 238), it can be said that both film viewers and "readers of print texts rarely maintain an 'accurate map of spatial relations' in the represented storyworld" (Ciccoricco 2007, 54). It is obvious that the topographic practice of literary or visual cartography is a useful tool for creative artists, but it is rarely triggered as a "natural" reader or viewer response. Yet there is empirical proof that adult viewers encode a more or less stable spatial layout "even when there is no explicit demand for them to do so" (Levin and Wang 2009, 26).
  7. The method of graphical extension of mental mapping might be implemented in the creative practice of designing narrative experiences as well. For instance, Christopher Nolan is known for making such sketches, as revealed in the shooting script for his fairly complex film *INCEPTION* (2010).
  8. In Van Heusden's words, since "[w]e do not live in, and reality does not coincide with, our representations" (2009, 614), the possible awareness of the fundamental difference between our experiential domains of "here and now" reality and "there and then" simulation of this reality "seems to be basic to human cognition" (614).
  9. Beyond technology-fuelled allegories, character-duplication films such as *ENEMY* "[tap] into the root of our newfound doppelgänger obsession and

- fear. Many of us are afraid that we're simply not enough as we are – that we're not cool enough, pretty enough, passionate enough, or interesting enough" (Wilkinson 2014).
10. Penrose and Penrose's article in the *British Journal of Psychology* (1958) featured the impossible staircase, which then, in fact, inspired Escher's *Ascending and Descending* (1960).
  11. The term stems from the story of Truman Burbank, who unknowingly participates in a reality television program in Peter Weir's *THE TRUMAN SHOW* (1998).
  12. This even resulted in an Oscar nomination for "Charlie Kaufman and Donald Kaufman" (for Best Adapted Screenplay), making Donald the first ever entirely fictitious Oscar nominee.
  13. Effectance is defined in organisational psychology as "the causal effect of an object in the environment" (Nugent, Pam M.S., "EFFECTANCE," *Psychology-Dictionary.org*, April 7, 2013).
  14. Of course, formally complex stories are not the only types of fiction that play on this. For instance, in his 1991 model of mystery enjoyment, Dolf Zillmann argued for the role of competence in all mystery fiction, noting that "the enjoyment of certain forms of mystery is motivated by self-esteem needs akin to competence" (Tamborini et al. 2010, 771). Although impossible puzzle films do not offer coherent and explicit answers that much of mystery fiction requires and provides (such as a clear answer to the "whodunit" question in detective stories), they do seem to tease a similar viewing disposition.

## References and Further Reading

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## 5. “Storification”

### Or, What Do We Want Psychology and Physiology to Tell Us about Screen Stories?

*Ian Christie*

Every place has a story, and every story has a place.

– Krissy Clark (2010)

I recently took a party of visiting grandchildren to a city centre toy store as a treat. As we waited in line for opening time, there was rising excitement. Then the thrill of rushing in, and finding a section devoted to *Ninjago* sets and their many spin-offs. An hour later, after weighing up options and combinations, we left with a haul of *Ninjago* material. No question that in the current world of four-to-seven year olds, Lego’s *Ninjago* rules; although of course by the time you read this, there may be another emerging play/product world to challenge its dominance.

The previous paragraph not only describes an actual observation of the “power of story,” it also follows a widely recommended rule that to secure attention, I should “tell a story,” and ideally one based on personal experience. I could have started by observing that Lego’s *Ninjago* is one of the most successful current entertainment franchises, selling model sets, costumes, games, books, television, and film consumption. In short, a “story-world” that is also a “product-world”; and moreover an excellent example of a “transmedial” world, in which almost every medium accessible to a young person is mobilized around a central theme, which is reduced to a single iconic name: *Ninjago*.

But in presenting my opening exhibit as I did, I am in fact following the advice of neuroeconomist Paul Zak, who advises business people to “begin every presentation with a compelling human-scale story” (2014). Straddling the worlds of academic research and marketing, Zak recounts his core “discovery”:

A decade ago, my lab discovered that a neurochemical called oxytocin is a key “it’s safe to approach others” signal in the brain. Oxytocin is produced when we are trusted or shown a kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others. It does this by enhancing the sense of empathy, our ability to experience others’ emotions. Empathy is important for social creatures because it allows us to understand how others are likely to react to a situation, including those with whom we work. (2014)

There is in fact a large and diverse scientific literature on oxytocin and the often exaggerated or simplified claims that have been made for its “effects.” But Zak recounts a highly functional experiment:

we tested if narratives shot on video, rather than face-to-face interactions, would cause the brain to make oxytocin. By taking blood draws before and after the narrative, we found that character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis. Further, the amount of oxytocin released by the brain predicted how much people were willing to help others; for example, donating money to a charity associated with the narrative. (2014)

Using more sophisticated experimental techniques, which involved monitoring the oxytocin levels of a group of viewers watching a Bond film, Zak concludes:

If the story is able to [create and sustain] tension then it is likely that attentive viewers/listeners will come to share the emotions of the characters in it, and after it ends, likely to continue mimicking the feelings and behaviors of those characters. This explains the feeling of dominance you have after James Bond saves the world, and your motivation to work out after watching the Spartans fight in *300*. (2014)

While such “findings on the neurobiology of storytelling” are offered for use in “business settings,” I invoke them here to characterize the tenor of recent research on spectatorship or viewer response.

Zak’s work referenced stereotypical fiction films to dramatize the lasting emotional impact of film, no doubt on the basis of showing his subjects short segments of the films mentioned. A more focused experiment is reported in another paper from his lab, making use of a specially created short film:

Participants viewed a brief story of a father’s experience with his 2-year-old son who has terminal cancer. After the story, participants were presented with an opportunity to donate some of their study earnings to a related charity. Measures derived from cardiac and electrodermal activity [...] significantly predicted donor status. [...] Moreover, cardiac activity and experienced concern were found to covary from moment-to-moment across the narrative. Our findings indicate that the physiological response to a stimulus, herein a narrative, can predict influence as indexed by stimulus-related behavior. (Barraza et al. 2015)





Fig. 5.1: Zak's story of Ben; behavioral outcomes from viewing a narrative created to test bioemotional response.

More typical of such research is this measurable behavioral outcome. A company that has specialized in developing tools for measuring bioemotional response from physiological data, Filmtrip, now offers its Sensum platform for use by advertising, "customer retail, ethnographic studies and augmented focus groups."<sup>1</sup>

We live in a world where stories and storytelling have been placed at the center of vast areas of human activity – seemingly as the result of a widespread cultural realization of "story" as a primordial form of engagement, but often in the banal language of PR and commercialism. "Storification" is a term widely used in education, as well as in new forms of journalism.<sup>2</sup> But it is also the name of a Finnish company selling marketing techniques:

A story gives your service a red thread – a plot – that makes your service a memorable experience. A story-designed service is easy and fun to sell. A story-designed service is better; daring and different. It is an experience that your customers understand and love. Tarinakone helps businesses to create meaningful and touching customer experiences.<sup>3</sup>

While "stories" dominate our culture, the tools and methods for understanding them have also proliferated exponentially since the end of the last century. The period during which film studies was taking shape, roughly

the 1970s and 1980s, followed the emergence of a structuralist paradigm in humanities – and indeed found considerable inspiration in this. Drawing on the insights of mainly Russian scholars of the interwar years (Viktor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp, Boris Eikhenbaum), together with the architects of semiotics (Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov), structuralism offered ways of analyzing the narrative structure of a wide range of individual films, showing how these conformed to standard patterns, as revealed in folklore by Propp or in nineteenth-century fiction by Barthes.<sup>4</sup>

However, this field can hardly be said to have developed, or even continued; so that the early classic studies of Christian Metz, François Jost, Raymond Bellour, and Peter Wollen increasingly look like lonely monuments to a once-imagined semiotic “science” of cinema. The question once was: What can we learn from the knowledge that films conform to narrative patterns discernible in other media? But now it is: What do we want to understand “behind” or “beneath” the obvious facts of film and television’s prolific storytelling. The spatial figures are perhaps significant, and could indeed be supplemented with “around” screen storytelling and “story-following.” Rather than study screen narrative *texts* in isolation, seeking to understand their mechanics – and to discover their readers/viewers “in” the text as was once fashionable (Browne 1975-1976, 26-38; Crofts and Rose 1977, 9-60; Barker 2012, 187-205) – we are increasingly interested in their *contexts* – of production, reception, intermediality, intertextuality.

Yet, at the same time, although in very different fields of research, there has been immense progress during recent decades in understanding *how* we as individuals, and as a species, “process” stories. This progress might be categorized as either psychological or physiological, or more broadly as “cognitive”; so that if there is a dominant paradigm of the twenty-first century, an equivalent to structuralism, it is almost certainly “cognitivism.” And an important subdomain within this is “cognitive narratology,” which is defined by one of its leading exponents, David Herman, as: “the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever—and by whatever means—those practices occur.” Herman casts the net wide in his definition:

cognitive narratology is transmedial in scope; it encompasses the nexus of narrative and mind not just in print texts but also in face-to-face interaction, cinema, radio news broadcasts, computer-mediated virtual environments, and other storytelling media. In turn, “mind-relevance” can be studied vis-à-vis the multiple factors associated with the design and interpretation of narratives, including the story-producing activities

of tellers, the processes by means of which interpreters make sense of the narrative worlds (or "storyworlds") evoked by narrative representations or artifacts, and the cognitive states and dispositions of characters in those storyworlds. In addition, the mind-narrative nexus can be studied along two other dimensions, insofar as stories function as both (a) a target of interpretation and (b) a means for making sense of experience—a resource for structuring and comprehending the world—in their own right. (2013)

For Herman and others who would accept the rubric of "cognitive narratology" to describe their work (and he notes a persistent level of resistance to "cognitivism," leading some to deny it as a label), this is clearly a continuation of "narratology" by an expanded range of means. But it is by no means the only emergent new mode of inquiry focused on the reception of storytelling.

For example, Liesbeth Korthals Altes proposes the concept of "ethos" as crucial to how readers form "an image of a storyteller's psychology, world view, and emotional or ethical stance," which then affects how they interpret or evaluate narrative texts (2014, n.p.). Attributing an ethos to characters, narrators, or authors, she argues, will significantly affect our interpretations. Then there is the extensive work of a number of mainly Dutch scholars on "absorption," described as "a spontaneous temporary change in the state of consciousness due to an exceptionally intense awareness of a fictional narrative," which may be investigated empirically through interview studies (Hakemulder et al, 2017, n.p.). Comparing these approaches, we might conclude that Korthals Altes is working within a "metahermeneutic" or more simply a rhetorical framework, while C and his colleagues are extending and refining an essentially experimental approach that seeks to define and *measure* forms of absorption.

Neither of these approaches is solely, or even specifically focused on film, or more generally on "screen media." Indeed, their frequent use of the term "reader" suggests a kinship with the broader literary tradition of "reader-response" inquiry. However, another emerging discipline that directly addresses the abundance of contemporary media is "attention economics," focusing on the consequences of competition for our attention by contemporary digital media. These may be considered negative, as Matthew Crawford argues: "Attention is a resource—a person has only so much of it" (2015, 11). Or, less commonly, they may be seen as positive. Clay Shirky makes use of the concept of "cognitive surplus" in the digital era in his study subtitled "How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaboration," arguing that the connectivity of social media makes possible new forms of social and cultural collaboration (2010). Whichever view is taken, there can be little

doubt that the pervasiveness of “always on” digital media has had a profound effect on the consumption of screen-based media, creating new habits and new pressures, which are often described in terms of “overload” or surplus.

There is, of course, an obvious danger in basing the study of stories on our present condition – however that is characterized. “In order for us to do what we do, our minds must have been prepared from before birth to learn the information specifically relevant to human problems” (Boyd 2009, 39) – or prepared over many generations/ before the arrival of smartphones, indeed of television and cinema? There is perhaps a certain symmetry between the traditional “origins of cinema” narrative and the efforts of modern evolutionary psychology to understand why and how humans have the storytelling and following capacity. In his pioneering, *A Million and One Nights*, which offered “a history of the Motion Picture through 1925” that reached back to its earliest antecedents, Terry Ramsaye claimed that:

The motion picture is as irresistible as the life stream behind it. [...] [It] may be called the last-born off-spring of the parent impulse of all the arts of expression, which are seeking to transmit to and infect others and ourselves with an impression of things and emotions. (1986, xxxviii)

For Ramsaye, seeking to provide newly arrived motion pictures with a respectable ancestry, the “age-old Wish of the world” that would lead eventually to movies had its antediluvian origins in “the dawning ability to re-enjoy by re-creation of the event of pleasurable memory” (xxxix), as had all previous forms of graphic and dramatic expression. Ramsaye had no need to invoke Darwin – probably wisely, writing in the same year as the Scopes Trial saw an American teacher prosecuted for teaching evolution in defiance of Tennessee’s Fundamentalist prohibition – but recent decades have seen a number of attempts to ground storytelling in an evolutionary or biocultural account of human nature.

In his wide-ranging study *On the Origin of Stories*, Brian Boyd argued, that an adequate understanding of the storytelling capacity exhibited uniquely by humans must “take evolution seriously” (Boyd 2009, 38-39). Many animals display an ability for what we can call “play,” but for Boyd, stories represent a uniquely *representational* form of play which has evolved in the human species. Moreover, as he observes, “to explain fiction fully we cannot merely explain narrative,” since understanding event sequences is something we share with other animals (129). The ability to understand representations as representations has been found to develop naturally in all children between their second and fifth years. And since such a species-wide ability, together

with our clear preference for fictional representation rather than "true" narration, does not seem to serve any biological need, its origins must lie elsewhere:

Fiction, like art in general, can be explained in terms of cognitive play with pattern – in this case with patterns of social information – and in terms of the unique importance of human attention. (130)

A significant implication of this biocultural turn, for Boyd and others, is to deprive structural, ideological, or narratological approaches, in favor of exploring "deep species-wide competences."

Although Boyd has little to say about film or screen media (despite crediting David Bordwell as a major influence on his thinking), Torben Grodal produced an ambitious overview of the potential for applying neuroscientific and ethological findings to understanding how films are made and experienced in his *Embodied Visions* (2009). Conscientious that this approach has been seen as reductive, Grodal offered a defense in his contribution to an earlier book in the present series:

Bio-culturalism is not an effort to banish history and culture from film studies. On the contrary, a bio-cultural analysis of film provides a double historicity: the long evolutionary history that has shaped our embodied brains and a much shorter recent history in which the interaction of embodied mind, film industry, film makers and audiences mold what specific film forms and film contents exist at a given moment in time. (2012, 142)

As it happens, a good example of using observed biological evidence from the recent history of film is provided by David Bordwell in an article offered in tribute to Grodal (Bordwell 2003). Drawing on empirical studies of how often people in real-life conversational situations look at each other, and comparing this with the much higher incidence of such eye-contact in such films as *L.A. CONFIDENTIAL* (1997) and *CHINATOWN* (1974), Bordwell is able to hypothesize that the direction and exchange of looks on-screen plays an important part in how we read narrative, and so has to be conventionally exaggerated, even within apparently naturalistic styles.

Bordwell links his observations on exchanged looks and blinking in film with Ed Tan's more general argument that "the ground of our emotional engagement in films is the attitude of interest" (Tan 1996, 85). A related approach to using biophysical data on how spectators related to film viewing is provided by the work of the psychologist Tim Smith, much of it using eye-tracking techniques to identify where viewers' attention is directed



Fig. 5.2: In *L.A. CONFIDENTIAL*, Bordwell observes that characters “look far more often and fixedly at listeners” than they would in real life, to avoid sending the wrong signals within the conventions of screen narrative.

(Smith and Christie 2012; Smith 2016). Smith’s general conclusion, in a report on “psychocinematics,” stresses:

how incredibly active the viewer is both in terms of how they shift their gaze around the screen and cognitively process the presented information. The construction of the narrative is a collaborative process that requires suitable presentation of the relevant audiovisual information by the filmmaker and active acquisition and encoding of that information by the viewer. (2013, chap. 9)

Significantly, the essay to which this formed the conclusion has as its epigraph a quotation from Eisenstein’s 1940 “Form and Content” essay, asserting that “the art of plastic composition consists in leading the spectator’s attention through the exact path and with the exact sequence prescribed by the author of the composition” (1968, 148). Once again, it is useful to be reminded that contemporary research has its roots in the pioneer period of film theory, with Eisenstein’s contribution to early biophysical and biocultural research now increasingly recognized (Vassilieva 2013).



Fig. 5.3: IVAN THE TERRIBLE. Eisenstein as a pioneer in both creating and studying control of spectators' attention.

If “cognitivism” became an important new paradigm for film studies early in the present century, it has none the less remained controversial and contested, while many earlier modes of analysis and methodologies have continued to be practiced. Yet within what has become a pluralistic field, now addressing a wide range of screen media, formats and “viewing positions,” it seems more important than ever to insist on the need to define precisely *what* questions we are seeking to answer, and to consider the most appropriate methodology. The fact that film studies, and to some extent media studies, were long held apart from the social and biological sciences that could contribute to addressing many of their questions was surely not beneficial.

In a valuable reflection on his own methodological trajectory, Bordwell looked back at his influential 1985 book *Narration in the Fiction Film* in a 2011 post. He noted that the book “explicitly left aside the emotional dimensions of narration,” partly because that was typical of cognitive science of the period, but also because early film studies also tended to disregard affective issues – possibly as a way of distancing its work from popular “film appreciation.” Bordwell goes on to reflect on how, subsequently, “the relation of emotion to cognition has become central to cognitive science,” and how:

cognitive film studies has moved in parallel with cognitive science generally. We have had neurological studies of film viewing; we have seen appeals to evolutionary psychology; we have seen studies of suprapersonal patterns of emergence. (2011)

This account seems to me exemplary in identifying nonpolemically how the field of film studies has changed, and how one scholar, concerned primarily with “functional and causal-historical” explanation, has also shifted, taking advantage of not only important new scientific insights but also of the ever-widening range of material that film and media historians have before them. Bordwell’s 2011 post ends by restating the goal expressed in his and Noël Carroll’s 1996 *Post-Theory*: “theorizing as an *activity* that asks researchable questions and comes up with more or less plausible answers—some commonsensical, some not, and some probing what counts as common sense” (Bordwell, 2011).

Two decades after that book’s polemical stance, and with stories and storytelling currently occupying so much of our cultural landscape, the need to clarify what questions we want to ask seems obvious, as well as the attraction of probing “what counts as common sense” within the “storification” bubble. So too does the value of making use of different models and methods, as appropriate, rather than adopting any single “theory of narrative.” Finally, we are perhaps ready to build upon the contribution of earlier generations of scholars, working within the frameworks of their era, but often addressing questions that are still with us, albeit in seemingly novel forms.

## Notes

1. See <https://sensus.co/>. Also the discussion of what can be learned from interactive experiments in the dialogue between Tim J. Smith and Ian Christie (2012, 183-184).
2. See Sylvester (2006), <http://post.queensu.ca/~sylvestr/articles/Storification.pdf>; Akkerman, Admiraal, and Huizenga (2009), <https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1480564>; Clark (2010), <http://niemanreports.org/articles/journalism-on-the-map-a-case-for-location-aware-storytelling/>.
3. “Story-designed services” by Tarinakone, <http://www.tarinakone.fi/en/>.
4. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, written in 1928, was first translated into English in 1958, and became a key inspiration for much early structuralist analysis. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970, trans. 1974) offered a semi-otic analysis of Balzac’s 1830 novella *Sarrasine*.



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## 6. Transmedia Storytelling

### New Practices and Audiences

*Melanie Schiller*

#### Prologue

Stories in popular culture such as STAR WARS, GAME OF THRONES, HARRY POTTER, or superhero sagas in the Marvel universe, are examples of stories which are increasingly told across a wide range of media, from novels and books to (animated) television series and feature films, jigsaw puzzles and computer games, online blogs, vlogs, webisodes, social media, and so-called mobisodes (short episodes made specifically for viewing on mobile phones). Another famous example is the Wachowskis' THE MATRIX (1999-2005), where key pieces of information are conveyed across three action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. In the case of THE MATRIX, there is no single urtext from which one can gain all the information needed to comprehend the story's universe (Jenkins 2007). For such new forms of storytelling associated with media convergence and expanding across multiple media platforms, Jenkins (2006) coined the (umbrella) term transmedia storytelling. The term refers to:

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. (Jenkins 2007, n.p.)

From the start, the phenomenon was clearly interesting for the industry, as shown by THE MATRIX. The entertainment industry was finding new ways to appeal to audiences, by merging media with marketing and entertainment strategies to appeal to young audiences in ways that had not been available to them in the predigital era. Nevertheless, there is more to this than marketing alone. The range of phenomena referred to by the term "transmedia storytelling" involves many different aspects, including new forms of storytelling and complex narratives; a new cultural context in which social media, connectivity, fan cultures, and online-information exchange play a big role, as do the use of marketing strategies and appropriate business models to address audiences in the world of digital connectivity. Smart

technologies are abundantly available to facilitate such processes; and new legal frameworks can help frame and support them (Gambarato 2015, 81).

However strongly new practices of storytelling across media are linked with the media entertainment industries' commercial interests in promoting entertainment franchises, it can hardly be denied that transmedia storytelling is also driven by users' increasing desire for transmedia experiences, as emphasized by recent debates (Clash of Realities 2015, 99). The phenomenon fits into the broader context of a growing popularity of user-generated content and fan productions. The culture of media convergence is typically marked by a 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). According to Jenkins, this new culture marks a cultural shift from a spectatorial culture of "passive" media consumption to a more active, *participatory* culture, as fans and consumers are encouraged to seek out new information themselves, to make their own connections among dispersed media content, and to participate actively in the creation and circulation of new stories and content (2006, 3).

It seems clear that the suggested shift from "passive" consumer to "active" participant presupposes a collaborative relationship of some sort between professional authors / industry-embedded producers and the consumer base of amateurs. The term coined for this is "collaborative authorship." The new practice of transmedia storytelling (Bernardo 2011) assumes new forms of cooperation between:

- different media industries, such as film, gaming, and publishing;
- different professional roles, such as screen-writers, comic-book writers, animators, and programmers;
- different artists shaping the story; and
- a collaborative relationship with the consumer base of participating amateurs.

To explain how the new practices work, Jenkins discusses stories, such as *HEROES* (2006-2010) or *LOST* (2004-2010), which have spread from television series to comics, the web, computer and alternative-reality games (also part of the entertainment industry), and the like. In the process, they acquire new consumers as they unfold, allowing the most dedicated fans to take it one step further (Jenkins 2010, 948). These fans are described by Jenkins and others as actively participating in the process: they translate their interests in the stories and the franchise into a range of media messages,

from concordances and Wikipedia entries, fan fiction, and fan videos to fan films, “cosplay,” and game mods.<sup>1</sup> Such participatory fan practices inevitably extend the story world in new directions. Thus, both commercial and grassroots expansions of narrative universes may contribute to a new mode of transmedia storytelling which can best be understood as both a top-down corporate process *and* a bottom-up consumer-driven one (Jenkins and Deuze 2008, 6).

### **Adaptation, Remediation, Transmedia, and Storytelling in the Stricter Sense**

For a further understanding of these new practices of storytelling across media, it is important to distinguish between media adaptations or remediations – like the film version of a novel – and transmedia storytelling in the stricter sense. While the first points to the *unidirectional* movement from one medium to another, the latter refers to a much broader expansion of narrative structure through storytelling activities in a range of different semiotic systems (verbal, iconic, behavioral) and historical media practices (cinema, comics, television, video games), all of which contribute to the construction of the overall transmedia story world (Scolari 2009).

There are also other terms, often referred to alongside transmedia storytelling, which must be kept separate, as they refer to phenomena other than storytelling, such as cross-media communication. In general, both terms refer to media production that takes place through different display technologies and media platforms (such as social networking, YouTube). However, cross-media *communication* is a broader, more generic term that includes the whole process of communication and interactivity (Mungioli 2011, 128; Gambarato 2013, 83). In the case of transmedia storytelling, the emphasis is strictly on narrative, and each medium involved in the storytelling practice is assumed to do what it does best (Jenkins 2006, 96). This implies that the story told by a comic book will be different from that told on television as part of a TV series, or the story world presented in a video game.

A story may well move across media, as the study by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, *Storyworlds across Media* (2014), suggests. In light of these new developments in storytelling, they plead for new narrative theories, and a *Media-Conscious Narratology*, as the subtitle of their study indicates. As narrative experts, Ryan and Thon were originally interested in stories and storytelling strategies found mainly in literature. More recently, however, they have come to address phenomena such as stories moving across media,

acknowledging that new practices of storytelling have evolved and that a story may be introduced in a film, expanded through a television series, explored through (graphic) novels and comics, and experienced through theme parks, game play, interactive websites, and fan fora. Jenkins argued that for a transmedia story world to develop in this way, each of these media platforms needs to be sufficiently self-contained to enable autonomous consumption: the user of the media content need not have read the comic to enjoy the film or play the game (Jenkins 2006, 98).

Although it may be argued that transmedia storytelling reflects the economics of media consolidation or “media synergy,” the phenomenon should not be conflated with general transmedia extensions of franchise branding. Transmedia storytelling, even in the stricter sense, may still include some narrative extensions of a new blockbuster movie through the release of prequel comic book issues, or expanded backstories in a video game. Nevertheless, the phenomenon cannot be reduced to mere franchise branding and exploitation, as in the production of toys, merchandise and the release of the original soundtrack on promotional websites. In the reality of marketing, these cross-media activities often go together and ideally even create some synergy. Clearly, however, the analysis of branding and marketing strategies invites a different analytical approach than the narrative analyses of story worlds across media. Whereas the latter may benefit from narrative analyses of expanding story worlds and puzzling story twists, as Ryan, Thon and others (cognitivists among them) offer, Harvard business professor, Anita Elberse, has argued in her study on blockbusters for an analysis of marketing strategies of the film / entertainment industry in line with social impulses and behavior of audiences (Elberse 2013). Elberse acknowledges that people, by their very nature, are social beings and find value in reading the same books, watching the same television shows, and visiting the same movies in the cinema as others do. Social beings like to take part in social activities in which they know others are taking part. In other words, transmedia storytelling practices may go well with marketing strategies of the industry aiming at creating blockbusters. Once a certain story (a film, book, certain character, or star) is popular and has been widely discussed in the media, audiences have much more reason to become part of the intrinsically social phenomena of reading/seeing/discussing this popular object of interest. With the “blockbuster” strategies adopted by the industry to promote one movie on a massive scale rather than many movies in a moderate or small way, the “winner takes all” effect in the world of big budget movies, together with big budget marketing, ensures that audiences are pulled in and become

participants in these captivating story worlds which are celebrated across media (Elberse 2013).

## Transmedia as a Buzzword

Despite the growing prominence in media studies of transmedia as a buzzword (Ryan 2015) and the fact that transmedia storytelling may be a new concept, any thoughtful study of contemporary transmedia must acknowledge that it is not a new phenomenon, unique to the digital age, as several authors have noted (Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman 2014). Marie-Laure Ryan recalls that story worlds involving multiple authors and artists interpreting and representing such worlds in many media already existed long before digital media and the social web – indeed it may be traced back at least to classical Greece and perhaps even before (Ryan 2013). One need only think of pictures dramatizing biblical scenes, or iconic nineteenth-century characters such as Frankenstein or Sherlock Holmes whose narrative scope transcends any single medium, as noted by Jason Mittell. Alternatively, we may think of one of US television's first hits, DRAGNET, which spanned multiple media, having started as a radio program. The popular TV series spawned many novels; a feature film; a hit record for its theme song; tie-in toys such as a board game, a police badge, and a whistle; and even a television reboot of the 1950s original in the late 1960s (Mittell 2015). Other famous examples are STAR TREK and DOCTOR WHO, or even popular narratives as early as the 1930s, such as MICKEY MOUSE or BATMAN, all of which made their appearance in different media (comics, pulp magazines, radio, etc.) (Scolari et al. 2014). Moreover, fan fiction is far from a new phenomenon, having existed before the digital revolution, as Ryan observes, while acknowledging that the phenomenon has since exploded across the Internet, making it possible for fans to share their creations with countless other fans across the globe (Ryan 2013, 10; Lindgren Leavenworth 2015; Thomas 2011).

A second point of criticism addresses the celebratory tone of some studies, starting with Jenkins's widely cited 2006 book, which celebrated the new era of transmedia storytelling in terms of a participatory culture that replaced *passive* consumers with *active* audiences. This binary opposition was criticized as anachronistic, making a claim that was already commonplace within poststructuralism, after Roland Barthes's celebration of "the Death of the Author" in the late 1960s (Barthes 1967); and Stuart Hall, as the founder of Cultural Studies, who emphasized the active audience

in his influential “encoding-decoding” model in the 1970s (Hall 1973). The question then must be: to what extent is the phenomenon genuinely new?

### What Is New and Different about Transmedia Storytelling?

The phenomenon is not entirely new, but rooted in much older practices, as several authors have argued, also stating that the proliferation of digital forms has led to a marked increase in transmedia storytelling practices and techniques (Mittell 2015; Gambarato 2015). Drawing on these commentators, we might summarize what is new and different about transmedia storytelling – and what narrative analyses we may want to focus on in future research – as follows.

It involves creating a new corpus of extensive stories that move beyond traditional storytelling and demand new terms of user participation as well as analysis. These stories manifest themselves less as singular plots, and may seem to readers and viewers more like architecturally narrative universes, inhabited by multiple characters, and articulating complex temporalities and contradictory perspectives. As *transmedia stories* can be told from different points of view, with shifting narrators and changes in focalization, these narrative universes are typically open-ended. As a result of fan-fiction and user participation, the temporal composition of these narratives becomes increasingly complex, since by their very nature, transmedia stories unfold in different sequences and across different timeframes for each audience member (Kustritz 2017). Additionally, as Kustritz observes, fan narratives not only include events which are out of sequence, but may also contain numerous alternate interpretations and versions of the same events.

Transmedia narratives, as they move through different media, problematize notions of authorship: these narrative universes do so not only by expanding across multiple media, which necessitates *collective authorship*, but also by allowing and actively encouraging audience participation. As a result, the borders between text, paratext, and fan-fiction become increasingly blurred. While it is relatively easy to identify the author of a novel (disregarding the editors and others who may have had an invisible hand in its composition), it is more difficult to single out one creative participant as the author of an entity as economically and culturally all-encompassing as Harry Potter, notes James Russell (2012). The #BlackHermione fan fiction, for instance, which identifies Harry Potter’s friend, Hermione, as a Person of Color, has now been incorporated into the “official” Harry Potter universe when the character (as an adult) was played by Swaziland-born



actress, Noma Dumezweni, in the 2016 London stage production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* – a prequel to the original Harry Potter novels. Therefore, the questions are now: Who determines a character's personality traits? Who makes the rules in the fictional universe? And who decides what “really” happened? (Kustritz 2014) Increasing dependence on (fan) participation obviously challenges traditional notions of authorship, and one may wonder whether there are forms which challenge and indeed worry the entertainment industry focused on keeping control of its market position. In light of this, it is interesting to observe that franchises attempt to retain traditional markers of authority such as authorship. In the “Wizarding World” of *Harry Potter*, the official website *Pottermore*, in an interesting balancing act, seeks to reinvent the brand and prolong engagement with its fan base, while simultaneously reinforcing J.K. Rowling as the central authorial figure of the story world (Brummitt 2016).

Transmedia storytelling *as such* depends on audience participation and therefore grants increased agency to fan cultures. Increasingly, fans are agents in the creation and negotiation of the meaning-making of (popular) cultural texts. An advantage of this, often mentioned in debates, is that it can lead to more diverse representations in popular culture. Jenkins celebrated this shift in narrative authority, perhaps prematurely, in his books and many articles as “we take control of the media.” However, it is fair to note that the emergence, however slow, of different marginalized perspectives in mainstream popular culture is becoming a force to be reckoned with. Fan-cultural production and fan-consumers are no longer considered eccentric irritants, but rather loyal and devoted consumers (Hills 2002). The STAR WARS fans, who have been putting pressure on the entertainment industry to provide a different, more diverse set of characters, and who have shown mounting impatience with the industry's slow process of diversification of the franchise's universe, are a good example of this. As a result, the transnational casting of *THE FORCE AWAKENS* (2015) and *ROGUE ONE* (2016) finally portrayed strong female characters and characters of color, although Disney was still reluctant to fully embrace this diversification in its marketing strategies (Guynes and Hassler-Forest 2018). The progress of this trend might be measured in terms of such recent films as *WONDER WOMAN* (2017) and *BLACK PANTHER* (2018), which surely reflect the importance of fan cultures today.

The new emphasis on collaborative authorship leads to yet another important element of transmedia narratives: their dependence on the participation of audiences reemphasizes the fundamentally social function of stories, as Walter Benjamin (2006) outlined in his 1936 essay. Today,

this is echoed by Nuno Bernardo (2016), an expert in story design for a multiplatform audience, who defines storytelling as bringing individuals together by revealing some truth about the world around them.

Finally, realizing how essential stories are for our social positioning in the world, transmedia storytelling may also create new opportunities in fields beyond fictional entertainment. These new practices of storytelling seem to offer, and indeed scholars are exploring, the potential of transmedia storytelling for expanding learning opportunities in higher education (Fleming 2011; Pence 2011; Kalogeras 2014), nonfictional storytelling in journalism (Moloney 2011; Veglis 2012; Pernía Peñalver and Semova 2014), and in politics and activism (Brough and Shresthova 2012). For Jenkins, a veteran of earlier phases of studying popular media, it is clear that we need shared stories in order to imagine what a better world may look like and to work toward its achievement (Guynes and Hassler-Forest 2018).

## Epilogue

*Transmedia storytelling* is a relatively new phenomenon and, in terms of production and analysis, is still in its infancy. Theoretical and analytical considerations around the development of transmedia projects are evolving, but remain relatively open in terms of results (Gambarato 2015). Broadcasters and the industry are in the process of finding the right narratives (Bernardo 2018) and the right role for them to play, while scholars have embarked on the definition of key terms and discussion of research goals and methods of analysis. Additionally, the practice of storytelling itself is far from fully developed and, as Propp said of his work on folktales in 1928, analyzing the structure of such hitherto disregarded material will increase the possibilities for creating new stories (Scolari 2009).

Media developer, Brian Clark, maintains that there have been no great transmedia successes yet, at least partly because most transmedia stories were not conceived as such from the outset, but *became* transmedial (Ryan 2013). The future should bring new kinds of stories. Creating coherent complex transmedia narratives requires a degree of storytelling control that the current system of television production seems unable to meet fully. Taking into account that transmedia stories propose new institutional as well as new narrative models (Scolari 2009), future development will need teams that are able to successfully manage such integrated narratives (Mittell 2015). It will also be interesting to see the impact of further technological innovations – such as Google Glasses, or 4K, 8K, and live cinema (Coppola

2017) – offering potentially greater immersion, multiple timelines, and interactive storytelling (Freeman 2017).

To respond to the growing influence of fans, the industry will have to produce an enhanced diversity of characters and story world representations, as is already happening to a limited extent. Further research also needs to address the dynamic interplay between marketing-driven *transmedia storytelling* on the one hand, and the home-made contributions of audiences on the other. Lastly, new narrative models and concepts for collective forms of authorship still need to be developed, to address the convergence of the traditionally separate roles of authors, industry, and consumers.

## Notes

1. Cosplay or costume play refers to participants wearing costumes and fashion accessories to represent a specific character. Game mods are modifications of an existing game to enhance its appeal or complexity.

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# PART II

History and Analyses





## 7. The Endless Endings of Michelangelo Antonioni's Films

*José Moure*

Michelangelo Antonioni dreamed of:

A film with a beginning, but maybe without an end. I have often wondered ... whether there should always be an ending to stories, whether literary, theatrical or cinematographic. A story which closes in on itself runs the risk of dying if another dimension is not provided, if one does not allow one's own time to be extended externally to where we are, we who are the protagonists of all stories. Where nothing ends. (Antonioni 1985, 224-225)

Built up around a disappearance or feeling of loss, and plotted along erratic, dissolving trajectories which efface or displace the initial emptiness without filling it, Antonioni's stories seem to resolve only in indecisiveness: the indecisiveness of a spiraling dénouement which is not a simple erasure or return to the point of departure. Instead, it "expresses the entropy, degradation and irreversibility of events" narrated in the course of the film, the irresolution of a dénouement in eclipse which "represents that ultimate point of a human being at last delivered from the negativity of projects, passions and human existence" (Bonitzer 1985, 101).

### The Endless Spiral

From *CRONACA DI UN AMORE* (1950) to *IDENTIFICAZIONE DI UNA DONNA* (1982), most of Antonioni's films are resolved at the end by means of a "spiral" structure which, while tending to complete the film by way of a circular and centripetal movement of returning to the place of departure or a situation which is very near that of the beginning, leaves a certain number of questions unresolved and open, thus suspending the story in the void around which it has incessantly revolved, confronting the characters with repetition "for not having been able to escape *the first time* during the times that followed" (Amengual 1964, 56). The fundamental structure of Antonioni's films follows a cyclical model, which apparently brings the

characters back to the starting point, place, or situation after an adventure that seems to have been pointless.

At the end of *CRONACA DI UN AMORE*, after the fatal accident of Paola's husband, the two lovers find themselves in a situation similar to that which separated them in the past after the accidental death of Guido's fiancée.

At the end of *IL GRIDO* (1957), after long meanderings in search of an impossible oblivion, Aldo comes back to his point of departure to die before Irma's eyes, by falling from the tower of the sugar refinery where he worked (in the last sequence, Aldo runs toward the factory while Irma runs after him, thus moving in the opposite direction of the first sequence).

At the end of *L'AVVENTURA* (1960), after having replaced the girlfriend at Sandro's side, Claudia reaches the point where Anna gave up: that of infidelity, of love without love or illusions, and of compassion.

At the end of *LA NOTTE* (1961), after a day of wandering around which started with a visit to a dying friend, Lidia and Giovanni receive news that the friend in question has died. In the early morning, on the edge of a deserted park, they receive confirmation that their love, too, is dead, despite Giovanni's desperate attempt to embrace his wife, an act that serves as a reminder of the young nymphomaniac who threw herself at him in the clinic corridor.

At the end of *The ECLIPSE* (1962), the sentimental adventure between Vittoria and Piero seems to dissolve into the void of the places where they met, in the same way as the liaison between Vittoria and Riccardo exhausted itself in the latter's object-saturated apartment at the beginning of the film.

At the end of *IL DESERTO ROSSO* (1964), Giuliana is walking with her son near the petrol refinery where chimneys continue to spew yellow smoke, a scene which is reminiscent of the opening sequence.

At the end of *BLOW UP* (1966), while Thomas wanders around in the park and notices that the corpse has disappeared, he again encounters the group of mimes whom he ran into at the beginning of the film as he was leaving a night shelter, surrounded by tramps.

At the end of *ZABRISKIE POINT* (1970), after his plane trip across the desert, Mark, who is suspected of having murdered a policeman, is shot down without warning while bringing the stolen apparatus back to the place where he borrowed it.

At the end of *THE PASSENGER* (1975), David Locke/Robertson, who feigned death, dies for real and fulfills the destiny he accepted at the start of the film by slipping into a corpse's skin.

At the end of *IDENTIFICAZIONE DI UNA DONNA*, just as in the beginning of the film, Niccolo returns to Rome and prepares to write a new script: only this time, the subject will be science fiction.

Far from the story closing in on itself by providing a solution or response to the enigmas, interrogations, or expectations raised in the course of the film, the recurring, loop-like endings of Antonioni's films always leave something in suspense, as though the graph of the characters' circular trajectories eventually rolls up around itself in a never-ending loop, in a spiral-like *dénouement* which opens up unavoidably into the void of irresolution.

At the end of an Antonioni film, the intrigue is never really made clear, either because:

- The enigma (Anna's disappearance in *L'AVVENTURA*; the crime in the park in *BLOW UP*) at the center of the intrigue is unresolved, or the characters interrupt or forget their investigation in the process.
- The *dénouement* itself remains obscure from an anecdotal point of view (does the husband in *CRONACA DI UN AMORE* commit suicide because of a police report on his wife's infidelity, or did he really have an accident? In *IL GRIDO*, did Aldo throw himself from the top of the tower of the sugar refinery or, which is less probable, was he also the victim of an accident? For what reason and by whom was David Locke/Robertson killed in *THE PASSENGER*?).
- The final scene, by its ambiguity, creates an endless suspension or total eclipse of the intrigue both as far as its meaning is concerned (does the fact that Claudia runs her fingers through Sandro's hair at the end of *L'AVVENTURA* mean that his betrayal is forgiven? Does Giuliana's stroll with her son at the end of *IL DESERTO ROSSO* mean that she has been cured of her neurosis? When Thomas joins in the performance of the mime artists at the end of *BLOW UP*, does it mean that he has learned how to look at things?), as well as its virtual prolongation in the "after-film" (will Lidia leave Giovanni "after" *LA NOTTE*? What happens to Vittoria and Piero after the wasted opportunity of *The ECLIPSE*? After having failed in his *IDENTIFICAZIONE DI UNA DONNA*, will Niccolo make the science-fiction film that he plans to shoot?).

If a film by Antonioni is resolved, it is only by means of an irresolution without solution (because it is resolved by default in death, renunciation, compromise, uncertainty, or eclipse), suspending the characters' present in an endless expectation of a future without content.

## An Ending in Eclipse

Antonioni's films end on suspended *dénouements* (in suspension points and questions) which, far from opening the film into an indeterminate future or field of opportunity, marks the return of the story to a type of stalemate or nonresult where the unresolved intrigue (without mystery or solution, henceforth open but already deprived of potential, incomplete but almost fossilized) exhausts itself and settles into the void around which it has not ceased to revolve, brought to the surface of the world or the conscience of human beings by the erratic, dissolving trajectories of the characters, who were unable to fill that void.

The final sequence of an Antonioni film is only irresolute because the story's future has no solution. At the end of their adventure, the characters find themselves facing a reality which they cannot escape. There is nothing left for them to do except resign and sacrifice themselves either by:

- death, by slipping into the void – like Rosetta in *LE AMICHE* (1955), Aldo in *IL GRIDO*, Mark in *ZABRISKIE POINT*, and David Locke/Robertson in *THE PASSENGER*;
- or in a less tragic way, by an act of renunciation – like Clara in *LA SIGNORA SENZA CAMELIE* (1953) who renounces her dignity as an actress, Clelia in *LE AMICHE* who renounces Carlo, Vittoria in *THE ECLIPSE* who renounces love, Thomas in *BLOW UP* who renounces grasping reality, and Niccolo in *IDENTIFICAZIONE DI UNA DONNA* who renounces his film;
- or by another type of survival with no illusions, i.e., compromising – like Claudia in *L'AVVENTURA* who forgives Sandro, Lidia in *LA NOTTE* who gives in to Giovanni's pathetic embrace, and Giuliana in *IL DESERTO ROSSO* who accepts life and reality as they are.

Thus, the end is the moment when a story unravels in a present which is decanted and free from past illusions and future inevitability. It is, of course, as much the mystery (the meaning of the past) as the outcome of the future that is being eclipsed at the same time as the story. All that remains is the tangible and opaque event recorded in the dimension of the precarious and the possible, stripped of all finality and without any indication of the meaning that should be attributed to the sequel.

From this point of view, the final sequence of *The ECLIPSE* provides the *dénouement* of a film by Antonioni with its most emblematic form and script: that of a wasted opportunity where past promises and future threats are decanted into the void of a space-time devoid of quality, in the process



Fig. 7.1: The final sequence of *THE ECLIPSE*; “a wasted opportunity where past promises and future threats are decanted into the void of a space-time devoid of quality.”

of reification, eclipsing characters and adventures, and presenting only the remains of a still-born sentimental story which, even before reaching its conclusion, freezes in revisiting the now empty spaces where *rendezvous* once took place; mineralizes in a suspension of what is to become; dissolves into a temporary darkening of the world; fades “behind an accumulation of micro-facts, notations and localisations which, while having as their initial aim to illustrate events as they develop [the rendez-vous neither Vittoria nor Piero will go to], eventually constituting a parallel world all by themselves” (Ollier 1981, 87), where future advance and past nostalgia are substituted for a participatory connection with a mysterious, suspended present.

After their lovemaking in the stockbroker’s deserted offices has been interrupted by the ringing of a doorbell, Vittoria and Piero part tenderly:

Piero: Will we see one another tomorrow? (Vittoria nods yes.)

We’ll see one another tomorrow and the day after.

Vittoria: And the day after and the day following that as well.

Piero: And the one after, too.

Vittoria: And tonight.

Piero: At eight. Same place.

They gaze at each other, then embrace with an almost desperate, anxious intensity. As Vittoria leaves, she looks at Piero one last time and disappears down the staircase.

Piero returns to his office and closes the door; he is in a pensive mood. With robot-like gestures, he replaces all the receivers of the telephones he took off the hook. On the stairs, the young woman, who is also in a pensive mood, descends slowly; she stops and leans against the lift shaft which is being repaired. In his office, the young man, who still looks pensive, but who smiles faintly, sits down at his desk, when the telephones in an adjacent room as well as the one on his desk start ringing. He remains motionless, leans back against his chair, absorbed in his thoughts, his eyes closed, now serious (Piero is not seen again).

After having glanced up behind her, Vittoria (as though she could hear the ringing of the telephones or could still see Piero) continues her slow descent of the staircase. When she reaches the entrance door, after a last hesitation, she exits and starts walking quickly and with conviction. A female passer-by bumps into her and this ordinary incident is enough to interrupt her walking. She stops, pensively, in front of the iron curtain of a closed shop, turns around and looks at the tops of the trees outlined against the sky; then, after having glanced one last time toward the windows of Piero's office, she walks away and disappears, peacefully, almost serenely, with a faint, secretive smile on her lips (Vittoria is not seen again).

In the famous final sequence, from dusk to dark, all the places where Vittoria and Piero used to wait for and meet each other file past: the area around the crossroads and in front of the house under construction. In this final coda we are presented with an accumulation and a succession of shots of that which, until that point, constituted merely the diegetic background of the film and of Vittoria and Piero's amorous adventure.

An automatic sprinkler is on in the park; the nurse is pushing a pram. Piles of bricks, most of which are broken, are on the paving of a house under construction. A wooden barrier surrounds the house. A water-filled can has been left against the barrier; behind the barrier, the place under the tree (at the corner of the crossroads, in front of the pedestrian crossing) where Piero waited for and met with Vittoria, is now empty. Straw mats cover the house and metal scaffolding pipes are outlined against the sky. The sulky drawn by a horse trotting along passes along the deserted avenue; then, on the opposite sidewalk, we see the nurse with the pram; their shadows glide across the asphalt, dimly lit by a pale sun. Behind them, on the opposite side of the avenue, the deserted ticket offices and stadium pylons can be discerned. The pedestrian crossing leads to the house under construction; the man crosses and disappears. The leaves of the trees are stirred by the wind, and the deserted crossroads come into view (overall view, high-angle shot). The house under construction is on one of the corners of the crossroads;

the sun has disappeared. The building-site can is filled with water; on its surface floats a piece of wood and the box of matches which Vittoria and Piero discarded there during their first meeting; a stream of water escapes from the pierced can and flows into the gutter. A woman waits at the trolleybus stop under the trees. A young woman (a prostitute?) waits for someone on a deserted corner of the crossroads. A trolleybus arrives, turns, and then stops with squeaking wheels. A woman and a man get off; the man opens a newspaper with the following headlines: "The atomic race" and "A precarious peace"; the man walks off. Children are playing; some run toward the sprinkler; a municipal worker closes the sprinkler; a few drops fall on the leaves. There is a shot of a modern building with balconies; followed by a close-up of one and then two of the balconies. A stadium pylon points toward the sky where a plane passes, leaving a long, white trail behind it. On the terrace of the white building, there are two tiny human figures: one stretches out her arm in front of her, toward the sky. The can with the piece of wood and box of matches is still leaking and the water is running slowly across the pavement. At first, one sees only the bottom part of an old man's face, then an eye wearing glasses and, finally, the head; he is motionless and seems to be looking at something, then walks away. We remain at the corner of the house under construction. The stadium pylons stand out against the cloudy sky, which is barely illuminated by the sun's rays which are disappearing below the horizon. There is a woman looking out from behind bars; a streetlamp is switched on. One of the avenues of the crossroads has lit streetlamps and cars, which have their headlights on; there is a shot of the house under construction with scaffolding pipes pointing toward the sky; another of the avenues has lit streetlamps. A trolleybus turns the corner of the house under construction; it stops and several people get off, their silhouettes moving away into the half-light. The corner of the crossroads is lit by a small streetlamp; toward the back, the house under construction is veiled by the now complete darkness of night; against the dark background of the horizon, points of light are coming from the streetlamps which line the avenue. A streetlamp, which diffuses an intense, luminous halo, fills the entire screen with a blinding light and seems to project the word: "END."

In this superb final sequence, Antonioni's cinema reaches the extreme point of the representation of the void toward which he has tended incessantly: *places* (or scenery) are emptied and exhausted in a fragmented space devoid of quality, which the camera revisits without any support of statement; *characters* suspend their adventure and withdraw to make way for a vanishing presence, indifferent movements and the fleeting faces of silent, anonymous figures; the *story* dissolves in the dispersion of heterogeneous

versions of the present (or microfacts), pure events – detached from any diegetic purpose which finally drowns the diegesis in the world's suspended and extradiegetic time, a parallel world to that of the film, threatened, too, by nothingness, by a total and universal eclipse.

This extinction of the narrative – what Pascal Bonitzer called “a spool of nothing” (1982, 88) – is a type of probe which the filmmaker uses to create mystery; a mystery which unpicks and loosens the weft of the story, perhaps because, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, “where there is mystery, there can be no story” (2015, 15). Or, simply because, as Antonioni admitted himself: “Any explication would be less interesting than mystery itself” (1985, 77).

*Translated from the French by Naòmi Morgan.*

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## 8. The Film That Dreams

### About David Lynch's TWIN PEAKS Season 3

*Dominique Chateau*

I recently told a friend that I had found TWIN PEAKS Season 3 “admirable.” He replied by asking whether I had seriously thought that admiration is a genuine aesthetic criterion. Knowing my pride in being considered an aesthetician, in the sense of practicing and teaching the discipline called aesthetics, it was a way of touching my sensitivity. However, at the same time, I was reminded of Charles Peirce envisaging the possibility of defining the beautiful by admiration: “we appeal to the aesthete, to tell us what it is that is admirable without any reason for being admirable beyond its inherent character. Why, that, he replies, is the beautiful” (1931-1958, 1.612). Leaving Peirce to his concerns – he immediately expresses doubts as to whether “any particular quality of feeling is admirable without a reason” – I wonder if admiring is not perhaps too much for a majority of beautiful things, insofar as they achieve beauty in simplicity, without ostentatious features, but with modesty. I mean that we must reserve admiration for special cases, special beauty. When I say that TWIN PEAKS Season 3 is admirable, I wish to express how *I* feel about it: this series is the most perfect and uncanny audiovisual product I have ever seen.

However, it is not my intention to bore the reader with this kind of manifestation of a pure subjective purpose. I am not alone in thinking that TWIN PEAKS 3 is “the most perfect and uncanny audiovisual product.” For example, Matt Fowler (2017) rightly points out that TWIN PEAKS “came back as a true artistic force that challenged just about every storytelling convention we know.” The uncanny feeling is based on some aspects of the series that are objectively strange. Among these strange aspects of characters and behavior, there is splitting – beginning with the splitting of FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) between Mr. C, a doppelgänger, Cooper’s dark half brought out of the Black Lodge, and Dougie Jones, ambiguously and partially linked to Dale and partially to Mr. C, who is affected by a chronic language disorder, but who is surprisingly charismatic at the same time. Aside from eccentric people, such as the enigmatic Log Lady (Catherine E. Coulson) who always carries a small log in her arms, there are very strange things, like The Arm, an electric talking tree,<sup>1</sup> a kind of “abhuman,” that is, “some indefinable ‘thing’ that is

mimicking the human, appropriating the human form” (Punter and Byron 2004, 41). Finally, it reflects another objective observation that *TWIN PEAKS 3* presents a very special form of storytelling at different levels: diegesis, story development, succession of scenes, rhythm (especially slow), dominant coloring (red, black), and so on.

In this chapter, I draw on research derived from textual analyses of *TWIN PEAKS 3*, using a theory of filmic storytelling, which is primarily based on Gérard Genette’s narratology (distinguishing between diegesis, story, and narration). Yet this also takes account of the diegetic perspective introduced by Christian Metz (1974) – and, subsequently, endorsed by Genette (1972, 1980, 1982, 1983) – reworked in order to integrate the logic of possible worlds.<sup>2</sup> This adjustment not only aims to “thicken” the concept of diegesis, but also to help anchor my aesthetic quest for an answer to the question: What does it mean to have a filmic idea? In relation to *TWIN PEAKS*, I will speak in terms of film or cinema. Not only is it rather difficult in general to draw a clear boundary between film and television series, but in Lynch’s case, starting with the fact that as a filmmaker, he is an *auteur*, there are special reasons to question this boundary. I will explain this in terms of “filmic ideas,” meaning ideas in storytelling which do not involve a simple “packaging” of optional sights and sounds, but rather deep structural work. This kind of deep work which transforms the surface structure, or by which the surface filmic form can also seize power over the deep semantic structures, results, in the present case, from a dream-like form that goes beyond the dream’s telling, toward *the film that dreams*. While Lynch did not invent this “genre,” he raises it to the highest level.

## Having a Filmic Idea

Although he did not exactly consider what I call filmic ideas, Gilles Deleuze answered my question as follows:

An example of a cinematographic idea is the famous sight-sound dissociation in the [...] cinema of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, the Straubs, and Marguerite Duras, to take the best-known cases. What is common to these, and in what sense is the disjunction of the visual and the auditory a properly cinematic idea? Why could this not take place in theater? Or, at least, if this happened in theater, if the theater found the means, then one can say without exception that the theater borrowed it from cinema. (1998, 16)

In this proposition, the classical cinema-theater *paragon* is correlated with exceptions observed in avant-garde films (more precisely the sight-sound disjunction exception). Deleuze's essay is entitled, "Having an Idea in Cinema ..." which, in French, is translated as: "Avoir une idée en cinéma ..." I prefer "Having a filmic idea," precisely because I agree with the presupposition that the filmic (or cinematic) idea involves both filmic specificity and an artistic intent which we do not find in every film.<sup>3</sup> To give another of my favorite examples, in the first part of Sergei Eisenstein's *GENERAL LINE* (1929), two brothers, having decided to divide their poor heritage, a very simple *izba*, saw it in half; it is, for Eisenstein, the occasion of a rhythmic montage which accelerates progressively, until the moment when, among the sawing shots, one of them very quickly appears upside down. The first time I watched this movie, I thought: "Here is cinema! Here is cinema as art!" I mean, the freedom to introduce a nonrealistic shot which, in this case, is not a breach by a foreign image, but the transmutation of the realistic film basis (this transmutation being supposed in Eisenstein's mind to elicit the ex-stasis process).

I compared that to my strong impression, which was constantly renewed from episode to episode, as I was watching *TWIN PEAKS 3*. I would speak of a masterpiece, especially with regard to Episodes 8 and 18, if the word was not obsolete – thanks to Antonin Artaud! – and despite the fact that it is a TV series. Yes, *despite that*, you read it right! I do not agree with researchers who think they have the power to decide that a TV series deserves the same level of respect as feature films or, more precisely, as feature films which are judged "artistic works." This label does not emerge from research, but from society and the institutions involved (I fully agree with George Dickie's institutional theory (1974), which invents nothing, but simply takes note of the fact that an artwork is such when a specialized institution supports its application to art). When research participates in this legitimation it is through an institution. With this in mind, I do not decide by myself to apply the filmic idea viewpoint to a TV series, and I only agree with the hypothesis that this viewpoint may be taken into consideration in the case of a work which includes both feature film and TV episodes, which is allegedly the case with Lynch.

To be more precise about the filmic idea, I refer to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in which he writes that the principle of an artwork:

is nothing else than the faculty of presenting aesthetic ideas. But, by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought

whatever, i.e., concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible. ([1890] 1911, para. 49)

I like the suggestion of something that “induces much thought,” but “which language, consequently, can never [...] render completely intelligible.” All is in “completely.” This outlines the question of specificity, not as a pure medium distinction, but as aesthetic features produced by the medium or by an intermedial state. There are some kinds of representation which are only complete in movies as much as some others are only complete in writing, painting, and so on.

To avoid the exclusive medium dogmatism, we can recognize that the filmic idea is not purely filmic, or “100% filmic” to use Dziga Vertov’s words. Mikhail Iampolski (1998) shows in *The Memory of Tiresias* that French avant-garde films, which were supposed to achieve a high level of filmic purity, involved a literary subtext provided by the poetry of the time. And Yuri Tsivian (1980, 118) shows that fully understanding the sequence of Vertov’s *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA* (1929), where we see in alternate montage seamstresses and the film cutter, implies referring to Russian lexical fields, more precisely to the verb *strotchit*, which means both sewing and writing (so that the film is implicitly defined as “cine-writing”).

To return to *TWIN PEAKS 3*, it is worth noting that it has some very clear series characteristics, some features of seriality interwoven with filmic ideas, for example the musical performances at the Roadhouse Bang Bang Bar at the end of most of the episodes (and in the first third of Episode 8). Incidentally, I do not want to become locked into the auteurism controversy. We can speak of Lynch’s series because he is designated as the director, but without forgetting that he shares the scenario writing with Mark Frost. This means that the fantasies of this series, which includes many gems of this type, are also shared. The author need not be a single human being. Authorship is not a question of number, but rather of cultural purpose and human approach.

## Possible Worlds

When we consider Lynch’s entire work, we see both continuity and evolution. The principle of diegetic continuity, especially that of characters (except when new ones appear or when characters acquire new skill properties by means of special narrative key events), not only governs each story but also spreads from

one film to another and eventually to the entire work. This diegetic feature must be linked to an obsessional characteristic which is difficult to miss: the same characters, places, and themes appear constantly. A simple example that Lynch's fans would understand is agent Coop's immoderate taste for coffee and cherry-pie! The recurrence of such details is both a signature and a principle of composition. An author's preferences, as Freud (1991) suggested, represent different aspects, even antagonistic ones, of his or her personality that are assembled to constitute the book (or the film) as a good object.

Lynch's works do not fit into any single genre classification. Cinema meets the challenge of being led by a dominant genre. In other words, a single genre is leading the story. However, in many cases, the supposed single genre hides complexity: even though it is supposed to belong to cinema, it is made up of a mixture of elements provided by the dominant genre and others originating in at least another genre – such is the case, for instance, with the well-known genre called film noir where we find typical elements of melodrama. The kind of genre hybridity that Lynch exemplifies is somewhat different from this customary interbreeding. The reason for this difference lies in the fact that the key of hybridity is no longer a question of genre. Neither is it the choice between pure and hybrid genre, nor, more precisely, the choice of hybrid genre as an alternative to the gradually declining trend of pure genres over the years. Beyond the question of genre, Lynch's key lies in filmic form. This does not imply a complete lack of genre, but that the way in which Lynch conceives the story prompts a partial reversal of relationships between diegesis and film.

A genre gives a specific framework to the film diegesis which also provides more precise properties so that the viewer can figure out the time-space conditions of the film and how the characters are supposed to behave within these conditions. When watching a film, the main issue generally faced is to understand the diegesis level vis-à-vis the world in which we live and the other worlds, more or less ideal, we are able to conceive – in other words, we need to identify a possible world which may be more or less close to our own. This definition of diegesis must be taken into account when trying to explain Lynch's keys for *TWIN PEAKS*.

A possible world is one which is defined by a set of assumptions we can more or less consider as assumptions of the world in which we live, not only our present world but past ones as well. These present or past worlds may be called the actual world, or the actual-like world. Admittedly, the past and present worlds differ in the same way that a world with mobile phones differs from one without. Nonetheless, we can assume that there is a historical continuity between past and present. In developing the theory

of possible worlds in order to cover stories, it is appropriate to adapt it to three types which can be defined as follows: a world comparable to the actual world; a world partially incomparable to the actual world; and a dream world. The first and second types share the feature of being portrayed as real, either because the world is simply interpreted as reality-based, or because the unreal facts or people it involves are supposed to work in a reality-like context; the third type is explicitly portrayed as ideal. An important question in terms of logic is how a possible world is accessible to others. The first accessibility relation concerning a film is its relation with our actual world or what we conceive as such. We will see that the question of accessibility must also be considered as a very crucial one in the heart of the film's diegesis when this is the case, as in *TWIN PEAKS*, which is composed of more than one possible world.

It seems relevant to consider Lynch's work as a dream world. However, this third type is inclusive, insofar as the representation of a dream world needs to involve the reference to a reality-like world. Moreover, in Lynch's case, there is a permanent play with this status of the fantastic ambivalence with regard to reality. To understand this point, it is useful to deepen the functioning of diegetic postulates within the story context. If the story's diegesis involves the postulate of someone who is supposed to belong to mankind and, at the same time, have a set of properties generally attributed to birds, this means that this person's behavior can incorporate, either simultaneously or alternatively, the behavior of a human being and that of a bird. For example, he or she can speak while flying. Nevertheless, the birdman- or woman assumption, or any assumption considered to be a diegetic one, needs to be understood very specifically within the framework of a precise story. Diegesis works as an axiomatic framework that determines the inferences underlying the story development. To give a very simple example, if the birdman- or woman is pursued by someone who clearly intends to kill him or her, we would be surprised if he or she forgot to fly in order to escape this threat. It is clear that what should be considered as nonactual, because it only belongs to the ideal and noneffective world of imagination, becomes such an imperative logical law that fantastic behavior (for example, flying) can be physically conceived as an actual ability (for example, speaking). Edgar Morin writes that:

*we experience the cinema in a state of double consciousness, [...] an astonishing phenomenon where the illusion of reality is inseparable from the awareness that it is really an illusion, without, however, this awareness killing the feeling of reality. (2005, 225)*

We could observe that this phenomenon of “double consciousness” is not really astonishing, meaning simply that we can feel with the characters or about the story while knowing that it is a film, and vice versa. In other words, the knowledge that we are watching a film does not prevent us from experiencing a wide range of feelings that we could have in reality (after all, watching a film is part of reality). Moreover, in most films, feeling supersedes knowledge, although, in a few, knowledge supersedes feeling. However, I do not wish to refer to reflexivity, the kind of films that teach us explicitly that they are filmic or cinematic. The key to Lynch’s films does not lie in this didactic approach, except very occasionally. Rather, his aim is to avoid any explicit reflexivity by means of promoting reflection within a dream context. His work has more to do with troubled consciousness than double consciousness.

### Clues about Dreaming

To what extent can we speak of dreaming in Lynch’s work? A dream narrative implies someone who dreams, yet a film does not come directly from someone. Its author does not literally dream it. We therefore need first to identify some clues that would justify the dream hypothesis, and then, unavoidably, face the question: Who dreams? A film is not a dream, but a dream-like story or form of storytelling. In general, such dream-like qualities are firstly due to special diegetic postulates, so that there is always a dream element in every fiction and, secondly, to illogical developments and inferences that differentiate dream films from fantasy films. In a dream film, everything is permitted, even if it appears illogical; whereas in the fantastic – because we do not refer to our ordinary day-to-day experience, awake or not, but to what has been shaped by literature and cinema, to books and films that develop extraordinary diegeses – we are obliged to fulfill a logic of the plausible. In dream films, based on our own experience of dreaming, we accept anomalies and logical gaps. A part of this acceptance concerns the content of the dream, another, its form. In terms of content, we could try to list the dream clues in *TWIN PEAKS*, if this would not produce an endless list (it took four-and-a-half years to make this new series). Let us therefore consider four of the most notable.

#### 1. *Double Doppelgänger*

Gry Faurholt writes:

The doppelgänger is an uncanny motif comprising two distinct types: (1) the alter ego or identical double of a protagonist who seems to be either

a victim of an identity theft perpetrated by a mimicking supernatural presence, or subject to a paranoid hallucination; (2) the split personality or dark half of the protagonist, an unleashed monster that acts as a physical manifestation of a dissociated part of the self. (2009)

Generally, as Faurholt also notes, the difference between these two can be considered “as a formal one only.” In *TWIN PEAKS*, Cooper has both a doppelgänger and his double, a kind of “double of the double,” who can be considered his opposite. It sounds like ubiquity, three Coopers seeming to be in different places at the same time, except that we cannot take for granted that these places are in the same world. In terms of possible worlds, it seems likely that such different worlds are parallel ones. Hypothetically then, for a given world, somewhere there exists one or more parallel ones in which the same people are acting, feeling, and thinking more or less differently. In one of these parallel worlds, I am a physicist, in another, an estate agent, and so on; and in one, I am writing a text for *Stories*, the next volume of AUP’s *Key Debates* series, and giving a rather distorted account of *TWIN PEAKS* ...

In this respect, Episode 3 Season 3 constitutes a diegetic node. Here, three possible or parallel worlds interfere, while electricity creates an accessible relationship between them. Electricity seems to be a materialization of the possible link between these worlds, as well as that of a dialectical tension between them. The fact that characters from different worlds are electrified in relation to one another, and that the worlds communicate by means of electrical discharges through plugs, materializes their dialectical tension. In a sequence which mixes *STAR WARS* with surrealist painting, Cooper is on a strange machine in outer space, with a woman whose eyes are sewn shut and whose words are incomprehensible. Pulling a lever then produces an electrical discharge, which electrocutes her and she disappears into space, before Cooper returns to the contraption. At this point, an alternate or parallel montage begins, which shows Mr. C driving on a desert road. Electrical spluttering is seen on the car’s dashboard, while Mr. C seems to become sick. Cooper meets a woman who looks like Laura Palmer’s friend, Ronette Pulaski, who says: “When you get there, you will already be there. [...] You’d better hurry, my mother’s coming.” Electrical spluttering and an obsessive pounding increase; Cooper’s face is distorted and he is sucked into an electric machine, all apart from his shoes. Mr. C has more and more difficulty driving and finally crashes his car. He is about to vomit, when, through the broken windscreen of the car, we glimpse the red curtain of the Black Lodge. Suddenly, at this moment, without any explanation, Cooper’s second doppelgänger, who may also be Mr. C’s double, Dougie Jones, appears.



The surest way to be disappointed is by trying to explain everything about *TWIN PEAKS*. Indeed, I assume there is no way to grasp the endless network built by Lynch from episode to episode, from detail to detail. Clearly, the appearance of Dougie Jones amounts to an arbitrary plot twist, which is retrospectively justified. We find the new character, Dougie, with Jade, a black prostitute and, while she is taking a shower, Mr. C and Dougie alternate, both being sick and vomiting. The red curtain intrudes in Dougie's universe while he is vomiting, and suddenly, he disappears, with Jade hearing a loud noise ("What the fuck was that?," she says). Dougie, who is shown sitting in an armchair, appears fleetingly through the dashboard and Mr. C vomits profusely. Back in the Black Lodge, Dougie converses with MIKE, the one-armed spirit:

Dougie: What's happening to me?

MIKE: Someone manufactured you.

Dougie: What?

MIKE: For a purpose, but I think now that's been fulfilled.

Dougie: It has?

Dougie dissolves in a golden ring, saying: "That's weird." Then Jade finds Cooper on the floor. The materialized Cooper is visibly frazzled by the transition through the electric machine. And while it has made him more slow-witted than the "real" Dougie, he has gained some special abilities and a thaumaturgic gift. He will prove to be a very special wonder worker. Everything happens now as if, having declined into a primitive state of understanding and communication, he has acquired a kind of guru-like telepathic power over things and others: Casino games, his wife (Naomi Watts), his boss (Don Murray), and the casino's owners, the Mitchum brothers (Robert Knepper and Jim Belushi).

## 2. *Slowness*

Episode 18 begins with short, disconnected sequences: Mr. C is on fire, supposedly in the Black Lodge; Dougie returns home (in fact, a new Dougie created by MIKE through electricity), and, at last, the "real" Cooper in the Black Lodge, meets MIKE, The Arm, and Laura Palmer's father (who says: "Find Laura!"). Now, while Cooper is with Diane, outside the Black Lodge, in the woods, a rhythmic slowdown begins. What must be emphasized in this regard is the fact that this kind of slowdown is as significant as short sequences with more or less fast cutting. It is true that illogical gaps and strange disturbances frequently occur in a dream, as do scary slow phases. Fantasizing requires slowing down, insofar as it involves a process of interplay between attraction and repulsion. Completely opposed to what we are conditioned to expect by the dominant

trend in TV drama series, Lynch's directing of actions and actors aims to reduce the storytelling rhythm. What he dares in this regard is extreme, the most extreme of which seems to be the car journeys in Episode 18, especially the third one. Cooper is now with Laura Palmer or, more precisely, with a woman he regards as her. Drawn to her by some evidence, Cooper meets this woman at her house, where there is a murdered man he overlooks – this lack of any reaction on behalf of an FBI agent is among the most explicit dream clues that should make the spectator think about the form of the film. The spectator could think that we were again in a first degree diegesis, since Cooper seemed to be conducting a police investigation. Still, it is no longer possible to maintain that belief. This is not the only strangeness, however. The investigation itself is not devoid of anomalies; rather, it is a matter of degree. Suddenly, the suspicion of the dream goes up a notch, and then there is an interminable road trip ... Cooper and Laura, side by side; a lacunary monologue by the woman; a hypnotic glide along a dark road lit by fleeting headlights ...

### *3. Details: Insignificant or Not?*

Details that seem at first sight to be negligible, become important through recurrence: the green ring, the golden seed, the log, and so on. As we know, details are very important in a dream. Moreover, in Freudian theory, details are more important than what would otherwise be considered the main story elements. Freud (1933) called the mechanism that brings such details to the fore displacement. Even if we ignore the technical details of such an unconscious operation, especially the different strata of (un)consciousness involved, the process referred to by Freud as a "shifting accent" is very similar to what happens in *TWIN PEAKS*:

The different ideas in dream-thoughts are [...] not all of equal value; they are cathected with quotas of affect of varying magnitude and are correspondingly judged to be important and deserving of interest to a greater or less degree. In the dream-work these ideas are separated from the affects attaching to them. The affects are dealt with independently; they may be displaced on to something else, they may be retained, they may undergo alterations, or they may not appear in the dream at all. The importance of the ideas that have been stripped of their affect returns in the dream as sensory strength in the dream-pictures; but we observe that this accent has passed over from important elements to indifferent ones. Thus something that played only a minor part in the dream-thoughts seems to be pushed into the foreground in the dream as the main thing, while, on the contrary, what was the essence of the dream-thoughts finds

only passing and indistinct representation in the dream. No other part of the dream-work is so much responsible for making the dream strange and incomprehensible to the dreamer. Displacement is the principal means used in the *dream-distortion* to which the dream-thoughts must submit under the influence of the censorship. (1953-1974, 9-10)

We could say: *no other part of the dream-work is as responsible for making the film strange and incomprehensible to the spectator.* This is one reason why I will consider *film distortions* in the next section. For the moment, I am mainly interested in the different aspects that are analogical to dream-work in the TWIN PEAKS story. More precisely, we could speak of TWIN PEAKS' *stories*, since it is clear that, starting from the central nerve of Laura Palmer's murder investigation, Lynch has created a kind of narrative network which might be compared to a neural one, just as some computing systems inspired by the human neural network provide a model for artificial neural networks.<sup>4</sup> These are also called "connectionist systems" because of the multiplicity and complexity of connections they involve (like brain synapses). In TWIN PEAKS, it is as though narrative or thematic signals can be transmitted from one to another, and instead of looking for a clear significance which marks the end of the process, it would be better to understand that the network opens many doors to unresolved hypotheses.

To give some examples, in Episode 18, the car that Cooper drives to the motel is not the same as the one in which he leaves after making love with Diane. He drives 430 miles to the motel, crossing over an electrical field and, after having sex, he wakes up in the motel room which Diane left, apparently after having left a note that reads "To Richard from Linda." At the beginning of Episode 1, a character identified as The Fireman, who resembles The Giant of the previous TWIN PEAKS seasons (because he is played by the same actor, Carel Struycken) provides cryptic clues, telling Cooper in the Black Lodge to remember "430 and Richard and Linda!" This kind of information, gathered in various places throughout the series, creates assumptions and expectations, which do not, however, insert definite decryption keys into the narrative locks, but establish *telestructures* that enrich the network, both narratively and aesthetically (Chateau and Jost 1979).<sup>5</sup> Apart from these discontinuous structures, strange additional information, in the form of images and sounds, seems to be largely interspersed to intensify the weirdness. Examples include Dougie's habit of repeating the last word uttered by those to whom he is talking as way of answering, and the way in which the FBI agent, Gordon Cole (played by David Lynch), who suffers hearing loss, speaks very loudly.

#### 4. *Story Derivations*

Film networks remain embryonic only unless there is some syntagmatic work in the end.<sup>6</sup> Film cannot exist without syntagmatizing some paradigmatic choices governed by a diegesis. A film has a more or less sophisticated paradigmatic structure governed by a diegetic possible world, but it is also composed by combining and interlacing story sequences which comply more or less with the statutory requirements that can be inferred from the diegesis. It may be something very simple, like an everyday diegesis with people acting as we might do, regardless of the psychological complexity of the characters. Or it may be more complicated, partly because the diegesis mentioned earlier involves special postulates and underpins a complicated network, and partly because the story itself is made up of many paths significantly branching away, more or less, from the main path (if indeed that exists). In addition to TWIN PEAKS' main path, the inquiry into Laura Palmer's murder, there are many secondary interconnected paths that make the story denser, while simultaneously creating ambiguities, especially in relation to genre.

The question, "What happened to Audrey?" provides a clear example of the secondary paths in TWIN PEAKS. At the end of Series 2 (Episode 30), Audrey (Sherilyn Fenn) has chained herself to a grid near the vault of the Twin Peaks Savings & Loan bank, in protest of an environmental problem, when a bomb explodes. Audrey disappeared at the end of the series. Twenty-five years later, discussions on the Internet show that spectators are still concerned about this way of eliminating an attractive character. They had to wait until Episode 7 of Series 3 for a scene with Tommy "Hawk" Hill (Michael Horse) and Frank Truman (Robert Forster) to see her again. Hawk and Frank examine the pages in which Annie tells Laura that the good Dale is trapped in the Black Lodge. Frank says: "Laura never met Cooper. He came here after she died, didn't he?" Hawk answers: "She said that these words from Annie came to her in a dream." Having realized that the Cooper coming back from the Black Lodge could be the "wrong" one, Frank calls Doc Hayward by means of Skype.

Doc: We all knew Coop, but that morning he was acting mighty strange. [... ] I took him to the hospital [...]. About an hour later, I saw him sneaking out of intensive care, fully dressed.

Frank: What was he doing in intensive care?

Doc: I thought at the time he might have been looking in on Audrey Horne. That terrible business at the bank, and ... She was in a coma.

Audrey then reappears under strange conditions. She is back, but seems to be in a kind of prison, chained once again and engaged in an endless



Fig. 8.1: TWIN PEAKS Season 3 by David Lynch, frames from Episodes 1 and 3.

discussion with her husband, Charlie. Charlie is a very strange character whose physical aspect (he suffers from rheumatoid arthritis) is provided by the actor, Clark Middleton (Episodes 12, 13, 15, and 16.) Audrey is obsessed with joining her lover, Billy, at the Roadhouse, but she and Charlie, who are continually arguing, seem unable to go. In Episode 16, due to Charlie's decision, they are finally at the Roadhouse, where Audrey dances in the middle of the crowd after a master of ceremonies (JR Starr) has announced "Audrey's dance." However, a fight breaks out and, feeling afraid, Audrey asks Charlie to leave. Prefaced by electric spluttering, we see her alone in a room, before a mirror in which she looks at herself with fear. All these details seem to be building a parallel story, a subsidiary offshoot of the main one. But two important details show that this is not the case. Episode 13 is entitled: "What Story Is That, Charlie?" In this episode, Audrey asks: "What story is that, Charlie? Is it the story of the little girl who lived down the lane?" The last clue which refers to Audrey, and which occurs in Episode 18 inside the Black Lodge, contributes to clarifying that Audrey's secondary story in TWIN PEAKS 3 has to do with the main story. Indeed, The Arm, the electric tree with a fleshy mass instead of a head, says to Cooper in its disembodied, jerky voice: "It is ... the story ... of the little girl ... who lived down the lane ... Is it?"

## The Film That Dreams

The following appears on an Internet forum:<sup>7</sup>

When he was pressed over the fate of Audrey Horne [...] Lynch remained typically tight-lipped: "What matters is what *you* believe happened. Many

things in life just happen and we have to come to our own conclusions. You can, for example, read a book that raises a series of questions, and you want to talk to the author, but he died a hundred years ago. That's why everything is up to *you*.

This seems to provide a valuable key for overall interpretation. People have different memories of the episodes, different awareness of the relevance of various details and clues to issues regarding interpretation. However, the most important aspect of TWIN PEAKS is that this artwork has been purposefully made with the intention of providing spectators with a network of enigmas. One possible approach is to try to crack the enigmas systematically. The Internet is a breeding ground for such exercises, but the dice are loaded against anyone trying to impose their own interpretation. According to Lynch, what counts is the personal belief that we form about the enigmas, trying to solve them and, above all, enjoying the mental process which they activate, even if this does not lead to any definitive end.

I think that the major obstacle encountered by interpreters stems from the limited range of diegetic conceptions which are available for TWIN PEAKS. It is clear that the series does not refer to a "reality" diegesis, a possible world whose assumptions match our expectations about the world in which we live. We would be very surprised to see someone dissolve into a seed, like Diane in Episode 16! It is obviously not realistic, but depends on the diegetic logic, as we saw earlier with the birdman- or woman postulate. Furthermore, given a diegesis, we need to know whether the assumptions, however special, continue to operate on a basis of reality. With TWIN PEAKS, it would be a huge mistake to use this kind of basis for solving the enigmas. These two mistakes can be avoided if we consider the series as a dream. Admittedly, dreaming is part of our real experience, but only when the conditions of our waking consciousness are suspended. In such a context, the logic, according to which the birdman- or woman must fly to escape some assailant, may be suspended. In Luis Buñuel's *THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL* (1962), the dinner party guests are unable to return home for no apparent reason. In the same vein, Audrey cannot go to the Roadhouse despite her desire to join Billy. In our dreams, it is not uncommon to be desperately moving toward a point which is impossible to reach.

Dream contextualizing not only changes the diegetic logic, but also has some crucial consequences for storytelling. Generally in films, a dream that is being told or visualized is ascribed to some character. Some parts of TWIN PEAKS 3 fall within this category. As we have seen, Hawk and Frank read the pages in which Annie describes her dream about Cooper being trapped

in the Black Lodge. In Episode 14, entitled “We Are like the Dreamer,” what happens is most important. Gordon Cole tells agents Tammy and Albert:

Last night, I had another Monica Bellucci dream. I was in Paris on a case. Monica called and asked me to meet her at a certain cafe. She said she needed to talk to me. When we met at the cafe, Cooper was there. But I couldn't see his face. Monica was very pleasant. She had brought friends. We all had a coffee.

Gordon speaks sometimes in vision, and sometimes in voice-over, the sequence being an alternating syntagm showing the deputies meeting in color, with some scenes described by the FBI chief in black and white. Gordon continues: “And then she said the ancient phrase ...” We see and hear Monica saying: “We're like the dreamer who dreams and lives inside the dream.” Gordon repeats: “We're like the dreamer who dreams and lives inside the dream.” Then he adds: “I told her I understood. And then she said ...” Monica whispers, in close up: “But who is the dreamer?” Gordon repeats: “But who is the dreamer?” And he adds:

A very powerful uneasy feeling came over me. Monica looked past me, and indicated to me to look back at something that was happening there. I turned and looked. I saw myself. I saw myself from long ago in the old Philadelphia offices listening to Cooper telling me he was worried about a dream he had.

Gordon and Cooper are now face to face, in black and white. Cooper: “Gordon, it's 10:10 a.m. on February 16. I was worried about today because of the dream I told you about.” Gordon again, in color: “And that was the day Phillip Jeffries appeared and didn't appear ...” Phillip Jeffries, played by David Bowie, appears in black and white.

With Gordon seeing himself as younger, and dreaming about Cooper, who tells him about a dream, this part of Episode 14 seems to give a double key: the dreamer living inside his dream and a dream within a dream. On this basis, one can entertain quite an interesting hypothesis: TWIN PEAKS is Gordon's dream. However, given the fact that Gordon is played by David Lynch, another interesting hypothesis would be that TWIN PEAKS is Lynch's dream. In fact, when we say that an artwork is the dream of its author, we assert this on a metaphorical level. A film is not a dream; it is neither the mental activity of dreaming, nor a dream narrative; and even more so, the film's author is not the film's dreamer. The only way to substitute the literal

for the metaphorical here would be to propose that *the film itself dreams*, meaning that it has a structure analogous to that of a dream. This hypothesis is clearly consistent with the idea that this kind of film subverts the logic of diegetic “reality.”

Accordingly, if dreaming is regarded as structural, we need to identify clues of correspondence between the diegetic material and the filmic form. To return to Episode 3, in the beginning, the film itself suffers electric discharges. An alternating or parallel montage begins at this point. Two series of images alternate when one image succeeds another according to a narrative relation, while parallel images create a discursive relation. Can we assume that the intruding series, which shows Mr. C driving on a desert road, has a narrative relation with the series inside the Black Lodge? We cannot be sure that the Black Lodge temporality is a narrative one, by which I mean following the diegetic temporality designed to be considered normal. We could name this sequence half alternating, half bringing together parallel worlds – a *shaky syntagm*. A new alternation begins. The new series may be considered as signifying *in the meantime* more precisely than the first alternation. Three worlds and stories are now intertwining more or less simultaneously. As already noted, electricity creates accessibility between the three worlds so that it works both in the deep structure governed by the diegesis and in the surface structure of filmic form. Nevertheless, if it is the film that dreams, we may perhaps reverse the proposition: insofar as the *electric conditioning* defines the *filmic form*, TWIN PEAKS’ story and diegesis are determined in the first instance by the author’s filmic idea. The extrapolation of Kant’s aesthetic idea to a filmic idea is clearly relevant in this case: something inducing thought, but inexpressible. It is symbolized by the woman whose eyes have been sewn shut and who merely whispers, within an electrified montage of choppy images accompanied by crackles, reverberations and, finally, loud pounding. When Cooper asks: “Where is this? Where are we?” the spectator feels bewildered. He or she wonders whether this part of the film is a rough draft, the sketch of a possible complete film.

Even though film is not literally a dream, in the sense that it is neither dreaming nor following the narrative of its own dream, the spectator who is well disposed toward a film, can have the experience of a dream while watching it. He or she has the feeling that he or she is dreaming, beyond the double consciousness that allows such empathic participation, despite awareness of the filmic *dispositif*. I will not invoke the filmic apparatus theories that identify it with a dream, and the moviegoer with a dreamer. There is a huge difference between the assumption that the filmic apparatus



is an ideological tool, because the viewer cannot differentiate between the filmic world and the real one – when the diegesis is supposed to be reality – and such films as *TWIN PEAKS*, where the filmic world is distinguished from the real one by a number of esoteric clues that progressively complicate the neural network, both at the level of diegesis and story.

### The Sublime and the Grotesque (By Way of Conclusion)

Episodes 8 and 18 are unbelievable, not only because they involve strange things, but also due to Lynch's artistic daring in stretching his filmic ideas. I know that there are some who wonder whether numerology is involved in *TWIN PEAKS*. Despite the fact that I was born on August 18 (8/18) in 1948, I do not know what I could do with this numerical conjunction. Still, when I spoke earlier about admiration, I particularly had these two episodes in mind. I have already analyzed Episode 18, the last one (last of the last?), and only need to mention the final scream. Accompanied by the supposed Laura, Cooper finds Palmer's house now occupied by strangers. At this point, when we come back to the kind of FBI investigation which was the main narrative path of the earlier series, Cooper fails completely. However, his attitude indicates that this is unimportant or, at least, less important than the dream-like mood and structure. He gives up, slowly goes down the steps and walks along the street with Laura, before turning round, leaning forward, and asking the surprisingly simple question: "What year is this?" Then we hear a distant voice calling "Laura." In close-up, the supposed Laura screams, Cooper jumps and the house lights go out. This is the end of the last episode, abruptly broken by a kind of power cut, emphasizing the sublimity of this primal scream ... except after the credits, there is a shot of Laura whispering in Cooper's ear – perhaps there is hope for a future *TWIN PEAKS* sequel.

Episode 8 is probably the best of all the *TWIN PEAKS* series. It responds to Episode 29 in Series 2, entitled "Beyond Life and Death," like black responding to red. Among other meanings, in the Middle Ages, red evoked Christ's blood and Hell's fire; and as a symbol of darkness before the days of creation, black refers to primitive terror (Pastoureau 2016). The Black Lodge is in red and, in Episode 8, night-time terror covers the earth. It might also be considered the final explanation: in 1945, the first atomic bomb was detonated at White Sands, New Mexico at 5:29 a.m. This was accompanied, after the countdown, by Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960), as well as an abstract suite of color explosions, like fireworks. It explains,

among other enigmatic parts of Episode 8, the phantom-like woodsman occupied by Mr. C's body after he was shot, then terrifying a couple in a car, and killing people in a radio station (while we hear The Platters' *The Prayer*), and broadcasting a mysterious quasi-Biblical message: "This is the water. And this is the well. Drink full and descend. The horse is the white of the eyes and dark within," which causes listeners to faint.

But it does not explain Lynch's decision to develop a very special filmic idea and to extend it throughout the entire episode. Dream turns to nightmare, and the film turns abstract for a long, absolutely unusual, time. The TWIN PEAKS' audience does not faint, but is hypnotized by this never-ending nightmare, contemplating the night-time terror it represents. We could wonder how it is possible to do that in the context of TV production, but it is better to simply enjoy being led by image and music that gradually bring us to a mysterious state, as enigmatic as the dark electrified images of the gas station. I do not know of any film or series which has taken a filmic idea to such extremes, except Luis Buñuel's *THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE* (1972), that we can consider one of the best examples of a film that dreams, especially the dream within a dream as filmic structuration.

"Dreaming is a second life" wrote Gérard de Nerval ([1855] 2001). If it means that a dream is real life reinterpreted, or another kind of life from the real one, it remains possible to distinguish reality and dream. In the cases of Buñuel and Lynch, dream representation is no longer supposed to occur in a real context from which it is distinguishable, because they develop dreams concretely; they develop them according to their proper mechanisms (sometimes called "dream work"), through the concreteness of filmic forms. Dream and reality become indistinguishable, so that fiction floats between them. The question is no longer the representation of a mental world, but the representation of the world as mental. Aesthetically, the mental or dream logic upon which the film depends is confirmed by values which we also find in films governed by a reality-diegesis, but with a very different purpose. The everyday has a role to play in the film that dreams: Coop's taste of coffee and cherry-pie are pleasures to be enjoyed every day; at the same time, these needs are so obsessional that we come to feel them as uncanny. Freud defined the uncanny as created "on the ground of common reality," and added:

By doing so [the writer] adopts all the conditions that apply to the emergence of a sense of the uncanny in normal experience [...]. But the writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience; in his stories he can make things happen that

one would never, or only rarely, experience in real life [...]. [H]e tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. (2003, n.p.)

We know the process of defamiliarizing by unusual repetition (whereas, as Shklovsky put it when he coined the concept of *ostranenie*, deautomatization also has the power to produce the same effect) (Shklovsky [1917] 1965; Van den Oever 2010). In dream film, some moments are highly differentiated from the sublime, as we have seen in the whole of Episode 8 or with Laura's scream at the end of Episode 18. But what is the sublime? Edmund Burke answers: "Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (1909-1914, n.p.).

Another value, the grotesque, which seems very close to the everyday, interferes with it, thus emphasizing the ambiguous relationship between strangeness and the familiar. Many texts have been written on this topic, especially with regard to Lynch (McTaggart 2010; Mulvey 1996; Schneider 2004; Weishaar 2012). In fact, it is difficult to grapple with the subject at the end of this present chapter, but in my opinion "the grotesque and the sublime in TWIN PEAKS" would be an attractive issue to address in a future essay. Therefore, I wish to offer a few pointers here. Coop's gourmet obsession is somewhat grotesque, as is Gordon's way of talking loudly, or the way in which the Log Lady holds her precious piece of wood against her heart. In TWIN PEAKS, there are numerous examples of such small discrepancies disturbing everyday life. This kind of grotesque playing with familiarity, as a kind of unfamiliar familiarity, makes the viewer hesitate between laughing and feeling the uncanny. Film, as a dream, is a particular context in which the grotesque and the sublime may communicate or amalgamate without losing their strengths; in fact, they may reinforce each other. Among the former, the sheriff's Deputy, Andy Brennan (Harry Goaz), a Stanley Laurel figure, is a very sensitive grotesque character (a police officer who cries easily) who has a grotesque relationship with Lucy (Kimmy Robertson), the shrill-voiced immature Sheriff's Department receptionist. However, in Episode 14, he is literally transfigured by his passage through the Black Lodge. Coming to the woods with Frank, Hawk, and Bobby Briggs (Dana Ashbrook), having held the eyeless woman's hand, he is transported into the Black Lodge, where the Fireman shows him visions of many aspects of the story, including BOB, woodsmen, Laura, two Coopers, and himself. A grotesque figure becomes sublime. Even Lucy becomes mature on this occasion. And Lynch gives Andy the honor of welcoming Cooper and bringing him to his doppelgänger.

As I have tried to argue in this chapter, in TWIN PEAKS 3, this kind of reversibility not only deals with the routine of the fantastic (the simple

development of a special diegesis), but also with the dreamlike form that is the main characteristic of *the film that dreams* genre. Annie van den Oever asserts that “the experience of the grotesque [...] is not merely or exclusively a perceptual experience of grotesque (fused, hybrid, monstrous) beings; it is, more fundamentally, an experience of the distorting powers of the new technologies themselves effectively ‘working’ on the percipients in the perceptual process and destabilizing their notion of images, representations, beings and meanings” (2011, 101-102). In my opinion, it is relevant to extend this technical hypothesis to film form, conceived as a way of appropriating film technique through filmic ideas. If one tries to master TWIN PEAKS’ diegetic network and complex story without considering its special dreamlike form one will inevitably be disappointed.

Whether considered from the standpoint of story or technique, *the film that dreams* genre makes it possible to identify the series as a movie, justifying my quest for filmic ideas in TWIN PEAKS 3. “I’ve heard that you think of it as an 18-hour movie, not a series as such”: I recently discovered that Lynch has already replied to this interviewer’s remark:

I always saw working in television as the same as working on a film. *It is* a film. So when I shot the pilot for *Twin Peaks*, way back when, I just saw it as a short film. The pilot was not that short; it was a feature film, it just had an open ending. And the same thing goes with this – it’s a film. It’s broken into parts. (2017a)

## Notes

1. Previously *The Man from Another Place*, played by Michael J. Anderson, in four episodes and in the prequel *FIRE WALK WITH ME* (1992).
2. Possible world semantics have been created in order to complete modal logic, i.e., logic of the possible and the necessary. Something is possible if it is true in one possible world, and it is necessary if it is true in all the possible worlds. About the logical background, see: Hughes and Cresswell (1972); about the application to story, see Eco (1979); Chateau (1976, 1983, 2015).
3. By the way, sight-sound dissociation is already in Eisenstein, Poudovkine, and Alexandrov’s “Statement on the Sound-film” (1928), a manifesto conceived as a weapon against the fascination that the introduction of sound, and especially word, might exert on the spectators: “The first experimental work with sound must be directed along the line of its distinct non-synchronization with the visual images” (Eisenstein 1949, 258).

4. Hence, recently, the idea to apply a neural network to planet discovery, “Artificial Intelligence, NASA Data Used to Discover Eighth Planet Circling Distant Star,” <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/artificial-intelligence-nasa-data-used-to-discover-eighth-planet-circling-distant-star>.
5. “Telestructures,” or discontinuous structures are relations established between different parts of a film (or a novel) that constitute a narrative structure or present a structural analogy. See Chateau and Jost (1979).
6. Syntagmatic versus paradigmatic is a linguistic concept introduced into film theory by Christian Metz. It aims to distinguish the story choices related to the diegesis from the relationship between story parts that occur within the same filmic construction.
7. <http://www.denofgeek.com/uk/tv/twin-peaks/51236/twin-peaks-lynch-breaks-his-silence-on-season-4-possibility>.

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## 9. Spoilers, Twists, and Dragons

### Popular Narrative after GAME OF THRONES

*Sandra Laugier*

#### I

“It’s not TV, it’s HBO” was the slightly pretentious slogan offered by the cable channel in 1997, in what now appears to have been a golden age of the TV series. *SEX AND THE CITY* (1998-2004), *THE SOPRANOS* (1999-2007), *SIX FEET UNDER* (2001-2005), *ENTOURAGE* (2004-2011), and *THE WIRE* (2002-2008) were series that have changed our way of seeing the world, as well as the social status of these singular works, which have often been neglected on account of their mass-market appeal. After a short period during which it seemed as though the channel might be overtaken by other networks (AMC with *MAD MEN*, 2007-2015 and *BREAKING BAD*, 2008-2013), HBO regained its control of the series culture with *GIRLS* (2012-2017) and *GAME OF THRONES* (2011- ) – two series that are really unlike all others. However, I am discussing *GAME OF THRONES* (GOT) here, because you do not have to be a fan of medieval fantasy, bloody fights, dragons, or soft porn; you do not need to love the sagas of George R.R. Martin to be a fan of *GAME OF THRONES*. You do not even have to like “series.”

Cult HBO series such as *THE WIRE*, which are comparable to the great cinematic or literary works, remained television, or even “super television” for the discerning spectator exploiting the expressive and narrative resources of the small screen. They gave the TV series its “nobility,” turning a favorite pastime into an object of study, even of erudition and distinction, while also allowing for an element of subjective exploration and self-identification.

Stanley Cavell (1979, 1981, 1997, 2004) has defined philosophy as the “education of grownups,” in parallel with his goal in his major works on cinema – *The World Viewed*, *Pursuits of Happiness* (on remarriage comedies), and *Contesting Tears* (on melodrama) – to give popular culture (Hollywood movies, in particular, are his main interest) the function of changing us. According to Cavell, the value of a culture does not lie in its “great art” but in its transformative capacity, the same capacity found in the “moral perfectionism” of Emerson and Thoreau. Cavell’s philosophy defines growth – once childhood and physical growth are over – as our capacity to change. And this capacity is manifestly at work in Cavell’s favored object of study,

the apparently minor genre of remarriage comedies, which stage characters' mutual education and transformation through separation and reunion:

In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups. [...] The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups, this is not natural growth, but *change*.  
(Cavell 1979a)

Cavell (2004) also gives this philosophical enterprise the old-fashioned name of “moral education,” or “pedagogy,” as in the subtitle to *Cities of Words*. For Cavell, whose childhood and youth were haunted by Hollywood movies, the culture in question is popular cinema, whose productions reached the greatest number at the time. The educational value of popular culture is not anecdotal. Indeed, it seems to define what must be understood both by “popular” and “culture” (in the sense of *Bildung*) in the expression “popular culture.” From this perspective, the vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* rather than the institution and valorization of a socially targeted corpus. The way in which Cavell has claimed the philosophical value of mainstream Hollywood cinema in the 1970s, whose task was to educate adolescents and adults, has been transferred to television series, which have taken over from cinema, if not replaced it.

A genre such as remarriage comedies provides an expressive grammar for the spectator, who finds within it resources for his or her own sentiments and situations. This ordinary pedagogical aspect has been radicalized in television series, which are explicitly sites of ordinary expression. They are, themselves, fed by moments of conversation in recent or classic comedies, which make up their referential and moral universe. The spectator's ordinary expertise turns out to be a capacity for expression that comes from knowledge, even mastery, of a genre. A genre is not an essence – its worth lies in the expressive possibilities which it opens up for actors and spectators. Thus, the remarriage comedy genre proposes a grammar of moral education. The democratic nature of cinema and television series is also found in this capacity for education. This is because, as Cavell notes, popular cinema and TV show the important moments of life, when life changes imperceptibly – moments which, in real life, are fleeting and indeterminate, or whose importance it takes years or an entire lifetime to understand. In order to rethink the concept of popular culture, it is necessary to understand that cinema is not a specialized art, and that it can transform our existences by educating our ordinary experience.

Cavell bases his hermeneutic work on “the intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making” (Cavell 1981, 10). The perspective he introduces with regard to popular cinema and the demand it places on criticism is, in my opinion, equally valid for television series such as *GoT*. The success of these series comes from the fact that they are polyphonic. They contain a plurality of singular expressions, stage arguments and debates, and are permeated by a moral atmosphere.

Compared to television series produced at the beginning of the 1990s (*ER*, *THE WEST WING*), a radical change took place in terms of the very form in which they are presented: viewers are initiated into new forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabularies that are not made explicit, without any heavy-handed guidance or explanation, as in earlier productions. This methodology and the new narrativity of series are what make for their moral relevance. However, this leads to revising the status of morality – to seeing it not in rules and principles of decision-making, but rather in attention to ordinary behavior, everyday microchoices, individuals’ styles of expressing themselves and making claims. Perhaps, the material of television series allows for even greater contextualization, historicity (regularity, duration), familiarization, and education of perception (attention to the expressions and gestures of the characters, which the viewer learns to know and love despite their flaws, attachment to recurring figures integrated into everyday life, the presence of faces and words on the “small screen”).

Morality is constituted by the claims of individuals, and the recognition of others’ claims; the recognition of a plurality of moral positions and voices within the same small world – hence, the polyphonic nature of television series, the plurality of singular expressions, the staging of arguments and debates, and the moral atmosphere that emanates from them.

Breaking with traditional criticism, which made the intelligence and meaning of films a by-product of critical interpretation, Cavell confirmed the importance of the collective writing of films, and the function of screenwriters, directors, and actors in creating the meaning and educational value of films. It is therefore necessary to show, within the *moral expression* constituted by television series, the moral choices – both individual and collective – negotiations, conflicts, and agreements that are at the basis of morality: the choices and itineraries of fictional characters, plot twists, conflicts, reconciliations, slips of the tongue, and repressions.

For many of us, one of the most painful personal events of recent years was the unexpected and cruel death of Eddard Stark (Sean Bean) towards the end of the first season of *GAME OF THRONES*. How many upset and indignant SMS messages were exchanged, across all generations, during

Episode 9 of Season 3, at the traumatic moment of the massacre of the rest (not quite all) of the Stark family? This wide sharing of moral emotions, the ability to arouse and release them, is one of the originalities of this series, unlike any other, which reworked our experience.

GoT changed our vocabulary and grammar, making “Khaleesi” a common name and “Hodor” an ordinary phrase. When looking around or observing themselves, everyone could see the mode of consumption of this series. At a time when we could imagine that the series would definitely be consumed in large doses, in box-sets of whole seasons, or in marathons of one or two days, GoT renewed its fan base. During the ten weeks during which it invades their lives, with the weekly rhythm of the soap opera, the imagination is set in motion with the anxious expectation of the sequel. As it is this rhythm that is the strength of the series, its inscription in the life of the spectators of both sexes, and in a human lifetime of days and weeks, in the sense of expectation that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted is a basic element of our life form. For the usually voracious consumer of series, this new way of inhabiting time is strangely responsive to the temporal extension of the seasons in the series: *Winter is coming*. At the beginning of the first season, we emerge from a ten-year summer; we wait for winter; and, in the world of GoT, winters can last ten years, or even a lifetime. This temporality, at once strange, displaced, and yet so close to us, gives GoT its atmosphere and distinctive texture.

GAME OF THRONES expanded the very concept of the “TV series.” It is a series that belongs to fans, and is the most downloaded and cited of all. It revived the traditional mode of consumption of the genre when it was assumed that series would be consumed as box-sets or binge-watching. GoT swamps its viewers during the ten weeks in which it invades their lives. With the weekly rhythm of the serial, the imagination is set in motion, by that anxious, curious waiting for what comes next. It is its vital rhythm that is the strength of the series. Its mode of inhabiting time responds strangely to its rescaling of the seasons: *Winter is coming*. This temporal texture is coupled with another modality of waiting: from the first episode, the viewer is caught, enlisted in this world where *anything can happen*. The end of the pilot showed us the young Bran Stark, who had been followed with increasing interest from the outset, climbing a tower and surprising Cersei and Jaime Lannister, who throws him out of the window. From this foundational moment, GoT engages with many taboos – incest, the invulnerability of heroes, and the protection of children – that structure the hierarchies of human life. From this point onward, everything is possible.

In addition, what is worse is our surprise at enjoying the dalliance of Kingslayer in Series 3 with Brienne (Gwendoline Christie). The appearance of this character, a giantess with proportions more suited to the large than the small screen, is a surprise. As for Ned Stark, his character surprisingly continues to hover over the entire series so far: despite the fact that he had a hard time politically, according to Machiavellian analysis, he represents a moral figure who impresses us, as in any real encounter. GoT surprises us, but this is because we surprise ourselves, male and female spectators alike, with our reactions.

In addition, there is the diversification of characters and the subversion of dualisms (able–disabled, man–woman, old–young, even human–nonhuman, living–nonliving). The heroism of Arya Stark, Daenerys Targaryen, and Tyrion Lannister – with Peter Dinklage’s “premiere” topping the credits – makes GoT a radically democratic series: dwarfs (Tyrion), fat slobs (Samwell), the physically and mentally handicapped (Bran, Hodor), prostitutes (Shae), savages (Ygritte, Osha), hideous monsters (Clegane, etc.), all exist on the same level as more presentable heroes. GoT is also a feminist series, despite criticisms provoked by its scenes of sexual abuse, because it integrates feminist demands, creating unforgettable female role models in a world still obviously dominated by men. It is also this political dynamism (which liberates or reveals the ordinary heroism and power of action by women, the disabled, slaves and populations from the South), which is the democratic power of GoT.

“It’s not Porn, it’s HBO” is the title of a short YouTube video that points to the hallmark of HBO, from *SEX AND THE CITY* to *GIRLS*. GoT is also gloriously at the root of the neologism *sexposition* (meaning sex scenes used in the main narration). Against a background of domination, superb women characters emerge: Catelyn Stark, Brienne, Arya, and Yara. All of these illustrate the ability of such series to invent a feminine heroism, which is sometimes modest, as in *GIRLS*, where Lena Dunham created a new distorted portrayal of the brevity of being a girl. GoT and *GIRLS* are more in line with the cult series of the 2000s, such as *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*, than with HBO classics.

In this way, GoT approaches the ideal popular culture since the beginning of Hollywood cinema as evoked by Stanley Cavell – a culture capable of being appropriated by all, thanks to an education which teaches us that heroism is within the reach of everyone. GoT releases or reveals women’s capacity for action, for the populations of the South and slaves, as liberated by the Khaleesi ... democracy is coming. There remains the essential anxiety: what will be left to tell when the series has (a long way to go) caught up with the novels of George R.R. Martin? *Winter is coming ...*

## II

It was a long time ago that Montaigne said one should not judge before the end: “In judging the life of others, I always look at how the end has gone” (Essays, Book I, chap. 18). It has also been a long time since one would not have been allowed to evaluate a work – either a film, book or, in this case, a series – before having seen it to the end (or, at least one season). But from the first episodes of the second season of *TRUE DETECTIVE* (2015), fans and critics went wild, expressing their disappointment as though it were a personal insult.

This series, which was hugely popular from 2014 onward – mainly for its Bayou atmosphere and Matthew McConaughey’s accent – has now sparked harsh criticism, particularly as a result of the conformity of its view of Los Angeles, with Mafia characters and over-the-top losers, plot confusion, and so on. Yet the second season offers revelations, including the impressive performance of Vince Vaughn, an underrated actor of genius. The Los Angeles of *TRUE DETECTIVE* baffles because it is a cocktail of contemporary culture, from *SWINGERS* (1996) to *24* (2001-2010) and *L.A. CONFIDENTIAL* (1997). There are also beautiful and unusual female characters (including the policewoman played by Rachel McAdams), unlike the first season, where women were merely functional in a male story. It is these women who close the story and give it meaning in the final moment where, fleeing yet still fighting, they express the very resistance of life. The heroes are endearing in their imperfection, which leads to the self-destruction of men. Spoiler alert! After premature judgment, the terror of the spoiler is the second plague of seriphilia – if we can still describe seriphiliacs as spectators who find their enjoyment in suspense above all else. What about the pleasure of rewatching a movie, such as *GONE GIRL* (2014) or *THE SIXTH SENSE* (1999)? I am not speaking about *TITANIC* (1997) or *LINCOLN* (2012), whose outcome is known, without, I think, diminishing their intensity.

Yet the absolute crime today seems to be to give the public some clue about coming events in a series. *GAME OF THRONES* is the one for which the pressure is the greatest, so much so that “spoilerphobia” occupies the bulk of critical energies. And yet, the spoiler is already there; no, don’t tell me whether my darling Jon Snow will die! But it’s already in George Martin’s book, as every reader knows. Such an obsession, again, even if it extends to films, devalues the series as genuine works and compromises serious criticism. But do not despise the series’ audience, I am told, for there is no misplaced elitism. The TV series *empowers* the audience, who is able, by virtue of its experience and preferences, to judge for itself. The populism of series also entails perfectionism, demanding that everyone go beyond their conformities rather than being satisfied with their own impressions.

David Simon, the author of the cult series *THE WIRE*, is not bothered by spoilers: the title of his latest work, *SHOW ME A HERO* (a 2015 series of 6 episodes for HBO) is a spoiler in itself. F. Scott Fitzgerald's adage, referred to in the title ("Show me a hero and I'll write you tragedy"), tells us in advance the end of the story. Like Wikipedia, *SHOW ME* tells the true story of Nick Wasiczko, the young mayor of Yonkers (a city of 200,000 inhabitants in New York State) who found himself engaged in a fight for racial desegregation in the decade 1980-1990, by enacting a law inspired by the planner, Oscar Newman, which dictated the construction of social housing in otherwise white districts. Here, the spoiler is a reality.

Given that this is Simon, the show is far from a biopic. In a style that is even more documentary in nature than *THE WIRE*, it presents a democratic galaxy of characters as striking as Nick (brilliant Oscar Isaac, the star who manages to stay on the same level as the others). The lesson of this series lies in its democratic aesthetic, without any moralizing: every point of view is expressed and heard. Democracy is presented, not as speech (hollow and hypocritical) or as a political system (totally corrupt), but as a form of life and social transformation; in the fate of the poorly housed (women) who will slowly benefit from desegregation and leave the housing projects (Carmen, an immigrant Dominican worker, mother of three children; Norma, a medical assistant who loses her sight; Doreen, initially clueless, who then emerges magnificently) and that of the white citizens who, like Mary (Catherine Keener), evolve from visceral and violent opposition to the arrival of foreigners to acceptance and support, out of shame for the repugnant racist behavior of their dear white neighbors.

The lesson of this experience of the last century is obviously topical. Out of tragedy – the political and personal disaster of Nick Wasiczko's trajectory – come democratic and ordinary success, however fleeting and limited it may be, for democracy is not a political game, whether tragic or ridiculous, nor is it a matter of great moralistic principles. It is the micro change of humans, slow and imperceptible and yet so visible on the screen. It involves their sense of responsibility toward strangers. What we call democratic "populism" today only makes sense (spoiler alert!) if it is anchored in the possibility of self-transformation.

### III

Yes, Jon Snow is still dead. He even spent the entire first episode of the season frozen on his table, while the other characters, Sansa, Theon, Arya,



Fig. 9.1: Concern about whether the GAME OF THRONES character Jon Snow was really dead became an issue of global concern.

and Tyrion each made their mark (on us too) on the ever larger territory encompassed by the credits of GAME OF THRONES.

There is no longer the annual rite of GOT's return for a new season – in this case, Season 6, which will, of course, be the best of all, say the show runners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, in the spirit of overbidding that characterizes the latest developments of the series. There is also the annual rite of waiting for the new season of GOT, with its procession of hypotheses, teasers, recaps, redundant commentaries, and delirium over spoilers. The rhythm of GOT, whose narration is explicitly built around a structure of waiting (*Winter is coming*) is now inscribed in our lives, this time creating the expectation of a possible resurrection of the hero massacred in the last episode of Season 5.

We are aware that in GOT anything can happen, as seen in such traumatic scenes as Episode 9 which includes the sudden beheading of Ned Stark, who had seemed to be the main hero in the first season, and the carnage of the wedding in the third season. It is this permanent threat to their lives, apart from the richness of the writing and performances, which creates our attachment to GOT's characters. This feature is shared with another popular series, THE WALKING DEAD (2010- ), which has just completed its sixth season with similar suspense: who was actually crushed in the last scene?

The potential loss and constant vulnerability of their heroes (which also structured its precursor, 24) builds a special relationship with the public, especially in a century replete with threats to human life.

Each in a kind of excess and adapted from other works, GOT and TWD have, in fact, rehabilitated two of popular culture's most underrated genres,



namely fantasy and the zombie movie, giving them an epic dimension as well as a particular realism, built on our attachment to characters who are imperfect yet striking, and who become part of our own stories. So much so that their loss, possible or realized, becomes personal, yet mourning is impossible because they are still there, even if they are dead – and not just because they are fictional characters! Ned and Jon Snow, like Shane, Beth, or Tyreese, are still alive, even when dead, and this makes their loss irremediable and melancholy. They are the walking dead.

No one outside the show knows about Jon Snow, except President Obama who negotiated advance viewing of the precious episodes. The 5th season (which was not completely successful) was a turning point in this respect as until then there were at least two GoT audiences: those who had read George R.R. Martin's five volumes and were more or less forewarned, and those who discovered the story on TV and were regularly in shock ("Aargh!", "No!"). The democratic nature of GoT puts an end to this ultimate segregation. The series is no longer an adaptation, having caught up with Martin. In going live, "off the page" it has become independent of the written saga, perhaps losing in narrative as it takes off, while developing its hold as a pure TV series. As Andy Greenwald stated on ESPN's blog *Grantland*, it is possible that "what we took for an exercise in adapting a book for television has led to making a book from television." Furthermore, there is the question about how to continue writing novels, with a new threat constantly looming, despite the protests of the followers: the series might spoil the books.

The tyranny of the spoiler ("spoilerophobia" which is nothing but the obsessive quest for spoilers) is certainly the dark side of the GoT phenomenon. Certainly GoT infantilizes, achieving the paradoxical feat of taking us back to childhood by means of a very adult TV series. The terror of the spoiler, however, blocks reflexivity and introduces unbearable constraints into an area that has liberated its audience. How is knowing what will happen (and which is known anyway) a problem? What conception of vision and criticism justifies such a normative delirium? One would come to appreciate the rude behavior of the actor, Ian McShane, a magnificent Swearengen in the cult series *DEADWOOD* (2004-2006), scheduled to appear in Season 6 of GoT, who spoiled a character's return from the dead, responding to the indignation of GoT fans on the Net with "get a life," adding, crassly, "It's just tits and dragons."

Neither breasts nor dragons, however, are what captivated audiences in the first episode of Series 6. Rather, it is the pure pleasure of finding Brienne and hearing her once again pledge allegiance to a woman: Stark. The strength of GoT, beyond its ability to make everything fit onto a small screen, lies in the moral aspiration and life force that carries it in such moments, and in the

ability to gradually bring together the characters spread over its territory. It is women, at least as much as men, who represent this form of perfectionist aristocracy: Catelyn, Brienne, Arya, Yara, and, of course, the Khaleesi, are the true moral successors of Ned, holding high the values of an imperfect world. Yet bravery and perseverance are not everything. Moral resources are also found among the humble, the vulnerable, and children – Samwell, the coward (a role comparable to that of Hugo in *LOST*, 2004-2010); Bran, the cripple; and Shae, the maid. These characters create new and unprecedented formulas with regard to heroism. Given the fact that *GoT* is more realistic in doing so than historical series, it finds its realism in proximity to humans, its emotional strength in humanity, and the modest heroism of characters doomed to death (“Valar morghulis,” S2, E10<sup>1</sup>), but who in the meantime, as the late Ygrette told Jon Snow, must live.

Meanwhile, Jon Snow lies on his table. Do something!

*Adapted from newspaper columns originally published in Libération, 2014-2016.  
Translated by Ian Christie.*

## Notes

1. “*Valar morghulis*” apparently means “all men must die” in High Valyrian. “Jaen H’ghar teaches it to Arya Stark when he departs. Although he does not explain its meaning to her (nor does anybody else), she begins to use the words in her prayer of people she wants dead” (“*Valar morghulis*,” *A Wiki of Fire and Ice*, last modified February 23, 2018, [http://awoiaf.westeros.org/index.php/Valar\\_morghulis](http://awoiaf.westeros.org/index.php/Valar_morghulis)).

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# PART III

Discussions



## 10. Storytelling and Mainstream Television Today – A Dialogue

*John Ellis and Annie van den Oever*

### Watching Television as a “Working Through” of Everyday Concerns

**Annie van den Oever:** In several publications since the 1970s, amongst them your *Visible Fictions*, you have described watching mainstream television as a *working through* in the sense of psychoanalysis (Ellis 1982). I would like to discuss with you some new questions regarding storytelling and television, as its ongoing practice allows us to *work through* the themes which somehow bother us *today*. Mundane, mainstream television, you have argued, offers viewers an opportunity to deal with the themes that bother them, and part of the working through is to return to these over and over again. In other words, mainstream television need not be “good” by any classical standard and watching it is not necessarily fun. I recall that significant moment during the London Hands-On History Conference in February 2016, when the American cultural critic, Susan J. Douglas, said that though she *studies* contemporary American television; she absolutely does not *like* watching it; to which you replied, “That’s the point!” Could you explain why “not liking television” is the point? What would you say are mainstream television’s most striking elements *not to like*?

**John Ellis:** In my comment to Susan Douglas, I meant that an academic studying television might well not enjoy the programs they are studying. Why should a cultural critic have the right to study exclusively what they like? The point is that those programs are fun for the people who use them on an everyday basis, and this enjoyment is a social phenomenon that any academic who is seriously interested in the area of television (or any other popular medium) may well not share, but should certainly be studying. However, even if you do share the popular enjoyment, studying things sometimes “breaks” them. The “fun” evaporates once it is interrogated; the magic disappears once the mechanism of the trick is revealed. This is particularly the case with popular television forms such as WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE-style game shows, celebrity-based chat shows, X-FACTOR-style talent competitions and other format-based entertainment, from BIG BROTHER to THE GREAT BRITISH BAKE OFF. They often belong to the ephemeral historical

moment of their production and consumption, and the reconstruction of the ephemeral conjuncture can be both prolix and painstaking. You have to understand how the particular stories of the participants fitted into a broader historical moment. Yet such a reconstruction is key to understanding how and why popular television forms actually work so well when experienced spontaneously and “in the moment.” These forms depend on a “currency,” and belong within a specific historical moment. This currency underpins the distinctive appeal of live or “near-live” television.

**AvdO:** However, “working through” also suggests that there is more to it than mere “fun”?

**JE:** The term “working through” tries to capture the social or psychological importance of these popular forms. They are able to use humor to channel anxiety and to offer (for example, in soap operas and novelas) narratives of success and failure lived by people who are very familiar to their regular viewers. Similarly, other popular forms can offer the entertainment of ordinary people, or (increasingly) celebrities, doing something “outside their zone,” dealing with everyday anxieties and problems.

A show like *STRICTLY COME DANCING / DANCING WITH THE STARS* (broadcast since 2004) offers narratives about people learning new skills, learning to adapt to a new way of using their bodies. They have varied responses to this challenge, and their weekly progress is monitored intensively. They are shown training, experiencing problems, or even accidents, and then participating in a weekly competition which culminates in the classic climax of one “celebrity” and his or her partner “winning.” Each week the candidates have to display and discuss their progress or lack thereof. They are no different from school kids in our increasingly test-and-result-oriented education system. More generally, their acquisition of dancing skills is a metaphor for one of the major concerns of modern life, the need of all citizens to adapt constantly to new circumstances: new forms of work, new and unfamiliar people, and hostile and challenging surroundings.

**AvdO:** You just said that, increasingly, celebrities are doing something “outside their zone,” helping viewers deal with everyday anxieties and problems.

**JE:** The current development of shows, such as *I’M A CELEBRITY, GET ME OUT OF HERE* to the celebrity versions of shows, such as *MASTERCHEF* or *FAMILY FEUD* are a means of pitching celebrities into situations that are uncomfortable for them. This provides a way of working through, in an entertainment envelope, one of the more fundamental problems of modern existence: the unsettled and unsettling nature of the modern economy as it undergoes a series of technological changes, global power shifts, and a

long depression unlike any in modern times. Celebrities are taken out of their comfort zones, just as we ordinary citizens are. Their reactions are no different from ours and those of people around us. So this “working through” is both instructive and cathartic.

**AvdO:** Is national television the best place for dealing with such national and global problems?

**JE:** National television still has a most extraordinary reach and penetration into national cultures, despite all the changes wrought by new forms of delivery of television-like material. National broadcasters still matter. They may be losing audience share, but their share continues to be large and, more importantly, continues to consolidate different demographic groups into a single experience in a way that no other form of television is capable of doing. So it may not be the “best place,” but it certainly is the prime place!

The concept of “working through” as I presented it in *Seeing Things* addresses the social and everyday nature of linear broadcast television, which is normally constructed around the world on a national basis. The concept seeks to explore the repetitive nature of much “ordinary TV” (as Francis Bonner put it in her excellent 2003 book *Ordinary Television*) by looking for the basis of its strength and continuing appeal. Repetition is key to TV forms in a way that is not as pronounced as other forms of storytelling in other media: the characters, settings, and scenarios are familiar, so that it is possible to concentrate on what is unfamiliar in a nonthreatening way. The disturbance or problem comes in familiar wrappers, so it is as though there is already a level of acceptance or acclimatization within the fictional universe (or the entertainment format universe). A new film or TV series requires an effort in order to acclimatize: the viewer has to get to know the characters and the rules of the diegetic world. When a “difficult social issue” is dealt with in a social problem fiction, it comes on top of all of the need to get to know and understand the characters and context. As a result, perhaps, the difficulty of the issue is emphasized by the unfamiliar context. In contrast, the soap opera or familiar format has no such problems of viewer acclimatization. There is less unfamiliar complexity at the character level (they are familiar to regular viewers), so there can be more complexity at the level of the social issues and the dilemmas that they pose.

Soap operas are a safe area in which the unsafe or the unfamiliar can be explored. Indeed, all stories are safe areas of risk where we can see and experience events that would be intolerable in real life. In fictional stories, there’s no problem with murder, extreme jeopardy, etc. In fact there is considerable pleasure in being able to play, in a narrative context, with such taboos and terrors. Different genres of storytelling balance the elements of

safety and risk in their own particular ways. Physical jeopardy, for instance, can be much greater in horror or crime genres, but these genres find it difficult to integrate the emotional anxieties which are usually stirred up in melodramas and soap operas.

**AvdO:** You just argued that historical and contextual reconstruction are key to understanding how and why popular television forms actually work so well when experienced spontaneously and “in the moment.” Can you give an example of such reconstruction?

**JE:** I undertook a reconstruction of this kind when writing about the crisis of trust in the documentary genre which occurred around the turn of the century. This was published as “Documentary and Truth on Television” in 2005. This required trying to find the popular discussions that took place in this presocial media era about “Did you really believe that show last night?” I tried to find evidence from the talk of radio DJs, but that isn’t archived; I looked for the interviews conducted by various researchers at the time, but they weren’t archived (scandalously); so, in the end, I returned to the familiar sources of newspapers and TV itself. But the excavation of that moment seems to succeed well enough to be able to explain a verifiable shift in terms of the way in which documentaries were made and how they tried to address the concerns of their viewers through increased self-reflexivity.

**AvdO:** Would you perhaps say that some parts of your ADAPT project, though not aiming at audience research but at the reconstruction of the BBC’s production circumstances in the earlier days, may be valuable for such reconstructions in the future?

**JE:** The practices of “hands-on history” show that having the concrete objects and circumstances of production produces very different memories in the participants, and enables them to demonstrate aspects of what they did in a way that: (a) they would not normally articulate; and (b) brings forward the group dynamics with regard to work. In terms of applying this hands-on approach to what people did when they watched TV (rather than its industrialized production), the work of Helen Wheatley, Rachel Moseley, and Helen Wood (2012) seems to have gone in the same direction, especially their Pop-Up TV shop.

## Television Is the New Cinema

**AvdO:** Some television scholars have claimed that so-called quality television from the heyday of HBO onward added considerably to the mainstream storytelling practices in television, adding complexity in terms of characters



and narrators, plot lines, story twists, multilayered narrative structures, and the like. As a result, viewing practices changed, as did the audiences that television was able to attract after the 1990s, as Jason Mittell has argued in his essay on “narrative complexity” (Mittell 2006). The changes on the production side and in the television series themselves, as well as the audience responses he observed, were not strictly an American phenomenon. As to the audience: HBO series have been watched worldwide and viewers have responded to them, often on fan pages. Would you say that these changes in storytelling and viewing practices have affected mainstream television’s audiences in some way? If so, are there indications that this affected the ways in which viewers watch mainstream television today? Have they perhaps “gone meta”?

**JE:** The development of multistranded narration dates back to *HILL STREET BLUES* (1981-1987), which is discussed in Todd Gitlin’s *Inside Prime Time* ([1983] 2000) and the subsequent work of Stephen Bochco, David E. Kelley and others (e.g., *NYPD BLUE*, 1993-2005). This was broadcast TV’s first moment of responding to the growth of new forms of suppliers: the beginning of the age of availability as I put it (in *Seeing Things*). Others (e.g., Henderson 2007) have identified this tendency as a “soapisation” of television drama, with the development not only of multiple plots and general sophistication but also story strands hanging over from episode to episode, sometimes disappearing and reappearing some time later, as I demonstrated in a short essay on *NYPD BLUE* (Ellis 2007). This was a development of television narration that exploited the regular episode pattern and was intended, from a business perspective, to develop customer loyalty. Creatively, it allowed greater character and storytelling sophistication in a way that fitted with the increasingly fragmented patterns of US network broadcasting.

It is interesting that HBO borrowed this newly developed form and continued using it, despite its lack of commercial breaks. Even more interesting was that subsequent nonlinear on-demand enterprises like Netflix have made this kind of narrative TV the cornerstone of their bid for world domination. It is a more industrial form of television production requiring teams of writers, as the Danish experiment with writers’ rooms has also proved (Redvall 2013). This development has provided problems for some TV cultures more used to the cult of the individual writer, as in the UK. It is impossible to think of Dennis Potter in a writers’ room, of course; but a younger writer such as Paul Abbott (*SHAMELESS*, *STATE OF PLAY*, *NO OFFENCE*) has experimented with team writing to develop and extend his initial series formats.

Generally, multistranded drama is a form of confident and expansive narration that has become relatively general for high-end television fiction.

This creates a class of fiction that is quite distinct from the form of the classical feature film, and has more in common with the three-decker novels of the nineteenth century (many of which, not uncoincidentally, were also first issued in weekly episodes). The multistranded narrative allows for many more incidental and seemingly accidental “in between” moments of a narrative, allowing writers to explore more of the implications and by-ways of the scenario than would be possible within a tighter feature-film format. I would say the multistranded narrative offers a very different kind of complexity from that of the puzzle film or the “complex” film. You could say that it exhausts more of the possibilities of the characters, situations, and themes. That it incorporates more of the feel of how everyday events take place, in a rather meandering way, always already embedded in a much larger set of happenings and concerns that the characters actually share, with events repercussing on one another. This is conveyed in a TV drama such as *HAPPY VALLEY* (2014- ), where an awful lot goes on that is not really relevant to the plot, but which is crucial to the state of mind of the main characters, and therefore how they deal with the events thrown at them by the main plot.

### The “Less Waste” Storytelling Model

**AvdO:** Many nineteenth-century novels were first published in the newspapers, piece by piece, as serials or *feuilletons* as they were called in the French newspapers, although this term has acquired different meanings in other cultures. In his 2006 book *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, David Bordwell argued that a wave of complex narratives emerged after the major popular success of *PULP FICTION* in 1994, although he also noted that twice before, Hollywood had seen such a wave: between 1940 and 1955; and from the mid-1960s till the early 1970s. The third wave, from 1994 onward, Bordwell attributes to product differentiation between independent filmmakers. In her 2006 introduction to a special double issue of *Film Criticism* on Complex Narration, Janet Staiger (2006) argued along similar lines: that among the “torrent” of complex narratives, *product differentiation* was important, especially facing the competition from quality television series, but also given the “manipulability” of a film’s linear flow through DVDs’ random access, which was also discussed by Laura Mulvey in her chapter on the “possessive viewer” in *Death 24x a Second* (2006). You have discussed the differences between cinema and television on a number of occasions, for instance in “Cinema and Television: Laios and Oedipus” (Ellis 1998). How

do you view the development of complexity within the context of quality television?

**JE:** Quality TV has a lot to do with the narrative complexity and character development (particularly of secondary characters) that serial space allows. But it is also a matter of the level of investment in production values ... in the creation of a complex and believable diegetic world that is inhabited by these characters. This costs money. And, as John Caldwell has pointed out in *Televisuality* (1995), high-end fiction in the US comes with the development of distinctive “looks” for the big drama series of the 1990s. This was a time when linear TV could command huge financial resources because of its concentration within a relatively small number of suppliers: the main television networks.

Things have changed economically since then, with many more ways of accessing and financing television but, once again, we are experiencing (and some say more than ever) a boom in TV drama/fiction series production. There are several factors contributing to this. One is the continuing storytelling crisis in the Hollywood fiction film, where big-budget cinema has seen little or nothing new for the best part of two decades, and middle-range narrative films have become increasingly difficult to finance and get made. “Television is the new cinema” is a regular refrain from a certain type of director and writer (such as Mike Figgis in Britain) and was even the subject of a *New Yorker* debate in 2012 (Remnick et al. 2012). Television fiction is also the new cinema because it is in some instances commanding feature film budgets. This was the infamous claim made for the Netflix series *THE CROWN* (2016- ). It offers good creative economy: why waste good characters and scenarios on one self-contained text, when you can stretch them over eight or even eighty episodes? Why waste money on promoting a new concept when the old one still works? In this sense, *THE CROWN* has even more finance than a medium budget feature film, because all the money shows on the screen, rather than the huge share of a feature film budget that goes toward marketing. Even Hollywood has tried to emulate this new “less waste” storytelling model by making its series of superhero movies. But the longest series of feature films so far is the Bond series, weighing in at a current 26 movies since 1962 – about the same as the average season of *NYPD BLUE* or *GREY’S ANATOMY* (2005- ).

In television, the current fiction boom is also fuelled by new entrants into the market, some of which, like Netflix, aim to be global disruptors. Netflix is in many ways the Uber of television. That’s a different argument, but the aggressive presence of Netflix, Amazon, and the others, accessing different forms of finance than traditional TV, has increased the sheer amount of quality drama being produced at the moment.

**AvdO:** What changes in the forms or genres of stories currently being told on TV do you observe, if indeed any?

**JE:** The main change is that television drama storytelling tends to be made for a longer period of active consumption than previously. It has less “currency.” Some of the role of what was once “for the moment” TV drama has now been taken by narratively driven reality and challenge shows. Drama is pretty explicitly constructed now for “boxset” viewing, for binge-watching, or watching in the user’s own time and convenience.

### Television Viewing Is the New Cinema Viewing

**AvdO:** In “Cinema and Television: Laios and Oedipus,” you argued that “[t]elevision narration learned more from Joseph von Sternberg than it did from Howard Hawks or John Ford. Television narration has a certain fetishism about it: it is condemned to repeat rather than to move forward” (Ellis 1998, 131-132). Do you still take this view?

**JE:** This is a complex and shifting situation, where it is dangerous to make huge generalizations in the way that I did in *Visible Fictions* back in 1982. The increase in television production values has had a pronounced effect, combined with the greater control that users now have over how they consume television. Even in 1982, when I tried to distinguish between the different visual regimes of television and cinema using the idea of glance versus gaze, I was careful to say that television could well support (and did support) much more sustained forms of concentrated “gazing” just like cinema. Huge screens, high definition, and personal control over scheduling have all brought us to a situation where “television viewing is the new cinema viewing” – but then cinema viewing has also changed greatly over this period.

There have been other developments too which have complexified how television tells its stories. The key TV form of the situation comedy has also changed in a narration-driven direction. Sitcom has long been the least “current” of TV genres: it is the one genre where repeats (a much-hated practice in the days of linear TV) were always tolerated, and often even welcomed. Now sitcoms, under the influence of US sitcoms, have begun to incorporate narrative developments and substantial changes in the scenario and the places of characters. Take the US sitcom *MODERN FAMILY* (2009 to present, 9 seasons so far) as an example. The child actors grow up; their characters change; they pass through the education system, etc. Their anchoring character flaws remain, still motivating the comedic scenarios and

providing the eternal conflicts. But this is sitcom where time elapses over a series, and characters live with the consequences of their previous actions in a way that was not the case for earlier iterations of the sitcom genre.

**AvdO:** Would you say that there is a difference in terms of the themes surfacing for a “working through” in complex television and mainstream television today?

**JE:** As is clear, I don’t make a distinction between complex and mainstream television. The mainstream is very often more complex than it first appears.

**AvdO:** Concerning the practices of viewing television today: how important are recent changes in TV as an apparatus or a setup (or the *dispositif* as theorized in film studies) for watching TV in the home situation? Do you think there have been significant changes in home viewing practices created by new technologies such as large screen, HDTV, and so on?

**JE:** The main change on the production side is the breaking of the single mechanism of linear TV as the sole form of delivery. Linear TV still remains dominant in most markets, and the single most important source of TV program production. But there are disruptive challengers at work even in that area.

In addition to linear TV, we have user-driven online TV provision, some of it provided by the traditional suppliers of linear TV, “the broadcasters.” They allow users to access a defined amount of material by streaming for a defined amount of time. There is very little on offer that is the equivalent of the DVD, something that you can download for good. So the mechanism is still a temporary one ... you get the stuff when they allow you to have it. It is still essentially the same mechanism as linear broadcast TV: the offer is “you can have it when we say you can have it.” The only difference is that the time of availability is stretched out for a few weeks or months. Programs still disappear, or are unavailable, as anyone who teaches TV well knows, and consumers are increasingly beginning to find out. It’s all right if you belong to the generations for whom *FRIENDS* (1994-2004) is a comfort blanket, but pretty much anything else disappears after most of its market value has been nearly exhausted.

In terms of the setup that users may choose today, streaming or time-limited downloading allows people to watch TV material on any available screen (smartphone, tablet, PC), and anywhere where there is an electricity supply to top up batteries (on public transport, in the bath, on the beach, at work, while watching linear TV, while on Facebook, etc.). The phenomena of split and dispersed attention that I tried to capture with the ideas of “glance” and “gaze” in *Seeing Things* still seem to apply in this new situation. In fact, the new forms enable dispersed attention even more. And so we continue to

see forms of TV which build into themselves the expectation of dispersed attention watching. The regular recapitulations of most reality shows are a good example of this. Constructed initially to deal with frequent commercial breaks, they have proved ideal for coping with the dispersed and interrupted attention that is equally an aspect of the new “view anywhere” culture.

The real problem in this new *dispositif* is that of choice (from the viewer’s perspective) and the management of consumer choice (from the supply side). Linear TV schedules are a very good way of managing supply and demand: they offer a relatively manageable supply of new material, which will instantly gain a certain cultural currency. You “hear about” new TV, and people are talking about new TV, both in other media outlets and socially. But when it comes to choosing something in the new *dispositif* or mechanism of nonlinear supply, the choice is both daunting and disappointing. The interfaces offer brief descriptions that all sound the same, because they leave out the accidentals and the incidentals that provide much of the pleasure of fiction. They arrange into genres which are very generic. They attempt to learn who you are, and tailor their offer to you, without seeming to understand that entertainment is as much about escaping who you are and what you have done, rather than about confirming those aspects of the self. And finally, there is just too much stuff to handle. This is also the reason why so much is taken away from consumers after a while. In theory, digital television archives can allow endless backlists, but in practice this is not the case. The abundance cannot be handled by consumers because it would be a chaotic abundance. Choice management (both for providers and for users) is a new problem and it is proving extremely difficult to solve.

And to illustrate further just some of the many choices presented to the consumer and some of the related problems looming for the broadcasters, the new *dispositif* also brings new problems in terms of image size, shape, and definition. Something made for HD widescreen viewing on a premium-price TV will also be watched on a PC or a handheld device, and so has to be decipherable and pleasurable on all these scales and shapes. Equally, within the industry, the question of file formats is a major headache. There are over a hundred delivery formats in current use across the world for different outlets and platforms. Ensuring that quality (image and sound quality, that is) is not overly compromised in format transfer is a continuing problem. This kind of problem replicates the old one of broadcast TV: what you send out is not necessarily what the audience will be seeing on their individual TV or phone or tablet screens, all of which are set up differently (just as individual analog TV all differed). In reality, the TV *dispositif* still remains rather less clear and perfect than as it is often idealized by both industry

leaders and academics. It is a rather messy and compromised thing, and so, from a technological point of view, most of what is made remains within the “safe area” of what is guaranteed to work ... just as it was in the analog era.

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## 11. The Single Shot, Narration, and Creativity in the Space of Everyday Communication

*Roger Odin*

One of the most surprising developments in the recent evolution of cinema is the inscription of filmic language as an *operator* in the *space of everyday communication*. The *space of everyday communication* refers to interactions with communicative intent between ordinary people (including with oneself) about the ordinary affairs of everyday life. What is of interest here is when filmic language is used to communicate common interests, what happens when nothing is happening or, according to Georges Perec, “what happens every day, and comes around every day, the banal, the everyday, the obvious, the ordinary, the ultra-ordinary, the underlying noise, the habitual” (1975, 253).

It immediately becomes clear that in this field, the single shot is paramount. To say that in this context there is hardly time or opportunity to edit seems inadequate as an explanation. It seems truer to recognize that the situation puts me in a position where making anything other than a single shot would seem inappropriate. In ordinary spaces, the simple idea of cutting a shot to change the angle is problematic. It is a matter of positioning: the person who is filming feels the obligation to take responsibility for the spatial and temporal continuity of the event being showcased, since he or she belongs to this space and is conscious of the fact that he or she belongs to it. Here Bazin’s rule of “montage forbidden” finds its most appropriate application: “when what is essential to an event depends on the simultaneous presence of two or more aspects of the action, montage is forbidden” (1969, 127). This is exactly what happens in such cases. The person who is filming forms part of the system of relations. Therefore, there is great temptation to believe that we are seeing a return to the language of early cinema, a victory of “monstration” over narration.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that this way of describing the situation does not address what is really happening: in particular, it neglects the fact that those who create such shots have integrated (at least implicitly) the figures of filmic language, and the fact that cinema always has to do with narrativity (though not necessarily with storytelling) (Odin 2000, chap. 2). Nowadays, we can no longer film naively.



Fig. 11.1: Visiting grandparents by Skype.

Consider the following example: the classic scene of grandchildren visiting their grandmother. Using his smartphone, the grandson films the welcoming at the door and the embraces between people, moving closer to catch the words of welcome and polite greetings; then, without cutting, he enters the house and tracks the visitors into the living room; and still without cutting, he pans around the room before finishing with a close-up of a black-and-white family photograph on the wall. What we have here is clearly a mini-story and, more precisely, a sequence shot, complete with internal montage and complex camera movements.

More examples follow below. A man films himself while walking in a bumpy tracking shot. We experience the creative work of the cameraman as we see the close-up of his face, his eyes narrowed as he concentrates on the movements necessary to keep himself in the shot. At the same time, we discover the space in which he is walking, that is, the vast commercial centre of an Asian city. We cannot say this is a case of description; in fact, the shot makes us participate in the man's discovery of the space in which he is walking: this is clearly a case of first-person narration. Then, a couple is waltzing and filming themselves from above; the man holding the stick is watching it, while the woman watches him. The effect produced makes us lose our spatial bearings, and leads us to wonder: Will the man who is filming end up looking at his partner (which is indeed what happens)? The question

arises from a narrative reading of the shot by the spectator (who asks the question). The main difference between a selfie still (*monstrative*) and a video is that in the latter, a process of *narrativization* is often introduced. In *The Aesthetic Life*, Laurent Jenny writes:

How often my eye is caught by the picturesque display of one of those New York grocery shops run by Pakistanis that stay open day and night, offering a heterogeneous panorama of goods, ranging from biros to bouquets of flowers [...] mechanically, I take out my mobile phone ... and in order to see more, I find myself using the digital zoom to compare the effects of transparency between ice cubes and banana. Checking the result fills me with amazement. The subject has become totally unrecognizable, having turned into an undeniably cubist composition, from that marvelous period between 1908-12 [*sic*], when Braque and Picasso were teetering on the edge of abstraction. [...] The whole gives the impression that forms and colors have been crushed into a frame that contains them with difficulty and from which they want to escape. (2013, 89-91)

Here we are definitely discussing a special form of monstration which aims at the transformation of a trivial filmed object into an abstract artistic production. The monstration is narrativized by the impetus of the subject of enunciation (what Ricoeur [1984, 88-89] calls a “phrase of action”: the formula is “X does A, with such an aim, in such and such circumstances, etc.”). It is also important to note, however, that the pleasure of passing into abstraction is henceforth shared by a large number of people. Feeling somewhat disillusioned, Jenny notes that “What was once refined aesthetic practice has become a kind of democratic habitus” (2013, 69).

Another remarkable form of recourse to the single shot in ordinary space is provided by *GIFS* or *Vines* which create a “loop” effect.<sup>2</sup> Here it may seem that we have returned to the precinema era of the Zoetrope, the Praxinoscope, or the Kinetoscope, as Lev Manovich has suggested (2001, 264-268). However, the novelty is that everyone can produce these loops by using a simple application. Transformation is very clearly at the heart of these productions. It is not always narrative and can be confined to a repetitive movement (the play of light on a woman’s face; a colored carousel rotating in the night like a magic ring), but when it is, the effect is a triumph of surprise. The shift between the action shown and the loop effect (a fall from a skateboard which has been looped produces a guaranteed comic effect); the wait for a transformation that never comes, as when a glass is constantly filled with wine but the level never rises; or the deceptive wait, when a magician taps

his finger on the ace of hearts and we wait for the card to change but it turns out to be the magician who has changed into a large black man while the card stays the same. Of course, we find constructions such as these in early cinema. However, at that time, they were discoveries. Today, making a GIF or a Vine is one choice among many (as one might decide to create a *haiku* in poetry). We are now dealing with a genre.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that many of these shots exist only in the moment in which they are created: they are not recorded. Filmic language may be involved, but this is direct or live communication, as in some television programs. It might begin with a Skype call between a young couple and grandparents who are abroad. After a moment, the young man's voice says, "I'm going to show you something," and then, without any cut, the mobile phone is turned toward a television screen in the living room, on which appears a video showing a young child taking its first steps. The voice of one of the grandparents is heard, asking, "Are those his first steps?"; then the grandfather says that he is sorry that he cannot speak to Laleh, who is not there. Following this, another young woman calls Laleh on her mobile, and the grandparents are able to see her on the mobile of the young woman who is in contact via Skype, and who films her husband's mobile ... An Iranian student described this situation to me, which was a common occurrence in her family. In this case, narration passes through a combination of different devices; and it really seems to be a new way of telling or showing. In addition, it is also found elsewhere, outside everyday space, for instance in art installations, transmedia storytelling, and business communications.

Such shots are a sign of real inventiveness. More generally, according to D.W. Winnicott ([1970] 1986), they are a sign of our ability to "live creatively," retaining throughout our lives something which belongs to the earliest experiences of childhood: the feeling of being able to create a world. Subsequently, we could speak of *transitional creativity*.<sup>3</sup> It is enough to look at what people do to realize that there is a certain joy in the way the single continuous shot engages with/captures everyday life.

*Translated by Ian Christie*

## Notes

1. On the difference between “monstration” – literally “showing” – and narration, see Gaudreault (1987). (translator’s note).
2. Vine was a short-form video hosting service which users could use to share six-second-long looping video clips. The service was founded in June 2012, and acquired by Twitter in the same year, just before its official launch. GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format, is a bitmap image format introduced in 1987, especially suited to short animations.
3. In 1953, Winnicott introduced the term “transitional object” to describe those blankets, soft toys, and bits of cloth to which young children frequently develop intense, persistent attachments. He believed that such attachments represent an essential phase of ego development leading to the establishment of a sense of self. See Winnicott’s seminal work, *Playing and Reality* (1971).

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# **PART IV**

## **Practicalities**





## 12. Rewriting Proust

### Working with Chantal Akerman on *LA CAPTIVE* – A Dialogue

*Eric de Kuyper and Annie van den Oever*

On October 5, 2015, the widely renowned Belgian filmmaker, Chantal Akerman, took her own life. Her untimely death prompted an outpouring of sadness about the loss of an extraordinary filmmaker, who has been celebrated ever since her masterpiece *JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES* made her famous in 1975 at the age of 25.

The Belgian filmmaker, writer, and film scholar, Eric de Kuyper, who, like Akerman, had been living and working in Brussels at the time, met her for the first time in his capacity as film critic. As he recalled shortly after her death, that was in 1968: Akerman brought him her first film, *SAUTE MA VILLE / BLOW UP MY TOWN* (1968) after having been sent to see him by the filmmaker, André Delvaux “for good reasons. At the time I had a film program on Flemish Television (BRT), *DE ANDERE FILM / THE OTHER MOVIE*. I showed experimental films, underground movies, and other bizarre things. I was impressed by the direct spontaneity of the film as well as by the maker. So of course I showed the film [on Flemish Television]” (De Kuyper and Van den Oever 2015). At the time, Akerman struck him as being a very young girl, thinking that she was only 16 years old, although she was actually 18.

They not only became friends and remained so for most of her life, but they also worked closely together on several projects, including *LA CAPTIVE* (2000). De Kuyper made several films himself, including *NAUGHTY BOYS* (1984) and, more recently, *MY LIFE AS AN ACTOR* (2015). This dialogue reassesses within the personal context of their friendship, the writing projects they worked on together. Proust played an important role in their joint reading and writing, and this dialogue deals mainly with their joint work on Proust for *LA CAPTIVE*.

**Annie van den Oever:** You have been working on and off on Proust adaptations for film and the theater over many years. For instance, you adapted and translated *À la recherche du temps perdu* into Dutch (with Céline Linssen) for Ro-Theatre, which was turned into four evenings in the theater by the well-known Flemish director, Guy Cassiers. As an essayist and novelist, you wrote about Proust in your nonfiction work *Het teruggevonden kind* (the child rediscovered), in which you addressed the question of how different

writers wrote about and rediscovered their childhood years while writing fiction or nonfiction. In that book, Proust seems to have been a source of inspiration to you once again and, after working with Chantal Akerman on *LA CAPTIVE*, you adapted the script for the theater: *Les intermittences du coeur*. What made you want to work on the notoriously unfilmable Proust together?

**Eric de Kuypers:** Since her adolescence, Chantal was an obsessive reader – actually more than being a film buff. She discovered *À la recherche* when she was still at school, whereas I read it some years later (in 1971), initially because of her warm recommendation. At the time, she had no thought of making a film based on Proust. On the contrary, Chantal developed her own film oeuvre, alternating between fiction and documentary, and writing her own scenarios. A not-so-happy interlude was her project to adapt Isaac Bashevis Singer's two novels about nineteenth-century Jewish life in Poland, *The Manor* and *The Estate*. This would have been a big production, and needed Hollywood-scale participation. I worked with her on a script, which I think was quite impressive. However, the film was never made. She was rather uneasy about one aspect of the project: the historical background. She pretended not to have a "historical imagination," claiming that she could not "see the past."

**AvdO:** So what about the past in Proust, then?

**EdK:** When she asked me to work on an adaptation of Proust in 1999, I was rather surprised. Having just reread the work, with much more pleasure than the first time, I was curious to find out how she would approach this complex and labyrinthine novel, with its fabulous cast of characters, its rich evocation of a period and society and, above all, its intricate plot. Volker Schlöndorff made his Proust film *SWANN IN LOVE* in 1984 and Raoul Ruiz his *LE TEMPS RETROUVÉ* in 1999. Sadly, the Visconti-Pinter project was never realized.

**AvdO:** But you wanted to find out how she intended to approach Proust, already knowing what she liked and did not like in films in general?

**EdK:** Indeed. I went to the movies with Chantal a lot, at times when we were working and living together so, for instance, I could easily imagine how she would have reacted to a film like *INCEPTION* (2010). After ten minutes or so, she would have fallen asleep, waking up just ten minutes before the end. She would, however, have a clear opinion about the movie – in this case, probably something like: "I don't like the works by Escher ..." At the time, however, I thought, how strange that she would have wanted to make a film of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It was certainly one of the more complex literary works of all time and one about which so much has been written in all languages.

**AvdO:** Was she fascinated by Proust's complexity?

**EdK:** I don't think so. From the beginning, there was no doubt in Chantal's mind: much as she liked many episodes in the novel, and was fascinated by the many colorful characters, she only wanted to make the film about the relationship between Marcel and Albertine. More precisely, she wanted to work on the theme of "jealousy in a love affair." So, without any problem, she could rid herself of the historical context of Proust's novel.

**AvdO:** No "things past," then, in this film?

**EdK:** No things past, no "remembrance." From the start, this was to be a film in the present tense, and strictly chronological, which could be considered very "anti-Proustian."

**AvdO:** And what about the plot, if the film was meant to focus on the relationship between Marcel and Albertine?

**EdK:** In her fiction, Chantal was rarely interested in a plot. She thought of a film story as characters in specific situations and, of course, of characters in different locations. After all, she was also the very talented documentary filmmaker that we know, and her way of developing film narratives was always to work in the present, in the continuity of time. Flashbacks, she felt, were "obscene" or "unnatural." So, in *LA CAPTIVE*, the character of Marcel was central, and the object of his jealousy, Albertine, more or less secondary. As there was already a film called *LA PRISONNIÈRE* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1968), which is actually the French title of the novel that tells the story of Marcel and Albertine, Chantal chose an equivalent which is, perhaps, still more evocative: *LA CAPTIVE* – the captivated. This title also suggests the ambivalence of "captivation." Who is captivating whom?

**AvdO:** As you told me soon after Chantal Akerman's death, to your own surprise, writing the script proved quite easy.

**EdK:** Yes, it was, except for one passage, which I will come back to. We were also quite surprised at how good – meaning "how useful for an Akerman movie" – the original dialogue turned out to be. That's to say, it completely satisfied Chantal, in terms of how she wanted the tonality of *LA CAPTIVE* to be. It was rarely difficult to cut the written dialogue and, if necessary, add our own in a natural "Proustian" style! We felt like the writer himself, working on his manuscript (as we know from his own manuscripts and what he called his "*paperoles*"): erasing, adding, changing ... We were rewriting Proust, which is a curious and exciting experience.

**AvdO:** Rewriting? So this was not really a literary adaption?

**EdK:** It wasn't ... She liked dialogue, people who talk, but none of her films, and certainly not *LA CAPTIVE*, are what one could call "literary" in the way that, for instance, those of Marguerite Duras are. And psychological portraiture was not Chantal's thing either: she wanted the emotions to be

there, filling the context or, rather, emanating from the context: most of all from, and in, the rooms. Everyday life with a twist, one could say (as we might say of her JEANNE DIELMAN).

Therefore, is it not strange that this adaptation, which refused many of the Proustian devices is, in the end, so close to Proust's universe? This, even the most traditional Proustians have to admit, don't you think?

**AvdO:** *LA CAPTIVE* focuses on a very small part of *À la recherche*?

**EdK:** Yes – on a very small fragment of one part of *À la recherche*: magnifying it and then observing with the camera-lens what happens. Moreover, the novel itself does not have a real ending for the Marcel-Albertine relationship, which in a typical Proustian fashion, flows away ... and, we felt, not in the most satisfactory manner. The hesitations of the novelist did not seem useful for the conclusion of our movie. To end a film narrative is to affirm that “this is a movie.” An installation, or any other way of looking at a “movie,” never has the temporal closure that a film intended for viewing in a theater has.

Thus, the ending, not so much in terms of content (the dialogue) as in context and location, includes the most radical changes. The couple is in a kind of union-disunion state (compare this, for instance, with Rossellini's *VIAGGIO IN ITALIA*, 1954), on their way to Biarritz, where they will stay at the fabulous Hotel du Palais. After the enclosure of the Parisian apartment, it becomes a kind of road-movie.

**AvdO:** How was your joint work organized practically?

**EdK:** We rarely worked together on a script for more than two hours a day, in the morning. In the afternoon, Chantal wrote some scenes that we had discussed in our morning session. But all day long, during our cooking, shopping, reading, we never stopped thinking and talking about the film. During our daily chats, I reminded Chantal of *A STAR IS BORN* (George Cukor, 1954) where, near the end, through the reflections in the big windows, one sees James Mason swimming far away into the sea. I also told her that, when I was working for the cinémathèque in Amsterdam, I used to screen a short silent film, *ZWEIMAL GELEBT* (Max Mack, 1912), in which we see, in a very long shot, a woman rowing on a lake.

In *LA CAPTIVE*, it is Marcel who is seen rowing in such a way in the last shot, having failed to save Albertine from her – accidental or voluntary? – death by drowning. I used to screen that silent film accompanied by Rachmaninov's *The Isle of the Dead*, a piece that Chantal eventually used in her film.

So even if some ideas came from me as her cowriter, Chantal never allowed me to write them down. She was the writer. I want to admit this, not because I felt frustrated as a cowriter. On the contrary: it is rather exciting to

identify yourself with somebody else's imagination. In a way, it is like acting: becoming another character. I always think that I am there as cowriter, only to help the filmmaker I work with in making a script as rich and as close to their vision as possible. A cowriter is not a cofilmmaker; in fact, as a filmmaker, I make films my own way!

**AvdO:** You have already said that she was a writer.

**EdK:** The written word was the real basis of her filming, at least for her fiction. She only felt safe to embark on the shooting phase when the script was finished the way she wanted it: carefully written. For filming fiction, she needed text! This was not the case for her nonfiction films. I contrast this with another filmmaker whom I have worked with several times, the Swiss Jacqueline Veuve, who could not make her documentaries without careful research, which to my eyes, knowing her way of shooting and editing, was a purely academic exercise (well, she was an anthropologist). Chantal went into the making of her nonfiction, her documentaries, without any serious preparation: "*J'étais là; telle chose m'advint*" (I was there, and this happened to me). It was the French poet, Jean de la Fontaine, who said this, but it could be the programmatic saying of a journalist. Of course, for films such as *HOTEL MONTEREY* (1975), *NEWS FROM HOME* (1977), *SUD* (1999), *D'EST* (1993), the positioning of her camera-look was chosen with care. But she did not read and study dozens of books before shooting, like Jacqueline Veuve.

**AvdO:** When the script of *LA CAPTIVE* was finished, and the production under way, the perilous phase of casting Marcel and Albertine began ...

**EdK:** Chantal's choices were rather surprising. I could see why she wanted Sylvie Testud for Albertine, and I think it was the right decision not to have chosen a more glamorous actress. Indeed, Testud gives a very contemporary touch to Albertine. However, I had my doubts about Stanislas Merhar. His appearance is as far from the images of Proust/Marcel as one can imagine. For a start, he doesn't look like an intellectual ... But after seeing the film, I was totally convinced that her choice was right. Merhar had the behavior and appearance of a rich boy, spoiled, incapable of being immersed in a great love affair. His smoothness was in contrast to a tender fragility. Indeed, a more conventional actor would have taken us back to the past, the historical background of the novel. With the choice of Merhar and Testud, contemporaneity was there right from the start.

**AvdO:** You worked on other projects together, didn't you?

**EdK:** Apart from *LA CAPTIVE* and the Singer project, I worked with Chantal on other adaptations. Most of them were abandoned, like Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (later made by Todd Haynes as *CAROL*, 2015). We were not satisfied with the last part of the novel: we didn't know what to do with the child.

In my opinion, this problem was not solved by Haynes either. As for the adaptation of Colette's *Chéri* (which would have been coupled in our version with *La Fin de Chéri*), we completed a very satisfactory script, again in a contemporary setting, but had to stop because of problems with the rights, which happened to be sold already to Stephen Frears, as we found out; and his version of *CHÉRI* came out in 2009. All these years, when not working on her own fiction, or on documentaries and later installations, Chantal also regularly talked about her wish to work on "a Dostoevsky." I think Robert Bresson's *UNE FEMME DOUCE* (1969) shows that adapting Dostoevsky would not have been impossible for her. Bresson's film has a contemporary setting, too.

**AvdO:** And Joseph Conrad?

**EDK:** She worked on Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, which became the last fiction film she made, in 2011. I would like to add this. I already mentioned how writing was important to Chantal. May I say that her real, hidden ambition was to be a writer! All the years we worked together, I was impressed by her passion for the written word. I regularly told her that she should work in that direction, too. "I'm too lazy," she would say. Lazy? Well, for working on a novel one must have a kind of discipline that she perhaps did not have. One is on one's own as a writer. In filmmaking, however, the team functions much like a mechanic obliging the film director to keep going!

Maybe this was one of the reasons why her relationship with someone like Marguerite Duras, a writer and filmmaker, was always tense (although they had Delphine Seyrig as a mutual friend). Anyway, Akerman wrote two autobiographical texts: *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998) and *Ma mère rit* (2013).

**AvdO:** Did you also like her as a writer?

**EDK:** As a writer, I learned a lot from the way in which she wrote: "Just put it down like you are saying it." At the beginning of our friendship, I often wondered why her pictures were so good. "How do you do it?" I asked her. "You just click ..." In the same way, she taught me how to cook: you just do it! Always fresh and direct.

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## 13. Introduction to DICKENSIAN

### An Intertextual Universe?

*Ian Christie*

The characters in each of Charles Dickens's novels belong to that work alone. Each novel, from *The Pickwick Papers* to the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, has its own cast and range of settings – its distinctive “world.” But what if these worlds *did* overlap, creating a larger “Dickensian” universe in which characters might meet and jointly create new shared storylines? The result would go beyond Dickens and might be “Dickensian,” but would it be Dickens? As if to test this proposition, BBC Television commissioned a unique drama series in 2015, which drew on the popular dramatic skills of one of Britain's most experienced television scriptwriters and “showrunners,” to create a “Dickensian” universe across a twenty-part series.

But in what ways was this unique? From Dickens's own era, we can think immediately of Balzac's great *Comédie Humaine*, in which a range of characters recur in over ninety texts, some of them more than twenty times, and many others less frequently. We can also think of the great multipart or series novels of the twentieth century, which follow a small group of characters across a span of time, from Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* to Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Or, perhaps, the characters whose exploits are recounted in novels and stories which maintain a certain consistency of detail: in England, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, and Bertie Wooster with his servant, Jeeves, would be obvious candidates.

Early cinema would latch onto these established and widely translated favorites, and quickly translate them into screen series. Sherlock Holmes became the archetypal modern detective in a series of film adaptations from as early as 1900; while “Nick Carter” became an indefinitely extendible cypher for an American equivalent in print from 1886, and thereafter promiscuously on-screen, with no unique authorial obligations to maintain. The “franchise,” referring to a named (and copyrighted) character or milieu has, of course, become a staple of modern narrative entertainment. However, the case of DICKENSIAN (2015-2016) posed challenges over the issues of high/low culture, and the integrity of an author's work as originally conceived.

In this respect, it may be worth recalling the *Wars of the Roses* adaptation of Shakespeare's English history plays, first performed to wide acclaim by

the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1963. This involved reordering four of Shakespeare's plays dealing with conflict between the Lancaster and York dynasties, and included the interpolation of new verse by the adapter, John Barton. The result, both onstage and later in television adaptation, was widely considered to have revived the reputation of some of Shakespeare's least popular plays – by reshaping them into a new dramatic form. Interfering with the central figure in English literature is clearly a different matter from adapting Dickens, long regarded as a popular rather than canonic figure. But a broader view of literary and cultural history reveals that no authors have been immune to often drastic reshaping and adaptations of their work.

Should *DICKENSIAN* therefore be considered more the latest instance of this process of adapting classical authors to the formats and sensibilities of the era – like removing “brutality” from Shakespeare in the seventeenth century; or producing comic-book versions of literary classics in the twentieth century? Or did it represent a significant experiment in exploring and updating the “fictional universe” of a popular author? Or, as a product of the contemporary world of television fiction, was it closer to such series as *BLACK MIRROR* (2011- ), acknowledging its debt to the earlier Sci-Fi series *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* (1985-1989), anticipating the Sony/Amazon *ELECTRIC DREAMS* (2017- ) series, based on Philip K. Dick's stories?

Luke McKernan's essay on *DICKENSIAN*, which was developed from an original blog post, explores some of these issues, while also paying tribute to a rare, and so far more unique, experiment in “popular Dickensian soap-opera.” Is this a path still to be followed in television fiction?



## 14. The Lives of the Characters in DICKENSIAN

*Luke McKernan*

On Christmas Eve, sometime during the 1840s, in a warren of London streets, a number of people are facing crises in their lives. Amelia and Arthur Havisham have attended their father's funeral and have returned to their home, Satis House. Outside, the moneylender, Jacob Marley, scowls at the cheerful Mrs. Gamp, then sends a boy with a message to Fagin. He runs past Mr. and Mrs. Bumble as he does so. Elsewhere, Marley's business partner, Ebenezer Scrooge, passes by the Old Curiosity Shop, which has a notice saying it is closed owing to illness. Inside, a dangerously ill Little Nell is tended to by her grandfather and a bibulous Mrs. Gamp. At Scrooge and Marley's office, their assistant learns that there has been a deduction in his wages, but prompt payment of a loan is still expected of him. Sensing that he must move quickly to gain a financial advantage, Scrooge asks for the Old Curiosity Shop account. At Satis House, Amelia is comforted by her good friend, Honoria Barbary, whose hapless father is facing financial ruin. Arthur Havisham starts to plot against his sister, with an accomplice, Compeyson. In his den, Fagin tells the prostitute, Nancy, that she has an appointment with Jacob Marley that evening. She shivers with fear ...<sup>1</sup>

The opening episode of the British television series *DICKENSIAN* introduced viewers to the back stories of characters from Charles Dickens's novels. These stories then unfolded and intertwined over the series. The roots of *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and others were imagined as having come from a single narrative source, a journey by suggestion into the mind of Charles Dickens, reinventing his *oeuvre* as a Balzacian *Comédie Humaine*, with interlocking characters across the different novels, revealing a fully realized alternative world. The figure that initially pulls all these characters and their personal stories together is Jacob Marley. By the end of the first episode, we see that almost everyone has good reason to wish him dead, and then his body is found lying in an alley. The mystery of who killed him must then, of course, be investigated by Inspector Bucket, the detective from *Bleak House*.

*DICKENSIAN* was the invention of British television scriptwriter, Tony Jordan, creator or cocreator of such popular series as *HUSTLE* (2004-2012) and *LIFE ON MARS* (2006-2007). He is best known as the lead writer of nearly

three decades of the BBC soap opera *EASTENDERS* (1985- ). Jordan has written that his interest in Charles Dickens as source material began when he was invited to present an episode of the BBC series *THE SECRET LIFE OF BOOKS* (2014- ), on *Great Expectations* (Jordan 2014). The program explored Dickens's art through the eyes of an expert soap-opera writer: the serial nature of publication, the use of cliff-hangers, the interwoven personal stories, and the high appeal to a mass audience. Inspired by a sense of affinity, Jordan then set about writing *DICKENSIAN*, a twenty-part series of 30-minute episodes produced by his own Red Planet Pictures. The connection between Dickens and soap opera has been made on many occasions. Jordan set out to prove his case, but rather than adapt any of Dickens's works – as has often been done on British television – he would appropriate and mix aspects of them all. In the world of *DICKENSIAN*, Fagin (*Oliver Twist*) rubs shoulders with Scrooge (*A Christmas Carol*), Inspector Bucket (*Bleak House*) crosses with Bob Cratchit (*A Christmas Carol*), a fawning Mr. Bumble (*Oliver Twist*) plays host to Gradgrind (*Hard Times*), and Amelia Havisham (known only as “Miss Havisham” in *Great Expectations*: her first name is Jordan's invention) is best friends with Honoria Barbary (*Bleak House*). The three main narratives are the Marley murder, the Barbary bankruptcy, and the false wooing of Miss Havisham. However, several smaller stories unfold: the Bumbles' hapless attempts at social advancement, a romance between Peter Cratchit and Little Nell, and Sikes freeing Nancy from Fagin's control (*Oliver Twist*). In addition, there are many wry references to other parts of the Dickens canon: the orders for an unseen Mr. Pickwick being taken at the Three Cripples pub, Honoria working at Mantalini's dressmakers (as featured in *Nicholas Nickleby*), Uriah Heep named as Jagger's secretary (combining *David Copperfield* with *Great Expectations*), and *Oliver Twist* asking for more. It begins with *A Christmas Carol* (“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that”). It ends at the point where *Great Expectations* could begin, the jilted bride asserting that, from this point onward, time for her would stand still.

What could merely have been a clever intellectual exercise revealed itself to be an original and ingenious entertainment. You could see the delight in the actors' eyes at the quality of the writing and the piquancy of the situations in which they found themselves. It is arguable that twenty episodes was too long, with the series' structural logic torn between the endless unfolding of a soap opera and the expected conclusion of a time-limited narrative, the difference between what Robert C. Allen (1995) in his studies of the soap-opera form defined as open and closed serials (the various narratives are all resolved by the final episode, featuring Amelia

Havisham's disastrous wedding day). At its weakest, *DICKENSIAN* overplayed the obvious (in particular, the Miss Havisham strand). At its best, it was as good a television drama as Britain had ever known.

In particular, Episode 16, in which Honoria Barbary (played by Sophie Rundle) gives birth, aided only by her embittered sister, Frances (Alexandra Moen), was among the best 30 minutes of televised drama that this writer has ever seen. While previous episodes had criss-crossed over the series' different story strands in the usual soap-opera manner, this episode concentrated on the one story alone with remorseless intensity and extraordinary effect, from the panic leading up to the birth to the shock of the dilemma Frances puts herself in at the end of the episode (the outcome of which would be known only to those who had read *Bleak House*). In writing, pacing, performance, lighting, decorative detail, and use of our knowledge of the characters' pasts to create tension and force climax, this was a program to hold up as the best of what the medium can achieve. It was also a convincing argument for why literature belongs on the screen.<sup>2</sup>

It can often seem that we are growing bored of the classics, and must mangle them to sustain our jaded appetites. Sequels and prequels, modernizations, parodies, and revered characters battling with the living dead – as in *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES* (2016) – seem to express an ennui, an admission that no one has the patience to read novels any more, or else frustration at some great novelists not having written more than they did.

On its announcement, *DICKENSIAN* sounded as though it was going to be yet another example of this syndrome, a desperate stirring of the ingredients to try and come up with something new to attract ratings. Instead, it showed that there was life in these characters beyond that set down on the page by Charles Dickens – and that reimagining the classics need not be sacrilege, but can be insightful, and even necessary, when it is done well. It showed how characters on the page remain in our minds because they live convincing lives. Those lives can be sustained in other forms, where there is enough imagination and belief. Indeed, to sustain those convincing lives, it may be as important to reimagine such stories as it is to read them. We can no longer read past works as those in the past did, because we are different people (different in terms of outlook and our sense of time). Nevertheless, if those works' status as art is to endure, then reimagining them becomes an essential part of how we continue to tell them. This, however, does not mean Little Dorrit and the undead – it implies getting inside the mind of the author and plucking out something new along with the familiar. This is exactly what Tony Jordan and his team did: they visualized “the mind of Charles Dickens” – and, in doing so, recalled Robert William Buss's painting

*Dickens's Dream* (1875), which is well known in Britain and which showed the author surrounded by a phantasmagoric gathering of his "characters."<sup>3</sup>

DICKENSIAN was an artistic success, but audiences showed a mixed response. The first two episodes were broadcast on BBC One, separated by an hour, on December 26, 2015. The timing was completely appropriate, but thereafter the series suffered from erratic scheduling. The time slots of the episodes appeared to change each week, making it difficult for audiences to get into the program's routine in the same manner as they would with a conventional soap opera, which had clearly been the producers' intention.<sup>4</sup> This seems to have been caused partly by uncertainty on the part of the BBC as to how best to present the series, but also to some degree a consequence of waning audience interest early on. The first two episodes attracted an audience of 5 million and 4.3 million respectively (excluding later catch-up figures), but dropped steadily thereafter, down to two million by the time of the twentieth episode (Martinson 2016).

Every effort had been made to give the series a broad appeal. The production values were high, with a reported £10m [\$14m] being spent, including the construction of a large single-set boasting 27 two-storey buildings and a 90-meter [98yd] cobbled street that placed the Dickensian characters in close proximity to one another (Burrell 2015). The cast was particularly strong: Stephen Rea (Inspector Bucket), Tuppence Middleton (Miss Havisham), Anton Lesser (Fagin), Caroline Quentin (Mrs. Bumble), Pauline Collins (Mrs. Gamp), Omid Djalili (Mr. Venus) and Peter Firth (Jacob Marley) among them. The faces were as familiar as the characters.

Yet something, beyond the troublesome scheduling, did not quite work. Critics were, for the most part, generous with their praise, admiring the wit of the conception and the style of its realization. Still, some felt a nagging sense of an uncertainty of purpose, perhaps best expressed by Ben Dowell in *Radio Times*:

[T]he first and most obvious question to ask is this: they may have the same names and look like they are described in the books but who are these people? Can they really be said to be Dickens characters? The great Victorian novelist invented these richly drawn characters to fit into the novels he wrote. He was a storyteller, first and foremost, someone who wrote episodic narratives driven by the unstoppable force of his ingeniously-crafted [*sic*] plots. He populated his books with amazing characters, of course, but tearing them away from their stories is to essentially denude them of their essential life and being. [...] If I am quite honest I couldn't see the point of this exercise which failed to teach us

anything new about any of Dickens' characters, or allowed them to develop in any meaningful way. (2015)

For Dowell, the problem was that DICKENSIAN wasn't Dickens. The characters existed within the fictions that had been originally created for them. They did not have, or could not have, exterior lives. The exercise was clever, but added nothing to Dickens's expression of those people, whose reason for being existed solely within his pages.

While this is an understandable line of argument, it is fundamentally false. Writers do not own the characters that they create, nor the works in which such characters may be found. Of course, in a legal sense, such ownership may exist. Charles Dickens raged against the American "pirates" who republished or adapted his original creations, in the absence of any international copyright legislation (such as was first introduced in 1886 with the Berne Convention). Copyright law identifies particular rights of ownership that lie with the originator of a creative work, but it is a different matter when one considers how people read. Ownership of the play of a creative work upon the imagination lies with any individual reader (or viewer), and more than stories, we feel that we own the characters. If the author has imbued any life in them at all, then our imaginations must flesh out what is presented to us on the printed page. We want to know what will happen to them; we want to know where they came from. They lead convincing lives.

This is the sentimental tendency against which the critic, L.C. Knights, famously railed in his, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* (1933). A great work of fiction, Knights argued, is not driven by the personal but by the thematic. Characters exist inasmuch as they support the governing ideas. Speculation on their lives beyond that which was the express purpose of the artist is fatuous, as critical enquiry. But that does not stop the reader from such speculation, nor the writer who might want to capitalize on such enthusiasm. Tony Jordan expressed such enthusiasm when he considered Miss Havisham:

I have always been fascinated by the character of Miss Havisham – this mad woman in a wedding dress and veil, sitting at the table, jilted on the day of her wedding, an event she found so traumatic that she never took off her wedding dress. We've all seen that image and we all know it, so I was interested in how she got to be that woman. What was she like as a young woman and in love? Did she laugh? Who was she? What did she care about? So I decided that was one of the first stories I wanted to tell,

it was exciting because nobody had ever seen the young Miss Havisham before – it was then that I knew I had something. (2015a)

Prequels and sequels to the classics, from Mary Cowden Clarke's series *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (a prequel to *Jane Eyre*), to the mini-industry that is the Jane Austen sequel novel (such as Emma Tennant's *Pemberley: Or Pride and Prejudice Continued*), all betray the urge to extend our belief. The film industry is sustained by sequels and prequels that recapitulate narrative elements and particular characters that a mass audience will pay to see once again.

The digital era has created a thirst for the extension of narrative and character, and provided the means to achieve this online, for example, fan fiction, in which the fans of a creative work publish their own stories developed out of the original characters or settings. Some authors have embraced this development of their imaginative originals (J.K. Rowling), while others have reacted angrily against it (Anne Rice, George R.R. Martin). Either way, the evidence is clear: stories and characters have lives of their own. We appropriate them through our affection. Once you have asked how many children Lady Macbeth had, someone will want to know the answer – and someone will set out to provide that answer. Lady Macbeth's other life matters.

Various commentators have suggested a link between DICKENSIAN and fan fiction, though Tony Jordan denies any connection. However, the fundamental motivation was the same. In the same interview, Jordan says that "it had to be about taking ownership of the characters, after all Dickens never wrote a scene between Scrooge and Fagin, or between a young Miss Havisham and Martha Cratchit, but I had to do just that" (2015b). The compulsion lay in that sense of ownership. This derives, fundamentally, from the sense of entitlement that the sharing of content over the Internet has engendered. It is not just about the assertion of a postcopyright age where former boundaries no longer apply. It is about a release of the imagination created by opportunity. The age of the copy is producing stories that must exist because they are copies.

Dickens himself was said to have appropriated characters, turning people that he met into figures on a page. It is a common accusation, but except for certain *romans à clef*, it is a misleading one. Peter Ackroyd writes of this tendency:

Dickens used certain salient characteristics of the people whom he met or knew, but there are very few instances when he simply transcribed what

he had seen and heard onto the page. The novelist's art is not of that kind: Dickens perceived a striking characteristic, or mood, or piece of behaviour, and then in his imagination proceeded to elaborate upon it until the "character" bears only a passing resemblance to the real person. In his fiction Dickens entered a world of words which has its own procedures and connections, so that the original "being" of any individual is subsumed into something much larger and generally much more conclusive. (1990, 65)

As with Dickens and real life, so it was with Tony Jordan and Dickens. Salient characteristics have been appropriated to build a fresh creative work. DICKENSIAN is not Dickens; it is Dickensian. It takes ownership of the characters and settings to make sense of them in a world of the new writer's invention.

In an essay on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, V.S. Pritchett considered the meaning of the word "Dickensian" in relation to style and characters. Arguing that much of what is understood as Dickensian in style is an inheritance from Sterne, Smollett, and Richardson, Pritchett looked instead at Dickens's people:

[T]he distinguishing quality of Dickens's people is that they are solitaires. They are people caught living in a world of their own. They soliloquise in it. They do not talk to one another; they talk to themselves. The pressure of society has created fits of twitching in mind and speech, and fantasies in the soul. [...] In how many of that famous congress of "characters" – Micawber, Barkis, Moddles, Jingle, Mrs. Gamp or Miss Twitterton: take them at random – and in how many of the straight personages, like Jasper and Neville Landless in *Edwin Drood*, are we chiefly made aware of the individual's obliviousness of any existence but his own? (1998, 85)

For Pritchett, Dickens's characters are "all out of touch and out of hearing of each other, each conducting its own inner monologue," a disassociation he identifies as having its roots in "the fright of childhood" (1998, 90). Quite the opposite is the case with DICKENSIAN. In this world, which is the world of the soap opera, existence is defined by the individuals' relations to others. They form an organic piece, no element of which has meaning except for the way in which it impacts on the fate of the other elements. The rapid cutting from one story element to another reinforces the sense of characters bound together by an overarching narrative whose direction, indeed existence, they do not sense – for the most part. Soap operas are sustained dramatically by the idea of the community that they portray, even if Tony Jordan's hugely

successful *EASTENDERS* regularly challenges the idea of community as something that is still valid in modern times (the characters, particularly in the early years of *EASTENDERS*, would speak of better, more communal times in the past – maybe as far back as the 1840s) (Geraghty 1995). If there is a childhood root in this to complement that identified in Dickens by Pritchett, then it is the urge to belong. However, this does not lie in the writer but in the readership, who yearn to own what they see.

There are moments when a realization of community and shared destiny are made apparent, most notably when Nancy (played by Bethany Muir) sings at the Three Cripples, on occasions where many of the leading characters have gathered in that same place (a pub, the Queen Vic, is the communal centerpiece of *EASTENDERS*). This occurs at the end of Episode 10 and, especially, at the end of the final episode, where her rendition of “I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls” touches every heart within, the camera panning from face to face, as all set aside private troubles and find themselves caught up in the collective sentiment. Beyond, but at the same time, Miss Havisham weeps at the table with her wedding feast; Arthur Havisham, his selfish plans in ruins, prepares to commit suicide; the ghostly voice of Marley is heard by Scrooge; and Oliver Twist is taken in by the Artful Dodger. No one, we learn, can exist alone.

The fatal flaw of *DICKENSIAN* was that it could not escape its cleverness. It wanted to tell a set of good stories, through engrossing characters, in a particularly televisual form. It did so, most successfully, but all the while it was inviting the viewer to see how ingeniously the pieces of the puzzle had been put together. There was an expectation, at least to a degree, that the viewer would be familiar with the novels, so that they would recognize the people involved and have a sense of their fate. Prequels can only be read with an understanding that their conclusion must be to arrive at the starting point of a story with which we are familiar. But despite countless film and television adaptations, and the familiarity of certain characters, the mass audience’s grasp of why these characters came together in the way that they did was probably not all that Jordan might have hoped for.

Paradoxically, what hampered *DICKENSIAN* was its allegiance to Dickens. No matter how widely the writer’s imagination might range, the ending could only be to return to Dickens. The ownership conferred by originality never goes away. So it was that, despite good reviews and a fervent body of fans, *DICKENSIAN* was not recommissioned by the BBC. This is surely a great loss, because there was every promise of Jordan’s creation seeking out endings beyond what were Dickens’s starting points. Jordan had storylined sixty episodes, pointing out that Dickens had created over 2,000 characters and so far he had only used around twenty five (Burrell 2015). Perhaps several



such works of art remain unmade. It is as tragic as a burned manuscript, a what-might-have-been that could still be reality if only someone was braver, and the schedulers more consistent. In some alternative universe, DICKENSIAN Series 2 and 3 can, perhaps, be seen, bringing delight at their ingenuity and pleasure at how they extend the art of a great novelist through characters that are owned by all of us. But not in this one.

## Notes

1. This essay has been developed from a 2016 blog post, "Dickensian," on my personal site: <http://lukemckernan.com/2016/04/22/dickensian>.
2. Britain has a long tradition of debate, and scholarship, on the subject of literary adaptation for television. For an overview, see Cardwell (2002).
3. This painting, often reproduced, now belongs to the Dickens Museum in Britain. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Dickens#/media/File:Dickens\\_dream.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens#/media/File:Dickens_dream.jpg). A nineteenth-century American wood engraving echoes the contemporary belief that Dickens's characters possessed a life of their own: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Dickens#/media/File:Charles\\_Dickens\\_characters.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens#/media/File:Charles_Dickens_characters.jpg).
4. The original broadcast dates (all BBC One) were: Episode 1: tx. December 26, 2015; 2: tx. December 26, 2015; 3: tx. December 27, 2015; 4: tx. December 27, 2015; 5: tx. January 1, 2016; 6: tx. January 6, 2016; 7: tx. January 7, 2016; 8: tx. January 13, 2016; 9: tx. January 14, 2016; 10: tx. January 21, 2016; 11: tx. January 22, 2016; 12: tx. January 27, 2016; 13: tx. January 28, 2016; 14: tx. February 4, 2017; 15: tx. February 5, 2017; 16: tx. February 11, 2016; 17: tx. February 12, 2016; 18: tx. February 18, 2016; 19: tx. February 19, 2016; 20: tx. February 21, 2016.

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## 15. Music Structuring Narrative – A Dialogue

*Robert Ziegler and Ian Christie*

**Ian Christie:** You've worked with film music from a very wide range of periods – in fact, all the way from resurrecting historical scores such as Camille Saint-Saëns's *L'Assasinat du duc de guise* (1908) and Pietro Mascagni's *Rapsodia Satanica* (1917), to conducting contemporary scores, such as those by Jonny Greenwood for the films of Paul Thomas Anderson. Along the way, you have also presented film music by many of the Hollywood greats in concerts. Obviously, the role of film music has changed considerably across the “sound period” as a whole since the early 1930s, but do you think it has also changed significantly since, for instance, the time of Bernard Herrmann – who actually wrote for Welles, Hitchcock, and Scorsese? Do modern filmmakers expect different things from composers in terms of making their films “work” as narratives?

**Robert Ziegler:** Technology has moved forward rapidly since Herrmann's time – everyone now has access to synchronization equipment, orchestral samples, and an infinite supply of sound designs to make a sound track. In fact, there is much more sound design (which is, in effect, organized noise) in sound tracks than there used to be – sometimes to the exclusion of conventionally composed music. There are also, for both commercial and aesthetic reasons, a great deal more pop songs, which give the audience an immediate indicator of the mood and aim of a film (see Scorsese and Tarantino, for example). However, I think the role of music in making narratives convincing hasn't really changed all that much. So much depends on how the director uses the music.

I recently conducted a live performance accompanying a screening of Scorsese's *TAXI DRIVER* (1976), which was Herrmann's last score in 1976. The most instructive moment was in the opening sequence, when the martial chords played by the brass and percussion underscore the scenes of the taxi emerging from the smoke rising from the threatening New York streets. Then, on a cut to a close-up of the driver's (De Niro's) eyes, the music switches to a warm and sensual sax solo accompanied by lush strings. In a nutshell, Herrmann and Scorsese have established the film's singular tension: one man trying to follow his heart in a city without mercy – a cliché perhaps, but one presented here with great drama and finesse.

The widespread use of “temp tracks” is another not always welcome innovation since Herrmann’s day. These are generic accompaniments added while a film is being edited, which can lead to certain tracks being wedded in the director’s mind to the film being made, as well as suggesting a preexisting style for the composer to which to conform.

**IC:** I wonder how many viewers realize the effect of such widespread use of this practice. I came across an online video essay by Tony Zhou in which he asks a cross-section of people whether they can hum or whistle anything from a Marvel film – and none of them can (Liptak 2016). Zhou quotes the composer, Danny Elfman, on how directors become so attached to their temp music that they ask composers to do more of the same. Therefore, he argues that temp music tends to make films all sound the same and bland.

**RZ:** Well, today directors can ask composers to write music “on spec” before the film has been made, or at least edited. Sometimes it will be used, and sometimes not. This isn’t all bad, but it would have been an unthinkable luxury in Herrmann’s day.

I’ve conducted a few new scores for Jonny Greenwood and Paul Thomas Anderson. Paul asks Jonny for a lot of musical ideas very early in the production process, sometimes before shooting has started. A great deal of music is written and remains unused, but not unlistened to, and there’s a lot of groping toward a particular mood or sound that goes on until Paul feels happy with it. This happened on both *THERE WILL BE BLOOD* (2007) and, more recently, *PHANTOM THREAD* (2017). So, depending on your point of view, this could be thought of as a deeper collaboration between composer and director, or not.

These sorts of demands didn’t exist in Herrmann’s day (and I doubt he would have submitted to them even if they had!), but they are increasingly common now. Again, digital technology has a great deal to do with this. When you can edit and cut and fiddle with a film (especially a technically complex film), you need the music to be updated constantly. On a technically challenging film, such as the *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* trilogy (2001-2003), this was very much the case. As Peter Jackson continued to edit and polish the film with its extensive special effects, Howard Shore constantly had to adjust the score.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in short, the role of music in supporting and structuring narrative hasn’t changed all that much. You can try to change a mood or create suspense without music, but it’s much easier and more effective to use it. They make great partners as (unlike other art forms, such as painting and literature) they both exist in time.

**IC:** “Supporting and structuring narrative”... But, of course, narratives have changed too, with much less well-defined narrative arcs, use of “dead time” and wide variations of pace that would have been unthinkable in the 1940s

and 1950s, and even later. I want to float an idea that might once have helped us to make sense of this relationship, to see whether it makes sense to you as a practicing film musician.

Erwin Panofsky, the great art historian, wrote an essay about “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures” in the early 1930s, and one of his key ideas was that there was a “principle of co-expressibility” governing the relationship between sound and image: “the sound cannot express any more than is expressed by visible movement” (1966, 21). (Of course, we have to remember that he was writing on the cusp of the transition to the Talkies, which included adapting the conventions of continuous live accompanying music and an incorporated score – which also had to leave the dialogue audible). In a nutshell, his idea was that intensity of image – like a close-up – required dialogue to be less prominent, and vice-versa.

I’m wondering whether Panofsky’s idea might also apply to the music/picture relationship. If the image is intense or busy, does music necessarily play a lesser role than when the image is quieter or less active?

**RZ:** That’s quite a broad assertion, though a very interesting one, that intensity of image requires less accompaniment of any kind. I think in a way, it supports the view that “pure” cinema is silent cinema – a director can, if he wants, tell a whole story using only pictures.

Certainly, if the image is very busy, music can be a distraction. You can find all sorts of exceptions to that rule but, in general, music functions best when it’s not commenting directly on the image. The crudest example would be “mickey mousing” the film, which refers to music that punctuates every detail of the action, as was often done for comic effect in cartoons. In fact, I believe that music is always at its best when it suggests an emotional component of the film, or plays with memory and anticipation.

I remember conducting a newly commissioned score for Hitchcock’s 1927 silent film *THE LODGER*.<sup>2</sup> There were very few crucial “hit points,” but if I were to miss one by a fraction of a second, it was *always* better to be early rather than late. A late “hit” immediately telegraphed a mistake to the audience, whereas an early one was accepted. This is because our senses are used to hearing something first, and then looking to see what it is, whether that’s a fire engine, a woman screaming, or an explosion. The ear is our early warning system. So, in film, it’s usually the soundtrack that tells us something is about to happen.

**IC:** I have another “case study” on which you might care to comment. Scorsese was obviously attached to the tradition of Hollywood scoring that Herrmann represented, and he had another of its last exponents, Elmer Bernstein, adapt the original Hermann score for his remake of *CAPE FEAR* in 1992. But when it

came to his epic *GANGS OF NEW YORK* (2002), having commissioned a score by Bernstein, he largely decided to drop this in favor of period-type pieces with a much simpler score credited to Howard Shore (Christie and Thompson 2003).<sup>3</sup>

**RZ:** I didn't know this, but it's another addition to the impressive list of composers who've had entire scores thrown out! In the end, the harsh truth is that it's always the director's film, and the composer can't really expect to write something that doesn't support the film with discretion. I remember an old arranger in LA saying that in film scoring, you should never start telling another story with the music. The audience can't take in two stories at once "unless they have two heads." Max Richter often refers to music as the amniotic fluid in which the film exists.

**IC:** That's an interesting metaphor: linking the process of a film's conception with its eventual public form. In his interviews about *GANGS*, Scorsese gave an account of the growth of his own musical taste as "a process of discovery." He described his interest in the roots of the blues, and how he had heard some traditional American folk music in a documentary by Alan Lomax, at the time he was making *RAGING BULL* (1980). He used to play fife and drum music repeatedly during the years when he was hoping to make *GANGS OF NEW YORK*, and so it must have become deeply wedded to his conception of this long-planned film – so that Bernstein would have seemed too "Hollywood," and Othar Turner and the Rising Sun Band now open and close the film! I notice that Richter also said about a recent score, for the Western *HOSTILES* (2017), "the challenge is really how to calibrate what you're doing and not telling the audience what to think ... judging how much to load up on to each moment in terms of what the music is doing" (Richter 2018).

In terms of "not trying to do too much," I was also struck by a recent review of Martin McDonagh's *THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI* (2017), where the reviewer commented on Carter Burwell's score being less distinctive than those he had written for the Coen brothers' films. But from my own viewing, the music in *THREE BILLBOARDS*, while seemingly unobtrusive, performs a wide range of functions, through quotation, punctuation, and other kinds of "shaping."

**RZ:** I saw *THREE BILLBOARDS* as well and know Carter Burwell's work. He is a great example of someone who is very precise and writes the minimum amount of music a scene requires – which he did very well in this film. In fact, he's also good at explaining what he does, and this is what he's said about working on *THREE BILLBOARDS*:

Because there are so many fully-drawn [*sic*] characters in the story, I considered an approach used by Ennio Morricone in his Spaghetti Western

scores (which I love) – giving each character a distinctive musical signature that stays with them even as their alliances shift. But ultimately this seemed too arch, and some major characters, like Sam Rockwell's, simply don't have any scored scenes until late in the film. [...] In the end I concentrated on Mildred. There's a soulful theme for Loss, which motivates everything in the film. There's a stomp-and-clap march when she goes to War. And there's a theme for Death, which is never far away. As the story and the relationships develop, the themes intertwine until, by the last couple of reels, they're barely recognizable. (Burwell 2017)

**IC:** Burwell is clearly interested in how music conditions our responses, not only to fiction but also to TV news. And he's put a great discussion between himself, Joel and Ethan Coen, and a neuroscientist, Aniruddh Patel, online, which touches on the issue of temp music “nudging” scores toward conformity (Burwell et al. 2013). But Patel also shows, quite graphically, by means of neuroimaging, just how much of the brain is activated by purely instrumental music, let alone when it's part of the whole sensory input that is a film. As he shows, music plays a major part in organizing spatial awareness, emotions, anticipation and, in fact, the whole apparatus of narrative. Well worth watching!

## Notes

1. Robert Ziegler conducted Howard Shore's score for *THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY* (2012).
2. A new score for *THE LODGER* was commissioned by the British Film Institute from Joby Talbot in 1999, and widely performed by Robert Ziegler, conducting the Matrix Ensemble. For Talbot's reflections on the project, see <http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/11838>.
3. Bernstein had also previously collaborated with Scorsese on *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* (1993) and *BRINGING OUT THE DEAD* (1999).

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**Robert Ziegler** combines guest-conducting major orchestras in concerts throughout Europe and the Far East, with extensive work in film music. He has commissioned new accompaniments for silent films with his own Matrix Ensemble, revived classical scores in concert performance, and conducts soundtracks for a variety of leading contemporary film composers, including Jonny Greenwood, Howard Shore, Max Richter, Mark Isham, and Michael Giacchino.

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