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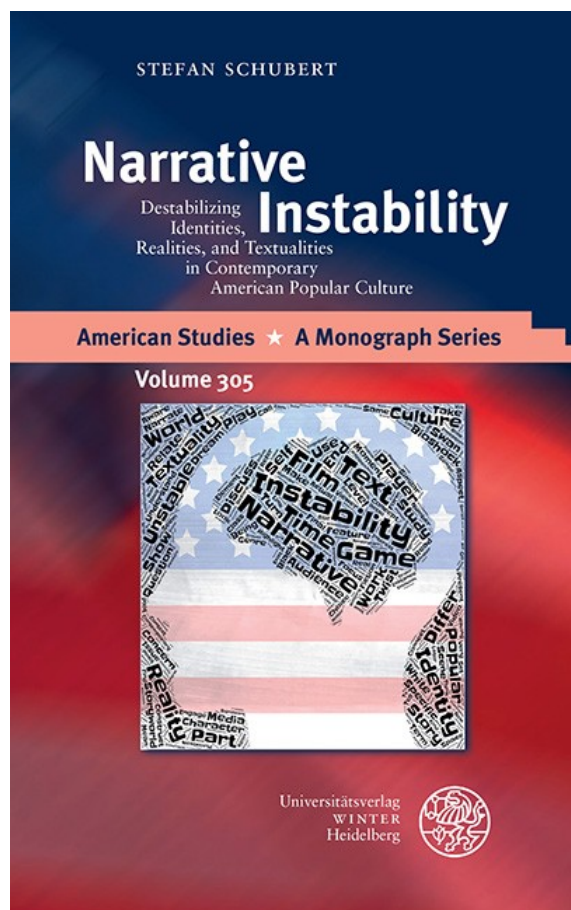
Narrative Instability: Destabilizing Identities, Realities, and Textualities in Contemporary American Popular Culture

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1 Introduction: Popularizing Instability

From the beginning, [literary postmodernism's] primary home was the university, a status that explains [...] why metafiction in particular was often said to be fiction "of the academy, by the academy, and for the academy." (Rebein 6)

[T]hrough the Reagan years and to the present, [postmodern fiction's experiments with form] have been greeted with an increasingly testy impatience: Why can't these authors put aside their postmodern games, their annoying stylistic tricks [...]? (McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodernism" 212)

[O]ne overriding common feature of mind-game films is a delight in disorienting or misleading spectators [...]. Another feature is that spectators on the whole do not mind being 'played with': on the contrary, they rise to the challenge. (Elsaesser 15)

Some of the directors may be just playing with us [...] [b]ut others may be trying to jolt us into a new understanding of art, or even a new understanding of life. [...] Are moviegoers bringing some new sensibility to these riddling movies? What are we getting out of the overloading, the dislocations and disruptions? (Denby 80)

The above sets of accounts peddle two divergent narratives about the contemporary moment, about fiction and its audiences: One portrays the contemporary as marked by a break with postmodernism and an end of formal experimentation, the other rather highlights a kind of 'hyper-postmodernism' (cf. Nealon x) of the contemporary, where the self-reflexive experiments typically associated with postmodern novels have spread to a variety of other media, most prominently film. While, of course, these accounts discuss different media—novels and films—they lay claim to similar audiences, the contemporary reading and viewing public.¹ On the one hand, Robert Rebein and Robert L. McLaughlin, writing about American fiction 'after postmodernism,' dismiss postmodern novels of the 1960s and 1970s as having never reached mainstream popularity because of their formal experiments, "their annoying stylistic tricks," and they argue that contemporary novels are characterized less by experimentation and more by a return to realism. On the other hand, Thomas Elsaesser, in an essay on 'mindgame films,' and David Denby, writing about the 'new disorder' in US films, notice a growing tendency of contemporary films to "[disorient]" and "[mis-

¹ As I will outline below, contemporary audiences of fiction can hardly be neatly differentiated anymore according to the different media they consume (if they ever could); instead, these media converge with each other and are 'consumed' by audiences transmedially (cf. Jenkins, *Convergence*).

lead]” their viewers, and they emphasize how popular such films are with audiences—precisely because of the formal experiments that lead to such “dislocations and disruptions.” Taken together, these accounts present an argument that the experimental techniques used in ‘high,’ ‘avant-garde’ postmodernism by authors like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, or Donald Barthelme led to their novels largely being ignored by nonacademic readers, failing to reach any mainstream popularity—yet that it is exactly the same techniques that, when used in films since the 1990s, such as *Fight Club* (1999), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), or *Memento* (2000), turned these texts into popular blockbuster successes.²

Intervening into such debates, this study introduces the concept of narrative instability to analyze these developments in contemporary US popular culture, a concept that better grasps what the discussions about the contemporary moment throw into relief and that reconciles this apparent contradiction. With narrative instability, as I will outline in more detail in chapter 2, I propose to analyze texts that consciously frustrate and obfuscate the process of narrative understanding and comprehension, challenging their audiences to piece together what exactly happened in a text’s plot, who the characters really are, which of the diegetic worlds is real, or how narrative information is received in the first place. The diversity of narrative instability ranges from so-called ‘twist films,’ like *The Sixth Sense*, in which the ending reveals that the protagonist has actually been dead for the majority of the film, to texts such as *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) or *Looper* (2012), which trap their characters in linear time loops, and to video games like *The Stanley Parable* (2013) or films like *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), featuring characters who hear voices in their heads that narrate their every move. Throughout this book, developing this new concept of narrative instability allows me to argue that these texts encourage their audiences to engage with the narrative constructedness of their universes, that narrative instability embodies a new facet of popular culture, that it takes place and can only be understood transmedially, and that its textual politics particularly speak to white male middle-class Americans—lines of argumentation that I will outline in more detail below.

Other concepts and terms have been suggested to focus on similar aspects of contemporary popular culture—Elsaesser’s ‘mindgame films’ and Denby’s ‘new disorder’ are just two of many—yet I argue that introducing

² This seeming contradiction arises in the fusion of contemporary scholarly debates that, often, do not speak to each other, instead adhering to their own distinct media. Yet it is also a discussion held beyond academia, as Denby’s piece, appearing in a 2007 issue of the *New Yorker*, exemplifies, one that nowadays spills over to fan discussions on social media and Internet forums, where many of these films are popularly discussed—a far cry from positing such fictional texts as “of the academy, by the academy, and for the academy” (Rebein 6). In turn, contemporary US popular culture inserts itself into these public and academic discussions about the cultural value and the social functions of literature and popular culture.

narrative instability is necessary to be able to properly delineate and analyze the textual and cultural phenomenon I identify in this book. While I will examine the shortcomings of existing scholarship below (cf. 2.1.1), one of the most important distinctions concerns my conception of narrative instability as an inherently transmedial trend, occurring simultaneously in different media and, significantly, through connections and influences between them. Many of the discursive techniques to implement instability hail from postmodern novels of the 1960s and '70s, but they attained mainstream popularity when they began to be more frequently featured in films starting in the late 1990s. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, during the 2000s, their popularity in film has in turn led to a number of other media engaging in narrative instability as well, most prominently video games (and increasingly also television). Throughout this book, I will explore this transmedial link between unstable texts and investigate how media traditionally known for their narrative prowess (such as film) tap into forms of play(ing) more commonly associated with (video) games. The often metaphorical use of 'play' appears frequently throughout the debates surrounding these questions: While McLaughlin complains about "postmodern games," both Elsaesser and Denby attempt to understand the peculiarities of the films they analyze by (more positively) suggesting that they are "playing with" their audiences. The readiness with which references to games are used in these contexts points to the centrality of elements of play in contemporary culture, and consequently, part of this book's project will also be to more thoroughly chart how narrative instability is 'playing' with us.

I conceive of narrative instability as a trend within contemporary US popular culture, one that has not been identified as such—partly since it occurs across different media, making it more difficult to be recognized in monomedial studies.³ Significantly, it is a trend characterized by immense mainstream popularity and commercial success, with films like *The Sixth Sense* or *Interstellar* (2014) grossing over 600 million dollars, establishing their status as pop-cultural artifacts instead of as "fiction[s] of the academy" (Rebein 6), and with many unstable texts having entered the pop-cultural repertoire. As such, a central concern of this study will be to probe into the popular pleasures narratively unstable texts exude, also implied by Elsaesser's reference to "delight" and Denby's focus on how these texts "jolt" their audiences. Essentially, these different vocabularies are

³ In contrast to many of the previously mentioned debates' implicit assumptions, I do not intend to insinuate a monocausal or homogenizing progression within the contemporary moment. Many of the scholarly contexts describing the current moment as 'post-postmodern'—positions from which Rebein and McLaughlin also write—seem to imply a monolithic understanding of postmodernism, displaying a "desire to be done with postmodernism" (J. Green 24) and proposing a new, equally homogeneous paradigm to replace it. I investigate this tendency among post-postmodern scholarship in more detail in section 2.2.1.

used for similar questions and phenomena—issues that I will bring together under the common rubric of instability, ultimately suggesting avenues for answering Denby's question of what audiences "are [...] getting out of the overloading, the dislocations and disruptions" (80) engendered by narrative instability.

Throughout this book, my central argument is that narrative instability functions as a site for contemporary audiences to interrogate the narrative constructedness of fictional texts and, in turn, of their own lived reality. That is to say, narrative instability leads to a confusion of the storyworld that does not, ultimately, frustrate audiences but that activates them. The instability in these texts does not necessarily culminate in a crisis; instead, the texts recognize that crises engendered by instability can be used to resolve matters—an embrace of complexity and ambivalence rather than of simplicity and binarisms. As such, narratively unstable texts allow audiences to see (and investigate themselves) how narratives work and how they use their formal elements to create meaning, particularly relating to questions of identity, reality, and textuality. As a second line of argumentation, I contend that the commercial and critical success of narrative instability speaks to a new facet of popularity, casting contemporary audiences as craving this complexity and the questioning of straightforward, linear narratives—pleasures that are traditionally associated only with high-culture texts. Such a shift can be read as part of a larger 'postmodernization' of society (beyond academia), where developments encapsulated in W. B. Yeats's famous line that "[t]hings fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (158) do not lead, as in modernist imaginations, to panic or crisis but where the center being questioned and not able to "hold" is a welcome development, deconstructing (both formal and political) master narratives. Third, I argue that one needs to understand this cultural trend as being driven by (trans)medial change, by a public that consumes a variety of media and by media that are aware of and influence each other. It is mainly the effects of notions of play, centrally occurring in video games, that propel such changes in other media, with play distinctly embracing nonlinearity and the potential for agency, for active engagements with texts. In this way, instability serves as an intermedial bridge, fostering a new kind of 'ludic' textuality. Finally, next to this interest in the poetics of instability, its 'politics' speak particularly to white male middle-class Americans. The textual politics of my corpus become complicated as many narratively unstable texts pursue ostensibly progressive projects but, beneath their textual surface, often end up reaffirming the normative power of white masculinity and sidelining minority voices. This potential ambivalence and polysemy of meanings, in fact, might also explain part of instability's popularity, outwardly speaking to a large implied audience—but, as my analysis will show, actually frequently upholding the dominant ideology rather than questioning it. Together, these different lines of inquiry conceptualize narrative instability as a trend illuminating an especially popular and dynamic part of contemporary American culture, pro-

viding audiences with the means to conceive and (de)construct the narrativity of their own reality as well.

1.1 Methodology and Interdisciplinary Impulses

My project locates itself firmly in American studies, and within this field of study, more specifically in American literary and cultural studies.⁴ It is mainly from cultural studies that I extract a broad conception of texts as encompassing a variety of different genres and media, defining a text more generally as “any organized set of discourses (and meanings)” (J. Lewis 403) and as “a signifying construct of potential meanings operating on a number of levels” (Fiske, *Reading* 34). My central focus on the symbolic form of narrative is equally informed by more recent scholarly work on the concept of narrativity, which emphasizes the narrative qualities or properties that a text can have rather than a formal definition, a distinction between “possessing narrativity” and “being a narrative” (Ryan, “On the Theoretical” 6). This emphasis on narratives from a broad array of cultural areas aligns with American studies’ (transmedial) interest in popular culture as well.⁵ Most significantly, however, my disciplinary approach in this project is informed by an interest in the cultural work that the texts I dis-

⁴ Narrative instability also closely relates conceptually to American studies as a field: Arguably, a certain degree of ‘instability’ has always been part of conceptions of American studies as well as of reflections on what ‘America’ means. Such uncertainties, fractures, or insecurities, however, do not lead to despair or crisis but are instead recognized as productive, functioning as motors of introspection and reflection, “a means [for society to think] about itself” (Tompkins 200). The questioning of clarity, of easily understood narratives, of binarisms, and of singular truths typical of narratively unstable texts fits into the constant (re)imagining of what ‘America’ means, which, in turn, is typical of American studies, having led to continuous reinventions of its scope, doubts about its methodologies, and worries over its (non)existence as a discipline or a field (cf. Smith, “Can”; Wise), all alongside interrogations of master narratives and previously established paradigms (cf. Paul 18-25).

⁵ While the narrative turn has already been well established in American studies, throughout this study, I also implicitly argue for a more focused and theorized engagement with notions of play, the ludification of contemporary culture, and video games as a popular medium within American studies. Particularly in terms of the last point, American studies is uniquely suited to study video games as part of popular culture, with its focus on the cultural work such texts can do, the pleasures they create, and the way the interaction between player and game relates to questions of power. American studies as a field also established itself in close connection with the study of popular culture (e.g., in Cawelti’s analyses of popular genres), yet it has been lagging behind disciplines like history and media studies in including this medium as part of its regular corpus. Consequently, I deem it especially insightful to study video games not in isolation but alongside other media and pop-cultural artifacts.

cuss do, an understanding unique to American studies. In her influential study of nineteenth-century texts largely ignored by the literary canon, Jane Tompkins approaches a text's cultural work as a way of "providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions" (200). Instead of valuing texts only for their formal or aesthetic aspects, Tompkins suggests a "notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them" (200). Paul Lauter similarly looks at cultural work as "the ways in which a book or other kind of 'text' [...] helps construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world" ("Reconfiguring" 23). Phrased in the most general way, this book's central goal is to examine the cultural work of narratively unstable texts, probing into both how they help audiences understand and express something about themselves and how they, in turn, shape those very processes.⁶

In line with how American studies operates as a field, this book draws on theoretical and methodological impulses from different disciplines. On the one hand, my study fuses approaches from literary and cultural studies, as just mentioned. On the other hand, there are a number of other fields and disciplines from which I use insights throughout this book. Most prominently, I utilize concepts and theories from (postclassical) narratology and narrative studies as an analytic toolkit in order to grasp how the texts that I analyze work narratively, even though my overall research interest is not (classically) narratological. More specifically, my approach is anchored in the still emerging field of 'cultural narratology' (cf. A. Nünning, "Surveying" 59), investigating the cultural processes and negotiations enabled through narrative. Furthermore, my focus on texts' cultural work also takes wider understandings of 'America' into consideration, notably from the study of history, politics, and society, even though I do not methodologically engage with political science or sociology. Finally, media studies, film studies, television studies, and game studies form important fields organized around different media, whose insights and research interests often overlap with my foci and from where I will use relevant scholarship throughout the next chapters as well. Since I conceptualize narrative instability as making use of the symbolic forms of both narrative and play, it is especially the relatively new field of game studies with which a number of my findings resonate. Although the study of narrative elements of video

⁶ From a disciplinary perspective, in turn, my study recognizes the significant shift entailed in American studies' suggestion to focus on the cultural work of a text rather than only on its aesthetic merits, as it opens up the study of texts previously not deemed 'worthy' of academic attention (and, often, in the process discovers aesthetic value in these texts as well). My focus on video games in this study, which, partly due to their enormous popularity, are at times still not considered 'serious' enough to be academically studied, fits into this shift as well.

games within game studies has a complicated history,⁷ my approach towards video games, understanding them as a liminal medium that includes elements of both play and narrative, promises to invigorate debates about narrativity in games as well, as does my general conception of studying elements of play in texts that are not games per se, potentially widening the scope of game studies.⁸ Altogether, these interdisciplinary impulses add to my overall project of analyzing and understanding a significant part of contemporary American popular culture.

In a way, the concerns and aspects I will outline about narrative instability in the next chapter also form part of methodological considerations. That is, to summarize, I use the narratological concept of the storyworld to discuss the discursive and narrative properties of a variety of texts from different media in order to investigate the cultural work they do. My analyses and interpretations specifically contextualize the primary texts within discussions of the contemporary moment and scholarship on post-postmod-

⁷ The debate over whether video games are narratives, games, or fit into other kinds of categories, which is called the ‘ludology vs. narratology debate’ in game studies, has too complicated of a history to render here in detail (for summaries, cf., e.g., Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 189-204; Wolf and Perron 2-13; or Mäyrä 5-11). More importantly, I deem it a relatively unproductive question for the study of video games to begin with, both because it pitted positions against each other that did not actually exist in this way—seeing video games as *only* narrative or as *only* consisting of rules akin to play (cf. Murray, “Last Word”; Jenkins, “Henry”)—and because both paradigms fundamentally engaged a formalist interest in finding out what video games (in a very general sense) are (Bogost). Instead, my interest lies in analyzing what games do and how they do that, focusing on specific texts rather than trying to ascertain homogeneous traits of this entire (and in itself very diverse) medium. For other recent scholarship within game studies that takes a similar approach, cf., e.g., Kapell; Ruberg and Shaw; Malkowski and Russworm.

⁸ This conception of video games as a liminal medium has been informed by discussions as part of the network “Narrative Liminality and/in the Formation of American Modernities,” funded by the German Research Foundation; and I have previously outlined this perspective in more detail (cf. Schubert, “Videospiele”). To summarize, I locate video games in the borders of the symbolic forms of narrative and play; all games, in this sense, include both narrative and ludic elements, the degrees of which differ between individual games. For details on these elements, see the discussion of remediated narrative elements in video games and the central aspects of interactivity, agency, nonlinearity, and iteration in conceptions of play in chapter 2 (cf. 2.1.3). There are, of course, additional aspects commonly associated with playing—e.g., while I include rules as part of interactivity, performative and simulational elements would be other components of playing; and elements such as a certain competitiveness could also be considered fundamental for play. Additionally, just like with narrative, the use of a number of these terms in game studies is not unproblematic; Espen Aarseth, for instance, argues against the use of the term ‘interactive’ and suggests his perception on so-called ergodic texts as an alternative (49, 1-2). However, I see most of these appeals as mainly terminological and disciplinary distinctions with little impact on the actual analysis of games, and hence, I will discuss them only in specific instances where they are relevant for the analysis.

ernism, convergence culture and transmediality, popular culture, and discussions of race, class, and gender. Accordingly, my methodology draws from both literary studies and cultural studies: At the core, I pursue an interest in how texts work as texts, which signifiatory strategies they use, and how they can be meaningfully interpreted. This literary-studies methodology is combined with a cultural-studies interest in connecting these texts' properties with their cultural resonances, understanding this textual trend not as self-contained but as part of a larger cultural moment.

On a more metastructural level, my analyses consist of close readings, a method adapted from New Criticism, with a distinct transmedial focus on the medial specifics of the studied texts. That is, I will analyze films and television shows for their visual and auditory as well as for their narrative elements, and likewise, my analysis of video games focuses on their audiovisual, narrative, and ludic aspects. My main argument thus works through analysis and close reading, and similarly, I argue for the conceptual validity of narrative instability both on a theoretical level in chapter 2 and, especially, via the analytic readings in the following three chapters. The connection of this focus on the poetics of narrative instability with their historicization and politics, in turn, is inspired by New Historicism's interweaving of texts and their historical context, associating texts "with politics, with ideas, and with social life, all these things being fluidly interconnected" (Mikics 206; cf. Gallagher and Greenblatt). While my study does not share New Historicism's usual interest in the past, it still probes into the cultural functions and reverberations of fictional texts in "a particular historical moment" (Tompkins xi), which I explicitly historicize as the contemporary. Lastly, reading narratively unstable texts for their constructions of race, class, and gender corresponds to the methodological repertoire of cultural studies, influenced by theories from masculinity studies and critical whiteness studies, among others.

The corpus of this study serves both to present a somewhat representative sample of narratively unstable texts and to focus on texts that allow for particularly insightful and productive readings. In this sense, the analyses in the following chapters all work towards my overall goal of examining narrative instability, but the six detailed readings also stand for themselves and contribute to the study of these individual texts. Acknowledging the importance of play and the influence of video games in contemporary media culture, I focus on three video games, two films, and one TV show, balancing the 'audiovisual media' (film and TV) with the 'interactive' one. In addition to this mixture of media, I have selected texts that are differently 'canonized' within their respective fields of study—while, for instance, the film *Inception* and the games of the *BioShock* series have been frequently studied in film and game studies, the video game *Alan Wake* and the (still very new) TV show *Westworld* have received comparatively little attention. Some of my readings will thus break new ground for these texts, whereas others benefit from being contextualized within a wide range of scholar-

ship, where my analysis adds to existing debates. Finally, I have chosen texts with different emphases on how they engage questions of race, class, and gender. Whereas almost all of them focus on white male middle-class protagonists, the analysis of *Black Swan* in the third chapter highlights one of the few unstable texts about a female protagonist. Similarly, while whiteness, class, and gender intersect in all of these primary texts, my analyses carve out different dimensions and facets of their representations, focusing, for instance, on issues of class in *BioShock*, on questions of masculinity and fatherhood in *Inception*, and on race, whiteness, and blackness in *BioShock Infinite*.

1.2 The Structure of This Book

This book's main theoretical and analytical work is divided into four sections: Chapter 2 provides the theoretical basis for narrative instability, whereas chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine and analyze narrative instability more closely, focusing on unstable identities, unstable realities, and unstable textualities. Chapter 2 will lay the groundwork for this project by theorizing and conceptualizing narrative instability in contrast to existing scholarship on related terms and concerns. Additionally, it will contextualize this study 'historically' by discussing my understanding of the contemporary period during which the texts analyzed in this book were released.

The first of the three analytic chapters, chapter 3, focuses on unstable identities texts, which feature protagonists dealing with uncertainties about who they are and thus closely connect their instability on the discursive level with a crisis of identity on the story level. The first section generally explores unstable identities texts with the help of the film *Fight Club*; points to related scholarship relevant for the study of these texts to carve out a productive understanding of identity; and briefly discusses the nexus between pleasure, reception, and audience expectations. Then, the second section analyzes the video game *BioShock* as a 'classic' twist text, with the significant deviation that it is not a film but a game, and works out how it connects its unstable elements with its setting, depicting a society inspired by Ayn Rand's philosophy of objectivism, which it especially relates to class. The third section reads the film *Black Swan* for how it negotiates instability through its female protagonist, discussing questions of femininity and motherhood, and how it connects these aspects with an instability that builds on the audience's expectations of narrative instability.

Chapter 4 investigates unstable realities texts, in which the overall nature of (the diegetic) reality is in doubt, as these texts envision reality as something that is narratively constructed through the representation of space and time. The first section of this chapter demonstrates general characteristics of unstable realities texts with the example of the film *Interstellar*, establishes a productive understanding of constructions of reality, and

illuminates popularity and popularization as crucial cultural contexts. The second subsection analyzes the film *Inception* in regard to its construction of narrative space—as it allows its characters to enter the dreams of other people—and demonstrates how the film connects this narrative instability with concerns about fatherhood and masculinity. Finally, the third subsection is devoted to the video game *BioShock Infinite*, with a slightly stronger focus on constructions of time, as the protagonists in the game have the ability to travel to alternate timelines (and, consequently, spaces) of their reality, a fantastic possibility that I relate to questions of race and class throughout American (alternate) history.

As the last analytic chapter, chapter 5 examines unstable textualities, that is, texts with storyworlds that become unstable through these texts' signals to representation itself, self-reflexively and metatextually pointing to the process of narration and then obscuring crucial details about their discursive setups. The first section uses the video game *The Stanley Parable* as a remarkably self-aware text to illustrate this group in general terms, focuses on related scholarship on metafiction and self-reflexivity to arrive at a productive understanding of textuality, and specifically highlights questions of genre as constituting how narratively unstable texts signal their own textuality. The second subsection reads the game *Alan Wake* as unstable in this sense, pointing to its ubiquitous self-awareness about matters of text(uality) and especially to its references to other media, notably the novel and television, to discuss its own storytelling effort. The third subsection, in turn, investigates the growing importance of instability in contemporary television by looking at the first season of the HBO show *Westworld*, which renders its awareness of textuality less through allusions to engaging with and producing texts (as *Alan Wake* does) and more consistently through references to narrative and play, which I, in turn, connect to questions of gender and whiteness in particular.

Finally, chapter 6 briefly summarizes my findings, brings a few of the larger contexts from the individual chapters together, and points to potentials for future research. Overall, this structure in itself does analytic work as well: As a survey of contemporary narratively unstable texts, it detects identity, reality, and textuality as the three most central cultural concerns among the entire corpus and argues for them as productive clusters. On the one hand, the texts within a specific group speak to each other, together forming a rounder picture of how contemporary popular culture engages identity, reality, and textuality, which is also why I at times point to other primary texts in order to accentuate this investigation of instability. On the other hand, while primary texts, e.g., in the third chapter do indeed center on questions of identity, they still also relate, only to a lesser degree, to issues of reality and textuality. These three clusters are thus not strict categories but relatively loose groups, where the individual larger chapters, in turn, also engage in a dialogue with each other, constituting cross-fertilizations between these chapters that I will at times point to in footnotes.

2 Introducing Narrative Instability

This chapter will lay the groundwork for this book in two larger sections: First, I will interrogate existing scholarship on similar concerns in order to identify drawbacks in these previous conceptions and to contextualize narrative instability within them, which will allow me to introduce the concept of narrative instability in more detail, on which all the subsequent chapters will build. Second, I will contextualize this study ‘historically,’ that is, I will elaborate on what is meant by ‘contemporary,’ what popular culture implies in the context of this project, and which US American cultural contexts an investigation of narrative instability relates to. Together, this will carve our narrative instability as a heuristic concept that allows me to make a popular and transmedial textual trend visible in the first place.

2.1 Conceptualizing and Theorizing Narrative Instability

In the following, I will outline narrative instability as the central concept of this book. First, in order to establish why narrative instability is needed as a concept, to accentuate its analytic benefits, and to contextualize my approach within existing scholarship, I will point to previous studies on related concerns and terms, particularly from narratology. Subsequently, I will chart my conception of narrative instability in more detail, which includes placing it in a transmedia(l) context, highlighting how it is to be understood as an inherently transmedial concept, and pointing out the significance of ‘play’ for this conception. Overall, this section will thus bring a number of at times isolated and medially specific studies into dialogue with each other, establishing narrative instability as a trend that points to a new understanding of contemporary narratives and that allows for these different contexts to productively speak to each other.

2.1.1 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

As I will outline in more detail later, I introduce narrative instability as a concept to grasp how contemporary US popular culture complicates audiences’ mental efforts of reconstructing a text’s storyworld.⁹ Such an interest

⁹ David Herman defines storyworlds as “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate [...] as they work to comprehend a narrative” (*Story Logic* 9). In comparison to the concepts of story, discourse, or narrative, a *storyworld* highlights both spatial and temporal aspects (*Story Logic* 14), and it especially points to the process

in how a text can impede narrative understanding touches on a number of existing terms and fields of research, begging the question why I am introducing yet another concept to the scholarly landscape. However, I argue that a new conceptualization is necessary since none of the existing terms and concepts sufficiently map the narrative and cultural phenomenon identified in this study or allow for its detailed analysis. I will recount these shortcomings in the following by discussing where previous studies point to related concerns yet where they do not capture the analytic interest that I propose. Accordingly, I will examine the most prominent and influential of these studies, first via related concepts from and (sub)fields of narratology, then in regard to other (mostly cultural-studies) contexts, and finally in terms of other singular uses of the term instability, in order to both delineate my approach from these related studies but also to point to productive resonances. Overall, I argue that my conception has three distinct advantages over existing ones: First, it brings together a diverse set of primary texts that have not been grouped like this before but that actually feature narrative and textual commonalities. Narrative instability elucidates and makes visible what they share, making these connections available for further analysis. Second, while the majority of existing studies focuses on single specific media (most prominently either the novel or film), my conception is inherently transmedial, opening up the possibility to identify patterns across texts from different media and in turn sharpening the understanding of what they have in common. Third, many previous studies work within typological and structuralist impulses, proposing categorizations or delineations from other concepts, whereas my conception highlights the potential to scrutinize the meanings and cultural resonances of these texts—my investigation of narrative instability’s cultural work puts these resonances front and center, examining them as part of a specific cultural moment.

Among the narratological concepts related to my understanding of instability, unreliability appears as the most pertinent one, particularly in more recent studies written in the wake of narratology’s ‘cultural turn,’ which has led to the emergence of a ‘postclassical narratology.’¹⁰ Unreliability has

of narrative comprehension, which Herman calls the “ecology of narrative interpretation”: When interpreters “[try] to make sense of a narrative, [they] attempt to reconstruct not just what happened [...] but also the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved” (*Story Logic* 13-14). In other words, this shift towards the storyworld emphasizes the role of audiences in making sense of a text, and it casts this process of understanding as going beyond the plot and encompassing other constituent elements as well, all of which together form a spatial understanding of that narrative text. In this book, I will extend the concept of the storyworld beyond the study of novels and instead investigate how a variety of pop-cultural media and artifacts can be narratively analyzed with its help.

¹⁰ For influential work both proclaiming and performing the shift entailed in postclassical narratology, cf. D. Herman, *Narratologies*; Alber and Fludernik, *Postclassical Narratology*; Heinen and Sommer; G. Olson, *Current Trends*; for more of an over-

been studied in narratology since Wayne C. Booth's influential definition as describing a narrator who does not "[speak] for or [act] in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)" (158). This focus on the implied author is ill-suited for my project, yet more recent reimaginings in the vein of cognitive narratology have "relocate[d] unreliability [...] in the interaction of reader and text" (A. Nünning, "Reconceptualizing" 99).¹¹ In this sense, how a narrator's unreliability affects the audience's process of reconstructing a storyworld often plays an important part in creating instability, and the recent surge in studies of unreliability, particularly in different media and disciplines, aligns productively with the study of narrative instability.¹² Yet unreliability describes just one possible discursive implementation¹³ that can lead to instability, appearing as a much narrower concept that does not take discursive traits such as metalepsis, polyfocalization, or an unmarked internal focalization into account, all of which can engender instability as well. Additionally, more structuralist concerns such as the binarity between 'factual' or 'normative unreliability'¹⁴ add relatively little insight to a cultural-studies framing of unreliability, which instead asks for the effects it has on readers. Finally, as an over-

view of the development towards postclassical narratology (or narratologies), cf. A. Nünning, "Narratology"; Sommer. Two constitutive developments of the shift from 'classical,' more structuralist narratology to its 'postclassical' variation include a focus on media other than the novel as well as a "move toward a grand contextual [...] and reader-oriented effort" as part of cognitive approaches to narrative (Alber and Fludernik, Introduction 6, 8). Both developments complement my conception of narrative instability as well, and accordingly, the narratological areas partly overlapping with instability have also been informed by them.

- ¹¹ Especially Vera Nünning's recent edited collection on *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness* significantly expands the scope of more 'traditional' research on unreliability, pointing out how scholarship has been lacking for unreliability in non-homodiegetic narration, in media other than the novel, and in disciplines beyond literary studies ("Conceptualising" 2-4). For other relevant studies on unreliability in the vein of this cognitive reimagining, cf. Zipfel; Köppe and Kindt; Koch; Ensslin, "I Want."
- ¹² This is similarly true for other narratological concepts that form part of generating instability, especially metalepsis (cf. Kukkonen and Klimek; Thoss; Hanebeck).
- ¹³ Here, as in most instances, I use the terms 'discourse' and 'discursive' to refer to a text's level of narration (as opposed to the level of the story), to how it narrates (instead of what it narrates). At times, I will also discuss certain concepts, such as truth or identity, as being discursively constructed, which implies discourse in the Foucauldian sense—I trust that these two very different meanings of the same term are usually understood, but I will distinguish them more explicitly in potential moments of ambiguity.
- ¹⁴ As Ansgar Nünning explains in reference to Greta Olson, "factual unreliability" implies a "fallible narrator [...] whose rendering of the story the reader has reasons to suspect," whereas "normative unreliability [is] displayed by an untrustworthy narrator whose commentary and interpretations do not accord with conventional notions of sound judgment" ("Reconceptualizing" 93, 93, 93-94; cf. G. Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability").

all concept, unreliability mainly emphasizes the trustworthiness of an individual subject, commonly a homodiegetic narrator. In this sense, it individualizes matters of trust, truth, or reality, often containing that uncertainty by, eventually, exposing a narrator as fallible. In contrast, narrative instability points to a larger cultural uncertainty and is interested not only in a specific narrator's unreliability but also in what the popularity of texts featuring these elements signals about the culture and society in which these texts circulate, understanding instability not as a 'universal' trait of texts but as belonging to a specific historical moment.

Next to particular concepts, two larger narratological theories (or fields of study) tangentially relate to my interest in instability: possible-worlds theory and unnatural narratology. Possible-worlds theory maintains that "reality—conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists physically—is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds" (Ryan, "Possible Worlds," par. 2). Applied to the study of narrative, it suggests that "when interpreting fictional narratives, recipients relocate to an alternative possible world" (D. Herman, *Story Logic* 15). As such, it is an important impulse in the study of storyworlds—and for the spatial dimension of narrative—as well, yet it functions as a more general approach to understanding narratives, similar to storyworlds.¹⁵ 'Unnatural narratology,' in turn, was developed in response to Monika Fludernik's conception of 'natural narratology' (cf. *Towards*) and focuses on "various kinds of narrative strangeness and in particular [...] texts that deviate from the mimetic norms of most narratological models," encompassing, among others, texts that are "experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, non-conformist, or out of the ordinary" (Alber and Heinze 2). Such a focus on 'strange' texts partly overlaps with the primary texts I consider narratively unstable and thus is certainly one of the most relevant recent trends that links my conception to narratological studies, yet it is less interested in a cultural historicization of these phenomena than in a narratological typologization.¹⁶ Additionally, the scope of what is deemed 'unnatural,' as the above quotation demonstrates, is also very wide, yet at the same time, much of what unnatural narratology encompasses, e.g., "physically impossible scenarios and events, that is impossible by the known laws governing

¹⁵ Among studies of possible-worlds theory and narrative, Marie-Laure Ryan's work is the most relevant—cf. in particular her monograph *Possible Worlds*. Other influential takes include those by Ronen; Doležel; and Bruner; for a study of possible worlds in video games, cf. Maza.

¹⁶ Unnatural narratology also has to relate to a complicated and potentially problematic notion of what is considered 'natural,' whereas what instability relates to (whatever we may call 'stable') is a less 'loaded' concept. For some of the concerns about the role of the 'natural' in unnatural narratology, especially also in relation to Fludernik's natural narratology, cf. Fludernik, "How Natural"; Alber et al. Another slightly related concept concerns notions of the 'disnarrated' or the 'unnarratable' (cf. Warhol).

the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic” (Alber qtd. in Alber and Heinze 4-5), seems quite congruent with a focus on the fantastic as a mode. In turn, while the elements that make fantasy and science-fiction texts fantastic or speculative often can initially induce confusion (and other reactions similar to encountering instability), they do not, in themselves, draw attention to the level of narration, which is a central element of the texts I consider unstable. Instead, fantastic texts entail a shift from the realist to the fantastic mode that is in line with how the fantastic functions as a mode, always encompassing both of these to different extents (cf. Rosemary Jackson 13-60; Koenen, *Visions* 42-43).¹⁷ Hence, although some overlap between fantastic and unstable texts exists, the texts considered in this study all self-consciously relate instability to their own narration, speaking to an interest in matters of textual representation among them.

The recent surge in (what I call) unstable texts has also prompted studies from a broader cultural-studies angle, whose scope at times overlaps with narrative instability. This scholarship typically makes use of certain tropes to denote the peculiarity they detect in their corpus, describing these texts by how they feature or engage in, among others, twists (cf. Wilson; Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic* 66-69), puzzles (cf. Buckland, “Puzzle Plots”; Buckland, *Hollywood*; Kiss and Willemsen; Panek), mindgames (cf. Elsaesser; Hesselberth and Schuster), mindfucks (cf. Eig), mind-tricks (cf. Klecker), or mazes (cf. Eckel et al.).¹⁸ Many of these studies focus only on single media—most prominently film—and a number of them imply a typology in their categorization of these texts as specific genres. In contrast, my conception will highlight how these texts operate transmedially (cf. 2.1.3), uncovering an audience interest in these texts across media and fo-

¹⁷ Nevertheless, there are, of course, many fantastic and science-fiction texts that are also unstable, such as *Inception* or *Interstellar*, both of which I discuss in chapter 4, and elements of confusion and uncertainty play an important role in fantastic texts—as Tzvetan Todorov influentially notes when he identifies the fantastic in “the duration of [...] uncertainty,” through the “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (136). Likewise, magical realism (cf. Zamora and Faris) forms another kind of ‘predecessor’ for narrative instability, as, for instance, the works by Jorge Luis Borges evoke topics and concepts taken up in unstable texts as well—yet they usually only occupy the plane of the story, not of narration. For example, Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941) describes the existence of an infinity of ‘forking paths’ that lead to a labyrinthine novel, yet it does not itself *perform* that infinity through its narration, unlike similar attempts in narratively unstable texts like *House of Leaves* (2000) or *BioShock Infinite* (2013). Still, particularly Borges’s fiction serves as an important intertextual reference point and inspiration for many unstable texts.

¹⁸ A number of these different approaches to contemporary texts simultaneously highlight that they are part of a larger trend towards ‘narrative complexity,’ an aspect I discuss in more detail in 2.2.1.

cusing on the cultural work of these transmedial engagements. Even more importantly, the studies using these different terms all suggest their specific terminology to describe a unique phenomenon, implying categories such as puzzle or twist films. However, the primary texts they consider both show significant overlap between the different studies and include a number of omissions, with texts mentioned under one rubric but equally qualifying for another, without being discussed there.¹⁹ Instead, I propose narrative instability as a more systematic account to cover these texts, maintaining a careful balance between too restrictive definitions and too wide or generalizing conceptualizations, which some of these studies engage in. For instance, Jonathan Eig understands mindfuck films as involving only “surprises about the identity of major characters,” which neglects a large number of texts that feature narrative ‘surprises’ in similar ways and through the same discursive techniques but focus on aspects other than identity. On the other hand, Warren Buckland describes puzzle films as “intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing” (“Puzzle Plots” 3), which appears to be a very loose conception, exchanging the difficulty of determining ‘complexity’ with a similar difficulty of discerning what is meant by ‘complicated’ or ‘perplexing,’ and accordingly, his scope of puzzle films is very wide and heterogeneous.²⁰ In turn, Julia Eckel and Bernd Leiendecker sidestep this problem by using ‘narrative mazes’ as an “umbrella term” for all of the existing scholarship, “a metaphor that encompasses all of the aforementioned terms and highlights their disorienting potential” (16). While this move might make sense when confronted with the sheer quantity of the proposed terms and definitions, it does not contribute to efforts of identifying commonalities and unifying tendencies among these texts or of distinguishing them from others. Instead, I propose narrative instability as a more theorized concept, one that argues that the commonalities between these seemingly diverse primary texts lie in how they affect the process of reconstructing a storyworld.

¹⁹ Since many of the texts that these scholars posit as ‘puzzle,’ ‘twist,’ or ‘mindgame’ films particularly overlap with those that I group as engaging with unstable identities, I will discuss this scholarship and how it engages my conception of unstable identities in more detail in the next chapter (cf. 3.2.2).

²⁰ In trying to distinguish his notion of complexity from Aristotle’s, Buckland mentions that puzzle films become complex as they “embrace nonlinearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality. These films blur the boundaries between different levels of reality, are riddled with gaps, deception, labyrinthine structures, ambiguity, and overt coincidences. They are populated with characters who are schizophrenic, lose their memory, are unreliable narrators, or are dead (but without us – or them – realizing)” (“Puzzle Plots” 6). While all of these are relevant aspects, the fact that they are listed as an enumeration points to the lack of a unifying feature that would combine all of these characteristics, which I propose with instability.

Finally, while narrative ‘instability’ itself has not been used as a theorized term in scholarship,²¹ it appears occasionally to denote various different but related meanings. To give just some examples of this variety, in a discussion of Fitzgerald’s novel *Tender Is the Night*, Michael North connects “the narrative instability of the novel and the mental instability of the characters” (133); while Shelly Jarenski briefly analyzes “moments of narrative instability” in Melville’s fiction, e.g., when “the point of view shifts in *Moby-Dick* from the first person perspective of Ishmael to the virtual disappearance of that character in the omniscient third-person explorations of Ahab’s monomaniacal pursuit of the white whale” (23); and Richard Misek, analyzing the film *The Thin Red Line*, mentions “a moment of diegetic instability in which the dividing lines between viewer, actor, and character break down” (121).²² Similarly, terms closely related to instability that are evoked in comparable contexts include narrative incoherence or incongruity (cf. Berliner, *Hollywood Incoherent*; Murphy 80; Vest 155), inconsistency (cf. Cusset; Fludernik, *Towards* 203), or uncertainty (cf. Parrish 27; Calvin; Harris and Crawford), yet none of them has been thoroughly theorized as a concept.²³ All these instances of using the term instability

²¹ The only exception is Claudia Pinkas’s German-language monograph *Der phantastische Film: Instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität*. Her study, however, is a narratological theorization of films told in the fantastic mode, using instability as a metaphor to describe narrative effects that fantastic films evoke—in contrast, I delineated my conception of instability from the fantastic above. Furthermore, her goal to “design a narratology of fantastic films” (“Ziel ist der Entwurf einer Narratologie des phantastischen Films,” 2) puts her study in a very different disciplinary context than my focus on arguing for the cultural work of narratively unstable texts.

²² Other examples of uses of instability in very different contexts include Catherine Cusset’s discussion of narrative instability and inconsistency in paintings by Antoine Watteau (126); Thomas Flynn’s claim that “[t]he generic and narrative instability of the modern novel reflects its double origins” (xx); Alistair Fox arguing for a “narrative instability [...] between history and historylessness” (109); and studies linking instability to the body and “physical history” (Küppers 32), to the fantastic (Lilleleht 25), to dreams and the “juxtaposition of reality and imagination” (D. E. James 189), or to the fragmentation of identities (Calvin 32). The primary characteristic of these uses of instability and related terms is their sheer variety and heterogeneity, yet another striking aspect is that many of these are employed in contexts of discussions of postmodernism. Gary K. Wolfe, for instance, calls narrative instability one of many “postmodern techniques” (153), and Timothy Parrish refers to it as one of the “tendencies [...] that are said to mark the so-called postmodern era” (27)—even though, again, neither of them theorize what exactly they mean by the term. I similarly see the success of narrative instability as very much a postmodern phenomenon, yet I historicize narratively unstable texts more specifically as part of the contemporary era in section 2.2 rather than only referring to a vaguer notion of postmodernism.

²³ As concerns my specific choice among these many different terms, I consider instability particularly suited for an analysis of these phenomena because it rings back to Yeats’s metaphor of ‘things falling apart’ and the ‘center not holding,’ epitomiz-

point to very different understandings, highlighting the status of instability as a metaphor rather than as a theorized concept, as this study proposes it.

These numerous terms, concepts, and fields discuss aspects and tendencies related to my conception, yet none of them allow me to focus on the narrative techniques and the cultural contexts that I deem significant in identifying a contemporary popular-culture trend, which I term narrative instability. Accordingly, introducing narrative instability as a new concept will allow me to highlight and accentuate what I see as drawbacks in the existing approaches. For one, the plethora of differently termed studies on puzzle films and the like provide evidence of a desire to point to something new, “a ‘certain tendency’” (Elsaesser 14) in contemporary popular culture, yet I argue that the overarching characteristic that these seemingly diverse texts actually have in common is a tendency to destabilize the process of constructing a storyworld. Significantly, however, unlike many of these other studies, I do not want to propose a new ‘paradigm’ or chart a narratological typology of these texts’ features through a structuralist model. In contrast, I propose to use instability as an analytical tool for the investigation of texts’ narrative properties and their cultural work, scrutinizing why they have become popular and have attained this cultural currency, why contemporary audiences find pleasure in these narratives and how they engage with them, and what this can tell us about American culture and society in a specific historical moment. For these questions, it will be crucial to analyze the effects narratively unstable texts have on audiences, and to trace these effects in the narrative discourse—which the focus on storyworlds as the audience’s mental reconstructions also facilitates. Finally, I propose that this phenomenon takes place across different media, calling for a larger scope in a transmedia investigation, for which the concept of the storyworld with its privileging of both narrative and space—a spatial understanding of narrative that fits video games and audiovisual media especially well—is particularly suited. Having thus identified a number of shortcomings and theoretical gaps in existing scholarship and having demarcated my general approach to narrative instability from it, I will use the next section to conceptualize and explain instability in more detail.

2.1.2 NARRATIVE INSTABILITY AS A CONCEPT

As mentioned before, I introduce narrative instability to identify texts that obfuscate or impede the audience’s effort of reconstructing a text’s storyworld. Narratively unstable texts thus impair and disrupt the process of narrative comprehension, the mental recreation of a text’s events, characters, and settings as an (imagined) world. In my conception, narrative instability makes visible a characteristic of a text, something that a text *does*—by us-

ing a central move of postmodernism. It also connects with a certain (productive) instability that I see as constitutive of American studies as a field (cf. 1.1).

ing a number of diverse discursive techniques, texts can destabilize the storyworld and, simultaneously, draw attention to that very process. In this sense, instability relates directly to a text's storyworld: It is the storyworld that can be stable or unstable, and as a shorthand, texts with unstable storyworlds can be called narratively unstable. On another level, I argue that texts with these unstable characteristics form a trend or a tendency in contemporary US popular culture, that they are experiencing a 'boom' and have attained a particular cultural currency.²⁴

How unstable a storyworld can be fundamentally concerns the knowledge the audience has about its elements—how much, in general, is known about its characters and events; how certain it is that these are really the 'correct' elements; how much competing information about characters and events there is; how reliable the sources of this information are; etc. This question of the knowledge about a text's narrative situation, about its discursive elements, is also important in the context of a number of narratological studies, particularly in examinations of classical Hollywood cinema, which is characterized by "transparency" (Wilson 81) and "redundancy" in order to ensure that it is "comprehensible" (Bordwell 73).²⁵ David Bordwell traces how such principles recur in contemporary films as well, where "well-entrenched strategies for presenting time, space, goal achievement, causal connection, and the like" (75) are intended to ensure that viewers are provided with enough information and knowledge to follow the narrative progression. In narratively unstable texts, a storyworld becomes more unstable the more in doubt these elements are, for instance when there simply is no information on a specific aspect. On another level, however, any text engenders not only the storyworld itself but also the process of reconstructing it, and by affecting this process, instability is generated as well. Any text's storyworld, after all, is "subject to being updated, revised, or even

²⁴ Throughout this book, I am centrally interested in both of these aspects of narrative instability—one stimulated by a (literary-studies) interest in analyzing specific narrative characteristics of a text, the other more geared towards a (cultural-studies) exploration of the popularity of these texts and their cultural context, as they experience an upsurge in contemporary popular culture. For simplicity's sake, I refer to these two different research interests as 'narrative instability' at times interchangeably throughout this study, often implying both perspectives.

²⁵ The audience's level of knowledge is also of importance in reader-oriented approaches to narrative, notably in cognitive narratology, yet 'narrative knowledge' itself as a term has rarely been theorized in such studies. Mieke Bal, for instance, mentions this aspect rather in passing, noting how a detective story often "takes care to keep the knowledge from the reader" in order for its climactic revelation to be more effective (95). Implicitly, narrative knowledge as I suggest to think about it also plays a role in narratological investigations of coherence in texts, which tend to regard coherence "as a textlinguistic [...] notion" that forms a "strong norm" for comprehending narratives (Toolan par. 1, par. 21). While investigations of coherence and stability share a number of concerns, incoherence has not been systematically studied so far.

abandoned in favour of another” (D. Herman, “Storyworld” 570) as the text reveals increasingly more information; storyworlds are thus inherently dynamic. However, this more ‘usual’ process of updating the storyworld can be impacted, for instance when a narrator is exposed as being unreliable, which renders an immense (and, initially, often uncertain) amount of narrative information gained from that narrative instance untrustworthy, necessitating a much more significant revision of the storyworld than if, for instance, a character is revealed to be a murderer in a classic detective story. Likewise, a text might suddenly offer another version of the same event, establishing two competing renderings of the storyworld that are ultimately irreconcilable with each other and thus refusing to privilege one stable storyworld.

In more abstract terms, then, sudden, very significant updates to the storyworld, irreconcilable information, or incoherence within the storyworld that works against the narrative logics set up so far can lead to instability, because these narrative strategies all, fundamentally, draw attention to the very process of constructing that storyworld. When, for instance, the ending of *The Usual Suspects* (1995) reveals that Verbal is actually the mysterious Keyser Söze, audiences will not only have to update the storyworld according to this character revelation, they are also prompted to think about why they did not notice this ‘twist’ coming—because Verbal has actually been narrating most parts of the film to special agent Dave Kujan, constructing an elaborate narrative that made it impossible for his identity to be correctly identified. Beyond the revelation of a character’s identity on the level of the story, this moment renders the storyworld unstable because it draws attention to the level of the narrative discourse, to its narration, prompting viewers to reconsider how they received information throughout the film and acquired knowledge about the narrative setup in the light of Verbal’s unreliability as a narrator. Hence, such a moment, like narrative instability in general, emphasizes how storyworlds are reconstructed, pointing to the narrative discourse and to representation itself. This aspect is also significant for specifying what is commonly called a ‘twist.’ Plot twists are prominent in many texts and are, arguably, constitutive for genres such as crime fiction.²⁶ This common usage of the term ‘twist’ partly differs from what some call a genre of ‘twist films’ such as *The Sixth Sense*, *The Usual Suspects*, or *Fight Club*. Thinking of these texts not as constituting a genre but as narratively unstable texts can help differentiate the terms: If a revelation about a character concerns only the story level and does not prompt a reflection on the narrative discourse, it is not an unstable moment as I un-

²⁶ The short stories by O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) are equally well known for typically featuring ‘surprise endings’ (cf. Monteiro). Throughout American literature, plot twists often also relate to instances of racial passing, revealing a character thought to be white as black in the ideology of the one-drop rule, for instance in Kate Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*” (1893).

derstand it. This is an important difference that also delimits narrative instability from many of the approaches discussed in the previous subsection, as it draws a line between plot twists, which have always been part of literature and film, and those unstable moments that characterize texts which have experienced an upsurge in contemporary popular culture—the distinction thus helps to pinpoint the novelty of these texts.²⁷

An interest in *instability* invariably also raises the question of what narrative *stability* entails. Constant (minor) additions, revisions, and corrections to a storyworld do not constitute instability in themselves, but rather, they can be understood as a text's effort to preserve stability while progressing the plot or certain character developments. Most ('mainstream' and popular) narratives, to some degree, crave stability, wishing for what they present to their audience to make sense and to be coherently decipherable for its meanings, so that, in Michael Toolan's phrasing about coherence, "the identified textual parts all contribute to a whole, which is communicationally effective" (par. 1). Core aspects of narrative, such as causality, closure, and a certain coherence of the depicted events (Nünning and Nünning 66), can all be understood as stabilizing principles.²⁸ Only because narratives usually strive for one stable storyworld that is consistent in itself, and because audiences have been attuned to such stability, can narrative texts impede that process to create instability in the first place. However, I do not understand this as a binary conceptualization that would characterize storyworlds as being either stable or unstable. Instead, I conceive of instability as a gradable concept, with a text potentially being more or less unstable. This distinction of instability as gradable allows me to incorporate a wider variety of primary texts that resolve their instability to varying extents (or refuse to do so), allowing for a comparison of seemingly very different texts—for instance as I analyze the game *BioShock* (2007),

²⁷ However, for some texts, it is more difficult to make such an absolute distinction, as instability is a gradual characteristic of texts. For instance, a film like *The Matrix* (1999) is partly unstable in this way: The unstable moment revealing Neo to be living in a virtual reality draws attention to the internal focalization of Neo through which the events had been presented thus far, yet it happens so early on that the rest of the film does not engage in instability anymore—whereas a more typically unstable text like *Fight Club* very much builds up towards its final climactic revelation of instability. Similarly, *The Truman Show* (1998) is not an unstable text in the sense I propose, since it early on makes the audience aware of the constructed reality of its protagonist, which he slowly uncovers throughout the events of the film. Hence, in this book, I am primarily interested in texts that are more thoroughly unstable on the level of discourse instead of featuring smaller moments of instability or those only located on the story level. From here on, when I use the term 'twist' in this study without referring to a specific scholarly text, I mean it in this sense, as a synonym for a 'moment of instability.'

²⁸ Specifically, it is especially narrative as a symbolic form that drives towards such stability, closure, and reconciliation. As I will discuss in 2.1.3, forms of play are often more open-ended.

which offers a restabilized version at the end of its story, and the film *Black Swan* (2010), which more ambiguously wallows in its instability, side by side in the next chapter.

While, conceptually, looking at a text's storyworld shifts attention from the text itself to its audience recreating a storyworld, analytically, I suggest to study narrative instability via the text, by examining its discursive techniques for how they can engender instability. My literary-studies analysis of the primary texts considered here will thus closely focus on the characteristics of the texts at hand, with an implied audience in mind (but no empirical interest). Discursively, turning a text's storyworld unstable can be achieved in a variety of ways, which I will analyze in more depth in the three chapters to follow. In general, these discursive implementations include internal focalizations without denoting them as such; unreliable or otherwise compromised narrators (both homo- and heterodiegetic); multiple different accounts of the same event, possibly through polyfocalization or multiple perspectives; instances of metalepsis (intrusions between levels of narration); or, often in combination with some of these, a distinct lack of information, a refusal to provide details about crucial aspects of the text's narration (such as its narrator). As my readings will show, many unstable texts use internal focalization to create instability, by focalizing the representation of their world through a character whose perception is flawed in certain ways, an aspect the audience is usually not aware of. They thus utilize an aspect of narration that has become naturalized in 'filmic' language as well—when a scene is shown with the camera positioned over somebody's shoulder or from the eyes of that character, audiences know that this is supposed to denote that character's perception and realm of experience (cf. Thomas 55; Verstraten 96-124). In this sense, narratively unstable texts build on the audience's understanding and knowledge of certain narrative or filmic techniques, of what one could call the 'literary repertoire' in Wolfgang Iser's terminology (69). To culminate in instability, these texts then 'exploit' the audience's knowledge and expectations by breaking with them, consciously working against their assumptions.²⁹

²⁹ A similar tendency is true for genre as well, with some popular texts innovating themselves by building on, and then working against, genre expectations. Many unstable films belong to and play into such genres, an aspect I examine in more detail in 5.2.2. Additionally, as I discuss in the next chapter, there is a rising sense of unstable texts as a kind of genre or trend as well, with audiences' knowledge (and expectations) of instability growing throughout the years. The popular reception of M. Night Shyamalan's films can be read in this way—while *The Sixth Sense* was a box office hit and generally received favorable reviews, all of his subsequent five films grossed less money (while still, overall, being successful) and were reviewed increasingly unfavorably. Each of them also includes different variations of some kind of twist towards its ending, something that worked to great effect in *The Sixth Sense* but quickly seemed to lose its potency when it could be expected as a director's trademark. I will discuss this growing awareness of instability throughout this book as well—often implicitly, but explicitly for instance when I talk about the ex-

To summarize, I introduce narrative instability as a concept that denotes the characteristic of a text's storyworld being unstable because the information provided about it is in doubt, incomplete, or contradictory or because the process of receiving that information has been obstructed. It is a gradual characteristic rather than an absolute one, and one that can be engendered by a variety of discursive implementations. To some extent, narrative instability always metatextually draws attention to the text's own effort of representing and narratively constructing a fictional world. In turn, such unstable texts have attained widespread cultural currency and popularity in the contemporary media landscape.

2.1.3 PLAY AND TRANSMEDIALITY: INSTABILITY ACROSS MEDIA

A core element of my conceptualization of narrative instability, and a striking difference from a number of other approaches, is to conceive of it as inherently transmedial, as a trend taking place across different media and in which individual media texts are characterized by influences from other media's textual strategies. In this sense, narrative instability is characterized by a "convergence" of media, defined by Henry Jenkins as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost everywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (*Convergence* 2).³⁰ In turn, and coming back to the observations from the beginning of the introduction, the proliferation of narratively unstable texts around the end of the 1990s can be partly explained through the logics of 'remediation' (cf. Bolter and Grusin), which I consider part of a larger convergence culture: Newer media 'remediate' or "refashion" (Grusin 497) older, more established forms in order to assume part of their cultural currency, and conversely, the more traditional media "are seeking

pectations of a twist in *Black Swan* (cf. 3.4.1) and *Inception* (cf. 4.3.1).

³⁰ As Jenkins stresses, this convergence culture is equally characterized by a participatory culture, "as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content." This active role of the audience, "contrast[ing] with older notions of passive media spectatorship" (*Convergence* 3), is also crucial for how audiences engage with narratively unstable texts, an aspect I come back to below. Another development Jenkins considers a part of convergence culture is transmedia storytelling, the dispersion of textuality across different media platforms. In stories told transmedially, "consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience" (*Convergence* 21). I will discuss these aspects of transmedia storytelling in slightly more detail in chapter 5 in my readings of *Alan Wake* and *Westworld*, which particularly foster such a transmedial audience engagement. For an investigation of transmedia storytelling between 'industry buzzword' and 'new narrative experience,' cf. Ryan, "Transmedia Storytelling."

to reaffirm their status within our culture” (Bolter and Grusin 5) by appropriating some of the characteristics of new media.³¹

These characterizations of a (media) culture increasingly interested in convergence and remediation provide the context for the proliferation of narratively unstable texts since the 1990s. As the literature on puzzle, twist, mindgame, etc. films mentioned above demonstrates, narratively unstable texts have first been noted in scholarly studies on film in particular. Around the turn of the millennium, it is films that first popularize instability as a larger cultural trend by acquiring significant commercial and critical success, among them *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *The Game* (1997), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *American Psycho* (2000), *Memento* (2000), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *The Others* (2001), and *Identity* (2003), to name just a few. Many of the narrative traits that engender their instability, as I discussed before, are inspired by ‘avant-garde’ postmodern novels of the 1960s and 1970s.³² These traits thus fit narrative characteristics of postmodern novels that have been variously described as “contradiction, [...], discontinuity, randomness” (Bertens, “Debate” 9; cf. Lodge 270-300), “logical impossibility” (Fokkema 54), “the self-reflexive, the incoherent, the discontinuous, and the immanent” (Hoffmann 37), and as characterized by metafictional tendencies (Nicol 30-31) and unreliable narration (Taniyan 53).³³ The unstable films emerging in the late 1990s take

³¹ For further studies on the nexus of convergence culture, remediation, and transmediality, cf. Jenkins, Ford, et al.; Ryan and Thon; Newman and Levine; Glaser and Georgi; Gernalzick and Pisarz-Ramirez.

³² Experimental cinema of the 1970s also forms part of this influence, a perspective that Brian McHale highlights when, in a discussion of typical traits of postmodernism, he points to Peter Wollen’s comparison of “Godard’s counter-cinema (paradigmatically postmodernist [...]) and the poetics of ‘classic’ Hollywood movies” (7). The cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, however, can be considered as belonging to the same ‘avant-garde’ postmodernism as the novels by Barth or Pynchon, and in turn, such experimental cinema was heavily influenced by narrative techniques from the novel as well, engaging in a similar remediation.

³³ In turn, many of these elements are not exclusively postmodern either; rather, they have literary predecessors as well, many of them in modernism—as McHale, for instance, notes for unreliable narration (18-19). Similarly, a prominent early example of a text using a moment of instability as I understand it is Agatha Christie’s 1926 *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, whose ending reveals that Dr. James Sheppard, Hercule Poirot’s assistant in the murder investigation, is actually the murderer. By itself, this would amount to a typical plot twist contained on the level of the story (and thus not constitute instability); however, Sheppard is also the narrator of the novel, and Poirot’s identification of Sheppard as the murderer thus points readers to the many unreliable moments in Sheppard’s rendering of the story, drawing attention to the narrative discourse. Likewise, Elsaesser lists a number of “precursors of the complex storytelling mode” in his take on mindgame films (20)—still, these and other earlier unstable texts are rather isolated or singular examples, whereas postmodern novels in the 1960s and ’70s established a trend, just as narrative instability does now in popular culture.

these narrative concerns and discursive implementations as their basis and transfer them to the cinema screen—at the core, their formal experiments are thus very similar, yet they are adapted to another medium, and while postmodern novels of the 1960s and '70s have at times been decried as 'elitist' and allegedly intended only for academic audiences, the films around the turn of the millennium have attracted large audiences.

I see part of this success inherent in the (audio)visuality of film (and related media): In line with John Berger's dictum that "[s]eeing comes before words" (7), the visual carries a particularly strong appeal to reality—having seen something might entail a more forceful claim to truth than having read something. This 'trust' placed on visuality is also what provides the film camera with its "ostensible objectivity" (Quendler 7), and this is exactly what unreliable narration and many of the first very prominent narratively unstable films build on, breaking the 'trust' audiences might have placed on the camera.³⁴ The strong effect that visually 'misleading' audiences can have is especially apparent in the narratively unstable films from the late 1990s and early 2000s, which centrally work with one significant moment of instability (an aspect I discuss further in the next chapter). In *Fight Club*, for instance, the revelation that Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is not actually a diegetically real character but a manifestation of the 'split' personality of the protagonist Jack (Edward Norton) has a stronger effect because we have been seeing Tyler Durden throughout the entire film, believing him to be a fully fledged character, whereas the moment of instability reveals that this was due to the film being internally focalized through Jack's unreliable perspective.³⁵ Additionally, while seeing something 'with your own eyes' entails a stronger claim to reality than 'only' reading about it, experiencing something yourself in turn supersedes the mere witnessing of it—this experientiality is what many video games tap into, allowing their players to ac-

³⁴ This apparent objectivity, credibility, or reliability of the camera comes to fictional films and TV shows through the appeals to the documentary mode, which is also visible, for instance, in the narratological term 'camera eye' for a third-person 'objective' narrator. Even there, of course, as with all visual depictions, what might seem objective actually is highly subjective (Quendler 7), and visual depictions can be just as misleading as narrative ones as well (cf. also Roskill and Carrier; Newton). For an account of the intermingling of fictional and documentary realism in this sense, cf. Nichols 165-98.

³⁵ Interestingly, the use of an unreliable narrator is also something cinema audiences had to become accustomed to—Maurice Lahde notes how the original reception of Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950) was relatively negative, since audiences felt 'cheated' by the revelation of an unreliable flashback (296). In this sense, instability can be effective partly because, originally, film might be a medium where audiences did not expect to be 'misled' by unreliability. Unstable texts that feature such moments but, eventually, lead to stability again thus seem to propose a kind of pleasure similar to what Michael Balint terms 'Angstlust,' a thrill experienced, for instance, during and because of the anxiety-inducing moment of instability and particularly after that moment has passed, seemingly restoring normalcy (cf. Balint).

tively experience and shape video-game narratives, where an unreliable rendering of these events can have an even greater destabilizing effect on the storyworld. Overall, then, within this nexus of convergence and remediation, (postmodern) novels form a crucial anchor point for my discussion of narrative instability, albeit one situated in the background as the (at times implicit) remediated source of many of the audiovisual texts I focus on.³⁶

Destabilizing a narrative often works particularly well through the visual aspect of reconstructing a storyworld, and as such, my focus in this book will be on films, TV series, and video games. Film is the most prominent medium to feature narrative instability, whereas TV shows—which have gained much cultural traction in the last two decades in the discourses surrounding ‘complex television’ and ‘quality TV’ (cf. Mittell, *Complex TV*; Ernst and Paul; Hassler-Forest)—do not seem to engage in instability often. At least partly, this might be attributable to their seriality: Featuring a central moment of instability to work towards implies some kind of finality; for TV, it is usually the end of a season that ushers in the majority of narrative revelations that can engender instability. Sustaining such a setup over multiple seasons can be difficult, however—either the revelations are postponed to future seasons, which might frustrate audiences, or an unstable season finale builds a similar expectation for the subsequent season, leading to increasingly more unstable elements having to be introduced in a dynamic of “[intra-]serial one-upmanship or outbidding” (Kelleter, *Serial Agencies* 81) and thus potentially compromising the coherence and believability of the storyworld. Perhaps due to these reasons, compared with the dozens of popular and successful narratively unstable films that have been released in the last two decades, only few television shows are unstable in this sense.³⁷ Yet as television is experiencing further shifts in close connec-

³⁶ Significantly, a number of popular unstable films have direct literary antecedents, such as the 1996 novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis’s 1991 *American Psycho*, and Dennis Lehane’s 2003 *Shutter Island*, all of which were adapted into films. Additionally, a number of contemporary novels also are narratively unstable, for instance Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* (2006), Doug Dorst’s *S.* (2013), and much of Mark Z. Danielewski’s fiction, especially *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* (2006). Notably, many of these novels are unstable through experiments with their own form, acknowledging their physicality and using that to highlight their textuality, for instance through the ubiquitous use of footnotes(-within-footnotes) or by having to turn the book upside down in Danielewski’s fiction. A number of these elements, in turn, are remediated from newer media, especially from forms of play (for instance in so-called choose-your-own-adventure stories), but also from film or television (cf., e.g., Edwards; Hayles). While these developments form an important backdrop to my study, the main focus in this book is on investigating how ‘newer’ media and popular culture have used the legacy of the postmodern novel.

³⁷ David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) was an early example of a TV show engaging in narrative instability; perhaps because it aired too early, before the surge in narratively unstable films at the end of the decade, it failed to acquire sufficient rat-

tion (and competition) with streaming services—such as Netflix’s practice to make the entire season of a show available immediately, allowing for binge-watching practices (cf. Barker and Wiatrowski)—more narratively unstable TV shows seem to be produced as well, and consequently, in order to investigate this development, I will look in detail at one such text in chapter 5 by analyzing the HBO show *Westworld*.

The trend towards narrative instability is more visible in another, even newer medium: the video game. I would argue that some video games have begun to ‘turn inwards’ more frequently in the last few years, metafictionally exploring the inner workings of their capabilities to tell stories, in line with some scholars’ calls for games to develop “their own deconstructions” in order to ‘mature’ as a medium (Domsch 179; cf. also Ensslin, *Language* 151).³⁸ While this trend to metafictionally discuss video games’ own narrative capabilities is particularly prominent among so-called ‘indie games’—released without major publishers on platforms such as Steam and often developed by very small teams—bigger, so-called ‘triple A’ titles with large budgets, teams, and often considerable commercial success are beginning to show similar tendencies.³⁹ There are, however, no major studies of this

ings for a third season (fittingly, however, it was revived with a reboot in 2017). The 2012 TV show *Awake* about a character existing in two separate realities met a similar fate, being canceled after its first season. Of course, many other shows include smaller unstable elements, for instance the occasional twist that works according to my concept of instability (e.g., on shows like *The Outer Limits* [1995-2002]) or single discursive devices like unreliable narration in a sitcom such as *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014). Yet while they formally make use of narrative instability, few of these texts engage as thoroughly in instability as the films I mentioned so far, particularly not in terms of their cultural resonances. The most prominent example of a popular TV show with elements of instability is *Lost* (2004-2010), which arguably engaged in both practices just mentioned, deferring more and more revelations to future seasons while simultaneously constantly introducing new mysteries. Eventually, as Jason Mittell notes, by “privileging the genre of fantasy adventure over science fiction, *Lost* was willing to let many dangling mysteries go unexplained within the context of the television series, offering instead a spiritual celebration of Jack’s (and, by extension, our) ‘letting go’ of the need for rational understanding in the program’s closing moments” (*Complex TV* 310), leading to a very polarized reception of its finale. In turn, a more recent example of a narratively unstable TV series is the 2019 Netflix show *Russian Doll*.

³⁸ Other popular media might be engaging in a similar trend towards metafictionality, arguably, for instance, comic books and graphic novels (cf. Hescher 81-83; Round; Stein et al.). Still, especially because of the prominence of notions of play in contemporary culture, I deem video games as the most salient of these.

³⁹ Examples of such indie games include *Dear Esther* (2012), *The Stanley Parable* (2013), or *Pony Island* (2016), whereas some of the big-budget games interested in their own narrative and ludic workings are the titles of the *BioShock* series, *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Alan Wake* (2012), or *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). Throughout this book, I will mainly focus on the latter kinds of games, the particularly popular and commercially successful ones.

trend among video games yet, which this book partly tries to assuage as well: Narrative instability is one way for video games to engage in these formal experiments, to draw attention to their own efforts of narration and how these can be interwoven with their ludic elements, i.e., their gameplay and the potential for interactivity. In their storytelling efforts, video games remediate narrative techniques from novels and, specifically, film as well.⁴⁰

Finally, taking video games serious as a cornerstone of this investigation of contemporary popular culture is also significant because video games' aesthetic dimensions are, in turn, remediated by the 'older,' more established media, leading to a fusion of narrative and play. In the contemporary environment of transmedia and convergence culture, media influence each other dialectically—as Bolter and Grusin also note (5), remediation is not a one-way street, but rather, just as newer media look towards more traditional ones to establish themselves, older ones try to reinvigorate themselves through inspiration from new media's innovative capabilities. I centrally read this reciprocity as one between the symbolic forms of play and narrative, and I understand video games as liminal media that make use of both narrative and ludic elements (cf. 1.1). In order to tell stories, they remediate aspects known from (audiovisual) media and add elements from what I call ludic textuality (or narrativity), partly inherent in their gameplay (i.e., the way the game has to be engaged with in order to function) and partly as additions to their narrative capabilities. As these elements of play, I propose interactivity, agency, nonlinearity, and iteration as the most relevant ones: Games have to be actively (and physically) engaged with in order to work (interactivity);⁴¹ they provide options and decisions to players

⁴⁰ Among the most prominent remediated elements is the use of so-called 'cutscenes,' which interrupt the gameplay and portray an important story event similar to a scene in a film. Since cutscenes are difficult to employ seamlessly within the gameplay, they are often criticized as "cinematic sequences a[d]dressing the reader, putting the player on hold" (Klevjer 193). Other remediated elements include the occasional use of voice-over narration and unreliable narration, codified camera shots, angles, and movement, and an established first-person and third-person camera perspective on the protagonist, both of which convey internal focalization.

⁴¹ Crucially, this interactivity also implies a familiarity with the rules of a game, an aspect that particularly ludologists highlight in their understanding of games (cf. Aarseth; Juul; Frasca). In turn, such a focus on the 'rules' of a text reoccurs in contemporary unstable texts that, like these games, highlight the importance of their poetics, their formal and narrative 'rules,' by drawing attention to their discourse. Additionally, next to an engagement with the text, interactivity also entails a social component, in online or cooperative games that depend on other players as well (whereas most single-player games work with an artificial intelligence, i.e., characters controlled by the computer). Applying this notion of interactivity beyond video games highlights the social and communal aspect entailed in a number of unstable texts, whose instability prompts engagements with other viewers or players on social media or online forums, together trying to piece together the plot and to uncover the meanings of the text.

between which they can choose (agency);⁴² these choices can lead to different narrative experiences (nonlinearity);⁴³ and because of that, many games encourage repeated playthroughs or repetitions of individual sequences (iteration). These aspects of playing inspire a number of narratively unstable texts and influence their textuality accordingly: Unstable texts encourage an active engagement with formal and textual properties, often by rewatching a film/series or going back to specific scenes with updated knowledge; they foster communal audience engagements, discussing possible interpretations or ‘hidden’ plot elements and connections on online forums; and they highlight narrative and interpretive openness (instead of closure) by mimicking games’ nonlinearity, advocating multiple possible outcomes and embracing ambivalence.⁴⁴

Narratively unstable texts ‘play’ with their own textuality in these ways, and while this is certainly something found in the unstable video games I

⁴² As I will come back to notions of agency throughout this study, it is important to point to a use of agency in the field of game studies that is often limiting or misleading. In fact, the rather complicated issue of agency and choice in video games has been discussed numerous times in game scholarship (cf., e.g., Domsch; Murray, *Hamlet* 126-53; Mukherjee 146-73; Eichner; Grodal), with one particularly influential idea being the ‘illusion’ of choice, agency, or free will in video games (Atkins 44; Domsch 42, 90; Haimberg 3). Atkins, for instance, speaks of the “limited illusion of freedom of choice offered that works against the expectations of linearity” (44), implying that agency is limited (and that complete freedom of choice is an illusion) only in video games. Instead, I propose to understand (most, but not all) video games as trying to achieve a certain textual *effect* in terms of choice and agency—they want their players to feel like they are in control of what happens. Video games will always feature some choices—starting from the mundane physical choice of which button to press and going over to narrativized choices, such as where to go, whom to attack, or how to develop one’s character—but cannot, of course, offer complete ‘freedom,’ the possibility to do whatever one pleases to do. Yet it is actually this idea of ‘complete’ freedom or agency that is an illusion; just like in real life, choices and agency in video games always happen “within a dialectic of enablement and constraint,” as Florian Bast phrases it (28), understanding agency not as “an inherent attribute” (27) but as “an ability realized in a specific cultural and historical context” (28).

⁴³ This kind of nonlinearity does not describe an achronological narration, as the term is used in literary studies. Instead, in the context of play, nonlinearity denotes that there “is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but [that] the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text” (Aarseth 41). A nonlinear text thus has the “ability to vary, to produce different courses” (Aarseth 41-42), for instance when, in a game, a specific choice leads to different endings.

⁴⁴ The 1985 film *Clue* is an early example of what nowadays could be considered a remediation of video games’ penchant to feature multiple endings, as it was shown with three alternative endings in different cinemas. In turn, such a practice also encourages audience engagement afterwards, comparing narrative outcomes and possible interpretations with viewers who have seen different endings (or, in the logics of iteration, watching the film again oneself in the hope to witness another ending).

discuss, it also extends, in remediated form, to the more traditional media of films, television series, and novels. Placing this much importance on play connects with recent discussions of the interplay between these symbolic forms and of what some term the ‘ludification’ of contemporary culture and society: As Valerie Frissen et al. argue, while ludification centrally includes the “immense popularity of computer games, which, as far as global sales are concerned, have already outstripped Hollywood movies,” elements of play have also entered realms such as “leisure time,” “work,” “education,” “politics,” and “even warfare” (“Homo Ludens” 9).⁴⁵ Significantly, ‘high’ postmodernism has also often been described as being ‘playful,’ yet frequently with very different implications: When McLaughlin complains about contemporary fiction’s “postmodern games,” he equates these with “annoying stylistic tricks” and a lack of “characters we can care about and a plot in which we can lose ourselves” (“Post-Postmodernism” 212), not only casting postmodernism but also games as a foil against which he supposedly places fiction with ‘meaning.’ In other contexts, describing postmodernism as playful equally serves to associate it with not being serious (cf. Edwards 69), with a certain looseness and an interest only in formal experimentation instead of a focus on characters or plot, constructing a binary between the seriousness of realism and ‘playful’ postmodernism as its opposite, unconcerned with ‘real’ themes or emotions.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ This ludification (to which discourses around ‘gamification’ also belong) is mirrored in contemporary media discussions as well, evident, for instance, in Elsaesser’s previously discussed notion of the ‘mindgame film’; Mittell equally notes that contemporary 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” (“Narrative Complexity” 38). In many regards, Johan Huizinga’s 1938 *Homo Ludens* still is the most influential work in highlighting the importance of play in everyday culture and spheres of life. In the following decades, a variety of scholarship has addressed the continued and renewed significance of play in contemporary society—for further research on this ludification and gamification and the influence of play and games on other media, cf. Frissen et al., *Playful Identities*; Warmelink 181-205; Savignac; Fuchs et al.

⁴⁶ Ryan notes that the metaphor of play or game is particularly prominent in postmodernism because “it exemplifies the elusive character of the signified and the slippery nature of language” (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 177), and Julian Kücklich similarly observes: “Play liquefies the meaning of signs; it breaks up the fixed relation between signifier and signified, thus allowing signs to take on new meanings. This is probably also the reason why the metaphor of play has gained such prevalence in the post-modern discourse” (7-8). As a case in point, Kücklich cites Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man as examples of influential uses of ‘play’ metaphors in discussions of postmodernism. The association of play with nonseriousness, in turn—even Jenkins implicitly evokes this binarism when he contrasts the “work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system” (*Convergence* 3)—also fits discourses that associate video games with a lack of seriousness, seeing them as a waste of time or even a danger (particularly to children) (cf. Happ and Melzer; Markey and Ferguson).

While, as I will discuss in the next section, I doubt that such a generalizing assessment is productive for investigations of postmodernism, I still identify a significant difference between how postmodern texts of the 1960s and '70s were considered 'playful' and how I understand narrative instability as engaging in play. As narratively unstable texts are characterized by this kind of ludic textuality, I argue that they have a different relationship to play than what has been ascribed to postmodernism in scholarship so far—specifically in the ways I outlined above (recurring to interactivity, agency, nonlinearity, and iteration). Overall, next to the more general narrative aspects making up instability, its inherently transmedial dimension is equally significant in identifying narrative instability as a trend across popular culture. In addition to remediations of storytelling techniques from older to newer media and vice versa, it is particularly unstable texts' relation to the symbolic form of play that establishes this transmedial dimension.

2.2 Contextualizing and Historicizing Narrative Instability: Why Instability Now?

In addition to the more 'literary' interest in outlining instability as a narrative trend, this book centrally pursues a cultural-studies project of examining narrative instability's cultural work. In that vein, and keeping Fredric Jameson's imperative to "[a]lways historicize!" in mind (*Political Unconscious* ix), I want to contextualize this study 'historically' by providing answers to the question of 'why instability now?'—why is it that narratively unstable texts have become popular now, in their particular media, instead of the high-postmodernist novels of the 1960s and '70s, and what can be learned about contemporary US culture and society from analyzing this popular trend. To approach these questions, I will take a closer look at my suggestion to position narrative instability as part of contemporary American popular culture: First, I will outline my conception of the 'contemporary' moment into which narrative instability injects itself, contextualizing the contemporary era within discussions of (post-)postmodernism. Second, I will detail what I understand as popular culture and the 'popular' in more general terms, linking this project to canonical scholarship in American studies and popular culture studies. Third, I will examine in how far this is a specifically (US) American trend, pointing to the cultural contexts that narrative instability evokes, centering on whiteness, masculinity, and the middle class. Finally, a fourth section will carve out a few of the recurring cultural framings engaged by narrative instability, specifically highlighting how the texts considered here consistently return to issues of identity, reality, and textuality. Together, the following pages accentuate the contemporary moment as characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity and complexity, by pleasures gained in the negotiation of popular narratives and

notions of play, and by complicated, ambivalent textual politics lying between progressive projects and reactionary backlash.

2.2.1 APPROACHING THE CONTEMPORARY MOMENT

By focusing on the contemporary moment in this study, I refer to roughly the middle of the 1990s to the 2010s, as this is when narrative instability begins to become popular. Notably, narratively unstable texts negotiate questions and frictions that are reflected in academic discussions about the contemporary as a possibly ‘post-postmodern’ era: With a variety of different terms and concepts, such as ‘post-postmodernism’ (cf. McLaughlin, “Post-Postmodern”; Timmer; Nealon), ‘late postmodernism’ (cf. J. Green), ‘after postmodernism’ (cf. López and Potter; Rebein; Hoberek, “After Postmodernism”), ‘metamodernism’ (cf. Vermeulen and van den Akker), ‘digi-modernism’ (cf. Kirby), or ‘cosmodernism’ (cf. Moraru), a number of scholars have suggested the ‘end’ of postmodernism, arguing at least that “it is in a state of decline” (López and Potter 4) but often, more forcefully, suggesting that “postmodernism became terminally ill sometime in the late-eighties and early-nineties [and] was buried once and for [all] in the rubble of the World Trade Center” (Brooks and Toth 3).

While my historicization of narrative instability also engages such discussions, I see four significant differences between them, which will help sharpen my own contextualization:⁴⁷ First, the variously labeled post-postmodern accounts all imply a strict periodization, identifying significant differences between postmodernism and whatever they propose comes thereafter. Such a penchant to periodize seems flawed for a number of reasons (cf. Herrmann, Kanzler, and Schubert 10-17), among them the arbitrariness with which they propose various points in history, such as the end of the Cold War or 9/11 (Brooks and Toth 2-3), as the liminal break between the two periods. Second, almost all of these accounts refer to a particular understanding of postmodernism that omits many of its heterogeneous aspects, instead using postmodernism as a foil against which they project a new paradigm, in the process “forg[ing] postmodernism into a period characterized by literature’s disavowal of politics and social referentiality” (Herrmann, Kanzler, and Schubert 12). Specifically, this narrative about postmodernism focuses only on its proclivity for formal, metafictional experimentation, largely disregarding another crucial dimension of postmodernism: the opening-up of (access to) discourses and the increased recogni-

⁴⁷ This historicization of the contemporary moment strongly builds on previous work done in the context of a research project on the ‘poetics of politics’—for a more thorough and detailed engagement with these various narratives of post-postmodernism, and particularly their tendency to periodize, cf. Herrmann, Kanzler, and Schubert.

tion of female and ‘minority’ authors.⁴⁸ Third, many of these studies discuss only one specific medium, most frequently the novel, often disregarding popular culture and failing to see the transmedial influences and relations between these media, which relate very differently to developments typically associated with postmodernism. Finally, this strong impetus to employ the logic of periodization implies a monolithic quality to culture in general, which is then understood to largely and coherently move from one period to another. For these post-postmodern studies, this is usually a shift towards ‘neo-realism’ or a similarly termed concept, variously characterized by “clarity and simplicity” (López and Potter 5), “probing, superconscious narrations” (Rebein 43), the examination of “social issues through the prism of personal experience” (Rebein 19), “more grounded (or ‘responsible’) works” (Brooks and Toth 5), and other elements that supposedly stand in opposition to postmodernism.⁴⁹ In many respects, this seems like a vast oversimplification—just as modernism did not simply ‘lead into’ postmodernism and, instead, the two constructions significantly relate dialectically to each other and share similarities (cf. Hoffmann; Brooker; Eagleton), many of these supposedly neo-realist aspects characterize parts of (different understandings of) contemporary postmodernism as well.

In contrast to these four larger points, my conception understands the contemporary period as a continuation of postmodern tendencies, not a sharp break from it; it sees postmodernism as always having had both an interest in self-referential formal experimentation and in ‘political’ aspects; it recognizes individual media as relating differently to postmodern tendencies and looks at the contemporary cultural landscape transmedially; and it envisions narrative instability as only one tendency within the heterogeneous contemporary moment, instead of casting it as a sharp break or shift from what came before. Narratively unstable texts highlight issues that reverberate with questions asked about the contemporary moment in discussions of post-postmodernism, yet narrative instability rather aligns with studies that argue for an intensification of postmodernism in the contemporary era (cf. Nealon), seeing that many of the traits characterizing instabil-

⁴⁸ This construction leads, for instance, to Rebein’s unusual claim that, among others, Toni Morrison is one of the “writers we would not normally associate with literary postmodernism” (7), in the process reducing postmodernism to a predominantly white male project. On the different facets and dimensions of postmodernism, cf. particularly Linda Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism*, which understands minority voices as the ‘ex-centric’ in an effort to ‘decenter’ the postmodern (57-73).

⁴⁹ This kind of new realism has been labeled ‘neo-realism’ (cf. Brooks and Toth), ‘dirty realism’ (cf. Rebein), ‘critical’ or ‘transcendental realism’ (cf. López and Potter), or ‘speculative realism’ (cf. Saldivar). While, of course, there are numerous works in the contemporary moment that can be considered to engage in such a neo-realist mode of writing, all of these studies use postmodernism in a way to misleadingly imply that works in the realist mode were not part of postmodernism, again reducing it to a foil against which to project proclamations of post-postmodernism.

ity align with ‘classical’ postmodernism as well. As some studies frame it (cf. Timmer; Brooks and Toth), in this sense, postmodernism is present as a ‘specter’ in these texts. Yet narrative instability also entails differences from these earlier postmodern conceptions, particularly in regard to unstable texts’ (transmedial) relationship to play, as discussed above, and in terms of how readily audiences have engaged with them, leading to immense mainstream popularity and commercial success (which I outline in more detail in the next subsection). Most importantly, though, with an interest in the ‘poetics of politics’ (cf. Herrmann, Kanzler, and Schubert), this study is not invested in periodizing the contemporary but in historicizing it—instead of proclaiming this as the ‘era of instability’ or engaging in a similarly grandiose gesture, my interest lies in analyzing what the proliferation of narratively unstable texts illuminates about contemporary American culture.

In turn, in addition to the shift towards convergence culture discussed before, another major cultural trend that relates to narrative instability concerns a move towards ‘narrative complexity.’ In Jason Mittell’s seminal study of the subject, he defines narrative complexity as a “distinct narrational mode” in an “era of narrative experimentation and innovation” (“Narrative Complexity” 29; cf. also Mittell, *Complex TV*). Although Mittell specifically discusses television, the idea of popular narratives becoming more complex has taken hold for other media as well (cf. Staiger; Buckland, *Puzzle Films*; Kiss and Willemsen; Hven). While I see a general drawback in the normativity implied in the term ‘complex’—which Mittell also problematizes, stating that ‘conventional’ and ‘complex’ “are not value-free descriptions” (“Narrative Complexity” 30)—it encompasses a larger media development that more productively captures the variety of textual transformations of the last decades than a more singular study on, for instance, puzzle or twist films. Narratively unstable texts generally fit into this trend as well, at least in terms of two strands that I consider constitutive of the shift towards complexity. On the one hand, audiences enjoy narrative complexity and draw pleasure from it because of what Mittell, via Neil Harris, calls ‘operational aesthetics’:⁵⁰ As Harris explains, this is a “pleasure in experiencing deception after knowledge of it had been gained” (68), an idea that Mittell prominently adapts to describe the pleasure of “watch[ing] the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics” (“Narrative Complexity” 35). It is thus a pleasure that derives not primarily from the content of the text but from its form, its narrative discourse, signaling a heightened audience interest in

⁵⁰ More correctly, Mittell uses the term in the singular, yet, in line with Felix Brinker’s analysis of complex television (50), I suggest to use it in the plural, since ‘operational aesthetics’ denote the multitude of practices and pleasures that can be involved in this engagement with complex narratives.

matters of textuality.⁵¹ On the other hand, narrative complexity implies a trend towards a level of audience engagement akin to the previously mentioned participatory culture, where texts encourage audiences to reengage with the text multiple times, closely watch for ‘hidden’ details, and collect their findings to discuss them with other viewers (or readers or players). Mittell more specifically refers to such practices as “forensic fandom,” a mode “that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling” (“Forensic Fandom”). Similar to how rewatching a film for such details mirrors the iterative nature of many video-game narratives, this social engagement with the text is an element I also understand as being influenced by play as a communal effort, which goes hand in hand with more widespread discussions of popular culture in online contexts.⁵² Overall, narrative instability as a popular trend in the contemporary moment thus is characterized by a continuation of many postmodern strategies, a difference in how it relates narrative and play to each other, a focus on operational aesthetics as a source of pleasure, and the encouragement of an active audience engagement with the texts’ narrative, discursive, and thematic elements.

2.2.2 POPULARITY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The texts and media I consider in this book are all part of popular culture, and hence, their study aligns itself with the historical emergence of the field of popular culture studies as well as with the significance of the study of popular culture within American studies. Theories of popular culture and of the ‘popular’ in general thus form an important context in which narrative instability inserts itself as well.⁵³ In this sense, investigating popular culture

⁵¹ Mittell adds that these traits of narrative complexity “convert many viewers to amateur narratologists” (“Narrative Complexity” 38), which, while again somewhat of a normative term, is a useful shorthand to describe the way in which contemporary audiences engage with many narratively unstable texts for pleasurable effects; accordingly, I will at times refer to this notion of ‘amateur narratologists’ as well.

⁵² Of course, talking to others about the meanings of a text is also something encouraged by the symbolic form of narrative (not least in the context of oral storytelling), and it is not a form of participation dependent on the Internet, instead having characterized negotiations of texts and their narratives for centuries. However, the Internet facilitates and encourages such discussions more easily, and it also makes it easier to study such discussions academically. Significantly, this trend towards ‘forensic fandom’ takes place across media as well; for instance, the official forum for Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* includes thousands of threads and ten thousands of posts that collect hints hidden in the book, compare clues from different pages with each other, and collaboratively work to interpret parts of the novel (cf. “House of Leaves”).

⁵³ As with a few other significant contexts for this book, the history of the study of popular culture is too broad and multifaceted to render here in detail. Additionally, since such retracings already exist, I will only summarize the most critical points

in American studies implies an inquiry into the functions and uses of popularly consumed texts and into an understanding of the interplay between texts and their audiences—and, notably, it also always entails an inquiry into the ‘Americanness’ of such popular-culture artifacts, as it is specifically American culture that is cast as something to be consumed (cf. A. A. Berger, *Ads* 35). Throughout the past several decades, popular culture has been studied from a variety of often contradictory approaches—in fact, part of the productivity of analyzing popular culture might be that “there can be no single unified outlook or critical perspective” on it (Haselstein et al. 335).

Taking a step back, however, the struggles over the meanings of popular culture are visible along three larger impulses: “ideological, commercial and populist concepts” of popular culture, among which “debate has ensued about exactly where to locate the authority over popular culture’s meanings on the spectrum from ideological manipulation to audiences’ semiotic freedom” (Kanzler, *Infinite Diversity* 49, 45). Ideological conceptions of popular culture debate its implications in the dominant ideology—ranging from condemnations as part of the ‘culture industry’ in the thinking of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno; cf. Witkin) to more nuanced takes on popular culture and its audiences as allowing for the potential of oppositional readings (Fiske, *Television* 65; cf. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”). In turn, commercial points of view highlight popular culture’s status as commercial products, implicated in a capitalist logic, yet since producers of popular culture “face the objective that their products *must* be popular,” they potentially “[need] to adopt positions that may collide with their own ideological interests” (Kanzler, *Infinite Diversity* 47). Populist conceptions, lastly, focus specifically on the role audiences play as well as on the agency they have in ‘consuming’ popular culture and, in the process, activating its potentially ambivalent meanings. While recognizing the importance of all three of these perspectives on popular culture, I am particularly interested in the last aspect throughout the course of this book: Influenced by John Fiske’s take on popular culture, I read the texts in this study for the pleasures they elicit for their audiences (*Understanding* 49-68) as well as for their polysemy, their potentials for complex, ambivalent meanings (*Television* 85-93), and for what could be called the ‘politics’ of these texts.⁵⁴

that are relevant for my study at hand. For a deeper engagement with the emergence of popular culture as an important paradigm within American studies and influential work on popular culture in general, cf. specifically Fiske, *Understanding*; Cawelti, *Mystery*; Jenkins, McPherson, et al.; Storey, *Cultural Theory*; Storey, *Cultural Studies*; Strinati.

⁵⁴ As the nexus of pleasure and reception practices forms an important context for this study, I will look at it in more detail in the next chapter (cf. 3.2.2), since it is especially relevant for unstable identities texts, which often feature single significant moments of instability about their protagonist’s identity that expect and encourage a certain reception in order to be pleasurable.

Against the backdrop of these theoretical discussions, popular culture has been variedly defined. In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey lists six different approaches of thinking about popular culture: quantitatively, that is, “culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many people” (5); relationally, as “the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture” (6); as ‘mass culture,’ “a hopelessly commercial culture [...] mass-produced for mass consumption” (8); from a populist perspective, as “the culture that originates from ‘the people,’” a kind of ‘folk culture’ (9); in a more ‘political’ understanding, via the Gramscian concept of hegemony, as “a site of struggle between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups” (10); and as part of postmodern culture, which “no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture” (12). Many of these dimensions can be set up against each other to more comprehensively study popular culture. For this investigation, I follow Storey’s quantitative impulse to understand popular culture as those cultural artifacts that have been both commercially and critically successful.⁵⁵ Moreover, in fusing some of the approaches that Storey lists, I consider those texts popular that make use of specific media and genres. For the former, this concerns those media that have attained a particularly popular standing in recent decades, engendering highly profitable consumer markets, and thus encompasses, in this study, video games, film, and TV. In regard to genres, texts can become popular by making use of formulaic narratives that have proven to be successful or well-liked by audiences—a crime novel or a science-fiction film, for instance, can easily be marketed as such, immediately speaking to a potential audience of genre fans. Texts can then use this allegiance to a certain genre and capitalize on the audience’s knowledge of formulas, fostering innovation by not neatly belonging to one single genre but by mixing different established ones or consciously working against the expectations of a specific genre.⁵⁶ Adding to Storey’s list, I also consider the texts in my corpus popular because they engage in the popularization of certain scientific issues, an aspect I discuss in detail in chapter 4 (cf. 4.2.2).

⁵⁵ Both commercial and critical success, along with other parameters that could be considered to denote being “widely favoured or well liked by many people” (Storey, *Cultural Theory* 5), can be measured in different ways, of course. Accordingly, I will point out how I understand the primary texts of the subsequent chapters’ central analyses as belonging to this understanding of popular culture at the beginning of each reading.

⁵⁶ John G. Cawelti’s work has been most influential in pointing out that the study of such popular genres, which work according to ‘formulas’ that he analyzes, has scholarly value even when taking them just as seriously as ‘high-culture’ texts, i.e., when reading them not as ‘simply’ formulaic fiction but considering their aesthetics (cf. *Adventure*). I discuss genre in more detail in chapter 5 (cf. 5.2.2), as it forms a particularly significant context for how unstable texts understand their own textuality.

Finally, the relation between popular and high culture, similar to conceptions of popular culture as hailing from ‘the people’ vs. being implicated in the culture industry, is more complicated than can be explored here. I certainly see postmodernism’s claim that it “no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture” (12) with suspicion, as divisions between high and popular culture themselves seem to continue their hold in American society, just, perhaps, with shifted positions, where, for instance, a medium like the video game nowadays takes on the ‘low’ cultural position previously held by television. Claiming to strip away these demarcations between low and high culture thus appears as a mostly performative act. Importantly, however, I consider narrative instability as potentially providing such an impulse, mainly through its transmedial dimension, breaking the barriers between formal conventions traditionally associated only with either high or popular culture, and thus offering popular pleasures in operational aesthetics.⁵⁷ In studying the texts in this book as popular, I thus understand popular culture not as an entity as such but as a process that is negotiated and discursively constructed.

2.2.3 AMERICAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MOMENT

A third significant contextualization of this project is its focus on the United States. As an American studies project, the corpus considered logically consists of US texts. However, narrative instability is also a transnational trend encompassing texts with international appeal: For one, unstable texts are commercially successful internationally as well; moreover, there are also a number of unstable texts from other countries that, even if they

⁵⁷ Similarly, the previously mentioned shift towards ‘quality TV’ performs such a breakdown of clear binaries between pop and high culture as well, as do discourses surrounding a ‘middlebrow’ culture (cf. Rubin), both of which come close to a ‘crossing of the border’ and ‘closing of the gap’ famously proclaimed by Leslie Fiedler. Still, popular culture, as mentioned above, also remains a commercial enterprise, and as such, it is implicated in the dominant ideology, which is why I would caution to understand it simply as culture from ‘the people’ (whoever that homogeneous entity might be). Previous signs of fusions between popular and high culture have, after all, often been met with alarm, for instance in David Foster Wallace’s influential essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in which he laments the fact that television has adapted techniques from the postmodern avant-garde, rendering it incapable of criticizing dominant ideology. As McLaughlin summarizes Wallace’s argument, “techniques that were for the early postmodernists the means of rebellion have become, through their co-optation by television, ‘agents of a great despair and stasis’” (“Post-Postmodern” 64-65). In contrast, however, I see this “co-optation” as potentially positive and productive, allowing, after all, for narrative innovation and experimentation. In turn, I do not consider the ‘political’ and ideological implications of such a fusion in terms of the traditions of a larger cultural critique (which Wallace seems to engage in) but by reading these texts for the cultural work they do (cf. 1.1).

are not as numerous as their US counterparts, still constitute a transnational trend.⁵⁸ Yet in line with a general minimization of authorial presences in literary studies following the ‘death of the author’ (Barthes, “Death”), I do not want to define the question of a text being American as who has written or produced it (something that is particularly difficult for films, TV shows, or video games, seeing that hundreds of people are involved in their production). Rather, I understand my corpus as American through a focus on the texts’ content, their subjects, and their themes, as even unstable texts from other countries are ‘Americanized’ in this sense.⁵⁹ These elements include specific American genres like the Western or the hard-boiled detective story, (founding) myths associated with the United States (cf. Paul), and, more specifically, a particularly self-conscious engagement with questions and categories of difference such as ‘race,’ class, and gender. I specifically want to focus on the latter in slightly more detail, as these categories form a cultural realm that all narratively unstable texts relate to.

Part of my overall argument is that one of the most recurring cultural dynamics among narratively unstable texts is their propensity to predominantly focus on white, male, middle-class protagonists.⁶⁰ Hence, while un-

⁵⁸ To name just two concrete examples of unstable texts’ international success: While *The Sixth Sense* grossed over 290 million dollars in the US, it made almost 380 million dollars in other countries (“Sixth Sense”); *Inception*, similarly, has a domestic gross of over 290 million dollars but was an even bigger international success, bringing in over 530 million dollars from other markets (“Inception”). The audiences reached by narratively unstable video games and television shows, which are more difficult to track, similarly extend across the globe. On the other hand, narrative instability is also found in non-American texts—there are earlier texts with single unstable elements, such as Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972) or Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Welt am Draht* (1973), and more recent examples that fully form part of contemporary narrative instability, like Tom Tykwer’s *Lola rennt* (1998), Nacho Vigalondo’s *Los Cronocrímenes* (2007), Jaco Van Dormael’s *Mr. Nobody* (2009), the Wachowskis and Tykwer’s *Cloud Atlas* (2012) based on the 2004 novel by David Mitchell, or the TV series *Dark* (2017-), the first German-language series created by Netflix. These and many others give evidence of narrative instability’s transnational popularity, but particularly texts such as *Dark* also illustrate how strongly they are influenced by their US ‘counterparts,’ since the show is closely modeled in its plot, unstable moments, and discursive presentation according to a by then existing tradition of American narrative instability.

⁵⁹ However, the six texts forming the central primary readings in the following analytical chapters all fit a more narrow, author-focused definition of US texts as well, with the exception of the video game *Alan Wake*, which was developed by the Finnish studio Remedy Entertainment (and published by Microsoft). As I will demonstrate in chapter 5, however, *Alan Wake* firmly locates itself in an American setting, with numerous references to and inspirations drawn from US popular culture and literature (such as film noir, the horror film, and the American Gothic).

⁶⁰ In terms of class, while some characters in unstable texts could be considered as belonging to the upper class in regard to factors such as income, occupation, lifestyle, or the power they have over others (Zweig 19), I subsume these under the moniker of the middle class as well. This is because what is most striking about the

stable texts tackle a variety of different subjects and settings, what the child psychologist Malcolm Crowe in *The Sixth Sense*, the unnamed car recall specialist in *Fight Club*, the investment banker Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, the best-selling eponymous writer in *Alan Wake*, the corporate espionage expert Dominick Cobb in *Inception*, the former NASA pilot Joseph Cooper in *Interstellar*, or the rival stage magicians Robert Angier and Alfred Borden in *The Prestige* (2006) all have in common is that they are white middle-class men.⁶¹ As I will demonstrate throughout this study, the texts considered here mainly construct instability as an issue of and for white middle-class men, the presumed unmarked ‘norm’ in US society. Arguing against this assumed unmarkedness, I see this constellation not as a coincidence but as a conscious intersection of categories, where the dominant majority positions along lines of race (whiteness), gender (masculinity), and class (middle class) reinforce each other to establish an even more powerful position.⁶² While the unstable texts discussed in this book differ in

treatment of class in many narratively unstable texts is their tendency to ignore it, to portray their protagonists as belonging to some universally assumed class—which is in line with an overemphasis on the middle class in American imagination as well. As Michael Zweig posits, “[a]s the working class has disappeared from polite conversation, the middle class has come to be accepted as the social position most Americans are in” (29), casting middle-class Americans as the “common man, everywoman” (30). This representation of the universality of the middle class also affects self-perceptions, as Americans from very different economic positions often tend to consider themselves to belong to the middle class along with a general tendency to “disbelieve in class” (Lauter and Fitzgerald 1; cf. 2-4), turning the middle class into “the source of normative representations of Americanness” (Robinson 2). Accordingly, when unstable texts, whether they consciously mark class or try to homogenize it, relate particularly significantly to constructions of class, I will analyze these moments in detail, for instance in the games of the *BioShock* series (cf. 3.3, 4.4).

⁶¹ There are, of course, a few notable exceptions, as a number of narratively unstable texts feature (white) female protagonists, such as the films *Lola rennt*, *The Others*, *Black Swan*, or *Arrival* (2016) and the video games *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) or *Life Is Strange* (2015). Accordingly, I will focus on *Black Swan* in a detailed reading in the next chapter in order to examine the differences in instability that such a choice of protagonist can entail.

⁶² This idea of thinking of whiteness, masculinity, and the middle class as intersecting is informed by Cynthia Levine-Rasky’s study of the intersection of whiteness and middle-classness. Like Levine-Rasky’s approach, this is intended as a theoretical move to help “advance an understanding of power” by “explor[ing] the intersections of race and class but [...] with the lens on whiteness, middle-classness” (239). Originally, intersectionality theory is a concept from black feminist theory intended to study oppression in particular (cf. Crenshaw), arguing that “identity is experienced not as composed of discrete attributes but as a subjective, even fragmented, set of dynamics” (Levine-Rasky 242). Levine-Rasky also problematizes the ‘appropriation’ of this concept for the hegemonic norm (240); yet I contend that part of a rounder understanding of power relations in society entails looking not just at how multiple categories of oppression increase the subjugation of minorities (cf. also

their awareness of these issues, as visual media, they all at least implicitly mark their characters, so even if they generally keep whiteness invisible as a discourse, they cannot avoid implicating themselves in the history of power relations surrounding whiteness in a US historical context. Accordingly, in order to problematize and probe into this particular construction, I will carve out in my analyses how the primary texts relate to issues of race, class, and gender, how they explicitly mark their characters as such in certain moments but in others try to keep their dominant positions invisible, and how all of these constructions significantly relate to questions of oppression, discrimination, and domination. In this sense, and in line with much recent scholarship in fields like masculinity studies (cf. Connell; Kimmel, *Manhood*; Robison) and critical whiteness studies (cf. Morrison, *Playing*; Dyer; Roediger; Frankenberg; Hill), I will argue against the assumed universality of these dominant poles by making them visible and contextualizing them within power relations.

Conspicuously, this focus on the white male middle class in narratively unstable texts comes at a time of concerted attempts and struggles by women and (racial) minorities to increase their sociocultural visibility and to reach into the domains of public (cultural) discussions.⁶³ While, as I will show in the detailed readings of the following chapters, many unstable texts ostensibly pursue progressive projects, they become entangled in a reactionary political landscape that has formed as a backlash against these developments. Part of the pleasures that these texts offer is thus a seeming criticism of dominant ideologies that, on closer inspection, entails fissures, tensions, and contradictions that end up reaffirming hegemonic structures. Across the variety of unstable texts, this dynamic works in three related ways: For one, many texts suggest that the instability of one's identity or one's world is something only the unmarked 'norm' of white men cares (and worries) about, epistemically privileging them over minorities by invariably tying these representations to whiteness. While this plays into ideas that people of color and women have more 'pressing' and 'real' needs to consider, seeing how they do not enjoy white male privilege, it is a patronizing tendency similar to the previously mentioned constructions of postmodernism that exclude minority writers from their definition of postmodernism as (only) self-reflexive formal experimentation.

Secondly, these texts argue for the constructedness, the arbitrariness, and the unknowability of categories such as one's reality precisely at a time when women and people of color in the US have, after decades and centuries of struggle, slowly attained more of a position to insert themselves

Beal) but also at how multiple categories of domination increase one's power of oppression. For a brief history of intersectionality theory, cf. Levine-Rasky 240-43; for contemporary research adding to the field, cf., e.g., Lutz et al.; Hancock; O'Donovan et al.

⁶³ Beyond matters of fictional representation, such struggles are also visible in recent social movements like 'Black Lives Matter' and '#MeToo.'

into discussions of and in the public sphere.⁶⁴ Notably, this is a development preceded by and closely tied to earlier popularizations of postmodernism as well, for instance when feminists “(suspiciously) wonder[ed] at the coincidence of postmodernism’s deconstruction of the subject with a historical moment when marginalized and previously silenced groups like women have just begun to ‘engage in the historical and political and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects’” (Koenen, *Visions* 304; cf. also JanMohamed and Lloyd; Koenen, “(Black) Lady”). Unstable texts that have become popular since the mid-1990s, in turn, reflect discussions about current and future societal and demographic shifts in the US, with projections about white Americans losing their majority status by 2050 instilling “fear of change” and “fear of losing privileged status” among “some Americans” (Frey 1). Consequently, just as white male America’s monopolistic grasp on certain cultural negotiations seems to be slipping,⁶⁵ some narratively unstable texts argue that reality or identity are concepts that cannot really, definitively be grasped or discussed anyway, constituting a form of (epistemic) backlash against the increased visibility and perceived power of women and minorities.

Finally, and again in close connection with the previous point about an alleged crisis of white middle-class masculinity, a number of narratively unstable texts function as a reassertion of (especially) masculine identity, where the narrative resolution of instability into an eventual stability goes hand in hand with reconstituting the white male self.⁶⁶ Often, this renewed

⁶⁴ This tendency also works closely together with the first one, as these narratively unstable texts suggest that the predominant ‘mode’ of discussing and negotiating one’s reality in contemporary popular culture is exactly through doubts and anxieties about the existence of reality, discussions from which they exclude nonwhite and nonmale voices.

⁶⁵ This development is also one of many that feeds into a perceived ‘crisis’ of masculinity and whiteness, appearing in a variety of different incarnations (cf. Robinson; Kimmel, “Contemporary”; Clare): Particularly around the turn of the millennium, “white, middle-class men, especially, perceived a threat to the meaning of hegemonic masculinity and to their positions of power” (Messner 9). Besides the theoretical level of thinking about “masculinity *as* crisis” (Traister 287), in line with Sally Robinson’s take that “[a]nnouncements of crisis, both direct and indirect, are *performative*” (10), proclaiming a dominant position to be in crisis can also be seen as one way of portraying that position as threatened and victimized, in turn legitimizing a patriarchal backlash in an attempt to preserve power.

⁶⁶ In this regard, unstable texts also highlight a dimension of contemporary American culture, society, and politics that, since the 2016 presidential election, has routinely been ascribed to a ‘Trump era,’ characterized by a backlash—or, in the words of political commentator Van Jones, a “whitelash” (qtd. in Carissimo)—against the progress made by women and people of color. This construction casts especially white working-class men as the ‘forgotten men’ of America, who, as Donald Trump put it in his electoral victory speech, “will be forgotten no longer” during his presidency (qtd. in “Transcript”; cf. particularly Kimmel, *Angry White Men*). Although, of course, the texts I consider in this book were produced before Trump’s election,

self-affirmation and -determination works specifically through the exclusion of an Other—in *Inception*, for instance, the white male protagonist's crisis as a father is ultimately resolved by silencing the voice and eliminating the presence of his former wife. In this way, although narratively unstable films are not generally 'conservative' texts (which would be too generalizing a label either way), their predominant focus on the white male middle class aligns with a complicated political moment that they do not seem to recognize as such—for all their narrative and formal awareness, they often do not acknowledge whiteness and masculinity as the normative, patriarchal powers that they are. Consequently, while many unstable texts are mostly perceived as progressively contributing to discussions about an increasingly heterogeneous society, beneath their textual surface, a number of them actually end up pandering to narratives of a white male victimization in similar ways to more obviously political and reactionary texts.

This nexus of race, class, and gender, then, will form an important background throughout this book, as investigating the meanings of these texts will often focus on notions of power as well, where these dimensions become crucial. I deem it significant to study these texts along the lines of these categories of difference exactly because they tend to only represent characters from the ostensibly unmarked norm, in order to analyze both how these portrayals always work relationally (along whiteness and blackness, middle class and working class, masculinity and femininity, etc.) and how they individually intersect with each other. Overall, next to the previously discussed dimension of the formal experimentation that narratively unstable texts engage in—which the existing scholarly contexts of puzzle films and narrative complexity so firmly center on—this 'political' dimension of narratively unstable texts will form a second larger context for my readings, further distinguishing narrative instability as a concept from these more formally oriented inquiries.

thinking less in terms of periods or liminal events but instead of larger, slower, and often contradictory cultural tendencies, the election of Trump can be understood as having made something visible that has been present in US society all along, something that, perhaps, during the presidency of Barack Obama, at least the political mainstream was more reluctant to see. The complicated politics of a number of narratively unstable texts play into this dimension of contemporary American society as well, functioning as a prism into the country's complex negotiations of matters of race, class, and gender. Specifically, the (at times contradictory) reassertion of white men through the exclusion of women and minorities from participatory spheres found in some narratively unstable texts connects with a fear of women's and minorities' 'overreach' and the perceived loss of white male dominance that has served to explain Trump's election in many subsequent analyses (cf., e.g., Coates; Gillon; Filipovic).

2.2.4 CLUSTERS OF INSTABILITY: IDENTITIES, REALITIES, AND TEXTUALITIES

Narratively unstable texts position and insert themselves self-consciously in the diverse cultural contexts that I evoked in the previous pages, echoing (scholarly) discussions about contemporary popular US texts. Through their instability, they cast doubt on the certainty of concepts such as truth or reality, they emphasize the complexities and ambiguities of issues like identity, and they render these questions as epistemological ones, highlighting the difficulties surrounding knowledge.⁶⁷ Many unstable texts, however, do offer or encourage one particular interpretation that ultimately leads to resolving much of their instability, privileging a stable version of the storyworld in the end—or, at least, offering multiple possible stable reconstructions, instead of more thoroughly wallowing in instability. They thus use instability to arrive at stability, rather than a more ‘straightforward’ consistently stable storyworld. Hence, a significant effect of instability is the complication of such more straightforward narratives as well as the questioning of narratives presenting ‘simple’ solutions or stable binaries. By refusing a more straightforward (and often binary) access to knowledge and truth, unstable narratives contrast with a focus on polarizing, simplistically presented narratives and a lack of nuance and ambivalence prevalent in other parts of contemporary culture.⁶⁸ The video games of the *BioShock* series, for example, narratively portray isolated cities envisioned as utopias but exhibiting many elements of dystopias, making it difficult to decide whether the societies they depict are either. The presentation of a clear con-

⁶⁷ In this sense, unstable texts are aware of what Fredric Jameson calls a “crisis of representation” (Foreword viii), casting questions about truth or reality not just as an ontological matter but as an epistemological one and thus highlighting how we can know about them, how they can be represented. This is also in line with Linda Hutcheon’s perspective on postmodernism as advocating that “notions of truth, reference, and the non-cultural real have not ceased to exist [...] but that they are no longer unproblematic issues [...]. The postmodern [...] is [...] a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it” (*Politics* 32). In contrast, this perspective argues against McHale’s, who considers postmodernism to primarily operate ontologically whereas modernism, for him, is characterized by epistemology (9-10), again evidencing the diversity of conceptions about postmodernism (cf. 2.2.1).

⁶⁸ Again taking up the context of the US’s contemporary political landscape, unstable texts thus go against a trend of simplified narratives particularly prevalent in the news media—where the election of Barack Obama was immediately hailed as American society turning ‘postracial’ (cf. Tesler); where Hillary Clinton’s potential and widely assumed electoral victory in 2016 would have universally shattered the ‘glass ceiling’ (cf. Karni; Ruiz), presumably embarking on a ‘postfeminist’ era of similar hyperbole; and where, since 2016, the election of Trump is portrayed equivalent either to the “apocalypse” having come true (Eskow; Bilton) or a “messiah” having arrived (J. Brown; cf. also Heer), depending on whether one asks detractors or supporters of Trump. Such narratives lack the complexity and nuance found in some segments of contemporary popular culture.

flict that leads to an eventual resolution can also be seen as a hallmark of the symbolic form of narrative, which strives towards closure, finality, and linearity, whereas narratively unstable texts are more influenced by the playfulness of nonlinearity and open-endedness, refusing to provide clear solutions (or even clear conflicts) and centrally highlighting ambivalence.

Within these more general concerns across narratively unstable texts, and while covering a variety of subjects, topics, and issues, there are still larger, overarching tendencies that frequently recur in narratively unstable texts. In fact, I argue that there are three central cultural realms that the texts considered here engage in, and around which their interest in instability convenes: identity, reality, and textuality. Accordingly, the questioning of straightforward, linear narratives and truths also primarily works along these issues in unstable texts. Significantly, these three areas are not intended to be a typology of narrative instability but rather a kind of ‘clustering’ or grouping of a number of texts according to the cultural issues they resonate most with.⁶⁹ I will discuss these realms in detail in the following three analytic chapters, each of which is centrally dedicated to how texts narrate unstable identities, unstable realities, and unstable textualities, respectively—used in the plural to indicate how the primary texts examined here complicate notions of the stability of these concepts.

Having introduced narrative instability as a concept in these more general, theoretical, and contextual terms, I will demonstrate how it can be used for productive readings of contemporary American popular culture in the following chapters. While the individual analyses of primary texts will work as readings in themselves, and while the overall chapters also function in a somewhat self-contained manner as investigations of groups of unstable texts, together, they will form a concerted inquiry into the cultural work of narrative instability. In this sense, the next three chapters and analyses will work to uncover the apparent contradiction mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, answering how contemporary films, TV series, and video games have received such enormous popularity through the use of narrative techniques influenced by avant-garde postmodern texts from decades before, and what, in turn, this tells us about contemporary American culture and society. While I pointed to potential ways of addressing this conun-

⁶⁹ As such, these three issues also often overlap, which I see not as a drawback of this clustering but as a methodological advantage, allowing for a productive dialogue between different kinds of unstable texts. Pointing out how unstable texts primarily engage one of these issues is meant to denote a matter of degree and intensity rather than an absolute category—films like *Interstellar*, *Donnie Darko* (2001), or *Twelve Monkeys*, which I read as unstable realities texts, also include many elements that relate to matters of identity (and some of textuality), yet it is reality that I see as the most significant one.

drum throughout this chapter, the following readings will inform these potential avenues with detailed arguments about specific primary texts, in the end promising to answer Denby's central question: "What are we getting out of the overloading, the dislocations and disruptions?" (80).

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