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Conference Report: Transmedial Worlds in Convergent Media Culture

- Winter School at the Graduate Academy of the University of Tuebingen, Germany
24th – 28th of February 2014

1. Conference Topic

The Winter School »Transmedial Worlds in Convergent Media Culture« examined the forms and functions of a wide variety of transmedial narratives from a range of different (inter-) disciplinary perspectives. An increasingly convergent media culture has given rise to complex entertainment franchises that transgress media borders, arranging narrative texts, films, television series, comics, and videogames (among others) into highly interconnected entertainment experiences as well as facilitating the participation of fans in the negotiation and re-appropriation of transmedial meaning(s)¹. The conference was divided up into four parts: the first, spanning four keynotes, focused on some base concepts and theoretical approaches, whereas the three consecutive parts (of two keynotes, respectively) were centered around specific media formations (television, comic books and videogames). Complementing the keynotes, junior researchers presented a number of thematically focused case studies on salient aspects of the Winter School's theme that connected to the keynotes.

Even though the participants departed from different disciplinary backgrounds (media, literature, film or even game studies), a quite surprising unanimity set the tone, at least with regard to the selection of relevant works and studies concerning the underlying theoretical concepts: David Herman's *Story Logic* (2004), Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Marie-Laure Ryan's *Avatars of Story* (2006) and Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012) were quoted frequently; Jenkins' central definition of ›transmedia storytelling‹ was referred to about a dozen times (›a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience«²). Nevertheless, the ontological basis of the ›worlds‹ discussed proved somewhat ambiguous, ranging from textually guided hypotheses and mental representations to shared imaginations and »abstract content systems«³. This might be due in part to the wide areas of phenomena under scrutiny, testing – and challenging – the suitability of literary concepts against the backdrop of radical storytelling transformations.

2. Narrative Theory and Base Concepts surrounding Transmedia ›Worlds‹

The conference was opened by **Klaus Sachs-Hombach** and **Jan-Noël Thon** (Tuebingen) with the keynote speech »Transmedial Worlds in Convergent Media Culture«. Taking the heading ›media convergence‹ as an entry point for the discussions, Sachs-Hombach elaborated on the dimensions of both conceptual elements: against the background of profound media changes in recent decades, a transformation of communicative dispositifs on technological, semiotic, institutional and content-oriented levels has been noted. Nonetheless, Sachs-Hombach argued, instead of a radical amalgamation of differentiated forms, distinctions between strategies of

combining, interrelating or refining existing media-aspects can be observed. Subsequently, Thon distinguished between fundamental concepts of storyworld-relations within transmedia-›universes‹, while also offering a survey of the present state of research. Proposing to, on principle, differentiate between adaptations, expansions and modifications of a given ›world‹, Thon argued for medium-specific theories of production, representation and comprehension.

The second keynote was held by **Lisbeth Klastrup** and **Susana P. Tosca** (Copenhagen) and traced the miscellaneous »Origins of Transmedial Worlds«. The speech focused less on commercial aspects but rather on issues of reception and creativity. Transmedial ›worlds‹, understood as ›abstract content systems shared by creators and audiences alike‹ (from which stories, characters or plot events can be actualized) can thus be seen as an invitation to engage creatively. Klastrup and Tosca thus turned their attention towards the concept of ›remix‹ as a possible alternative to that of ›adaptation‹, not tied to (or judged by) any fidelity to source material. Subsequently, they showed various differing roots and origins of such ›worlds‹, ranging from the ›fan love‹-aspects in the case of *Sherlock Holmes* through Tolkien's deliberate emphasis on fictional data (rather than on singular plots) up to the gradual transformation of ›inside jokes‹ into a Lovecraft-mythology. The ›worldness‹ of a narrative, they concluded, always involves the invitation to participate in one way or the other.

Marie-Laure Ryan (Boulder) addressed various topics of interest with her keynote speech »Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?«: With reference to the stated claim that storytelling would never be the same again under transmedial conditions, Ryan critically examined to what extent recent developments actually differ from older phenomena. Seen rather as aggregations of a number of different practices (some age-old, some not really transmedial by themselves), transmedia ›worlds‹ nonetheless intensify the differentiations between more story-centered narrations unfolding in time and more ›spatially‹ oriented ones. Some writers, genres, or even franchises seem more interested in presenting complex environments and in ›mapping‹ fictional places, institutions or interaction-structures than in developing a coherent story or characters. In that type of ›world‹, Ryan pointed out, distinct storylines serve only as access points or walkthroughs, if not mere pretenses; Another new focus of scholarly interest could lie in the different relations between the gaps and omissions of a ›mothership‹ (the main instalment of a storyworld) to the (relative) autonomy of any expansion accessed through those departing points.

Jens Eder (Mannheim) presented a huge array of definitional and methodical approaches surrounding the term ›transmediality‹ in his keynote speech »Transmediality, Adaptation, Imagination: Concepts, Forms and Strategies«. Eder made the point that on all levels of media perception and interpretation an overlay of what is perceived with memories of earlier medial experiences must be taken into account. Additionally, these questions should not be restricted to fiction, but must also be applied to non-fictional and amateur forms, to journalism, advertisement, and education. Eder then turned the audience's attention towards politically significant effects of transmedial practices, questioning whether it is appropriate to consider them enthusiastically as participatory or emancipatory, rather than observing a growing dominance of ›big players‹ and homogenization. Following the increasing structural disadvantages of genuinely alternative productions, the preeminence of market-conforming ›monomyths‹ should be kept under critical observation.

In workshops following the keynotes, participants discussed various case studies of exemplary phenomena – some of which seemed far away from canonic cases at first, thereby testing the range of the concepts put under scrutiny. **Martin Stobbe** (Münster) and **Theresa Schmidtke** (Rostock) proposed to re-read the gospels of the Bible (and their associated action figures) as one of the earliest cases of transmedial phenomena (››Comes with removable stone tablets and

shepherds staff: Contemporary Manifestations of the Bible as a Transmedial World«), while **Laura Schlichting** (Gießen) continued to expand the field of reference with her contribution on the online-journalism project *Hollow*: »Non-Fictional Transmedial Storytelling and Web-Aware Journalism: A Case Study of *Hollow* (2013) created by Elaine McMillion«. **Anna Weigel** (Gießen) discussed the interaction of Marisha Pessl's novel *Night Film* with a downloadable mobile phone App (»Reframing the Concept of Transmedia Storytelling for Novel-Based Transmedial Worlds: An Analysis of Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013)«), while **Vera Cuntz-Leng** (Berkeley/Mainz) elaborated on some of the potential pitfalls of transmedia-expansions in the *Harry Potter* ›online experience‹: »»Pottermore was our friend, and it betrayed us: Transmedia Storytelling, Audience Engagement, and Fan Alienation on *Pottermore*«. **Krzysztof M. Maj** (Kraków) followed up on Ryan's distinction between spatially vs. temporally centered ›worlds‹ with his presentation »Transfictional Storytelling in World-Building Narratives: The Role of Encyclopaedic Competence for Immersive Participation in Fictional Storyworlds«. With reference to Umberto Eco's concept of *encyclopaedic competence*⁴, Maj pointed out that – in many genre videogames – fictional ›worlds‹ serve as invitations to develop ›fields of reference‹ and expand our registers of (fictional) competence about the storyworlds' background (rather than following distinct storylines *or* acting according to the game's key objectives). **Raphaela Knipp** (Siegen) pursued the ›spatial‹ aspects of transmediality even further in: »Transmedial Worlds and Fan Mobilities: What is to Be Found on the Spot Marked ›X‹?«: Discussing the phenomenon of ›fictional media-tourism‹ whereby people travel great distances to visit places somehow associated to fictional places, Knipp presented a variety of such ›mediated‹ pilgrimage sites. **Christina Formenti** (Milan) opened subsequent questions in »Expanded Mockuworlds: Mockumentary as a Transmedial Narrative Style«. Formenti gave an overview about the development of different Mockumentary formats. The speaker pointed out to what extent the codes and conventions that we are used to read as references to ›reality‹ are reliant on transmedial practices and tactics. **Sebastian Armbrust's** (Hamburg) concluding observations in »*Mad Men* between Historical Fiction, Transmedial World and Pop-Culture Phenomenon« centered around a ›division of labour‹ between verbal and visual modalities, with only the former taking a critical or ironical stance towards *Mad Men's* *mores*. In contrast, the visual designs mostly reinforce some kind of eroticization or nostalgia by means of the shows' highly recognisable aesthetics, which must also be understood as part of *Mad Men's* ›worldness‹.

3. Narrative and Television

After the focus on broader theoretical and ontological issues, the conference addressed narrativity in specific media, starting with the changing dynamics and practices surrounding television and broadcasting.

Elizabeth Evans (Nottingham) launched the discussion with her keynote speech »The Temporal Dynamics of Transmedia Television«. After an overview about British television's gradual attempts to experiment with websites and mobile Apps during the last decade, Evans referred to the theoretical backdrops of Raymond Williams' concept of ›flow‹⁵ and John Ellis' ›glance‹⁶. While, on the one hand, TV is said to become more and more ›cinematic‹ (with shows like *Sherlock* being watched most often on DVD boxes in a linear and repeatable fashion), shows like *The X Factor* or *Defiance*, on the other hand, try to reclaim a sense of immediate temporality in the audience's engagement. With various Apps reacting on and interacting to exact broadcasting moments of the shows, we experience simultaneous instances of multiple screens layered on top of (and parallel to) each other. Voting for candidates in the ›fifth judge game‹ (or for your favorite characters in *Defiance*), comparing your reactions to other user's

experiences, ordering sponsored pizza online during commercial breaks, or browsing for additional diegetic information: the audience is more and more compelled to engage in multiple ›micro-flows‹, understood as radically *time-based* experiences. Contrary to prior conceptions of ›glance‹ (that is, being easily distracted by events not related to television at all), this reclamation of ephemerality and ›liveness‹, Evans argued, reinforces broadcasting, the centerpiece of ›transmedia television‹.

Susanne Marschall (Tuebingen) opened the second half of the TV-oriented considerations with her keynote »Non Finito: Fragmentary Worldbuilding in Transmedia Television«. Revisiting the Romantic notion of Schlegel's ›fragment‹ – understood as part of a puzzle that couldn't or shouldn't be completed – Marschall investigated different ways in which the concept of a ›Leerstelle‹ (Iser)⁷ has migrated into contemporary TV's aesthetics and narratives. Contrasting the disruptive and politically subversive fragmentation of Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) with James Cameron's syncretistic cultural amalgamation *Avatar* (2009) – the latter carefully covering its *sutures*, its gaps and holes, instead of revealing them – Marschall argued that most TV shows draw upon both sources. Non-linear, fragmentary plots provide more opportunities for viewers to contribute, be it in terms of branching out fan art/fan fictions, or in study and discussion of various intratexts (as in *Lostpedia*-like databases). Transmediality, in itself an enormous *Non Finito*, can therefore be discussed either to the paradigm of the hypertext – an artistically well-formed construction – or to that of Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of the rampantly growing *rhizome* (as in the non-linear interactions between producers, writers and fans alike in shows like *Lost* or *The Walking Dead*).

In the workshops' subsequent case studies, **Jonas Nesselhauf** and **Markus Schleich** (Saarbrücken) discussed ARTE/SWR's *Zeit der Helden* (»A Stream of Medial Consciousness: Transmedial Storytelling in Contemporary German Quality Television«), while **Amelie Zimmermann** (Passau/Turku) presented the highly metaleptic ARTE-show »*About:Kate*: Experimental TV between Transmedia Storytelling and Paratextual Structures«. In both cases, the presenters pointed out, a high degree of interactivity challenges the term ›paratext‹ with regard to the additional (website-, app- or social media-)content. **Anne Ganzert** (Konstanz) pointed back towards one dawn of such transmedial audience interaction around 2006: »We welcome you to your *Heroes* community. Remember, everything is connected.«. Finally, **Jonathan A. Rose** (Berlin) made the contribution of ›fandom‹ activities to transmedia ›worlds‹ his primary object of research: »Crossovers and Fusions: Convergence in Online Fandom«: The realm of ›fandom‹ must be understood as a place where meaning is generated and modified, where cultural products are constantly re-evaluated in ways quite differently from (yet not entirely unrelated to) scholarly interest.

4. Narrative and Comic Books

Bernard Perron (Montreal) opened the spotlight on comic book-based transmedial storytelling with his keynote speech »Wandering the Panels, Walking Through Media: Zombies, Comics and the Transmedial Postapocalyptic World«. Proposing to uniquely advance the study of medium specificity through closer looks at adaptations over media, Perron contrasted the aesthetics and the emotional appeal of a comparable scene in *The Walking Dead* throughout its comic book-, TV show- and the Telltale videogame-instalments. Arguing that the zombie genre is as much about separating, demarking and transgressing (safe or contaminated) spaces, as it is about movement through those spaces, Perron analysed parallels to the ›grammar‹ of segmented comic book frames and thresholds in that respect – very different from the more direct presentation of movement in film. Genre-defining transmedial motifs and standard situations,

such as ›the bite‹ or ›the headshot‹, seem to transcend medium-specificity, even though their successful actualisation relies heavily on the potentials and limits of the given medium.

Stephan Packard (Freiburg) presented the second keynote on the subject: »Closing the Open Signification: Transmedial Chronotopoi in Comics«. Building on the Bakhtinian concept of ›*chronotopos*‹⁸, Packard analysed the regulated connections between spatial representations, genre markers and narrative motifs in comic books. With examples ranging from the earliest *Spider-Man* crossovers to playful frictions between Marvel’s cinematic and comic book universe(s), he showed how ›convergence effects‹ (not necessarily tied to – but especially salient within – transmedial phenomena) point to negotiations between authorial ›masks‹ (supposed instances of narratorial intent) and the audience’s expectations about what (in a given story-world) might be relevant or possible. Following this line of argument semiotically, Packard linked it to a fundamental distinction within the visual repertoire of comic book signs: between spatial markers on the one hand and (often ›cartoonized‹) objects of interaction and identification on the other.

In the following case studies of the workshop, **Hans-Christian Schmidt** (Cologne) scrutinized the suitability of a comic book-›text‹ to translate in different videogame genres (››They are Everywhere!‹: *The Walking Dead* and Transmedia Worldbuilding«). **Matteo Riatti** (Passau) focused on the character and the myth of the Batman in his various incarnations across media in: »The Joker, the Bat and the Integrity of Transmedial Narration«. **Laura Oehme’s** (Bayreuth) presentation »The Transmedial World of/in *Watchmen*« focused not so much on the various film, animation and videogame expansions of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s 1986/87 ›mothership‹ but rather on the textual heterogeneity of the source text itself. **Johannes Fehrle’s** (Mannheim) concluding investigation on »Remediation as (Simulated) Transmedia World: The Case of *Scott Pilgrim*« focused on the many paradoxes surrounding the *histoire/discourse* distinction within the ›transmedially saturated world‹ of *Scott Pilgrim*: ›Ludic game mechanic‹-elements play a critical role within the film’s story, whereas in actual videogames it’s not quite clear whether they are even part of the represented ›world‹ at all.

5. Narrative and Videogames

The last focus of the conference was mostly dedicated to videogames. **Espen Aarseth** (Copenhagen) gave the first keynote speech, which was intended to initiate many of the following discussions: »Transreality Game Worlds: Tracing the Signified across Media«. Insisting on a categorical difference between (fictional) narration, opposite to ›real‹ (albeit virtual) gaming, Aarseth promoted the idea of a ›ludo-realism‹: within that notion, the perceptible ›surfaces‹ of videogames signify conceptual game components, *ludemes*, i.e. game events. Since the matrix of any given videogame can generate an infinite amount of virtual ›worlds‹, Aarseth pointed out, we have to think about games as *meta-chronotropes* that only later serve as foundations for possible stories. The speaker went to demonstrate this with *MMORPG* (online multiplayer) phenomena, where people experience and perform ›real actions‹ – regardless of what those might represent in terms of narrative. A comparison to the concept of *ludoforming* was touched upon, the ›gamification‹ of actual places. The discussion afterwards brought many additional issues to the table, questioning where problems such as chess, Shakespearean theatre or the stock market would fit within that model.

The last keynote of the conference was given by **Benjamin Beil** (Cologne) on the topic: »Core-Gaming: Towards the Interactivation of Transmedial World«. Focusing on game-expansions of

HBO's series *Lost*, Beil examined the implications of their supposed shortcomings. Despite the fact that the series itself is often considered to ›draw on videogame conventions and structures‹, the questionable vagueness of such notions was criticized. Beil conceded that ›game logic‹ assertions often rest upon grave misunderstandings about the nature of interactive narratives. With this in mind, he addressed some key problems of transmedia expansions: delivering paratext for paratexts' sake while failing to transform a story's emotional core into an interactive experience. As a counter-example, Beil discussed *Dear Esther*, initially released as a free source engine mod in 2008 (although mostly lacking all typical game-features). Drawing on a similar motif to *Lost*, *Dear Esther* at the same time reflects and deconstructs the process of explanatory coherence.

The last workshop on challenging case studies was opened up by **Robert Baumgartner** (Munich): »In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war«: *Warhammer 40k* and the Issue of Change and Stasis in Transmedial Franchises«. **Nieves Rosendo** (Granada) then turned the audience's attention once again towards the changing role of fan participation in the canon-building of major franchises: »The Map is not the Territory: Canon and the Transmedial World of *Halo*«. **Martin Hennig's** (Passau) subsequent presentation (»Why Some Worlds Fail: Dysfunctional Transmedial Convergences in the *Resident Evil*- and *Silent Hill*-Universes«) traced the mutual influences and resulting modifications of the franchises in question – from initial videogames to cinema-adaptations, back into consecutive versions of games. The last presentation of the conference was given by **Felix Schröter** (Hamburg): »The Game of *Game of Thrones*: The Transmedial World of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Its Video Game Adaptions«. The audience was presented with the question if a specific choice of game genre might already constitute an interpretation of a given ›world's‹ *ethos*.

While it is impossible to sum up a conference with such a broad scope, connecting very fundamental and theoretical questions with detailed close-readings, some points are worth noting: Many of the phenomena in question expanded the field of reference far beyond what is traditionally considered the domain of narrative theory – action figures, real world-tourist destinations or *Tumblr*-fan artworks, to name just a few. Yet, many fundamental narratological concepts (as the *histoire/discourse*-distinction) still proved instrumental even in the more eccentric cases. It became clear that there arises a challenge for scholars, however, to decide which of the countless properties of a given medial instalment should be taken into account as ›storyworld‹-relevant – or solely as means of representation. The *Lego Star Wars* videogames, for instance, established themselves as recurring ›test cases‹: whether the ›Legoness‹ of this (*Star Wars*) re-narration should be regarded as a modification of content provided some food for discussion; as did the problem, whether ›lup‹-extra lives in videogames are to be dismissed as *external* to the ›content system‹ – or even central in ›unnatural narrations‹ like *Super Mario World*. What became clearer in the debates, however, is a general shift from product-oriented to process-oriented forms of narratives, surrounding fan cultures and their influences on major franchises as well as all kinds of participatory engagement and subversion. One of the major challenges therefore consists in the critical application of our terms and concepts to these transformations, without falling into the trap of prescriptive judgements.

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Notes

1 Cf. Call for Papers, *University of Tuebingen Website*, <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/philosophische-fakultaet/fachbereiche/philosophie-rhetorik-medien/institut-fuer-medienwissenschaft/aktuelles/news-einzelansicht-startseite/article/winter-school-transmedial-worlds-in-convergent-media-culture.html> (23.08.2014).

2 Henry Jenkins, *Transmedia Generation*, http://henryjenkins.org/2010/03/transmedia_generation.html (23.08.2014).

3 Lisbeth Klastrup/Susana Tosca, *Transmedial Worlds – Rethinking Cyberworld Design*, *Proceedings of the 2004 International Conference on Cyberworlds*, Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Computer Society, http://www.itu.dk/people/klastrup/klastruptosca_transworlds.pdf (23.08.2014).

4 Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, London 1984.

5 Raymond Williams, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form*, London 1974.

6 John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, London 1982.

7 Wolfgang Iser, *Der implizite Leser*, München 1979.

8 Michail M. Bachtin, *Chronotopos*, Frankfurt am Main 2008.

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