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Blurring the Line Between Fiction and Reality. Functional Transmedia Storytelling in the German TV Series ABOUT:KATE

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Amelie Zimmermann

Blurring the Line Between Fiction and Reality. Functional Transmedia Storytelling in the German TV Series *About:Kate*

Abstract

New technological innovations offer a range of possibilities not only to tell a story via a single medium, but also to expand the diegetic world of the story via diverse devices. This leads to an expanded story universe (i.e., hyperdiegesis), not only confronting the recipients when they use the story's core medium but also accompanying them in their daily life when using social networks or reading newspapers. This article takes into account the existing definitions of transmedia phenomena and their structures in order to suggest a theoretical approach that uses semiotic and structuralist models applicable not only to individual texts but also to their interdependent constructions. These models are then applied to the ARTE production *About:Kate* (2013). Here, the transmedial way of telling the story (›discours‹) is functional for the content of the series (›histoire‹) and the communication of its overall semantic meaning.

1. Stories Told via More than One Media Device

When discussing stories told by more than one medium, Henry Jenkins should be mentioned first. His was the earliest definition of ›transmedia storytelling‹ in 2003 and, although his definition may not take into account all phe-

nomena in this field, it is the one frequently referred to. In his book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins describes ›transmedia storytelling‹ as follows:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced in an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. (JENKINS 2006: 97–98)

Jenkins' favorite example of the *Matrix* universe composed, of movies, videogames, short animes, comic strips, etc. illustrates his understanding of transmedia storytelling. Not only the overall story arc that is enriched by every text¹ but also the different texts themselves are important. Each different part of this overall story is valued in itself, because it can be received individually from the other texts.

According to Jenkins, every media device functions as a rabbit hole to the story and offers a unique access according to the individual mediality of the specific device: ›Each medium does what it does best‹ (JENKINS 2006: 97). The ›self-contained‹ franchise entries thus stand alone but can be added to one another and then form the overall transmedial story arc.

Nevertheless, the nomination of *storytelling* already puts emphasis on story, on narration, which excludes texts without narrative structures and, therefore, might not be the most useful one for many transmedial phenomena. ›Story‹ itself has a variety of meanings (cf. PRINCE 2003) and must therefore be defined thoroughly when used. In narrotological analysis, we basically speak of story, or ›histoire‹, when the text communicates a transformation process: ›[A]s soon as there is an action or event, even a single one, there is a story, because there is a transformation, a transition from an earlier state to a later and resultant state‹ (GENETTE 1990: 19).

The different states are presented in chronological order and differ distinctly from one another:

state1 -> transformation process -> state2

Jurij M. Lotman substantiated this understanding of narration by defining the change of state as a crucial event which violates the rules and laws of the diegetic world. In the end, this event is always redeemed. Crime stories, for example, tend to start with a murder that must not happen according to the ethical and juridical rules and values in the diegesis. In the end, the murderer is found and punished for the murder—a transformation process is told. Lotman's approach originally concentrates on spatial organizations of narrations and their semantic meaning. Thereby, it enriches theoretical approaches that focus on temporality (cf. LOTMAN 1993: 312).

¹ A ›text‹ is here understood as a syntactically assembled sequence of signs that communicates a semantic meaning through its structure. Cf. KRAH 2011: 22.

While the story—or ›histoire‹—concentrates on what happens, the ›discours‹ focuses on the way of telling the story. Which narrator figure does the text present? From which perspective is it told? In which order are the events of the story presented? Which description modes are used? When speaking about transmedial phenomena, the ›discours‹ level implies more than one media device. An analysis must therefore consist not only of an accurate closer look on the ›discours‹ of the individual texts but also of an examination of the interdependency of the texts as a whole. This certainly belongs to the ›discours‹ of a transmedially told text.

Transmedial projects like *Matrix* consist of individual texts with narrative structures. This is why Jenkins argues for their independence. Nonetheless, there are texts without narrative structures existing in transmedial projects, giving information needed to shape the diegetic world. Especially new media technologies allow connections of different devices, linking them more closely than Jenkins' definition permits. With new technological possibilities the different texts are not that autonomous anymore, they highly correspond and relate to one another. *About:Kate* will serve as an example for this.

Another frequently used term for transmedial phenomena is ›story-world‹ (cf., e.g., HERMAN 2002: 13). Still using the ›story‹ but putting emphasis on the creation of a world at the same time gets closer to the point of transmedial phenomena. However, yet again rejecting the term because of its focus on narration, Christy Dena suggests the term ›transfiction‹ (cf. DENA 2009: 23):

By transfiction I refer to stories that are distributed over more than one text, one medium. Each text, each story on each device or each website *is not* autonomous, unlike Henry Jenkins' transmedia storytelling. In transfiction [...], the story is dependent on all the pieces on each medium, device or site to be read/experienced for it to be understood. Basically, no single segment will be sufficient. (DENA 2006: n.pag., original emphasis)

Dena suggests the term ›transfiction‹ for those phenomena where the individual texts are not autonomous at all, but hold a close connection to one another. They just make sense because of their interdependency with the other texts in the transmedial universe. Accordingly, Dena's description is the opposite of Jenkins' ›transmedia storytelling‹. If the different texts are perceived autonomously without the other texts in the franchise, they cannot be understood.

What both Jenkins and Dena do not pay attention to however, are those transmedia phenomena which have one core text communicated via one media device and other texts accompanying it. While the core text is autonomous, the accompanying texts just make sense in correlation with it. Technically or with regard to content bound to the core text, the additional texts strengthen particular meanings communicated in the latter. They might therefore be considered as what Gérard Genette calls ›paratexts‹:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is rather, a *threshold*, or [...] a ›vestibule‹ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turn-

ing back. It is an »undefined zone« between the inside and the outside [...]. Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*. (GENETTE 1997: 1f., original emphases)

While Genette has titles, subtitles, prefaces or blurbs in mind that, on the one hand, belong to the core text and on the other hand, do not need to be perceived with it, some texts of transmedial projects might also be considered paratexts. When they function like rabbit holes leading to the diegetic universe by using another media device than the core text, they do not make sense without it and therefore just fit into Genette's definition of being in this particular zone between text and off-text. In addition, the distinction between text and paratext is often made by the analyst, while the recipient him- or herself refers to the whole as »the text itself« (GRAY 2010: 46).

What the different texts in a transmedial project have in common is the creation of a widely spanned universe. The term ›storyworld‹ already indicates the importance of this unifying element. Based on structuralist and semiotic models for analyzing texts, the term shows that those models do not only apply to single texts but also to transmedial phenomena. Lotman, who analyzes texts with regard to their abstract spatial organization, defines them as ›secondary modelling systems‹. It is the structure of signs on the primary level of the language that creates a syntactic pattern on the second level of an abstract world, when it is organized in a text. So, every text, regardless of the concrete sign system used (movies, art, poetry, videogames, and so forth), presents its own world organized in spatial groups with different semantic meanings (cf. LOTMAN 1993: 312).

The »spatio-temporal universe designated by the narrative« (GENETTE 1990: 17) is called ›diegesis‹ (cf. MARTÍNEZ/SCHÉFFEL 2009: 151–156). It consists of all the information explicitly and implicitly given in the text about the worldness, meaning its geographical shapings, the time and historic background, the acting personae, and, of course, the events that form the narration. The concept of a denoting diegesis incorporates every form of text, whether its sign system consists of linguistic and written signs or, for example, audiovisual or iconic ones. Furthermore, it includes texts with a narrative or descriptive mode or combinations of both and, hence, is a fundamental concept of the theory of interpretation not only in literary criticism but also in film and game studies.

Keeping in mind that every text exposes its own diegesis, one can apply this concept to transmedia phenomena. A transmedia project might come along as a *Matrix* universe consisting of games as well as movies. It might also be a TV series combining television's first with the smartphone's second screen. Whether or not its texts have a narrative structure, they all have an individual diegesis. For the composition of the different diegeses in a trans-

medial project, the term ›hyperdiegesis‹² has been suggested. Elizabeth Evans and Matt Hills use the term to describe a mosaic of texts. The latter concentrates on the fact that a hyperdiegesis can never be fully explored or observed by the recipient. It is a »vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text« (HILLS 2002: 104). The term ›hyperdiegesis‹ shows that what is referred to here is not only a diegesis extracted from one text. It is vaster and only entirely to cross if all the texts are perceived.

When moving the attention to the recipient, another characteristic of transmedial hyperdiegeses becomes obvious: a transmedial hyperdiegesis has a flexible structure that does not only depend on the author responsible for the texts but also on the behavior of the recipient. The first text he or she perceives is the kick-off for the universe. The following texts will just add information to the existing diegesis. Hence, a hyperdiegesis is developed and shaped by one or more authors, but at the same time dependent on the recipient. The latter is thus strongly involved in decoding the semantic meanings of the text and its worldness.³ The fact that a transmedial project consists of more than one text empowers the recipient even more, because the hyperdiegesis it composes depends on his or her choice and chronological consuming behavior.

There is one last concept in the context of transmediality that should be mentioned. Starting from the analysis of computer games, Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca developed their model of ›transmedial worlds‹. They strengthen the approach of a world that is shaped by different texts, an »abstract content system [...] from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2004: n.pag.). The model of Klastrup and Tosca differentiates transmedial worlds with regard to their mythos, topos, and ethos. Their categories differ from the proposed concept of hyperdiegesis only in their nomination. What the outlined structuralist model of a text (and many texts in a hyperdiegesis) communicates is identical to the proposed information in the transmedial world's model: Mythos, topos, and ethos also correspond to the characters of the world, the existing conflicts, the geographical and historical background, and the moral rules existing in the transmedial world. As has been argued above, transmedial phenomena can be explained very well by structural analysis and semiotic models that do not only work for texts standing alone but also for those forming a franchise.

² The greek ›hyper‹ or latin ›super‹ suggests that the hyperdiegesis accompanies every part of the franchise. It can be estimated as the equivalent to Jenkins' overall story arc, with a focus on the worldness of a transmedia phenomenon.

³ The power of the recipient of literature is, for example, discussed by Umberto Eco (cf. ECO 1987). Eco's concept is at least partly applicable to other media.

2. Structure of *About:Kate*

2.1 TV Series

The German TV series *About:Kate*—directed by Janna Nandzik, produced by Ulmen Television GmbH, and first broadcast on ARTE from April to July 2013—serves as a good example for a transmedial structure functionally used to communicate content. In other words, the ›histoire‹ (what happened) and the ›discours‹ (how what happened is told) are highly dependent on one another in transporting the semantic meaning of the whole project. To understand this creation of meaning on two levels, it is useful to have a closer look at the structure of the project, meaning the ›histoire‹ as well as the ›discours‹.

As already mentioned above, many transmedial projects, especially when the parts are highly bound to one another, consist of a core medium that is accompanied by other texts. In the case of *About:Kate*, the core text is a TV series of 14 episodes, each with a length of 20 to 25 minutes. The TV series tells the story of Katherine Sophie Harff (Kate), who is in her late twenties when she submits herself to a psychiatric hospital. She is not sure about what defines her identity because of a posttraumatic stress disorder resulting from a car accident. In addition, she feels lost in the multitude of ways the new media offer to create different selves. The superficiality of social networks and the ability to recreate and invent oneself over and over again have disoriented Kate. The TV series begins with Kate's arrival in the psychiatric hospital and ends with her release, narrating the process of Kate successively regaining her autonomy through an increasingly reflected use of media. Perception and identity, (mis)interpretation of signs and their meanings, and self-representation via social media are the main topics of the TV series.

With regard to the ›discours‹ level, one can state that the series has a highly fragmented structure with lots of interposed pictures, drawings, short films, and photographs that differ in what they represent as well as in the way they represent it. Kate's experiences in the hospital are ruptured and illustrated by images that form a, presumably Kate's, stream of consciousness and that author Janna Nandzik calls »associative« (TOBESOCIAL 2013: n.pag.). The insertions are directly connected to the core story and thus never shown arbitrarily. Accordingly, the function of signs which create meaning by referring to something else instead of to their own terms (cf. ECO 1989: 27) is emphasized on a higher level. It is the structure that communicates denotative signification, not the different illustrations and images themselves.

Still, there is a high degree of semiotic diversity to be found within the series. The core story of Kate in the hospital, for example, is at one point interrupted by an animation that shows old media (book) crowing over new media (smartphones, computers):

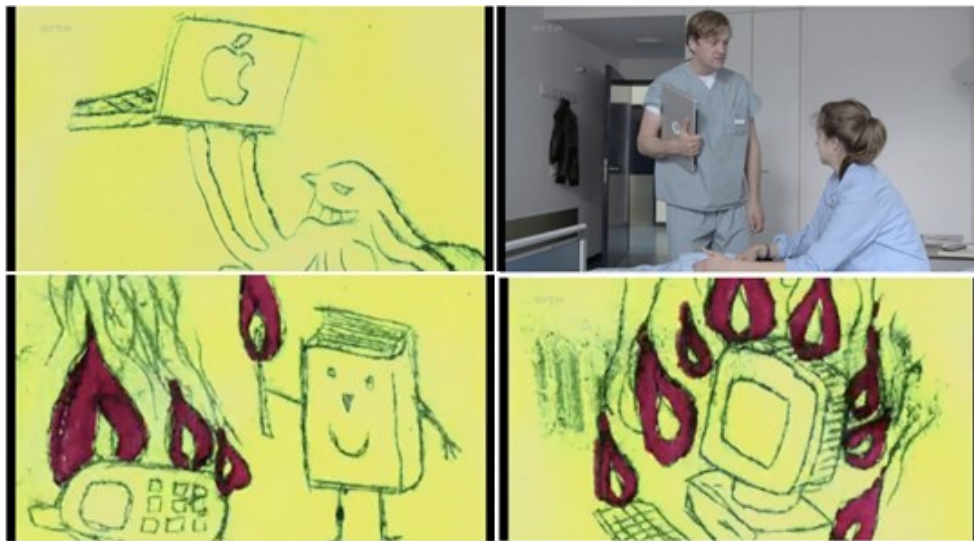


Fig. 1:
Screenshots of episode 6 »Das Tribunal«

With the setting of the animation in between the confiscation of Kate's laptop and her smartphone, the nurse and with him the entire hospital is semanticized as evil and oldfashioned (in opposition to new technological possibilities and the *status quo*). Furthermore, a lot of references to other texts such as music videos (e.g., The Prodigy: *Smack My Bitch Up* [1997]), movies (e.g., Stanley Kubrick: *The Shining* [1980]), literary texts (e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre: *The Flies* [1943]), etc. create the fragmentary structure of the TV series. To decode these references, ›culturally shared knowledge‹ is necessary (cf. TITZMANN 2011: 90). Through the transmedial structure of *About:Kate*, and particularly through the application on the second screen, some of these references are explained, though (see section 2.2).

With breaks and ruptures as the main principle of the TV series' overall structure, orders are continually questioned and repeatedly rejected. The diegesis, for example, is constructed mimetically; geographically and historically orientated in here-and-now Germany. Nevertheless, any assumption of a diegetic reality like our actual reality is steadily rejected, for example, when Kate's 11-year-old Minimé dances through the corridors with her older equivalent, or when the nurse is able to enter rooms through cupboards. *About:Kate* thereby intentionally rejects the logical implications it just created. Leaps in time as well as different versions of the same sequence are characteristics of the ›discours‹, too. The diegesis is consistent in presenting inconsistencies. Thereby, the series states that perception is a playful combination of fiction and reality.

2.2 Second Screening

The application *About:Kate* was programmed by Netzbewegung GmbH to simultaneously accompany the TV series. It was downloaded about 15,000

times during the broadcasting period.⁴ With a special technology utilizing the microphone of the smartphone or tablet, the app remains in-synch with the particular episode via audio signals. The geographical setting of the TV series was picked up for the application as well. Designed as a psychological test, the recipient could answer questions concerning his or her psychological constitution and habits and in the end get his or her own psychological analysis. Main topics of the series' episodes correspond to those of the application. In part, the questions posed by the app directly refer to the sequences in the series, asking for the recipient's interpretation of it. It has already been discussed that the series employs plenty of intertextual references. With the app as a simultaneous second screen, the cross references could be pointed out and explained. Culturally shared knowledge, which is frequently required on the part of the recipient in order to understand references, can thus be provided more explicitly. In other words: the recipient does not need to understand the intertextual connection; if he or she uses the second screen, knowledge gaps are filled up by the app. Another function of the app becomes apparent in this game of signs and references: it provides additional background information and links to websites that in turn inform about related issues. Unsurprisingly, then, some information could also be read as advertisements for movies, newspapers, to-be-released books, etc.

One peculiarity of the app should still be mentioned. The application was programmed in a way, that employed the smartphone's original quality as a bilateral communication medium several times during the broadcasting period. While watching the series and using the app to get additional information or answer the occasional question, the recipient gets a call from Kate. The telephone rings and the recipient has to answer the call. One time, Kate directly addresses the recipient as ›you‹ and asks for his or her support, because she could not explain to herself what just happened. Certainly, this does not constitute an actual two-way communication, because Kate would not answer any directly posed questions, but the situation of an actual phone call is at least simulated. The character of Kate thereby stepped out of the diegesis and gets into contact with the recipient. A parasocial interaction between figure and recipient is simulated (cf. HORTON/WOHL 1956: n.pag.). Narratological theory speaks of metaleptic structures when narrative levels are combined against their logical composition (cf. GENETTE 1972: n.pag.).⁵ In the example analyzed here, Kate, as the protagonist of the story, could not have been aware of an audience that was not part of her represented world. Accordingly, her calling the recipient was a step across the border between diegetic and extra-diegetic world, a breaking of the fourth wall⁶, and, hence, a further blending of the fictional diegesis with the recipient's reality.

⁴ This information results from correspondence with ARTE employees.

⁵ Examples of metaleptical structures in movies are e.g. Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) or Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).

⁶ »The fourth wall convention exemplifies the articulation of traditional screen-based narrative techniques and aesthetics in which the fictional world is kept at a distance from reality, where on-

2.3 Profiles of the Main Characters on Facebook

Facebook is a social network that is used to communicate with others and to inform oneself about the world. Both of these functions were adopted for the transmedial project *About:Kate* during the broadcasting period. On the one hand, the project had its own Facebook page to inform the recipients about its structure or upcoming episodes. This Facebook page can be seen as a marketing tool for the whole project. On the other hand, Facebook also worked as a communication tool. Six of the characters in the series had their own profile on the social network. When creating a Facebook profile, one is able to choose if the profile belongs to a fictional character—a celebrity—or if it is for a real person. One can just ›follow‹ the former and get informed about his or her status news, while it is possible to become ›friends‹ with the latter which opens up the opportunity to chat with the person via Facebook. During the broadcasting period, six character profiles were installed, all as real persons. While they were deleted from Facebook after the last episode was broadcasted, Kate and the other figures posted films, pictures, quotations, or thoughts during the shows initial run:



Fig. 2:
Kate's post on Facebook

Consistent with the overall design of the TV series, Kate's posts differed a lot from one another in style and content. 5,000 friends is the maximum one can have on Facebook, a limit that Kate easily reached. When becoming friends with a person on Facebook, it is possible to write messages and chat with him or her. Similar to Kate's calls via the app, Facebook, too,

screen characters and storytelling processes seemingly ignore the presence of an audience« (ATKINSON 2012: 78).

offered the possibility to »bleed the narrative world [...] into the »real« world of the internet« (EVANS 2011: 24f.). A virtual conversation with the characters was not only possible but frequently took place. According to Janna Nandzik, recipients easily got into a parasocial interaction with the characters, during which they totally forgot about the artificial nature of their chat partners.⁷ Although the characters did not start a conversation in the first place, but rather reacted on opened-up talks, one can also observe a metaleptic structure here. The diegesis and the actual world became indistinct, because the characters could »bleed« into the latter via these virtual conversations.

2.4 The Website

During the broadcasting period, the website of the project functioned as a metasite where it was possible to watch all the episodes after their broadcast on TV, to take a look at the results of the psychological test of the app, and read through some of Kate's posts on Facebook.⁸ Furthermore, the website provided information about the project itself, the characters and places of the diegesis, and comments by the recipients. In addition, during the broadcasting period, the website offered the possibility to hand in user-generated content that was inserted into the episodes.

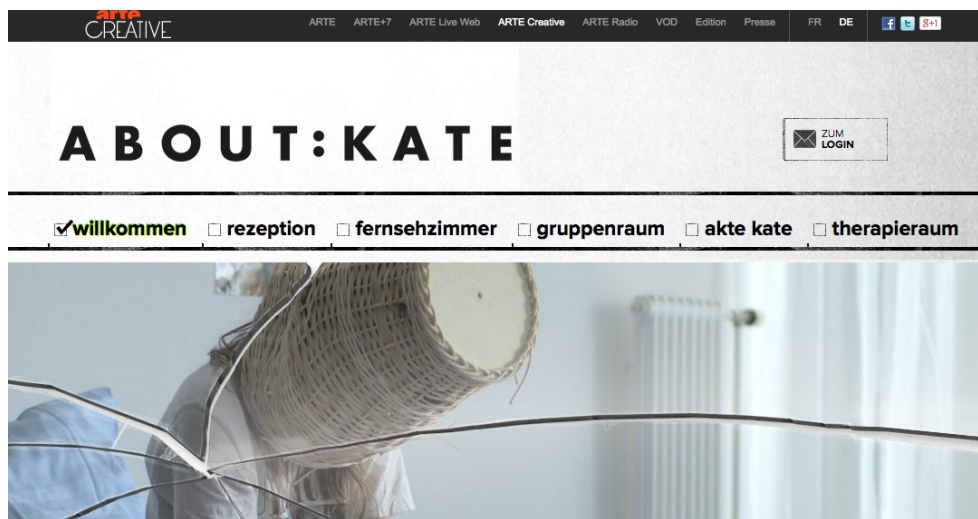


Fig. 3:
Homepage of the project. Screenshot from <http://kate.arte.tv/de> [accessed January 8, 2014]

The titles of the subpages referred to the spatial layout of a psychiatric hospital. The diegesis of the TV series was thus remediated on the Internet. However, the interrelation between the diegesis of the TV series and the website was not limited to their spatial design. Take, for example, the above

⁷ As Nandzik said in an interview with the author of this paper, the producers even had to involve pastoral care in two cases.

⁸ Whenever this analysis focuses on irretrievable parts of the project, like website or communication via Facebook, past tense is used. Present tense indicates that the text is still available in its original form of the broadcasting period..

photography of the main character Kate who is sitting in her room in the psychiatric hospital with a self-made basket put over her head. As opposed to the original image, this one had streaks on it suggesting damage. Accordingly, the website metareflexively commented on the whole project: what we see here is a photography broken into pieces that need to be put together again. The image as a whole is damaged, just as Kate's perception is not clear. In addition, the importance of the question of Kate's identity⁹ was reaffirmed on every single one of the subpages. Hence, the central topics of the website correspond to the thematic focus of the TV series. What the core text of the TV series transports is closely aligned to what the paratexts website and app as well as the social network Facebook communicate(d). The whole project of *About:Kate* consists of various different parts that together form a consistent image, a consistent hyperdiegesis, transporting the project's meaning.

On the subpage ›group room‹, the users had the opportunity to hand in images or short videos to different topics (e.g., ›stealing food‹). They were asked to produce their own content relating to specific issues during particular periods. This user-generated content was integrated in slots left blank when the series was produced, starting with the third episode. Due to new technological options, interactivity and user participation are parts of many modern transmedial projects (see, e.g., *The Truth About Marika* [2008], *The Spiral* [2012]). The user-generated content in *About:Kate* enriched its fragmentary structure and thus did not appear out of place at all. Also, the producers decided which user-generated content would fit into the series thematically as well as in terms of style. Despite some degree of control by the producers, then, the recipient of *About:Kate* could at least partially occupy the position of a co-author by sending in his or her own reactions to this pre-defined topics.

3. Functional Transmedia Storytelling in *About:Kate*

Like many transmedial projects, *About:Kate* is strongly connected to the time and place of its first broadcast. The experience of the whole project will never be the same again for any recipient, because he or she will never again have the opportunity to connect with the show's characters via Facebook or to submit his or her self-generated content. The character Kate is present in all the different texts. She and the location of the psychiatric hospital indicate a coherent group of texts that form one hyperdiegesis. The diegesis originates from the TV series, which functions as a core text for the transmedial project. The other texts on different media devices do not make sense without the core text, while the latter itself can be received autonomously. Watching the series without visiting the website has the effect that the recipient cannot participate as a co-author; becoming friends with characters on Facebook, in

⁹ »Wer ist Kate Harff?« (Who is Kate Harff?).

contrast, would not make sense without watching the series. Furthermore, the app is technically bound to the series and just does not work without any audio signal from the series. Hence, we may neither speak of ›transmedia storytelling‹ as Jenkins would define it, nor categorize the project as ›transfiction‹.

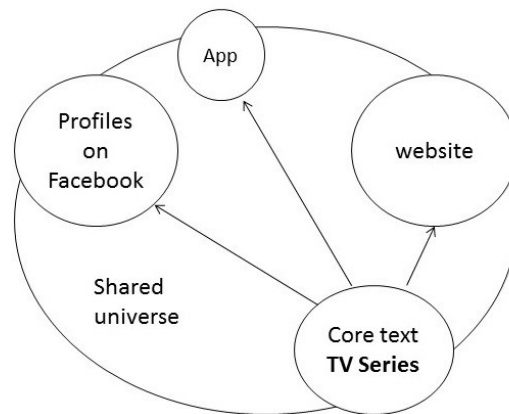


Fig. 4:
The structure of *About:Kate*. Illustration by the author of this article

The diegetic universe of *About:Kate* expanded widely (see fig. 4). It confronted the recipient not only when he or she was watching TV, but also when he or she was using the computer or his or her smartphone. Kate—and, with her, the whole storyworld as well as its topics—accompanied the recipient through his or her daily life. The diegetic world and the recipient’s reality did not exist parallel and independently of one another, they intertwined. Furthermore, every text of the transmedial project *About:Kate* presented a metaleptic structure where the separate narrative levels cross against the internal logic of the storyworld. The effect was a blurring of the line between intra- and extradiegetic world, between fiction and reality. Kate does not know who she is or even whether she perceives the world more or less accurately.

On the ›histoire‹ level of the series, Kate’s psychiatrist states at one point that perception is a game which can help us to position ourselves if we play it consciously.¹⁰ This advice is not only spoken in the direction of Kate. Moreover, it can be understood as a metareflective indication how to perceive texts in general: as an interdependent game of signs on a micro and, in case of transmedial projects, of texts as combination of signs on a macro level (see fig. 5).

¹⁰ »Aber als Spiel, als bewusstes Spiel kann es uns helfen, uns von außen zu betrachten.« Psychiatrist Dr. Desmarin in episode 14 »Das Feuerwerk«, 5:24–5:29



Fig. 5:
The psychiatrist Dr. Desmarin pointing at the reception of the psychiatric hospital. Episode 14, »Das Feuerwerk«.

Perception and identity are correlated in the transmedial project *About:Kate* and examined via different texts on different media devices.¹¹ On a ›histoire‹ level, the series presents a process of re-gaining autonomy in a mediated world. The narration starts with a disoriented protagonist and ends with her conscious decision against suicide and for a life in this complex world. However, Kate's disorientation is also passed on to the recipient via diverse narrative techniques. Thereby, the forth wall to the audience is frequently broken and reality and fiction are intertwined indistinctly.

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¹¹ Another sentence of the psychiatrist is prominently positioned at the end of the last episode: »What we see is not what we see, but what we are « (»Was wir sehen ist nicht, was wir sehen, sondern was wir sind«). Episode 14 »Das Feuerwerk«, 22:59–23:03.

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