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Storytelling in the media convergence age: Exploring screen narratives

Emre Çağlayan

The early 21st century has been witnessing extraordinary changes in digital media technologies that transformed the means of production and reception of screen narratives. Industrial shifts and an increasing use of the Internet enabled media companies to circulate their content globally and across a range of channels and platforms. This in turn gave more control to consumers, who not only acquired greater freedom in their ability to access narrative content but also the opportunity to create and disseminate their own. These circumstances rendered terms such as ‘the rise of digital’ shallow and inadequate, and media scholars heralded a new age: the age of media convergence. In a frequently cited passage, Henry Jenkins defined convergence as ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want’.⁵ In this respect, subsequent studies focused on understanding how these shifts in media technologies and industries brought forward further changes in consumer culture and suggested the blurring of traditional boundaries between different media and nations.

Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), a new anthology of essays edited by Roberta Pearson and Anthony N. Smith, is a welcome contribution to this important scholarly debate. In this new era of ‘radically reconfigured mediascape’, the editors argue, ‘the field of media studies and the subfield of media narratology can only progress by fully embracing transmedial and transnational perspectives’ (p. 3). The sensitivity toward the transmedial and the transnational is reflected in the variety of case studies offered within the anthology. More importantly, the editors are careful in not dismissing preceding frameworks for the sake of progress and instead stress continuity over change and transformation. In fact, they firmly assert that ‘convergence and globalization do not invalidate the consideration of specificities’ (p. 4) and convincingly demonstrate the persistence of medium, national, institutional, and technological specificities in the age of convergence. Their introduction is succinct and nuanced, offering enough food for thought on convergence culture for both the expert and the uninitiated.



The book as a whole claims that ‘distinct sets of cultural and [...] industrial conditions’ (p. 5) continue to determine the preservation of media identities, despite immense changes in production and distribution technologies. Individual chapters discuss a variety of topics (ranging from U.S. television to animation, from video games to European art cinema) and are divided into two parts titled ‘Production’ and ‘Circulation and Reception’. The remarkable diversity of the topics covered in the anthology also benefit from an overarching methodology: David Bordwell’s historical poetics, which goes beyond ordinary textual analysis to link ‘screen narratives to their national, institutional and technological contexts of production, circulation and consumption’ (p. 8). Although the editors do not offer further commentary on Bordwell’s definition they nevertheless envision historical poetics not simply as a methodology characteristic of film and media studies but more as an interdisciplinary framework that can be applied to other media. In many ways this testifies to the applicability and usefulness of historical poetics in understanding aesthetic strategies, audience responses, and industrial trends across a range of art forms and cultural practices.

The anthology begins with Anthony N. Smith’s chapter examining the innovative audience-targeting strategies the Kyoto-based video gaming company Nintendo employs in order to reach two distinct segments. Smith argues that the distinctive storytelling strategies and treatment of well-known narrative formulas in serial game franchises such as *Super Mario* and *Legend of the Zelda* produce ‘story-

worlds' that are simultaneously appealing to new gamers (as the basic narrative formula 'offers a discrete and coherent narrative experience') as well as 'hardcore' gamers familiar with the preceding episodes (for the variations' 'potential to surprise and delight dedicated players') (p. 22). Smith's work represents a unique type of inquiry into game studies, as it goes beyond standardised accounts of narrative analysis of games based on their interactivity and provides evidence from Nintendo's production strategies and the games' critical reception

Smith begins his analysis by distinguishing Nintendo games against differences in syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes in serial texts. The syntagmatic axis refers to the causal chain of events constituted by individual episodes in serial instalments, an aspect of seriality rarely demonstrated in Nintendo games. In these games the 'associations between the instalments of a series form not via a chronology of depicted events but by inferred thematic parallelism', or what others have termed as the paradigmatic axis (p. 28). For Smith, this paradigmatic seriality 'has become a key selling point in Nintendo's address to dedicated gamers', while its basic narratives continue to capture broader audiences. Following this crucial distinction Smith provides snippets of critical reviews of Nintendo games which demonstrate both a sense of affinity and delight by experienced players. This attention to critical reception is balanced later in the chapter by an overview of Nintendo marketing strategies and a consideration of how developments in gaming technology have helped Nintendo retain the paradigmatic serial connections.

The next chapter penned by Claudio Pires Franco examines the little known *Muddle Earth* franchise, initially a children's book parodying Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, subsequently adapted to other media forms such as a BBC animated cartoon series and a browser-based game by the British studio Dubit. Franco also transcends a standardised account of textual analysis and engages with adaptation studies in suggesting 'transmedial *brand consistency*' to be a more productive model, as opposed to fidelity (p. 42). Franco's analysis is not only based on the textual differences and similarities between the book, the cartoon, and the game, but also depends on extratextual data gathered from the franchise's production team and their documents. As Franco writes, 'the game producers used the specific affordances available to the game medium, but in a way that aimed to maintain brand consistency by adopting a similar tone' (p. 50). Given the complexity and web of references between each adaptation of the franchise (as well as the source text that it parodies), Franco succeeds in theorising a useful analytic framework to better understand how transmedia franchises operate, which combines intertextuality, medium affordances, and extratextuality as determining factors. It will be

interesting to see whether this framework will be applied to analysing other trans-media franchises in the future.

In one of the longer chapters in the anthology Jason Mittell examines the nature of anti-heroes in contemporary American television serials and questions the reasons behind audience engagement and allegiance to such morally-ambiguous characters, tracking the complex ways in which the protagonists of *Mad Men* (2007-present), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Dexter* (2006-2013), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) are constructed. Mittell has published some of the most valuable scholarly work on American television in recent years,⁶ and here too one can see the breadth of knowledge and insight he can bring to the analysis of narrative and emotional strategies employed by television producers. However, it is not clear how this chapter relates to media convergence or the institutional specificity of the serials' production (as one can all too easily tally countless examples of anti-heroes in the history of cinema), and it invests perhaps too much sustained attention into character evaluation. Moreover, Mittell's claim that audiences engage with these questionable characters due to the length of serials seems tautological at best and does not clarify how audiences come to terms with the ethical conundrums involved in this engagement in the first place. In this respect, the suggestion he makes at the very end of the chapter about 'operational allegiance', which he defines as the viewer's engagement 'with the character's construction, attuned to how the performance is presented' (p. 91), appears to be little different from what Murray Smith has previously called 'recognition', and therefore it requires more elaboration.⁷

In contrast, Gloria Dagnino's chapter discusses a genuinely interesting legal and economic framework behind Italian television productions, where commercial companies are financially encouraged to invest into media narratives for product placement and receive tax credit on part of their investment. Dagnino argues that 'the association of product placement with tax credit [...] increases the financial involvement of private companies in film production in a way that enhances commercial influence upon the narrative and aesthetic features of the films' (p. 93). Dagnino demonstrates this argument through a case study exploring *The Commander and the Stork* (*Il comandante e la cicogna*, Silvio Soldini, 2012), where the famous Disaronno liqueur was not only depicted prominently (with no obvious narrative function, as the author emphasises) but also featured in a number of promotional events during the pre-production and distribution stages of the film. Commercial companies investing in screen narratives for the purpose of publicising their products is most likely not news in film history, but the combination of product placement, tax credit, and the legitimate legal background testifies to the active cooperation between media industries and other private enterprises in visibly circulating their commodities.

The next chapter places its analysis within a comparative framework. Iain Robert Smith investigates *Ghajini* (A.R. Murugadoss, 2008), a Hindu-language remake of the director's Tamil-language *Ghajini* (2005) and a re-remake of the American *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and considers the ways in which its Indian producers altered the sources' narrative mode in order to appease their indigenous audiences and neatly fit their project into the conventions of commercial Indian cinema. 'Bollywood remakes should not be seen as resulting from a simple process of "Indianisation"' (p. 118), writes Smith, and indeed he provides evidence from the ways in which the complex narrative structure in *Memento* was adapted into local storytelling customs: by normalising the film's linear structure (which obliterates the source text's trademark reverse-chronology), adding song numbers, and increasing emotional intensity through the exaggeration of a background love story. However, Smith also suggests that 'this cross-cultural remake should be understood as an indicator of certain symptomatic tendencies of the two industries' narrational modes rather than in terms of essentialised cultural differences' (p. 112), which might remain disputable. Judging from Smith's descriptions of vast alterations made by the producers of *Ghajini*, the end result appears nothing like *Memento* apart from fragments of story elements and situations that directly cite (or plagiarise) the source text. In other words, Smith's evidence directly supports the idea that producers 'Indianised' the source text by strictly adopting their traditional storytelling conventions and went as far as to eliminate the only remaining unique aspect of their source, which does not necessarily render the process 'simple' or 'essentialising' but at the very least demonstrates the unidirectional course of this 'cross-cultural' exchange.

While the previous chapters examined belong to the first part of the book, focusing on production aspects of screen narratives, the second part focuses on their reception and distribution. Richard McCulloch's chapter investigates the ways in which Pixar Studios' brand image is reinforced through paratextual materials, particularly through the mediation of Emeryville (California), the company's headquarters, as a place for creative freedom. McCulloch argues that 'Emeryville acts as a physical space for the reification of Pixar's intangible brand values – a nexus point for the conceptions of creativity, fun and innovation that purportedly distinguish its films from those of its rivals' (p. 175). Following a consideration of paratextual materials in the form of critical reception and DVD bonus features, McCulloch concludes that 'Pixar's commodification of Emeryville' through strategic marketing reaffirms a complex brand identity composed of contradictory, yet embracing ideals: 'the brand manages to exude inclusivity *and* exclusivity, sophistication *and* frivolity, and its films manage to be both forward-thinking *and* nostalgic' (p. 186). The suggestion here is the increasingly overwhelming power of promotional material accompanying distribution of screen narratives in the

forms of special features, making-of documentaries, or interviews, and the ways in which this paratextual material can help reshape the identity of a singular narrative, or indeed a whole production company.

The majority of the essays focus on mainstream and popular narratives, while Cécile Renaud explores the various distribution strategies employed to promote Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) in the British market. Ironically, as Renaud demonstrates here, some of the marketing strategies consisted of describing the film as less of a subtitled, art-house entry and more of a thriller loaded with stars such as Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche. For Renaud, the 'attempt to shift the position of European cinema in British film culture, notably by emphasising familiar narrative straits so as to bring films from the margins towards the mainstream' (p. 191) is one of the key aims of the UK Film Council, which was set up in 2000. However, in reality, as Renaud demonstrates through the analysis of the theatrical and DVD distribution history of *Caché*, the distinctions in national and linguistic specificities remain (and so too does the special category of art cinema) despite efforts of distribution companies in overcoming 'the almost pathological British fear of subtitles' (p. 190). This chapter not only contributes to the scholarly literature surrounding one of the most important European films of the 21st century but also invites further comprehensive studies on niche distribution labels such as Artificial Eye as one of the major champions of European cinema within the British market. In her conclusion Renaud also calls for further studies on the ways in which video on demand services bring forward newer patterns in consumption.

In the book's penultimate chapter Alessandro Catania charts the discrepancies between national audiences in terms of their exposure to transmedia narratives on television, which normally occur due to 'the traditional industry logics still dominant among broadcasters' (p. 206). Because the release dates for transmedia narratives are uneven across the globe and the availability of their ancillary narratives are likewise unequally accessible, Catania suggests that so far scholars have 'overlooked the significant theoretical and empirical implications of international content distribution' (p. 206-207). Catania's compelling argument is supported by actual data that demonstrates major delays in the release of American television serials in their European counterparts. The rest of the chapter considers windowing, 'the practice of circulating content on specific channels at specific times', as a 'distribution practice [that] trumps the logics of transmedia narratives' (p. 207), and he subsequently feeds these ideas into a reading of the potential shifts in the reception of *Flashforward* (2009-2010).

These chapters merely represent a small sample of the valuable content in this anthology. On the surface, the disparate range of subjects in the book might encourage ideas about the absence of a central theme to the overall project. How-

ever, that would be too unfair. The volume's strength lies precisely in this interdisciplinary variety in validating media narratology as a legitimate paradigm that can consider topics as varying as film, television serials, video games, and trans-media franchises. Another strength is the spread of essays in terms of geographical areas, although only two of the essays actually go beyond the North American and Western European bubble. While this should not be taken as a limitation, it nevertheless might function as another urgent plea in welcoming further projects with a wider ranging scope. As a whole this volume displays essays on the cutting edge of academic research evolving in contemporary film and media studies.

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Notes

5. Jenkins 2006, p. 2.
6. See for example Mittell 2004, 2010, and 2015.
7. Smith 1995, pp. 110-141.

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