

Extreme Storytelling

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Hic sunt leones. Exploring the limits of contemporary film and TV storytelling

In the last two decades, various filmmakers have challenged their audiences and the definition of “classic” narrative in cinema and television. With their new ways of approaching audiovisual storytelling, films like Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Tom Tykwer’s *Run, Lola, Run* (2006), Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) and *Inception* (2010), Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2006), Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2006), Gaspar Noé’s, *Irreversible* (2002), David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Dr.* (2000) or Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* (2013) stirred the interest of other writers, directors, viewers and researchers, equally intrigued by the causes and the effects of these extreme narratives.

Some film theorists never saw these transformations as groundbreaking as the authors claimed them to be, interpreting them as mere variations on classical Hollywood storytelling (David Bordwell, 2006). Others read these approaches as a way to organize the late modernist excess on subjective or schismatic temporality, thus creating only more conservative modular narratives (Allan Cameron, 2008). Meanwhile others praised the engagement of the audience in a complex adventure of puzzle-solving, thus transforming film consumption into a game-like endeavor (Warren Buckland, 2009).

Just as these three approaches have defined the debate, and many of these films have created their own special place in the contemporary film canon, new production and distribution opportunities have sparked the interest in other approaches on storytelling in cinema and television, with an increased attention to the mechanics of TV series narratives. The amazing and undisputed success of contemporary television productions like *Six Feet*

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Under (HBO, 2001-2005), *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), *Downton Abbey* (ITV/PBS, 2010-2015), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-) (to name just a few) re-ignited the interest in serialized products and also transgressed the limits of what we knew as television. Thus, television series and the mechanism of today's television production have become some of the main interests of media and film scholars also due to the effects they have on mass-audiences and the immediate response they elicit. Moreover, the traditional serialization process is seriously challenged by contemporary consumption practices like Netflix, Amazon and other such platforms, with a subsequent rise in the narrative complexity of TV productions.

On the other hand, interactive movies, micro-movies, collective online productions or database features are considered cutting-edge storytelling made possible by today's technical advancements. Seen as defining elements of "the third screen (...) the screen after the TV and computer" (Crow, Longford, Sawchuk), micro-movies are becoming cultural forms all over the world, having their own festivals and events, like Nottingham International Microfilm Festival or Beijing International Micro Film Festival. Closely related to game narrative strategies of participation governed by the viewer-to-user dynamics, the interactive movies and database documentaries and features are still a novelty that challenges both practitioners and theorists (*see* Göbel, Malkewitz, Iurgel, 2006). *The Source* (Doug Aitken, 2012), *I Love Your Work* (Jonathan Harris, 2013), *Reinvention Stories* (Julia Reichter, Steven Bognar, 2013), and *ROME. 3 Dreams of Black* (Chris Milk, 20011) scout the possibilities of interactive and immersive online audiovisual experiences, exploring transmediality.

At the other end, technical developments also enabled audaciously choreographed extreme one-take movies like Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014) or Sebastian Schipper's *Victoria* (2015), which that seem to overthrow the fragmentation and instability that mark many of the post-modern narratives in audiovisual formats.

Do all these stand as a narrative turn in contemporary cinema and TV series or are they just individual experiments with storytelling? What are the major determinants of these plays upon the narrative form? Are they social, political, technological, industrial? How is the audience engaged by such stories? These are just some of the questions that the contributors to this *Ekphrasis. Images, Cinema, Theory, Media* try to answer.

In the first section of this issue, Doru Pop looks at the way contemporary television practices of production and consumption, and the mechanisms of *televisuality* have radically changed following a habit loop of recycling and replaying. Looking at various TV shows broadcasted in the past years, from *Sex and the City* to *Californication* and *Shameless*, and from *Desperate Housewives* to *Army Wives*, the author states that the repetitive nature and lack of originality of many of today's television programs added to the over-sexualization of television are parts of the contemporary promiscuous

culture, leading to what he defines as promiscuous narratives. More than that, the frequent reuse and remix of the same formulas have enthroned *televisual promiscuity*.

Sticking to contemporary television, Sânziana Șerbănescu searches for the recycled prefabs in *Mad Men* television series, as products of popular culture, and also the creative and innovative strategies used throughout the series. The study focuses on the defining characteristics of transmediality and proves that the mentioned television program is both internally and externally governed by its laws while appealing to myths and their memetic capabilities.

Still looking for particular mechanisms of contemporary TV series, the author of this introduction chooses the phenomenon of cult television production and reception by analyzing the *en vogue* FX production *American Horror Story*. The study follows the politics of hyper-sexualization and pornification of contemporary society and culture and the way in which they are inscribed in this particular series, and also the way these transformations have become defining traits of some pieces of contemporary cult television. For a complete overview, it also scrutinizes the residual abilities of the re-mixed horror tropes and various types of sexual of monstrosity, by looking at several communities created around the show on various social media platforms.

In the second section, Damon Blalack studies the provoking phenomenon of fan-edits, with respect to what it means to film production, ownership and response. As an effect of democratization of filmmaking in the digital era, fan-edits became new means of adaptation of consecrated filmic texts and also of introducing important features of film history to contemporary audiences. The author explores what can be gained and lost through this unusual process of adaptation, as well as the tension between the fan-edit culture and the still dominant auteur's authority in cinema.

Fragmented narratives are the starting point of Alice Teodorescu's view on the work of famous Japanese director Satoshi Kon. Starting from the quoted approaches on the modular and database narratives, the author states that all these operate in Kon's animated films in order to translate "doubles, public and private, real and virtual, real and dream, identity and alter-ego". These aspects become the setting of the *fantasyscape* of Satoshi Kon and the narrative strategies that he uses ensure the most appropriate context for the fantastic entertainment experience.

The third section looks for stances of extreme storytelling again in the Japanese film production as Ana Dosen and Luiza-Maria Filimon address the works of Hitoshi Matsumoto, respectively Seiji Mizushima.

At Dosen, Matsumoto brings the bizarre grounded in both the cultural and the technological in the provoking structure of *Symbol* (2009). As noted by the author, the unconventional structure of this particular Japanese film played, written and directed by Matsumoto dwells in the traditional practices of narrating *nansensu*, as well as those of the *benshi*. All these are conducted to the use of the director's micro-narratives and the film's meta-narrative, as the film transforms, in the author's opinion, in an extremely contemporary work due to the appeal to fragmented experiences.

The narrative-politics relation is the main focus of Luiza-Maria Filimon's study on Mizushima's *Concrete Revolutio* anime series. For the author, by opposing the frequent variations of other animated films, the series has a "syncretic structure due to the multitude of ideas and various subsets of socio-political implications as well as due to its American influence". Filimon considers the socio-political, military and ethical implications of the series outlining the links to actual events from the past decades of Japanese and international history that are re-addressed throughout the series.

In the final section, Călina Părău explores the tensions between "what cannot be undone and what is there left to be undone" in Andrey Zvyagintsev's films, looking at the Russian filmmaker's "wasteland" through the glass of *the narratives of the Fall*. Furthermore, through works by Eliade and by Ricoeur, the author scrutinizes the power of the inhuman eye of the machine that governs Zvyagintsev's work, lending a mythological quality to the Real.

Trauma and anamnesis sublimated by media are the main concern of Cătălina Botez's study on the portrait documentary that René Frölke dedicated to Norman Manea. Starting from *Le Beau Danger* (2014), the author argues that transmediality can be used to re-contextualize and augment Manea's literary message, and that autofiction mediated by film is a powerful tool of circulating individual memory. Furthermore, the author approaches the strategies that the German director uses for the transformation of "the written text into readable images" in this provoking documentary that starts from Foucault's aesthetic peril and follows multiple traumatic experiences.

As it derives from all the above described works, exploring the extremities of contemporary television and film narrative strategies is both an intriguing and adventurous experience. There is still much to discover on the map in order to understand how the "storytelling animal" (Gottschall, 2012) shapes and consume the stories in these latter days.

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