

Stories. Screen Narrative in the Digital Era

Edited by Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever

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If there is an aspect towards which the interest of narrative scholars has consistently grown in recent years, this is represented without any doubt by the impact of digital technologies on the way stories are constructed and shaped, as well as on how they are experienced by their audience. Indeed, a number of books and journal special issues, but also conferences and seminars, has been devoted to the study of both these aspects, and more in general to the attempt at mapping the broader transformations of the very idea of narrative in the contemporary mediascape.

Stories. Screen Narrative in the Digital Era, the volume curated by Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever for the Key Debates series of Amsterdam University Press, participates in this trend in a significant way. Not only does it recapitulate some of the key issues in the debate on the relationship between narratives and the digital, but moreover it proposes new perspectives on it, especially concerning so-called ‘screen narratives’, i.e., the narratives that we nowadays experience through the mediation of a screen, being it that of a movie theatre, of a personal computer, or of a mobile phone.

As the editors suggest, the premise of the volume is to answer two main questions: first, whether storytelling, or ‘story-following’, has changed decisively ‘either during the era of “cinema” or, perhaps more pertinently, in the postcinema era of digital and interactive media’ (p. 12); secondly, whether the ‘overuse of the term “story” devalue[s] or detract[s] meaning from what we would formerly have called a story’ (Ibidem).

In order to respond, the authors of the fifteen contributions collected in the volume draw upon different methodologies, adopt different styles (besides ‘classical’ scholarly contributions, there are interviews, and journalistic or journalist-like pieces as well), and — perhaps more relevantly — problematize the contours of the debate, thus suggesting from the outset that easy answers cannot be given. Or, at least, this is what emerges from the first essay, in which Jan Baetens discusses the inequalities of stories, namely that, beyond the idea that Roland Barthes once famously promoted that stories are universal and ubiquitous, they are not equal at all. By looking at how comics and graphic novels have been historically overlooked — with comics for a longtime occupying ‘the margins of the cultural system’ before being accepted, along with his most ‘serious’ twin, ‘in

the field of culturally legitimate storytelling' (p. 40) — Baetens reflects on how the social status of stories, as well as 'the degree of acceptance of storytelling in different fields' (p. 33), can dramatically change depending on the society and the historical context in which they appear. This idea resonates even more vividly in a world such as ours, where, as Ian Christie puts it in his essay, 'stories and storytelling have been placed at the center of vast areas of human activity' (p. 87), and where we seem constantly involved in a process of 'storification', i.e., a process by which we are invited to give shape and enjoy whatever content, even the more mundane, as if it were a story.

Building on this awareness, each contributor focuses on a specific media product or set of products, pondering the extent to which the stories 'contained' within depart from traditional notions of storytelling. However, seeking a common denominator among all the essays, there are at least two main aspects that emerge distinctly.

On the one hand, they all seem to share the idea that if a change has happened in the way stories look like today, this has to do with their complexity. Many of the stories we commonly experience are characterized by intricate plots, sophisticated characters as well as by unconventional visual forms. This is, for instance, what Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen argue in their essay, a revised version of the last chapter of their monograph *Impossible Puzzle Films*. The authors discuss a range of popular films (most notably, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception*) 'that evoke pervasively confusing viewing experiences, undermining narrative comprehension by means of various complicating storytelling techniques and the eliciting of dissonant cognitions' (p. 56), which, for this reason, invite viewers to speculate on the possible ways to come to terms with such complexity. Similar claims are also made by Ian Christie in his discussion of *Dickensian*, the BBC TV show which projects a storyworld where characters from different novels by Charles Dickens meet and interact, thus expanding the story in an intertextual direction; by John Ellis, who in a dialogue with Annie van den Oever acknowledges that many contemporary TV series are likely to exhaust, more than classical series and of feature-films, 'the possibilities of the characters, situations, and themes' (p. 160); and in particular by Dominique Chateau, for whom the third season of Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, due to its complexity and its dream-like qualities, erases the boundary 'between film and television series' (p. 120).

Complex formal and narrative qualities are also crucial aspects of the works of Michelangelo Antonioni and Chantal Ackerman, whose oeuvres are discussed respectively by José Moure in an essay devoted to the 'endless endings' of the films by the Italian director, and by Eric de Kuyper in a dialogue with van den Oever about Ackerman's *La captive* (2000). And also Robert Ziegler, even though he states that, from his perspective as a conductor, 'the role of music in making narratives convincing hasn't really changed all that much' (p. 193), he also agrees with Christie that nowadays music needs to be adapted to 'much less defined

narrative arcs, use of “dead time” and wide variations of pace that would been unthinkable in the 1940s and 1950s, and even later’ (pp. 194-95).

However, as Sandra Laugier reminds us in her essay on *Game of Thrones* and its astounding success, such complexity is not just thematic or formal. Indeed, there is a moral element involved in many of the stories we currently enjoy: fictional universes as the one projected by *Game of Thrones* are permeated by a sort of ‘moral atmosphere’, i.e., by ‘a plurality of singular expressions, stage arguments and debates’ (p. 145) which invite viewers to reflect on important moral questions.

This observation helps to highlight the second aspect that is central to the essays collected in the volume: namely, that if stories have changed and become increasingly complex, their audiences have undergone a similar transformation. Not mere passive spectators, viewers are increasingly attracted by complex films and TV series, to the point that they seem more interested in feeling challenged by them than by solving their puzzles, as Kiss and Willemsen argue. This does not come as a surprise, though. Indeed, this is the premise of transmedia storytelling, whose recipients, according to Melanie Schiller, are not satisfied solely by enjoying a story, but also by being somehow involved in it, making connections among different media contents, expanding them via fan fictions, and more in general manipulating the materials of which a story is made.

Furthermore, it can be argued that this kind of involvement with stories informs also our everyday experience with the devices with which we usually interact. For instance, according to Vincent Amiel our use of mobile phones, portable computers and other devices changes significantly the way in which we look at images and interact with them. Since within such devices ‘images and frames are moved, interlocked, and zoomed in or out according to the viewer’s will’, this familiarizes us with a range of experimentations with images that were still precluded a few years ago, at the same time opening the ground to ‘a new conception of storytelling’ (p. 52), one that is probably less author-driven than in the past. This is also what Roger Odin suggests in his short but very compelling contribution, focusing on the aesthetics of the single shot which dominates our use of mobile cameras. He argues that we have ‘incorporated’ the basic figures of filmic language, thus suggesting that ‘we can no longer film naively’ (p. 167). According to Odin, the way in which we approach communication devices and screens can often produce, even beyond our intention, artistic effects, thus introducing creativity in the space of everyday communication.

In a sense, this last remark is likely to synthesize in a rather provocative way the double assumption that underlies *Stories*: that the very idea of narrative is evolving in quite unexpected ways, and that we are probably becoming not just, as Jason Mittell puts it, self-trained narratologists, but also self-trained filmmakers, who learn the ways in which films, TV series and stories more generally work, not just by looking at them, but also actively exploring the possibilities and the limits of the images and the screens around us.

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