Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti and Matthew Freeman. *Transmedia Archaeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comics and Pulp Magazines*

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- 1 According to the authors of *Transmedia Archaeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comics and Pulp Magazines*, transmedia storytelling is not quite new after all. They concur with Henry Jenkins, who coined the phrase and the concept in 2003, to deny technological determinism and the central importance of digital technologies behind the advent of transmedia storytelling. Yet they are also driven to the conclusion that, “if we consider transmedia storytelling as an experience characterized by the expansion of the narrative through different media and, in many cases, by the participation of the users in that expansion, then we could say that this is not a new phenomenon” (6). This is a very broad definition indeed, which allows them to highlight older narrative techniques which are clearly, as they successfully demonstrate, diachronically related to transmedia narration. However, it also leads them, as their stated goal, to “look[ing] for transmedia storytelling practices in the past” (ibid.), rather than looking for their ‘ancestors’, and to use the word transmedia

repeatedly throughout the book when they should probably have been using the more accurate term ‘crossmedia’. The latter can also lead to the creation of a storyworld through many different media, delivery platforms and storytellers, but without having a unified story which moves forward or one common, consistent world expanding consistently, coherently and simultaneously (thanks to strong coordination) across various media, and from one storyteller to another. That is the essence of transmedia, relying as it does on what Jenkins calls additive comprehension or what Horace Newcombe called cumulative narration in the case of serialized TV shows, instead of the more traditional concurrent and contradictory versions of the same story or storyworld afforded by crossmedia franchising – the story, the characters and/or the storyworld move forward thanks to transmedia, rather than going in circles. This terminological problem has been a recurring one over the years, with many scholars taking liberties with the notion to the extent that they tend to obfuscate the qualitatively innovative nature of the present moment. This should not detract from the many strengths of this thoroughly researched book and the many insights it does provide on storytelling in 20th century popular culture, but it does highlight a certain limitation which goes beyond terminology.

- 2 The authors of *Transmedia Archeology* break up transmedia narratology into some of its constituent parts to offer an archeology of those parts. They identify in the introduction the older techniques underpinning transmedia narration as part of what they justifiably call the “aesthetics of the pulps”, their central tenet being that transmedia is directly related to that aesthetic. Borrowing the first two notions from Gregory Steirer, they identify these narrative building blocks as: narrative implication, which finds ways to imply “the existence of untold stories, hinting at a larger storyworld beyond the confines of the narrative taking place – a further series of spaces where concurrent adventures are unfolding”, 8); narrative expansion, with narrative growing, perhaps indefinitely, beyond the limits of any single text; seriality; and the “retroactive linkage” (a term borrowed from Mark J.P. Wolf), a cross-over technique where writers find a way to link two independent narratives and storyworlds by retroactively building narrative bridges between them – Superman and Batman are suddenly revealed to inhabit the same storyworld, for instance. These four techniques all participate to what Jenkins identified as the end result of transmedia storytelling: world-building, with texts incrementally elaborating a persistent and consistent world which can ultimately survive its originators, its early readers and even its original characters. However, the authors’ demonstrations show how early storyworlds failed to a large extent to coalesce, with characters and their redundant adventures being for a long time the center of attention. Finally, the authors never forget to include active audience participation, which, as they successfully demonstrate in the three case studies making up the book, was another central element of this early form of expansive storytelling, even though they tend to leave aside the other pole of transmedia storytelling – synergistic integration of resources and strategies by media conglomerates.
- 3 The first case study is in fact the only one to situate itself squarely in the world of pulp narratives. Paolo Bertetti minutely describes the evolution of *Conan the Barbarian*, adopting a “character-centred approach to the study of transmedia storytelling” (16): it is not so much the world in which Conan inhabits which will expand with time, but the character itself. By recounting the complex story of the slow popularization of the

character, mainly after the death of its creator, Robert E. Howard, in 1936, Bertetti aims at showing that here the character is not subservient to the texts or the world which it inhabits, but is rather a “semio-pragmatic effect produced by texts” (16). This leads him to state that “older forms of transmedia franchises were constructed on character sharing rather than on the logics of a particular world” (17) and to focus on an “‘effet-personnage’ (‘character-effect’)” (16), rather than world-building. Conan is thus shown to be ultimately the result of a “bottom-up construction of the identity of a fictional character” (21-22), as early fans contributed to establishing the canon surrounding the character, making up a chronology of his events, a consensual biography for the character, and slowly filling out the numerous blanks left by Howard. The essay is thus very successful in showing how audience participation, a key feature of transmedia narration, did not require the Internet to appear and was already a force in the 1930s thanks to written correspondence, fanzines, cooperative publishing and fan conventions. Early in the history of the character, therefore, there was indeed co-creation rather than adaptation, which is true of transmedia narration.

- 4 However, when he moves on to later transmedia iterations of the character, Bertetti’s account tellingly reaches its limits, showing how these belonged in fact to more traditional crossmedia merchandising by Conan Properties in comics, cinema, television and video games. There has been so far no attempt to build a consistent and expanding “hyperdiegesis”,¹ each medium and platform offering concurrent, incompatible reinterpretations of the character and his world; all are roughly based on the early *Conan* canon, but do not add to and expand on an overarching story and storyworld. Clearly aware of the problem, the author does state that “transmedial fictional coherency and consistency are less central. What is instead more important is the recognisability of the character and his identity [...]” (36). Yet the recognisability of a character borrowed by other storytellers (be they producers or consumers of content) in other media is a very old phenomenon indeed, as he himself demonstrates, and does not offer any valuable insight into recent storytelling innovations, if only to highlight the type of storytelling that did not yet exist. The limit here might well be that storytellers have to a large extent failed so far to expand on Conan’s world; constantly focusing on the titular character inevitably reaches narrative limits which encourage constant revisions and reversions, rather than the continuous narrative accumulation which is the hallmark of transmedia storytelling.
- 5 The second chapter, by Matthew Freeman, focuses on Superman, and is more convincing in its attempt to demonstrate the presence of actual transmedia storytelling in older franchises. The essay is strong when it comes to demonstrate how “pulp aesthetics” informed narration in comic strips, comic books, radio dramas and movie serials to create expanding storyworlds like Superman’s – even though, as Umberto Eco has already noted, Superman’s early adventures are essentially redundant and repetitive, even when taking place across media. But it is particularly intriguing when it comes to the 1939/1940 New York World’s Fair. There, DC Comics published a one-off issue of their comic book, which included a new adventure of Superman and Lois Lane, set at the Fair. July 3, 1940 also happened to be “Superman Day” at the Fair: a marketing operation consisting in having an actor dressed as Superman greeting the fair-goers and organizing an athletic contest to choose “America’s Super-Boy and Super-Girl”, an event which was broadcast live on the *Superman* radio serial, while “the stage setting of the performance in turn served as the setting for the [comic’s] prologue” (47). As Freeman writes, “Superman Day represented an integrated media

experience – the fictional adventure of the *New York World's Fair* comic combined with the spectatorial spaces of the day in ways that created an integrated, cross-pollinated transmedia attraction”, one which does indeed “echo Jenkins’ characterization of contemporary transmedia audiences” migrating from one medium to another in search of new perspectives on a story and a storyworld rather than yet another adventure of the titular character (48). This offers the clearest and most convincing example in the book of one story being told simultaneously and cumulatively in different media thanks to strong cooperation and coordination among producers of content. The scale and sophistication of such marketing operations has immensely changed today, but there is not really any qualitative difference.

- 6 The third chapter is the most intriguing one, consisting in the study of an Argentine science fiction comic book, *El Eternauta*. Written by Carlos A. Scolari, the essay describes the story and its fascinating (re)incarnations through the decades, from the 1950s to the present day. It then essentially returns to observations similar to Bertetti’s: how the comic book was reappropriated and reimagined by successive storytellers and the wider public after the originator’s, Héctor Germán Oesterheld, death (at the hands of the Argentine dictatorship in the late 1970s) and became a striking example of user-participation in the act of storytelling. With time, *El Eternauta* became more and more explicitly politicized, first by its original author and then by new authors and by audiences, becoming “an icon of popular resistance against dictatorships and military power for 30 years now” (62). New generations of storytellers and readers adapted and reimagined the character and his time-traveling adventures to express this theme according to their own eras’ preoccupations. The essay includes the picture of a graffiti of the “Nesternauta”, a combination of the now traditional representation of the character with the face of President Nestor Kirchner, who died in 2010: “Before Kirchner’s death, the character was considered a cultural and political icon of the popular ‘resistance’ and ‘sacrifice’. After 2010, the myth was re-signified transforming Néstor Kirchner into a hero who gave his life for a political project” (67). This is an excellent example of the complex ways popular culture can work and the way it relates to political and societal issues, and it does a lot to help the book reach its major achievement: demonstrating how audiences have been for decades active in the co-creation, transformation and reappropriation of characters (Conan, Superman, *El Eternauta*). At the same time, the coordinated emergence of expanding and immersive storyworlds appears to be a more recent and more authentically transmedia-related phenomenon.
- 7 The authors do recognize in their conclusion that “these case studies are also atypical of our understanding of transmedia storytelling” (73). It is indeed telling that when they come closest to our current understanding, at the 1940 NYC Fair, corporate marketing (which after all is all about integration, synergies and consistency) is central to the phenomenon. This should argue for the necessity when working on transmedia to give proper consideration to corporate synergistic strategies designed to offer innovative experiences to consumers, be they at World’s Fairs or on social media. Transmedia is at its highest point of relevance when it situates itself at the intersection between media conglomerates and empowered audiences in the way they relate to, and sometimes the way they struggle over, expanding narratives.

ENDNOTES

1. Matt Reeves's proposed term in *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), Kindle edition.

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