

Hans-Joachim Backe

## Narratology Between Transmediality and Medium-Specificity

Jan-Noël Thon: *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*. Lincoln / London: University of Nebraska Press 2016 (= Frontiers of Narrative Series). 558 pp. USD 60.00. ISBN 978-0-8032-7720-5

Jan-Noël Thon's monograph is impressive in more than one respect. It seeks to develop "a 'toolbox' for the analysis of prototypical aspects of narrative across media which can be described as transmedial strategies of narrative representation" (p. 6). A product of many years of hard work, it draws on Thon's PhD thesis and integrates no less than 15 book chapters and papers of his, five of which were originally published in German.

As such, the book compresses a sizeable body of work into a single, coherent volume – which has, at 558 pages, considerable heft. A third of it is taken up by over 330 endnotes, a 66-page bibliography, and a 34-page index of terms, names, and authors. The remaining 330 pages are structured in a straightforward fashion. After a short introduction, the first chapter situates the book in the context of contemporary narratological research and unpacks the "fundamental problems related to the project of a transmedial narratology" (p. xxii). The bulk of the argument is organized in three parts of two chapters each, dedicated to the concepts of storyworld, narrator, and subjectivity (vaguely reminiscent of Genette's central concepts of diegesis, narrator, and focalizer), followed by a very short conclusion.

Thon situates his research in the overlapping, yet not congruent, areas of transmedia research and narrative theory. The necessity for his research stems from the fact that entertainment franchises which "transgress the borders of different 'media' and hermetically packaged 'works'" (p. xvii) have become ubiquitous, maybe even culturally dominant. These transmedial configurations are a challenge that narratology has not adequately reacted to, which leads Thon to the formulation of an overarching framework of genuinely transmedial – and thus general – narratology. Thon's ideal is a narratology that

not only allows for the analysis of *transmedial strategies of narrative representation* and their realization within the specific mediality of contemporary films, comics, and video games [...] but also provides a welcome opportunity to critically reconsider – and, at least occasionally, revise – some of narratology's more canonized terms and concepts. (p. xviii, emphasis in the original)

The book pursues this (quite immodest) goal in a highly systematic fashion and with strict delimitations. Examples are taken from three media (films, comics, and video games) and restricted to a contemporary time-frame of the 1980s onward. Individual texts' (e.g. adaptations') relationship to other texts as well as

the construction of fictional worlds are only analyzed insofar as they further the understanding of

narrative meaning making across media [and] provide a foundation for studies concerned with larger-scale questions of cultural meanings, their socioeconomic contexts, and the ways both are renegotiated in the inter- and transcultural dynamics of our globalized world. (p. xx)

While inevitably touching upon the transmedial and cultural situatedness of the examined texts as, respectively, their basis and significance, the book's central goal is to do groundwork.

Situating his research in relation to the main trends in narratology – contextualist, cognitive, and transgeneric / intermedial approaches (p. 2) –, Thon sees his own work (unsurprisingly) mainly in terms of the latter. He gives a brief and largely disillusioned account of the history of narratology, but stresses the heuristic potential of the larger (neo)classical tradition. With regard to the narrower field of transmediality, the book is dedicated rather to transmedial strategies of representation, i.e. “‘medially unspecified’ phenomena and [...] representational or, more generally, aesthetic strategies” (p. 12), than to the creation of transmedial storyworlds or ‘crossmedial’ content distribution.

Thon defines transmedia narratology restrictively as consisting of approaches interested “not in narrative media per se but in transmedial phenomena that manifest themselves across a range of narrative media” (p. 14). Following Siegfried J. Schmidt, Marie-Laure Ryan, Werner Wolf, and Irina Rajewsky, Thon conceives of media as cognitive constructs that are shared by cultures at a certain point in time and synthesized from the prototypical traits of many examples. They are part of a hierarchical heuristic that includes the subordinate categories of media forms (such as feature films or graphic novels) and media genres (such as horror or fantasy) (p. 19).

Adaptation of theory across media is, to Thon, not generally precarious. He considers “media blindness”, the inevitable influence that theoretical premises of studies of one medium have on theories conceived as medium-independent, as “a matter of emphasis rather than principle” (p. 21). He stresses that the “core condition for a transmedial narratology to remain ‘media-conscious’ is an awareness of the granularity of its concepts” (p. 22). Granularity is a term frequently used in disciplines like corpus linguistics or physics, where it designates the level of detail of description and it forms the basis for much of Thon's argument, his descriptive categories, and his analyses. Highly universal concepts lack the granularity necessary for “in-depth analysis of narrative representation across media” (p. 25), while more particular concepts often are not transmedially applicable because they “primarily aim at medium-specific phenomena” (ibid.). Thon attempts to solve this issue by identifying comparatively ‘neutral’ (p. 26) narratological concepts, arguing that

concepts such as ‘narrator,’ ‘point of view,’ ‘perspective,’ or ‘focalization’ may point at certain transmedial properties of many, most, or all kinds of narrative representations that are revealed when one discusses the respective concept on a sufficiently abstract level. (p. 23)

To attain the granularity required for detailed analyses, Thon integrates these high-level concepts into a modular approach. A concept such as “narration”

then is, like a medium, identified as a synthetic prototype that allows the discussion of the commonalities – the family resemblance, to use a connected metaphor – of narrative across media to create a framework for analyzing the medium-specific manifestations of the phenomenon in the individual media with dedicated tools that possess sufficiently high granularity. Thon’s approach to transmedia narratology thus is to create an overarching framework, within which existing (medium-specific) theories, tools and methods can be applied in individual analyses.

After the research project has been situated and the general theoretical foundations explicated, the study comes quickly into its own. Chapter 2, “The Storyworld as a Transmedial Concept”, does not only continue the expansive literature review of the introductory chapter with a sharper focus, it impressively demonstrates the author’s grasp of the bigger picture. He successively adds detail and depth to the discussion of narrative worldness, always distinguishing between epistemological domains, only to re-connect their arguments in a highly meaningful way. The reasoning in chapter 2 leads from establishing the need for a level of pre-narrative events (expressed in concepts like Genette’s *diégèse* or Schmid’s *happenings*) to the observation that all narratives are representative of such (fictional or factual) events and the (story)world in which they occur (p. 45). Thon asserts that representations of storyworlds are “necessarily realized within the specific mediality of conventionally distinct media”, are “necessarily incomplete” (and thus need recipients to “fill in the gaps”), and consist “not only of existents, events, and characters but also of the spatial, temporal, and causal relations between them” (p. 46). “Filling in the gaps” in such a relational network is only possible because narratives are structured not only chronologically, but also teleologically, which is especially apparent whenever primary and secondary (and tertiary and so forth) storyworlds are juxtaposed in e.g. metaleptic narratives. Therefore, Thon subscribes to a “broadly *intentionalist-pragmatic account of representation*” (p. 51, emphasis in the original), based on the assumption that some meaning is intended in a narrative. Thon is primarily interested in meaning-making processes of comprehension, i.e. negotiation processes in the face of storyworld inconsistencies that allow him to highlight narrative conventions and strategies. The strategies of plausibilization which he identifies pertain mostly to the ability to ignore irrelevant or mismatched elements and to the distinction between local and global phenomena – a distinction that is of great importance for all of his argument (p. 61).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to general and medium-specific dimensions of plausibilization. Before dealing with the examples, the chapter introduces further important concepts (multimodality, conceptual and nonconceptual mental representations) and establishes the distinction between the representation strategies of films, comics, and games, which Thon terms audiovisual, verbal-pictorial, and interactive (p. 75). The chapter then distinguishes multimodal procedures of creating narrative uncertainty in fiction film based on Kendall Walton’s concept of ‘charity’ – a commonsensical willingness to accept that e.g.

the narrative ‘translates’ the dialogues of fictional Ancient Greek characters into English for the recipients’ sake. The different manifestations of charity in the various media are connected to Gregory Currie’s distinction between (authentic) “representation-by-origin” and (make-belief) “representation-by-use” – a distinction especially pertinent, as Thon demonstrates, for comics’ pronounced gap “between the level of representation and the level of what is being represented” (p. 91). The inferential meaning-making processes rely “on our knowledge about more or less medium-specific representational conventions” (p. 94). These reflections are applied in a discussion of different types of metalepsis in comics and the complexity of storyworlds digital games produce through friction between narrative sequences, which introduce and illustrate the “global storyworld as a whole” (p. 113), and playful elements that are, according to Thon, usually understood as “local situations” and allowed “partial subversion of conventional notions of representational correspondence” (ibid.). The chapter concludes with the observation that medium-specific charity is “particularly salient with regard to the representation of local situations”, whereas the spatio-temporal and causal representation of the global storyworld “appears to be generally more transmedial” (p. 121).

Chapter 4 is dedicated to concepts of narration and authorship. In an extensive overview of the most pertinent theories, Thon deconstructs (sometimes rather harshly) numerous established positions in film, comic, and game studies and argues compellingly against anthropomorphizing metaphors for the representational devices and strategies of media (in the vein of Chatman’s ‘cinematic narrator’). Instead, he distinguishes different author-concepts by engaging with questions such as collective authorship. He differentiates between individual and collective “hypothetical authors” (p. 138) – inferred agents that have apparently ordered the narrative in all its medium-specific dimensions –, and between narratorial and nonnarratorial representation. In the case of narratorial representation one or several characters appear explicitly as narrating instances; in the case of nonnarratorial representation, the hypothetical author is assumed to be the source of the narrative representation. In multimodal narratives, the majority of audiovisual, verbal-pictorial, and interactive representation are usually perceived as nonnarratorial (p. 153). Thon then goes on to identify a number of transmedially significant dimensions of the narrator concept, such as narratorial hierarchies, and the questions of framing and unreliability (p. 165).

Chapter 5 mostly focuses on examples of unreliable narration in the three discussed media to demonstrate different forms of narratorial and nonnarratorial representations of narrative, their correlation with one another, as well as their casual and systematic use. The discussion of fiction film revolves around the distinction between lying narrators, narrators with a limited or distorted view of events, and narrators that are in control of their own story (p. 178), and categorizes these “rather salient strategy of narrative representation as transmedial” (p. 182). The discussion of comics then focuses more strongly on the medium-specific uses of the concepts of extra-, hetero-, and homodiegetic narrators (cf. p. 195) and “questions of authorship and narratorial control”

(p. 206), especially the ability of comics to blur the line between narrator and author. With digital games, most attention is devoted to the fact that narration in them refers both to the “noninteractive nonnarratorial representation [...] as well as to the interactive parts of the game” (p. 207). The concept of narrator is used in a wide sense here, including the frequently found strategy of having a diegetic character guide the player through the gameworld by communicating (often one-sidedly) with the avatar (p. 208). The chapter distinguishes narrators of different degrees of complexity and with different relations to both their storyworlds and ludic elements, e.g. by renegotiating the “fundamental tension” (p. 215) between the nonlinearity produced by interactive freedom and superimposed narrative structure.

Chapter 6 shifts attention to the Genettian question of “who sees” – formulated more precisely as “who is represented as experiencing the local situations” (p. 220) – under the umbrella term of subjectivity. The chapter begins with conceptual clarifications of focalization and related concepts aimed at overcoming (as far as possible) the “terminological dilemma into which contemporary narratology has maneuvered itself” (p. 233). Consequently, the chapter mostly demonstrates the conceptual lacunae involved in adapting these ill-defined concepts to multimodal media. As a pragmatic solution to this problem, the chapter then proceeds to identify (in a bottom-up approach) narratorial as well as nonnarratorial strategies of subjective representation and markers of subjectivity. Local strategies of narrative representation are identified as being subjective, intersubjective, or objective representation, and as leading in a “specific combination [...] to a global arrangement of these strategies” (p. 263). A wide array of markers for subjectivity is discussed and eventually grouped into the brackets of contextual and simultaneous markers.

The seventh and final chapter accommodates the (compared to storyworld and narrator) wider range of medium-specific strategies through a discussion of its examples more in the style of case studies. The analytic procedures introduced in the previous chapters are used in conjunction, and to great effect. The case studies convey a clear impression of remarkable narrative strategies found in the different media and of their medium-specificity – like the ludic subjectivity of First-Person Shooters (cf. p. 306). Throughout the whole book, Thon rigorously identifies the most precise concepts and terms from among the wealth of transmedial and medium-specific theory, which allows not only for a precise analysis, but for a comparative perception of the very different texts – at least implicitly, as the book only compares them very briefly.

Rather than recapitulating, the conclusion projects the book’s methods and results forward by giving a brief account of possible further applications as well as expansions to other media and the addition of additional concepts.

There is little actual criticism to be leveled against the book. Maybe the most apparent issue concerns the title, which is potentially misleading. It might be taken to promise an exploration of narratology *and* contemporary media culture to equal parts, while the book ‘only’ discusses and demonstrates a general narratological framework that is both expertly derived from and carefully situ-

ated in contemporary media culture. A second issue is that while the promise of an analytical toolbox made in the introduction is definitely fulfilled, the book does not collect its theories and methods in one single place. Readers will have to distill a comprehensive analysis model from the individual chapters themselves. Finally, although the range of discussed examples is almost staggering, it has a pronounced bias towards American and British material; among the 27 main examples listed in the introduction, only one film and three games have a different origin. This geographical and cultural limitation is, of course, a common and completely acceptable practice. It nonetheless seems worth mentioning, given that especially Japanese and French comics and games often differ significantly from Anglo-American cultural products in ways that call into question whether all of Thon's conclusions will hold up when applied to them.

These minor issues do not diminish the book's value in the least. It is eminently readable without sacrificing academic precision, and has been proof-read with great diligence. Some readers might object to the occasional 10- or 12-line long sentences (especially in the more theoretical passages) and the extensive use of italics to stress important concepts, yet this is ultimately a matter of personal preference.

Thon's *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* is an excellent contribution to transmedial narratology. It discusses established concepts in a concise and insightful manner and manages to reconfigure them in a highly systematical fashion. Its poignant and precise analysis of narratology between the poles of transmediality and medium-specificity will be a yardstick for similar studies in the years to come.

Dr. Hans-Joachim Backe  
Assistant Professor  
Center for Computer Game Research  
IT University of Copenhagen  
Rued Langgaards Vej 7  
DK-2300 Copenhagen S  
Denmark  
E-mail: [hanj@itu.dk](mailto:hanj@itu.dk)  
URL: [www.hajobacke.com](http://www.hajobacke.com)

**How to cite this article:**

Backe, Hans-Joachim: "Narratology Between Transmediality and Medium-Specificity [Review of: Jan-Noël Thon: *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*. Lincoln / London 2016]". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 5.2 (2016). 105-111.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20161122-100102-3](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20161122-100102-3)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/240/331>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).