

Anna Weigel-Heller

‘Fictions of the Internet’

From Intermediality to Transmedia Storytelling
in 21st-Century Novels

Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning (Hg.)

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Anna Weigel-Heller.-

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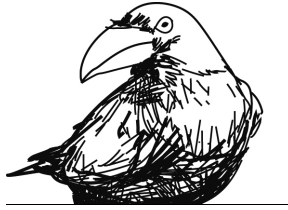
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The Raven

“Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.”

(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*)



“Raven is our version of what you call Coyote in the Southwest. Raven stirs things up and makes change happen. He catalyzes different interactions to occur. Whether you like it or not, Raven makes the people grow and change.

[...]

Maybe that’s how change starts – with someone getting angry enough to upset the apple cart, to initiate revolt, to cause trouble, like Raven did.”

(indigenous story, quoted from Lewis Mehl-Madrona,
Narrative Medicine: The Use of History and Story in the Healing Process.
Rochester/Vermont: Bear & Company, 2007, pp. 60-61)

Sowohl die traditionelle Narratologie als auch die interdisziplinäre Erzählforschung haben in den letzten Dekaden einen anhaltenden Boom erlebt, der zur Entwicklung zahlreicher neuer Ansätze in einer zunehmend transgenerisch, intermedial und interdisziplinär orientierten Erzähltheorie geführt hat.

Die neue Buchreihe RABE/RAVEN trägt diesen Entwicklungen nicht nur Rechnung, sondern stellt ein Forum dar für Monographien und konzeptorientierte Sammelbände, die

- sich mit Erscheinungsformen des Narrativen in lange als ‚nicht-narrativ‘ eingestuften Gattungen (z.B. Drama und Lyrik) oder in vernachlässigten Phänomenen und Texttypen (z.B. Rituale, Nachrichten, Alltagserzählungen) beschäftigen,
- Formen des Narrativen in anderen Medien (z.B. Cartoons, graphic novels, Film, bildende Kunst, Musik, Hyperfiktion, Erzählen in den neuen Medien) oder multimodales bzw. transmediales Erzählen untersuchen,
- narratologische Kategorien rekonzeptualisieren, neue narrative Formen untersuchen oder die Konzepte, Modelle und Methoden der klassischen und postklassischen Narratologie erweitern,
- Ansätze, Erkenntnisse und Methoden aus der Erzählforschung anderer Disziplinen (z.B. Geschichtswissenschaft, Linguistik, narrativer Medizin, Psychologie, Kognitionswissenschaft, Sozialwissenschaften) einbeziehen,
- Formen des langsamen Wandels (z.B. Altern, Evolution, Klimawandel, der durch digitale Technologien ausgelöste Geisteswandel, Krankheit, Artensterben) und andere Phänomene (z.B. Performances, Rituale, komplexe Systeme) erforschen, die auf nicht-narrativen Logiken basieren, sich einer narratologischen Analyse widersetzen und mit zentralen Kategorien der Narratologie nicht recht zu erfassen sind (z.B. Geschichten ohne Akteure, Ereignisse, Handlungen, Plot).

Darüber hinaus versteht sich die Reihe als ein Forum für innovative Publikationen und alternative Beiträge zur Erzählforschung, die die Grenzen der Narratologie ausleuchten und der Erzählforschung neue Gegenstände, Konzepte, Methoden und Horizonte erschließen. Sie ist auch ein Forum für Bände, die Definitionen des ‚Narrativen‘ im Sinne eines kognitiven Schemas, einer (Repräsentations-)Form oder eines semiotischen Artefakts weiterentwickeln, das Narrative von anderen Modi/Strategien der Sinnerzeugung abgrenzen oder es in seinem Verhältnis zum ‚Fiktionalen‘ bestimmen. In der Reihe erscheinen Bände in deutscher und englischer Sprache. Die Bände werden von den Herausgebern und/oder Mitgliedern des internationalen Beirats begutachtet.

Both traditional narratology and interdisciplinary narrative research have witnessed an ongoing boom during recent decades which has resulted in the development of a host of new approaches in an increasingly transgeneric, intermedial and interdisciplinary narrative theory.

The new book series RABE/RAVEN does not only reflect these developments, but offers a forum for monographs and concept oriented collective volumes which

- deal with forms of narrative in genres traditionally regarded as ‘non-narrative’ (e.g. drama and poetry) or with relatively neglected phenomena and text types (e.g. rituals, the news, narration in everyday contexts),
- explore forms of narrative in other media (e.g. cartoons, graphic novels, film, art, music, hyperfiction, storytelling in new media), and multimodal or transmedial storytelling,
- reconceptualise narratological categories, explore innovative narrative forms, or extend the range of concepts, models and methods of classical and postclassical narratology,
- take into consideration approaches, insights, and methods developed by narrative researchers working in other disciplines (e.g. history, linguistics, narrative medicine, psychology, cognitive science, the social sciences),
- examine forms of slow change (e.g. ageing, evolution, climate change, mind change as a result of the impact of digital technologies, illness, extinction of species) and other phenomena (e.g. performances, rituals, complex systems) that are based on non-narrative logics, and that challenge or defy narratological analysis and its key concepts (e.g. stories without actors, events, actions, and plot).

The series offers a forum for innovative publications and alternative varieties of explorations in narrative which gauge the limits of narratology and which open up new objects, concepts, methods and horizons for research in narrative studies. It is also a forum for volumes which advance definitions of narrative as a cognitive schema, as form or as semiotic artefact, which conceptualise narrative in contradistinction to other modes/strategies of meaning-making, or which probe into the relationship of narrative and fiction. The series publishes books in German and English. All volumes are peer reviewed by the editors and/or members of the international advisory board.

For my parents

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While writing this final and very personal section of this book, I realize that I am experiencing a wide array of emotions ranging from happiness, relief, and pride to wistfulness, melancholy, and deep gratitude. Looking back on my PhD journey, it was a real privilege to pursue a cotutelle dissertation in an international and thought-provoking academic environment at Justus Liebig University Giessen (Germany) and at the University of Helsinki (Finland). My membership in three PhD programs—the European Phdnet “Literary and Cultural Studies”, the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), and the International PhD Programme “Literary and Cultural Studies” (IPP)—has given me the opportunity to conduct research at my home university and abroad; to attend intriguing master classes, keynote lectures and conferences; to organize events myself; and to exchange ideas with scholars from all over the world.

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Anna Weigel-Heller

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PART I:
INTERMEDIAL AND TRANSMEDIAL RELATIONS
BETWEEN THE NOVEL AND THE INTERNET

1. INTRODUCTION: THE INTERNET AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION— MANIFOLD ‘FORMS OF ART’

I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex. (Vonnegut 2005: 17)

Novelists have gone to great lengths—setting stories in the past or in remote places—to avoid dealing with the internet. Is this finally changing[?]? (Miller 2011: n. pag.)

Life in the 21st century is to a large extent dominated by the Internet and new media. People surf websites and google answers to all their questions; make Skype calls to friends abroad; use Google Maps to find their way; play online role-playing games; monitor and control their health using fitness trackers; buy clothes in online stores; try to find true love on dating websites; send countless tweets, WhatsApp, and chat messages 24/7; post ‘selfies’ on Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat; follow celebrities, star athletes, and politicians on Twitter; and try to distinguish between real and fake online news. This is why American writer Kurt Vonnegut ironically remarks in his essay collection *A Man Without a Country* (2005) that contemporary writers who leave out technology and new media in their novels misrepresent life in the 21st century (see first introductory quote). Likewise, *The Guardian* columnist Laura Miller observes in her article on recent trends in 21st-century literature, entitled “How Novels Came to Terms with the Internet”, that more and more writers are responding to the ubiquity of new media and new technologies in their texts (see second introductory quote).

Whereas at the end of the 20th century many authors were hesitant to address the immediate present in their novels and thus opted to compose historical fiction instead, one can perceive a major shift in mentality at the turn of the millennium. In *How Literature Saved My Life*, bestselling fiction and nonfiction author David Shields explains his idea of how writers should deal with the current situation:

The key thing for an intellectually rigorous writer to come to grips with is the marginalization of literature by more technologically sophisticated and thus more visceral forms. You can work within these forms or write about them or through them or appropriate the strategies these forms use, but it’s not a very good idea to go on writing in a vacuum. (Shields 2013: 129)

Instead of writing in a vacuum, many authors let themselves be inspired by the overall media landscape and try to depict a realistic image of life in the 21st century in their novels. Literary scholar Daniel Punday uses an unusual metaphor to describe the situation contemporary writers find themselves in. In his view, novelists “have a nearly unlimited choice of options” when they ‘go shopping’ in the “veritable supermarket of media options” (Punday 2012: 30).

As a consequence, one can make the following observation about the contemporary book market: Authors do not only write about and refer to the Internet and new media in their novels; they also imitate medial structures, adopting the strategies of medial forms. Others explore the limits of literary texts by distributing narrative content across the novel and other media, or by publishing the literary text in an enhanced format as an electronic book. To better illustrate these current developments, I will briefly highlight four paradigmatic 21st-century novels that deal with the Internet on different levels.

First, Joshua Ferris' *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* (2014) belongs to an increasing number of intermedial novels that not only refer to new media and the Internet on the storyworld level, but also reflect on changing attitudes and lifestyles of the 21st century. Common themes that are discussed in such literary texts have to do with cyber-crime, identity theft, cyberbullying, sexting, online messaging, online dating, and general questions concerning security and privacy in the Internet age. For example, the plot of Ferris' novel centers around protagonist Paul O'Rourke's skepticism toward new media and his difficult relationship with the Internet (and emoticons):

My relationship with the Internet was like the one I had with the :) . I hated the :) and hated to be the object of other people's :) , their :-) and their :> . I hated :-) the most because it reminded me of my double chin. Then there was :(and :-(and ;-(as well as ;) and *-) , which I didn't even understand, although it was not as mystifying as D:< or >:O or :-& . These simplifications of speech, designed by idiots, resulted in hieroglyphics for such compounded complexity that they flew far above my intelligence. (Ferris 2014: 73)

O'Rourke, a self-absorbed New York dentist in his mid-thirties, does not know how to live in this medialized world and is totally fed up with the Internet and its encroachment on everyday life, for instance when his friends 'google things' during dinner, such as, "Do white wines need time to breathe like red wines?" (ibid.: 70) instead of dedicating their full attention to a joint conversation. For this reason, the young man has never in his "life felt more disconnected" (ibid.: 32):

I was sick to death of having as my dinner companions Wikipedia, About.com, IMDb, the *Zagat* guide, *Time Out New York*, a hundred Tumblrs, the *New York Times*, and *People* magazine. Was there not some strange forgotten pleasure in reveling in our ignorance? Couldn't we just be *wrong*? (Ibid.: 71; emphasis in original)

Second, new media are not just a leading topic in contemporary writings. They also have a great impact on the way the story is narrated. Some literary texts imitate medial structures on the discourse level (e.g., in the form of e-mails, tweets, Facebook chats) or integrate visual elements, such as photographs, illustrations, or facsimiles of whole websites. Whereas lovers in epistolary novels of the 18th century, as for example in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), once wrote letters to each other, the protagonists in contemporary fiction impatiently await the responses of their friends, lovers, and colleagues via e-mail, tweet, snap, Facebook chat, or WhatsApp. Currently, one can find a number of intermedial novels that are entirely, or partly, written in the form of one or more imitated media. Whereas Matt Beaumont's *e* (2000) and Lucy