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Information Architecture in Contemporary Television Series

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to apply some of the principles of IA to a disciplinary sector that is adjacent but has not traditionally considered this kind of approach. Basically, what we suggest in the paper, is the need to adopt a wider vision of IA, considering it as the design of every shared information environment. Therefore, in our paper, we propose to apply IA principles to the media field, also trying a synthesis with principles and topics that come from other study fields (such as semiotics, media studies etc.) and that are traditionally associated to TV series, demonstrating relevant intersections point.

Thus, our ultimate purpose is offering a cross–disciplinary approach capable of taking advantage from all those fields together. In order to do so, we will focus our paper on some relevant changes that affected the TV series production in recent years, suggesting that we cannot consider a TV series as just "a text" anymore, but instead we need to study and analyze TV series as narrative ecosystems, that is to say as a composite environment, able to integrate the energy flows originated by users, technologies and media items

Recently, especially American TV series have enjoyed great success and have stimulated considerable critical attention from scholars of audiovisual media — recently in Italy, Franco La Polla, Aldo Grasso, Massimo Scaglioni Franco Monteleone, as well as in Anglo-Saxon circles Jason Mittell, Roberta Pearson, Christy Dena and Henry Jenkins — who have stressed the important experimental work on narrative structures and staging, the complex mechanisms of production and promotion, along with the significance of the response these products generate in their viewers.

Within the macro-category of TV series, we tend to differentiate products into two primary models:

- series composed by episodes characterized by self-contained narrative; the episodes favor the development of an anthology plot, or episodic plot, where the events narrated always get to a

conclusion at the end of the episode. The most common forms are those of the so-called "anthology series", composed of episodes completely independent one another and with non-recurring characters (such as The Twilight Zone, 15-164, taken up again between 185 and 18 and later between 2002 and 2003) and sitcoms (such as Friends, 14-2004 or Modern Family, in production since 2009).

- series composed of installments characterized by suspended endings; the events narrated in a single installment never gets to a conclusion and it is necessary to follow the story for many episodes in order to see how it ends. This model favors the running plot, that is to say a long lasting plot that is carried on for a long time and for many episodes (at least 4-5, in some cases for an entire season). The most evident example is that of soap operas, coming mainly from Anglo-Saxon culture and characterized by a story that does not provide resolution nor an end (such as "The Bold and the Beautiful", in production since 1987).

Since the mid-eighties, however, there has been a phenomenon of a so-called "serialization" of the series. Although the classic structure of the self-sufficient episodic series has not yet completely disappeared [1], the narrative formulas have gone through a process of mutation and hybridization and many TV series have become serialized, mixing their structure with that of soap-operas. In contemporary "serialized series" the episode generally maintains a high degree of autonomy, so there is always a central story that gets concluded within the episode (known as anthology plot), yet there is also a framework that continues for more episodes (the so-called running plot).

This adds an element of temporal progression and narrative opening, that was missing in traditional formulas. Therefore, contemporary TV resists the risk of atrophy of the narrative by creating a diegetic world where changes at all levels - of the characters, scenes, and narrative techniques - are continuously sought as well as valued and celebrated by fans. (Innocenti & Pescatore 2008, p. 18-22).

Now, the question we asked ourselves working on this paper is the following: what happens when we watch a TV series? Apparently, we get caught up with the narrative developments involving a group of recurring characters, we focus on their stories and relationships and finally surrender ourselves to the pleasures of the narration. Nothing different from what happens in front of any form of storytelling, be it literary, cinema or television. On closer inspection, however, the series have anomalous

characteristics as compared with their narrative progression. They are in fact "abnormal" objects, which overflow in both time and space.

There are in fact series which have lasted several decades [2]. But there are also TV series that are able to branch out across different media, according to the model of "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2003), generating different products in different media spaces, such as novelizations, comic books, video games, guides for fans, trading cards and mobisodes. This capacity of overflowing in media space is the result of a mutation, either formal or epistemological, of narrative structures. It is clear that today we are dealing with objects which are no longer "unique" (as in self-conclusive and finished texts), yet have become long lasting transmedia phenomena.

Contemporary TV series offer the viewers an entire universe rather than a single story. We are thinking, for instance, to what happened with Heroes (2006–2010) and with the ARG (Alternate Reality Game [3]) Heroes 360 Experience, or with the Lost Experience – an ARG played by fans during the second season of Lost (2004–2010) in the UK and in the interval between the end of the second season and the beginning of the third in the U.S. These are clear examples of an extension of the series narrative along several digital (but also physical) platforms.

Watching a TV series is a distributed and diverse experience, which generates participation and stimulates further consumption. It is more like living in the world of the program rather than simply following a storyline. The narrative no longer has a single center of irradiation, but tends to develop along different roads and the traditional tools of narrative analysis (semiotics, narratology), which considered the story as having an oriented and targeted direction even if complex and labyrinthine, are no longer able to give a full account of new forms of TV series narration. Compared with traditional concepts of story and text, contemporary TV series carry out the following changes:

- from textual forms to modular content;

- from oriented storytelling to universes in expansion;

- from the story to the architecture (and the user's experience);

- from texts to interfaces;

- from serial narrative to narrative ecosystems.

From Textual Forms to Modular Content

We can define contemporary TV series as high concept (Wyatt 1994) that is as objects that are recognizable, well-defined and have an impacting look. Distinctive feature of high concept audiovisual productions is its modular structure, which means that the content may be parceled out and replicated in different recreational or entertainment contexts, thus allowing fragmentation, displacement and diversification of use.

High concept TV series adopt multilinear narrative which serve as inspiration for additional narrations on other media. Contemporary series generate narrative matrices, or concepts, which develop on multiple platforms relatively in an independent way (Bittanti 2006, p. 133) receiving, from the series from which they originated, influences and indications of atmosphere and ambience.
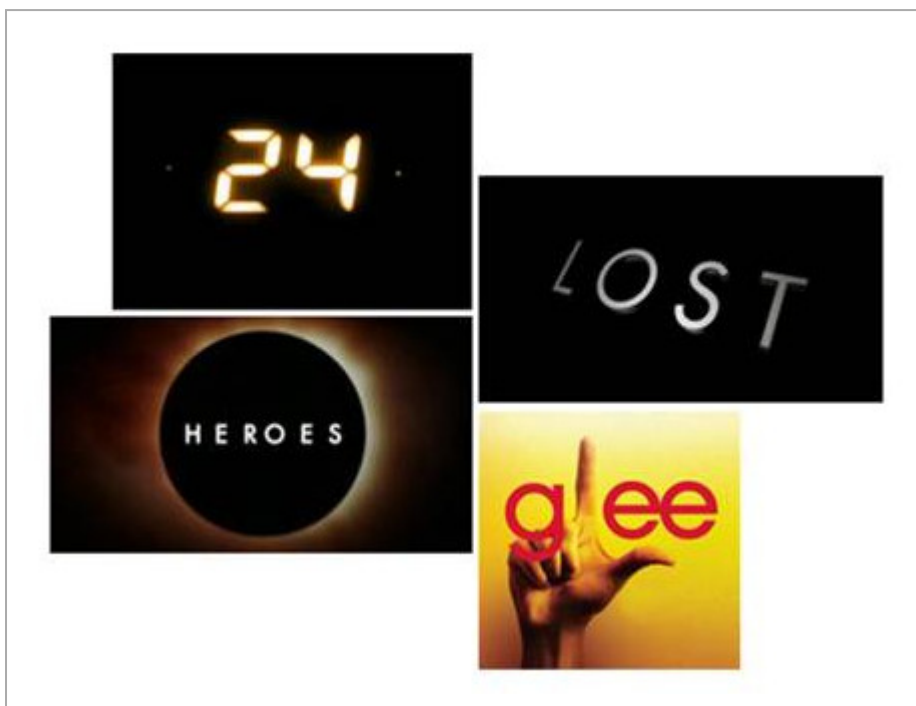

Figure 1

The result is that these narrative objects become true long sellers, to be exploited for a long time and subject to restyling for each season. They take on the form of a complex constellation of products, grouped around a brand (for example "Lost" and all the ancillary products it generated, from ARGs to books, from videogames to mobile-only content).

From Oriented Storytelling to Universes in Expansion

What contemporary TV series have in common is a particular sense of permanence. Henry Jenkins (2008) notes how these products, through the integration of media offered by the big conglomerates, by franchising practices and by the construction of high concept, conquered exceptional duration and persistence amongst the audience.
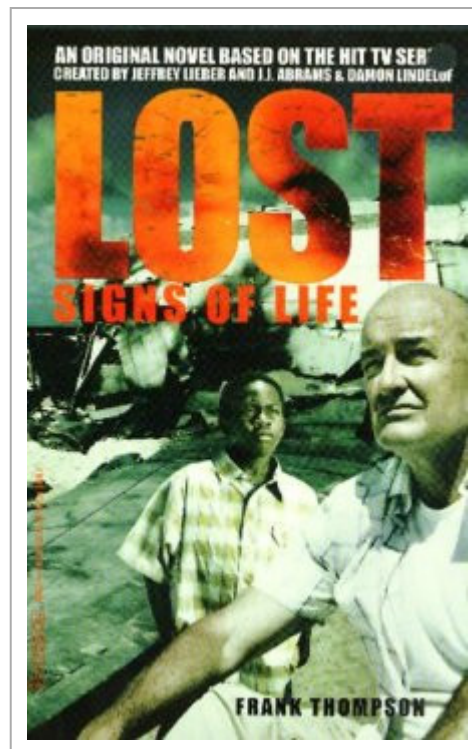

Figure 2

In contemporary mediascape, the textual structures have changed substantially and systems of procedural stories [4] have now evolved into forms of storytelling much more difficult to catalog, which from the point of view of the narration may be identified with expanded universes (Carini 2010), like that of Lost, and from the economic and industrial standpoint give rise to the system of franchising5.

So the plot moves towards a "topical wave" narrative structure (Moor 2009), a kind of wave that develops and persists over time, involving multiple media and is characterized by the presence of strong links and references that integrate new content already available in relational systems. Expanding universes are created; they are durable, furnished, full of rich relationships

between characters, the diegetic world and the audience. In few words, it is possible to inhabit those universes.
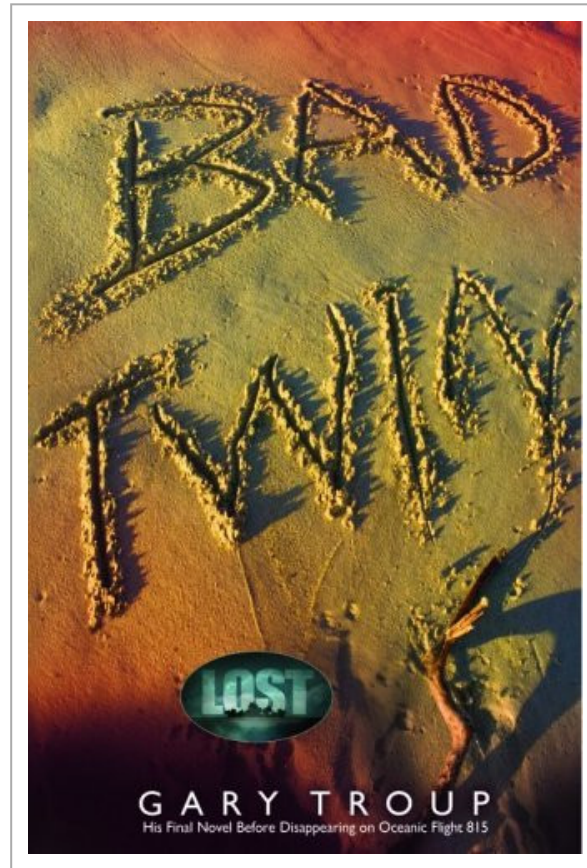

Figure 3

Contemporary series production is thus characterized by constant replication, by open structure, remixability and a permanent extensibility (Manovich 2008) thus allowing the viewer to have an active role in the process of construction and development of the narrative universe. Some of the stories written by the fans and published on fan fiction websites [6] have, for example, the function of filling in the gaps left by the original screenplays, enriching the characters with nuances and otherwise unexpressed emotional implications, while others tend to establish romantic relationships between certain characters that are only mentioned in the show.

The active participation of the viewers and the impact of the narration on the real world is demonstrated by the proliferation of blogs "managed" by characters from the series which may be "official" products managed directly by the production, such as the blog of Hiro Nakamura [7], as well as non-official ones managed directly by the fans themselves, like that of Yoda [8].

There are also the "profiles" of characters from the series which have been placed on social networks like MySpace or Facebook (official and unofficial).

From the Story to the Architecture and the User's Experience

Contemporary narrative series consist of a multiplicity of narrative elements. Alongside the weekly episodes designed for television viewing, we also find a multitude of material (webisodes, mobisodes, recaps) typical of transmedia storytelling, which allow the user easier access to complex story universes.

These different forms of narration enable the viewer to orient herself within the highly complex information architecture acting as an interface between the viewer and the bulk of narrative material, sometimes unmanageable, accumulated by these productions. Therefore, the weekly episodes themselves allow us to connect and pass through that narrative universe in expansion we just mentioned.

The narrative universe exists independently from the episodes; it is a virtual object which you cannot experience until you pass through it. By comparison, the Web but also e-mail or irc are interfaces for the Internet understood as a social universe, just like the episodes of the series are interfaces for the expanded narrative universe.

In the wake of the five pervasive information architecture heuristics defined by Rosati and Resmini (2011), we can say that these narrative elements are able to fulfill an important function of place-making, as they help the viewer to reduce confusion and favor entry, exit and the return of the viewer within complex and layered narrative universes of different spaces that exist within diegetic, physical and also digital space.

These elements of the information constellation are also able to orient the viewer and to facilitate the assimilation of information, providing information package defaults that allow everyone to acquire functional competence with respect to that expanding universe, which of course given the long duration of these narrative objects must be continuously enriched with content and ramifications. The user moves and acts / experiences the narrative universe as she would do in a city and needs guidance and local contextual information.

Viewers must be capable of moving within the narrative paths and to link one narrative element to another, while citizens need to go from one place to another. In fact, neither viewers nor citizens need a global map, they

instead need some local knowledge that allow them to orientate themselves. There are, however, also forms of global representations (such as wikis or encyclopedias) that function as the urban or land plans and thus serve to make the meta-operations so different from context experiences.

Let us take a look at an example of contextual information from Lost, as opposed to contextual information which might be necessary for walking around the city of Bologna.

Here is the synopsis of "The Other Woman", episode 6, season 4 of Lost, first aired March 6 2008:

1. Juliet and Jack pursue Daniel and Charlotte, after they leave without notice for the Dharma electrical station, where they render a deadly gas inert.

2. Meanwhile, Ben, who is being held captive by Locke, tells Locke about Widmore.

3. Flashbacks show Juliet's relationships with Ben, her lover Goodwin and his wife Harper.

Now, instructions for how to get to Via Zamboni from via Barberia, in Bologna.

1. Go right on Via Barberia toward Via Collegio di Spagna, 54m.

2. Continue on Via De Carbonesi, 150m.

3. Continue on Via Luigi Carlo Farini, 350m.

4. Turn left and continue on Via Castiglione, 240m.

5. Continue on Piazza della Mercanzia, 62m.

6. Continue on Via Zamboni, 450m.

The series, like a city, is made up of standardized objects (for the series these are narrative functions, types, characters, recurring situations; for the city, however, they are elements of dwellings like rooms, kitchens and bathrooms). Despite the standardization of the series universe, like what happens within an urban settlement different morphologies are developed and are not completely predictable.

Figure 4

Every series, like every city, offers its own experience. Each series universe organizes its global meta-knowledge [9] the same way a city does it through maps, land registries, directories, etc.

Meta-knowledge allows for meta-operations that are necessary for the configuration of the universe, they also provides metrics, a catalog of the story objects and a set of rules. The configuration of the narrative universe (construction of meta-knowledge) is a negotiating process between the use (fruition, experience and production) and the project (screenplay, media delivery and marketing).

From Texts to Interfaces

The fruition of a contemporary TV series no longer ends with the vision of the weekly episode, but has become a lasting process that ignores the typical temporal patterning of these products (one episode per week aired on

a predetermined time slot). The weekly episode, in fact, is only the starting point of the viewer's engagement, who is increasingly called on to interact with the series in an intense and rich participatory activity.

The textual objects that build up the series universe (episodes, webisodes, mobisodes, recaps) act as interfaces and allow the viewer to navigate within an information architecture with a high degree of complexity, modulating the viewer's relationship with the series universe and acting as design tools of a narrative experience. A relevant case is the use of temporal disturbances in Lost (flashbacks, flash-forwards, flash-sideways), which are more than just tools for modeling the narrative material since they in fact have a strong impact on the configuration of the audience experience.

Through these temporal disturbances, more than acquiring new information on the narrative, the user is inclined to experience processes of fragmentation and of reconstruction, both of the narrative material and of the temporal flux.

As noted by Gianluca Brugnoli (2009, p. 6):

> (t)o achieve their goals through the interaction flows, users tend to combine an increasing number of different applications and tools within wide and fuzzy ecosystems, where technical factors blend in with behaviour and intention. The user experience itself is the result of a non-linear and occasional combination of various systems' fragments and components, which are activated and connected by users from case to case, following their goals and intentions in specific times, situations and contexts.

The experience of watching a TV show is pervasive and becomes the vehicle of many and more complex meanings. The direction of the show expands beyond its borders (the weekly episode) and the television program is the result of a composite constellation of products, also formed by its spin-offs, comic books, show-inspired novels, Internet sites (amateur or not) and video games which create environments and characters that allow the fans to act in first person. Cult programs (Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson 2004, Monteleone 2005; Scaglioni 2006; Volli 2002) do not import the reality in the realm of TV drama, but on the contrary, they export the fictional universe in the behavior, habits, and sphere of experience of its audience.

In this way, the practice of viewing dramatically expands involving many other moments of the viewer's day, thus permitting her to continue and be part of the dimension created by the show, and at the same time, to be part of that narrative universe even beyond the space-time limits imposed by the television viewing.

From Serial Narrative to Narrative Ecosystems

Drawing on some comments made by Leonora Giovanazzi and Luca Mascaro in their talk on "Information architectures and ecosystems" [10] at the Italian Information Architecture Summit 2009, which discussed the different ways of designing informational content (derivation, parallel and ecosystem), it is possible to rethink the TV series narrative in the contemporary mediascape.

The first wave of recent TV series production seems to belong to the design of derivation. We are referring here to those series from the mid 80s that introduced multilinear narratives. The multi-strand narrative structure makes for an easy scalability of content and the storylines might be broken down into modular packages. Therefore, thanks to the process of digitization, they are distributed through various media forms other than that they were conceived for. For example ER, 1994-2000, or Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 1997-2003, from which video games and novelizations were generated on the wake of the success of the series.

The cross-media design so typical of audiovisual production has many points of contact with what Giovanazzi and Mascaro call "parallel design mode". Audiovisual products start with a narrative matrix and develop into a complex project which uses several media to be completed, creating ad hoc objects available to different types of audiences. This way of conceiving audiovisual cultural products is much more frequent in the cinematographic production than in the TV production.

An exemplary case is the Matrix [11] trilogy and its parallel products, the short animation film collection The Animatrix (2003), two video games ("Enter The Matrix" 2003; "The Matrix: Path of Neo" 2005), comics and related merchandise and media offerings. Parallel production is a typical configuration of the relationship between cinema and video games. Since different sectors require different timing for production, this makes it necessary to harmonize the production timing in order to ensure the synchronization of the release dates of the individual objects belonging to the same story.

Consistency between the different products for the different platforms and production models is a necessity. There must be an effective integration among all the products to avoid loss of information, as well as information redundancy. Nevertheless, in this second case, we are still dealing with a "finished" narrative universe that is presented in the form of a plurality of texts related by a common genesis.

The originality of recent productions, however, seems to go in an even more complex direction than that seen so far. The contemporary TV series are no longer simple textual objects, they are instead the result of an ecosystemic design, where a general model is developed in advance as an evolutionary system with a high degree of consistency between all its components. Therefore, we like to move from the idea of "text" or "narration" to that of narrative ecosystems, that is to say systems that have specific characteristics:

- ecosystems are open systems. They are inhabited by stories and characters, which change through space and time. This is what happens, for example, in Heroes, where the changes of setting, characters and even temporality are peculiar traits of the product;

- ecosystems are interconnected structures, which are configured, at the level of the relations among different media, through mechanisms of remediation [12] / relocation [13] (Bolter & Grusin 2000; Casetti 2011) as well as, at the levele of narrative elements, through the mechanism of sequel and prequel, reboot, spin-off and crossover;

- ecosystems tend to reach and maintain a certain balance over time, orchestrating a sustained and persistent universe that lasts outside the confined space of the screen, whilst modifying according to unpredictable lines of development. The system is in equilibrium when it is persistent and resilient. Historically, TV series have been built on long/very long narratives and have had a strong persistence. They are also resilient because they can survive various perturbations; both external ones, such as changes in programming slots, a decline in the ratings and changes in the audience [14] or exceptional events, such as the writers' strike that lasted 100 days between 2007 and 2008, as well as internal ones like radical changes in the cast, the defection of actors [15] and spoiling phenomena (Jenkins 2008);

- narrative ecosystems are non-procedural systems. That is to say they are not determined by a syntagmatic sequence of functions, but instead from declarative elements that describe the environment, characters and relationships, making the narrative material a universe traveled by the viewer, and where the experience can be randomly reconfigured. The procedural narrative structures are only local (single episodes) or confined to individual story arcs;

- drawing on the model of natural ecosystems, narrative ecosystems are also formed by an abiotic component and a biotic component. The abiotic component is represented by the media context, while the biotic component is represented by the narrative structures. The narrative material is a living material, a vital subject that undergoes processes of competition, adaptation, change, modification, etc., while the abiotic component is provided by the mediascape in which the series structures are inserted.

In this sense, the concept of a pervasive information architecture becomes a crucial component of this new perspective we suggest. It is the foundational, invisible layer that has the significant role of connecting the whole ecosystem together. This deep layer is declined in a different way in each medium, through a kind of "execution / translation" rules.
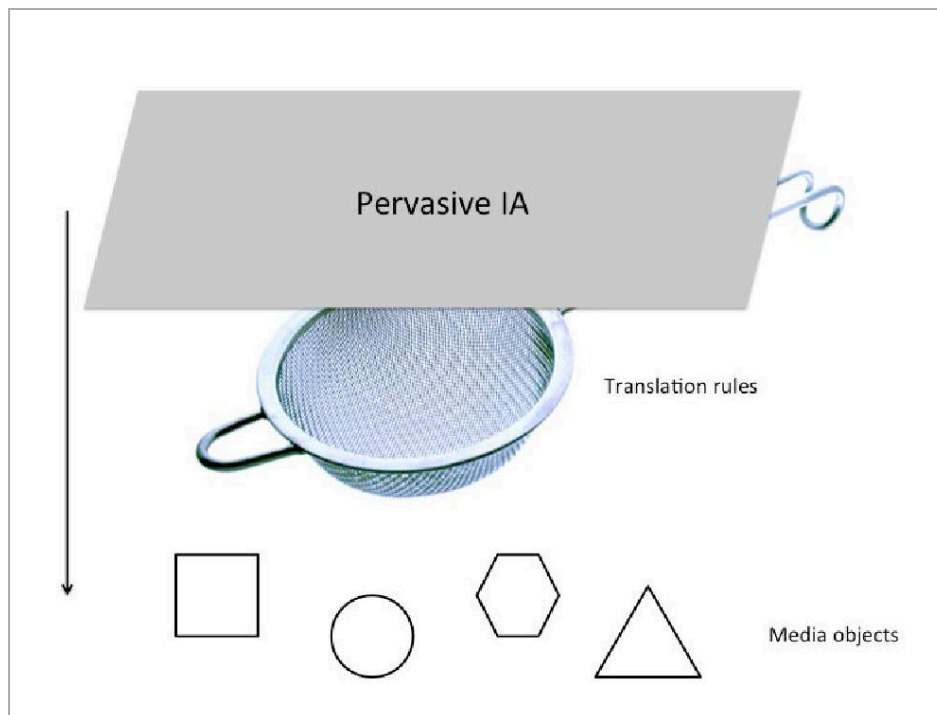

Figure 5

The impact of information architecture is relevant insofar as its invisible layer is crucial to keeping the ecosystem in a condition of equilibrium, which is also a result of the system being well balanced and organized, of being open, interconnected, persistent and resilient.

As remarked by Resmini and Rosati (2011), many tasks we perform everyday require us to move between different media and between digital and

physical. Among this tasks we can also include those that are linked to the fruition of the entertainment production and of TV series in particular.

Conclusions

What we proposed here is therefore a set of hypothesis that needs to be further investigated in order to confirm the validity of an ecosystemic approach to new narrative forms, such as those proposed by contemporary TV series. This approach seems to us quite promising, because it allows the overtaking of the aporia textuality/fruition. Moreover, we propose to shift the perspective on narrative forms, taking the analysis outside from the mimesis paradigm, which is quite obvious today, but also outside from the logic of communication.
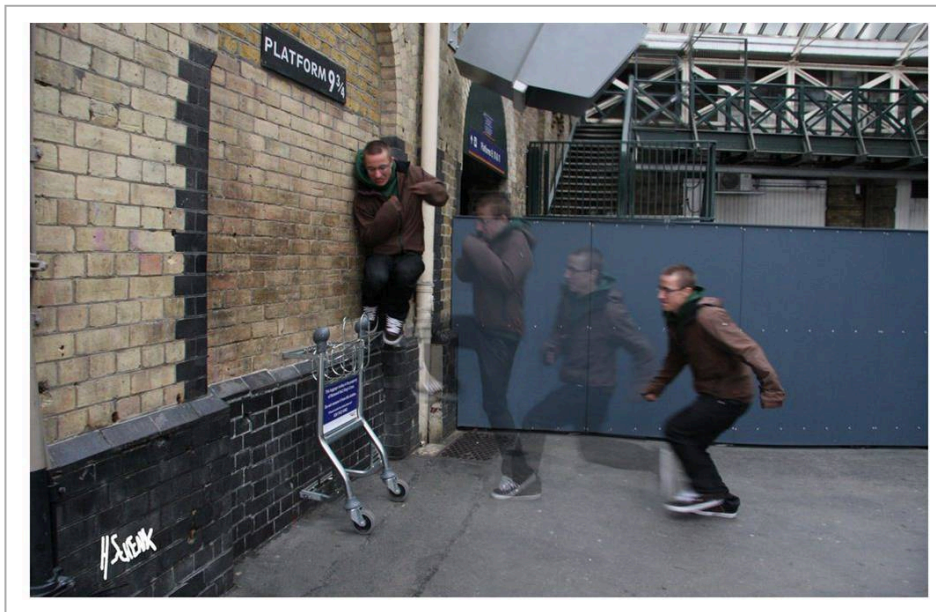

Figure 6

Media products are not "statements" or "texts" anymore: they are artifacts that, like many others, inhabit our world, furnishing and extending it according to an additive logic toward unpredictable directions. And we believe this is much less obvious.

If it is true that some media productions can be considered as proper ecosystems, then it is our entire experience of the surrounding reality that gets affected by this change. Nowadays we are dealing with a composite and complex reality, rather than with a naturalized, iconic and reproductive reality, in which media images and the information flux become tools for

everyday life and a relevant part of our life experience.

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Footnotes

[1]. Consider products such as Cold Case (2003-2010) and Law & Order
(1990-2010).

[2]. Such as ER fifteen seasons, 1994-2009, 24 eight seasons, 2001-2010; Doctor
Who 26 continuous seasons between 1963 and 1998, then again in 2005 and still in
production today.

[3]. Alternate Reality Games (ARG) are games that combine the Internet and the
real world. They are developed through several Web tools (blogs, e-mail etc.) and
present the player with a mysterious story full of clues pointing to the real world.
See Montola, M., Stenros, J. and A. Waern (eds) (2009) Pervasive Games. Theory
and Design. Elsevier.

[4]. Such as Columbo (1971-1978) or Murder, She Wrote (1984-1996).

[5]. Not necessarily is there a correspondence between the structure of the franchise
and the expanded narrative universe. Consider, for example, CSI: Crime Scene
Investigation (in production since 2000), which is a good example of a franchise
from the industrial point of view, with its spin-offs, (CSI: Miami, in production
since 2002 and CSI: NY in production since 2004), but does not appear as an
expanded narrative universe since it is still linked to a narrative structure that tends

to favor the anthology plot to the running plot.

[6]. One of the most popular is www.fanfiction.net.

[7]. Character from the series Heroes. The blog is now closed, but during the entire first season, it was located at http://blog.nbc.com/hiro_blog/.

[8]. http://masterjediyoda.blogspot.com/.

[9]. Through different devices, such as wikis, timeline, maps and the like. For instance, Lostpedia is an interesting tool, careful to provide its users a timeline for the series and for the ARG, a list of recurring themes, iconographic materials and maps of the island with geographical indications of all points relevant to the story.

[10]. Originally "Architettura informativa ed ecosistemi".

[11]. "The Matrix" 1999; "Matrix Reloaded" and "Matrix Revolutions" 2003, all directed by Andy and Lana Wachowski.

[12]. Remediation is defined as the representation of a medium in another medium, or the use of some typical characteristics of a medium inside another.

[13]. Relocation, as described by Francesco Casetti, "is the movement that allows the media to work in new environments and new platforms by bringing back to life the experience it was connected with". http://francescocasetti.wordpress.com/.

[14]. These are events resulting answers from the narrative universe; for example, with the insertion of new ad hoc characters created to attract once again the attention of a lost audience. This was the case of the sudden entrance of the character of Dawn in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, specifically created to recover the teenage audience which was moving away from the series as a result of its aging stars.

15. The classic example comes from the world of soap operas, where the same character is played by different actors, without this leading to major problems for the viewers. Take, for example, the character of Thorne in The Bold and the Beautiful who has been played by 3 different actors since 19G87.

Cite as