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# *NIGHT OF THE OWLS*: DEFINING TRANSMEDIALITY AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL FOR RECONSTRUCTING COMIC BOOK MYTHOLOGY

**Abstract:** In recent years, "transmedia storytelling" has become a handy term to describe certain types of popular narrative. While this term is now crucial to many areas of media studies, Żaglewski offers a challenge to the common, and often rather shallow, understanding of transmediality. He questions the very idea of transmediality and in particular its multimodal character. The basis for such an effort is modern comic book studies, and more specifically, the highly successful *Night of the Owls* story arc from the Batman universe. Żaglewski adapts the theoretical design of transmedial storytelling for at least two purposes: Firstly, he seeks to define the multi/transmediality of comics themselves, which can be seen in the unity of words and images. Secondly, he offers a new understanding of the enormous superhero-driven storylines that are an important feature of contemporary comic books (along with all of the associated retcons, reboots, crossovers etc.). Such story arcs are now presented as an important example of transmedial storytelling that takes place within a single (trans)medium. Exploiting a method that might appear to be paradoxical, Żaglewski opens up the definition of transmedial storytelling by limiting his discussion to a single medium: the comic book.

**Keywords:** transmedia storytelling, transmedium, comic books, graphic storytelling, Batman, *Night of the Owls*

"Beware The Court of Owls, that watches all the time,
ruling Gotham from a shadow perch, behind granite and lime.
They watch you at your hearth, they watch you in your bed,
speak not a whispered word of them or they'll send The Talon for your head."
*fictional nursery rhyme*

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, transmediality has become one of the most important concepts for the production, reception and analytical research

of modern media culture. As happens with almost every popular and 'fetishized' term, over the last 20 years it has, however, become more and more difficult to accurately reconstruct the main idea that stands behind 'transmediality'. There are as many theoretical concepts and practical uses for the term as there are media channels and/or media brands. It would therefore be quite accurate to observe that transmedial storytelling should be defined on a case-by-case basis, looking every time only at (a) specific object(s). Nevertheless, for academic purposes, it is crucial that we look beyond the enigmatic aspects of transmediality, that we try to find the essence behind the concept. Of course, this is not to say that such efforts have not been made before. Conceptually significant coverage of the topic has, historically, been produced by a number of individuals, most obviously Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jan-Noël Thon, for instance. However, in my opinion, these commentaries do not cover the most important issues associated with transmediality. This concerns the manner in which transmediality constitutes a specific form for making use of a fictional text, as well as the fictional world of the story.

In my article, I propose a new definition of transmediality. However, this should not be seen to be in opposition with former studies on this subject. Rather, my work follows on from these studies, at the same time as it tries to add some new meaning to terms and concepts that may be seen as 'drained'. I believe that a 'complete' vision of transmediality should underline the cultural aspect of the whole phenomenon. Transmediality becomes then the act of making a specific use of a specific text, while at the same time respecting the cognitive, economic and narrative patterns mentioned before by Jenkins, Ryan or Thon. The main core of my paper follows on from this theoretical dispute. Here, I take a deeper look at one of the most important areas of media production when it comes to defining a transmedial revolution: comic books. By using a specific example of the medium (a storyline called *Night of the Owls* from the Batman comic universe), I reconstruct the mechanisms that underpin the comic book's transmediality.

## Towards a cultural definition of transmediality

As noted in the introduction, three theoretical models are returned to in almost every academic discussion about the function and aesthetics of transmedia, namely Henry Jenkins's 'convergence' approach (as presented most profoundly in *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collides*), Marie-Laure Ryan's 'narrative' approach (as presented in many of Ryan's articles and publications, such as *Narrative across Media: The Language of Storytelling* or *Avatars of Story*) and Jan-Noël Thon's 'cognitive' approach (proposed in many academic papers, i.e. "Toward a Transmedial Narratology: On Narrators in Contemporary Graphic Novels, Feature Films, and Computer Games" and summed up in his forthcoming book *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*). There are of course limitations to

'labeling' these researchers in this way; after all, it is hard to say that Ryan is more 'narrative-orientated' that Thon and Jenkins, and Thon is not the only one who considers the mental aspects of transmediality. My main purpose however is to reconstruct the core conceptual elements that underpin these previous approaches. These core elements at the same time represent the main features that have usually been used to define transmediality.

In his highly interesting work, modern comic books researcher Jared Gardner suggests one main problem with the unquestioning acceptance of Jenkins's approach: namely, that this approach is closely connected to the idea of economic capital, drawing our attention to the strictly 'corporate-centered' aspect of transmediality. According to Gardner: "Too often in transmedial narratology we are inclined to theorize a future independent of capital and its controls […]. Any fantasies we might have about the possibilities of multimodal storytelling in the twenty-first century must always be attenuated by the realities of transmedial corporations that are determined to shape storytelling environments to serve their horizontal monopolies."[1] What the author is suggesting here is that discussions of the strictly economic dimension of transmediality have been limited to ways of describing marketing movements for the mass media organizations. We may say that these discussions have relied too heavily on analyzing the corporate discourse of media culture, leaving little room for the cultural aspects of transmedia objects.

Let's go back to Jenkins here for a while. In *Convergence Culture*, he refers to "transmedia stories" by constructing a list of four elements (or mechanisms) that produce and sustain transmedia phenomena. These elements are: synergistic storytelling, collaborative authorship, the art of world-building and additive comprehension. The main paradox of Jenkins's approach is that, while he recognizes transmedial mechanisms as a 'cultural shift', in his commentary there is room only for corporate considerations. This can be seen in Jenkins's statement about 'collaborative authorship', which basically concentrates on collaborations between trademarks or media studios, rather than on collaborations between users, or between the user and the text. Stephan Packard captures this idea very well:

> Jenkins's much-quoted descriptions of transmedia storytelling […] relegating mostly to the *consumers* the assumed *role of hunters and gatherers* that are *chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort comes away with a richer entertainment experience.*[2]

[1] J. Gardner, *Film+Comics: A Multimodal Romance in the Age of Transmedial Convergence*, in: M.-L. Ryan, J.-N. Thon (eds.), *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Lincoln–London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, p. 200-201.

[2] S. Packard, "Closing the Open Signification: Forms of Transmedial Storyworlds and Chronotopoi in Comics", *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 2015, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 64.

Indeed, this consumer-driven transmediality emphasizes the abilities of the hunter more effectively that a postulate of an.

This approach constitutes a substantially different transmedial perspective than that which appears in the works of Jan-Noël Thon. Thon's works are often considered as 'model' examples of the so-called 'cognitive-turn' in transmedia research, turning away somewhat from research that is strictly focused on economic questions in order to move towards more individual and active ideas about the crucial role of the reader/viewer. It is the mental operations of such individuals that actually constructs fictional transmediality (including the drawing of transfictional connections within the spherical/thematic space of participation). As Thon himself explains:

> The *subjective representation* of consciousness can be considered a genuinely transmedial phenomenon in that it is realized across a wide range of media, each with its own specific limitations and affordances. Hence, transmedial strategies of subjective representation appear to be a particularly rewarding area of inquiry for a transmedial narratology that acknowledges both similarities and differences in the ways narrative media narrate.[3]

The main idea behind this cognitive-orientated shift is that the difference between trans-medial and non-transmedial texts lies precisely in the nature of the specific interplay between the text and the perception of the viewer/reader. Transmedial phenomena arise from technical, conceptual and textual reconfigurations of our experience, underlining the role of 'subjectivization' inside a media object by using techniques that actually cross the borders between the user's conscious mind and the apparatus of the medium. According to Thon:

> In the context of a transmedial narratology, it may be defined as referring to segments of a narrative representation where the storyworld is pictorially represented from the spatial position of a particular character. While it is obvious that the spatial position of a character heavily influences his or her perception, this pictorial strategy of subjective representation usually still represents an intersubjectively valid version of the storyworld, albeit from the specific spatial position and resulting *visual perspective* of a particular character.[4]

Once again it is important to mention that the 'subjective' mechanisms of a transmedial story are not limited to the use of a fictional character's perspective. Such mechanisms are also responsible for the specific construction of a whole fictional world, a world that might, for example, become more 'subjectivized' with reference to a vision of the world that comes from a mentally distracted character.

In my opinion, Thon's observations, cited immediately above, are correct. However, I also find it quite difficult to accept these subjective mechanisms as the main paradigm that lies behind transmediality. The views of Jenkins, Thon and Ryan

[3] J.-N. Thon, "Subjectivity across Media: On Transmedial Strategies of Subjective Representation in Contemporary Feature Films, Graphic Novels, and Computer Games", in: M.-L. Ryan, J.-N. Thon (eds.), *Storyworlds across Media…*, op. cit., p. 67.

[4] Ibidem, p. 73.

(which I will refer to in a moment) are in my opinion too restricted to constitute a satisfactory definition of transmediality, a concept that surely represents something more than merely a marketing strategy, acts of mental orchestration, or the construction of certain narrative patterns. While this element is surprisingly absent from the conversation, I believe that the most important aspect of the transmedia phenomenon is the fact that transmediality can first and foremost be understood as the concrete use of a specific text/fictional world.

My proposition, then, is that transmediality should be considered according to the following definition: Transmediality is a culturally and socially organized act of reading and understanding a specific type of 'crossing' narration. Let's focus now on the specific terms of my definition. When it comes to my notion of 'culturally-mediated' acts of reading, I have adopted a definition of culture as a space of practices (technological, conceptual, interpretative etc.) that have to be undertaken around a specific fictional text. At the same time, the practices themselves should have a social aspect, which means that they should be undertaken within a web of relations between human actors (readers/viewers) and non-human actors (texts and/or media) that intersect with each other in terms of discussion and commentary.

Finally, my definition also takes advantage of Marie-Laure Ryan's narrative definition of transmediality. I refer to very specific types of 'potential' transmedial texts, texts that in my opinion should be regarded first and foremost as "crossing" objects—i.e., stories that, according to the dictionary definition of a "crossing", constitute a transition, gateway, pathway, journey, crossroad or intersection. Such stories create the trans-textual pattern of a fictional universe or multiverse, in which all of these various strategies (crossing, mediating etc.) are taking place.

As noted above, I do not wish to argue that my definition represents a conclusive and exclusive means of perceiving transmediality. Coming from the position of cultural studies, however, my approach to transmedial research does have two main benefits. Firstly, it points to the fact that the act of reading a transmedial text is not simply a 'mentally' organized experience, it is culturally and socially organized too. Secondly, my definition is based only on specific types of media objects, objects that possess the traits of 'crossed' narratives.

## The comic book as (trans)medium

Accepting the 'new' cultural approach to transmediality, I believe that it is now a good idea to turn to comic books, the most suitable area, in my opinion, for the possible research of transmediality. Of course, I am not the first to adapt graphic storytelling for this kind of academic focus. The same notion appears in the previously mentioned article by Jared Gardner, who is very clear about the possible benefits of rediscovering this kind of material:

> An important part of what defined the unique experience of the twentieth century's new multimodal media is that early comics and film both told their multimodal narratives in complex transmedial environments—newspapers, illustrated magazines, vaudeville houses, and nickelodeons—where paratexts multiplied in profusion, creating almost infinitely varied and unruly encounters with the text […]. The early narrative strips were experienced across the serial disruptions of the weekly (and later daily) newspaper, with its own cacophony of tragic headlines, advertisements, and data. And as was the case with early film, the audience itself contributed vitally to the transmedial experience of the early comic, with people often reading and commenting upon the comics in public spaces and collaborative environments.[5]

What I find most interesting in Gardner's approach is that he very specifically refers to the 'transmedial' character of early comics. He does this by underlining the role of the act of reading ("people often reading and commenting upon the comics in public spaces and collaborative environments") and the structural organization of the text ("across the serial disruptions of the weekly (and later daily) newspaper, with its own cacophony of tragic headlines, advertisements, and data"). Indeed, I'm absolutely in agreement with Gardner here: comics books—from the perspective of both aesthetics and perception—represent a truly great field of research when it comes to the transmedial mechanisms mentioned above.

In fact, there is something at the very core of the comic book, viewed as both a semiotic and conceptual pattern, that builds upon the transmedial characteristics of the 'crossing' paradigm (this can be seen in relation to both the reader's attention and the work's formal qualities). As Gardner continues:

> multimodal narrative was inseparable from transmedial reading experiences and environments […]. These first multimodal narrative forms were inherently interactive in ways we often imagine are unique to new media forms of the twenty-first century, being not only inviting but often responding to active participation from readers. In addition, these narratives placed heavy demands on readers to cross the inevitably contentious relationship between the semiotic systems of text and image—to which, in the case of comics, we must also add the cognitive demands inherent to the elliptical form, requiring the reader to actively fill in the missing *action* from one panel to the next.[6]

I believe that Gardner is using the term 'crossing' quite intentionally here. He understands perfectly that receiving the message contained within a comic book is mediated by several 'crossings': the crossing of the semiotic codes of image and word, as well as the crossing between a single frame and the series, the series of frames and the whole panel. Charles Hatfield describes this 'crossing' ability, understood as a specifically transmedial characteristic of comic books, very well. Hatfield is actually describing the original quality of comics as an art of tensions between its

[5] J. Gardner, *Film+Comics…*, op. cit., p. 194.
[6] Ibidem, p. 195.

two basic formal materials (language and image) as well as between a single image and its series, or a comic book as a story and a comic book as a material object.[7]

It is crucial here, nevertheless, to return to the main idea that lies behind my approach to transmediality as a cultural act. Here comic book's form and its reception are understood, most importantly, as a participatory avant-garde for all the others transmedia storyworlds that can develop at the same time a specific type of thinking about and using a primarily 'transmedial' object (that comics essentially are). In Gardner's opinion:

> Hollywood now understands that comic book readers' ways of reading—ways of reading that the film industry had worked to foreclose a century ago—are increasingly vital to multimodal storytelling in the twenty-first century and to Hollywood's economic vitality in a horizontally integrated transmedial corporate environment. Comic book readers had been exploring the pleasures of multimodal serial storytelling for generations, following their favorite characters and narratives across installments, media, and industries.[8]

It is obviously true that highly involved patterns of consumer attention represent something of a Holy Grail for today's media conglomerates; they are still searching for trademarks sophisticated enough to capture the viewer's attention, attentions that are becoming more and more scattered. At the same time, we have an important question to answer here: what precisely can the perception of comic books tell us about preferential patterns for perceiving a transmedial storyworld? According to Werner Wolf, one cognitive mechanism is especially important for helping us to understand and decipher the complex multi-textual structures of transmedial storyworlds. This is the so called 'pre-framing' tool that supports our overall recognition of a specific area of texts. As Wolf puts it:

> Concerning the framing of narrative, all the prototypical features of narratives, or *narratemes* may function as such covert framings. Most notably, this refers to the representation of settings, characters, and events, implying a chronological, causal, and teleological order. Yet such covert framing may also extend to one feature of typical narratives that has hardly found attention in research—that is, our assumption that stories, including their ending, have happened (in reality or imagination) before they are told, performed, or otherwise represented and that they elicit the *sense of the precedence of event[s]* or of a pastness of the story in question.[9]

In other words, the framing mechanism refers to our previous knowledge about fictional stories. It creates a conceptual limit for the new transmedia universe that we are entering, something that we can actually pre-consider thanks to our previous contact with the worlds of fantasy, science fiction or superheroes.

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7 See: Ch. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

8 J. Gardner, *Film+Comics…*, op. cit., p. 203.

9 W. Wolf, "Framings of Narrative in Literature and the Pictorial Arts", in: M.-L. Ryan, J.-N. Thon (eds.), *Storyworlds across Media…*, op. cit., p. 129.

Interestingly here, this kind of 'framing' device—crucial for transmedial storytelling—is in essence very similar to the devices described by Will Eisner in his approach to the act of reading a comic book. In his influential *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner made a very important observation about the cognitive mechanism that is responsible for our contact with graphic narration. According to him, there is a characteristic mental process that determines our contact with comics and that forces the reader to perceive the comic book page as a whole ('framing' the images and narrative tropes encoded in the page) before he/she turns to the specific frames that carry individual parts of the story. This conclusion, that returns once again to a specific aspect of comics, precedes transmedial theories but uses the same 'framing' device.

Finally, there is one more interesting point of intersection between the comic book as a transmedial object and transmediality as a quality of modern media. This one comes from Marie-Laure Ryan's famous approach and her innovative ideas about transmedial narrativity. In her introduction to *Narrative across Media*: *The Languages of Storytelling*, Ryan refers to the term 'remediation', a term that was notably rediscovered for modern media studies by Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter. This is seen as a main distinguishing feature of transmedial narration. As Gabrielle Rippi and Lukas Etter explain, Ryan's use of remediation is based on the following understanding: "transmedial means that a story told in one medium can later be retold in a different medium, but due to medium specificities, the result will never be the same."[10] While the approach of Ryan and her commentators is fully understandable, some different ideas about 'remediation' as a crucial aspect of transmediality (and comic books as well) can be tabled at this point.

Remediation requires that a single story should 'travel' between the media objects and between the different interpretations/uses of that story. But what is the main idea here? Is it the multi-modality of the story, the fact that the story is represented on many different platforms? Or is it the fact that the story garners many different retellings, which are constantly reshaping it? Perhaps paradoxically, I believe that multi-modality is not the dominant factor determining transmediality. Therefore, we can imagine transmedial operations that take place within one medium, namely comic books. This encapsulates within itself possibly distinct narratives that can be viewed as 'crossing'.

Once again, for me transmediality is not simply the result of technological or economic discourse, but rather it is more a question of readerly practices and the specific qualities of (a) given text(s). We've seen this before with reference to comic books as the art of tensions or 'crossings' between modal codes (word vs image). It is crucial now to underline the fact that the 'crossing' ability of comics also grants permission for the 'remediation' of single stories, characters or even whole fictional universes;

[10] G. Rippi, L. Etter, "Intermediality, Transmediality, and Graphic Narrative", in: D. Stein, J.-N. Thon (eds.), *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, p. 203.

many possible reconstructions of these elements are allowed. A certain kind of complex comic book phenomenon will allow us to consider the role of 'pre-framing' mechanisms, as well as the role of possible 'remediations' within a single graphic medium: that is a superhero multiverse (a universe that is able to sustain many, sometimes contradictory, timelines and versions of the basic storyline).

## *Night of the Owls*

A result of the collaboration between acclaimed comic book writer Scott Snyder and artist Greg Capullo, the storyline that exists today as *Night of the Owls* (directly preceded by *Court of Owls*) began publication in October 2011 in the second issue of the relaunched Batman series. The work of Snyder and Capullo was part of a large-scale universe-shifting event for the publisher DC Comics, called "New 52". This was supposed to be another example of refreshing classic heroes and stories for modern readers. However, *Court of Owls* as well as its main culmination *Night of the Owls* constituted something far greater than an update of the Batman character and his mythology. According to both critics and viewers, Snyder and Capullo's work was one of the most original and ambitious things to happen within a popular comic book series in decades. Its crucial quality lay not only in retelling the well-known story; rather, it forced readers to completely reorganize their ideas about the Batman multiverse.

To start with, the main idea behind *Court of Owls* is quite typical. The protector of Gotham City—namely Batman—starts a new investigation after a series of strange, quasi-ritual killings. At the same time, Batman's alter-ego—billionaire Bruce Wayne—announces his ambitious plan to rebuild the rust bucket areas of Gotham, which happens to make him a target for the same strange killers who captured the attention of the Dark Knight. In the course of his investigation, Batman discovers a strange, underground organization called the Court of Owls. Mason-like in nature, they are supposed to have gained hidden control over the city by using an army of masterful assassins called The Talons.

The Court of Owls is originally described as some kind of urban legend, told to children before going to bed. And the resurfacing of the underground organization is especially traumatic for both Wayne and Batman. The former remembers how as a youngster, just after his parents were killed, he actually tried to unmask the Court, revealing them to be a group of a wealthy Gotham citizens who were responsible for the deaths of the Waynes. For Batman on the other hand, the Court of Owls is a frightening, hidden and unknown part of the city's life, a city that is supposed to hold no secrets for its most powerful vigilante. Batman is led into the very heart of a Court of Owls lair, a giant underground labyrinth that serves as a mortal trap for the Court's enemies and as an 'act of passage' for future Talons. After his dramatic escape from the hands of the Court, Batman forces his new adversaries to start an official war for

control over the city. The *Night of the Owls* begins when a deadly army of Talons is sent to kill every important Gotham citizen. This ends with an inevitable fight with Batman and all of his allies.

Although it is described in official materials as a 'crossover', *Night of the Owls* is not a typical example of this type of narrative structure in comic books (classic crossovers usually engage many titles and characters from across the franchise, who intersect as part of one massive event). According to the editors of the Comic Vine webpage, *Night of the Owls* differs from other crossovers in its basic lack of an undeniable temporal and thematic connection.[11] Instead, *Night of the Owls* consists of a series of Batman-related titles that "continues from one book to another" with each book possessing its "own self-contained story."[12] As a whole, it gives the reader a full sense of the events of the storyline, but at the same time every title can be considered as a standalone event. As Scott Snyder puts it:

> Some books are just going to keep on going as they are, while other books, where the writer decided they thought they could use some material from *Night of the Owls* to just further or do something within the story they were telling, or tell a short story in a way that would fit the series that they were writing, those series will tie-in. "All Star Western", "Birds of Prey", "Batgirl", "Nightwing", "Batman and Robin", "Red Hood" and "Dark Knight"—we're really excited to be including all of those books in the crossover. But they will all be self-contained, too, just to be clear. Meaning, you could read *Batman* and none of the other books and it will not affect your reading experience when it comes to the narrative in "Batman". You will not need to go and read "Nightwing" to understand "Batman". And you really shouldn't have to read "Batman" to understand what's happening in any of these other books. So if you are enjoying "Batgirl" or "Nightwing" or "Batman and Robin", you can read all of those books singularly and not need to come over and read *Batman* in order for it to make sense.[13]

The official story arc for the *Night of the Owls*, however, is represented by the following pattern: "Batman" #7, "Batman" #8, "Red Hood & the Outlaws" #8, "Batwing" #9, "Nightwing" #8, "Batman & Robin" #9, "Batgirl" #9, "Batman" #9, "Red Hood & the Outlaws" #9, "Nightwing" #9, "Detective Comics" #9, "Batman: The Dark Knight" #9, "Birds of Prey" #9, "Batman Annual" #1, "Catwoman" #9.[14] At the same time, the specific titles mentioned above can be recreated according to the fictional timeline depicted in the comics:

| HOUR | EVENT |
|---|---|
| 4 p.m. | 4:30 \| Batwing is at Batman Inc. Research and Development working with Mr. Fox. |
| 5 p.m. | 5:24 \| The Court wakes their Talons up. |
| 6 p.m. | 6:02 \| Batwing is entertaining at a Batman Inc. Gala. |

[11] See: http://comicvine.gamespot.com/the-night-of-the-owls/4045-56675/ [accessed 2016-06-29].
[12] Ibidem.
[13] See: http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=36421 [accessed 2016-06-29].
[14] See: http://batman-news.com/2012/06/01/night-owls-reading-order-complete/ [accessed 2016-06-29].

| | |
|---|---|
| | 6:07 \| Batgirl is attacked by her Talon (Mary) in the Little Jakarta village.<br>Talon runs away. |
| 7 p.m. | 7:01–past 7:51 \| Batman is attacked at Wayne Manor.<br>7:04 \| Gordon is walking down the street until a messenger tells him to stay out of the way tonight.<br>7:14 \| Batgirl pieces together what is happening. Meanwhile phone calls flood in at Gotham PD.<br>7:40 \| "The Call" goes out through Alfred.<br>7:40 \| Batwing is attacked by his Talon (Alexander Staunton).<br>7:40 \| Robin receives the call and moves to defeat his Talon.<br>7:45 \| Nightwing arrives to protect Mayor Hady and to attack his Talon (William Cobb). |
| 8 p.m. | Sometime after 8:18 \| Gotham PD is attacked and Batgirl faces Mary again to defeat her.<br>8:18 \| Red Hood is staking-out Chinatown before he faces his Talon (Xiao Loong).<br>8:20 \| The Birds of Prey are attacked by their Talon (Henry Ballard).<br>8:22 \| Battle continues with Nightwing until he defeats his Talon.<br>8:26 \| Cops arrive to watch over Arkham Asylum.<br>8:36 \| Batman is done protecting his house and moves to Arkham Asylum.<br>8:51 \| Batman arrives at the asylum to protect it.<br>8:53 \| Red Hood runs into Batgirl at the spot light to drop Mr. Freeze off. |
| 9 p.m. | 9:03 \| Batgirl reunites with The B.O.P. to finish off the Talon.<br>9:49 \| Batman is done at the asylum taking Dr. Arkham with him to drop off. |
| 11 p.m. | 11:02 \| Batman arrives at Lincoln March's office. |
| 2 a.m. | 2:03 \| Catwoman tries to rob Penguin. Her Talon (Ephraim Newhouse) attacks.[15] |

If we look at the *Night of the Owls* only as a concrete story, it may appeal to us as a fairy tale that reuses traditional themes associated with conspiracy plots and secret organizations. Through its confrontation with the previous versions of the Batman mythology, I do however believe that the story arc created by Snyder and Capullo reveals its truly transmedial nature. This is achieved by following two transmedial mechanisms: the arc offers an interpretative and conceptual challenge to the reader at the same time as it remodels the narrative architecture of the Batman comic books' cosmos.

[15] See: http://comicvine.gamespot.com/the-night-of-the-owls/4045-56675/ [accessed 2016-06-29].

## Crossing of the myths

According to Gabrielle Rippi and Lukas Etter, transmedial narratology should be defined as a shift from a media-orientated perspective towards a more 'flexible' approach when it comes to narrative storage devices. As they write:

> By developing a flexible concept of medium, he [Werner wolf – T.Ż.] accounts for the material effects of a medium and *thus mediates between the positions of media determinism and media relativism*. If narratology leaves behind concepts such as that of the narrator and the preoccupation with the verbal medium and focuses on prototypical and cognitive aspects of narrativity, a transmedial reconceptualization of narrative becomes possible.[16]

It is a very reasonable statement that basically follows my earlier observations: the practice of reading is crucial, and it is this—instead of technological dictates—that defines transmediality.

There is, however, one further very interesting element in the observations by Rippi and Etter; that is their statement about leaving media determinism behind and instead following an approach that is media relativism. Such a theoretical revolution allows us to understand a given story without restricted media and textual boundaries. This is not, as can be clearly seen, simply a radical interpretation of the 'openness' of a textual artifact. Rather it is the expression of a feeling that for a transmedia story the main attraction lies in offering the reader/viewer a chance to simultaneously explore and undermine a fictional storyworld. Using the terminology explored in the previous section, it could be said that that pre-establishing cognitive and narrative patterns of a transmedia story serves an additional purpose: buttressing and shaking the very foundations of a story according to specific narrative and visual tropes inside the text itself.

Such a mechanism is the main idea behind the *Court of Owls* and *Night of the Owls* storylines. Fundamentally, these are not only stories about the evil machinations of a secret society but rather a conceptual challenge—for both the reader and Batman—to reveal the hidden story behind the official comic book mythology. When we cut down all of the fantastic and thrilling elements of the "Owls" story arcs, there will remain a very simple and characteristic Batman tale that once again confronts the comic superhero with his greatest fears. However, this time it is not a conflict with Batman/Bruce Wayne's traumatic past, another reliving of a lonely young boy's trauma, nor a narrative that presents a sense of uncertainty about the rightfulness of Batman's crusade. Instead, Snyder and Capullo confront Gotham City's Dark Knight with the premise that he doesn't know everything about his beloved city, and, what's more, these hidden secrets are actually connected more closely to the Batman myth than he could possibly imagine. *Court of Owls* and *Night of the Owls* are stories about

[16] G. Rippi, L. Etter, "Intermediality, Transmediality, and Graphic Narrative", op. cit., p. 202.

the greatest fear of both Batman and his readers: that is the fear of ignorance, a lack of a basic knowledge about the 'actual' history of Gotham City.

Batman's whole investigation is centered around uncovering the hidden history of the city as well as a hidden history of himself and his friends; the reader becomes once more a partner to the masked crusader, although in this case he/she starts with the same lack of knowledge and belief in the Court of Owls. As Snyder himself reveals:

> It's very much going to expand into that kind of a terrible nightmare for Batman, where they're [The Court of Owls – T.Ż.] showing him over and over and over and over in this next issue, how little he is to Gotham's history and how big they are and that they've been there from the start. They've influenced the shape of Gotham, politically, architecturally, socially—all of these kinds of things, and what is he? He's been around what? Whether he's been around five years or 70 years, it doesn't matter, because it's a speck in the timeframe of a 400-year old city. It's belonged to them and it always will. That's what they're saying to him […]. Well, I don't want to spoil it but I do want to say that their history is very long and dark. You'll see how far they claim to be there—from the very, very beginnings of Gotham. And you'll see how they show this to Bruce. Or how they make that argument and try to prove that to him. But in terms of how far their actually reach goes globally, that's stuff that we're excited to explore even further down the line.[17]

The main cognitive goal here—once again for both Batman and the reader—is to deal somehow with this sense of 'unfamiliarity' about the storyworld, namely Gotham City. In fact, the whole narrative scheme created by Snyder and Capullo has only one clear goal: to bring back control over the narration. In superheroic terms, this is Batman's goal (he must actually gain control over the secret society). This is also true of the reader, who needs to gain control over this portion of revealing information about the story arc.

However, in terms of transmedial storytelling, this mechanism can be seen as a confrontation of myths: the established, well-known Batman myth and this new myth of the Owls. This new myth claims its place in the established order by actually invading the traditional patterns of the Batman story. Snyder and Capullo are indeed very skillful in sustaining many visual and fabular tropes that force the reader to rethink the cornerstones of the whole comic book franchise. For example, according to the "Owls" storyline, there is a clear suggestion that the killing of Bruce Wayne's parents—the turning point of Batman mythology—is in fact the result of the Court's hidden control over the city. The same thing happens to Dick Grayson (Robin, more lately, Nightwing), who is also unaware of the Court's role in his life. After the tragic loss of Grayson's parents, he too was targeted by the Owls, who wanted him as their new deadly Talon assassin. After the unexpected offer from Bruce Wayne to become his protégé, the fate of Dick Grayson was fortunately altered.

[17] See: http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=36421 [accessed 2016-06-29].

Playing this kind of game with the main events of the storyworld provokes the reader to engage in conceptual work with existing texts; he or she is invited to look for clues indicating the presence of the Court in former Batman adventures. Once again, we see the basic conceptual mechanism of transmedia storytelling in action: according to the logic of an endlessly renewing procedure, a given scheme is constantly reconfigured. Similarly, the "Owls" storylines can be viewed as a sophisticated game played with a mental framing device, as described by Werner Wolf. Both histories are based on a perpetual act of doubt—doubt in the stability of the narrative frames of a Batman story. This act of doubt is imprinted on both the events of the comic book and the doubting pose of the reader.

Adapting Mikhail's Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, Stephan Packard makes a vital remark about relations between the dynamic and static aspects of transmedial worlds:

> As we will see, storyworlds might be considered more properly to be chronotopoi's dialogic meeting places. While Ryan eventually contrasts the temporal, dynamic aspects of transmedia stories to the more static, spatial aspects of their storyworlds, conceiving the latter as space-times that may host various events, Bakhtin's model places much greater emphasis on a more genuine inseparability of these halves, offering a complementary view on that dichotomy which concerns the semiotic structure involving space and time within each specific story told.[18]

I believe that Packard's point has merit here: he is trying to describe the active process of telling a transmedial story, stretching the boundaries of a transmedial universe at the same time. The "Owls" storylines are good examples of that process, as they not only extend the fictional storyworld diachronically (by adding new points to the basic timeline) but also, and most importantly, synchronically (by adding new meanings and interpretations to the basic storyline). This kind of specific 'space-story' is the very essence of the transmedial text. It presents a perceptual challenge, a challenge that is similarly realized in many other examples of multiverse story arcs in the area of comic books.

## Between the grids and gutters of Gotham City

As I've mentioned a few times before, by reconstructing readerly patterns we can more clearly understand the specific acts entailed in following and comprehending the transmedial storytelling models utilized by comic books. Once again, if we look at studies concerned with the narrative and visual organization of comic books, we will find some highly pertinent observations about the dynamic nature of constructing and deconstructing a transmedial story. As Silke Horstkotte writes:

[18] S. Packard, "Closing the Open Signification…", op. cit., pp. 58-59.

> By *dividing the picture into several distinct frames* […] graphic narrative *uses the eye of the spectator moving from panel to panel to keep narrative time running. The reader constructs a story.* According to this school of thought, comics narrative is structured by means of grids and gutters, that is, it breaks the narrative flow down into discrete panels, and it opens up a space between the panels that offers a way in for readerly engagement and imagination.[19]

When it comes to defining the characteristics of comic books, the most important supporter of the 'grids and gutters' approach is Scott McCloud. In his influential *Understanding Comics: An Invisible Art*, he made the following statements about the crucial role of 'blank' spaces:

> See that space between the panels? That's what comics aficionados have named *the gutter*. And despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! Here, in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea.[20]

Over the course of many years, the 'grids and gutters' theory has developed into one of the mostly often discussed theoretical approaches to comics. However, this approach has also seen many reinterpretations and revisions with regard to the actual mechanism of human perception. Horstkotte's has continued the discussion as follows:

> Even in graphic narratives that follow a more formal grid pattern, the linear understanding implied by the term *sequentiality* may be too reductive and the emphasis on gaps and gutters misleading. After all, readerly engagement with the storyworld is bound to focus not on the space between panels but on what is inside the panels as well as on the ways in which panels speak to each other […]. In fact, the linear sequence is only one of many possible ways of organizing visual information in comics. Since narrative directionality in comics is not dictated by technology […] graphic artists may, and increasingly do, choose other ways of presenting a course of action that that of grids and sequences—either exclusively or intermittently.[21]

I have recreated these critical discussions about the visual organization of material in comics with a specific purpose in mind: for me, it is clear that this can be used as another mental model for organizing the textual material in transmedial storytelling. In a transmedia story, the 'blank' spaces of a 'grids and gaps' approach can be masterfully redirected. Once again, the "Owls" storylines are quite accurate examples; both storylines basically represent the logic of blank and directed grids and gutters between the separate storylines.

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[19] S. Horstkotte, "Zooming In and Out: Panels, Frames, Sequences, and the Building of Graphic Storyworlds", in: D. Stein, J.-N. Thon (eds.), *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels…*, op. cit., p. 33.

[20] S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Glasgow: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1994, p. 66.

[21] S. Horstkotte, "Zooming In and Out…", op. cit., p. 34-36.

As previously noted, on the one hand, Snyder and Capullo's tale is some kind of a deconstructive story, which significantly impacts the reader's understanding of a whole fictional world, that is a dark and gritty Gotham City. As Capullo admits:

> It's funny because Scott and I were just riding around in the city together. We were in Soho, and he goes *it's really crazy, I don't recognize any of this area except for like, that Starbucks over there*. He says the rest is all changed. He says to me and my wife, *that's the crazy thing about this city*. And that's how he thinks about Batman. Because it is impossible to know this entire city. It's ever-changing, and destroying and rebuilding itself so fast. It's a ludicrous notion to think you know it all.[22]

The 'destroying and rebuilding' mechanism mentioned in the above quotations works itself out in the *Court of Owls* storyline; it's true nature is to add some new points of interpretation to a well-established story. However, these new 'inputs' into the Batman myth function as individual panels that appear in a much larger and expanded story, and only some narrative and visual clues connect with previous events. Around them, there is a vast space of uncertainty and doubt—the mental and narrative 'blank spaces'—that awaits incorporation into the bigger story arc. As Snyder himself admits, even the individual titles involved in the *Night of the Owls* crossover do not demand a strict and full reading; as is much needed in a 'proper' transmedia story, readers have freedom in shaping their own reading process. These comic titles comment upon and fulfill themselves, but at the same time they can be treated as standalone 'frames' that can be taken under consideration (or not) during the reconstruction of the whole "Owls" mythology.

At the same time, it is fascinating to note that Snyder and Capullo offer their readers some compelling visual and narrative tropes that—according to Horstkotte's assumption about the necessity of 'directing' the spaces between individual images in comics—go beyond the previous 'blank' connections between the *Night of the Owls* individual frames and a larger Batman multiverse. Here, one such 'directed grid' constitutes a small part of a short portion of the *Court of Owls*, which returns to one of the most iconic visuals in the whole Batman mythology. The example in question presents a bitten and wounded Bruce Wayne sitting in his father's office. As he experiences unending rage about the death of his parents, he waits for some kind of a sign about what he should do with his resources. Suddenly, a window is broken by a giant bat that flies into the room and sits on the bust of Bruce's father; the sign is a clear inspiration to the young man. "Yes, father", Bruce responds. This iconic scene, taken directly from Frank Miller and David Mazzucchielli's *Batman: Year One*, is repeated by Snyder and Capullo only to create some kind of continuity. In this case, however, we actually see what happened to the mysterious bat that inspired Wayne to become Batman. The animal flies into the woods where he is unexpectedly attacked and killed by an owl. This visual and conceptual connection with the most fundamental Batman

[22] See: http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=36421 [accessed 2016-06-29].

scene stands in for a 'conversation' between individual visual panels (or, in this example, conceptual panels), reshaping the previous Batman inception scene with the new Owl-centric storyline.

## Conclusion

A proper summary here recalls Stephan Packard's proposition, following Bakhtin:

> I claim that this transmedial entity retains its history in a chronotopic structure. This view emphasizes two relevant and complementary aspects: the procedural, performed quality of transmediality, and the signifying relations of characters in worlds depicting those worlds. […]. Transmediality is thus currently a work in progress […]. The greater context of this view insists that transmediality, if it is to be understood as transcending media boundaries into an abstract point of reference beyond media specificity, refers to a counterfactual performance rather than some actual universal that merely needs to be acknowledged. Historicism about transmediality, in other words, entails skepticism about transmedial entities. Entities without media specificity should be examined for traces of their construction and reification and should be connected to the historical processes that construe them.[23]

I wholeheartedly agree with Packard in his emphasis on the counterfactual and skeptical nature of both the structure of transmediality, and the process of its own deconstruction. After all, as the *Court of Owls* and *Night of the Owls* storylines highlight, a fictional comic book multiverse is founded on related ideas: notions of continuity, of reshaping crucial points of the storyline, and, after that, forcing the reader to reconsider his/her perception of the fictional world. The transmediality of the comic book is once again shown to be more a result of a cultural approach than a strictly mechanical one (this latter approach being too often used to connect the so-called 'new media' with often unquestioned notions of transmediality). At this juncture is important to restate that the category of remediation—something that Ryan connects with transmediality—is not a synonym for multimodality. Rather this can be seen as a conceptual remediation, retelling a concrete story that acquires new subtexts and story paths.

This article has referred to two main research goals: firstly, to present the category of transmediality anew by using a definition connected with a cultural approach, and, secondly, to use the example of a specific comic book story arc in order to reconstruct the main transmedial qualities of comics in a broader sense. Proper closure might be obtained by inviting academics concerned with the transmedial category to use comic book storylines in their own work. A specific type of popular comics, often described as the crossover genre, does, I strongly believe, represent a rich and fruitful area for transmedia studies. Such works offer tools for creating and understanding transmediality that are at once prototypical and unique.

[23] S. Packard, "Closing the Open Signification…", op. cit., pp. 61-62.

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