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Micronarratives as the form of contemporary communication

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Abstract: Narratives can be considered as a way for presenting and representing reality, going beyond time, space, aesthetic form, and medium of conveyance. From Aristotelian classical principles, to structuralist rules, to post-structuralist plurality, the aesthetics of narrative representation is constantly put into discussion. Narratives are composed by both constant structures and figures, which determines whether an object can be identified as a narrative, and variables which determine the way in which it is conveyed on different media. In this paper, we concentrate on contemporary narratives on social media. After declaring what are the main characteristics of the medium in terms of affordances, content, and role of the users, we analyse two existing case studies using the concepts of remediation and narrativity. The paper aims at bringing a contribution to the discussion about contemporary aesthetics in media design, considering narratives as a matter of design, and investigating on the role of the designer.

Keywords: social media, micronarratives, remediation, narrativity

1. Introduction

Within various human societies narrative has always represented one of the main systems for comprehending reality and sharing knowledge. Human intelligence – in the unremitting effort of understanding the surrounding world – has produced and continues to create symbolic, categorical, and aesthetic models of reality, in order to allow individuals to assimilate those cultural assets created by society throughout times. Without these processes based on the elaboration of symbols and categories, it would be quite impossible for human beings to codify and to put in order such a complex and chaotic experience as reality. In this sense, the art of storytelling should not be seen

exclusively as an entertaining activity, but it should be considered like a key tool for identity building, either individual or collective. At the same time, it should be seen as a way for organizing and sharing collective knowledge and personal experiences. According to Jerome Bruner (1991), narratives operate a mediation between the cultural world and the idiosyncratic world which includes beliefs, desires, and hopes. Narratives help to understand exceptional phenomena and, at the same time, they are useful for organizing the human relation with the unknown. Narratives could preserve memories, as they can modify the past. Moreover, narratives, we would add, can forecast and imagine the future, probably the most extreme form of what humans usually call "the unknown". It is not a case if the many civilizations and different cultures living on Earth, have built its founding myths and its proper rules starting from tales.

Throughout centuries, narrative social functions have remained essentially the same; narrative structures are still tied to the Aristotelian principles, which preserve its basic elements – characters, actions, objects, contexts, instruments, according to Burke's Pentad theory (Bruner, 1986). What is changed in a radical manner is the way in which tales are conveyed and spread. Today, the massive proliferation of digital platforms and media brings to the concept of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and, after twenty years, linguistic and stylistic fragmentation, and overlap is increasing.

This paper focuses on the contemporary aesthetics of narratives which can be seen today on social media. Considering narratives as a matter of design, what is the role of the designer when dealing with digital narratives on social media? Analysing two existing case studies of narratives on social media using the concepts of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and narrativity (Ryan, 2004), this paper aims at bringing a contribution to the discussion about contemporary aesthetics in media design.

2. Context: Social Media

The remediation of narrative aesthetics can be noted in the forms of digital stories, which are created and conveyed on social media. Today in fact, social media, i.e. the internet-based platforms and applications that allow the creation and exchange of contents among connected users, introduces further challenges and possibilities for the creation of narratives. Social media can be considered as an emergent territory for digital storytelling, intended as the practice of telling stories using digital tools and media with the integration of text, pictures, videos, and sounds. Using Facebook updates, *tweets*, and pictures on a variety of social network sites, users are sharing their personal life stories, in public or semi-public environments. These practices are analysed as non-fiction narratives for their ability to create and reinforce identity and interaction (Page, 2012). However, social media represents also a fertile ground for works of fiction designed by professionals. The term "social media", in fact, includes the whole variety of practices, technologies, and aesthetics, in which amateur users (Burgess, 2007), professional producers, and industries have interconnected roles and functions. The use of social media today is not driven only by the spontaneous practices of its connected users, but it includes a whole range of professional activities and content which are part of the media ecology as well. Companies, designers, artists, and media practitioners are creating fictional stories, harnessing social media as a narrative platform, and bringing forms and languages of narrative representation into social media platforms.

Social media can be considered as a particular category of media with its specific characteristics, affordances, and limitations. First, social media presents a specific architecture, that is the series of elements which allow different kinds of activities to users, enabling them to produce and consume media content for various purposes. As the material aspect of a book affects the way in which readers experience a narrative, allowing them to unfold the story one page after another, so the

architecture of social media determine how users perceive and interact with narratives through the medium affordances. The technical properties of social media can be translated as possibilities of actions for designers. For example, one of the affordances of social media is the reversed chronological order as the standard for published content. Facebook timeline, Twitter feed, and Instagram feed privilege the newness of published content, displaying the latest post or tweet on top and placing the older ones at the bottom of the feed. The standard of the reversed order constitutes a technical constraint, a property of the environment of social media; this means that the order in which the events of a story are presented to the viewer/reader, may not be a creative and aesthetic choice as the reversed timeline *affords* nonlinearity of narratives.

Another group of affordances is represented by comments, shares, likes, retweet and all of those features that allow social interactivity. This group of affordances represents not only the potential to interact with other users, allowing social networking activities, but it accounts for a potential way for interacting with the narrative itself, thus influencing the development of the plot. On social media, narratives could be designed to support the active involvement of the audience. On social media, the social interactivity affordances as comments, likes, and shares allow users to interact with the story, expressing opinions and reactions to the content published online. Comments, shares, and likes represent the remediated (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) practice of shouting to the actors on stage of previous forms of participatory theatre.

Second, narratives on social media are multimodal: on the one hand, the single content, intended here as the combination, for example, of one image and a text as a post on Facebook combines two different modes of communication (visual and written) in the same post. On the other hand, a page or profile on a social network site composed by more than one single content – e.g., a Twitter profile which uses both textual tweet and visual tweets – is multimodal as it combines two different modes in the same profile. Narratives can be composed of both types of combination. Multimodality, intended as the capacity of designers to use many communicative channels in order to reflect in the digital environment the complexity of human cognitive action, making use of different sensorial modes (Bollini, 2004), represents one of the properties of narratives on social media. Being constituted by different modes, narratives on social media can be considered as fragmented compositions of different microcontent pieces. Fragmentation represents, therefore, another specific property of narratives on social media. Analogously, Manovich calls this property modularity, such as the characteristic of media objects to be composed of small parts with their own autonomy as in a "fractal structure" (Manovich, 2001). Each microcontent piece, or fragment, can be accessed, read, saved, liked, shared, and commented as an element on its own, even when it is part of a bigger media object. Therefore, microcontent pieces as fragments are autonomous chunks with their own semantic and syntactic independence. From a semantic point of view, each fragment has its meaning, it communicates something on its own, sometimes being completed by different modes, e.g. text and images. From the syntactic perspective, fragments as units of meaning require a specific code which is situated in each social media platform/application.

Third, social media are based on the interactions between content and users, and the connections that can be created among them. Regarding narrative content, interactivity cannot be considered only the physical action performed by users (as clicking or tapping on a like button); for narratives conveyed on social media, interactivity is also a *mental process*, which requires users to elaborate on a cognitive level the messages and information conveyed. As fragmentation, multimodality, and modularity are properties of social media content, users are required the mental activities of filling-in, recall and identify the links between different fragments. The affordances of social media require the users' capacity to perceive, and so to mentally recognize and reconstruct all elements as parts of a narrative.

Considering the abovementioned characteristics as specific of social media, we can argue that this category of media inevitably changes the way in which stories are represented in the digital realm. Narratives on social media can be considered as the result of a design activity, in which, as described by Ryan (2004) both formal aspects, such as the syntactic level of the narrative discourse; content aspects, such as the semantic level of the contents conveyed through social media; and aspects connected to user interactivity, that is the pragmatic level of narrativity (Ryan, 2004), should be taken into consideration. Social media are means for conveying messages and information, but the balance between the form and the substance of narrative meaning, is the result of a careful ideation, planning, and construction. In other words, as Ryan argues, selecting themes and genres, building plot structures, defining users' limitations and field of options, and, we would add, creating a visual imagery, can all be considered as proper design activities.

3. Methodology: Key Analytical Concepts

Bolter and Grusin introduce the concept of *remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) meaning that media do not operate in isolation, rather they are represented one media after the other; that is to say, each medium represents itself in another medium both in form and content. Thinking of the evolution of storytelling practices, the media used to convey stories has been remediated in newer forms of media, becoming its content. The concept of remediation becomes central if we analyse how the aesthetics of narrative representation has been transported into the contemporary media (e.g. social media, to which our analysis is focused), although keeping the narrative basic elements and structures unaltered. Consequently, as the aesthetics is being remediated, narratives on social media assume new forms of representation and audience involvement. Thus, the capacity of the audience to recognize a fragmented text as a narrative, relies in the way the narrative is built. For this reason, we consider the concept of narrativity as a second key analytical concept.

In contemporary studies, narrativity is often used as a variable quality, rather than a fixed set of properties which define narratives. As Page argues, narratives are perceived as a fuzzy set in which qualities of narrativity allow readers/viewers to recognize the text as narrative-like (Page, 2010). Ryan proposes the following set of nested conditions, which help identifying narrativity (Ryan, 2006, p.194): the possibility of identifying a storyworld in which actions take place; the presence of one or more intentional characters able to produce changes of state in this world; the presence of one or more conflicts to be resolved; the identification of causal relations between actions and events; the motivation of characters to resolve the conflicts through their actions; the disruption brought by the conflict(s) in the storyworld; and the capacity of a narrative to lead to an end, fulfilling the desire of the reader/viewer. Members of the audiences may not consciously put the narrativity in question while consuming a text; in other words, it depends on how many of these conditions one would assume as constituents of narrative.

The concept of narrativity becomes crucial when dealing with narratives that are not represented in the traditional forms of novel, drama, or film. The form that narratives assume on social media can be considered as composed of fragments of narratives. Different authors have analyzed narratives in its most basic possible form. Turner (1996) defines "small stories of events in space" (Turner, 1996, p. 13) as proto-narratives, such as the basic unit which could represent an event. Murphet argues that proto-narratives represent a single event, without being proper narratives. In the view of Murphet, these fragments may become narratives, but only if combined with other fragments (Murphet, 2005). In other words, proto-narratives are those simple representations of an event, which represent the basic unit for more articulated compositions. On social media, each piece of content is autonomous at both the semantic and syntactic levels; however, being it characterized by modularity

(Manovich, 2001), it gains meaning in the relationship with other content. In this sense, for example, a post on Facebook may be the simple representation of a single event (a proto-narrative), but more conditions for narrativity may be recognized in the combination with other posts. The single fragments of narrative gain their meaning when they become part of a storyworld, such as shared models mentally constructed between recipients and authors, or audience and creators, in which other possible narratives can be built starting from characters' expectations, desires, and goals. Storyworlds can be considered as dynamic models that evolve over time according to the main properties of *invention*, *completeness* and *consistency* (Wolf, 2012). These three properties allow users and audiences to combine the single fragments with each other, creating unexpected storylines (*invention*); adding details to other pieces of narratives (*completeness*); and building consistent and causal relations among fragments (*consistency*). In this way, the narratological model is expanded, on the abstract level, with the concept of possible worlds, such as the possibility of alternative narratives or an alternative course of events, which is based on logical models (Ryan, 2012) and conditions for narrativity.

In the following paragraph, we are analysing two case studies of narratives on social media (Twitter and Instagram) according to the concepts of remediation and narrativity in order to illustrate how the characteristics of social media affect narrative representation.

4. Case Study Analysis

The two cases we are presenting are both examples of a design practice; this means that the represented narratives do not stem from the autobiographical and spontaneous sharing of content on personal pages, but they are considered as professional or semi-professional works of fiction. The first case "I Guardiani della Nove" ("Watchmen of the Nine") refers to a project developed by design students of the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano; the second case "Desert Friends" is a web series developed entirely on Instagram and written and produced by a group of professional photographers and filmmakers.

The two cases were chosen as they share some narrative elements: both storylines refer to a group of characters who are somehow thrown into a future world and struggle to find their way back home. The traditional narrative structure of the hero's journey (Vogler, 2007; Campbell, 2008) can be identified in both narratives, however the representation is profoundly different, also due to the two different social media through which they are conveyed.

I GUARDIANI DELLA NOVE (WATCHMEN OF THE NINE)

Authors / Designers: Laura Ferreira, Chiara Miceli, Davide Povolo, Silvia Tremolada, Alessandro Zotta; School of Design, Politecnico di Milano.

Year: 2015

Country: Italy

Platform: Twitter

Profile: @CORTO2115, @XY2115

The Twitter project "I Guardiani della Nove" is a sci-fi adventure that tells the story of five heroes who are sent back from the future (year 2115) to the present (year 2015) in order to save the world of the future, in which nature is almost completely extinct and the few green areas represent a

privilege for an élite. The narrative is developed as a modern form of the epistolary novel: an instant message conversation on Twitter between the leader of the five heroes (@CORTO2115), who writes from the present, and the scientist's assistant who developed the mission (@XY2115), tweeting from the future. Through the messages the two characters send to each other, it is possible to recognize the dystopian world of the future (the storyworld), and identify the characters that populate it.

The Twitter conversation between @CORTO2115 and @XY2115 represents one of the many different storylines that can be experienced on different media and profiles, however each of them is an autonomous digital narrative. The storylines were created by different teams of designers according to the original storyworld, which represents an archetype for the dystopian worlds of the science fiction genre, with its specific characteristics and rules.

In this short narrative, many conditions for narrativity can be identified, as the presence of a storyworld as well as intentional characters; causal relations among the events, and actions performed by the characters which disrupt their habitual existence. The narrative begins with an initial situation in which the team of heroes arrives to the present world and starts exploring the area. After a few lines, the conflict between the characters emerges: @CORTO2115 is a spy and his initial plan was to sabotage the mission of the five heroes. However, the travel and the meeting with the people of the present, who still care of natural areas, generate an inner conflict, which leads him to abandon his initial plan and to dedicate himself to the mission, helping the other heroes to save the present nature. Throughout the conversation many events are described, emphasising the causal relations between what happened before the mission, leading the world to an undesirable future, and what is happening while the narrative unfolds. In this way, the narrated events, even if not completely visualized or detailed, result coherent with the storyworld presented, and lead to a final conclusion.

From a navigational point of view, the audience can read the Twitter feed of each profile in a reversed chronological order and can use the hashtag *#gd9* to follow the whole conversation. Even though this is mainly a copywriting project, the team of designers decided to create illustrations in a form that imitates 8-bit style to match the story told: coming from a future scenario characterized by low resources, designers hypothesized that the transmission between future and present time has a low resolution.

DESERT FRIENDS

Writer / Director: Dave Hill

Producer: Trenton Waterson, theCollaborate

Year: 2013

Country: USA

Platform: Instagram,

Profile: @desertfriends, instagram.com/desertfriends

The web series *Desert Friends* is composed of more than one hundred clips, each with a duration of maximum fifteen seconds, as required by the platform. The series tells the story of three Californian friends, Ruby, Emma, and James who find themselves in another galaxy, inhabited by alien creatures. They struggle to find their way home, and along the journey they have the opportunity to know better each other and find out details about their personal lives, which allow them to succeed in their goal. From the point of view of narrativity, the storyworld is situated in a future time and a different space (an unknown galaxy) and the audience can identify the characters which populate it.

The three main characters, Ruby, Emma, and James are presented in their state of equilibrium at the beginning of the series for the first ten episodes. The eleventh episode shows the moment of disruption of equilibrium, and from there on each clip moves the story forward through the events presented to the Californian friends, whose goal is to find their way back home. The goal and motivation to reach their goal is made clear and the conflicts, which are implied at the beginning, become more and more evident as the narrative continues. The main conflict is represented by the fight against the aliens, which prevent the characters' return to normal life; other conflicts are present, as the jealousy of Emma towards Ruby, caused by James' interest in her. The roles in the narrative are as well very clear: the good characters fighting against the bad aliens, and helped by a mysterious old man. In the end, Ruby, Emma, and James have to go through many events and work together in order to finally get home.

According to the genre of science fiction comedy, the series mocks the standard conventions like the interstellar travel, the encounter with aliens and the futuristic technology. Sound effects, costumes and set design directly refer to the TV series of the Sixties – e.g. Star Trek – to the Eighties. Those TV shows were born in an era in which the evolution was from professional video-making electronic formats and home movies. What represented, at that time, a technical constraint of the semi-professional video-making device, becomes an aesthetic reference for today's media designers. Dave Hill, director of Desert Friends explained in an interview, that, on Instagram, he faced the same problem of video-makers of the past when he had to edit the clips while shooting them. The "retro" style of Desert Friends, becomes a perfect remediation of TV on social media, both in terms of genre, aesthetics and in terms of production process.

5. Discussion & Conclusions

In the previous paragraphs we proposed the two key concepts of *remediation* and *narrativity* in relation to the methodology and to the case studies. We are now discussing them as representative of the "aesthetics of fragments" and proposing it as the "aesthetics of micronarratives". In fact, the fictional narratives conveyed on social media can be defined as *micronarratives* such as representations which 1) possess some of the conditions of narrativity, 2) are composed of autonomous multimodal fragments, spread across the digital narrative space, and 3) require the user's cognitive action of interpretation in order to be connected to other fragments. Micronarratives represent an important strategy for designers to engage with people as users of social media, focusing their attention and maintaining their motivation and engagement. Structuring micronarratives in a whole storyworld is part of the designer's role. Micronarratives, in fact, gain meaning as narratives based on the degrees of narrativity they possess, but they gain meaning as designed objects, if they are able to establish a relation with their audience. This relation with the audience is established through the possibility for users of social media to interpret the different fragments and connect them one to each other, in order to reconnect the micronarrative to a storyworld. Storyworlds, in their turn, bring a whole imagery which can be shared among members of the audience, as in the case of the sci-fi worlds described through the case studies.

The aesthetics of micronarratives uses remediation for making the various contents and media consistent with each other, requiring a coordination and equilibrium among the different storylines. Considering the abovementioned case studies, on the one hand, @Corto2115 tells on Twitter just one storyline of a bigger storyworld, which is expanded and articulated on other media (i.e., a website[1] and two Facebook fanpages[2]). On the other hand, Desert Friends quotes older TV series in

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[1] http://d9news.imagishub.it/

order to engage with a specific audience and let its members recognise familiar references. It is possible, then, to define as "parasitical" those short narrative forms that clone aesthetics and styles from the imagery created through the storyworld: in fact, the recursion and the operation of quotes represent a characteristic of contemporary digital narratives. Moreover, with the proliferation of spin-offs across multiple platforms, the narrative universe is more and more expanded toward a polycentric system.

Storyworlds can be considered as generative narrative engines, which allow for infinite possibilities of stories; connecting with the theory of Possible Worlds (Ryan, 2012), more and more narratives can be generated from a world according to logical models. We can, then, consider storyworld-building as a design practice (Ciancia, 2016), considering the typical relational, user and community-centred approach of the design activity.

Designing narratives as parts of storyworlds on social media, means to directly engage with users and let them be part of the storytelling process. Social media introduces an interactive relationship between narrator and narratee, this latter actively participating in the storytelling process on both physical and cognitive level. The role of the designer is then to take advantage of affordances and boundaries of each platform, building narratives using the conditions of narrativity in order to link together different fragments with each other. In other words, the designer exploits the remediation in order to elicit the cognitive effort of linking fragments together. The condition of being parasitical is both a matter of dramaturgy and visual representation, that means selecting and combining the well-known elements of a shared imagery into an original order based on the concepts of *variety* and *repetition* (Varnedoe 2016, p. 83). Instant communication and instant production and distribution of contents, which are typical of social media, can release their ephemeral nature by designing a meaning-making process of dissecting and assembly.

Narratives on social media are often addressed to specific audience, to a niche of people sharing common interests and to their stakeholder system. These communities of interests differ from the audience of traditional broadcasting: for example, I Guardiani della Nove refers specifically to a localized community whose members are interested about a specific urban area; aim of the project was, in fact, to use *micronarrative* representation in order to engage with this community of interest and motivate them towards taking action for preserving the green environment. Differently, Desert Friends refers to a community of peers in the field of professional filmmakers whose members share interests about cinema, TV series, and audiovisual productions in general. Differently from the general broadcasting audience, community is a safe area created by its members sharing an affinity of tastes and purposes. This does not necessarily mean that it is a collaborative environment, or that there are not any kind of conflicts: more generally, the designer addressing a niche community, may be led to seek its consent, with the risk to flatten the narrative contributions to an "average taste" expressed by the community members. The point here, is that today it is not possible to identify a single specific aesthetic paradigm that completely break with the past (as the "isms" in art history). Whenever the designer addresses the community of reference, he/she introduces small *variations* in style (Manovich, 2016) based on his/her sensitivity, compared to what the target audience knows, understands, and reclaims. In the long run, what motivates a number of people to gather around a theme can run out very quickly as people may simply lose interest. Consequently, also the development of a story will suffer to achieve his total depletion. Social media is able to engage with the audience using different methods compared to the traditional channels. In this sense, the practices of interaction and completion of the narrative discourse are creating different aesthetics: the fragmentation of the story and its arrangement through small narrative "tiles" (e.g., the

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[2] https://www.facebook.com/guardianidella9/, https://www.facebook.com/Il-viaggio-di-Ivan-1749654475262869/

multimodal microcontent pieces) is based on the active collaboration of the audience exploiting the participatory nature of social media. In this paper, we have discussed and described the contemporary narrative aesthetic on social media as an aesthetic of micronarratives based on remediation and conditions for narrativity, which can be used by designers for engaging with a niche of users and establish a relation with its audience.

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