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Introduction: Characters across media

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Contemporary media culture is fundamentally shaped by a technological and cultural media convergence that has also led to the continued rise of transmedia franchises such as *The lord of the rings* or *Harry Potter*, *Star wars* or *A song of ice and fire/Game of thrones*, *The walking dead* or *Doctor who*, the DC or Marvel universes, *Warcraft* or *Tomb raider*. During the past decade, literary, media, and cultural studies have increasingly become aware of the socio-cultural significance of these franchises as well as of the considerable theoretical and methodological challenges their study presents. A range of book-length studies by scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006), Kristin Thompson (2007), Robert A. Brookey (2010), Elizabeth Evans (2011), Mark J.P. Wolf (2012), Derek Johnson (2013), Colin B. Harvey (2015), Matthew Freeman (2016), or Dan Hassler-Forest (2016) examine important aspects of the production, aesthetics, and reception of transmedia franchises in convergent media culture. Yet, while virtually all of these studies mention characters at some point and there is a solid consensus that characters fulfil key integrating functions for many transmedia franchises, their reception, and the continued engagement of their fans within networks of collaborative creation, there is as of yet comparatively little research that focuses specifically on the forms and functions of characters across media (see, however, the discussion of “intertextual characters” in Margolin 1996; of “transtextual characters” in Richardson 2010; or of “transmedia characters” in Bertetti 2014; as well as various in-depth studies of “character-focused” franchises such as Brooker 2012, 2013; Condry 2009; Denson 2014; Hills 2010, 2015; Pearson 2015; Steinberg 2012).

This is of course not to say that there are no attempts aimed toward a better understanding of the forms and functions of characters in different media. While it may still be true “that many have written only a little and only a few have written much on characters” (Eder 2008a: 40; “dass viele nur wenig und nur wenige viel zum Bereich der Figur geschrieben haben”), we now have a range of medium-specific theories of characters not only in literary texts and theatrical perfor-

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mances but also in audiovisual media such as films or interactive media such as video games (see, e.g., Jannidis 2004; Phelan 1989; Schneider 2000 on literary characters; Eder 2008; Smith 1995; Tomasi 1988 on film characters; Schröter and Thon 2014; Vella 2014 on video game characters; Aldama 2010; Vari 2019 on comic book characters; as well as the various contributions in Eder et al. 2010b; Leschke and Heidbrink 2010 for perspectives on characters in other media such as television series, theatrical performances, advertisement etc.). These various medium-specific approaches often consider characters to be “elements of the constructed narrative world” (Eder et al. 2010a: 9) or “non-actual but well-specified individual presumed to exist in some hypothetical, fictional domain” (Margolin 2007: 66). While earlier approaches to “re-used” characters appearing in more than one work maintained that “[o]ntologically and aesthetically, it is [...] impossible to have entirely identical characters in literary works by different authors” (Müller 1991: 107), for the protagonists of the contemporary transmedia franchises mentioned earlier a transtextual or even transmedial reappearance and, as such, some degree of cross-work similarity or perhaps even (partial) identity is the rule, rather than the exception (see, e.g., Bertetti 2014; Wilde 2019).

But of course, contemporary transmedia franchises can seldom be said to represent just a single noncontradictory world (see, e.g., Thon 2015) or, indeed, a single noncontradictory character as a represented entity located in such a world. *The walking dead*, for instance, comprises not only a long-running comic book series by the publisher Image (2003–2019) following the postapocalyptic adventures of Rick Grimes and his son Carl, but also an ABC television show in which Carl had died in episode 9 of season 8 (2018) while still being very much alive in the comics. As early as in issue #28 of the latter, Rick had lost his hand, a major plot point for the character that never occurred in the ABC show. Andrew Lincoln, the actor playing Rick has finally left the show in season 9, episode 5 (his character presumed dead to the other characters while the audience knows him to still be alive), while Rick served as a leader in the comics until he surprisingly died right before the series reached its conclusion in issue #193. Clearly, then, there must be at least two different “instances” or “versions” of both Rick and Carl Grimes. Interestingly, other transmedial expansions of the franchise (a second television show, *Fear the walking dead*, another spin-off show already announced for 2020, as well as various novels, audiobooks, video games, and board games) follow either the comic books or the television show, with many of these media products being carefully designed to “add up” to one or the other of the respective worlds and their character “versions.” Telltale Games’ *The walking dead* adventure game series (2012–2019), for instance, is set within the comic book storyworld, while Terminal Reality’s shooter game *The walking dead: Survival instinct* (2013) follows the stories of characters existing only in the television show. Hence,

both “versions” of Rick Grimes can be considered transmedial. The two diverging, contradictory “canons” and their authorship are relatively strictly governed by the respective rights holders in these cases, so that most or all representations of the respective characters can be clearly attributed to one of the two storyworld contexts. As some franchises (and their characters) draw on the model of continuity, others embrace the paradigm of multiplicity (see, e.g., Jenkins 2009).

For characters in popular culture that are used, re-used, and related to each other for a much longer period of time, the management, negotiation, and acceptance of canonicity and character identity between their many appearances throughout media history may prove exceedingly complicated and contested (see, e.g., Friedenthal 2017; Singer 2018, 36–93). This is especially relevant if their authorship is less tightly governed, as in the paradigmatic example of Sherlock Holmes, or rather the hundreds of distinct versions of Sherlock Holmes, some of which contextualize their main protagonist within the present day (e.g., the BBC television show *Sherlock* [2010–2017]) or in another country (e.g., the CBS show *Elementary* [2012–present]). These negotiations become even more complicated if one acknowledges not only “official” authorized media products, but also the unlicensed works of participatory culture such as fan fiction (see, e.g., Hellekson and Busse 2006; Leavenworth 2014; Okabe et al. 2012). While the semiotics, aesthetics, and economics of serial and transmedial narratives have generally been the focus of many studies in recent years, from a historical perspective as well as from a systematic one (see, e.g., Freeman 2014; Kelleter 2017; Scolari et al. 2014), less attention has been paid to the crucial role comprised by characters as “nodal points” or “currencies” between converging and diverging storyworlds (see, however, the detailed discussions in Denson 2014; Denson and Mayer 2012; Meyer 2019). The present issue thus aims to contribute a range of character-oriented perspectives to ongoing discussions within media studies around media convergence and transmedia franchises.

First, Jan-Noël Thon develops a theoretical framework and introduces a method for the analysis of transmedia characters, arguing against the “model of the single character” when analyzing the various characters that are, for example, called “Batman,” “Sherlock Holmes,” or “Lara Croft.” Initially focusing on specific instantiations of these characters in single works or individual media texts, before asking how these local work-specific characters relate to other local work-specific characters or coalesce into glocal transmedia characters as part of global transmedia character networks, Thon explores not just relations of redundancy, expansion, and modification between work-specific characters but also sketches how these relations are policed by normative discourses that involve both the producers and the recipients of what often are rather extensive corpora of media texts. Paolo Bertetti then offers a different account of dynamic character identity

across media. Building on and expanding his earlier analytical model of transmedia characters, he investigates the development of Buck Rogers from the late 1920s through pulp magazines, daily comic strips, radio dramas, movie serials, and finally a TV show. This historical view suggests that character-oriented franchises can be traced back almost to the origins of the modern cultural industry. While some characters are based on a single course of events, he concludes, others – such as Buck Rogers – are based on multiple courses of events generated by the productive constraints and rivalries of different media industries.

Lukas R.A. Wilde further investigates some of the peculiar tensions between narrative theory and character theory from an intercultural perspective. His contribution proposes to take a closer look at a variety of contemporary Japanese “character” franchises which cannot be fully accounted for if the entities in question are primarily understood with reference to stories or diegetic worlds. Virtual idols like Hatsune Miku, mascots like Kumamon, or product placement figures such as Hello Kitty instead circulate on material artifacts such as clothes, office supplies, or decontextualized artworks, and within mediated performances such as stage appearances or cosplay. Wilde relates and contrast Japanese notions of a “pre-narrative character theory” to international literature and argues for the relevance of these approaches for “Western” contexts as well. Stephan Packard further reflects on “de- or recontextualized characters,” seemingly existing outside of all narrative contexts, or rather across a variety of heterogeneous and contradictory ones. He offers an in-depth discussion of cartoonish character depictions that represent faces or bodies in an altogether reduced and selectively overstated manner, to be found especially, but not exclusively, in comic books. His detailed semiotic analysis of Donald Duck as Paperinik (the “Duck Avenger”) draws on Charles S. Peirce’s logic of deduction, abduction, and induction alongside the roles of case, rule, and result, suggesting a multi-dimensional and multiply iterated model of character construction that allows for the abstraction of a non-contextualized core cartoon shape preceding narrative representation.

Jeff Thoss then investigates a specific intermedial form of character recontextualization: comic book superheroes within contemporary poetry. Analyzing DC’s Batman and Robin as protagonists in Simon Armitage’s seminal poem “Kid” (1992), as well as Marvel’s Luke Cage in Adrian Matejka’s dramatic monologue “America’s first and foremost black superstar” (2009), Thoss argues that these works are neither licensed creations partaking in sanctioned transmedial networks, nor can they quite be seen as a product of fandom and participatory culture. With a focus on character recontextualization as a critical lense, his contribution tries to locate the place of poetry within the convergence culture that disseminates superheroes in the media ecology. Finally, Matthew Freeman turns our

attention towards the transmedia phenomenon of AMC's *The walking dead* once again, now with a focus on character building and audience engagement through emerging forms of “augmented” television. Investigating the webisode series *Walking dead: Red machete* available online, AMC's accompanying talk show *Talking dead*, as well as the mobile phone application Story Sync designed to enable audiences to post live comments about the episodes, Freeman explores the notion of character-building as a sociological and anthropological process: Just as the ubiquitous technologies via which we engage with characters disentangle the reception experience from any particular temporality, many strategies of generating affective responses towards characters are, paradoxically, deeply rooted in memory and temporal reflection on the passing of time.

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