A commentary on Narrative Platforms, Cinematic Universes, and Consumers Formerly Known as the Audience

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The Narrative

Something has changed. Once, a hero with a small group of friends had to undertake a journey to solve a problem. Walking through unknown territories, facing the unexpected, the hero grew to be a 'man', saved himself and others, saved the world. Told in oral histories from the elder to the younger, remembered in melodies and rhymes, printed on paper, whispered into a microphone, banned on celluloid, multiplied as tapes, and then channels and files; changing names, places, times, attributes, and then gender; the hero's journey gave birth to a variety of narrative patterns. It was not the Odyssey destined to break open story structure, but rather Scheherazade and her struggle to stay alive by adding story after story, night after night, that traversed the narrative universe. She broke from the path of linearity, and in the process of her continuous creation of a world every night, the hero's journey took its essential pedagogical form in the multidimensional space of the narrative. But this is not what has changed — the 'hero's journey', that Vladimir Propp identified as a structuring form in traditional folk tales, continues to be the constitutive framework in contemporary popular narratives (Propp 2009).

Once in an Istanbul coffee house, on a fabled and historic street in Beyoğlu, a storyteller had been sitting among the people on a slightly elevated seat, comfortably leaning back, raising his voice melodically, occasionally stopping and slowly inhaling deeply from his water pipe, and exhaling mesmerizing rings of smoke. Strangely, whenever somebody entered or left the place, there would be a little tic, a flick on his face, a micro second of hesitation. A careful listener would have realized that at every movement among his audience, with every new visitor, whether an older customer, a stranger or a seemingly well-known person, there was a swing in his narration, a slight change and adaption. And so, each time it was told, his had been a slightly different story. The talent of the storyteller was to keep us immersed in the world he was building with his words, adopting to the interrupting events that took place at the moment of narrating, incorporating them into the temporality of the story.

Of course, the storyteller in the Turkish coffeehouse is an image; it is a projection of an ideal of storytelling — a metanarrative device, constructed most powerfully in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (Pamuk 2001)*.* Yet, this crystalized image of the storyteller appears through the condensation of the social functions of narratives.

Although, following André Leroi-Gourhan (1993), it is reasonable to consider bipedality (upright stance that frees the hands for grasping) as the primary condition for human evolution, it is also reasonable to consider our unique capacity to perform indirect speech, allowing life experiences to pass down the generations in the form of stories and myths, as the source of our cultural evolution and social complexity. Narrativity is built around any operation, human action, and societal formation. Through narration our identities, our language, our behaviors, opinions, ideologies, rules, laws, economics, the market, money; in short, our daily lives are constructed and maintained. We are automatically subscribed to an enormous range of narratives, which virtually define our individuality as well as social norms, and construct the present reality all together. We are always already the subjects of the narrative, of any narrative that is recounted. That is why Marx would assert "*De te fabula narratur!*" ("*Of you the tale is told!*"), to claim the fidelity of his analysis of capitalist production in late 19th century Europe (Marx 1887, p. 6); and Rimbaud, in his rebellion against a history as told by the 'one-eyed intellect of those old imbeciles', would claim "*I is another*" (Rimbaud 1871).

The Platform

What has changed is the mediation of our narratives. What has changed is the structure and logic of the mediation, maybe even the rationale of such mediation in its roots. Through technological advance, digitalization and algorithmicalization, narrativity became extremely personal and at the same time very much global. Digital technology provides various narrative platforms, which offer accessibility at a practically personal level — such as, Netflix individually offering 'you' what it thinks you may like the most, based on what you watched previously among thousands of videos. Yet such platforms can only generate such personalized narratives as a result of an intense surveillance of broadly general tastes, tendencies, choices. We are watched while being talked to. Our specific insights and reflections are evaluated by the algorithmic processes and reflected back on us by the personalized platforms. Me is showing me, and comforting me.

The platform swaps the narrative to the glass surface of the mobile device in our hand from the classic TV set, the furniture in the living room, and then swaps once again to the navigator screen in the car. The platforms operates through and remains visible on constantly changing screens, updating timelines, messaging videos, pulling and pushing. The platform becomes 'cinematic' in a profoundly structural sense if not as an aesthetic form, by 'curating' (rather than 'editing') the moving images upfront. The curatorial appearance is based on and reflects back the data feedback loop generated by ME.

What has changed is that, we came to discover that our oldest myths, the stories of our heroes, or the stories of our mundane existence, are not simply flowing in a linear fashion; they take place in and embody universes, and these universes can expand endlessly within themselves and connect to each other (Dholakia, Reyes and Kerrigan 2018). Although we cannot yet leave this thin skin of the planet earth, we can transport our minds to other universes — as cinema has always done.

Our modern technological worlds are constructed extremely tightly; we can't imagine a world in this universe being held on the backs of four elephants which in turn stand on the back of a giant turtle just because that is how god created it, unless there is an Unseeen University where wizards can academically observe and explain the phenomenon (Terry Pratchett, *Discworlds*). Modern techno-scientific developments did not limit our imagination; on the contrary, our tightly explained existence these narrated gave birth to expanding universes. Cinema had opened windows and doors to other new worlds, TV had brought them home, and our smartphones keep them with us in our pockets. This is a world of hyperdiegesis as identified by Matt Hills: The texts before us present us only a fraction of a 'vast and detailed narrative space' directly, the rest of which remains yet to be explored, hidden in the details of the history of characters, places, events (Hills 2002, p. 137). Characters like Marvel Heroes, or the Federation in Star Trek, or places marked in the detailed maps of Lord of the Rings or Game of Thrones, and events like the rebellion in Star Wars, move along the gaps of a world with their own histories, present us with worlds – which had once a beginning, a middle and an end. What is visible around us, or in the narratives surrounding us and being with us, are just very, very little pieces of a whole that will remain forever incomplete — just a few grains of sand on a narrative beach. Cinema's world has always been diegetic in its own structure and logic. Hyperdiegesis creates a granulated narrative space, a candy town with its own infrastructure, roads and canalizations, climate and atmospheres. But we are neither at the beginning, nor the middle or the end. They are not present in this order. We are at any point, at any time in any space. It is here where we can construct sidelines, create our own fictions, become fan producers to bridge the contents, and generate the temporality of the narrative platform. The worlds of cinema, television, and games merge 'here' and 'now', to create a single multidimensional narrative universe.

Cinematic universes like Marvel's provide narrative space and structure by setting certain rules and modes of operation. The rules of the narrative universe are almost as strict as those of physics, and they provide consistency. Thus, on the one hand, the narrative universes seem to be governed by a limited set of rules and the producers need to stick with them to sustain climatic conditions. Yet, on the other hand, there lies the 'emergence'; the producers need to play with them in order

to expand the narratives, and introduce the new elements that enters the diegesis. As such, the world outside of the narrative space becomes as important or even more important as the diegetic space itself. The architectonics of the temples of the acropolis embed a non-Euclidian space that points towards a universe of gods and humans way beyond its simple three-dimensional representative depiction. The non-diegetic space prompts a continuous exchange, promotes viewer or user activity, and therefore generates more layers in an already multi-layered environment.

The Stream

What has changed in media now is the emergence of 'streaming' — a new and natively digital form of content delivery that is profoundly different from television broadcasting and cinema screening. Both 'broadcasting' and 'screening' were collectively experienced 'audience activities' (as it has been named in the classical media studies literature), whereas streaming brings the fragmentation of the audience to the very level of individual spectator. Thus streaming introduces what we may provisionally call 'micro-casting' — an almost individually 'customized' form of content delivery at the practical level, rather than 'narrowcasting' introduced by cable TV in the previous decades. The audience activity in the streaming format is different from TV — it doesn't necessarily take place in the living room, it doesn't even necessarily take place in front of the TV screen. Every member of the household can stream the content of their choice on their individual computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, and eventually to wearable and implantable devices.

Streaming brings the fragmentation of the audience activity, spreads it around the house(hold), frees it from the domination of the head of the household (categorically men, as Morley (1986) and Ang (1991) once identified), and creates a situation which enables 'minor' choices within the household (those of women and children) to be effective in demanding content. In fact, the streaming platform Netflix anticipates such fragmentation from the very beginning, and gives two or four different user accounts per every subscription at different price ranges when signing up. In this respect, perhaps it is important to note that the streaming media audience is not just a 'fragmented' version of the same TV audience, it is a different audience-like palette of segments.

Netflix's programming itself attests to such transformed audience; the constitutive formats of traditional broadcast TV programming (such as game shows, reality TV, news, talk shows, variety shows) are not the most important assets on Netflix. Only culturally or historically significant shows of these types, in a rather retrospective, curatorial manner, are presented within its repertoire. These types of shows have once provided the 'liveness' of the broadcast TV, and the 'live broadcast' has been the fundamental characteristic of 'televisuality'. In contrast, the

programming of Netflix is mostly geared towards narrative formats; serials and films from every genre, and 'special interest' documentaries. Except the few instances of anticipating forthcoming episodes, the content on Netflix is timeless, or at lease time-divorced.

For the streaming platform the definitive aspect of audience activity is not 'watching what happens in the world as it happens, live, at the same time with the rest of the world/nation, collectively, together as a family in the living room' anymore. Not only the 'live TV' notion becomes depreciated, but also the 'seriality' — that had been another constitutive element of televisuality — becomes passé. 'Liveness of the event' takes a new form on the platform, the launching of the new shows, the starting of the new seasons become the 'events' that construct the temporality in that global 'depth of time' upon which the platform operates (Virilio 1991).

'Seriality' (having the news programming in certain times of the day, the new episodes of the serials on certain days of the week, weekend programming, morning programming etc.) had created a sense of continuity, and constructed a collectively experienced 'social time' regime. The audience activity that Netflix offers is 'binging'; watching what you like in an uninterrupted fashion, at anytime you like, even independent from spatial constraints (like, you can still continue watching even if you need to go to the bathroom). The closest relative of 'binging' as an activity is 'reading', and not 'TV watching'. Netflix, with the power of the brand it already established among urban young professionals with its DVD rental service, evolved into the 'platform' that contains and unifies this fragmented, individualized, yet highly concentrated audience activity; and the new, distinct type of atomized/focused audience that sustains it.

The Cinematic Universes

Marvel franchises provide excellent examples of how this fragmented audience couples with a new narrative modality. Cinematic Marvel universe offers a series of movies with hyperdiegetic plots, featuring rather shallow action heroes, pursuing quick and fast-paced action sequences for the duration of individual movies that are very loosely connected to each other through the characters rather than narrative threads. Produced for the big screen (and big sound), these are movies made for the cinema audience; aesthetic substance of these films remain as the CGI (computer generated images), working no more like 'special effects' but becoming the core storytelling devices that deliver the 'moving image comic book' form, and appeal to the traditional superhero audience.

On the other hand, Marvel's Netflix franchises (*Jessica Jones, Daredevil, Luke Cage, Iron Fist, The Punisher*) feature tightly connected hyperdiegetic threads, more sophisticated plots, well-constructed

multidimensional characters that unfold over the diegetic temporality. The real commercial potential of the streaming platform becomes apparent when we look into the representational modes, genres and identification threads in these serials. Although they belong to the same 'narrative universe'; Jessica Jones is a post-punk, feminist anti-heroine; Dare Devil is a film-noir narrative; Luke Cage is essentially a blaxploitation story; Iron Fist is an extended Kung-Fu movie; The Punisher is a Ramboesque ex-military vigilante justice story. Although they exist in the same hyperdiegetic universe, each narrative belongs to a different well-established genre and appeals to a distinct audience. Even one finds some genres/characters/plots appealing and the others not so much, however, s/he has to continue binging the others as well, in order to figure out those hyperdiegetic connections and threads, as the narratives connect and overlap. Although the differences in genres would be expected to exclude certain pieces of the Netflix's fragmented audience in each storyline, hyperdiegetic threads glues those viewers back to the Marvel Universe.

Through the modern times, in the era of 'mass media', from the first newspaper to the emergence of the multiplex movie theaters, the 'audience' had referred to a two-fold entity. On the one hand, it referred to those multitudes that watched, read, and responded to the news and stories — a corporeal mass of living people. Yet on the other hand, it referred to an imaginary collective subject whose feelings, tastes, values, and psychology (and rarely, intellectual awareness) had been the primary concern for the editors of the newspapers, Hollywood executives, and TV producers. Audience had been the 'ghost in the narrative' as much as the living public, and precognition of its unforeseeable reactions to the stories had been the job of editors and producers.

For the producers of streaming platforms, audience is neither 'imaginary', nor 'collective' anymore; the audience has been fragmented into its atoms only in the way that every atom became identifiable and explicable for the streaming platform. The producers of the streaming platforms know their spectators individually and feel their pulse in a manner only comparable to the storyteller in the Ottoman coffeehouse. They know what we watch, how we watch, when we watch, what we do before and after we watch – and our other mundane activities, well beyond what we watch. Now, the producers only produce what they definitely know which one of the individual audience members (and how many in total) will watch. We, 'individuals' formerly composing the audience, do not buy this or that TV show or film — we subscribe to the streaming platform, knowing that it knows and delivers what we are interested in watching. Unlike previous media distribution systems, Netflix does not intend to sell individual shows/products. Instead, it aims to sell a service, an experience that becomes a part of a certain lifestyle;

a virtual shopping mall of narratives in which a broad range of individuals belonging to a certain socioeconomic demographic (urban, financially able, upwardly mobile, educated young professionals) with somehow varying tastes can find what they consider as 'their niche' for their enjoyment.

The Difference

Ann Kaplan was pointing to a constitutive difference between the cinema spectator and the TV audience, while defining the television as a 'decentered' postmodern media (Kaplan 1987). Evoking the long lost Simmelian marker that separates everyday life from the realm of aesthetics, she was pointing to the 'frame' that delimited the experience of the cinema spectator (Simmel 1994). Cinema had been framed temporally by the fixed duration of its narrative that only lasted for so long, and spatially by the darkness of the movie theater that surrounded the image. The never-ending flow of programs on television, on the other hand, creates a continuum that has no spatial and temporal boundaries. Cinema captures the spectator by triggering her/his desires and offering a pleasurable dream, from which the viewer eventually wakes up at the end of the film – to face the actuality of everyday life, upon exiting the movie theater. Television, on the other hand, offers its audience plenitude; there is always something to watch — if not at that moment, a few minutes later, if not on that channel, certainly on one of the others. For Kaplan, that insatiable desire for plenitude kept the audience watching around the clock, and diverted their attentive enjoyment to the consumer products advertised in the meanwhile.

Streaming media platforms present an amplified effect of plenitude without the advertisements in their subscription based services, and in this respect, seemingly redeem the narrative from the interruption of those consumer products that belong to the everyday banality. Yet, this is a deception that hides the fact that the streaming platform itself is the ultimate consumer product — one that you can never finish consuming, one that always has more to offer than you can ever want, regardless of how different your desires may be. The illusion of interactivity sustains the semblance of difference and differentiation; we 'find' this show or that movie on the platform, add it to our playlist, and choose to watch it whenever we want —as if those movies and shows are not algorithmically curated for us based on the general consumption patterns associated with our customer profile, and boldly pushed onto the top of the screen towards our attention. Therefore, it seems necessary to consider the streaming media platforms in the context of the 'global culture industry' as portrayed by Lash and Lury (Lash and Lury 2007), whose products are indeterminate objects that seek to produce 'differences' and 'differentiations' rather than 'identities'. In fact, the impetus is obvious; the platform makes you think that your tastes are

different, that you want to hear a different story, that, the story is different. A personal Scheherazade for every Shahryār.

As a 'collective being' the audience had always been present in the narrative —if not diegetically certainly indexically, as a collective subject that is physically embodied in every person that listens, reads, or watches. Newspapers and books replaced the storyteller in the coffehouse, movie theater replaced the coffeehouse itself, only to be superseded by the television screen in the living room. Yet they all offered a shared experience to otherwise dispersed strangers who listened, watched, or read together, and turned them into 'publics'. The making of a 'public' out of multitudes had been perceived as such a crucial aspect of modern governmentality that, mass media had been considered as a prerequisite of nation building. Throughout the modern times, 'public opinion', and that sweet spot of public opinion where every taste and value meets, the 'lowest common denominator', had been the curse of liberal democracies that actually somehow made it work (Özgün 2010). The fragmentation of the audience has to be considered in this political context too, as the dissolution of the publics as we know it. The platform, the difference engine that constantly detects, cultivates and manufactures the differentials and turns them into flows of demand and supply, replaces the curse it lifts with another one; I is always an algorithmically categorized 'other' now, our stories may intertwine at some point in this hyperdiegetic universe, but we are not a part of a common plot. Yet, as always, we are only in the middle of the story, and things are just getting complicated.

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