

# *True detective stories:* **media textuality and the anthology format between remediation and transmedia narratives**

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## **Premises: which ‘theory’?**

In a recently published essay “Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis”, now part of a book aptly entitled *Transmedia Frictions. The Digital, the Arts, and the Humanities* (Kinder and McPherson 2014), Katherine Hayles reaffirms the “importance” of Media-Specific analysis as a way to substitute the language of text with «a more precise vocabulary of screen and page, digital program and analog interface, code and ink (...) *texton* and *scripton*, computer and book» (pos. 733)<sup>1</sup>. Participating in a now considerably vast interdisciplinary debate on materiality and affect<sup>2</sup>, MSA - Media-Specific Analysis - deals mainly with contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> I am quoting here a book I have bought and downloaded through Kindle, where the text one has access to does not have page numbers, only “positions”. Even though the practice of reading books via computers and I-Pads has become more than common, I am not aware of an accepted and shared way to quote them. I have chosen to mention the position in the book file of the quotation.

<sup>2</sup> It is too wide a debate to be able to summarize it here: see for example Bruno 2014. For a gender studies perspective on materiality see Braidotti 2014.

examples of how a literary genre «mutates and transforms when it is instantiated in different media (...) MSA insists that texts must always be embodied to exist in the world. The materiality of these embodiments interacts dynamically with linguistics, rhetorical, and literary practice to create the effects we call literature» (pos. 752).

However, in the diverse and often fragmented transdisciplinary space of Media Studies, there is a contemporary, more sociologically oriented tendency which maintains quite the opposite, underlining how media “functions” have been unhooked from both the tools and the objects with which they have been traditionally associated (Carini 2009, Scaglioni e Sfardini 2009, Scaglioni 2011). To give the most common example, what we normally thought of as TV has come out of the TV set, its content released from its “container”; that is, one could say, from its specific embodiment, its own materiality. In other words, what used to be defined as a media product – even what is labeled as literature – is now a transmedia set of events and practices of consumption: programs are seen in streaming or downloaded from the Internet, books and their characters cannot be launched without a YouTube trailer; they have websites and Facebook pages, their actors living many other lives as characters of a proliferation of narratives produced and archived in fan fiction websites.

What I have here very briefly described is now almost a cliché in Media Studies; it is part of a phenomenon that has been called, and from then on overtly quoted as, a convergent and participative culture (Jenkins 2008; Green, Ford, Jenkins 2013) made up of media-content flows emerging from a limited and bonded (by big producers, gender/generation/digital divides, etc.) “cultural creativity”. Consciously using scholars’ categories that have already become slogans, the narrative complexity on one side and, on the other side, the transmedia overflows exemplified by fanfic websites constitute, supposedly, the evidence of a participatory and spectators-centered culture of *prosumers*, of a diffused audience whose agency has helped to blur the boundaries between an original “text” (as, for example, a TV series) and its transformations (how the characters and their stories

are transformed, re-imagined, in the short stories that constitute fanfic archives).

Yet, how can this migration of content and narrative models – or, else, any migration – avoid the subject and object *material and discursive* positioning favored by any practice of mediation and remediation? And how can any s/object re-positioning do without its memory and previous “content”? I am not maintaining that one of the aforementioned perspectives on media excludes the other, and I am aware that Hayles is most of all interested in the “effect that is called literature”, while the sociologists reflecting on cultural convergence are more focused on that other effect called mediascape, meant – and this is my interpretation – as a set of different relations constituting new kinds of force-fields. Nor am I interested in merely conflating positions that offer stimulating and, I believe, also complementary insights. Nevertheless, in questioning the so-called complexities of narrative models through the possibilities offered by the new trans-media digital platforms, what defines the specificity of a medium, its materiality, inks and codes, along with the effects of the vanishing anchorage of the content in an identifiable technological *dispositif*, are questions to be confronted. This essay tries to elaborate on a very limited such confrontation, through the case study of a TV series – the first season of *True detective* (USA, HBO, 2014) and the ways it rewrites and translates some of the features of contemporary seriality and transmedia storytelling.

Hence, what I would like to continue elaborating here is, firstly, a hopefully productive, however brief, reflection on a *language of the text* - to quote Hayles - that does not exclude the “materiality” of the screen or the computer (there are no books and there is no ink), along with the effects that the idea of contents outside their containers might induce on the very thinking of new forms of narratives and their affects. The different media and screens implicated in this case-study (TV, Internet, fan fiction writings), their specificity but, also, their *syncreticity* – that is the simultaneous presence of different languages and their particular intertwining, effects and affects (verbal, visual, written, sound: see Peverini 2011) – allow me to reflect on the peculiar ways in which

contents might migrate from one digital space to another, and different or, else, very similar stories, might be told. In the background of these very minor rumblings what is at stake are the main transformations undergone by narrative imagination (Montani 2010), that is from a mimetic account of time (as in epic or ancient theatre), to a more productive imagination, first helped by the narrative configurations allowed by the novel and cinema, and now by contemporary media narratives - remediations of all previous forms and genres: novel, cinema, TV, etc.

In short, what is at stake is the need to oppose, or propose an urgent alternative to, firstly, assumptions based on some fuzzy idea of materiality – as if a text is not always already material – and, secondly, all easy statements in respect of a content that can just migrate, through anything and everything, as if its embodiment does not count, need not be taken into account.

### **What is a text in the world of remediation?**

Let us take a due step backwards in order to clarify the general frame within which we might redefine a language of texts and their forms of transmedia narrativity.<sup>3</sup> How can we think of the media today? A widely accepted, though very broad and general definition, sees media as forms of experience, knowledge and socialization. These three functions, and their intertwining, turn the media into a social space crossed by communicative relations and flows that are, in themselves, surely not just “messages” communicated by a sender to a receiver, but produced by particular subjects, and entering, along with many other technologies of identities, possible paths and positions of

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<sup>3</sup> I use here the term narratives instead of storytelling on purpose, since I am convinced that the latter carries less precision than the former. I shall use the expression transmedia storytelling when referring to the way it is employed in Media Studies’ literature. For a detailed discussion on narrative and narrativity as different and more heuristic categories see Lorusso, Paolucci, Violi 2013.

identification and agency. This space is 'real' (and therefore 'material'), notwithstanding the reality effects these actions produce as the results of different media aesthetics. A medium can thus be considered as any technical support, tool or device that can give shape to our sensible experience: that which configures and reconfigures it, sets it up, turning it into something understandable, sharable and transmittable (Diodato e Somaini 2011). The media work as complex *dispositif*, in the Foucaultian acceptance of the term, in as much as they participate in those relations of knowledge and power able to produce subjects and dynamics of subjectification and de-subjectification.

Within this horizon, where does a language of texts meet with the media thought of as practices and experiences, as forms of an *experiential design*? (Eugeni 2010). And where do new or old forms of narrativity enter the shaping of our experience?

If it is not 'true', but at least debatable, that we cannot any longer simply talk of media representations, whereby the latter is just a mirroring of reality; nor can we think of works of fiction as merely filtering, thus altering and producing, a condensed 'reality' within the borders of meaningful, but most of all entertaining, small possible worlds; if the social space created by the media is also the result of the interactions between producers, consumers and the "expanded texts" that circulate among them, what we are left with is exactly the confrontation I am here only trying to sketch. However, what is not always clear in this debate are the very objects that one needs each time to cut out in order to analyze instances in which contemporary narrative imagination does make a difference; and how, in every case and instance that one chooses to confront, the media and cultural flows of contents come to coagulate in specific forms of textuality. Maybe it is time to refresh the very idea of text and textuality and the culture from which they stem. Nowadays, semiotics adheres to an idea of culture «as the ever renegotiable and revisable result of processes of manifestation, communication, translation of social circulation» (Lorusso 2014, in press). Conceived in this way, Lorusso continues, «culture neutralizes any presumed separability between subjects and

actions, actions and representations, texts and practices». If we accept this position, it follows that:

Texts, indeed, are not given objects, but the outcome of a complex cultural negotiation, while practices are not "pure" experiences but are instead conditioned and formed by complex textual models [...] The action does not belong only to the subject acting on the object, but occurs within a network where the different actantial functions of subject, object, opponent, and so on may be played by different entities, *with hybrid results that challenge the rigid boundary between the world of nature and the world of culture, the objective world and the subjective one, the internal world and the external one* [...] A text does not remain static, surrounded by the wealth of its contents, instead it circulates and *interferes* with the surrounding world. (*Ibid.*, my italics)

This idea of (media) texts thus does not imply a fixed language or a self indulgent rhetoric – as Hayles and also Lev Manovich (2014) believe - abstracted from its contexts or software; nor does it refer to a closed, homogeneous, a-historical disembodied entity; on the contrary, it is meant as signifying practice, a process. If we follow this perspective, it becomes probably easier to imagine what we mean by “the content that migrates between media-borders and platforms”: content is, in itself, an embodied process, not just a mere *unit*, something definable once and for all that just waits to be transmitted from a sender to a receiver. It is a set of values, models and forms of filtering, elaborating and constructing experience that acts in the world and constitutes forms of identification, no matter how ephemeral and volatile these forms can be. In other words, to think of media textuality does not mean to exclude the way, and specific analysis of how, it is embedded in a computer, or the affective effects that it produces. Moreover, to state that a medium re-configures the very organization of sensible experience is a way to talk about how it might change the very subject it affects in her body and mind: this is how meaning is made, and meaning is not just about ‘content’. Some of the elements

that constitute a supposed content might migrate in the forms of different genres and models of narrativity to acquire diverse, and often interactive, forms of expression. It is again a coagulation of meaning that, through its transformations, its re-make and remix, cannot be separated by the different forms it acquires, intended not in a 'formalist' sense, as an independent structure, but as that which participates in the experiential design of our lives through media supports: the enunciative dynamics, the absence or presence of images, the inter-semiotic processes of translations. There is specificity and there is transformation, and among the many ways one can investigate both of them is to concentrate on the narrative models that are expanded and translated through different supports and devices: what is the 'matter' that is played out? What is gained, and what is lost in the process of contagion that marks the contemporary media reproducing, as a re-imagining, of a *récit*?

What is at stake here is the status of transmedia narrative 'entities', along with the dissemination of "possible worlds" (Eco 1979) whose 'content' acquires more readability as a function of the narrative models that characterize it. Hence, what becomes particularly interesting is the *identitary dimension* that emerges from the narratives of these hybrid cultures. In a mediascape in which reality and fiction, artistic or spectacular identities seem to co-exist and intertwine, the subjects inhabiting it seem to acquire a status if they are given a form of media readability. What counts are the narrative worlds where each identity is more or less inscribed, thus acquiring "semiotic personalities" (Lotman 1985) within the media circuit.

## ***True detective* between genres and formats**

Finally, now that you didn't have to hold on so tight. To realize that all your life, all your love, all your hate, all your memory, all your pain -- it was all the same thing. All the same dream. A dream that you had inside a locked room. A dream about being a person. And like a lot of dreams, there's a monster at the end of it. (Rust Cohle, episode 4)

We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self, a secretion of sensory experience and feeling programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody's nobody. I think the honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming; stop reproducing; walk hand-in-hand into extinction. (*Ibid.*)

The *esergo* of any writing on this series cannot be but a quotation from Rustin Cohle, the pessimist and gloomy one of the two detectives, whose take on life is one of the main features not only of the narrative model and the building of semiotic personalities of *True detective*, but also of its expanded life in fan fiction archives. I shall go back to this; yet, for now, I would like to start by quoting different kinds of references. The following is what Wikipedia, as the first Google entry for *True detective* (from now on TD), recites about the series (details being checked and found accurate). If we are to see what becomes of ways of telling, this is an example of the *wikipedia resumé genre*:



*True Detective* is an American television crime drama series on HBO created and written by Nic Pizzolatto, with the first season directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga and starring Matthew McConaughey, Woody Harrelson (both executive producers of the series), Michelle Monaghan, Michael Potts, and Tory Kittles, and uses multiple timelines to trace two Louisiana State Police Criminal Investigations Division homicide detectives' hunt for a serial killer in Louisiana across seventeen years. The series premiered on January 12, 2014, and consisted of eight episodes which concluded on March 9, 2014 [...]. *The series' title is a reference to the "true detective" genre of pulp fiction, particularly the 20th-century magazine True Detective.* Season one is set along the coastal plain of South Louisiana, where it was also filmed.<sup>4</sup>

And here is how the plot is summed up in Wikitrueinvestigator website:

In 2012, Louisiana State Police Detectives Rust Cohle and Martin Hart are brought in to revisit a homicide case they worked in 1995. As the inquiry unfolds in present day through separate interrogations, the two former detectives narrate the story of their investigation, reopening unhealed wounds, and drawing into question their supposed solving of a bizarre ritualistic murder in 1995. The timelines braid and converge in 2012 as each man is pulled back into a world they believed they'd left behind. In learning about each other and their killer, it becomes clear that darkness lives on both sides of the law.<sup>5</sup>

The last reference I report is a quotation from the HBO official website<sup>6</sup>, where the two main characters are profiled as follows (my italics):

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<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True\\_Detective\\_\(TV\\_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Detective_(TV_series)); retrieved September 30th 2014, my italics.

<sup>5</sup> [http://truedetective.wikia.com/wiki/True\\_Detective](http://truedetective.wikia.com/wiki/True_Detective); retrieved August 31th 2014.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hbo.com/true-detective/>, retrieved August 31th 2014.

Rust Cohle is a Louisiana State Police detective who transferred out of Texas law enforcement. *A cerebral, intense thinker, he holds a negative view of society* which sometimes puts him at odds with his partner, Martin Hart, and the rest of the force.

Partner of Rust Cohle, *Marty is the more conservative of the pair*. While he may not always understand Rust's methods, he respects his partner's commitment to police work and will run interference between Rust and their commanding officer. Marty has two daughters with his wife, Maggie.

Just by reading these different entries - from Wikipedia to the fan websites up to the 'official' webpages - it becomes obvious how TD is a clever mix of different genres and narrative models: to the classic crime thriller, drama and mystery genres, TD adds a pulp fiction, *southern gothic* and *neo-noir* touch, along with a reservoir of forms or remediation (Montani 2010; see also Rajewsky 2005). The digital TV format remediates some of the stylistic devices and tonality of cinema (in the acting and the cinematography), of the horror and gothic literary genres (references to Lovecraft and the contemporary cult novelist Thomas Ligotti are explicit), and of cartoons in the style of its direct and dry dialogues and in the framing of the shooting. Moreover, it proposes a novel-like sort of cathartic ending that seems to atone for the (true) detectives. After seventeen years into the story, in the last episode they eventually put all the clues together and track down the 'true' serial killer risking their own lives; Cohle is stabbed in the gut and enters a coma; but he survives, the last sequence of the season staging a dialogue between the two former detectives that here I quote as re-framed by one of the many websites that provide the audience with a *resumé* of each episode:

It's just one story, the oldest .... "Light versus dark". And as Marty helps Rust shuffle away from the hospital, Rust seems to

shuck his pessimistic nature for a moment as he observes that once, there was only dark. "If you ask me, light's winning."<sup>7</sup>

All eight episodes of this miniseries focalize – in the semiotic acceptance of the term, that is, the way Cohle's and Hart's are the two narrative (and not optic) points of view that structure its narrative – on these two Louisiana state homicide detectives: the aloof and antisocial Rustin 'Rust' Cohle and Martin Marty Hart, who defines himself as "just a regular type dude... with a big-ass dick" (episode 2). Their investigation and the patching up of the clues and pieces of evidence is not a *Criminal Minds* or *CSI*-like story with a central anthology plot, neither does it propose parallel soap opera running plots aimed at exposing the sentimental or domestic troublesome lives of the main characters. It is a way to show their personality, their obsessions and their transformations *as* their work and how they relate, often problematically, to each other.

In the now very crowded and diverse worlds of TV series, *True Detective* does not propose the most common intertwining of the serial and the series, but recuperates the particular seriality of the anthology form. Along with some other series that are marking this new trend – such as *Fargo* (inspired by the Coen brothers' feature film, USA, FX, 2014) or *The Knick* (directed by Steven Soderbergh, USA, Cinema, 2014-) – TD is one example of what one could call the Third Golden Age of TV shows<sup>8</sup>. The Second Golden age refers back to the '80s with the production of series such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987, NBC) up to the so called Quality TV series of the new century – such as *The Sopranos* or *Six feet under* (both produced by HBO). These series brought into TV production elements of cinema (in the construction of more complex characters, in the editing and the whole

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://truedetectiverumors.com/category/recap/>; retrieved September 12th

<sup>8</sup> The Second Golden Age is an accepted and frequently quoted label to refer to the Quality TV, and especially its fiction products, of the last decades: see Carini 2009.

cinematography), while changing the TV classic model of seriality (series, serial, etc.) through the mixing of vertical (ending with each episode) and horizontal narrative lines (some ending at the end of the season, some other at the end of the whole series), this new trend offers yet another remediation. As happened with *Twin Peaks* by David Lynch, they last a maximum of ten episodes (the second and last season of *Twin Peaks* featuring 22 episodes) that have their own titles, as chapters of a book, are directed by just one person, most of the time a cinema director; characters are played by well-known and Oscar-winning actors (Rust Cohle is played by Matthew McConaughey, who won the Oscar as the best actor in 2014), and present sequences praised by cinema critics, as the one that ends episode five of TD which develops as a six-minute tracking shot of a stash house in south Texas, reframing the convention of western shootout with a cinematic language.

This format allows the director and the author of the script to build up their story in a sufficiently long time, yet not too long to lose in intensity and cohesion, the result what I would like to call a *TV novel*: if many examples of present Hollywood cinema are like novellas, the new quality TV is the contemporary novel, yet, of course, not in the sense of a TV series transposing a book, but in the ways its structures its narrative. This form indeed does not exclude its consumption in a participant and convergent culture and its fruition in immersive contexts, as with the internet streaming of each episode or, more simply but not less effectively, with the watching of the DVDs that come with extra features (interviews with the actors, the authors, the sound designer, and the “inside the episode” clips) that can be seen in between episodes, after having searched the web for more news and gossips on <http://truedetectiverumors.com/> or on its Facebook page: in sum, it does not exclude the proliferation of an *ancillary textuality*.<sup>9</sup> And what one wants to dig the most, and what the rivulets of TD transmedia narrative are focused on, is the life and personality of the

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<sup>9</sup> This is how, for example, I have not only watched, but immersed myself into TD worlds.

two (anti-)heroes of the series, whose figures seem to be well placed within a more trans-format tendency of series defined by the maverick role of their main protagonist; as Marianne St. Laurent comments: «the moral righteousness of the western genre with its clear definition of good *vs* bad seems to be in crisis».<sup>10</sup> Nowadays modern TV heroes are indeed serial killers (as in *Dexter*, USA, Showtime, 2006-2013), meth producers (*Breaking Bad*, USA, ANC 2008-2013), heartless and murderous politicians (*House of Cards*, USA, Netflix, 2012-), living in «a brave new world where bad is the new good». In the brave, even though desperate, world of *True detective*, Rustin Cohle is a PTSD-wracked detective whose life has been «a circle of violence and degradation long as I can remember» (episode 8). Cohle, in the end, is portrayed using a very well-known cliché, that of the 'true' guardian not of an institutional order that he, many times, subverts in order to survive, but as the dark one who fights against the darker (to have the light win...), epitomized by a serial killer of children and young girls that are being raped, mutilated and tortured, and eventually left in the wilderness, their bodies arranged in what looks like a ritualistic pose, with antlers on their head and a spiral tattooed on their back. To continue listing clichés, Cohle is the nocturnal opposite of Marty, embodying the deterioration and chaos of what St. Laurent aptly calls a "post-collapse America", whose myth of progress has long since disintegrated. If it were only for the plot and the main thematic roles of the actors, TD does not seem to show us something particularly new. However, it is, as always, the coming back of the old in new forms and recombinations that usually makes a difference, in as much as remediation can be thought of as a critical remediation, whereby the viewer «is invited to compare between different forms of audiovisual imagination», and the text she is experiencing «one that interrogates the very relations between media forms... a result of the very serious play of intermediality» (Montani 2010: 9; my translation).

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://sensitiveskinmagazine.com/america-as-afterimage-in-true-detective/>.

## **Tempos: how and when do we see?**

The narrative develops along seventeen years and it mingles and overlaps different temporalities, hence building up a plot that moves constantly backwards and forwards, from the 'now' of a present that dates sometimes in 2012, when the case is re-opened, to a 'then' that takes place in 1995, when the body of a prostitute is found and the two detectives start their investigation and, also, apparently close it. Then it goes back again, after six episodes, to the evolution of the present, of what later happens in 2012 after the interviews, with the last two episodes reacquiring a linear temporality that takes the series to its actual end. In between a narrative which goes back to its beginning in order to shed new light on its 'future' developments, two episodes (3 and 4) are also partly set in 2002, seven years into the story duration, when two different events disrupt the narrative both of what has so far happened, and of what will happen. While interrogating a detainee, Rust is told by the man that the real killer was not the one they thought (and already killed), but somebody else who is still alive and killing. Few weeks later, and well into Rust's obsession to re-open an investigation that his superiors prefer to forget, Marty's wife seduces Rust after discovering yet another affair her husband is having and confesses it to Marty. As Rust goes to the police station for his last time, having been forced to quit his job, the two detectives enter a violent fight, and the two will not meet until 2012, when they have become a weary and consumed bar tender (Rust), and a lonely and single private investigator (Marty). But how are these different temporalities, along with the evolutions and transformation of the two characters being woven into the audiovisual rendering of the story?

Let us start from the very beginning of the series, from episode one "The Long Bright Dark", the very first shot of the series showing Marty interviewed by two other Louisiana state detectives who, for the main part of the first episode, we as spectators do not see but only hear, their concern the 1995 case he solved with Rust; their enquiry mainly regarding how the two worked together, and how Rust behaved and conducted the investigation. From Marty's answers and

observations we move to a similar setting, to the same room and the same interrogating detectives, where this time Rust is being interviewed – only later in the series we learn the interview took place a few days before Marty’s testimony. From their distinct and somewhat parallel memories, we move to images supposedly showing what ‘actually’ happened in 1995, with the two detectives’ words in the present at times acting as voices over. However, at other times, we are brought as spectators directly into a past that unravels in ways that do not coincide with what Rust and Marty are telling the two black detectives. The reason why this construction is particularly relevant is manifold. There is, of course, the play between different times and places, and thus the narrative strategy of constructing different layers and relationships between the telling, the showing and the filming. The text oscillates from the predominance of the spoken word and dialogue in the narrow interview room accompanied by close ups on the characters and their expressions, to their words becoming a narrative voice over contrasting with the images of the past, only to withdraw in order to let the images speak, as the whole narrative is expanded and inhabited by what goes beyond the actions, thanks to travelling shots and long shots: a sort of opening up of the story to the world of Louisiana bayous, to other senses and different layers of affects. Images of close ups of faces and their telling trigger the digging into a past that needs a visual and sound language to reveal itself. There is the effect, for sure, of the verbal and visual play of narrative models, of their temporality and spatiality. However, what I believe affects the very way we can think of narrative models as content, in their ‘specificity’ and modes of translation, is a particular distribution of knowledge between the different actors at stake: the text and its authors, the characters in the texts, the construction of a point of view, and what the viewer is put into a position to know and learn.

The viewer/listener knows more than the two black detectives who collect Marty’s and Rust’s versions of what happened, albeit s/he – at least for more than half of the whole series - does not really know why they are interviewing them, what they themselves are hiding. This play determines also the distribution of knowledge and desire, and

while this is an element that has always been at the core of any narrative, it has acquired a prominent role in transmedia telling, as I shall discuss in the last paragraph. At the same time, and more on the level of the optical point of view, the strategy is different. When it comes to showing specific details, the spectator is put into a seeing position the object of which is almost always deferred: not only, for example, do we discover the faces and identities of the two other black detectives late in the first episode, but also all the time that Rust sees something, the shot of the actual evidence is delayed, and comes only after the character in the story has already seen it. On one side, we are given clues and hints that we can follow together with the true detectives; on the other side, we are brought in and captured by a visual point of view that contrasts and conflicts with the narrative point of view. Moreover, what we eventually see is never to be wholly trusted. As St. Laurent once more specifies: «It is only through the hallucinogenic lens of PTSD and synaesthesia that Rust can clearly read through, he is in a place outside and between». On the other side, Marty, almost since the first shots of his interview, declares his inability to see and understand, because of what he calls “the detective curse”: the inability to read signs right under one’s nose. Clichés are played one against the other, adding layers to the series’ complexity, with an interchange between moments of transparency and others of opacity (cfr. Di Chio 2011).

### **A dystopian narrative?**

*True Detective’s* structuring of temporality and seeing positions does not only multiply its different spaces, but it is also a way to refer to a past *in* and *for* the present, and vice-versa: the present containing a past that is being re-written. Both past and present belong to very recent US history and contemporary predicaments: the mid-1990s when America was experiencing the Clinton period, before 9/11 and Katrina, but when Louisiana had already been hit by other less famous but very violent tropical storms; the US after 9/11 and all the disruptions that it caused (2002), up to the ‘present’ (2012); three



periods of different crises-as-change that do not seem really to make a big difference in how people live in the bayous. It is almost as if time, as Rust says, is a flat circle (a line he repeats in many episodes): time passes but everything comes back, only a little bit more rotten: the hunting of the same killer in a landscape that, no matter what has been happening in the US or world-wide in the meantime, is still a territory folded into itself, at the margins of any histories and, most of all, of History. Images as evidence of this lost *American-ness* are shown through immersive and dramatic aerial shots of a gothic south, or a southern gothic. But why the South? St. Laurent explains it quite convincingly: «Out of the contradiction and uncertainties of the American situation, the Southern has emerged as the western of our time» (2014), a baroque south «for audience to contemplate the twin ghost-worlds of our pre-industrial past and post-industrial present». It is a landscape punctuated by images of neglected infrastructure and characterized by the environmental collapse of contemporary post-hurricane Katrina Louisiana, with its coastline, small towns (we never see the centre of New Orleans) and ubiquitous oil refineries. «A silent witness to atrocity, the landscape becomes the voice of the disappeared» (read killed), an exhausted, poisoned landscape. It is a «dystopic portrayal of a post-collapse America» (*ibid.*). In other words, it is a depiction of *America as afterimage* and its slum economy, with a distinctive plasticity, a chromatic isotopy: the gray of “aluminium and ash”, as Rust comments in the last episode (whose title is, not by chance, “Form and Void”), looking out of the car’s window as he and Marty approach the serial-killer’s home, a post-industrial jungle made of rumbles: «This place is like somebody’s memory of a town and the memory is fading. Looks like there wasn’t anything here but jungle» (always Rust speaking), inhabited by ghosts, or by out of the grid outlaws, bikers, prostitutes, meth producers, and preachers of a tent evangelism. Little space is left for the world and the values that Marty, a caricature of the Lone Ranger, seems, at the beginning, to struggle for, those of an America of house in order and mowed lawns.

However, differing from more ‘properly’ dystopic contemporary narratives, whereby we witness the return of the zombie in a

«vivification of the very border that separates the human (man) from everything else, i.e. the woman, nature, the beast, the non-human and nowadays the post-human» (Giuliani and Proglia, in press), the monstrous here has a ubiquitous and perturbing presence, since it resides in everyone and it is potentially everywhere. And even if TD does not thematize a *finis mundi*, it does points to the inner and outer border of a barely surviving US contemporary society, the Southern gothic amplifying atavistic fears and precarious lives not only exemplified by Rust Cohle in 2012, but also by the deserted world surrounding him, inhabited by marginal and dysfunctional people.

Dystopian narratives usually grow in time of crisis, whereby crisis is meant in its more literal meaning, that is, a period of transformation, of turns and confrontation between the intimate sphere of the individual: “who am I, what can I do?” and “what is left outside in the world to value”. Quoting again Giuliani and Proglia, «moving back and forth from the public and the private, dystopia emerges through a double process of recognition and adhesion of the subject to an idea» (in press). But which idea? Dystopic narratives are syntheses of dense auctorial idiosyncratic effects and affects, and, as such, they cannot exhaust the complex intertwining of contemporary fears and hopes, albeit, in a way, they do sum up a collective *récit* of possible interpretations of the relationship between the individual and the (imagined) community of the nation. What they offer is a fictionalized narrative of the convergence between the catastrophic versions and the ruled (media and political) version of that same imaginary. Moreover, they display the tension between the government of this imaginary and the supposedly unforeseeable and potentially unlimited translations of both individual and collective imagination of catastrophe and the post-catastrophe. In our case study, this ‘idea’ is expressed by a dystopic portrayal of a post-collapse America that, nevertheless, can still be entertaining and not too perturbing, as the final atonement of Cohle – a long-haired Jesus Christ kind of figure in his hospital bed that really risks going too transcendental – reassures us that light can still win. Yet, TD, as opposed to many other dramas, is not about an action that solves itself in the hypertrophy of spectacular

movements, amazing and surprising performance and compulsive doing (as, for example, in *24*, Fox, 2001-2008; 2014), because the world created in these fictions does not ask to be really and deeply changed, it only wants to go back to the equilibrium momentarily lost. TD's world and its time remain "out of joint" (Hamlet), no matter how much light we might shine. At the same time, the undecidability of its subjects' gaze (objective? subjective?) to which I referred previously, does not lead to a total undecidability of the world as the result of the ambiguity of the gaze that constitutes it. This conclusion seems to go against what Federico Di Chio (2011) has called the "lost illusion" of contemporary fictions, since the whole series does maintain a modern, not postmodern novel-like intensity and cohesion.

### **In conclusion: how does a story survive?**

As *True detective's* story, and my own, unfolded, I have already tried to mention what remains and what migrates out of the matrix text of the series to become part of the topics debated in forums and fanfic archives. Normally, these are texts that module and re-module the roles and the emotions of the main characters, expanding and leavening the scheme of contemporary seriality. However, the case of TD and its anthology format does introduce a difference in the way its transmedia storytelling has worked so far. In serialized series lasting for several seasons, the so-called *mytharc*, the mythological arc that sustains the inter-episodic narrative structure, is dispersed in many rivulets that, together, enrich the possible world of the story, and participate in the overall construction of a supposedly endless deferred narrative. What is meant by this definition is a narrative that is not sustained, as in soap operas, by the proposing again and again of topics and plots none of which is prevailing, but by the opening up of questions and issues aimed at re-enforcing the myth-arc. In such cases, the hyperseriality (Carini 2009) at work is precisely what favors the dynamics of cultural convergence, where the texts of the series become potentially replicable. The attention of the viewers not only has to remain high and stable, but it also has to be replicable. In other words,

the hyperseriality of products like *Lost* or *24* allows the construction of a hyperfidelity, the endless deferred narrative creating what Hills (2002) has called a “perpetual hermeneutic” whose conjectures and speculations are nowadays expressed in forums, chats, dedicated websites and fan fic. In the case of the latter, a hermeneutic that takes the form of another story, and not just that of an interpretation or a comment. The result is the creation of a dense and vast world thanks to a hyperdiegesis whereby the fictional world trespasses upon the one available on the small screen of the TV set.

The circular dynamics of this seriality and its narrative dispersions are what constitutes transmedia storytelling meant not simply as the repetition of the same story on other media, but that devolves upon its very meaning and its telling to other forms of textuality. The relation between the original text and its “derivatives” – that is by different expression of its ‘content’ – is bi-univocal: they can be consumed together, but also separately, in a very difficult balance between redundancy and originality, familiarity and difference.

Whilst TD maintains some of these qualities, it does not have those of hyperseriality: its deferred narrative is not endless, its fan fic stories rather limited and quite redundant. What is there instead? In blog-like or fan web site-like <http://www.reddit.com/r/TrueDetective/> one can find texts produced by what one could call the *Experienced Reader* (as opposed to the Naïve Reader: see Eco 1994), who takes pleasure in the mere recognition of citations, and in the sharing of this knowledge, but without the addition of an interpretative stance, the result a community of viewers that compete in finding references, inter-media and intertextual connections and quotations.<sup>11</sup> In the True

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<sup>11</sup> As in <http://io9.com/the-one-literary-reference-you-must-know-to-appreciate-1523076497>, where the blogger thus starts his entry: «Two episodes into the series, True Detective dropped a reference to one of the strangest, most compelling tales in the canon of weird fiction: Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow*, a collection of short stories published in 1895. Knowing this book is key to understanding the dark mystery at the heart of

Detective Wikia or in other blogs such as <http://www.wekeeptheotherbadmenfromthedoor.com/one> one encounters instead the fans participating in, and almost identifying with, the investigative role of the two detectives, especially in the obsessive work of Cohle: fans writing in forums as if they were Cohle, becoming him, accompanying him through his hunting: the clues he finds analyzed, possible alternative explanations suggested. There is, in this case, a “theologization of seriality”, the interpretation of already happened events as the anticipation of facts yet to come, trying to write alternative yet coherent and authorial interpretation of the original narrative. In these examples there is also the expanding of the text by converting its temporalities into others that subvert its original articulation, no matter how fragmented; paradoxically, in the case of TD, whose narrative tries to defy the very idea of a temporal linearity, by regaining it.

However, we do not find what are common practices for other series, such as the moral realignment (sympathizing with the antagonist), nor a strong emotional intensification or eroticization of the characters’ life. Moreover, the process of re-focalization, that is, of writing new stories from the point of view of a secondary character, is very limited and, when it happens, the entry in the fan fic archives receives almost no attention. All the characters are indeed classified, as in the True Detective Wikia,<sup>12</sup> where we get information that we might have skipped, and that is not at all relevant for the story: whether a secondary character is married, where he studied, his or her main lines quoted. But what happens is not the telling of another story, the texts produced looking more like a gloss, an annotation, the adding of a thin background that *remains in the background*. The only real fan practice seems to be maintaining the story still alive, still present in our present, even if it is finished: for each character the profiles compiled True

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this series». After this entry, the debate on the influence of *The King in Yellow* has been huge.

<sup>12</sup> [http://truedetective.wikia.com/wiki/True\\_Detective\\_Wiki](http://truedetective.wikia.com/wiki/True_Detective_Wiki).

Detective Wikia includes the entry: “dead or alive”, although we know that the ones that have survived will never get a chance to die, since that story will never begin again. The narrative is here expanded but via minor details, its possible world filled in by many, yet not decisive, clues and hues, as its borders do remain relatively stable, in a sort of contained thickening, yet not deferring, narrative.

Why? A possible reason can be the format I have described earlier: while enticing a strong hyperfidelity and the creation of vast communities of viewers, *True Detective* as a TV novel is a too-cohesive audiovisual text, its *scripton* too sophisticated, its content too linked to its form to be able not to migrate, but really to create different and effective new semiotic personalities. Probably, in this new Golden Age of transmedia fiction there is space also for this, that is for a narrative model that exploits remediation as a powerful tool, for a narrative working on its forms of expression and its texture; exploiting the directors’ expertise and the already dense world it creates, a text whose syncretic elements (scripts and words, music, images) are difficult really just to expand in other forms of media textuality. It is a narrative that looks back to old models in order to transform them, re-mixing cinema and novel not through strategies of transposition and inter-semiotic translations, but as the novel’s possible new embodiment, its contents not so free to travel out of its materiality.

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