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### Question 1

It could be stated that your path through formal learning is a bit unorthodox for an academic who does research on literature and related humanities. Which theoretical frameworks and traditions constitute the grounds of your academic training? How do you relate to other actual theoretical frameworks such as post-structuralism or cultural studies?

My path began in the late sixties when I studied French and German literature at the University of Geneva with such luminaries as Jean Rousset (a founding father of narratology, though not widely recognized as such) and Jean Starobinski. After I moved to the U.S., convinced that poetry was the essence of literary art, I wrote a dissertation at the University of Utah on poet Saint-John Perse, winner of the 1960 Nobel Prize for literature. The second stage of my intellectual development was the study of linguistics, also at the University of Utah. I knew that Saussurian linguistics was all the rage in literary theory, linguistics having been declared a “pilot science” by structuralists, and I thought that if it was really a pilot science for the humanities, it would be useful to find out how it had evolved after Saussure. As part of this study, which introduced me to Chomsky and to the idea of a universal grammar (as opposed to the linguistic relativism that dominated Saussure-inspired literary criticism), I read a book by James McCawley titled “Everything Linguists Always Wanted to Know about Logic but Were Afraid to Ask” and I had an “aha” moment: this moment was caused by McCawley’s presentation of David Lewis’ treatment of the truth conditions of counterfactuals such as “If Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo he would not have been sent to St Helena”. I thought that this treatment, which relied on the idea of possible worlds, could be easily adapted to the problem of fiction. Later I discovered that Lewis had indeed done so in “Truth in Fiction,” a truly ground-breaking article (together with John Searle’s “The Logic of Fiction”). This reading awakened the logician in me and shifted my interest from poetry to narratology, possible worlds theory, and the nature of fiction, a problem that literary theorists of the 70s and 80s seemed to totally ignore. Shortly after my “aha” moment I undertook computer science studies and I worked for a few years as a programmer in California. My approach to literature and narrative has been deeply influenced by this study, especially by the data structures and the AI modes of reasoning to which I was exposed. This led to an increasing distancing from what I call “textualist”(i.e. post-structuralist) conceptions of literature and to an interest in non-literary, or non-high-literary forms of storytelling. By “textualism” I mean the view that literature is not about world-creation, the relations of humans to the world or of humans among themselves, but essentially about language, a view epitomized by Derrida’s claim that “il n’y a pas de hors-texte”, and by the view, held by New Criticism, that if you change a single word the meaning of the entire text will be changed. This view is fine for poetry, and I certainly adhered to it in my dissertation, but when you work with narrative, you realize that stories transcend language, in the sense that they can be translated or transposed into other media, and that readers remember characters, events and setting without remembering the words. In addition, some characters seem to have a life of their own and to inspire other writers to imagine them in new situations. This is not to say that the handling of language does not influence how readers construct stories and storyworlds; but for narratology, “language” is not merely the inherited system of signifiers and signifieds that

Saussure envisioned; it is rather “discourse,” this is to say, a collection of strategic or rhetorical techniques that transcends individual languages. Post-structuralism and its off-spring, cultural studies share the idea of relativism and of a higher principle that conditions behavior: in post-structuralism meaning is created by a system of signs that speaks for the individual; in cultural studies attitudes and behavior are regulated by a cultural system that imposes conventional (i.e. “could be different”) rules and values on its members. While the study of how languages or cultures differ from each other is certainly fascinating, I am personally more attracted by the universal than by the culture-specific. Narratology gives a privileged access to the universal, because all cultures tell stories, and the logical structure of stories must be the same in all cultures, otherwise the texts of different cultures would be incommensurable. Once we accept the idea that all narratives have something in common, it is a small step to the assumption that narrative teaches us something important about the human mind. This assumption is the basis of cognitive approaches to literature and narrative, which are currently flourishing .

#### Question 2.

Since your first approaches on possible worlds, transmedia storytelling and digital culture, which do you consider are the most important turns and changes that have since reshaped that field of study? Which of your own proposals and approaches did you need to rethink or change as a result?

As I stated in the previous question, the most important recent development in my areas of interest has been the advent of cognitive approaches. Cognitive work on mental imagery, which means on how we represent storyworlds in our mind, and on reader’s empathy for characters has helped me rethink the phenomenon of immersion, but without really changing my view of its importance for the narrative experience; rather, it has lead me to a better understanding of the various forms of immersion and of the mental operations that give readers a sense of the presence of storyworlds and create attachment for these worlds. Another development of interest to me, first in culture, and then in theory, has been the emergence of the notions of world and of storyworld. The recent surge of interest in genres that are traditionally ascribed to popular culture, such as fantasy and science fiction, means a new conception of narrative art, a conception that no longer limits this art to style and écriture, but also recognizes world-creation, and therefore invention, as an aesthetic dimension. Does this interest in worlds vindicate Possible Worlds theory? Yes and no. No, because the idea that the imagination can create worlds and that people can become immersed in them does not need the fairly technical concept of possible worlds to be understood. But yes, because possible worlds theory, by relying on a contrast between one actual or real world, and many merely possible ones, explains immersion in these worlds by postulating an event of imaginative “recentering”, or transportation by which users regard the possible worlds of fiction as real in make-believe, and pretend to be members of these worlds. This imaginative membership becomes an active participation in digital online worlds such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, but the creation of fan fiction extends active participation to literary worlds, which normally limits imaginative participation to being witnesses of the action.

#### Questions 3 + 4

In these last few years, we've been going through a transmedial narrative boom, in both cultural industry and independent production. Which advantages do you think could arise from the analysis of transmedia corpora for the field of literary studies? How do you think these phenomena could interact?

Do you deem possible to combine a transmedial approach, which tends to emphasize the accessibility and production conditions of the objects studied, with aesthetic questions as those arisen by hermeneutic and stylistic analysis?

I understand these questions as a broad invitation to give my view of transmedia (or transmedial) narrative, so I will bundle my answers into one response. Judging by the number of requests I have received to participate in conferences on transmedia storytelling or media convergence, there is indeed a transmedia boom in both popular culture and academic discourse. This boom was fueled, in popular culture, by the large transmedia franchises that develop around best-selling novels (*Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, even *Fifty Shades of Grey*) or blockbuster films (*The Matrix*, *Star Wars*), and in academic discourse, by Henry Jenkins' ground-breaking book *Convergence Culture* (2006). Transmedia narrative is frequently linked to the rise of digital technology, and because digital technology facilitates communication among fans, it is widely considered "participatory". But if we take a close look, there is nothing particularly digital, new, or participatory about transmedia narrative. Ancient Greek and medieval culture was highly transmedial, since it developed a widely known corpus of stories (mythology, the Bible) into drama, sculpture, paintings, and epic poetry. As for the tendency to associate transmediality with active user participation, it comes from the fact that the texts (or media objects) that generate transmedia activity are the same texts that generate online discussions, cosplay events and fan fiction, namely the texts that have achieved cult-status in contemporary culture.

There are two ways to develop a transmedia narrative system: bottom-up, by taking an independently successful storyworld (*Lord of the Rings* is a prime example), and by expanding it to many other media. This is the most common approach. The other is top-down, and consists of conceiving a storyworld from the very beginning as a world that is presented through many media. There are very few examples of this way of proceeding because it is financially risky: you don't want to make a movie, computer games, novels, TV series, alternate reality games, and graphic novels out of narrative material that is not tested. Transmedial narrative, in my view, is mostly a commercial phenomenon, and it is more interesting from a marketing and social point of view than from an artistic or narratological point of view. But if one sticks to the literary/narrative approach, then transmedial narrative lies at the confluence of two important phenomena that have long been ignored by literary theory. One is adaptation, the transposition of a story from one medium to another (novel to opera or to the theater, computer games to film, etc., and more recently, phenomena such as the oral narration of films for blind people), the other is transfictionality, the expansion (or modification) of a storyworld by another text of the same or of another medium, such as writing a sequel to *Madame Bovary* or putting zombies in Jane Austen's world. The great transmedia franchises of our time include both adaptations and transfictionality. The impact of transmedia narrative on literary studies should therefore reside in an increased attention to adaptation and transfictionality, and I am glad to see that this is happening right now. Another way the transmedia phenomenon can influence literary studies,

and has already done so, is through the rise of a subdiscipline devoted to audience studies, for even though transmedia is not *inherently* participatory, most of the great franchises are born out of cult narratives, and what makes a narrative a cult object is the weird or novel or imaginative behaviors that it inspires in the fans. Incidentally, I think it would be better to call the phenomenon transmedia *world-building*, because typically we do not have a single story that is told through multiple media (that would be disturbing for the users, since they would have to acquire multiple media-objects to get the whole story), we rather have a world that contains many stories, or retellings of the same story, each of them using its own medium. The concept of world is necessary to capture what holds together the various stories of a transmedial storyworld.

As far as I am concerned, the most interesting question raised by the transmedia boom is this: what are the features of storyworlds that cause people to fall in love with them, to the point of wanting to return over and over again. Answering this question means unlocking the preferences of the human imagination, whether innate or culturally conditioned.

#### Question 5

Do you consider yourself part of the “Digital Humanities”? How do you relate with this field?

To answer this question I consulted the article on Digital Humanities from *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, which I co-edited; I guess that makes me automatically part of the Digital Humanities, whatever they are. Following my customary urge to classify, I came up with three branches within Digital Humanities. First, there is the interpretive/philosophical approach, which deals with the many manifestations of digital technology (computer games, electronic literature, digital art, social media, virtual reality, ubiquitous computing, “critical code studies,” etc.), attempting to capture their role in culture, their aesthetics, and their mode of functioning. I squarely situate myself in this tradition through my book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* and through my work on interactive narrative. Second, there is the analytical, or Big Data branch. While branch 1 is very much a human reading of digital texts, branch 2 can be described as machine reading of any kind of text. It consists of collecting vast amounts of data (especially textual) from the Internet or elsewhere and of designing search algorithms that will extract useful information. In literature we are overwhelmed with data but we don’t really know what to do with it, beyond word and phrase searches. It would be fascinating to be able to interrogate narrative texts for the structure of the plot, the goals and plans of characters, the occurrence of certain stylistic devices, the creation of narrative effects such as suspense...but we don’t have the algorithms, unless the texts are painstakingly coded by humans to yield certain types of information. I don’t do this kind of work, because as an independent scholar I do not have the resources of supercomputers and graduate students who can do the coding. But though I am not personally attracted by this kind of work, I am very curious about where it can lead, especially from an artificial intelligence point of view. The third branch could be called pedagogical and practical. It includes: designing multi-modal Web sites about certain topics, building archives, creating searchable databases, annotating maps, editing texts, preserving old video games and texts of electronic literature. Many of these projects are not ends in themselves but tools for scholars who want to work in the other two branches. The work of the Electronic Literature Organization is a good example of this third branch. Again, because it requires team work and specialized resources, it is not really practical for an independent scholar without a supporting institution.

## Question 6

In many of your works there is a certain fascination with new technologies and their possibilities, but at the same time a certain critical perspective about the “hype” surrounding them. This is very clear while reading, for instance, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*.

It is true that I have an innate skepticism for technological innovations. My first reaction is : do I really need that kind of thing. I immediately saw the immense potential of some digital applications, like computer games, email, word processing, photo processing and the Internet. On the other hand when smart phones, touch screen tablets , and Twitter appeared on the market my first reaction was: who would want these things? (I have greater understanding for Facebook than for Twitter.) And I have no clue whatsoever why anybody would want an Apple watch, except to demonstrate brand loyalty. But people jump on any new digital product, and after a while they cannot live without it, because the formula for success with digital technology, in fact for many other technologies, is not a matter of answering needs but a matter of creating needs. With VR, I was fascinated by the idea as soon as I heard about it, but I was deeply disappointed with the slow rate of development. With hypertext narrative (to take another of the topics addressed in my VR book), I was immediately skeptical and I think I have been proved right, but I was intrigued early on by the narrative possibilities of computer games and I still am, though I do not expect that these possibilities will be seriously explored by the mainstream game industry. We need independent game designers.

How do you think new transmedial and digital objects can be studied in this tension between fascination for the brand new and critical distance?

Do I view transmedia narrative as pure hype or as a topic worthy of critical attention? I have written an article titled “Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or a New Narrative Experience?” (*Storyworlds* 2015), in which I argue that in order to create a New Narrative Experience transmedia systems should be deliberately created top-down rather than being a haphazard collection of documents that take advantage of the success of a monomedial bestseller. (I cringe when people consider the production of collectibles and paraphernalia such as *Star Wars* mugs and T-shirts or Lego figures to be a form of transmedia storytelling.) But even transmedia franchises that are mostly a brand rather than a deliberate orchestration of many media are worth studying as a social phenomenon. This implies critical distance. Another way to study transmedia franchises with critical distance would consist of investigating how the various documents relate to each other: do they expand the original world, modify it, satirize it, what do they add, what do they cut out, etc. There has been a lot of theoretical talk about transmedia but too few close studies of individual franchises, because there are too many documents to take into consideration. It is most efficient to concentrate on the relations between the “Mother Ship” (i.e. central document) and one of the satellites, as Jason Mittell has done for the TV series *Lost* and the Alternate Reality Game connected to it. (See Mittell’s contribution in *Storyworlds Across Media*, eds. M-L Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon.)The problem is even worse with fan fiction—who would have time to read the 70000 stories available on the Internet that relate to *Harry Potter*? So far, transmedia and fan fiction have been successfully treated from the point of view of

audience studies, but it is much more difficult to approach it aesthetically or even narratologically.

### Question 7

The systematic use of classifications and diagrams are trademarks of your writing style. Do you consider that approach an essential part of your processes of thought, or rather a didactic tool?

Indeed, I believe that thinking visually is the trademark of my work. We are a long way from the structuralist belief that all thinking occurs through language. The example of Richard Feynman demonstrates that diagrams can be both a mean of discovery and a terrific pedagogical tool. The Feynman diagram was a pictorial representation of mathematical formulae that describe the behavior of subatomic particles; but it was less a visualization of already known equations than a heuristic tool that allowed their formulation. In my case, when a papers' main idea can be expressed with a diagram, I find it much easier to write than when the idea must be elaborated through language. When the idea has no graphic representation, it tends to shift during writing, but when it originates in a diagram, it is already there, fully formed, before I start writing. But the expressive power of diagrams is limited by the two-dimensionality of the page. It is easy to represent things with Cartesian coordinates with an x and y axis, but when the z axis is involved it becomes very difficult. Computers can do it much more efficiently than drawings on a page, since they make it possible to rotate objects and see their projections in the two dimensions of the screen. I became acutely aware of the issue of dimensionality when I tried in a recent paper to express through a diagram which narratives are plot-dominant (in my view, tragedy and jokes) and which ones are world-dominant (science fiction, fantasy). The diagram was linear (one-dimensional), the plot-dominant genres on the left and the world-dominant ones on the right. Then somebody asked me: where do you place on your diagram narratives where plot and world are equally interesting, such as the great realistic novels of the nineteenth century. Oops, I could not put them on my diagram, because its linearity meant that the more plot-centric a narrative, the less world-centric it is. I finally solved the problem with Cartesian coordinates: the x axis was plot-interest, the y-axis was world-interest, so the great realistic novels could have a high value on both variable. But then I realized that another form of interest lies in the medium: style, écriture, narrative techniques, you name it. This could have been the z axis, but a 3D object cannot be easily represented on a flat page. And what if there was a 4<sup>th</sup> criterion, it would be impossible to visualize such a system, except through a table that gives a certain coefficient to the various properties.

As far as my love of taxonomies is concerned, I realize that they force you to make rigid distinctions in what is basically a messy, or continuous field. Deconstruction has made it into its program to deconstruct all binaries, especially those inherited by culture. But as imperfect as they always are, taxonomies are for me inevitable, because making distinctions is an essential part of thinking. Tables and taxonomies satisfy my mind because they make it possible to contemplate an entire field simultaneously. They represent therefore a spatial and visual mode of thinking.

### Question 8

Do you think it still makes sense to talk about “canon” in a transmedia, network-oriented culture?

My answer is yes and no. The Internet allows so many cultural objects to be made public (think again of the 70000 texts of fan fiction about *Harry Potter*) that it is very difficult for a work to become culturally established. Since everybody can upload their work on the Internet, without peer review or acceptance by a respected publisher, there is no guarantee of quality, and it would take forever to find texts that truly stand out in terms of quality. The two collections of digital texts put together by the Electronic Literature Organization are an attempt to restore some degree of canonicity within the field of digital textuality. One may disagree with the selection criteria, but once a text has been selected for the collections, it will be easy to find by scholars and teachers, and if it is reasonably easy to operate, i.e. does not require the downloading of recalcitrant or obsolete plug-ins, it will be discussed in their papers and used in their courses, the first step toward canonization. Another problem with establishing a canon with digital texts is obsolescence. Hypertexts like Michael Joyce’s *afternoon*, Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden*, and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* have achieved canonical status, but they do not run on today’s computers; will obsolescence destroy their canonicity, since they can no longer be read, or will it make them legendary? In the domain of video games, some old games have reached canonical status and are being preserved by emulations that run on modern computers. But will the next generation of computers require rewriting these emulations? The rapid rate of evolution in digital technology is the second most important obstacle to the formation of a canon, after the sheer quantity of available works.

Within transmedia franchises, the problem of canonicity is no longer a matter of artistic recognition, but a problem of who owns the copyrights, which means, a commercial issue. The George Lucas company has tried to preserve a canon by declaring all texts created by fans to be its property. As for J.K. Rowling, she has been actively blocking the creation of texts by “unauthorized” sources. These authors want to exercise a strong control over what texts belong to the franchise.

Question 9

What are you researching these days?

Right now I am between large projects. I just finished a much revised second edition of my book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (to appear in Fall 2015) and a book on space and narrative, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative* in collaboration with two geographers, Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, due out Spring 2016 from Ohio State UP. What’s next? A number of small projects I have been invited to contribute; an edited book on recent applications of Possible Worlds Theory, and hopefully, in a far future, a project on Object Oriented Narratology studying the role of objects in stories. But I must admit that presently I do not have much more than a title in my mind.

How can you relate your current lines of thought with the objects of your current cultural consumption (literature, videogames, TV, etc.)?

One big problem for literary and media scholars is an overly utilitarian use of cultural objects—reading or watching only those books and movies and TV shows and digital texts that are useful in teaching or research. It is important to consume just for pleasure because it gives you new ideas. But when you are in the business of literary and media theory the distinction between reading for pleasure and reading for research becomes blurred, because you derive pleasure from finding material for your next project, and conversely you tend to find use for the stuff you read for pure pleasure. Still, on my pile of things to read there is always a book or two from which I expect absolutely nothing but entertainment and that I read without a pen in my hand for highlighting. It's mostly books I have already read, and I do not feel compelled to finish them. I can just open them and savor a few pages.