

Martin Zimmer

Online videos, webisodes, multiplatform storytelling:

What scriptwriters should know about “semantic spaces” and about “short stories for the small screens”

In 2009, we find ourselves entering a media age that is vehemently demanding the short, succinct form of audiovisual storytelling for a host of new distribution channels. “Moving images on the Internet” is a hot topic at media conferences and in marketing magazines. Online video and storytelling for streaming media are catchwords on panels in this shaken industry. Their titles alone fall short and usually convey little meaning.

As authors, we seek to understand and depict human nature. We try to offer our audience fictional stories conveying inner experiences that influence our viewers’ moods and ideally, maybe even alter their personal view of life.

Authors consider beforehand the situation in which their messages will reach the recipients and how they can be guided emotionally. In earlier days when movies and the theatre dominated the entertainment industry, the underlying assumption was fundamentally simple: The audience buys tickets, sits for two hours without interruption in a darkened room, and gives into the steady flow of the story, allowing itself to be swayed and touched by whatever they experience. Having paid admission, it enters the theatre with certain expectations. As writers, we have two hours to develop our characters and story lines. We have been sharing formulae for doing just that for more than 2000 years and have developed the craft of writing in the process.

Let us return to 2009, to current media trends and to the expectations of our audience today.

The new screens

In a myriad of everyday situations in 2009, we encounter viewers no longer sitting in front of huge movie or TV screens. People are increasingly surrounded by small screens: their computer screen, the touch screen on their cell phone, the screen on a GPS device or the screen on their notebooks or laptops. People use these devices for work but also for private, personal communication. Young people have grown up with these screens and their controls.

Researchers have introduced the term “digital natives” for this generation. It connotes native tribal inhabitants of a digital world whose everyday electronic devices were unknown to their ancestors. Having hit my mid-forties, I personally am a “digital immigrant”. My generation had to learn how to use this equipment; it was not inborn knowledge for us. Nonetheless, I still feel at home with these many new screens and have no desire to deprive myself of any of them. Digital natives, but also many digital immigrants, are the first to experience what media philosophers and Sci-Fi authors in the 1950s and 1960s once envisioned: They are living a human-machine relationship. They communicate and live with their screens as they would with a pet, sometimes even as they would with another real human being. They entrust their favourite music to their mobile devices, along with their most personal photos, their contacts, their mail, and their deepest longings. And they use these devices for phoning, text messaging, for retrieving media content or exchanging opinions or information with others. The screen devices are also fed, petted, primed up with updates, and cared for daily. The human-machine relationship has already become a reality for a minority and is becoming a reality for the majority at a dizzying pace. The sea change in the media and in personal communication has only just begun.

Clarifying unclear concepts

When we talk about the “New Media”, are we really even talking about media in the classic sense? I think there is a prevailing vagueness in the New Media debate that authors need to clarify before they can begin drafting and writing their stories. Classic media were easy to understand: linear distribution channels for disseminating messages and content. As classic media, TV and radio are one-way channels directed at what tends to be passive listeners or viewers tuned in to be entertained or relaxed or excited by a program or a show they have

come to trust. They do so at a certain place and time, like a daily ritual that structures everyday life and satisfies the recipients.

The New Media, and the Web 2.0 world, a term popularised by Tim O'Reilly, have three aspects that make them new:

- Audiovisual content is available at any time and place, provided the user has a small screen and access to the Internet.
- This content and the recommendation of content are discussed jointly in personal networks (social networks) without participants having to be present physically at a real place or simultaneously at a virtual place.
- People build up networks of relationships in their personal and professional surroundings. As a result, individuals are constantly accompanied and observed by digital friendship groups while generating and "transmitting" their own digital tag clouds.

Is the social networking website Facebook a medium? No, it is not, not in the classic sense. Making a comment or recommendation for your personal circle of friends, somewhat more than one hundred on Facebook, is not akin to issuing your own medium. But it is an act of expressing something to a defined public. It is in the public, but not for the public. It gains public attention and has social relevance. If several Facebook members express the same opinion or recommend a link, their doing so ensures that classic media content such as news, short films, show content or film clippings will reach their audience on the Internet.

The strengths of the new world of communication are in its conversation about media content, its recommendation functions and the build-up of social networks where people embrace the same things and firmly reject the same things. This new method of communicating and sharing ideas and opinions will change the entertainment industry, sidestepping traditional media distribution partners and entertainment corporations.

The audience in front of the small screens

Use of YOU TUBE and other online video platforms and newspaper websites peaks right before and right after the standard time for a lunch break and late at night.

What does that tell us about the audience? Let us stay with work for a moment. After working for a while, a person feels a need to relax. He wants to “a change of mood.” That does not necessarily mean calming down. Many people enjoy getting excited. Others want to chuckle. Aristotle cited these grand basic emotions long ago in his *Poetics*. We empathise with those who suffer unjustifiably, tremble with those who are similar to us and feel joy for those whose life has turned from misfortune to happiness.

The YOU TUBE generation looks for this happiness for just a few minutes, just before and just after their lunch break. Now the good news: 80 percent of the traffic on YOU TUBE involves professionally produced content. Users select short excerpts from movies, series and TV shows. That makes YOU TUBE a perfect non-linear secondary distribution channel for TV and movie content.

What do the masses watch?

In answering this question on which type of online videos succeed and reach an audience of millions, I will make use of a concept introduced by the Russian literary critic Yuri M. Lotman (1922 – 1993) for the analysis of literary texts: semantic space. I use the term not for academic analysis but as a tool in the craft of writing.

What do I mean by the term “semantic space” in this context? Well, it is any space in which we find ourselves as authors. It is defined not only by externalities such as landscape, buildings, furniture, weather patterns and inhabitants but also by inner values that the space takes on and radiates in our piece of fiction. Each space also stands for certain words created by the author. Here is a simple example. We create a semantic space in a rural area, in a small village, and fill this space with values like deep piety, the simple life, honesty, family solidarity, and poverty. So, that is example 1. Now let us invent semantic space 2, sticking with our simple example. A city. Inhabited by bankers. The values we inject into this world: rich, dishonest, Godless, with money reigning supreme. Do the two semantic spaces by themselves constitute a story? No, they do not, not in this theoretical model.

We do not have a story worth telling until a protagonist from semantic space 1 sets off for semantic space 2 and takes his values into the new world with him. In the classic three-act

model and in Christopher Vogler's "mythic structure for writers" (*The Writers Journey*), the first act ends and the second begins with "crossing the first threshold". The hero steps over a threshold from his normal world into a special world. In the course of the second act, he becomes familiar with this new world and is confronted by its idiosyncrasies. I am taking this concept and applying it to the act of stepping over the threshold from semantic space 1 into semantic space 2. Example: The honest and pious farmer from the village comes into the city of bankers and their values. First possible scenario: The city changes him and he becomes a rich but Godless and lonely man. Second possible scenario: He changes the bankers, who suddenly realize the true meaning of life can be found in leading the simple life. Third possible scenario: The farmer learns to be crafty in business dealings in the city and takes this formula back with him to his village. His dealings make his family prosperous but cause him to lose his moral innocence. You sense that this is the point, at which stories worth telling begin, stories that can win over an audience.

Semantic spaces and stepping over thresholds

My thesis is as follows: **Successful short online videos with more than a million views depict individuals who pass over the threshold between two contradictory semantic spaces. In the new semantic space, they undergo changes themselves in fundamental aspects of their being or in their set of values or change others in these same ways. The change has to be shown visually in an online video. The plot unfolds in the second semantic space. It suffices merely to allude to the first semantic space with accessories. Viewers will imagine and understand it.**

Below are two examples to back up my thesis. The first is a purely amateur video that generated nearly two million views and 3600 comments on YOU TUBE. You will find it at the LINK

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivjybzdXVml>

The video is called "flight attendant doing raps". There are safety announcements that have to be made to travellers on each flight. Instead of delivering them the regular way, this flight attendant turns them into a rhythmic rap. He raps the safety announcements. He brings new values, a rapper's values and style, into the airplane, a semantic space occupied by boring businessmen. What happens then? The businessmen are visibly changed by the experience. They clap in time to the rap, smile and laugh, applaud and cheer. The rap has changed them.

At the end of the clip, they are different people. And that is exactly why this video clip attracted millions of viewers.

The second example is well known to everyone in Britain: Susan Boyle's first appearance on BRITAIN GOT TALENT has chalked up 167 million views on YOU TUBE thus far. LINK: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PPlkOyaqaQ>

Once again, two semantic spaces collide. The one world is that of Susan Boyle, an unemployed woman from a remote village, the ugly, and somewhat scraggly, duckling from the country. The other world is that of show business with its fake smiles and cynicism, its money, glitter and glamour. By the end of Susan Boyle's performance, even this show world has changed. The judges admit to having smiled cynically when Susan stepped on stage. The studio audience forgets all scepticism and backs the singer enthusiastically. Susan Boyle herself also changes, undergoing a transformation from wallflower to uncut diamond.

Websites on the Internet

A new genre for short fictional formats is now arising on the Internet. One of the first series was *Lonely Girl 15* (www.lg15.com) by Miles Beckett. It tells the story of the everyday life of American girls as a soap opera in daily segments lasting several minutes. It appeared only on the Internet, with no financial backup from a TV station. In German-speaking areas, a series called *Candy Girls* on the German My Space platform was one of the first webisode series in the German language. The producers also mentioned the production budget for the first time at Medientagen München. The series cost € 950 a minute, about one-fourth the price of similar soaps on TV. The scriptwriter's fees were probably equally meagre.

Nonetheless, these new genres offer real opportunities for non-established authors and producers who have a good idea and want to present it for the first time to the public. With few resources and great enthusiasm, they can show they have talent and ideas. With YOU TUBE or Vimeo or Sevenload (in German-speaking areas), they can also prove to bosses at TV networks that they have reached their audience. This is often the first step to landing a large and lucrative contract. The Austrian animated short film *Bunny Animation* was part of a cinema project carried out by Michael Sormann named "Theme Planet". It has generated 1.7 million views so far on YOU TUBE plus a 5-star rating and more than 5,000 comments. And

it has drawn the attention of the international animated film industry.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFuitd30vH4>).

The web is a platform and stage for creative publishers that still lack backing from an entertainment group.

Trend toward multiplatform storytelling

The trend in TV business is toward multiplatform storytelling. It is no longer enough to tell a great story in linear fashion on television. What is important, also for ratings, is the discussion and conversation about the story itself on Internet platforms, in chat rooms, on blogs and in social networks. Separate short formats are invented and produced for this express purpose and laid out as bait to be sure the material is found and passed on months before its first airing on TV. One success story for this kind of participation drama is the Swedish format *The Truth about Marika*, which won the Emmy for Best Interactive TV in 2008. A friend had disappeared without a trace. The search for her was then conducted not only on TV but also on radio, on the Internet, on mobile phones, even at specially created events on roads throughout the country. The production firm (www.thecompanyp.com) is planning to follow up with a format for several European broadcasting companies belonging to the European Broadcasting Union.

In May 2009, the Rose d'Or Festival for Entertainment Television Programming in Lucerne, Switzerland, introduced "Multi Platform" as a new category alongside its classic ones: Comedy, Game Show, Sitcom or Arts Documentary. Fifteen programs were submitted, among them the Channel 4 project *Battlefront* (www.battlefront.co.uk), *Flatmates* from Portugal (www.t2para3.sapo.pt), *Operation Earth* from Finland (www.operaatiomaa.fi), Endemol's *Cell* (www.thecell.tv) and *I Prophecy* from Canada (www.iprophecy.net).

Berlin producer Marc LePetite calls this type of multimedia storytelling a "360 degree" format. What he means is that fictional material must be presented in several formats, distribution channels and forms to maximize use of as many means of communication (and revenue sources) as possible. His company Phoenix Film Berlin is producing *Kill your darling*, a TV movie and accompanying horror series consisting of 30 three-minute segments each with its own aesthetics and dramaturgy for mobile phones. The webisodes will be

shown on the TV station's website prior to airing on TV. The production budget for the 30 mini-movies amounted to 1 million euros. The film will be broadcast on Pro Sieben in the autumn of 2009.

Authors who can envisage and invent multimedia narration layers for their stories can look forward to great opportunities from TV production firms and TV broadcasters. The small, short format for the small screens could well be their admission ticket to the Big Screen.

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