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Building Science-Fiction Worlds

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Abstract
Fantasy and science fiction are crucial genres for techniques of transmedia storytelling, with notable contemporary examples such as The Matrix, Star Wars, Lost, Heroes, etc. What do these genres offer as a structural or thematic framework for constructing storyworlds that cross multiple media? The nature of world-creating in science fiction and fantasy is pivotal, as the creation of detailed worlds that serve as a bedrock for inner (fictional) references is a structural necessity. The paper investigates, from a semiotic point of view, the nature and the modes of composition of science-fiction worlds as “structurally different from the real one” (Eco 1984, 1257), showing the mechanisms of world building, together with the modes of representation and transmission of information.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Possible worlds, World-building, Fantasy

Fantasy and science fiction seem to be crucial genres for transmedia storytelling, with notable contemporary examples such as The Matrix, Star Wars, Doctor Who, Lost, and Heroes. What do fantasy and science fiction offer as a structural or thematic framework for constructing storyworlds that cross multiple media? If world building is a key concern of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006), the nature of world creating in these genres is pivotal, and certainly much more evident than in crime, mystery stories, and even horror stories; in science fiction and fantasy, in fact, the creation of detailed settings seems to be a structural necessity.

My contribution focuses on science fiction writing from a semiotic and narratological point of view, with particular reference to studies on possible narrative worlds and on enunciation. First, I will briefly summarize some key aspects of the theory of possible worlds with regard to the science fiction genre; on this basis, I will tackle a definition of science fiction worlds before
investigating more deeply their nature. Finally, I will explore the question of narrative transmission, both in regard to the first elements that allow access to the fictional world and, more generally, in relation to the enunciative modalities of the genre.

Possible worlds

The notion of Possible Worlds has been elaborated in modal logic by philosophers of the analytic school (Kripke, Lewis, Rescher, Hintikka), taking inspiration from the philosophy of Leibniz and, probably, also from science-fiction writers’ conception of parallel universes (see: Volli 1978). In modal logic, possible worlds are formal constructs, bare undifferentiated sets that have no structure whatsoever, while, in semiotic and narratological studies, possible worlds have substantive nature, they are “overfurnished sets” (Eco 1978, 27), of which one must know acting individuals and properties that make them different from the real world. Following Umberto Eco:

(i) A possible world is a possible state of affairs expressed by a set of relevant propositions where for every proposition either $p$ or $\neg p$; (ii) as such it outlines a set of possible individuals along with their properties; (iii) since some of these properties or predicates are actions, a possible world is also a possible course of events; (iv) since this course of events is not actual, it must depend on the propositional attitudes of somebody; in other terms possible worlds are worlds imagined, believed, wished, etcetera. (Eco 1978, 29)

As products of such mental activity, possible worlds are cultural constructs in Eco’s conception: they have a semiotic and textual nature. They have no ontological existence, unlike the parallel universes described by science-fiction writers, which lie on different planes of reality, but are not less “real” than ours. A possible world is a set of individuals (i.e. recognizable entities: characters as well as places and objects, etc.) singled out as bundles of properties (i.e. physical qualities, relations, actions performed, etc.). Thus, we can assume the notion of property as primitive: we can construct different possible worlds by combining a set of properties differently or simply by changing a single property.

In particular, we can create a possible world starting from our “real” world (the so-called Actual World, in opposition to Possible Worlds) by
altering (i.e. activation or narcotization) even a single property. For example, the possible science-fiction world outlined in *Dying Inside* (1972), a novel by Robert Silverberg, is different from ours because it is inhabited by an individual called David Selig who has the ability to read people’s minds; a property, as we know, that is not present in the Actual World. Apart from this, the blanket of information described in the novel can almost completely overlap with the Actual World. However, the text of the novel presents to the reader only a limited number of the propositions and the properties that are predicatable of the individual “David Selig”, mainly those that are relevant to identify the possible world, while many others that are common to the world of reference (for example, the fact that he has two feet, eats, and speaks English) are taken for granted and not mentioned.

Generally speaking, any possible world overlaps the Actual World to a large degree, while differing from it in some respects. There are obvious reasons of expressive economy for this, but there are also deeper motivations related to the nature of fictional worlds. In fact, fictional worlds are, by their very nature, largely incomplete: “No fictional world could be totally autonomous since it would be impossible for it to outline a maximal and consistent state of affairs by stipulating *ex nihilo* the whole of its individuals and of their property” (Eco 1978, 31). According to Doležel (1989), fictional worlds are inevitably incomplete “small worlds”, as incompleteness is a distinctive feature of fictional existence. Every text, in fact, only partially describes its world, from a certain perspective: detail is determined by its usefulness in serving textual strategies. Other scholars underline the “role of the reader” (Eco 1979), who “fills the gaps” of the text, making inferences based on his or her encyclopedic knowledge. In doing so, “readers imagine fictional worlds as the closest possible to Actual World, and they only make changes that are mandated by the text” (Ryan 2013).

For instance, the beginning of the “Editor’s Preface” in Clifford Simak’s classic novel *City* (1952) mentions Dogs:

These are the stories that the Dogs tell when the fires burn high and the wind is from the north. Then each family circle gathers at the hearthstone and the pups sit silently and listen and when the story’s done they ask many questions:

“What is Man?” they’ll ask.
Or perhaps: “What is a city?”
Or: “What is a war?”
In this case, the readers will imagine creatures that look like real-world dogs in every respect (and have all their properties) except for the fact that these creatures sit around hearthstones. Ryan (1991) calls this interpretive rule “the principle of minimal departure”; Walton describes it as “the reality principle”.

Towards a definition of science-fiction worlds

According to possible worlds theorists (Eco 1979; Pavel 1986; Doležel 1998) every fictional text outlines a possible world; this is true not only for science fiction or fantasy narratives, which describe imaginary worlds, but it generally applies to any work of fiction. Eco says that “any work of narrative, even the most realistic, depicts a possible world inasmuch as it presents a population of individuals and a succession of states of the world that do not correspond to those of our everyday experience” (Eco 1984, 1257). From this point of view, there is no fundamental difference between the small fishing village of Aci Trezza depicted in the Italian veristic masterpiece *I Malavoglia* by Giovanni Verga, the Riverworld created by P.J. Farmer, or Tolkien’s middle-earth. However, it is obvious that, in some respects, these three worlds are essentially different. What is it that differentiates between the world of a “realistic” narrative and those described in a science-fiction or fantasy novel? Reworking Robert Scholes’ definition of fantastic literature as “Structural Fabulation”, Eco says that this kind of narrative builds “structurally possible worlds”:

What distinguishes the fantastic narratives from the realistic [...] is the fact that its possible world is structurally different from the real one. I use the term “structural” in a very wide sense. To refer to the cosmological structure as much as to social. (Eco 1984, 1257)

For Eco, science fiction is a particular kind of fantastic literature:

SF exists as an autonomous genre when a counterfactual speculation about a structurally possible world is conducted by extrapolation from certain tendencies in today’s world, which is the very possibility of a “futurizable” world. That is, SF always takes the form of an anticipation and anticipation always takes the form of a conjecture formulated from existing tendencies. (Eco 1984, 1257)
Eco therefore restricts science fiction to the sole narratives of anticipation—in other words, to that kind of science fiction sometimes called “speculative fiction”—that focus on the mechanism of extrapolation, in which such extrapolation can, from time to time, be social, technological, scientific, etc. He defines this kind of fantastic literature in which “a possible world represents a future phase of the world as we have it here and now” (Eco 1984, 1257) as metachronia or metatopia and distinguishes it from the allotopia (where the world is really different from the Actual World, as is the case with fantasy worlds where wizards and fairies exist), the utopias (where the possible world exists somewhere, parallel with our own but normally inaccessible to us; “usually—Eco goes on to say—it constitutes a model of the way our real world ought to be”) and the uchronias (where the parallel world is based on a “what if” clause; for example, what would have happened if the Axis forces had won the war, as in Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* [1962]?).

Eco’s typology is certainly ingenious and theoretically well-founded, but his definition of science fiction is rather narrow and abstract, while also failing to account for the variety of the phenomenon, so Eco himself is forced to admit that we can have science fiction works also among the utopias, the uchronias, or the allotopias (as in the case of space operas). Moreover, from a more general point of view, in a logic of possible worlds—as Eco understands it—it is not sufficient to talk of “structurally possible worlds”, instead, we must specify the particular properties that distinguish a science fiction world from a naturalist or a fantasy one, as well as the rules of construction. In short, we should identify and define a class of property, whose presence or absence in the text defines the world as science-fictional, or fantastic, or realistic. Doležel (1998) does not deal explicitly with science fiction and focuses very little on fantastic literature, but he does nevertheless make some useful distinctions. He poses a distinction at the level of alethic modalities between logically possible worlds and physically (or naturally) possible worlds. In physically possible worlds, there is nothing—nor does anything happen—that violates the alethic conditions of the Actual World (Doležel 1998, 121). On the contrary, fictional worlds that violate the laws of the Actual World are supernatural worlds and physically impossible. Science-fiction worlds (and the individuals that inhabit them, such as extra-terrestrials) belong to naturally possible worlds, as they are physically possible. Doležel believes that using modal criteria of distinction enables us to avoid ontological commitment as well as the problems related to subjective beliefs and the changes in scientific knowledge.
Similar criteria are adopted by Marie-Laure Ryan (1991; 2005), who sketches a complex typology of possible worlds related to fictional genres based on the various relations between Actual World and Fictional Worlds (the so-called “accessibility relations”):

In a broad sense, possibility depends not only on logical principles but also on physical laws and material causality. Following this interpretation, narrative worlds can be classified as realistic […] or fantastic, depending on whether or not the events they relate could physically occur in the real world. (Ryan 2005, 449)

For Ryan (1991), there are different degrees of accessibility between Actual World (AW) and Fictional Worlds (properly TAW “Textual Actual Worlds”, as defined by Ryan) depending on the different genres. In decreasing order of stringency, the types of accessibility include: identities of properties (when the two worlds are furnished by the same objects and they have the same properties), identity of inventory (when the two worlds are furnished by the same objects and they do not have the same properties), compatibility of inventory (when the fictional world has the same inventory of AW, as well as some native members), as well as chronological, taxonomic, logical, and linguistic compatibility.

With regard to the difference between realism, fantasy, and science fiction, Ryan says that fictional worlds of all these genres can be associated with the Actual World by compatibility of logical and analytical propositions. However, the fantasy worlds (legends, fairy tales, fantastic realism) do not have physical and natural laws compatibility that is maintained in the worlds of science fiction. Science-fiction worlds have physical, logical, analytical, linguistic compatibility with the Actual World, but they do not necessarily have taxonomic compatibility (technical objects are usually different from those of the Actual World, and also natural species could be different); moreover, there is no chronological compatibility. As for Doležel, even for Ryan, the maintenance or not of the natural laws of the Actual World is a main taxonomic criterion.

A clearer description of science-fiction worlds can be achieved by crossing the two parameters: the structural difference (or not) from the Actual World and the correspondence (or not) to its physical and natural laws. To resume: if every fictional text describes a possible world, different in some respect from the actual one, fantastic narratives outline structurally different possible worlds. The structural difference may violate the alethic conditions of the Actual World (as in fantasy fiction or in fairy tales, in
which it involves the physical laws of the universe) or not, as is the case with science fiction, in which physically (or naturally) possible worlds are described.3

This distinction could enrich Eco's typology. If every fantastic narrative outlines a structurally possible world—in other words, a world structurally different from the actual one—we can distinguish between genres like fantasy or fairy tales, in which the structural difference involves physical laws, and science fiction, in which it does not involve them.4

**The nature of science-fiction worlds**

The nature of science-fiction worlds therefore closely approximates Darko Suvin's well-known definition of the genre: “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic” (1979, 60). The *novum*, or cognitive innovation, is a phenomenon or relationship that deviates from the norm of the author and the implied reader's reality. In science-fiction texts, the *novum* is "totalizing" in the sense that it entails a change to the whole universe of the tale (similarly to Eco's structural differences), and is also "hegemonic", because it is so central and significant to determine the world's narrative logic.5 Concerning the difference between science fiction and fantasy, Suvin says that, in science fiction, the *novum* is cognitively validated, while it is unvalidated in fantasy fiction; “cognitively validated” means that it is “postulated on and validated by Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific method” (Suvin 1979, 64-65) and it follows an accepted scientific logic.6 In other words, science-fiction worlds do not violate the epistemic foundations commonly accepted by our culture, while the worlds of fantasy invent different foundations.7

In possible world logic, we can redefine the novum as the whole set of properties that distinguish the possible world (W1) of the story from the Actual World of reference (W0). This definition of the *novum* differs slightly from Suvin’s. For Suvin, the novum is a single dominant, a single variation of the real world. However, as Csicsery-Ronay has noticed:

> The model of a single novum is useful for reading narratively simple fictions, such as short stories and novels with relatively simple narrative arcs. [...] However, once fiction crosses a certain threshold of complexity it becomes more difficult to pin down exactly what the novum premise is. [...] Once a Science Fiction has several interlayed narrative arcs, novums
can become complex, ambiguous, and multiple. (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 62-63)

For example, Philip K. Dick’s novel *Ubik* (1969) is based on at least three variants: i) the presence of individuals with parapsychological powers, belonging to organizations that fight each other, who are sometimes powerful enough to change reality and undo events by changing the past, ii) the possibility for civilians to travel to the Moon regularly, iii) the “moratoria”, a condition whereby the deceased are kept in a state of “half-life”, lost in their inner realities, but still have the ability to communicate with the world of the living. The structural difference of *Ubik’s* fictional world arises from the intertwining of these themes.

In effect, we could consider the history of science fiction as a progressive development of the completeness and structural complexity of its fictional worlds. As Wolf noted, the progressive growth in size and detail of imaginary worlds during the 20th century was a general trend, firstly in literature, which remained the primary place in which imaginary worlds were conceived until the middle of the century. From this point of view, J.R.R. Tolkien’s imaginary worlds marked a turning point. In particular, the presence of an organic, coherent, complex, and detailed organization of fictional worlds is not a starting point in science-fiction literature, but a goal, which actually seems to emerge fully only in some works of the 1960s. As early as the 1950s, the fictional world of so-called “social science fiction”—focused on the description of future societies in which certain trends of today’s world were vividly exaggerated—suffered from oversimplification: the extrapolation, in fact, was generally based on a few elements that become totalizing, such as the power of advertising agencies in F. Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth *The Space Merchants* (1952), or the hegemony of supermarkets in Damon Knight’s *Hell’s Pavement* (1955).

**The Gates to the Worlds**

As we have seen, according to Pavel and Doležel, fictional worlds are incomplete, “small worlds” that largely overlap with the actual one. Thus, many of the elements that form fictional worlds (and even imaginary worlds) are common to the Actual World and, as such, are often not explicitly described in the text. If this is true, in studying the nature of science-fiction and fantasy worlds, we should pay particular attention to the presence of “estranged” elements (Suvin 1979) that characterize these fictional worlds.
and that are “not mimetic” of empirical reality. In this regard, the study of *incipit* is of special importance. In fact, if world construction takes place on the basis of clues throughout the whole text, it is usually the beginning that sets the genre conventions and the protocols of reading, marking the difference between the Actual and the Fictional Worlds and allowing the text to establish a non-existent but possible context, an imaginary world: “In most Science Fiction novels the *incipit* has precisely the function of establishing very violently this relationship. Plausibility, concreteness, tangibility of nonexistent; construction of a world that is ‘other’ but just as ‘true’ as the real one” (Volli 1980, 121).

The analysis should therefore be focused on the way in which the elements constituting the novum (in Suvin’s terms) occur to the reader, revealing the science-fiction nature of the world described by the text and giving a first characterization of the fictional world that is further developed (or denied) thereafter. Considering the different ways of presenting the structural difference between Actual World and Fictional World to the audience (reader, viewer), a short typology should include at least three types of incipit (Volli 1980; Arganese 1987):

1) Initially, the Fictional World is structurally similar (compatible) with the Actual World; then “something” happens that changes the world-defining relation. This is the case with various apocalyptic fictions, like the one used in the movie *The Road* (2009)—the movie based on Cormac McCarthy’s novel. The film opens with a series of shots of a farmhouse garden full of plants and flowers, where a man and a woman are engaged in daily activities. The catastrophe is announced (but not explicitly shown) until the second sequence: at night, indoors, the man feels “something” and turns on all the taps at home; screeching noises and desperate cries in the background can be heard. The third sequence shows the man awakening one morning many years later, in a grey devastated land.

2) The Fictional World is structurally different from the beginning, but this difference is not immediately clear to the viewer or reader due to an information delay and a strategy of gradual revelation of *novum*. This creates a state of ambiguity that continues until an explicit science-fictional element awakens the reader or viewer and makes her reinterpret the information already received from this new perspective. An example is the beginning of Robert Heinlein’s novel *Starship Troopers*, which opens with a reference to a “drop” and a “ship” whose semantic value is ambiguous and can refer both to a current or to an estranged context. The text goes on between an “everyday” interpretation and a “science-fictional” interpretation of fiction for a couple of pages, until the word “ship” is understood to mean “starship”,

...
with the observation that the ship “stayed in orbit”, and a reference to the sensational gravity endured by soldiers in the “braking” of the ship (Arganese 1987, 20).

3) The Fictional World is structurally different from the beginning and the difference is immediately made explicit thanks to information unrelated to an Actual World encyclopedia, such as in the Star Wars opening crawl: “It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire.”

We will call the “first elements” of the world those elements that allow the reader or viewer to recognize the fictional world as science-fictional. The ‘first elements’ of the text are not necessarily the introduction to the fictional nature of the text, especially if the fictional nature is revealed first with elements that do not differ from elements of the Actual World or are charged by a semantic ambiguity that prevents the immediate awareness of their science-fictional nature.

Giving narrative information

Giving information about the world (the so-called “narrative information”) is certainly one of the major problems in science fiction. In fact, if science-fiction worlds are structurally different from the Actual one, the knowledge that the audience should have to “fill in the gaps” (Wolf 2012) and interpret the texts should also be structurally different. Science-fiction worlds are based on a semantic “absent paradigm” (Angenot 1979) that requires an encyclopedia of reference (i.e. a set of knowledge about the world; Eco 1979) that is not that of the present world shared by the audience. Obviously, the audience can fill in some of the gaps by making proper conjectures based on their knowledge of the Actual World, or by referring to a sort of encyclopedia of genre, as in the case of stereotypes or recurring figures, such as “hyperspace”, that need not be explained time and again, and are usually taken for granted. However, the text should provide a larger number of details in order to establish the new world logic and how it differs from the Actual World.

However, as Angenot notes, literary science fiction and, in particular, that of anticipation tales, avoids explaining every datum systematically, as this would be tedious and inadvisable if not contrary to the “rules” of the genre. Angenot (1979) observes that science-fiction readers proceed from the particular to the general: “he induces from the particular some
imagined, general rules that prolong the author’s fantasies and confer on them plausibility. The reader engages in a conjectural reconstruction which ‘materializes’ the fictional universe” (15). The reason for this actually lies in the peculiar discursive organization of a science-fiction text, that involves narrative information in a complex textual game (Bertetti 1997).

With the exception of some prophecies or literary experiments, narrative texts are usually not told in the future tense, even though they refer to future events. So there are historically two main modes of “telling the future”:

a) The text places an eye witness in the scene, who somehow becomes aware of future events, and reports them at the present moment: it is the typical mode of prophetic texts and some early novels such as The Time Machine by H.G. Wells (1895).

b) More often, the text enacts a real enunciational fiction, simulating a situation in which an enunciator belonging to the future addresses an enunciatee also belonging to the future, recounting a series of events that happened in their past (near or remote), a past that is always our future.

Maintaining the consistency of this fictitious situation of enunciation, which cannot be broken without compromising the referential illusion requires several limitations to the carriage of information. In particular—at least in theory—notions that would be trivial for a fictitious narratee must be avoided. This is the reason why anticipation tales often take the narrative form of a historical novel, travel literature, or Bildungsroman. This, of course, is an ideal model; de facto sf literary texts very often give information that would be redundant on the basis of the simulated enunciation. To some degree, this is generally accepted by the reader, who needs these notions to understand the fictional text.

As Wolf notes, “Audiovisual media such as movies have an advantage when it comes to world-building” (2012, 59), as they can more easily depict a large number of details and have less problems related to the fictional instance. While a literary text has trouble justifying the description of a vehicle that is futuristic for the reader but actually belongs to the everyday reality of fictitious narratee, a film can show it without any problems. However, even in the movies, parts of encyclopaedic information, such as historical details, environmental information etc., cannot be revealed by the images and must be communicated (or suggested) otherwise. But, of course, the problem is less central than in written texts.
Notes

1. Note that, in Eco’s constructivist approach, when we refer to the Actual World, we do not refer directly to the phenomenal world of our experience, but to another cultural construct, that is not different in this respect from fictional worlds: in fact, it would not be possible to compare entities that do not have the same nature.

2. A different attempt to define sf on the basis of a typology of narrative worlds was made by Bandirali and Terrone: recovering Pavel’s ontological conception of possible worlds, they say of a primary ontology (the real world, traces of which are preserved in the movie) and a secondary ontology (the world created by the film, that is real inside the story). In any case, the secondary ontology is always the result of a speech act (the one of the film). Within this theoretical framework, Bandirali and Terrone define sf on the basis of the relationship of transformation between primary and secondary ontology. In sf, this relationship is given in terms of an ontological extension (secondary ontology is more extensive than primary, as the inventory of accessible entities is broader) and a technological intensification (such extension is due to an epistemology and a technique, meaning “a system of knowledge and procedures through which thought exercises its control over the world” [Bandirali and Terrone 2008, 19]). This allows us to distinguish sf from other genres, such as the techno-thriller (in which you have a surplus of technology, but no ontological extension) or fantasy tales (in which the technological extension is not related to a technological intensification).

3. Or, at least, if there is a difference, it is postulated on the basis of scientific extrapolation, as in the case of different planets or portions of universe that do not obey normal physical laws, such as the anomaly singularity described in the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy by M. John Harrison (2002-2012).

4. This proposal is intended only as a typology of different possible worlds, typical of each specific genre, and not a typology of genres. We believe that the different nature of worlds is not a sufficient condition to define what a genre is: in our opinion, in fact, genres are empirical entities or, better, discursive institutions recognized as such by producing institutions and audiences (Altman 1999); for this reason alone, they have communicative and pragmatic effectiveness (arousing expectations and addressing the work of interpretation). Not to mention that not all literary genres are distinguishable on the basis of the recurring features of their narrative worlds: if it is true for fantasy, sf, or the historical novel, conversely a romance novel, a Bildungsroman or a mystery novel can share the same narrative world (or, at least, the same type of world, similar for example to the Actual World), but what sets them apart and defines them are essentially their thematic or narrative structures.

5. This allows us to discriminate sf from other kinds of narratives in which technological or scientific innovations appear as “gadgets” with only a mar-
ginal role in fictional economy (for example, the invention of a new kind of weapon in a James Bond story), but also, as Suvin points out, from poetic metaphors or other literary forms that display new visions of the real, as is the case with Bertold Brecht’s “estrangement”.

6. This does not mean that sf should be based solely on scientific-technological postulates, but rather on knowledge that is generally respectful of scientific method and an explicit, consistent and immanent explanation of reality.

7. I speak of “epistemic foundations commonly accepted by our culture” because, of course, any distinction between natural and supernatural happenings are based on our beliefs and our encyclopedia of reference (Eco 1979).

8. Unpublished research we have carried out on a number of classic sf novels has shown that these elements are mainly related (in order of frequency) to: I. machinery and technological objects (often means of transport); II. exceptional individuals (monsters, mutants, aliens, etc.); III. locations; IV. other elements, among which: references to future historical events, references or citations of media and literary texts, elements of daily life (sometimes similar but slightly different from those of the Actual World), and references to news items.

Works cited


**About the author**

Paolo Bertetti has a PhD in Semiotics and Psychology of Symbolic Communication. He currently teaches theories and techniques of mass communication at the University of Siena, where he is also responsible for the organization of teaching of the Master’s degree in Business Communication. He has previously taught Semiotics of Audiovisual Text at the University of Siena, Philosophy and Theories of Languages at the Polytechnic of Turin, and Semiotics at the Universities of Pisa and Turin. His research interests concern Narratology, Analysis of Audiovisual Storytelling, Semiotic Theory, Semiotics of Film, and Semiotics of Text. He is also interested in the genres