

The Immersive Novel

Stefano Calabrese¹ & Sara Uboldi²

Abstract

The paper analyzes the emergence of an emotional immersion pattern in the works of authors of the contemporary bestselling such as Nobel prize winner Orhan Pamuk, in particular the novel *The Museum of Innocence*, the *Hunger Games* saga by Suzanne Collins and the Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *Tetralogy*, *El cementerio de los libros olvidados*.

Keywords: Bestseller, Immersivity, Orhan Pamuk, Serial Novel

1. Augmented Reality Novels

Orhan Pamuk has always been courting the idea that the reading of a story could change our fate inasmuch as, in 1994, he made it the subject of *The New Life*, a novel where Osman, the main character, first sees a book in the hands of a girl he falls in love with, and then he finds out that the same book, not its occasional reader, will change his life. Is it a parable on the performativity of narrations? A little thing in comparison with the successive novel *The Museum of Innocence* (2008), where the young and rich Kemal, engaged to the young and rich Sibel in Istanbul around 1975, meets the cousin Füsün, poor and already scarred by adventures of transgression in the city's oppressive setting. With Füsün, Kemal enters a new life. By loving, Kemal feels he resembles his beloved and ends up being, so to speak, absorbed to the point of a definitive isomorphism: "I could not deny the startling truth that when looking at Füsün, I saw someone familiar, someone I felt I knew intimately. She resembled me" (Pamuk 2009: 13). Abandoning the flare for vertigo typical of post-modern novels - upon which Bruce Kaplan's nice cartoon in Figure 1 ironizes -, *The museum of Innocence* is about love with no ifs or buts.

The narrator is extremely skillful in immersing us in the maze of roads walked by the two characters to their meetings in a flat in Istanbul, of which we are given the complete address; all is vehement and memorable, every moment of the day seems to disentangle from routine and seek asylum into the two characters' claustal passion. However, the reality of love soon gives way to a stylistic tic, according to which a lot of the objects or of the scenes which enter the story are preceded by anchoring the linguists call deictics (demonstrative pronouns, space and time adverbs etc...): this object, this situation, these things. Furthermore, the reader is treated as a viewer who can both read the elements of the story and visualize them, or even visit them. Though meticulous, the reality of this "realistic" story is swept away and replaced with a more vivid, 3D one. It happens for the first time on page 21, when the narrator suddenly says: "Here I am exhibiting the newspaper advertisements, the commercials, and the bottles of strawberry, peach, orange, and sour cherry flavors of Turkey's first domestic fruit soda, Meltem, in memory of our optimism and the happy-go-lucky spirit of the day". From this moment we are immersed in a deictic carnival of here and this: "One evening, while we were eating at Fuaye, Sibel gave me a fragrance called Spleen that she'd bought for me in Paris; I exhibit it here." (Pamuk 2009, 35); "Here I exhibit a cutting from *Aksam*" (Pamuk 2009, 223), etc... Where are we? Which bizarre intersemiosis are we the modest decoders of?

¹University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. E-mail address: stefano.calabrese@unimore.it

²University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. E-mail address: sara.uboldi@unimore.it

The narrator accompanies us, as readers, through the plot, temporally fractioned from 1975 to 2003 and spatially concentrated in a few neighborhoods in Istanbul; as onlookers he invites us for a guided tour to a museum where relics and wrecks are collected, proofs of the story we are reading. As readers, we mentally reconstruct the possible worlds of the novel; as onlookers we perceive in multimodal forms (we see, touch, smell) what we believed was fiction and now seems reality - the reality of a metalepsis. In this way the deictic profusion of here, now and this acts as a release from the reality from which we were reading the text in order to be introduced to a second reality in which we are immersed just like into an aesthetic installation. Indeed the narrative work proceeds without repentance towards this objective: to self-destroy as a verbal narration in order to revive as a visual story, by moving from imagination to the imagined reality. Therefore the narrator/museum exhibitor and the reader/visitor flow across the love story, in double-entry system, on semiotic channels that run parallel and tend to reinforce each other; as to the character- coinciding with the narrative self for most of the novel - while experiencing his love story, he collects visual memorabilia that have a therapeutic function for the pain which soon replaces happiness. By now these objects were no longer just tokens of moments in my life, nor merely mementos; to me they were elemental to those moments. For example, the matchboxes on display in the Museum of Innocence: Füsün touched every one of them, leaving behind the scent of her hands with its hint of rosewater. As with so many other things on exhibit in my museum, whenever I held any of these matchboxes back at the Merhamet Apartments, I was able to relive the pleasure of sharing a table with Füsün, and gazing into her eyes. But even before that, whenever I dropped a matchbox into my pocket, pretending not to notice what I had done, there was another reason to rejoice. I may not have “won” the woman I loved so obsessively, but it cheered me to have broken off a piece of her, however small” (Pamuk 2009, 283).

The verbal novel by Pamuk is oriented to model itself into a museum, a sort of thematic park, like the one built in Florida to adapt Harry Potter’s plots into augmented reality, or “Dickens world” just outside London. The plot sometimes stands still to give way to a photographic summary, the Museum of the museum, and the narrator has the plot’s highlights, developed till that moment, painted by professional artists. Why did the author adopt the double-entry structure - a novel/museum, reader/visitor frame - for this text? We find it towards the end of the novel, when the narrator talks about the sensation of unreality and elusiveness, similar to that generated by dream, alcohol, hashish, experienced during the years of the loss of desire: it is the impossibility to feel completely part of the present, because we live it as a memory at the very time it happens, to make us not actors in the scene of life, but witnesses. The “visitors of the Museum of Innocence have to consider the exposed objects...not as something really existing, but as my memories”, the memory of what was experienced by the narrator as a memory. The “Museum of Innocence” is the 3D container of the story that is told in the novel; Kemal decides to set it up in the flat where he experienced his love story with Füsün: he wants both the museum and its fictional equivalent, and to obtain it he goes to a professional writer, Orhan Pamuk, already present in a previous scene of the plot and that indeed starts speaking in first person on page 319 of the text: “From the next paragraph until the end, it will, in essence, be Orhan who is telling the story. Having paid Füsün such sincere, detailed attention during their dance, he will, I am sure, do no less in these last pages. Farewell! HELLO, THIS IS ORHAN PAMUK!” (Pamuk 2009, 319).

The narrative self is double (Kemal and Pamuk, who tries to put himself in Kemal’s shoes), as the recipient of the story (a reader and a visitor) and the semiotic score: on the one hand the novel that we are reading, on the other The Museum of Innocence that we first visit through the novel - a museum-home, familiar and lived-in, not a home-museum that makes private existence monumental, as the narrator points out, certain that we should live a museum, not just visit it (Pamuk 2009, 319) -, then in the real life’s world. Actually The Museum of Innocence opened in Istanbul in 2010. It is situated in Çukurcuma’s area, in a three-floor block of flats with dark red walls, on the corner of Çukurcuma Caddesi and Dalgıç Sokak, where Kemal would look for Füsün’s ghost; it is in the city guidebooks and the reader gets a free entry ticket on page 319 of the novel; he has only to cut it out and give it to the keeper. From the novel to the museum, from the word to the three-dimensional reality: the crossmediality did not finish here, because Pamuk finally published *The Innocence of Objects*, a catalogue of the things present in a museum inspired by a novel where a love story is told and documented by the protagonist in view of setting up a museum etc... How shall we interpret this metaleptic vertigo, which leads us from a fictional character - Kemal - to a living author - Orhan Pamuk - , and from fiction to a piece of Istanbul reality we can see, touch, hear, smell and listen to?

Let's start from the consideration that today writers aspire to mix up with their fiction's characters or disguise themselves among the readers like never before, from Dan Brown giving interviews in Florence, near the corners mentioned in *Inferno*, and dressing as Robert Langdon, to Carlos Ruiz Zafón who presents his novel *El juego del ángel*, sequel of *La sombra el viento*, in a dusty place, with spiral staircases, old tables and four thousand old books, purchased by the pound by Planeta publishing house, in order to make fictional what in first degree fiction is the "Forgiven Books Cemetery". In all these cases, reading becomes a simulation of possible existences, where it does not matter the level of plausibility of what we read but the reader's close proximity to the text. If the hocus-pocus of the novel makes the reader soluble in the text, by capturing him in the character's orbit or, in a more radical way, of a narrator that is very often the decal of the real author, it has to be said that such a pervasive full immersion was never seen: the avant-gardes of the twentieth century had proclaimed an equivalence between art and life, but now it seems that the narrations do not want to finish, tending to an insuppressible survival thanks to the passage from one medium to another. I call immersivity this "survival" so well represented by Pamuk, and in the following pages I shall support the hypothesis that it applies as a well-established element, if not as the most salient component, in the best seller's grammar.

2. The Serialization

It is not difficult to realize that in the last fifteen years the successful novels have given rise to trilogies, quadrilogies and even pentalogies: a case history to which we should add all the narrative extensions forwards (sequel) or backwards (prequel). Also the "adaptations" are finally included in the phenomenology of the to-be-continued, that is the phenomenon on the basis of which a novel is trans-coded into a film or vice versa, and the same story can reincarnate into a video game, a theatre script, a screenplay, a television serial, a thematic park etc... Most of the best sellers this writing is about represent serial chains (by structuring themselves as sagas, for example), and inter-medial, forcing a text to reincarnate as video game, theme park attraction, web site, graphic novel, music cover, opera, musical, choreography, radio and theatre performance, cinema and television too. Since an adaptation is a form of "repetition without reduplication able to survive - according to Linda Hutcheon - just because it can conciliate the force of an existing model with the vitality of a new model, the strong process of the narrations' adaptation could be associated with the biological one of genetic adaptation, through which something is made suitable to a given place" (Hutcheon 2011, 58): in a sort of Darwinian fight for survival, made fierce by the global dimensions of the publishing market, texts need to undergo transformations, adjusting themselves to the changing cultural and medial conditions of the environment, so as to escape from immobility, disappearance or unintelligibility. Every adaptation is an "indigenization", the way in which the individual (narrative) fits the surroundings (Hutcheon 2011, 209). If we limit ourselves to the calendar year 2013 and consult the New York Times figures, the list of best sellers which (a) are part of a serial fiction and (b) have at least given rise to an adaptation or re-mediation (films, video games etc...) soon appears substantial, even if from this short list we take out the novels adapted into movies but not serialized.

E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011): it is an erotic film which develops as the spin-off of the *Twilight* saga and it is part of a trilogy together with *Fifty Shades of Black* (2012) and *Fifty Shades of Red* (2012); the first adaptation was made in 2014.

D. Brown, *Hell* (2013): at the moment it is the final chapter of a quadrilogy together with *Angels & Demons* (2000), *The DaVinci Code* (2003), *The Lost Symbol* (2009); the first two have already been adapted for the cinema, while the third is expected in 2015.

D. Baldacci, *The Forgotten* (2012): it is part of a serial fiction based on the figure of John Puller, a special agent of the army, including *Zero Day* (2011) and then *The Escape*; *Zero Day* as a film adaptation is expected for 2015.

C. Hoover, *Hopeless* (2012): it is part of a love serial fiction together with *The Best First Kiss From Holder's POV* (2012), *Losing Hope* (2013), *Finding Cinderella* (2013); an adaptation for a television series is being put into production.

S. Meyer, *The Host* (2008): it is a science-fiction film, particularly aimed at teenagers; it is the story of an alien soul that takes possession of the body of a human being and it is part of a trilogy of which we are expecting the following chapters; the film adaptation came out in 2013.

G.R.R. Martin, *A game of Thrones: a fantasy solid saga, still unfinished*, which includes *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996), *Trail of the Wolfe and Dance with Dragons* (1998), *A storm of Swords* (2000), *The Winds of Winter* (2005), and *A Fest for Crowis* (2011). Since 2010 the HBO channel has produced a series of great success, which is now broadcast in Italy, and numerous role games based on the cards of *A game of Thrones* have been created; at the moment three video games which imitate Martin's fantasy saga are marketed.

J. McGuire, *Walking Disaster* (2013): it is the second volume of the erotic-sentimental serial fiction whose first act is *Walking Disaster* (2012: the version from her point of view of what it is told according to his point of view in *Walking Disaster*); the prequel *A Beautiful Wedding* (2013) has been added later.

J. Archer, *Best Kept Secret* (2013): it is part of the serial fiction "Clifton Chronicles" together with *Only Time Will Tell* (2012), *The Sins of the Father* (2012), *Be Careful What You Wish For* (2014). The film adaptation is being put into production.

L. Child, *Never Go Back* (2013): it is the eighteenth volume of a serial fiction based on the character of Jack Reacher; in 2005 a volume of the series was adapted (Jack Reacher, with Tom Cruise), while the film version of *Never Go Back*, sequel of the previous film, is being put into production.

J. Grisham, *Sycamore Row* (2013): it is the sequel of the previous *A time to kill* (1989); it is now being adapted into film as the preceding.

In short, all is repeated. Or better all that has success tends to be reiterated - where the word success does not mean, as the Marxist critics meant it, "imposed by the cultural industry", but rather "fit for producing interest and pleasure for a substantial audience of users".

To wonder why this is happening means getting closer to the manufacturing secrets of the global best seller: even *Love Story* by Erich Segal, which was published in February 1970 and sold ten million copies, was born as a script for a film which Paramount released after the novel (in December 1970), though they had asked Segal to make a novel out of the film. The issue is crucial and it is well worth asking what the causes of serialization are.

3. Why do we live of Serial Fictions?

First answer. It is a marketing strategy to determine serializations, put to use by publishers: given a successful plot, it is lengthened as an elastic in all directions, both backward in time (prequel), by making the past of a present that we have known, and forward (sequel), extending the event in a time following the one in which the story is over; and also laterally (spin-off), taking a secondary story's character and making him/her become the main character of the next story. Since the nineteenth century the transmedial restructuring of the large international publishers (the so-called multimedia conglomerates) has led the publishers to have more and more interest in producing also television programmes, cds, video games, cinema adaptations. In this way, the novel is just the humble interpreter of a global entertainment market which contemplates many other forms: if 65% of books sold in The United States in 1958 came from the best fifty publishers, 88% came from only 5 conglomerates in 2010. And these apparently impose a picture of the present cultural consumption far more unitary than in the past: a cross-medial blend of music, literature, cinema, journalistic information, television entertainment and collateral activities. Furthermore, the conglomerates support the merchandising deriving from a work of imagination from the inside, so as to extend fiction to daily life. If a conglomerate pays the author copyright to Suzanne Collins for *The Hunger Games*, the production company adapting the novel for the big screen will pay nothing for the copyright, if that company belongs to the conglomerate group. So that what I pay for the full exploitation of a text is drastically cut down, while the profits from the exploitation of the same text is multiplied exponentially.

The increasing influence of cross-mediality in the novel world however is only one of the aspects of the cross-medial turning in western culture, and it cannot have been induced by a group of nasty and profit-oriented entrepreneurs. If cross-mediality is by this time a constitutive feature of the present media systems - in the intersection point between production and fruition, business requirements and artistic ambitions, in such a way that media should not be thought of as merely independent or opposite but as working on interdependent assumptions and linked to the point of creating an unlimited flow of adaptations - we are just as responsible. The web cross-community, the "democratic" people born from it are not easily manageable anymore. This first is no answer to the complexity of the global fictional market. Second answer. It's us, the readers, who have determined the cross-medial turning and let the demand of adaptations rise: through the massive and continuous ingestion of fictions which are interrelated we want to experience a parallel life, or more simply live the fiction as if it were a piece of reality going on with us day by day.

The so-called couch potato consumption (I watch all the fictions on my sofa, in order to be disconnected from the environmental context) or what is known as binge reading (the massive and impulsive fruition of the same aesthetic product) are not inventions of a marketing guru, but forms of “feeding” established by the readers. According to these readers/viewers a story should be “liquid”, temporally fluidifying itself, like television, which has adopted serialization for ages, has taught us to appreciate: television time has the advantage to be a flow that tends to make the starting and ending borders less perceivable, but also to set up stories less consequential and linearly structured than those born in the literary medium, with the result that many television genres place side by side different narrating lines and shift point of view alternatively from a character to another, from a situation to another, making temporal relation before/after difficult to perceive.

Therefore television has invented a new model of seriality and ratified a new generation of users, but then the web has liberalized the serial fruition and transformed it further. The Netflix’s website, which contrasts piracy by selling the most important television series in streaming on demand at a low price, has noticed a tendency from the audience to watch the episodes of a whole seasonal serial all at a time. Just as binge eating (the bulimic big meal), binge watching is a hyper-exposure to the TV serial programmes, a ten-hour immersion into fictional worlds, and binge reading is a fidelization of the ardent reader devouring book after book, following his/her heroes and heroines along paths indefinitely prolonged. Serial fiction consumption has steadily entered the lifestyle of today’s global aesthetic market; it can remodel time, space and the reader/viewer’s identity in two different ways, currently in process of implosion: the open serial, with a potentially unlimited saga structure based on a group of characters whose existence evolves together with ours; or the closed serial, with a structure divided into episodes bound to a conclusion, based on a main character whose identity is perfectly recognizable, for example Camilleri’s *Montalbano* (Grignaffini 2008). If the novel had so far avoided the open model of seriality preferring the closed one, at present it tends to ground itself in the episodic structure of the closed serial, though turning its consumption into the forms characteristic of the open model. For once let’s make an Italian example: The success of *Romanzo criminale* by Giancarlo De Cataldo (2002) first led to a film adaptation in 2005 and then to a television serialization, *Romanzo Criminale - La serie*, which was broadcast from 2008 to 2010 with 22 narrative units. Pantographed to global dimensions, the example of *Romanzo Criminale* is not different from the current success of G. R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones*, a fantasy novel which is only the first part of the saga’s starting book called *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

This best seller’s publishing story is emblematic. *Game Of Throne* was born as a serial narration where some characters, linked for ancestry reasons or politic militancy, share the novel’s chapters both from the point of view of the point of view (they are POV characters, point of view: they observe the actions told by the narrative self in third person, and in *Game of Thrones* there are 9 POV characters) and from the point of view of the adventures of which they are time to time the protagonists. But while the readers can follow the *Game of Thrones* through the saga’s volumes which are successively released, the serial density coefficient suddenly rises with the publishing of (1) a summary in form of serial spin-off, such as *Dragonslayer*, which speaks about Princess Daenerys’ adventures, (2) a serial graphic novel in 24 releases, (3) a television serial that has been broadcast everywhere in the world since 2011. After 4 seasons and 40 episodes, the TV serial is still being produced and the wave of success has just reached many countries, including Italy. It may be thought that the fantasy setting of *Game of Thrones* weakens in the reader the desire to immerse in times and places so distant from reality, but it is exactly the opposite. Real life is buried by fantasy, and *Game of Thrones*’s author explains why: “The best fantasy is written in the language of dreams. It is alive as the dreams are alive, more real than real, at least for a moment, that magic moment before the awakening” (Grossmann 2007).

Of course, the open serialization (parallel to real life) has tended to become closed for ages. The *X-Files* TV series, despite having the characteristics of a closed series, where each episode has its independent plot and continuity is given by the protagonists Mulder and Scully, actually develops a parallel macro-narration that is created fragment by fragment in every episode, with a narrative expedient which is typical of the open serial; and similarly films and novels in form of serial fictions produce episodes composed of plots both continuative and closed in themselves. These combinations, called flexi-narrative, are progressively supplanting the clear division between continuative and episodic serial forms, as pointed out in *Game of Thrones*’ late-medieval imagery, whose light and dark could reach in streaming the reader/viewer directly these days. Nothing can be immersive that is not flexible, closed and open, real and imaginary, present and future. Third answer.

The proliferation of adaptations derives from the confluence of the semiotic codes: on one hand the novels' verbal language has got simpler in a paratactic mono-language where verbal expressionism has almost disappeared and the dialogues have more space (Coletti 2011, 21 ss.), much easier to readapt to visual language; on the other hand by this time the cine-TV narrations have reached very high standards - as *Lost* shows, characterized by a chronology and focusing extremely complex typical of literary tradition. An American researcher has demonstrated that cine-TV products require from viewers active methods of cognitive involvement similar to the literary ones, inviting audiences to decode the narration's riddles and formulate or reconsider the hypotheses in order to create their personal vision of the plot (Mittel 2007, 170). Up to 20 years ago it was thought that adaptations were derivative and subordinate, a form of sabotage or tampering with a source text, while at present we see the texts adapted, even when they involve substantial cutting (scenes, ironies, semantic complexities), as a way to orient the attention to the source-text, mixing in something different and new.

If we consider Harry Potter's film adaptations, which have been going on nearly in parallel with the novels' publishing (8 feature films from 2001 to 2011), it seems that this perfusion has truly occurred, and Harry's face has become forever the actor's, Daniel Radcliffe, growing up together with his fictional twin brother. With the introduction of the magic element that, for example, can show the character's inner desires as if they were reflected in a mirror - Rowling has been able to combine with such a rare skill the indirect and displaced communication of the novel - which describes, comments, expands or summarizes - with the cinema direct communication. We could say that Harry Potter's serial fiction is adaptogenic, because he has got a lot of dialogues, he stages characters emergent or strongly individualized in specific roles, and whose thoughts reach us thanks to magic instruments (Hutcheon 2011, 19). Does the tendency to serialization and cross-medial adaptation depend on media's languages getting to look like each other nowadays? If it is true, we should expect even a solid semiotic activity not only from verbal to visual (from novels to films), but also from visual to verbal: it is so, and there are a lot of cases of novelization, when a novelist adapts a film. But let's make a still more juicy example in order to show that at present we need cross-medial competences to make a best seller; we need to be scriptwriters starting to write novels or novelists becoming scriptwriters of a TV series etc... Carlos Ruiz Zafón, author of best sellers over the threshold of 10 million copies, in particular *La sombra el viento* (2002), the first volume of the tetralogy *El cementerio de los libros olvidados*, including *El juego del ángel* (2008) and *El prisionero del cielo* (2011: the fourth volume is in production). He made a first appearance with a teenagers' serial fiction, *Trilogía de la niebla*, but before that he was the director of an advertising agency and later, since 1996, he has been working as screen player for the great Hollywood industry. Tens of scripts written for very poor quality movies and never signed by his own name have oriented the Zafón's writing to visual language. With a culinary metaphor, in a statement made to the digital newspaper *El cultural*, in June 2014, Zafón defined the screenplay as a bouillon cube of glutamate, and the novel as a dish of braised meat in which the cube will be one of the many seasonings. A virtuoso of semiotic codes, to the point he composes special music for each novel he writes. Let's read this repented screen player:

"I compose soundtracks for all my novels, musical miniatures to help me conceive the story and look for relations that I did not imagine, and I draw upon instruments in some way audiovisual, so that in my novels readers look for the tactile depth of surfaces and lights, but the structural complexity and intensity of the novel's characters would be lost at the cinema; readers can take the best image from the theatre of their imagination". This is the exception that proves the rule: Zafón is so used to the screen player's working style and to conceiving his serials as inter-semiotic structures, even endowed with a sound track, that he refuses to sell his copyrights to film producers. He has been perentory about this in interviews, the last time in 2011: *La sombra el viento* will not become a film, "no está en venta para el cine". Indeed Zafón's novels are already films, with a morbid attention to light conditions (misty, blinding, evanescent), macabre scene furniture of vaguely potterian inspiration (ingenious devices and semi-magic machinery, straight from a timeless past) and unnatural scenery to make locations suitable for the story and represent an easily recognizable visual mark. Why should such cinematographic novels be turned into films?

Also zafonmania, developed after the release of *La sombra el viento*, and the fact that Barcelona's toponymy is well detailed in the novel - every Touristic Information Centre organizes guided tours through the places in Catalonia mentioned in *La sombra el viento* - explain the reason why there was no need for a film adaptation. For example the novelist/screenplayer organizes the descriptions of post-war Barcelona at the beginning of *La sombra el viento* film sequences, where the editing gives essence to the images, alternating close-ups and long fields, slow motions and fade-outs: "Las farolas de las Ramblas dibujaban una avenida de vapor, parpadeando al tiempo que la ciudad se desprendía y se desprendía de sudisfraz de acuarela.

Al llegar a la calle Arco de Teatro nos aventuramos camino del Raval bajo la arcada que prometía una bóveda de bruma azul” (Zafón 2004, 18). [The Ramblas’ lampposts drew a road of vapour, flashing at the same time the city stretched and took off his watercolour costume. Reaching Theatre Arch Street we ventured towards Raval under the arches which allowed a light-blue mist spiral] “Una penumbra azulada lo cubrió todo, insinuando apenas trazos de una escalinata de mármol y una galería de frescos poblados con figuras de ángeles y criaturas fabulosas. Seguimos al guardián a través de aquel corredor palaciego y llegamos a una gran sala circular donde una auténtica basílica de tinieblas yació bajo una cúpula acuchillada por haces de luz que pendían desde lo alto. Un laberinto de corredores y estanterías repletas de libros ascendían desde la base hasta la cúspide, dibujando una colmena tramada de túneles, escalinatas, plataformas y puentes que dejaban adivinar una gigantesca biblioteca de geometría imposible” (Zafón 2004, 19). [A light-blue half-light covered all, leaving insinuating strokes of a marble staircase and a gallery of frescos populated by figures of angels and extraordinary creatures. We followed the watchman through that corridor and reached a big circular living room where an authentic cathedral of fog laid under the dome crossed by beams of light which hung above.

A gaze of corridors and shelves full of books that ascended from the base to the pinnacle, drawing a beehive patterned with tunnels, staircases, platforms and bridges which let guess a huge library from the impossible structure]. “Aquella tarde, después de cerrar la tienda, mi padre sugirió que nos acercásemos hasta el café de Els Quatre Gats en la calle Montsió, donde Barceló y sus compañeros mantenían una tertulia bibliófila de breves poemas, lenguas muertas y obras maestras abandonadas a merced de polilla” (Zafón 2004, 19) [That evening, after having closed the shop, my father suggested on going toward the Els Quatre Gats Café at Montsió Street, where Barceló and his friends hold a bibliophile circle on damned poets, dead languages and main works abandoned at the mercy of termites] (Zafón 2004, 29). Linda Hutcheon wrote that adaptations and remakes have always an “Edipic” relation with another first level work, making a sort of rival present, where the adapting text is in the position to overpower the adapted text (Hutcheon 2011, 28). Zafón - this Catalan writer who dreams the modernist dreams of Borges and lives in Los Angeles - has made the miracle to do all by himself: his best sellers are novels-films-grand operas which have been auto-readapted and we watch as films because, as films, they predispose to immersivity.

4. The Global Best Seller’s Genome: Immersivity

According to Marie-Laure Ryan one of the main characteristics of digital media, introduced in the nineties, is their reactive and interactive nature, where “reactivity” means the answer to the setting changes or the user’s unintentional actions, and with “interactivity” the answer to an action deliberated by the user (Ryan 2004: 338). Now, one of the new forms of storytelling is the immersive fiction, a narration where the text tells events in a simulated way and where the user controls a character or identifies with him, as in a video game. If in the latter inputs and outputs are often completely textual, with commands such as “look through the window”, “attack the dragon”, “ask information for the motorway”, Ryan claims that immersivity works without specific commands and it has now entered the habits of the user of aesthetic products. Immersivity has become the new barrier of cultural consumption because the man-to-man fight between text and context, author and recipient, subject and object have all come to an end. Now there is only the prosumer, the producer-consumer according to the Ikea model, and the idea of art as object of “frontal” contemplation has definitely disappeared in favor of installations, where the visitor “enters” the artistic text and is submerged by it (Ryan 2011). Frank Rose, in his latest book *The Art of Stories. How the Digital Generation is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories* (2012), claims rightly that the imposing of web and not-sequential reading methods have revealed a new model of empathy, based on the recipient’s emotive participation and on his identification with the narration’s source, up to the point of a substantial indistinction. It is the end of the reader, turned into prosumer. It is the end of the “spectator”, turned into a participating observer, the spectactor (Rose 2013: 80 ss.). Here is the birth of widespread forms of authorship, such as the fanfictions. We could state that everything becomes immersive when:

- (i) There is simultaneity and real time;
- (ii) The aesthetic work involves all the perceptive system, from sight to smell and touch, as in thematic parks (for example the latest “The Wizarding World of Harry Potter” in Florida) and in brand stores of the new generation (such as Heineken in Amsterdam);

- (iii) Narrations are in first person and pretend to take place in the present reading time, like *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, which begins with “When I wake up, the other side of bed is cold. I stretch my fingers in order to look for Prim’s heat, but I find only the rough canvas of the mattress’ lining” (Collins 2009: 11), or *Adultérioby* Paulo Coelho, which begins with “Every morning, when I open my eyes on what is called ‘new day’, I want to close it and not get out of bed. But I have to do it” (Coehlo 2014: 7).

The explanation that Frank Rose provides for this is very complex. Our mind elaborates reality through neuro-cognitive mapping where all comes simultaneously, without a before and after, so that plunging in means letting my time and my space disappear in favor of the other’s time and space, or at least making them simultaneous; furthermore the web participatory experience has produced a type of “beehive” perspective, where the increasing profusion of links makes the electrochemical gelatine necessary to activate neurons and synapses produce connections on a large scale and induce a loss of identity of the individual. Finally, we should not forget that interactivity and 2.0. sharing has produced an authentic reality hunger, as it was called by David Shields, “whose key elements are causality, spontaneity and emotional urgency, participation and reader-viewer captivation, autobiography with anthropological function, desire of authenticity matched with the enthusiasm of artifice and simulation”(Shields 2010: 28).

Researchers dealing with novels from a psychological point of view claim that narrative transportation is a high-impact experience able to confer to the reader the sensation of getting lost in an alternative world (Green, Brock, Kaufman 2004): a deeply engaged individual turns into a sort of avatar emotionally and cognitively involved in first person in the story, thanks to a like-experiential flow which triggers vivid mental images. The narrative language does not behave as a mere mirroring system, which reflects the external reality, but it is reality itself, a contingent reality but with lasting effects (Laer et al. 2014: 11). Immersivity also implies that our dispositions towards fictional characters are different depending on whether they defend or transgress moral laws. According to recent tests, during the reading of a book or the viewing of a film, we monitor the characters looking for individuals who behave well, and we take pleasure when the transgressor of the social rules is punished. The notion is not trivial: the reader’s mind acts as a moral controller constantly engaged in judging the characters’ actions as appropriate or not, clapping or condemning their purposes and deeds. Psychologists define it a “vicarious” apprehension which leads the reader to look for “justice”, and the most extraordinary thing is that the process seems to be linked to some increased levels of oxytocin in the readers’ blood: this hormone is considered an empathy indicator, able to increase the tendency to morality, the individuals’ generosity and the consumers’ passion for brand products. The neuro-economist Paul Zak, director of the Center for Neuroeconomic Studies of Claremont Graduate University, tried to measure the levels of cortisol (the hormone of stress and attention) and oxytocin (“the moral molecule”) in a group of individuals who had been asked to let themselves empathize in a narration, animated in Disneyland style; They were surprised to find out a relation between the increase of oxytocin and the plot’s “fair” evolution (Zak 2012, 30ss.). Who does a story belong to if it is told in Augmented Reality and stimulates the full immersivity of the reader? Let’s investigate the fusion model of novel, created by Suzanne Collins, in order to find it out.

5. The “Fusion” Novel by Suzanne Collins

Suzanne Collins was born in Hartford in Connecticut in 1962. His father was an official of the Air Force who, fond of war history, during his time off drove the family on the battlefields in order to reason of military strategies. He was also a veteran of Vietnam, where he went while the four-year-old daughter daydreamt a lot about it noting down these fancies in words and images (Grossman 2013, 32). The picture ebook *Year of the Jungle* (2013) was born from these sketches, designed for an audience less mature than the young adults of *Hunger Games*, but it was just where the writer started to make up a personal mythology and to promote herself as a writer (Collins 2014, 12 ss.). After graduating in Communication Sciences and having worked since 1991 as a scriptwriter of children’s TV programs, in 2003-2004 Collins had a great success with the fantasy saga *Gregor*, in five volumes, in which the protagonist is an eleven-year-old boy. All changed quickly in 2008 with the publishing of *Hunger Games*, the first volume of a trilogy which includes also *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). Although in Panem - the country where the stories of *Hunger Games* take place - everything is videotaped, monitored, analyzed by the dark Government of Capitol City and the Games are broadcast on air and in real time, Collins has always avoided a media overexposure, perhaps because she did not need it. The trilogy figures are baffling: 90 million copies sold in the world; translated into 40 languages; the best-sold Amazon-for-Kindle fiction work (over a million digital copies); in the top ten of the *New York Times* for 60 consecutive weeks; the dystopian novel best sold in the history of publishing after 1984 by George Orwell (see Figure 2), and we could go on.

The original idea for *Hunger Games* is told by the author as the result of TV zapping between a reality show and a report on a war conflict: “in a channel a group of young people competing for money, in another a group of young people who were fighting a real war. I felt tired, the narrative lines began to mix up and I thought of *Hunger Games’ story*” (McDonald 2012, 8-15). An excellent example of fusion narration, able to shake dystopia and teen romance, action movie and Bildungsroman of “de-formation”, science fiction and post-modern contephilosophique, *Hunger Games* made Collins famous as a literary fusioner who opted for a transverse narration but always in augmented reality: she, the Author, sails on the high wave of the conversational genres, she avoids the pulp genre’s intellectual freezing and therefore supports the philosophical reflection, as the academically authoritative volumes dedicated to her show, for example *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason* (Dunn et al. 2012). But what is *Hunger Games* about? It is a dystopian novel set in (1) a hypothetical and post-apocalyptic future, following the destruction of North America, (2) in a country called Panem, composed by the rich capital, Capitol City, and 12 poor districts. Among these, District 12, from where the protagonist Katniss comes, is placed in a region rich of petrol, called Appalachia.

As a punishment for a previous attempt of rebellion to the power of Capitol City, every year one boy and one girl between 12 and 18 years old are taken by chance (during the so-called “Harvesting”) from each district and obliged to participate to the *Hunger Games*, a TV event where the protagonists or “tributes” must fight until death in a prearranged place, the “Arena”, until only one of them survives. The narrative work of Suzanne Collins is completely handcrafted: each thing is invented, given a name and described in order to be submitted to a set of rules which makes the novel similar to a board game, with some possible permutations, gains, problem solving stages and characters linked by systemic relations. The work of invention, if we may say so, is excellent, and everything appears different from the real world: pea-green bodies; characters that speak in a peculiar way, with an “extended hiss” and “odd vocals, pronouncing syncopated words”; buildings painted like lollipops “which we could never afford to buy at the District 12’s small bakery (Collins 2009, 64). The fusion cookery is more than ever immersive: we are in a true, self-sufficient world, and real because its predominant themes are hunger, thirst, love, hate, war, family, sex. Even the *Hunger Games* are events halfway between the ancient games of roman gladiators and the modern reality shows: 24 boys between 12 and 18 years old, males and females, fight each other usque ad mortem in a specific set called “Arena”, an apparently natural location, but created artificially by the Strategists: definitely a non-place (Pharr et al. 2012, 201 ss.). Cameras scattered among the vegetation film the Tributes continuously and in real time; the Arena shares with TV studios the fact that weather conditions can be controlled according to the Strategists’ will, by causing drought and floods, telluric events and other natural phenomena. We are immersed in the alkaline solution of *Hunger Games*. The time of the story will last two weeks, but our reading’s time will be shorter, 8, at most 10 hours during which we weigh anchor, say good-bye to daily routine and go down to the *Hunger Games’* underground world. On one hand the characters, which experience everything “live”, on the other we, readers/spectators, urged to flow into those characters’ identity.

Everything is filtered through the eyes of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, (the story is completely female, a very militarized female), who narrates in first person and describes what happens with the narrative present: “I lift my legs out of bed”, for example, we read at the beginning of the novel, “and I slide directly into the hunting boots. Soft skin which has been adapted to my feet. I put on a pair of trousers and a t-shirt, I put the long dark tress inside the cap and I take the bag of fodder” (Collins 2009, 12). The narration consists in a long, incessant sequence-shot from which the intervention of a narrative direction working on the editing is excluded. Collins’ apprenticeship is meaningful of the fact that nowadays the most successful novels are written by people that cut their teeth on script work. Born as a screenwriter, the author selects disposable words, without semantic depths difficult to sound out, and has got a good crafts in the cut-and-past when it comes to segment the story in micro-narrative packets, succeeding in making texts that are already at a pre-adaptation stage, suitable to an intersemiotic circulation. The novel contains some summaries - perhaps we should call them highlights, given their filmic origin -, which nevertheless the first person narrator, while she is telling the story in sequence-shot, has to justify at the level of the narrated story (and not of narrative discourse): “To concentrate several weeks in three hours”- we can read with reference to the final show in which the winners enter the scene – “is a good exploit, especially if we consider how many cameras were in operation all together. Whoever assembles the synthesis, has to choose what kind of story should be told.

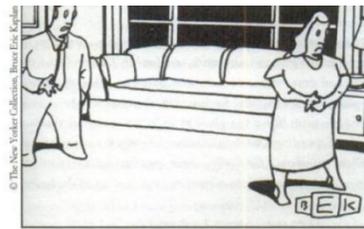
This year, for the first time, a love story has been chosen. It is true that Peeta and me have won, but the space that they have dedicated to us from the very beginning is out of proportion” (Collins 2009, 360). If the characters act and at the same time see themselves on a screen while acting, as if they represented the reader/viewer look, directing it (“First I am petrified, then I see our image on a big TV screen and I am speechless seeing how extraordinary our appearance is”) (Collins 2009, 75), the way the narrator furnishes the text’s possible world is rigorous, millimetric, suitable to encourage the immersion of the reader, who sees everything because everything can be seen: in the imaginary world of Hunger Games the characters have got a GPS under their skin, read the other protagonists’ fate in a video-projection oriented to the sky and their body is a dreamlike and glittered fetish - like the body of Katniss (“Big dark eyes, red intense lips, eyelashes which give flashes of light when I blink my eyelids. Finally they sprinkle my body with gold dust, making it shine”) (Collins 2009, 123). It was said that the ages of economic recession and political-religious conflict, as the present age, would be those where the dystopian genre has a great success (see figure 1) because it encourages the reader’s immersivity better than other novel typologies and because comparison with a model of loss (dystopia) helps us see the historical reality as a compensation (utopia).

When readers visit the immersive story world of Hunger Games, they soon begin to adapt to its laws, different to a various extent from the laws enforced in the real world they come from: in spite of their trying to build on the knowledge deriving from their life’s past experience in order to move in the plot, it is not them who lead the game. First they become unable to formulate inferences starting from the real world’s principles, because these have been already undermined, then, as it happens in every mental intense activity, the deep immersion in the textual world lets the immediate context and the daily interests disappear from their conscience. Of course, no syndrome of Don Quixote. The reader who enjoys the pleasure of immersion keeps reality distinct from the fictional plot, helped in this by the dystopian and e futurible atmosphere in Hunger Games. Nevertheless readers need to elaborate a mental mapping of the narrative space by elaborating it on the basis of different textual clues, which have to be linked and synthesized in a panoramic view of the plot, obtained through an inductive process of construction. A complex exercise, but not too much: Collins’ descriptive precision allows us to avoid the insertion of geographical maps, as it happens for example in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nigh-time* (2003) by Mark Haddon or *Mänsomhatakvinnor* [The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo] (2005) by Stieg Larsson. Pushed by the astute use of the first person and the recourse to the sequence shot, enmeshed in the real time of a very detailed plot, the reader can rely on a limited number of constitutive rules and passions which he recognizes as its own: The mayor gets on the platform and starts to read. It is the same story every year. He tells of Panem, the country risen from the ashes of a place called North America once upon a time. He makes a list of the disasters, droughts, hurricanes, fires, the advance of the seas which swallowed up a good part of the mainland, the brutal fight for the remaining resources. The result was Panem, a shining Capitol City surrounded by twelve districts, which gave peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then The Dark Days arrived, the districts’ insurrection against the capital. Twelve were defeated, the thirteenth destroyed. The agreement of Betrayal gave new laws to us... and it gave also the Hunger Games. The rules are simple. As punishment for the revolt each of the twelve districts has to provide two participants, one boy and one girl, called tributes” (Collins 2009, 25). After the space-time immersion, which reduces the imaginary distance between the reader’s position and that of the narrated events, the emotional immersion takes over and in Hunger Games it manifests itself in two ways.

- (a) The first one is suspense, which urges to run through the text burning the narration’s stages: in Hunger Games the suspense’s intensity is in inverse relation to the range of survival possibilities, as it rises when the narrative situation lets us suppose the future in divergent but reasonably calculable results and its peak is where the narrative possibilities are reduced to a bifurcation success/failure (Cheong-Young 2008: 144-155). The binary alternatives which involve the emotional participation towards the heroin’s destiny and the desire for a positive result actually count as one of the dominant features of Collins’ trilogy, where herbs may result healthy or poisonous, weapons successful or disastrous, people friendly or hostile, sleep restoring or lethal, the climate burning or glacial.
- (b) The second way in which the emotional immersivity shows itself in Hunger Games is the continuous, structured empathy which the reader feels for the protagonist, in the forms of a contagion which seems to be taken straight from a famous book by Martha C. Nussbaum in which empathy cognitive mechanisms are described: enucleated as judgments of gravity when a serious negative event strikes Katniss; judgment of not guilty, because Katniss is not responsible for the suffering that she has caused to herself; eudaimonistic judgment, as the protagonist and her future partner have been struck by a disgrace that makes them vulnerable and weak (Nussbaum 2004: 370 ss.).

But there is more. Katniss too feeds herself on empathy and suggests to the reader a model of emotional immersivity which manifests itself as an infection:

“I run past my pool and towards unknown areas in the wood. The world starts to get deformed in more alarming ways. A butterfly swells up to have the dimensions of a house, then it breaks in a million of stars. The trees become blood that spatters in my boots. Creeping ants go out from my hands’ bladders, I shake them but I am not able to get rid of them. They are scrambling up my arms and neck. Someone is shouting, a prolonged and shrill shout which does not stop even to breath. Vaguely, I think that it could be me to shout...Disoriented and racked with nausea, I can formulate one thought: ‘Peeta Mellark has just saved my life’. Then the ants perforate my eyes and I conk out” (Collins 2009: 197). Appealing to the readers’ ability to picture themselves in somebody else’s place and abandon themselves to an empathic contagion that lets them assume the fictional character’s point of view, Hunger Games becomes real: dystopia becomes naturalized and takes abode in our historical-social habitat, proposing itself as a reading model of reality. Or, we’d better say, as a form of realism, the realism of an Augmented Reality novel. So as to understand this apparent paradox, we have to remember that representation of reality is not an aesthetic gesture, but a need functional to human life itself. The main characteristic of the real world seems to be the instability and ambiguity of information, which never reaches us in the same way, so our brain’s principal task is to reject occasional forms and “store in memory” the immutable essence which is hidden behind such forms. Therefore the so-called realism would be the tool which each cultural system builds in order to stabilize, through some opportune neuro-perceptive stratagems, the persistent and dangerous variability of the information transmitted by the environment. Not a photography of reality but a beautiful and good construction of it. With her serial fiction, Collins has the merit to show us how we could always, also in a distant and dystopian future, continue to attribute the immutability (of love) to the irregularity (of war).



«Certo che mi interessa sapere cosa immaginavi che pensassi di come credevi che io volevo che ti sentissi.»

Figure 1: Satire on the Met Narrative Excesses of the Postmodern Novel: “Sure I’m Interested in Knowing What You Imagined I Thought You Believed I Wanted You to Feel” (Source: The New York Collection)

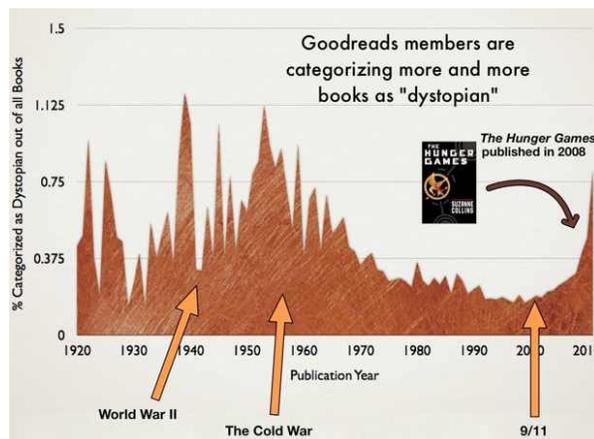


Figure 2: Sales performance of dystopian novels 1920-2010: Most are sold: 1984 of George Orwell (1949); Hunger Games of Suzanne Collins (2009); Brave New World of Aldous Huxley (1932); The Handmaid's Tale of Margaret Atwood (1985); A Clockwork Orange of Anthony Burgess (1962) (Source: Claeys2010, 107-135)

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