

English 394 – Theories of Mass Culture: Trans-Media Narratives

Course Concept and Overview

As the name suggests, this course will focus on the telling of stories through multiple forms and technologies of expression – print fiction, graphic novel, video, video game, and that strangest of all multi-mediations, the Alternate Reality Game.

One approach to this media-crossing might look directly at adaptations across various media – and we’ll do a bit of that. However, the course is less about literal adaptation than reconception and reinvention, matters that lie deep in the heart of what Henry Jenkins calls “media convergence.”

We will deal with page-to-screen conversions, but in most cases our subjects will have a distinct twist. We begin with Jules Verne's 1872 novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which we'll read both for its literary merits and as background to our second selection, Inkle's video game *80 Days*, written by Meg Jayanth. The relationship between novel and game is highly complex, in many ways antithetical, complicated by the fact that the game is also to a large extent a reading experience. Saying that the game is a 21st-century, post-colonial re-writing of Verne's mid-Victorian story just skims the surface. I'll invite you to think a good bit further.

One important axis of difference between Jayanth's work and Verne's is the injection of science fiction (of which, ironically, Verne was one of the first masters). In *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Verne was writing as a realist-futurist. By contrast, the Inkle game takes place in a steampunk universe, an alternative history where industrial and political development evolved differently than in ours. We'll follow this concept of alternative history into the next unit of the course which takes up the matter of the superhero, both in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and in Damon Lindelov's sequel-reboot for HBO. As we'll see, though, *Watchmen* in either version is always about more than masks and crimefighting. Like all epics, the *Watchmen* stories hold up mirrors to their societies.

Mirrors (of various kinds) will be a major theme for us. After *Watchmen* we'll turn to another text of social analysis, China Mieville's novel, *The City and the City*. This is technically a fantasy story, but instead of steampunk or superheroes, it gives us two cities occupying the same place, whose inhabitants agree (on pain of serious consequences) to “unsee” each other. There's a murder mystery that threatens to unravel the balance between these strange civilizations, and a detective who must try to hold things together. *The City and the City* was made into limited series by the BBC in 2018, which we'll view and discuss. This will be our closest approach to direct adaptation, an opportunity to think about book-to-cinema crossover, in terms of screenwriting, art direction, cinematography, and more.

We finish up with a very different sort of media crossing – a multi-mediated Alternate Reality Game (ARG) called *This Is My Milwaukee*. An ARG is a system of puzzles and cryptograms presented not as a fiction or show but an extension of everyday life. If you sign up for an ARG, you will find yourself receiving email and even phone calls and in-person contact, from other plays and game masters. We won't be actively playing *This Is My Milwaukee* -- the project closed (or imploded) years ago -- but we'll be able to explore its documentary traces, with help from Wren Dalton, a doctoral student who is studying ARGs. *This Is My Milwaukee*, which was created by people who had never been to our town, is in many ways another vision of “the city and the city” – that is, we'll look at this imaginary city from the perspective of the real city (ours) to which it refers. Along the way we'll have some things to say about media, technologies, and the way they construct reality.

Media and reality comes close to describing the general through-line of the class; though on the way we'll also be concerned with history, colonialism, race, gender, social justice, and of course, the impacts of technology. Ultimately what's in this course will be up to you, in weekly discussion and three reflective essay. I look forward to what you'll find.

Course details:

The format is asynchronous online; weekly contribution to a discussion forum is required, plus several papers, one of which can be a creative project.

Required purchases include:

Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (any edition, though I recommend Oxford)

Inkle's *80 Days* game (available for phone, tablet, and PC)

Watchmen graphic novel

HBO's *Watchmen* series (episodes 1, 3, 8, and 9) – available from Amazon Prime

China Mieville's *The City and the City*

BBC *City and the City* (I will try to put up a free version online; otherwise Amazon)

I will try to keep outlays under \$100.