

Transmediated Narratives:

An Analysis

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Integration of analog components into digital art practices has prompted me to question the ability of the materiality itself in fostering narrative structure. Using John Kessler's two works from the 2017 Whitney Biennial as case studies I will inspect the technologies he implements to see how they form his narrative structure. Specifically, I will focus on his interplay between analog and digital modalities to speculate if they may bolster his narrative or if his use of analog is implemented merely as spectacle.

Containing strong socio-political narrative structures, I would say that Jon Kessler's *Evolution* and *Exodus* are two of the most successful technology-based artworks that I have ever seen in a prominent contemporary gallery show. However, I have begun a new quest of inquiry, as I believe Kessler is tapping into the realm of transmediation, or the blending of analog and digital modalities. After a semiotic analysis of his works I will establish how Kessler's implementation of identity (through his narrative) is actually calling upon what Sage J. Elwell calls the 'transmediated self.'<sup>1</sup> I believe this is an important area for exploration because we no longer live in the space of the analog, but rather somewhere between the spaces of the analog and the digital.

Within the white wall gallery aesthetic, these works are visually spewing with technology yet gracefully unite to generate narrative structures of social inequality through the topic of global warming. Situated one next to the other in the gallery, Kessler describes that in some ways they are opposite from one another.<sup>2</sup> Taking this into consideration, I

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<sup>1</sup>Sage J Elwell, "The Transmediated Self: Life Between the Digital and the Analog," *Convergence* 20, no. 2 (2014): 234, DOI 10.1177/1354856513501423

<sup>2</sup> Jon Kessler, *Exodus*, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, date of access November 15, 2017, mp3, <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/1437>.

will analyze each to dissect not only how they differ but in what ways they might form together to enhance the underlying narrative.

Kessler's work *Evolution* contains one male and one female mannequin that are sporting VR and swimwear while fixated on a 3D printed miniature of a luxury condo that is residing in the females' hand. They are standing waist deep in the middle of ocean waves, represented by mechanically oscillating flat screens.<sup>3</sup> These screens present video digitally from an analog switcher, alternating its contents between a prerecorded video of the condo and two live camera feeds. These two 'people' represent the wealthy elite, taking pride in their seawalls and structures while comfortably oblivious of what is going on around them.<sup>4</sup> Being in one of the countries responsible for the effects of global warming, Kessler shines light on this inequity, possibly suggesting we take the humanitarian approach by not only trying to resolve the conflict but also helping these people in need. After digesting the more formal qualities of the work, the focus may then shift to how Kessler's unconstrained mishmash of cables and other hardware, questioning the technology implemented.

In contrast, the refugees seen in *Exodus*, taking no direct responsibility to global warming, are the ones dealing with its catastrophic effects.<sup>5</sup> This work (literally) revolves around a flat screen, mounted vertically on top of a trunk that serves as a pedestal. Turning around the monitor is a never-ending march of immigrants/refugees, represented by various tchotchkes.<sup>6</sup> A mounted iPhone camera is pointing at the figures with its feed sent

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<sup>3</sup> Jon Kessler, *Evolution*, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, date of access November 18, 2017, mp3, <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/AudioGuides/40?stop=8>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Kessler, *Exodus*.

to the monitor that is behind the figures and in the framing of the feed itself. This creates a feedback loop, further exemplifying the complexity of the march.<sup>7</sup>

It can be argued that the general meaning or narrative of these works is interpreted by viewing, similar to that of a painting. Therefore the meaning is constructed through an assemblage of signs. Acknowledging this we can then pick up McLuhan's aphorism, "the medium is the message"<sup>8</sup> in order to look past general representations and dig into the specific usage of medium. Since the narrative structure behind these two works rely heavily on varying forms of video, I am going to focus in on the individual uses of each.

Below the flat screen waves, *Evolution* showcases an old analog security camera that is mounted on a reciprocating track. Pointing downward onto an open spinning book, the feed presents a painting by Bridget Riley,<sup>9</sup> essentially containing squiggly blue lines. The effect delivers a dizzying video feed to further the illusion that these represent real, analog waves. However these waves are of course then played back in digital form on the TV's. If the destination is digital, with a focus on contemporary life, then why does Kessler bother using an old analog camera? I believe this camera forms the keystone in my analysis, bringing forward notions of a less-mediated era (before the digital revolution).

*Evolution's* other live feed is a bit different. It originates from an iPhone camera that the female mannequin is holding up over her head. She is pointing it downward onto herself to illustrate the act of a selfie. This feed is taken digitally, converted to analog to pass through an analog switcher and then converted to digital again to be shown on the flat screen waves. Again, why not use a digital switcher? Kittler writes, "A total connection of all

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Chandler. *Semiotics: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Kessler, *Evolution*.

media on a digital base erases the notion of the medium itself. Instead of hooking up technologies to people [to make it interactive,] absolute knowledge can run as an endless loop.”<sup>10</sup>

Stepping back to look critically at Exodus, a similarity and a difference can be found. There is a feedback loop here as well, but this time there is no conversion to analog and no switching. The digital iPhone does capture analog space but presents it on the digital screen. The feedback loop formed is essentially digital-to-digital, posing how analog life is suspended in the middle. What could Kessler be trying to say about this work with his use of technology in this way?

Kessler could have used all digital components but chose to also include analog. Elwell points out that since we no longer ‘go online’ but rather are always connected to the infosphere of the Internet through ubiquitous digital gadgets.<sup>11</sup> He states that solely analog identities are outdated and that the transmediated self is the new locale of every-day life.<sup>12</sup> I believe Kessler’s use of analog and digital components is to situate viewers into a metaphysical reflection on their digital identity while also observing amongst other users in a physical space. Reflecting on postphenomenological relations involving humans and technology, Verbeek would classify *Evolution* as hermeneutic; it forms unity with the world rather than viewers using the technology.<sup>13</sup>

Taking this transmediated approach, I propose perceiving Kessler’s use of analog technology as a lens focused on analog life and digital technology focused on digital life. In

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<sup>10</sup> Fredrich A. Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays*, Edited by John Johnston (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Elwell, “The Transmediated Self,” 233-5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Peter-Paul Verbeek, “Beyond Interaction,” ACM Interactions, accessed December 12, 2017, <http://interactions.acm.org/archive/view/may-june-2015/beyond-interaction>.

this way, the analog camera capturing an analog book of waves can represent the analog worlds underlying structure, which supports all existence of digital life. The digital iPhone cameras, in *Exodus* and *Evolution*, generate feedback loops. Elwell claims, “Transmedia is a[n interactive] process precisely because the old top-down industry model of creator-spectator, producer-consumer is giving way to a nonlinear, immersive, and dialogical model of participatory cocreation.”<sup>14</sup> This suggests that rather than reflecting on real world (analog) effects that are captured and presented by digital technology, we are instead ranting about it on an interconnected digital platform where no analog action happens in our analog world.

*Exodus*’ fully digital tech may represent our examination of the world from a digital distance while the analog switcher in *Evolution* can be seen as the human sensibility trying to interject itself into the feedback loop. The feedback loops may represent this modern inadequacy. While *Exodus* is simply titled for what it shows, my proposed lens on *Evolution* can now situate the work as a comment on modern society; we have become an interconnected society while paradoxically we are also driving ourselves further apart.<sup>15</sup>

Art-savvy people might classify *Evolution* and *Exodus* as new media works, however the artist himself refers to them as “mechanical sculptures;” perhaps rightfully so.<sup>16</sup> Kessler’s work holds notions of society that are enmeshed in digital computation, but does not directly offer any live network for interaction within the work. On the subject of media art, Dietz argues that a work can not be labeled as ‘new media’ if computational processes

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<sup>14</sup> Elwell, “The Transmediated Self,” 240.

<sup>15</sup> Sherry Turkle, “Connected but Alone?” TED, modified February, 2012, [https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_alone\\_together](https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together)

<sup>16</sup> Kessler, *Exodus*.

do not make a difference to the presentation or reception of the work.<sup>17</sup> Arguably, they do contain analog-based, or “smoothly varying” computing.<sup>18</sup> Whether *Evolution* can be classified as ‘new media’ or not, interactive medias transmediation does seem to hold more potential at forming identity.

Introducing a work that incorporates interactive media may prove to offer a more accurate account in examining networked medias ability to form identity. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s *Bilateral Time Slicer* is one that structures its narrative around a simple interactive parameter. Since Grodal argues that a semiotics approach to interactive media can be problematic,<sup>19</sup> I will make my analysis of this work brief as to focus on the creation of narrative.

This work harnesses a biometric tracking system that is implemented to analyze subjects when they enter the space.<sup>20</sup> When this live camera system recognizes the full body of a subject, a vertical slice of video is recorded and its looped playback is presented next to the live feed. When there are no participants, these slices of time in space fold back into themselves where the live feed was.<sup>21</sup> This forms a series of past happenings that can serve as further reflection. Each recorded video gives the current user a literal slice of them juxtaposed with other previous users slices. Paul Booth might classify this work as

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<sup>17</sup> Steve Dietz, “Collecting New Media Art: Just Like Anything Else, Only Different,” YPRODUCTIONS, Last modified November 5, 2005, [http://yproductions.com/writing/archives/collecting\\_new\\_media\\_art.html](http://yproductions.com/writing/archives/collecting_new_media_art.html).

<sup>18</sup> “Analog vs. Digital Computing,” *World of Computer Science* (2007), Gale, 2007, *Science in Context*, Gale# GALEICV2424500027.

<sup>19</sup> Torben Grodal, “From Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles: Video Games, Media, and Embodied Experiences,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.

<sup>20</sup> Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, “Bilateral Time Slicer,” Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, date of access December 1, 2017, [http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/bilateral\\_time\\_slicer.php](http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/bilateral_time_slicer.php).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

‘narrativity,’ or the development of a coherent narrative database through communal interactions.<sup>22</sup>

Study of the signal realizes video as evoking the third person,<sup>23</sup> meaning a paradox is formed in that the self can be mapped (or known) either internally or externally. Following Comolli’s assertion that the spectator is the one who invents cinema,<sup>24</sup> work like *Bilateral Time Slicer* is an example where users are able to invent their own video-based narratives. Elwell describes how this type of story-world formation is an example of transmedia storytelling.<sup>25</sup> It could be argued that this style of user-formed narrative is apparent in all signal-based interactive art, however I chose to look at Hemmer’s because of its focus on the body and its co-creative capacity.

I have now discussed two video sculptures and one interactive video work, however thus far I may have eluded that both can be classified as transmediated works. Is this analysis accurate? *Bilateral Time Slicer* does not contain any analog media, but by virtue of moving in an analog space, a digital version of the self is presented which then forms an identity feedback loop. Since interaction by the user in both spaces is required, Elwell would classify a user in *Bilateral Time Slicer* as an example of ‘the transmediated self.’<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Kessler’s works require a viewer to enter the narrative on a metaphysical level through the act of looking. Since Kessler’s works are passive, and do not permit bodily interactions from a user into the system, I believe they should be considered to exist as ‘transmediated sculptures.’

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<sup>22</sup> Elwell, “The Transmediated Self,” 234.

<sup>23</sup> BodilMarie Stavning Thomsen, “Signaletic, Haptic and Real-Time Material,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 4, no. 1 (2012). DOI 10.3402/jac.v4i0.18148

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Elwell, “The Transmediated Self,” 241.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.



If Kessler's works are to be a comment on western society, but are not interactive, then can his narrative prompt personal reflections of identity? The female mannequins arm in *Evolution* (holding the iPhone) moves based on a physical gear where every so often it abruptly forces the arm to move about. This calls direct attention to its video feed. Cassell and McNeill would classify this as a metaphoric gesture as it displays to the audience the vehicle for Kessler's metaphor.<sup>27</sup> However, the arms movement may also be considered an abstract gesture in the sense that the iPhone's lens is pointing at what Kessler would most likely describe as discourse material.<sup>28</sup> "An analysis of phenomena thus enables us to formulate a 'transcendental logic' and a 'metaphysics of experience'."<sup>29</sup> It is here that we can see how Kessler's use of an unidentifiable mannequin and the ubiquity of the iPhone may create a sort of subjective vision.<sup>30</sup> This establishes a metaphysical entry point to interject the spectator into this works hybrid narrative.

With a definition of the transmediated self, and explored thoughts on identity, we can now look more critically at *Evolution's* formation of narrative. Kessler is situating the mannequins as 'people' who are in the act of forming their transmediated selves. This can be seen a strong, hidden message, or what Verbeek would call a decisive or implicative influence of technology.<sup>31</sup> Viewers can not interact or interject identity into the work, but I believe it is avant-garde in the sense that it may be the first transmediated work that

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<sup>27</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 115-6.

<sup>28</sup> Ryan, *Narrative across Media*, 119-20.

<sup>29</sup> George A. Schrader, "Hegel's Contribution to Phenomenology," *The Monist* 48, no. 1 (1964): 24. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27901535>.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Peter-Paul Verbeek, "Beyond Interaction," *ACM Interactions*, accessed December 12, 2017. <http://interactions.acm.org/archive/view/may-june-2015/beyond-interaction>.

represents and questions the transmediated self. I believe this is an interesting hidden narrative, but why should this all matter to the average viewer?

In Levy's paper he argues that "narrative-unity is necessary for a sense of self and that narratives serve as the self's immanent structure."<sup>32</sup> Identity through the early web treated technology like masks that could guarantee that the user would stay anonymous, offering users to 'go online' and assume new roles.<sup>33</sup> This break from reality pushed against any sort of meshing of analog and digital modes. However society seems to have worked through that hiccup, as you can no longer go anywhere online without signing into a virtual representation of yourself. Platforms such as Facebook and even Spotify now directly favor the representation of the individuals' analog identities into their virtual spaces. This offers computing communications that are seamlessly integrated and transparent.<sup>34</sup>

With the world becoming ever more connected, I believe it is important to step back and analyze the ways in which technology is mediating our existence. Works like Hemmer's are indeed more direct in the formation of identity, only the effects are more local and internal. Even though Kessler's *Evolution* is not interactive, it points at the transmediated self in a more meaningful way. Through playful metaphysical entry it questions society at large, posing potential problems through use of our interconnected technologies. Verbeek notes how technology is a part of us now, and that by designing technology we are in effect designing humanity.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lior Levy, "Reflection, Memory and Selfhood in Jean-Paul Sartre's Early Philosophy," *Sartre Studies International* 19, no. 2 (2013): 98, DOI 10.3167/ssi.2013.190206.

<sup>33</sup> Elwell, "The Transmediated Self," 234.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>35</sup> Verbeek, "Beyond Interaction."

Societies exponential advancement of technology has embedded the world within turmoil, both politically and ecologically, in the sense that we are collectively starting to lose sight of our analog reality. I believe Kessler's framing of technology in this light does a wonderful job at calling his primary global warming narrative into view. My meditative analysis of the transmediated self as an underlying narrative not only enhances the work's meaning, but in some ways it can be seen as the primary narrative structure of both *Exodus* and *Evolution*. I side with Levy's statement that we not only mirror the past but also are continually "weaving the past into the present."<sup>36</sup> I believe it is important to not only reflect on ourselves but also on the past technologies that help form our identity.

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<sup>36</sup> Levy, "Reflection, Memory and Selfhood," 103.

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## Annotated Bibliography

Cartwright, Lisa. *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

This book establishes different views of the body through different lenses of technology, firmly establishing that technology is an extension of ourselves. I have found this book to be incredibly influential to my current practice and its ability to draw ties into this paper.

Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

This work has given forth the history of optics and vision. Particularly useful thus far is its distinction between observer and spectator. It covers the general evolution of vision, specifically the ways sight prompted the study of physiology.

Dietz, Steve. "Collecting New Media Art: Just Like Anything Else, Only Different." *YPRODUCTIONS*. Last modified November 5, 2005. [http://yproductions.com/writing/archives/collecting\\_new\\_media\\_art.html](http://yproductions.com/writing/archives/collecting_new_media_art.html).

Amongst talking about new media art in terms of collecting, Dietz gives a straightforward definition of 'new media' that I found to be quite the paradigm shift in my understanding of the medium. Also, I previously had not thought about it in terms of creating a platform for which users will perform, and here he states it is important not to judge the work by the performance of the users.

Elwell, Sage J. "The Transmediated Self: Life Between the Digital and the Analog." *Convergence* 20, no. 2 (2014). DOI 10.1177/1354856513501423.

Elwell covers how we are now hybrid analog/digital, what he calls the 'transmediated self.' He describes how technology not only forms identity in the individual but also to networked identities. This work is influential to this paper and my research as it was the first source that described the digital self in terms of identity and established transmedia ability to form narrative structure.

Penny, Simon. "Bridging Two Cultures: Towards an Interdisciplinary History of the Artist-

Inventor and the Machine-Artwork.” Simon Penny. Accessed February 15, 2017.  
<http://simonpenny.net/texts/bridging.html>.

Penny steps back to look at what it means to be interdisciplinary and in what ways has producing in this mode shifted from that of traditional art making. He coins ‘aesthetics of behavior’ and that by working with technology there will be different worldviews on the production.

Rae, Gavin. “Overcoming Philosophy: Heidegger, Metaphysics, and the Transformation to Thinking.” *Human Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 235-57. Accessed January 19, 2017.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24021495>.

Pairing a bit of philosophy to this paper has allowed me to differentiate the context in which I am framing part of my analysis. Through the writings of Heidegger, Rae differentiates calculative thinking and meditative thinking; the two sub-categories of metaphysics. Even though technology is associated with calculative thinking by nature, it has been interesting to think in the more creative context of meditative thinking and to ‘see’ Kessler’s works in a new light.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

Digesting most of this book through class has given me an overview of the potential arenas that narrative can be implemented. I came into this area of study thinking there was a more solidified version of ‘narrative.’ However the structuring of narrative laid out in this book has given me a foundation and reference for understanding how I can contextualize and formulate my own narrative structures.

Thomsen, BodilMarie Stavning. “Signaletic, haptic and Real-Time Material.” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 4, no. 1 (2012). DOI 10.3402/jac.v4i0.18148

This work analyses the transmission of the signal and its relation to new media. It gave me some entry thought into the ‘now here’ and ‘nowhere’ spaces of the analog and digital.

Torben Grodal. “Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles: Video Games, Media, and Embodied Experiences.” In *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Wolf, Mark J.P. and Bernard Perron, 129-55. New York: Routledge, 2003.

I chose this work to get a better understanding of how interactive media functions. Even though this writing is focused on video games, the way in which it defines user motivation and alluding to feedback loops is helpful. It concluded with a brief reference to meta-narrative in that narrativity through user interaction can be open-ended and determined by the user.

Verbeek, Peter-Paul. "Beyond Interaction." ACM Interactions. Accessed December 12, 2017.  
<http://interactions.acm.org/archive/view/may-june-2015/beyond-interaction>.

This short read has given me a bit of structure in my analysis of the interaction itself. It is also specifically structures interactive modes around technology, which formulates the ways in which humans and technology structure one another.