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What's Next? The Law of the Series.

New storytelling in old media – Breakthrough of new media groups – Industrializing writing.

Where do we begin? It's probably best to start with the tried-and-tested turnaround of storytellers – a surprise coup of death and rebirth.

### 1. New television? How boring!

“How boring!”, I'd still have declared a few years ago when the medium of TV was the talking point and to discuss how digital storytelling instantly stirs things up across the entire media industry. Because for almost two decades there were repeated murmurs about the ‘convergences’ of TV and Internet. In one of the first *Virtualienmarkt* columns here I had quoted the former Bertelsmann boss, Thomas Middelhoff, who dreamed of exploiting content across all formats and channels in the global village. But this much lauded convergence never happened.

Until of all quarters to give the most unlikely hint of revolution suddenly news emerged of a new style of narrative, thrilling stories and fantastic craftwork: from American cable TV networks. With “Sex in the City” (from 1998), the mafia clan episodes of “The Sopranos” (from 1999), or the crime-thriller series “The Wire” from Baltimore (from 2002), the premium network HBO laid the foundations for a new look at television. At the latest with the fantasy epic “Game of Thrones” (from 2011), based on the novels by George R.R. Martin, this approach has become the new standard for storytelling in the mass media.

The decisive note in this case is that this ‘new’ television is mainly digital, distributed online through streaming and paid for by subscriptions. It can be consumed on TV sets and computers and tablets. However, probably a different device – the smartphone – is the most important driver of the ‘new TV’.

Consumers can decide at whim and depending on their circumstances which content they play back and when. This TV content, particularly TV series, influences a fundamental shift away from linear television, where a broadcaster could decide at the end of a long and exclusive value-added chain when a story can be received. Everything is reversed in the new world. Here, the consumers decide (and, as we will see, several new network organizations as well): now I want to, and no matter where I am – online, offline, at home or even on the go – I can catch up with the “Game of Thrones” episodes that I've missed. But I'm paying a regular subscription for this.

In autumn 2017, the American-British children's book author and TV producer Jeff Norton bluntly stated: “TV is now the dominant medium of culture.”

(<https://publishingperspectives.com/2018/04/will-fine-television-film-byte-the-book-in-storytelling/>)

### 2. Why series?

When I was immersed in the middle of the third volume of the Swedish “Millennium” crime-thriller series by Stieg Larsson (1954–2004), I was not only sure that the real model for the journalist, Mikael Blomkvist, could only be a certain Swedish friend of mine called Lasse, who of course is also a journalist. One day en route to my regular Viennese coffee house, I also caught myself expecting almost instantly to meet Mikael Blomkvist here. At the latest, mid-way through a season of “Breaking

Bad” – and I’m also convinced about this – most people identified their close circle of friends with the main characters in this series.

Of course, the trick of identification is old hat in literary history. Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) called his great novel series “The Human Comedy” to highlight the universality of the narrative. Marcel Proust (1871–1922) resorted to “In Search of Lost Time” until every reader made the moment of lingering over the cup of tea with madeleine cakes their uniquely personal experience.

The American modern-day Balzac counterpart “Doonesbury” by Garry Trudeau (\*1948) appeared from 1970 in consistent daily doses as a comic strip in about 1,400 newspapers. An overflowing repertoire of fictional and real people (Donald Trump was already included in the late 1980s) revolves around the figure of the football quarterback B.D. Over 43 years, the comic strip developed into a chronicle of America that was even awarded a Pulitzer Prize. The continuous storytelling came to an end when Amazon Studios commissioned the Doonesbury inventor Trudeau with the production of a satirical WebTV series which premiered in April 2013 under the title “Alpha House”.

The interruption and its quite ironic punchline is no dramatic ending, but rather a transition to new forms of serial storytelling.

### 3. Commerce plus art, that’s the trick

To make a direct comparison here between the pioneers among the writer-producers of the new series genre like Jill Soloway (“Transparent”) or the Coen brothers (“ Fargo”) with Balzac, or even with Proust is certainly a “stretch” (in new-American speak). However, their contributions are respectfully considered in the serious literary *feuilletons*, and this clearly signals to us: in this case, something important is going on here!

The stars of conventional authorship have long since been asked about their favourite series (Daniel Kehlmann (\*1975): “Mindhunter”) and whether they also intended to write a screenplay for Netflix. (Kehlmann’s response: “Why not? Only, so far nobody has asked.” I’m surprised about this because I could certainly imagine him as a fantastic partner in an unpredictable and new kind of production.) <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/schriftsteller-daniel-kehlmann-blickt-als-heiterer-skeptiker-auf-die-gegenwart-und-sagt-nicht-auf-facebook-sein-ist-kein-abschied-von-der-zivilisation-ld.1424136>

What is more interesting to me here is that among the foibles, at least of the series for upper cultural classes, it seems to be common to argue unexpectedly and extensively about the essence of ‘narration’ and each time with a warm-up that obviously signals: pay attention! Now, real thoughts are under consideration!

One example suffices: at the end of the first season of “Westworld”, with the meaningfully glammed-up title “The Bicameral Mind”, and after another round of countless fatalities, Anthony Hopkins comes forward (signal: “Cult”! “Silence of the Lambs”), who mysteriously controls the whole series in the background as “Ford”. (Dr Ford naturally appeals to pioneers of serial production in the US car industry whose ‘Fordism’ had already inspired Aldous Huxley to write his novel “Brave New World”). In short, Anthony Hopkins suddenly strikes this omniscient fatherly tone, ‘Son, I’m now telling you something important’ and murmurs: “You will lose control over us!” (The wildly labyrinthine story of “Westworld” is about artificial people that stage Wild West-themed simulated scenes in infinite loops with deviations from the narrated storylines for paying guests, while the real humans are allowed to mow down the artificial people (“It’s only a simulation”). But soon everything somehow goes to pieces.

Then, Ford/Hopkins unveils the alter ego Bernard, so the point is simply how we should all be ‘saved’ because in the end it’s always about “The suffering. The pain that the world is not as you want it to

be.” Cut. Then Hopkins/Ford continues: “Since I was a child, I’ve always loved a good story. I believed that stories helped us ... become the people we dreamed of being.” And this self-reflexive musing ultimately indicates that at this point nothing less than the “birth of a new people” is at stake. Credits. End of the first season. Everything is left open for the next series.

All components of the “open work of art”, as the semiotist (and bestselling novelist) Umberto Eco (1932–2016) called it, are recycled here; they are shaken up to be re-used again and newly combined according to all the rules of narrative art, like in a puzzle. This is not meant in a derogatory sense. Classical modernism also engaged in something similar to the sublimity of ancient art, and therefore already laid the foundations early on for a thriving modern art market with its stars and gallerists, collectors and muses. In the beginning, it was in a few avant-garde cities like Paris, Berlin or New York, but nowadays this is global with new, prospering hubs in Asia, Hong Kong, Singapore or Manila.

For the viewers, perhaps Anthony Hopkins’s slightly awkward theory-murmuring fulfils the proven purpose – as presented in the open work of art – of creating blank spaces, which we fill, inquisitively and creatively, with our projections in the narratives and pictures that were kept deliberately ambiguous. But now the debate becomes intriguing and the artworks become relevant, because thanks to these interactive movements they are suddenly suited to offer formulae and patterns for a present that overloads us through routine daily experience.

#### 4. Narrating like on amphetamines

Narration in many of the series is primarily achieved with picture setting, cut, rhythm and the sequencing of scenes, and only on a secondary level with the actors’ text, or quite often thanks, too, to some narrator voices offstage.

As a reader of novels who often has already forgotten the plot halfway through the book, already shutting and pushing aside an entertaining crime thriller two chapters before the ending – and then still insistently recommending the book, since I enjoyed it – what fascinates me most is the visual narrative flow of many good series. Just like the sound of a novel captivates me and carries me carefree over the pages – W.G. Sebald’s “The Rings of Saturn”, where 250 pages further on I frankly confessed, I didn’t quite know what the book was about that I was just devouring. In exactly the same way, I occasionally slid into an episode of the series and into a maelstrom of visual impulses!

A good example of this is “*Fargo*” by the Coen brothers. Only a month or two after I surfed my way through scores of episodes, I read through some content summaries in amazement at how my memory of the story almost completely dissolved. But images, moods and especially the rhythm have made an impression.

Some series grant the stories that they relate seemingly unlimited time. They are almost the radical opposite of the supposedly so impatient ‘mobile phone culture’ of their core target group of ‘millennials’ about whom it is always claimed that they just about have the attention span of mayflies. A great number of series are rampant with a plethora of individual characterizations and deviate massively from the main narrative plot. My personal paradox as a reader is that the epic scope of most series far overreaches my patience to memorize temporary minor characters and storylines, or even such peripheral details that maybe suddenly turn up again later in an episode as the central feature.

In fact, plenty about these loops and turns occurs not mainly as ‘narrative’, but as a picture sequence, as a visual and unpredictable patchwork. In the very best moments such sequences then remind me of 1950s and 1960s experimental literature, of the Nouveau Roman when this became a narrative depiction like Nathalie Sarraute (e.g. “*Tropismes*”, 1957) or Alain Robbe-Grillet (“*L’Année*”).

dernière à Marienbad”, a ‘ciné-novel’, 1961), or Ernst Jandl’s poetry (1925–2000) whenever he placed his trust purely in words and sound. There is an impertinence about this that I like. However, the aesthetics of the series gives this impetus in another dimension.

I am fascinated and equally shocked, like in series such as “*Fargo*”, where every performance, every dialogue implodes seamlessly on the viewer. Breathlessly. Ecstatically. It’s narrating like on amphetamines. It is, and yet these are irreconcilable contradictions, a seamlessly woven narrative tapestry that is simultaneously filled – the key word is ‘open work of art’ – by those open, since meaningless projection fields for my fantasies, which modernist art had made so provocative. However, similar to the way in which post-modernism excludes itself from modernism, there is a random aspect, almost boredom, which is ideal for blissfully losing oneself binge watching on the sofa with friends on a Sunday afternoon.

#### 5. Sofas: placeless, story: from the village.

The setting comprising a sofa, friends and binge watching is placeless. The same applies for many of the previously mentioned series. It’s an adequate condition, if we imagine a middle-class environment somewhere between Minneapolis, Barcelona, Bogotá, Copenhagen, Dubai or Singapore – so, people who have the time, education and financial means to devote to this frivolous exercise. These middle classes have grown over the past two decades by hundreds of millions of households around the world. They are globalization’s target group and their greatest beneficiaries. They incorporate the most diverse cultural identities, religious affiliations and political preferences. Recently, a fair number of them vote in democratic elections for those who are fighting precisely this globalization. What unites them is above all the option to design parts of a ‘private’ life.

One aspect of this design incentive is to tell one another stories in which thoughts, fantasies and also anxieties as well as life plans and rupture points are repeatedly woven into new tapestries.

This is why many of these stories work almost everywhere in the global village. But in one way or another each one of these stories is also simultaneously quite specific.

Even if the output, which is now difficult to keep track of, and the growing rivalry, of the major US companies like Netflix, Amazon Studios and HBO (and soon several more from Disney to Comcast) is dominating the world market for TV series, several striking alternative examples are worth mentioning.

Denmark’s small public broadcaster DR – with “*Borgen*”, “*The Bridge*” and especially “*The Killing*” – is regarded as a breeding ground for the ‘Danish mini-series wonder’, the series-counterpart for the preceding world hit of ‘Nordic Crime’ with books such as Stieg Larsson’s “*The Millennium Trilogy*”.

The magic formula for the series (and also for the preceding crime-thriller books) is: “Keep it local, put the author at the centre of the production and avoid TV adaptations.” ( <https://www.tvbeurope.com/business/killing-chief-reveals-drama-dogma> ) That’s the verdict of Morten Hesseldahl. He was responsible in the decisive years for all these productions from the TV channel DR. He has recently changed medium – once again in his professional career – and in these times of abundant and surprising turnabouts he now directs the biggest Danish publishing house Gyldendal.

The motto “keep it local” and “trust the authors”, not some intermediaries, has in the book world already catapulted several worldwide popular hits via a kind of wormhole shortcut from the extreme margins to the global distribution centres of the culture industries. An early example is the South

Indian village story “The God of Small Things” by Arundathi Roy (\*1961) from Kerala, published in 1986, long before the Ayurveda holiday boom. But the journey of J.K. Rowling (\*1965) also belongs in this group. At about the same time, she wrote the first volume of her Harry Potter series – when series were still regarded as unmarketable – in **Edinburgh** coffee shops.

Today, Netflix repeatedly presents a Cinderella glass-shoe writer, usually from the margins ignored by the culture industries, such as the Croat-Bosnian Ivica Dikic (\*1971, Netflix series “The Paper”, 2018, <https://www.croatiaweek.com/croatian-series-the-paper-picked-up-by-netflix/>), or Hannah Gadsby (\*1978) from Tasmania whose “Nanette”, according to “USA Today”, even “revolutionized” the genre of stand-up comedy. (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2018/07/05/hannah-gadsby-nanette-netflix-special-could-revolutionize-stand-up-comedy-me-too/758929002/>)

Admittedly, it’s mostly local writers who in their – sometimes still so small – home market have already earned their laurels and put their professional skill-set to the test. Even Cinderella only had the biggest break after the begrudging stepmother had noticed her.

Not all new series formats are aimed at a global audience. On the contrary, once the format is developed it allows for thoroughly national spin-offs. France’s Canal+, as a production partner for decades a pioneer of European as well as African authors-cinema, jumped on the bandwagon of the series model with nothing less than an homage to the sun king and his belief in the progress of the ‘Grande Nation’. The three seasons of “Versailles” about King Louis XIV (1638–1715) and the architect of the epoch-making palace and gardens of Versailles firstly present a computer-generated design, that is, if you wanted to fit the French universe as a whole on a games console. And sex and naked flesh don’t miss out, there is even a fleeting glimpse of the king’s pubic hair concealed in his mistress’s lap.

It’s more fascinating, because it’s more surprising how the evolution of technology during the early modern period, the connection of science with confidence in the circle of visionary thinkers is interwoven as a minor theme amidst all the chatter of simpering courtiers that satisfy the taste for gossip and stories. And in the grand spectacle surrounding today’s rather tired, middle-ranking power, France, only a mischief-maker may stretch things from Louis in Versailles Palace to the current reform enthusiast Emmanuel Macron in the Elysée. However, it’s silly that after the third season “Versailles” already came to an unscheduled and premature end. Ultimately, not every homage is borne out by the people. (<https://www.programme-tv.net/news/series-tv/202895-versailles-canal-pas-de-saison-4-pour-la-serie/>)

The examples listed here of last decade’s boom in the series are, of course, only a heavily edited ‘best-of’ review and not a representative cross-section of the immense output of the new digital video stories.

Perhaps, the real surprise about the success story is totally different: namely, the unbelievable volume of anecdotes and stories, of narrative styles, themes and genres, which obviously for a long while went unnoticed in the conventional feature film departments of most television broadcasters and by many book publishers.

## 6. Netflix as a paradigm

With 124 million paying subscribers from 190 countries, 11.7 billion dollars revenue in 2017 and strong gains of 40 per cent in the first half-year of 2018, currently Netflix is the brand icon of the new global media industry. In the current financial year 2018, Netflix plans to invest 13 billion dollars in its own productions. In 2017, the figure was 6 billion.

(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2018/09/12/a-closer-look-at-netflixs-valuation/#7c3a066a7bbf> )

As a comparison: the world's biggest publishing company, Penguin Random House, reported sales of 3.359 billion euros for the financial year 2017. As its German parent company – also including the RTL television group and magazine publisher Gruner & Jahr – Bertelsmann achieved sales of 17.190 billion euros, however, without eye-catching expansion fantasies in recent years.

'Netflix' is not alone here on the wide media spectrum. With a massive injection of its own funds, Amazon Studios has long since stepped into the ring. The scale of the funds involved here becomes clear from a press release in the *Financial Times* in spring 2018 that suggested Amazon plans to invest one billion dollars to film the Chinese science fiction trilogy "Trisolaris" by Liu Cixin (\*1963, "The Three-Body Problem", "The Dark Forest" and "Death's End"). The resulting series should become a new "Star Wars". This is possibly more a PR gag than a factually based preview of a commercial plan, but the note clearly pushes the bar upwards.

(<https://www.ft.com/content/a10b14c8-2c15-11e8-9b4b-bc4b9f08f381> )

In summer 2018 a bidding war with stakes into the high two-digit billion figure between Disney and the cable TV group Comcast for parts of Rupert Murdoch's Fox empire also made clear that here an almost epic battle for the future control of content and their consumers is being fought out on a truly mammoth scale. (A summary can be viewed at <https://www.theverge.com/2018/9/22/17890660/comcast-sky-acquisition-disney-21st-century-fox-auction> )

Three strategic dimensions overlap here:

- Linking global range and simultaneously local proximity;
- Linking content to pinpoint personalization;
- The confrontation between all the conventional, national or regional content providers with new global competition that acts financially on completely different levels.

Taking these into consideration together, it's probably no exaggeration to discern the step towards a new age of entertainment media here.

Markus Dohle, the boss of Penguin Random House, who is well aware of how infectious his youthful self-confidence can be, gives an assured performance on all platforms where he appears. Dohle believes in good times for "storytelling" which has always been the core of book culture and the publishing business. However, he adds the caveat that the publishers should understand that their authors, not themselves, should stand at the centre of all their activities.

Netflix has particularly grasped the latter part of this statement and made it a pivotal point of its global expansion. Of course, Netflix is also in discussion with classical book publishers and has even commissioned a respected New York literary agency to carry out 'publishing scouting' to discover interesting book material. Successful books naturally are a constant source of material for popular TV series.

Elena Ferrante's worldwide bestseller "Una amica geniale" ("My Brilliant Friend") was recently distributed with great acclaim in Venice when HBO screened the first instalments of the film version of the series. The coproduction with Italian TV channel RAI was "staged dead" grumbled German broadcaster, Deutschlandfunk. (<https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/elena-ferrantes-neapel-saga->

[als-tv-serie-entzerrt-klinisch.1270.de.html?dram:article\\_id=427125](https://www.als-tv-serie-entzerrt-klinisch.1270.de.html?dram:article_id=427125) ; the official HBO web page (<https://www.hbo.com/my-brilliant-frien>). Naturally, all the major national stations rushed to secure the rights, starting with the Parisian Canal+ for France and French-speaking countries in Africa, Sky for Great Britain, HBO via its European subsidiary for Spain, the Scandinavian countries and large parts of Central and Eastern Europe, VRT for Belgium and Digiturk for Turkey. (<https://m.livreshebdo.fr/article/la-serie-lamie-prodigieuse-arrive-sur-canal> ; whether the broadcasting rights have now finally been awarded in Germany was still unclear at the time of going to press; but Suhrkamp's acquisition of publishing rights for the books already happened later than in most other major book markets irrespective of Italophilia among German readers.)

Occasionally, it can even happen that the series dynamics outstrips the creative powers even of an ingenious writer. This also happened, and is widely cited at HBO, of all things with "Game of Thrones" when the logic of the series and the worldwide fan base demanded the ending, but Martin couldn't deliver the final volume. In the end, the original book and the series script went their own separate ways. (More about the book: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Winds\\_of\\_Winter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Winds_of_Winter) ; and the series: <https://www.cnet.com/how-to/game-of-thrones-final-season-8-release-date-cast-theories-hbo/> )

It's obvious that book publishers are no longer involved as coproducers in these projects. Rather, they become one member among numerous service providers in a wide-branching value-added chain that other entities control. For Ferrante, it was good fortune that the additional revenue boost was substantial, and there was also a consulting role for the film version as a double package from two smaller publishers, the Italian Edizioni E/O and its American sister publisher Europe Editions. This highlights how the new world of the series not only involves an arrangement among the established major players.

However, the enthusiasm of Penguin Random House and its CEO Markus Dohle about the new dimensions of storytelling also confronts entirely different parameters that even overwhelm the world's biggest trade publisher, of all things, because of a lack of wide-ranging appeal. Because 'talent' and 'content development' are one strength of Netflix and the others. The really long arm to the consumer – both worldwide and individually – is the other, strategically presumably decisive element in the new story about storytelling.

In spring 2018, Netflix posted a job advert in Manila on the Philippines. The ad was for an "editorial analyst" whose main tasks were to "watch, research, rate, tag, annotate and write analysis". However, the specific requirements of the professional binge watcher also aimed high: "The ideal candidate has a deep knowledge, 5+ years experience, and education in the film and/or television industry, can write efficiently with attention to detail, is comfortable using a variety of publishing tools, and is thoughtful in the delivery of information while working on a diverse team", and he or she should preferably be fluent in another language besides English. (<https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/04/03/netflix-seeking-for-professional-binge-watchers/> )

Netflix, just like all other major digital groups, employs growing armies of people who at first manually and by virtue of their human intuition accomplish a painstaking process of 'tagging' – or indexing using thousands of keywords – the deluge of digital content. The deluge is to some degree shared out in streaming, waves and then divided up even more in individual drops and compiled in miniscule structures in databases. This material is then further processed via 'machine learning' and artificial intelligence so that ultimately – and adjusted for the individual viewing habits of every single subscriber – it is used to set up personal favourites lists. This longwinded process is certainly immensely more worthwhile for a series with countless instalments and seasons and running for months and years than for a single film lasting 90 or at best 120 minutes. Series that captivate,

engage, entice and disappoint me as a viewer and then reconcile with me again are simply better suited to finding out what I like, and who I am!

Based on this process, Netflix, just like Amazon, is not only a content provider or marketplace, but at least halfway to being a technology business as well.

In the end, all of these favourites profiles are different. They make each one of the currently 124 million Netflix subscribers an unmistakable individual customer, while simultaneously granting Netflix an equally unique treasure trove of data.

This is where the true distinction runs between Netflix, Amazon, Facebook, or Google on the one side – and the rest of the world.

## 7. Industrializing writing

And what does it all mean for writers?

First and foremost, new options. In light of the shrinking book markets across Europe and around the world, this is primarily excellent and significant news. Because alongside the possibility of new commissions and publishing models, it's a groundbreaking sign that narration – even in differentiated forms with everything that goes along with storytelling and discourses – does not represent a dying pleasure of outdated cultural elites. On the contrary. The present-day with its overexerting confusions, its unclear perspectives and interpretations once again searches for the maximum diversity in terms of projection fields in new stories. Because, as already mentioned, the most astonishing thing about the boom of the new media groups and the series is that these stories have not predominantly found their forums with the traditional establishments – from publishing houses to national TV institutions.

It is plain how far these two worlds of old and new have already drifted apart not least in view of the most recent stars.

Jill Soloway must be mentioned here for multiple reasons. Without knowing the name, I first got hooked thanks to a video sequence lasting only a few minutes and not somewhere online, but in the Jewish Museum on Upper East Side in New York. A handful of video clips were playing in an infinite loop as the most up-to-the-minute examples of Jewish-American identity. I went back again specially to watch a scene a second and third time: obviously, a Jewish wedding party is being ushered together for a group picture; everyone is chattering among themselves, everybody is celebrating his or her personality foibles, until finally someone takes control and begins to direct them – once again, a hint of self-reference of the genre – until the official photographer finally has the proper, valid picture in the box. This miniature is staged with a virtuosity and simultaneous nonchalance that is breathtaking.

In the middle of the anarchic troop, an older man in white women's clothes spins his small pirouettes – and by now, it's already clear for series fans that the scene must be from Jill Soloway's cult series "Transparent". Okay, the fans have in any case long since internalized this scene!

The episode opened the 2015 second season of a self-ironically narrated, semi-autobiographical story about Soloway's father coming out as transgender. "Transparent" was produced by Amazon Studios, Jill Soloway's most important client. The main character Morton Pfefferman is delightfully played by Jeffrey Tambor. But all the success couldn't prevent the scandal that erupted soon after

the broadcast – and caused the cancellation of the series – when Tambor was accused of sexual assaults. Soloway and her lead actors – only recently a dream team – fell out. Not only that, meanwhile Soloway has also changed her own sexual identity and will no longer be addressed by ‘he’ or ‘she’, but only in the neutral form ‘their’.

Here, it’s not (or: not only) about an intertwining of artistic biographies with the *zeitgeist* and even with social policy. Instead, topics are tackled head on that are hardly addressed in the conventional culture industry. This relates not merely to content, but also to design as well as organizational forms, in which radical new ground is broken. This is happening not in some isolated ‘off’ niche, but professionally and commercially with sights set on the mainstream and realizing with self-awareness that this is turning the great wheel of the new media industry.

Soloway is both an author as well as producer and makes her personal life a manifesto and her personal identity the linchpin of higher ambitions. The production company is programmatically called “Topple”, derived from ‘toppling’ patriarchal power relations. Recently, Soloway is also responsible for a book programme under the publishing arm of Amazon and focusing on ‘queer’ topics, naturally also under the label of “Topple Books”.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/13/style/jill-soloway.html> )

All this doesn’t mean, of course, that in future all writers have to mutate to media entrepreneurs. But the option is more obvious than in the past. And the changing terms from (ingenious-solipsistic) ‘writer’ to ‘talent’ and from the ‘work’ – that is to be sent ready-packaged to the editor please – to ‘content development’ certainly allows a suspicion to resonate that not only one individual is striking a high tone here. This transforms the old handcrafted creative process into a much greater thought-out, industrial framework.

If necessary, even the stories by the most respected icons, as happened with George R.R. Martin, can be drawn to a conclusion by a team. Conversely, however, quick as a flash, all ignored stories can suddenly form a new centre.

For authorship this means the risky leap from the late 18th century, a time of revolutions and risk, into a rough landing in the 21st century, which most likely is not characterized by accident both by incomparable turmoil as well as similarly lofty hopes of something new.

## 8. What’s next? Like starting over!

“Everything remains different”, we can sum up with a nice pun. Books never had a monopoly as the best, or even only medium, of delivering stories to the audience. From the epic troubadours of pre-history to theatre and opera and all the technical media of the past two centuries – photography, film, television – there were always several competing and cross-fertilizing formats for the ultimate question, which small children already intuitively express, about prolonging the good night story, about another twist – or instalment: “What’s next?”

There is more than only one valid form of telling a story in the right way. However, there are amazingly few long-lasting variants. These are neutral as far as media and formats are concerned.

On the one hand, aesthetic forms are fundamental. The basic tendencies to introduce and develop characters, to build tension levels to a crescendo and then calm them down, to create surprises, to disappoint, to evoke laughter and emotions have not changed much since the early days of recording stories about two and a half centuries ago. There are not many basic building blocks.

On the other hand, there are very clearly distinguishable lines. Chinese or Indian epic tales function in a different way to all traditional Greek dramas. That's still true today. Excellent examples of this are the wonderfully light film adaptation of the classic Chinese novel "Journey to the West" (西遊記) by Cheang Pou-soi from Hong Kong, a series of feature films, but created as a popular series exactly like the 16th-century novel by Wu Cheng'en (吳承恩), which it is based on. Where one escapade and adventure follow another, and the characters remain stoically unchanged, you feel as though you are transported back in time to the early modern icons of European narratives – from Cervantes' "Don Quixote" to the Flemish "Till Eulenspiegel" and the picaresque novel "The Adventurous Simplicissimus Teutsch" by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, published in 1668. All of these are pioneering narratives and, incidentally, reading them today is not only worthwhile but also works well.

The contrasting post-classical Greek mode of high dramatization in complicated arcs and theatrical forms, which abruptly cut frame-sequences in the current series are also aesthetically committed to, this is all extremely fertile post-Shakespeare territory. Perhaps for this reason, too, it's important to have the ever-recurrent self-reference for self-legitimation. The world's literature and theatre festivals have long since discovered these riches. More conservative corners of the cultural worlds still shy away from an inquisitive break-out into these zones. But that will still happen.

Whatever... The game that we are witnessing is certainly older than we thought when this provisional research began. This game is audacious, relentless and decadent. Which is why we like it so much.

"A great while ago the world begun,  
With hey, ho, & c.  
But that's all one, our play is done,  
And we'll strive to please you every day."

(William Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night", Epilogue)