

Title:

***Performing Identity in Transmedia Digital Narratives in The Big Bang Theory: Penny!
Penny! Penny!***

Abstract:

Considering the concept of *speech acts* as *performative acts* of the *self-identity*, as Benveniste (1986) argued, with the concept of classical and digital transmedia narratives as constructors but also *construal* of natural narratological ecosystems, as Jenkins (2011) argues, under the gender theory (Butler, 2006; Rich, 1986/2002; Foucault, 1970; Irigaray, 1977; Vidal, 2005; Héritier, 2005; Beauvoir, 2008; Showalter, 2002), we intend to discuss the female characterization (under the concept of *male gaze*, Mulvey, 2007); Beauvoir, 2008; Showalter, 2002), in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, focusing the characters Penny/Amy vs Sheldon/Leonard (namely, season 10, episode 2).

Introduction

Our main purpose is to question whether the cultural convergence and transmedia digital narratives focus on the linear and non-linear narrative issue, as it prefigures a reorganisation and reconfiguration of television and computer narrative, which may or may not suggest a new representation of the female status. Bearing this purpose in mind, let us analyse the embodiment of the three female lead characters (Penny, Amy and Bernadette) in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, re-proposing the hereby reflection for further work, analysing a specific dialogue in the second episode of the tenth season.

1. The speech act as an identity performative act

It is though language that men represent themselves whether as subjects or subjectivity. That is, I am the one who says I! Self-awareness is an outcome of bipolarity; when saying 'I', I know I am referring to a 'you' which comes from without. This same bipolarity brought about by subject pronouns is what allows the act of language to be recognised as an identity performative act, while permitting the making of a speech act (Benveniste, 1986).

The term narrative with the Latin 'narrare' and, with the Indo-European 'gnarus' which means to know oneself and to know the world, what surrounds the self, and to know the reality in which one is immersed each time and place. Narrative is hence built from self (Beynon, M., Russ, S., McCarty, W. 2005), from the world, and the narrative ecosystem it produces.

Narration uses a plot, characters, elocution and thought (Aristotle, 1998). Man narrates to communicate, share culture, values, and knowledge.

The act of narration is founded on a pact of fiction — tacit suspension of disbelief — thinkable through the consciousness that the narrated act reports to the imaginary and not to the real (Coleridge, 1817).

The narrative act hinges upon the phylogenetic and ontogenetic developments but it also, depends on the improvements of communication technology.

The advent of Digital New Technologies and its formal and technical options have long drawn out the freedom of creative assembly by crossing *media* and interactivity. However, there is no essential difference on the narrative act. Within cinema and television, narrative structures are attended by techniques which allow the explosion of temporal linearity through spatial management. With digital transmedia narratives, the viewer exits their passive place and becomes an active user each time there are narratives. Forget we not that stories are universal, whether they are linear, non-linear or even interactive narratives, the key elements that characterize them — context, plots, characters — remain unchanged.

2. Classical and digital transmedia narratives as constructors and also *construal* of natural narratological ecosystems

The present moment of *media's* change can be defined by the overlapping of diversified layers and by the interconnectivity of the media, contrasting with the previous model which supposes that new media would replace *old media* (Jenkins, 2011).

Transmedia narrative asserts itself in a paradigm characterised by the convergence of mass media and digital media properties. It operates in a media ecosystem in which the

digital has preponderance, determining the form, production, diffusion and reception of cultural products (Jenkins, 2006).

Computers as *metamedia* with unique properties allow the representation of the contents in accordance with a new logic. Previous media struggled against bi-directional communication, and fostering the sharing of emotional space; while digital media offers individual access to interactive media, promoting and sharing cognitive space (Manovich, 2001). However, it takes place in the brain of each individual consumer.

So the question re-emerges: how are women characterised in the new transmedia narratives, of which we make *The Big Bang Theory* our object of reflection.

3. Gender theory & (Digital Transmedia) Narrative

Being a woman is prior to corporeal existence (Butler, 2006). The body is the ability to act as much as it is the place in which actions occur.

There is a public dimension to the body, constructed as a social phenomenon; an imaginary construct, (Showalter, 2002). In the public sphere, my body is not *my body*, in the sense that the feminine is prior to the body (Butler, 2006); it is a *speech* in the sense which Foucault (1970) attributed to the concept.

The *I/you* polarity which confirms the act of language as an act of communication, ends up confirming another polarity: the binary categories of language oppose the notions, quantities and values, which are also seen as absolute representatives; as what is cold is not warm and what is one cannot be multiple (Héritier, 2005). This arsenal of universal categories anchors the opposition between *male* and *female*. The root of the question lies in the difference between the *self* and the *other* (Beauvoir, 2008).

The fact that culture comes forth as and becomes patriarchal is a profound mark of language, (Irigary, 1977). The very technological apparatus is taken into patriarchal surroundings, which escape the female and which ostracise her eternally within her own skin and making her a function of her own speech (Doane, 2000).

Taking the issue of the *female* category in cinema into her own hands, Mulvey (2007) prefers to place the essence of the search into the question: *Is the Gaze Male?*

The *female* category is mixed up with the social roles which reflect in the filmic screenplay — narrative, (Cowie, 1978). *Id est*, women are circumscribed into a definite

social placing, as women. What we aim to evaluate is whether the characterisation of Penny and Amy as opposed to Sheldon and Leonard, as well as Bernadette and Howard is shown in parallel to the typical *male gaze* of linear narratives.

4. Performing Identity in Transmedia Digital Narratives in *The Big Bang Theory*: *Penny! Penny! Penny!*

The Big Bang Theory (CBS, 2007) authored by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady is a *sitcom* which takes *nerds* as reference. *The Big Bang Theory* is multiplatform expanded through old or new media, namely blogs, forums, merchandising, board games, online digital games, replication of the characters in *Lego*, and comics.

The Big Bang Theory follows the life of a group of young scientists, who live in the city of Pasadena, California. The resident characters feature Sheldon Cooper, a Theoretical Physicist, Leonard Hofstadter an Experimental Physicist, Howard Wolowitz an Engineer and the Indian Astrophysicist Rajesh Koothrappali, also known as Raj. Penny, Amy and Bernadette are also part of the group.

The female characters emerge around the male ones, which confirms the female characterisation in this transmedia digital narrative as observed by the Gender Studies in linear narratives, as previously described.

Penny is their front-door neighbour. She was born and raised in Nebraska and dreams of becoming a famous actress. She goes on subsisting on her work at the restaurant The Cheesecake Factory. Until the third season, Bernadette Rostenkowski works with Penny, but being a student, she completes a PhD in Microbiology. From the third season onwards she appears as Howard's girlfriend. Amy Farrah Fowler holds a PhD in Biology and can be considered the feminine version of Sheldon Cooper.

Each one of the female characters is portrayed as a stage of the female stereotype:

Amy is shown as an intellectually privileged female figure, within a highly regarded field of study. Not showing much of an affective or emotional life, up to the when she finds Sheldon, she lives for the scientific research she develops and shows a complete lack of social skills. She's an uninteresting brunette, inelegant in demeanour and attiring, pushing the stereotype that intelligence and elegance cannot go hand-in-hand.

Bernadette is a character of commitment. She is of small build and can convey a blonde version of *Lolita*. Despite working for The Cheesecake Factory, she manages to finish a PhD in microbiology, which allows her to work for a pharmaceutical company and be extremely well paid, situation which creates harsh conflicts for the Bernadette–Howard couple, as well as demeaning commentary amongst the male characters. Bernadette is the first one to go through pregnancy and motherhood but she does it emphasising the conflict she feels as to her professional life.

Penny is depicted as the typical blonde, of sensual shape, who bears the dream of becoming a cinema star. With no superior academic education, she is the representative of good sense. However, she is shown as a regular alcohol consumer, as a person with broken dreams, who comes from a dysfunctional family. To her favour — the favour of her stereotyped female characterisation — strong social skills are evidenced through her, almost as an award for being kept within the narrow limitations of the female representation.

Underlining that in *The Big Bang Theory* the female characters emerge around the male ones, we draw particular attention to the opening sequence of episode 2 in season 10. In this opening sequence, the narrative begins in Sheldon and Leonard's living room. Sheldon is researching on the computer and comments with his flatmate that he is consulting an online forum, in which a young man commented that *The Big Bang Theory* is a *sitcom* (a fictional narrative) and that the characters' figurines are for sale online. Amazed by that piece of information, Leonard asks: Are we not real?! Are we the product of the mad imagination of a young guy interacting in online forums?

The beginning of this episode is particularly interesting. The proposal launched through the dialogue is: are we characters of fiction, are we not real? Are we interactive digital fiction?

This issue raised at the opening of episode 2 from season 10, is paradigmatic. Not only is the *The Big Bang Theory* a digital transmedia narrative, but it also allows its male characters (and only male) to question whether they are characters in a digital transmedia narrative.

The female construct is marked by Sheldon's obsessive way of knocking on his neighbour's door: Penny! Penny! Penny! ; echoing a not-so-distant obsessive imperative that we get used to recognising in the way children call their mothers.

The women in *The Big Bang Theory*, within a technologically-driven landscape, are not found in a different characterisation than the one in linear or even ancestral narratives. Language remains masculine, even when entering the fields of technologic developments or the promise of an admirable new world!

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Film:

The Big Bang Theory (CBS, 2007) authored by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady