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Echoes from Other Rooms: Joseph Cornell, Robert Coover, and the Transmedial Narrativity of Collage

Room 1: Joseph Cornell[1]

It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to define the historical contours and origins of collage. The history of collage is temporally vast, trans-cultural, and reaches far beyond the Modernist confines of its typical Western definition as a form of novelty assemblage (with the names of Pablo Picasso, Hannah Höch, and Kurt Schwitters being thrown about as early 20th century proponents). And, yet, it is here, within the ironic confines of the Modernist novelty assemblage that we must begin to understand the medium of collage as it was practiced by the reclusive American artist, Joseph Cornell. Cornell's works are as connected to the vast, vague history of collage as they are connected to the circumstances of Cornell's obsession with the obscure Dadaist aesthetics of Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst. But unlike the collage works of these artists, Cornell's works although sharing definite similarities in design and ambiguity began with the rather more private aim of diverting the attention of Joseph's physically- and mentally-impaired brother, Robert, who suffered from cerebral palsy.

Taking on a leadership role in his family after the early death of his father to leukemia in 1917 (when Joseph was 14 years old), Cornell found himself in the unique position of having to provide for, educate, and entertain his brother. And having always had a knack for constructing objects, paired with a passion for the theatrical dreamscapes of Hollywood cinema and the pop-machinery of the penny arcade, Cornell's instinct was to playfully re-create a semblance of this world of intrigue within the confines of his suburban New York residence and, thereby, bring some measure of the amazing variety of city life (which Cornell experienced as a textile salesman) home to his sequestered brother.

Beginning with the construction of a delicate diorama made from a small, round tin, lined with mirrors and featuring three thimbles balanced upon pins dancing into the infinity of their own tinkling musical reflections (see Figure 1), the obvious delight that this object brought to Robert fueled Cornell to continue constructing objects to amuse and inspire the kind of enthusiasm that he witnessed in his brother.

From this simple diorama, Cornell's works of collage increased in complexity. And eventually he arrived at the form that would characterize the majority of his creations the shadow box.
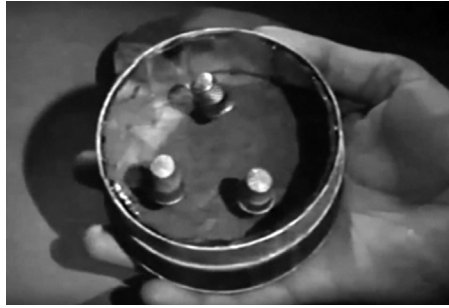
Figure 1. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Thimble Diorama)*[2]

Room 2: Robert Coover

In or around the year 2000, Robert Coover (American postmodern writer and professor of literature at Brown University) was contacted by Jonathan Safran Foer (then an undergraduate student at Princeton University). Foer's formal proposal to Coover (which also contained a set of images) was meant to solicit Coover's participation in a writing project concerning the works of Joseph Cornell. Coover's task was to write something devoted to the series of boxes often referred to as Cornell's "Grand Hotels" (see Figure 2). And along with an impressive list of other American literary heavyweights, including Joyce Carol Oates, Barry Lopez, Robert Pinsky, and Lydia Davis, Coover took up the challenge and provided Foer's collection, *A Convergence of Birds* (2001), with five short vignettes. These vignettes were later added to and expanded into the ten chapters of Coover's own collection, *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)* (2002)[3].

Figure 2. Some examples of Joseph Cornell's "Hotel" series of shadow boxes[4]

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[2] J. Cornell, *Untitled (Thimble Diorama)*, c. 1929, image from *Joseph Cornell: Worlds in a Box* (BBC: Dir. Mark Stokes, 1991).

[3] See, R. Coover, *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)*. Providence 2002; J.S. Foer, ed. *A Convergence of Birds*. New York 2002.

[4] P. Allen, "Armchair Voyages with Joseph Cornell at the Royal Academy", <http://travellingcalavera.com/2015/08/01/armchair-voyages-joseph-cornell-wanderlust-royal-academy/>. [access: 17.08.2016].

Room 3: Thesis

There are both narrative and non-narrative forms of collage[5].

The non-narrative collage is intended as a text without the characters, events, and/or semiotic content necessary to evoke a narrative script. The non-narrative collage is, therefore, unable to introduce a distinct storyworld, or to potentially communicate any narrative meaning that goes beyond the structural correspondence(s) of its intra-textual components.

The following example of non-narrative collage, composed by the collage artist Spooky Dooky, juxtaposes numerous images of cat heads within a single panel (see Figure 3). The only proposition that might be derived from the interpretation of this collage is, "(Here are some) cat heads." And while it might be safe to propose that the collage involves a set of characters and, at a stretch, that a certain potential exists for a story-world to emerge, there is nothing within the intra-textual graphic syntax of the collage to suggest an event (or a series of events) that might connect these cat heads to a narrative that has any story potential beyond the descriptive statement of, again, "(Here are some) cat heads".

Figure 3. Spooky Dooky, *BW Cat Collage*[6]

Even if the proposition of, "(Here are some) cat heads", might be considered as an intertextual or transmedial framing of some (perhaps, potentially ironic) discourse concerning the proliferation of cat-head images and cat-related content in contemporary media (including, for example, cat-head imagery and iconography in advertising,

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[5] In direct reference to the question of narrativity within pictorial works, Werner Wolf makes the following statement: "… a crucial distinction concerning the narrative quality of given works must be introduced. Besides the well-known fact that narrative is a prototypical phenomenon and thus gradable, many representations do appear to possess genuine narrativity to a considerable extent in themselves, whereas other representations, while not actually narrative as such, may yet encourage a narrativization based on intertextual or intermedial references to clearly narrative representations," see W. Wolf, "Framings of Narrative in Literature and the Pictorial Arts," in: *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. M.-L. Ryan and J.-N. Thon, Lincoln 2014, p. 129.

[6] Spooky Dooky, *BW Cat Collage*, c. 2015, image from the website, society 6, <https://society6.com/product/bw-cat-collage-tob_print#1=45>. [access: 17.08.2016].

fashion, television, online social media, etc.), this collage is missing all of the necessary signs of semiotic framing that might serve to connect this feline kaleidoscope to a narrative syntax possible of suggesting some purpose behind, or (intertextually) beyond, the simple ubiquity of overlapping cat heads. Without this semiotic framing, the potential for any comprehensible narrative to emerge is negated by the abject lack of the necessary semiotic markers. Even the paratext of the title, "BW Cat Collage", offers nothing in the way of a transmedial framing or intertextual connection to a wider discourse. And without the implicit framing of an ironic, rhetorical, semiotic, or transmedial syntax, this collage fails as a narrative.

The narrative collage on the contrary, proposes a distinct story-world through metareferential mentions, paratextual framings, intra-textual sequencing, and/or transmedial/intermedial reference which allows the audience to engage with the arrangement of a set of characters, objects, and/or environments, and connect them in such a way that a narrative script is suggested (or is capable of emerging) in the imagination[7].

Narrative collage, as a collection of connected lexias proposing a meaningful network of verbal, graphic, gestural, emotive, sonic and/or other semiotic elements (i.e., Barthes's "contiguous fragments")[8], typically establishes its narrativity through its rhetorical structure as a communicative set or sequence of related components and framings (both within and across the forms of media involved in the collage).

The non-narrative collage is only capable of proposing or describing an arrangement (e.g., a collection of cat heads) without suggesting the nature of that arrangement in the context of an intra-textual/extra-textual narrative sequence. Whereas the narrative collage involves the appropriation, augmentation, or representation of a series of potentially meaningful components that can be cognitively connected into an intra-textual, intertextual, and/or transmedial narrative sequence.

As will be established through the following analyses of Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)* (c. 1945–46) and Robert Coover's "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade", the narrative collages of these artists are not only actively engaged in the process of transmedial narrative, they also correspond to the properties necessary to satisfy the rhetorical, sequential and transmedial conceptions of narrative proposed by Mieke Bal, James Phelan, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jan-Noël Thon.

Room 4: Mieke Bal

Narrative collage exhibits each of the building blocks of story as specified by Bal in her 1986 treatise, *Theorie van Vertellen en Verhalen*, namely: "characters, time

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[7] For further details on narrative framing and the topic of narrativity within the visual arts, see Wolf, "Introduction: Frames, Framings and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media", *Description in Literature and Other Media*, ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart, Amsterdam 2007, pp. 1–40.

[8] In definition of what he refers to as "contiguous fragments", Barthes writes: "[A narrative, such as Balzac's 'Sarrasine', can] be cut up into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, which we shall call lexias, since they are units of reading. This cutting up will be arbitrary in the extreme ... The lexia will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings ..." see R. Barthes, S/Z, New York 1975, p. 13.

and place"[9], or, as Gerda de Villiers re-phrases it, "something happens to someone somewhere and sometime"[10].

Each of these elements of character (someone), time (sometime) and place (somewhere) can be discerned in the narrative structures of Cornell's *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)* (see Figure 4).

Involving two central characters 1. the figure of Lauren Bacall as the focal point of the box's construction and 2. the iconic wooden ball that travels through the interior of the box Cornell's *Penny Arcade Portrait* not only involves the viewer/player with a series of recorded moments related to these characters, the images of Bacall as a child, along with the photo clippings of Bacall's cocker spaniel, Droopy (both set within the mosaic columns on the right and the left), add to the cast of characters referenced by the overall design of the collage. Furthermore, the elements of time and place specified by Bal are played out quite literally as the wooden ball slowly navigates the interior of the box (through a purpose-built slot at the top of the right side of the box), the film noir diorama of Manhattan skyscrapers is sequentially connected to the various images of Bacall and her dog, and the active component of the parodic "penny arcade game" mechanism is set in motion. The vector-specific, revolving animation of the rolling ball also conveys a suggestion of film stock being reeled through a projector, a quality which is further enhanced by the delicate "sound track" of the ball's musical "*plink plink plink*" negotiation of the inclined glass platforms that form the concealed architecture of the box time and place set into the immediate cinematographic context of sound and image[11].

Figure 4. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)*[12]

[9] M. Bal, *Theorie van Vertellen en Verhalen: Inleiding in de Narratologie*, Muiderberg 1990, p. 101.

[10] G. de Villiers, "From the Walls of Uruk: Reflections on Space in the Gilgamesh Epic", in: *Constructions of Space V: Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Gert T.M. Prinsloo and Christl M. Maier, London 2013, p. 143.

[11] D. Solomon, Utopia Parkway: *The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*, New York 2004, p. 75.

[12] J. Cornell, *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)*, c. 1945-46; image from Dickran Tashjian, *Joseph Cornell: Gifts of Desire*, Miami 1992, p. 120.

Room 5: Critical Interlude

The following quote is from Brian Evenson's *Understanding Robert Coover* (2003):

> … 'The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade,' is based on a Cornell box done in blue. At the box's center is a portrait of the actress Lauren Bacall. Below that are three smaller pictures of Bacall, all behind panes of blue glass. To either side are two columns of … cubes, some of which are painted blue, some of which depict either a dog or Bacall in childhood, smiling. The box functions as an arcade a small ball can be put into the top of it to rattle through the interior and come out at the bottom. In constructing his story, Coover draws on many details from Cornell's box. At the heart of his "Grand Hotel Penny Arcade", 'encased in blue glass and pale as porcelain, floats a sleeping princess, gracefully coiling and uncoiling, clothed only in her own purity, her eyes open but unseeing'.[13]

Room 6: James Phelan

Narrative collage fulfills the requirements of narrative rhetoric as conceived by James Phelan in the statement: "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened"[14], because narrative collage either actively enacts a sequence of meaningful "happenings" (such as in Cornell's *Untitled [Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall]*), or, it serves to illustrate some sequence of action(s) through the structure of its lexical components.

Furthermore, narrative collage involves either the overt incorporation of a narrator's voice (through the presence of verbal material, as well as through music and movement; e.g., the written narration, subtitles, and/or the emotive musical accompaniment in a silent film), or, the arrangement and structure of the collage components suggests a certain diegesis that must be deciphered and/or imagined by the audience (e.g., the narration in a non-verbal, purely graphic comic strip, which can be attributed to the diegetic structure of the chosen graphic style, to the implied and/or explicit focalization, and to the narratorial "voice" indicated by the arrangement and symbolism of the graphic components including paratextual material, panel size, panel shape, color choice, and the presence of intertextual mentions).

Room 7: "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade"

Robert Coover's text, "The Grand Hotel Penny Arcade", operates as a narrative collage not only in its relation to Cornell's box, but also in its coordination of ekphrasis and diegesis. The narrator of Coover's prose poem provides the narratorial voice and external focalization (i.e., Phelan's "somebody telling somebody else … that something

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[13] B. Evenson, *Understanding Robert Coover*, Columbia 2003, p. 248.
[14] J. Phelan, "Rhetoric/Ethics", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Cambridge 2007, p. 287.

happened"); this is the diegetic function of Coover's text. The occasion and the pur-
pose of Coover's text is to verbally interpret and explain the experience of confronting
the narrative of Cornell's box. This is where Coover's description of Cornell's box col-
lides with the diegetic dimension of his story's narration. In other words, Coover's nar-
rator is telling the reader that Cornell's box has a definite set of qualities that can be
discerned through a sequential decoding of the characters, environments, and events
involved in the mechanisms of a collage devoted to Cornell's own coded interpretation
of the character, Lauren Bacall, within the context of Bacall's role in the film, *To Have and
Have Not* (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Lauren Bacall, still image from the film, *To Have and Have Not*[15]

Assuming the perspective of an objective interpretation of one of Cornell's "Grand
Hotel" boxes (metaphorically masked within the conventional rhetoric and cliché phra-
seology of the hotel brochure genre), Coover's narrative approaches Cornell's collage
as if it were an actual location that might only be visited by an actual visitor encountering
a conceptual space within the poetic confines of the imagination. Coover writes:

> The guest rooms of the hotel, all decorated in marine blue
> and permeated with the faint sweet aroma of youthful flesh, en-
> circle the sleeping princess on several levels, each room with its
> own individual coin-operated peephole viewers, viewers techni-
> cally augmented by manual zoom lenses, tracking and lock-on
> mechanisms worked with a crank, and simulated kinetoscopic
> flickering. As the princess is never completely still, or almost
> never, no room is particularly privileged, so room rates are

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[15] Lauren Bacall, still image from the film, *To Have and Have Not*, Warner Brothers, Dir. Howard Hawks, Scre-
enplay by William Faulkner, et al., 1944.

the same for all, though each visitor is known to have her or his preference. Although some first-timers feel compelled by nature to zoom in on her private parts, so called (the princess's private parts, as they eventually discover, are hidden deeply within), most viewers come to prefer close-ups of her face, thrilled by the illusion that the dreamer is sometimes gazing directly at them as if in recognition, or else they select more distant views of her whole figure, in movement or at rest. The classic perspective. Some leave their rooms to take in the full panorama from the open galleries on the top level, while others prefer not to watch at all, but only to be told what others are seeing that they might more fully imagine her.[16]

Room 8: Marie-Laure Ryan

In her introduction to *Narrative across Media* (2004), Ryan outlines the necessary components of a narrative text:

1. A narrative text must create a world and populate it with characters and objects. Logically speaking, this condition means that the narrative text is based on propositions asserting the existence of individuals and on propositions ascribing properties to these existents.[17]

Cornell: The storyworld of the film-noir penny arcade game, inhabited by images of Lauren Bacall and a wooden ball, asserts the mediated existence of Lauren Bacall, describes the literal existence of the rolling ball, and ascribes unique properties to both entities.

Coover: The storyworld of Cornell's box, which is inhabited by "the architect" (i.e., Joseph Cornell), "the visitor" (i.e., the viewer) and "the princess" (i.e., Lauren Bacall), undergoes a series of events as it is experienced both by the implied visitors and also as it is described by the narratorial voice of the "hotel guide" (i.e., Coover's third--person narrator).

2. The world referred to by the text must undergo changes of state that are caused by non-habitual physical events: either accidents ("happenings") or deliberate human actions. These changes create a temporal dimension and place the narrative world in the flux of history.[18]

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[16] Coover, *The Grand Hotels*, pp. 13–14.
[17] M.-L. Ryan, *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln 2004, p. 8.
[18] M.-L. Ryan, *Narrative across Media*, p. 8.

Cornell: The sound and action of the ball connecting the sequential images of the collage is initiated by a deliberate human action (i.e., the active placement of the ball into the entry point at the top of the box), which creates a measurable temporal dimension. Furthermore, the images of Bacall at various stages in her life/career (including, of course, the role played by the box itself in collecting and arranging the sequence of those images) places the narrative of Cornell's collage both within the immediate context of its own mechanically-structured internal history as well as a culturally-negotiated, external, transmedial history.

Coover: The narrator's guided tour through the architecture of the proposed storyworld, and the narrator's descriptions of events occurring (or that might conceivably occur) within the space described, creates a temporal dimension not only through the rhetoric of the language used, but also in the text's description of an extant work (which gestures toward a temporal relationship between two texts, which is significant within the narrative).

3. The text must allow the reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around the narrated events. This implicit network gives coherence and intelligibility to the physical events and turns them into a plot.[19]

Cornell: The dream-like game of connecting the film-noir dioramas of New York to the photographic traces of Lauren Bacall's cinematic and tabloid personas plays with Hollywood iconography and the world of American popular media surrounding the character, "Lauren Bacall", which functions as the "plot" of the work's narrative sequence. The voyeuristic scanning of the hidden interior of the box, which is suggested by the rolling action of the ball, is also an element "that gives coherence and intelligibility to the physical events"[20]. The physical design of the box as a kind of arcade-game is clear in its suggestion of "goals, plans, and causal relations", although the "psychological motivations" surrounding the events that take place within the box can only be imagined by the viewer.

Coover: The dream-like game of giving voice (through various layers of diegesis and ekphrasis) to the physical mechanisms and encoded motivations behind the construction of Cornell's box gives Coover's narrative its coherence and intelligibility. However, the "interpretative network" that emerges from the prose, like pop-cultural transmissions encrypted in the synapses of the subconscious, playfully navigates the conventions of the hotel brochure genre and stays within the bounds of the metaphor sufficiently for a dominant theme to emerge in each paragraph (which amounts to a "plot" within the hotel brochure genre). Each of these semi-autonomous themes, when related back

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[19] *Ibidem*, pp. 8–9.
[20] *Ibidem*, p. 9.

to the greater text of *The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)*, adds to the network of relations that exists between each of the ten chapters each contributing to the literal and fictional dimensions of Coover's narrative collage of Joseph Cornell's life and works.

Room 9: Christie's, "Lot Notes", 13 May 2014

Among the copious notes and sketches included in his dossier entitled, "Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall: Working Model Based upon *To Have and Have Not*" (a portion of which was included in the exhibition guide to Cornell's 1946 show at the Hugo Gallery in New York, "Romantic Museum: Portraits of Women"), is the following description:

> A Botticellian slenderness of extreme youth with a touch of *jeune fille* awkwardness contrasting the rude assurance with irresistible appeal. (The sullenness which became uninspired in subsequent films here redeemed by a grace of sincerity) the atmosphere of the cabaret songs, with indescribable effect of tenderness in the high notes against the husky ones in *How Little We* Know the nocturnal mood and half lights of the hotel room, the evocation of the silent films in the boat scenes in the fog at night. … Impressions lingering despite the dense smoke-screen of hysterical publicity impressions bright and clean impressions intriguingly diverse that, in order to hold fast, one might assemble, assort, and arrange into a clean cabinet the contraption kind of amusement resorts with the endless ingenuity of effect worked by coin and plunger, or brightly colored pin-balls traveling inclined runways starting in motion compartment after compartment with a symphony of mechanical magic of sight and sound borrowed from the motion picture art into childhood into fantasy through the streets of New York through tropical skies … into the receiving tray the balls come to rest releasing prizes as the honky-tonk piano-tinkling of the Hong Kong Blues fades out.[21]

Room 10: Jan-Noël Thon

In his recent publication, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (2016), Thon argues that in today's hyper-interactive, multi-platform network of textual expansions, commercial adaptations, and trans-cultural appropriations, the storyworld of any given narrative often has more than one intended iteration. Stories are told and re-told in an immediate proliferation of media forms that stretch the bounds of contemporary narrative theory to the breaking point. Thon writes:

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[21] D. Tashjian, *Joseph Cornell: Gifts of Desire*, Miami 1992, p. 127; Christie's, "Lot Notes", 13 May 2014, <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Sculptures-Statues-Figures/joseph-cornell-untitled-with-penny-arcade-5792503-details.aspx?lid=1>. [access: 17.08.2016].

Even though it has become something of a cliché within narratology to assert the commercial, aesthetic, and sociocultural relevance of narrative representations across media, the fact remains that narratives indeed are everywhere. Interestingly, however, while there is a broad consensus that narrativity is a transmedial phenomenon, much of current literary and media studies tends to focus on strategies of narrative representation in specific media, neglecting the question to what extent the strategies that can be found there share an intermedial or, rather, a transmedial dimension. If one acknowledges that a significant part of contemporary media culture is defined by narrative representations, and if one accepts that an examination of their similarities as well as their differences will be able to help explain . . . as well as generally contribute to a better understanding of the forms and functions of narrative works across media, it becomes evident that media studies need a genuinely transmedial narratology.[22]

And it is this genuinely transmedial narratology that is the ideal critical platform for a truly comprehensive understanding of the narrativity of the collage. For, as suggested in the many "rooms" of this chapter, the collage narrative exists within the textual interstices of image and iteration, and across the formal boundaries of culture and communication. As an inherently hybrid manifestation, involving (in most instances) a variety of semiotic and rhetorical components, the collage is based in the cognitive space between media forms and modes of discourse a space which is both synchronic in its arrangement of its constituent parts, and diachronic in its appropriation of media from a multitude of historical epochs and cultural milieus. It is, therefore, impossible to adequately explore the collage without recourse to transmedial methods of narratological comparison and differentiation.

As Cornell's notes remind us, his collage is "a symphony of mechanical magic of sight and sound borrowed from the motion picture art into childhood into fantasy." Thus, there is no privileged, unified perspective from which to comprehend the orchestration of the collage's panoply of method and message. However, a transmedial narratology might begin to make sense of the connections and meaningful trajectories implied in each of the collage's discrete components and to comprehend their significance, both within the structure of the work in question, and across the spectrum of media involved.

Likewise, Coover's verbal dalliance within the realm of Cornell's metaphysical theatrics also reminds the critic that the dimensions of diegesis and the exigencies of ekphrasis are not essentially bound by the rules of relational logic, but are also influenced by the playful ploys of poetics and the subversive politics of irony. And as a genuinely

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[22] J.-N. Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, Lincoln 2016, pp. xvii-xviii.

transmedial narratology begins to take shape, the contemporary narratologist is advised to take note of these points. For if narratology is the study of narrative events and a narrative event specifies the (re-)production of a meaningful iteration concerning character, time, and place then any collage (whether verbal, pictorial, gestural, or otherwise) containing these elements must be considered as fulfilling the basic prerequisites of narrativity.

Room 11: Lauren Bacall (Herself)

No evidence has emerged to indicate that Cornell ever established any direct correspondence or familiar connection with Lauren Bacall, however, as Deborah Solomon writes in her biography, *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*, "One suspects he would have been elated to hear Bacall exclaim of his box years later, 'I love it and wish I had it!'"[23].

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[23] Solomon, *Utopia Parkway*, p. 75.

Attachment bibliography

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