(Dis)Orientation appears to be a phenomenon that is connected to media in numerous respects: today, finding your way in the world often means finding your way with the help of as well as within media, which in turn creates new virtual realms of (dis)orientation. This book deals with recent media technologies and structures (navigation devices, databases, transmediality) and unconventional narrative patterns (narrative complexity, plot twists, non-linearity), using the ambivalent concept of (dis)orientation as a shared focus to analyse various phenomena of contemporary media, thereby raising overarching questions about current mediascapes.

Julia Eckel (M.A.) is working on her PhD-thesis about anthropomorphic motifs in audiovisual media and their relevance for media theory.

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Due to technical media, spatial orientation in our world appears to be easier than ever before: Navigation systems, mobile screens, digital maps, and augmented reality applications tell users where they are and where to go. But at the same time it seems that media technologies—with their abundance of information, references, and functions—complicate orientation. Hypertext and databases, worldwide interconnectedness, and diversity of programmes open up virtual spaces in which orientation is only possible with the help of media themselves (e.g. search engines, web profiles, electronic programme guides, etc.). Even many recent narrations provided within these media networks feature disorienting structures by transgressing norms of storytelling and borders of (inter-)mediality, thereby raising the question of how far media and (dis)orientation can be considered mutually dependent.

But how can these contemporary, medial challenges to our senses of (dis)orientation be assessed? How exactly do media technologies orient and disorient us? And can the labyrinths of digital mediascapes be put in relation to the narrative mazes of contemporary film and television productions? These are the questions this book will focus on.

According to its title, the volume is divided into two major parts, which are entitled (Dis)Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes and which focus, on the one hand, on (dis)orientation caused by media technologies and structures and, on the other hand, on (dis)orientation occurring within media narrations—with the awareness, of course, that one focus hardly ever excludes the other completely. Enclosed in these major chapters are additional smaller ones consisting of two articles each. These are dealing with one facet of the main topic and are dedicated to a specific medium or more general questions concerning any type of media. Thus, the articles are put in smaller dialogues, which deal with specific questions and objects, but nevertheless shed a light on the big question of (dis)orientation in and across media. (Dis)Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes therefore must be considered as two faces of the same coin.
The ability to orient oneself is, of course, neither a new nor a particularly contemporary challenge. Quite the contrary, finding one’s way in the environment (e.g. back to one’s cave, village, city, etc.) has always been a crucial skill. Hence, it is worth pointing out that the term ‘orientation’ was established only during the 18th to 19th century (see e.g. Bogen 2010, 268f.; Oxford Dictionaries 2012): Based on the Latin term for East (‘oriens’) and the French verb ‘orienter’, it signified the practice of aligning something—in most cases a map—towards the East.

Particularly interesting about this fact in the context of this book is that ‘orientation’ as a word and a phenomenon thus seems to be fundamentally connected to media: The map as a visual medium is the origin of ‘orientation’, thereby raising the question of how the medium primarily affects and encourages the search for a definite position in space. Because even when an individual may find her way through the world only by looking at the sun or the stars or the moss on the trunk of a tree, it is only the map (or another medium) that may—in its abstraction—illustrate what it means to orientate oneself. Only the medium allows for reducing the ‘big picture’ to a (shortened and conceptional) smaller one, thereby offering the view on a minimised space that is comprehensible and structured. By giving an overview the medium makes it possible to plan, to ‘map out’, a way beyond the own field of view. The map as a medium thus generates an intersubjective knowledge space that is characterised by a reduction of details and that at the same time enables its user to comprehend space or at least parts of it as a whole (may it be a city, a continent, the world, or the universe). An increase in individual mobility is the desired effect.

But do these features only apply to media that visualise/generate knowledge about space? To pursue the aforementioned assumptions a little further, it could be said that the medium as such may be defined by its ability to gather information, to reduce its complexity and to transmit it to its user. As Niklas Luhmann points out:

“Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media. This is true not only of our knowledge of society and history but also of our knowledge of nature. What we know about the stratosphere is the same as what Plato knows about Atlantis: we’ve heard tell of it.” (Luhmann 2000, 1)

Therefore, the correlation of media and orientation seems to be a universal one: By reducing the complexity of the world, by generating and transferring know-
ledge about what we call ‘reality’, media become a main vehicle of orientation. They expand not only the (spatial) viewing range, but the range of knowledge about where, when, what, and who we are.

However, the facilitated and enhanced movement through these (mediatised knowledge) spaces also carries the risk of getting lost—not only by using an incorrect map or by reading it the wrong way, but also by the sheer abundance and uncertainty of possible paths. To continue with Luhmann:

“On the other hand, we know so much about the mass media that we are not able to trust these sources. Our way of dealing with this is to suspect that there is manipulation at work, and yet no consequences of any import ensue because knowledge acquired from the mass media merges together as if of its own accord into a self-reinforcing structure. Even if all knowledge were to carry a warning that it was open to doubt, it would still have to be used as a foundation, as a starting point.” (ibid.)

Thus, the reduction of complexity does not only lead to a better overview and to facilitated comprehension, but also to a multiplication of perspectives and ‘truths’, to decontextualisations and conversions. The increased mobility thereby causes a heightened risk of getting lost.

Orientation as well as disorientation therefore seem to be immanent in all processes of a (mediatised or general) appropriation of the world—because they allow the individual to easily overview and know more, but thus leave her confronted with more options of where to go or what to see or do next. This holds true not only for the original understanding of (dis)orientation, but even more for its current use as a synonym for all kinds of (mis)alignment or (de)localisation in time and space as well as factual or mental states of (un)certainty or confusion.

To condense and systematise these thoughts and observations, one could conceive two interdependent realms in which orientation and disorientation (as forms of directed or strayed action) may occur. The first one comprehends orientation in the subjective realm of experience—which means an individual, subject-centred orientation that enables oneself to navigate the actual world (with or without a map): for example, finding one’s way from the kitchen to the bathroom or from the office to the bakery around the corner, or knowing left from right and up from down. These are mental processes that enable everyday orientation concerning space and time as well as persons, causalities, and actions.

Second, a virtual realm of mediatised knowledge and content is conceivable which complements and augments the real world’s space-time. This realm with its abundance of information produces and establishes structures of orientation and disorientation by generating abstract and simplifying knowledge systems, which organise or disorganise real-world-related or fictional contents. These
mediatised structures of (dis)orientation therefore may be described more systematically and intersubjectively, allowing for more general thoughts about the phenomenon itself.

As mentioned before, these two realms are not separable and have to be conceived as constantly interdependent—on the one hand, due to the media space of knowledge shaping and transforming the subjective realm of experience; on the other hand, due to subjective mechanisms of real-world orientation being used for exploring media.

Especially the developments in the field of digital and mobile media during the last years make this interdependency of realms interesting for a current closer examination, because like the (mainly religiously relevant) East has been replaced by the (mainly physically relevant) North Pole as a central point of alignment for maps and the world, nowadays new structures of alignment and (dis)orientation seem to arise: Navigation systems, for example, do not align the map towards a compass point anymore, but centre the individual and its destination as a new and variable pole; augmented reality applications hybridise ‘real’ space into a virtual space in ‘real’-time; and media narrations embed subjective experiences of disorientation in their contents and forms.

It is, therefore, the interdependency and intersection of realms that this book focuses on. While the lastly named aspect (the implementation of mechanisms of (dis)orientation in audiovisual narrations) is discussed in the second part, the first part analyses structural (dis)orientations which result from the steady and current transformation of the realm of mediatised knowledge and its impact on subjective realms of experience.

In the initial section of the first part, this analysis is conducted by Nanna Verhoeff and Rolf F. Nohr, who both investigate the transformation and (re)-structuring of Spatiality through media. While Nanna Verhoeff focuses on mobile screens and their visual intersections with ‘real’ space, Rolf F. Nohr examines heterotopian spatial extensions of media, which, as he shows with the example of the photo booth, generate deviant spatial structures and seem to lead us to what Foucault describes as “other spaces”.

The second section is centred on the generation and structuring of knowledge through (Dis)Orienting Databases. Julius Othmer and Andreas Weich use web-profiles (on dating and shopping websites) as evidence for the (dis)orienting effects of databases. While their objects of study are, hence, utilised for a future-oriented search for the best product or the ideal partner, the database focused in Alina Bothe’s article deals with preserving the past: From a historian’s perspective, she analyses the Visual History Archive of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation by describing its orienting and disorienting effects on the re-creation of history.

In the next section, the heading Productive Aberrations unites two articles that deal with transgressive practices in digital media environments. Martin
Schlesinger focuses on Glitch art, which uncovers dysfunctionalities of digital interfaces and programming structures and thus consciously and purposefully causes disorienting effects. Such disturbing qualities of media images and sounds are also the main focus of Benjamin Eugster’s article, which assesses disturbed and disturbing images of contemporary advertising campaigns and mashup videos through the concept of ‘Manipulation Aesthetics’.

Negotiating Boundaries is the topic of the concluding section of (Dis)Orienting Media. The contributions of Daniela Olek and Katja Hettich focus on the exploration and variable definition of orienting boundaries within media systems. While Olek describes the prevalent (dis)orientation in the face of serial universes that expand beyond the boundaries of the medium of television, Hettich concentrates on the ambivalent relationship between the extra-filmic orientation of genre boundaries and their disorienting transgression in Richard Linklater’s Before Sunrise.

With this last exploration of the (dis)orienting genre system in film we transgress the border to the second section of this book, which addresses media that are dealing with (dis)orientation as a topic and/or feature it as a narrative structural mechanism.

...AND NARRATIVE MAZES

In parallel to the phenomena described in the first part of the book, media themselves tend to reflect their disorienting properties self-referentially by using them as an effect of entertainment. Many media scholars have noticed a recent increase in audiovisual narrations that purposefully confuse their audiences in a way that makes disorientation a main feature of the narration. Certainly, some kinds of disorienting narrations can be observed throughout the history of audiovisual narration. However, they seem to have migrated from an art house niche to the mainstream and new forms seem to have emerged, replacing or complementing the old ones.

Depending on the particular kind of disorientation and the focus of the analysis, numerous terms have been used to describe such narrations: “mind-fuck” (e.g. Eig 2003), “mind-bender” (e.g. Johnson 2005), “narrative complexity” (e.g. Mittell 2006), “modular narratives” (Cameron 2008), “puzzle films” (e.g. Buckland 2009), and “mind-game films” (e.g. Elsaesser 2009) are more general categories, while terms like “forking-path narratives” (e.g. Bordwell 2002), “twist movies” (e.g. Lavik 2006), “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2006), “unreliable narration” (e.g. Laass 2008), or “temporal non-linearity” (e.g. Eckel 2012) focus on particular groups of disorienting narrations.

While the large amount of terms might be rather disorienting in itself, each term has its own merits and flaws, so that we did not want to limit the contribu-
tors to just one term and thus one approach. Consequently, we chose the umbrella term of ‘narrative mazes’ without intending to add another fully defined term to the list. Instead, narrative mazes is best understood as a metaphor that encompasses all the aforementioned terms and highlights their disorienting potential. In the end, it all boils down to this: If the classical narration with its goal-oriented plots, clear causal connections, and its general drive to facilitate viewer comprehension can be understood as a straight corridor (Bordwell 1986, 18ff.), there are other narrations that are better described as mazes. Or, in Bordwell’s words:

“In classical narration, style typically encourages the spectator to construct a coherent, consistent time and space of the fabula action. Many other narrational norms value disorienting the spectator (albeit for different purposes). Only classical narration favors a style which strives for utmost denotative clarity from moment to moment.” (ibid., 26; emphasis added)

As indicated by the number of concepts united by the term, the nature of a narrative maze can be manifold, dependent on the kind of divergence from the classical norm. The audience may be confronted with the vast universe of a television serial and its official or unofficial extensions in other media. Another possibility is that the temporal order diverges from the classical, rather linear chronology of a narration, leading to numerous possible effects. In other variations of narrative mazes, viewers may have to discard a lot of what they thought they knew about the story of an audiovisual narration and replace it with new hypotheses. They even might come to the conclusion that it is impossible to construct a coherent story out of the plot information that has been offered. What all of these narrations have in common, however, is that they transform being disoriented into an incentive, being confused into a pleasure, and achieving re-orientation into the prevalent purpose.

The second part of this book focuses on these audiovisual narrative mazes, covering several of the most common variations. In the first section titled Televisual (Dis)Orientation, Jason Mittell and Christine Piepiorka both analyse the narrative structures of contemporary television serials as well as their expansion into a transmedial environment. While Mittell puts his focus on strategies of re-orientation through orienting paratexts often developed by fans in a kind of “forensic fandom”, Piepiorka describes how the need for re-orientation is created in the core text of the serial in the first place.

Filmic Incoherences, the second section, unites articles by Nele Uhl and Kathrin Rothemund, who develop their ideas about (dis)orienting effects in film with a special focus on two particular examples. Uhl presents her thoughts about the concepts of Diegese and possible worlds and applies them on Jean-Claude Lauzon’s Léolo, while Kathrin Rothemund uses the theories of Siegfried Kracauer
in order to make sense of the filmic rendition of mental disorientation in Darren Aronofsky’s π.

The third section, titled Narrative Re-orientation, features articles by Miklós Kiss and Bernd Leiendecker that are also concerned with filmic narrations. However, their main interest is in the relationship between disorientation and re-orientation. Kiss offers a reconceptualisation of the categorisation into simple and complex, puzzle and art narrations by adding the category of the riddle plot. Leiendecker analyses the phenomenon of plot twists in film as a standardised element of conscious re-orientation.

Mirroring the section on spatiality that opened the book, Temporality, the last section of this volume, is devoted to time as a dimension of orientation and disorientation. The focus of Julia Eckel’s article is on an array of contemporary films that feature a-chronological plot structures and serve as a foundation to establish a categorisation of non-linear plot temporalities. One particular form of a-chronology—the backward narration—is the main subject of Matthias Brütsch’s article, which describes this phenomenon by using examples from film, TV, and literature.

Attempting to cover the vast field opened up by the concepts of (Dis)Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes in one book at this point in time is, of course, an undertaking that would be certain to fail: The evolution of existing media of (dis)-orientation and the emergence of new ones have led to some noteworthy innovative forms for the time being, but they will, of course, continue to develop and change. Furthermore, it is rather unclear if the abundance of narrative mazes in the last two decades of audiovisual narration are just a fashion that will (or perhaps has already started to) fade, or if these storytelling innovations are here to stay. Thus, all this book can offer is kind of a map, focusing on some details and leaving out others, so that comprehension of these parts is possible. It can serve as a starting point for a journey into researching one of the manifold phenomena of (dis)orientation (be it in past, contemporary, or future mediascapes). Hopefully, it will leave its readers better oriented for the rest of their way.

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