

‘The (Meta-)Game is On’. Metafiction in *SHERLOCK*

KATHRIN NEIS

Universität des Saarlandes

kathrin.neis@yaboo.de

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In this paper, I deal with metafiction in British television series *SHERLOCK*. For this purpose, I have chosen, as an example, “The Empty Hearse”, an episode with frequent occurrences of metafiction. Originally devised as a literary concept, I will show that metafiction is also applicable to televisual ‘texts’. In accordance with Patricia Waugh, I understand metafiction as a literary form that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” and thereby addresses “questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 1984: 2). This could also be the case in media understood as belonging to popular culture. Firstly, I take a short look at metafiction in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes canon. Secondly, I examine its occurrence in the TV series episode. In doing so, I distinguish between two forms of metafiction: metafiction that can be understood immanently and metafiction that requires additional contextual knowledge on the part of the viewer. This form draws on intertextual references rooted in popular culture. In the end, it becomes clear that both forms are used in the episode. However, by no means do they always have a disruptive character; on the contrary, they often have an additional immersive effect.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a new Sherlock Holmes boom seems to have taken place. After Guy Ritchie’s first of two films set in the original era, *SHERLOCK HOLMES* (2009), Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss took a radically new approach in 2010 by transferring the Victorian detective archetype to modern times in the BBC series *SHERLOCK* (2010 - 2017). A little later in the US, CBS produced a second modern version with *ELEMENTARY* (2012 - 2019); Bill Condon’s adaptation *MR. HOLMES* (2015) showed the detective as an aged man. The BBC’s *SHERLOCK* has achieved such widespread recognition that it has developed into a major fandom, the epitome of popular culture. Inevitably, the question arises as to what constitutes the adaptation’s special appeal, since Holmes is — after all — the second most filmed literary character of all time (Frost; Kynvin, 2015: 15). Striking characteristics of the modern Holmes narrative in *SHERLOCK* are drawing attention to its own mediality and self-consciousness. These metafictional phenomena, often described as typically postmodern,¹ are not merely ends in themselves, but decisively influence narration and reception. Therefore, a closer look at these aspects might make us see that metafiction is more than “just a magic trick”.²

¹ Balaka Basu almost completely denies *SHERLOCK*’s postmodernity and calls the series “neo-Victorian” (Basu, 2012: 196-209).

² These are Sherlock’s words to John Watson when standing on the roof of St. Barts Hospital shortly before his apparent suicide in “The Reichenbach Fall” (TRF; episode 2.03), also cited in TEH in Anderson’s narrative (see chapter 3.3). The quotation can be understood as a clue to the deceptive nature of Sherlock’s actions and magician Derren Brown’s involvement in the deception.

In this paper, I will examine “The Empty Hearse” (TEH), an episode of the series that is particularly suitable for this purpose due to its richness in metafictional elements. This first episode of the third season could be called — both positively and negatively — a ‘fanservice episode’ in that it refers to *SHERLOCK* fandom and makes use of popular fan theories and fanships. In TEH, Sherlock (Benedict Cumberbatch) officially returns ‘from the dead’ after he staged his suicide to distract his nemesis Moriarty’s death squad from his friends in “The Reichenbach Fall”, a case that drew as much popular attention as Doyle’s original story *The Final Problem* where Holmes apparently died. The paper will elaborate on the various forms and stages of metafictional narration in TEH and examine their functions. In doing so, I will refer to other episodes of the series to illustrate its self-reflexivity and intratextual references.

Firstly, I take a short look at metafiction in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes ‘canon’. While metafiction is often associated with postmodernism, self-conscious fiction occurs much earlier. I examine whether the Holmes stories already make use of this technique. In a second step, I examine metafiction in TEH. In accordance with the idea that postmodern texts are doubly coded, I think it is advisable to distinguish between two forms of metafiction: metafiction that can be understood by mainly analysing the work in itself and metafiction that requires additional knowledge. This form draws on intertextual references which often refer to other products of popular culture.

In Sherlock’s words: “The [Meta-]Game is on!”

2. Is There Metafiction in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes Canon?

Superficially, Doyle’s original canon of Sherlock Holmes stories seems to be narrated conventionally without any metafictional elements. But if we closely examine the narrative situation, we find that the narrator, who in most of the cases³ is Holmes’s friend Doctor Watson⁴ and who tells the stories in retrospect with often great temporal distance from the events, draws on his case notes, diary, or letters (Doyle, 2014: 175, 201, 213, 341, 385, 427, 455, 527, 629, 759, 823, 897, 955). Furthermore, he alludes to the publication of his ‘narratives’ (403, 483), sometimes by self-consciously calling them “prolonged” or referring to the editing of passages (223, 542), which of course were actually published by Doyle, the real author. Doctor Watson chooses to record some cases only due to their peculiarity, for example *The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez* (527).

Sometimes, his accounts include embedded narratives as in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (586-588) and sometimes, the stories themselves partly consist of extracts from his diary, like, again, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Doyle, 2014: 625); the first part of *A Study in Scarlet* is even dubbed “Being a reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., late of the Army Medical Department” (4).

This fictionalised narrative situation emphasises the accounts’ fictional character while at the same time setting them up for ‘real’. According to Patricia Waugh’s definition,

³ The exceptions include *The Musgrave Ritual*, which contains a frame story narrated by Doctor Watson and an embedded story narrated by Sherlock Holmes, recounting one of his first cases (Doyle, 2014: 327-337).

⁴ In *SHERLOCK*, John Watson’s (Martin Freeman) role as ‘narrator’ is updated to him being Sherlock’s “blogger”, whose blog actually exists (Lidster, s.a.: s.p., Stein; Busse 2012: 13). However, due to the filmic medium, *SHERLOCK* is not ‘told’ or even focalized only by Watson, so that we experience Sherlock’s adventures without that narrative bias (also Kazmaier; Opp 2014: 256 and chapter 3.1).

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. (Waugh, 1984: 2)⁵

Thus, Watson's narrative can be considered metafictional, especially since a certain unreliability is given due to temporal distance. Holmes himself points out what he sees Watson's incorrect rendition several times, for example in *The Sign of (the) Four* (Doyle, 2014: 67).⁶

Also possibly metafictional are occasional references to stories from the canon itself, for example in *The Five Orange Pips*, when Doctor Watson replies to Sherlock Holmes's claim that there had rarely been a "more fantastic" case: "Save, perhaps, the Sign of Four" (Doyle, 2014: 179). Since both plots have motivic similarities, such as the five pearls or orange pips sent by post, one could call it a deliberate self-reference as well as read this as an ironic comment on the structures of repetition Doyle sometimes resorts to. Or when, thinking about Mycroft Holmes's occupation in *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans*, Watson remembers that "I had some vague recollection of an explanation at the time of the Adventure of the Greek Interpreter" (Doyle 2014: 785), he also invites readers to remember that adventure.

At the beginning of their acquaintance in *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson cannot help but tell Holmes that "You remind me of Edgar Allen Poe's Dupin. I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories" (Doyle, 2014: 13) — which Holmes declines, as he "was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends' thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and superficial" (13). This quote is funny in a twofold way: Firstly, Watson distinguishes between Holmes and his literary predecessor as if one were real and the other fictional. Secondly, Holmes criticises Dupin for a quirk the detective himself is not free of.

Thus, metafiction is already present in the canon, and, while creating authenticity, simultaneously blurs the lines between fiction and reality. This duplicity reached its climax with Holmes's 'death' at the Reichenbach Falls in 1893 and extreme reactions of the recipients.

In the following, metafiction in the modern TV series will be examined. In the first part, I will look at 'obvious' metafictional phenomena, before I consider less obvious metafictional aspects in the second part.⁷

3. Metafiction Inherent to the Episode

3.1. "Welcome to my world": Meta-phenomena Representing the Detective's

Methods

In the first episode of *SHERLOCK*'s first series already, a unique aesthetic mode to depict the detective's methods, especially his 'deductions', becomes apparent (also Busse; Stein, 2012:

⁵ However, there Waugh's formulation can also be discussed, especially with regard to "self-consciously" (Dauner 2009: 36-40).

⁶ Sherlock critiques: "Unlike the nicely embellished fictions on your blog, John, real life is rarely so neat" (TEH 1:23:30-35).

⁷ This differentiation between aspects that are immanently understandable and those that require contextual knowledge is based on the idea of two types of viewers: a viewer who watches the series without knowing the Sherlock Holmes canon (in detail) or having paratextual information such as fan sites or the filmography of individual actors, and a viewer who has this information. This construct enables me to distinguish between metafiction that is recognisable to the 'average' recipient, and metafiction for 'insiders', thus postulating different levels of understanding for metafictional features.

11, 12). The most frequently used technique is the insertion of written words in the televisual image (also Niehaus, 2017). In the following series two, the range is expanded by the ‘Mind Palace’ which is presented in increasingly elaborate form (Neis, 2020: 13-15). Often, a combination of written inserts, dissolves, and fast-motion elements as well as additional music and sounds illustrates the detective’s perception and thought processing. This technique is metafictional as can be seen from examples in TEH.

A first example is the scene after Sherlock’s ‘resurrection’. Disguised as a waiter at a restaurant, he surprises John Watson, who for two years thought he was dead. After the first shock, Watson, his girlfriend Mary Morstan and Sherlock visit another restaurant and Sherlock starts to narrate how he faked his death. In this short flashback sequence (TEH 23:12-38), some of Sherlock’s reflections and calculations are visualised in the form of arrows and graphs:



Although obviously, these elements seem out of place in a film and, due to their artificiality, are metafictional (Basu, 2012: 200), they do not disrupt the illusion. On the contrary, they even provide additional immersion into the fictional world, as they visualise Sherlock’s thoughts faster and more efficiently than a purely verbal voice-over could do. This immersive function of metafiction could be categorised as ‘non-critical or affirmative metafiction’, as ‘mimesis-affirming *ficturn-metafiction*’ (Wolf, 2008: 448; my translation), since it does not destroy illusion (Dauner, 2009: 77-79).

A second example can be found shortly afterwards, when the three prepare to part. Sherlock talks to Mary, looks at her, and the audience can see his deductions written around close-ups of her face. This first ‘classic’ display of deduction within this episode is corresponding to the previous *SHERLOCK* series:



Here, too, viewers notice the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the presentation, but at the same time gain an insight into Sherlock’s mind. However, because the sequence takes only a few seconds (TEH 26:06-16) and the words are moving, only some individual words can be

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read on first viewing, so the sequence merely creates an impression of the detective's perception and encourages a second viewing.⁸

Another vivid visualisation of the deductions happens during a typical *SHERLOCK* situation: the investigation of a crime scene. There, the detective critically examines the evidence and weighs various possibilities before acknowledging the most plausible result during his observations. In TEH, this process takes place at the alleged crime scene with the skeleton (TEH 40:24-43:38). The visual design of the inserted writings here matches their content: Smelling the scent around the corpse, Sherlock's visualised thought of "NEW MOTHBALLS" transforms into small, animated mothballs (TEH 41:06), "Fire damage" bursts into flames (TEH 41:19-20).

In addition, there is a funny element: while Sherlock tries to concentrate on investigating the 'crime scene', he repeatedly hears John's voice — who is absent and temporarily replaced as his assistant with Molly Hooper (Louise Brealey) — as a 'voice of conscience', sarcastically commenting Sherlock's generic behaviour, e.g., telling him "You forgot to put your collar up" (TEH 43:11). Like the deductions, these comments additionally appear in written form, and these visual realisations 'haunt' Sherlock, so that he tries to shoot them away with gestures and utterances such as "Shut up!" (TEH 42:28). Referring to Sherlock's quirks, such as turning up his coat collar, this kind of comedy is based on serial recognition and is also self-referential.

Furthermore, Sherlock's "Mind Palace"⁹ is featured extensively when he tries to solve the mysterious disappearance of the underground train carriage (TEH 45:43-46:20, 47:07-16): Highly aestheticized, often distorted images blend into each other or are projected onto the detective's body, especially his eyes, which emphasises the topic of perception. Despite the apparent surrealism of the images, the illusion again is not disrupted: Such sequences are always framed by an (extreme) close-up of Sherlock seemingly endeavouring to think and are thus tagged illusional:



⁸ This deduction is taken up again in the third case of the third series, "His Last Vow" (HLV), when Sherlock remembers having already had the association "Liar" with Mary at the beginning of their acquaintance (HLV 34:04-14), which is already recognisable here if one pauses the film and looks very closely at the background.

⁹ John explains Sherlock's special mnemonics technique to genetic engineer Dr Stapleton in episode 2.02 "The Hounds of Baskerville" (THOB).



Shots simulating the view from a helicopter with night vision camera (TEH 06:36-07:30), visible light reflections (TEH 1:04:25) as well as the overall use of innovative fast-motion elements and editing can create a similar effect: on the surface they seem artificial, but they also engender immersion.

3.2. “They want the story”: Meta-phenomena in Relation to the Media

A short chapter should be devoted to the references to media within the series, which can also be seen as metafictional, since they draw attention to the series’s mediality. At the beginning of TEH, we see the filming of a news report for *BBC News* and excerpts reporting on Sherlock’s public rehabilitation (TEH 04:42-05:44). At the same time, the ‘news’ are extrafictional references to BBC One, the TV station where *SHERLOCK* is broadcasted. When Sherlock is officially ‘resurrected’,¹⁰ the news reports: “BREAKING NEWS: HAT DETECTIVE ALIVE” (TEH 29:57).¹¹ Lord Moran, while waiting in his hotel room for the bomb attack he planned to be carried out, watches a TV report about the parliament hearing on an anti-terrorism bill (TEH 01:02:19-37). Mrs. Hudson listens to a report about it on the radio (TEH 28:12-22).

Such references to the media, used several times in *SHERLOCK* episodes, often foreshadow events of the current case¹² or illustrate — as in TRF — Sherlock’s double-edged popularity. This is the case near the end of TEH, when John tells Sherlock to face the journalists waiting outside: “Come on, you’ll have to go down. They want the story” (TEH 01:22:03). Furthermore, John Watson’s blog features again in this episode when his future wife Mary reads it (TEH 30:17-37); interestingly, she actually reads an excerpt from *The Sign of Four* (Doyle, 2014: 83), the Holmes case when Doctor Watson meets Mary Morstan.¹³ Moreover, there is a strikingly frequent occurrence of screens in the filmic image, which — e.g. in the Skype conversation with the Underground enthusiast filmed as shot/reverse shot from ‘inside’ the PC — underlines the series’ modernity, but also draws attention to its medium, the (TV) screen.

¹⁰ In this context, it is interesting to note the Jesus/Redeemer symbolism used in TEH for Sherlock in statements such as “It’s a cross I have to bear” (TEH 57:43), “I heard you [John’s plea for ‘one more miracle’]” (TEH 1:24:22) as well as the staging as the crucified (TEH 07:53-09:18) and the ‘Lazarus’ plan.

¹¹ Interestingly, in reality, BBC News reported that there will be a fourth series of *SHERLOCK*; an additional blending of fiction and reality.

¹² Another example is the already quoted BBC news (TEH 29:57): the news ticker below the headline reads “Magnussen”, the name of third episode’s villain who secretly also is the mastermind behind John’s abduction.

¹³ Incidentally, the blog created by the BBC as part of their viral marketing strategy also features quotes such as “Wait are any of you real? Is any of this real? How do we know that people like ‘Harry Watson’ and ‘Mike Stamford’ aren’t just made up for this blog?” (17th June) or “Yeah! Everything on this blog is real!” (7th November) (Lidster, s.a.: s.p.). By drawing attention to their reality status, they become ironic meta-comments.

3.3. “I’m the last person you’d tell the truth”: Meta-phenomena and Storytelling

A particularly impressive metafictional narrative that addresses the process of storytelling itself is extending over the entire episode, referring to the preceding and a later one and even including extrafictional references. It takes up the cliffhanger of TRF — Sherlock staging his suicide —, whose resolution had been eagerly awaited. However, instead of simply granting it, various narrative techniques are used to build tension and unsettle the recipients. These include offering at least three different scenarios of Sherlock’s alleged suicide.

The first version (TEH 00:13-03-38) is shown right at the beginning of the episode: after a cold opening with a tracking shot of Sherlock’s grave, the viewer learns what initially seems to be a credible story of how Sherlock managed the deception with a bungee cord, Molly Hooper’s help and a rubber mask on the dead Moriarty’s face. However, its credibility is significantly challenged when, shortly afterwards, forensic scientist Anderson (Jonathan Aris), in conversation with DI Lestrade, turns out to be the narrator. The second version (TEH 28:43-29:37) is introduced in a similar way: the audience first see Sherlock and Moriarty as co-conspirators, obviously beginning to get romantically involved and using a doll wearing a Sherlock mask to trick John Watson, before a female member of the titular “The Empty Hearse” club founded by Anderson proves to be the *narratrice*. Her credibility is immediately questioned by Anderson himself.

The most plausible version is Sherlock’s (TEH 1:11:50-1:20:03). After John refused to listen to his account of the ‘Lazarus’ project, we are told his story at the episode’s climax, when John and Sherlock are apparently awaiting their death in the Underground car prepared to be a bomb, seemingly unable to defuse it. The embedded narrative is emphasised as well as additionally fictionalised by being separated from the main storyline by an image interference signal.¹⁴ The narrator is obviously Sherlock, sitting in front of a video camera¹⁵ whose image resolution is imitated. He tells Anderson his ‘story’.¹⁶ Anderson, who has become a conspiracy theorist — possibly out of feelings of guilt due to his earlier mistrust in Sherlock — in the end even doubts¹⁷ this version.

Even without acknowledging the other references to fandom, the viewer can see Anderson as a kind of stand-in who — unsettled by the multiple versions — is no longer willing to trust *any* narrative authority. However, the implied paranoia casts doubt on his own reliability; the third version might even have come out of his imagination. The occurrence of several versions of a story without the opportunity to verify one of them highlights the storytelling process and thus also emphasises its artificiality and construction. The use of an additional screen and thus another dimension reinforces this effect. This method clearly increases suspense and causes a lingering curiosity on the part of the viewer to wait for

¹⁴ Note the frequent use in *SHERLOCK*: It can be seen in TRF, when Moriarty tells the perverted ‘fairy tale’. In series finale HLV, it occurs several times, when Moriarty has apparently also risen from the dead and asks: “[Did you] Miss me?” both as a meme on all screens in the country on the intradiegetic level and on the extradiegetic level as a person after the closing credits (compare for Moriarty as a ‘storyteller’ especially Kazmeier; Opp, 2014: 257-261).

¹⁵ In the online-only prequel to the third season “Many Happy Returns”, Sherlock addresses John via video and Anderson is introduced as a conspiracy theorist.

¹⁶ The phrase “[...] like a scene from a play” (TEH 1:18:08) again refers to the illusional character.

¹⁷ Compare chapter 4.2 of this paper for reliability and further reference to fandom.

clarification in the next season.¹⁸ Therefore, despite its artificial qualities, immersion is not disrupted but rather enhanced.

4. Metafiction Requiring Contextual Knowledge

4.1. *House, Sumatra, Identity: Intertextuality and the Question of Adaptation*

Unlike conventional literary adaptations, *SHERLOCK* does not use one literary source per episode, but combines quotations and content from various Holmes stories in the canon, as well as allusions to pastiches and extrafictional material. Theoretically, it should be noted that intertextuality can in principle also encompass non-metafictional phenomena (Wolf, 2008: 447-448). Nonetheless, the Bakhtinian web of canon references can — in viewers familiar with the canon — arouse a certain detective ‘hunting instinct’ for the allusions that remain hidden from the ‘ordinary’ viewer — which, however, does not necessarily affect the enjoyment of an episode. However, the references do add a source of comedy and another, ‘deeper’ level of understanding; viewers able to perceive it might even feel Holmesian superiority.

In addition to the aforementioned *The Sign of Four* reference and allusion to *The Adventure of the Empty House*, the story that brought the original Holmes back to life, these include Mycroft’s mention of “Baron Maupertius” (TEH 12:07), a reference to *The Reigate Squires* (Doyle, 2014: 341) as well as “Sumatra Road” (TEH 01:01:43-45), which is also mentioned in *The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire* (Doyle, 2014: 897). The case Sherlock and Molly work on which involves “the stepfather posing as online boyfriend” (TEH 38:45-39:10), is a modernisation of *A Case of Identity*. A shot/reverse shot sequence of Sherlock and John (TEH 37:05-40:23) reaches the climax of comedy when John mistakes a patient, who offers him pornographic media with headings identical to the (innocent) books the disguised Holmes offers for sale in *The Adventure of the Empty House* (Doyle, 2014: 416-417), for the disguised Sherlock.

4.2. *Hats, T-shirts, and Cameos: Fandom References and Guest Appearances*

As already mentioned at the beginning, *SHERLOCK* generated an enormous hype, which resulted in the formation of an extensive fandom on the Internet. The end of the second series had a reinforcing effect, leaving open the question of Sherlock’s method of faking his suicide, which triggered a flood of various theories as part of ‘forensic fandom’ (Opp, 2016: 142, with Mittell). Remarkably, in TEH, a transmedia repercussion takes place as these theories and fan behaviour are taken up by the creators and used for the story. The three versions mentioned in chapter 3.3 show elements of popular fan theories. They also allude to some (*fan*)*ships*, namely ‘Sherlolly’ and ‘Sheriarty’.¹⁹ However, this is done with an ironic attitude. Sherlock cosplay, especially the wearing of the Deerstalker hat as practised by many Sherlock and Benedict Cumberbatch fans (‘Cumberbitches’, ‘Cumberbabes’), is also parodied when one member of the ‘Empty Hearse’ fan club says: “I don’t think we should wear hats”, while other, only dimly recognisable members do (TEH 29:47).²⁰ Molly’s fiancé Tom even looks like a Sherlock copy, complete with coat, shoes, and curly hair (TEH 1:22:29-1:23:17; also in TSOTI).

¹⁸ Especially as John also asks for clarification at the end of TEH, which Sherlock no longer wants to grant him this time: “You know my methods, John. I’m known to be indestructible” (TEH 1:24:01f.). Opp calls this the ‘fourth version’ that extends the mystery (cf. Opp, 2016: 153f.).

¹⁹ ‘Sherlolly’ as a contraction of ‘Sherlock’ and ‘Molly’ propagates a (romantic) relationship of Sherlock and Molly Hooper, ‘Sheriarty’ (or ‘Jimlock’) of Sherlock and Jim Moriarty (also Opp, 2016: 151).

²⁰ See also Sherlock’s dialogue with journalist Kitty Riley, who is disguised as a fan, in TRF: “There are two types of fans [...]”, interpreted in more detail by Kathrin Kazmaier and Annemarie Opp in their essay (2014: 258).

Andersons, who initially quotes the then popular hashtag #IBelieveinSherlockHolmes²¹ (TEH 04:40), but later doubts Sherlock's version and downright breaks down, comes across as a parody of a fan getting too carried away with their theories. His behaviour seems to be an exaggerated anticipation of the audience response to TEH. In addition, another hashtag is used: #SherlockLives, which is displayed when his 'survival' is officially announced (TEH 30:10-17). It also was used in advance for marketing purposes. By addressing these and other similar phenomena in the series, the fictional *SHERLOCK* world in a way comes in touch with the real (or internet) world. Fictional and extrafictional content blur, which is why we can call it metafictional. Here this primarily has a comic effect and is at the same time a kind of self-parody. Thus, metafiction is once again an integrating and not a deconstructing element in the series.

Guest appearances of some actresses and actors have a similar effect. In addition to well-known magician Derren Brown "as himself", hypnotising Watson (TEH 02:32-03:03), these include the cameo of Cumberbatch's parents as Sherlock's parents (TEH 56:03-57:15; also in HL.V) and Martin Freeman's then-life partner Amanda Abbington as John's future wife Mary Morstan. In this context, it is justified to speak of metalepsis, if one takes Karin Kukkonen's statement into account: "With metalepsis, however, readers [here recipients in a general sense] are reminded either that someone is telling the story or that there is a reality 'outside' the fictional world" (Kukkonen, 2011: 5).²² Sherlock's statement "I've got lots of coats" (TEH 01:17:51) can also be interpreted as a reference to the extrafictional existence of several *Belstaff* coats for the filming. However, it should be noted again that this content is only accessible to viewers with the appropriate contextual knowledge.

In addition, the series takes advantage of the popularity of shirts with generic Sherlock quotes such as "I am Sher-locked" (from ASIB) or "Anderson, don't talk out loud, you lower the IQ of the whole street" (from ASIP) for marketing purposes: John's statement "I don't shave for Sherlock Holmes", commented on by Mary with "You should have that on a T-shirt" (TEH 31:00-03), was available for purchase as a real T-shirt the day after the first broadcast (BBC Shop, 2014: s.p.).²³

4.3. Sheldon, Bond and the Doctor: Pop Culture Influences

The popularity of *SHERLOCK* has resulted in worldwide recognition, which is also echoed in other products of popular culture. As arbitrarily selected examples, we can mention *THE BIG BANG THEORY* episode 07.20 "The Relationship Diremption", where the main character Sheldon is heard to drunkenly tell Stephen Hawking on his answering machine: "It's me again. I gave up String Theory. You should give up black holes and we totally solve crimes together!" (Cendrowski, 2014a: 18:51-19:01), which is reminiscent of the "[...] now you're solving crimes together" often mentioned in *SHERLOCK* (ASIP 36:35) or "We solve crimes, I blog about it [...]" (ASIB 15:54).²⁴ Sheldon also talks about Sherlock Holmes in episode 08.01 "The

²¹ Opp provides analyses of the fandom and its hashtags in greater detail (Opp, 2016: 146-150).

²² Among the different functions she names: "[to] reinforce readers' immersion in fiction" (Kukkonen, 2011: 15) and emphasizes: "There is no essential effect in metalepsis—only effects that arise out of the larger narrative contexts" (11).

²³ Likewise in HL.V: "JOHN: I don't understand. MAGNUSSEN: You should have that on a t-shirt" (HLV 01:18:50-51) and "JOHN: I still don't understand. MAGNUSSEN: And there's the back of the t-shirt" (HLV 01:19:32-33). John's beard can be seen as a reminiscence of traditional Holmes adaptations.

²⁴ Funnily, Benedict Cumberbatch portrayed Stephen Hawking in *HAWKING* (2004). Furthermore, Sheldon and Sherlock are both occasionally associated with Asperger's.

Locomotion Interruption” (Cendrowski, 2014b: 05:50-06:17, 09:30-40). A parody of female Sherlock fandom can be found in the sitcom *2 BROKE GIRLS* in episode 03.18 “And the Near Death Experience”, where the American dish ‘Eggs Benedict’ is altered to “Eggs Benedict Cumberbatch” by the ‘fans’ (Allingham, 2014: 00:19-22).

These allusions highlight *SHERLOCK*’s popularity and can be seen as attempts to participate in it. Their perception always requires familiarity with the phenomena alluded to. Again, this creates comedy for ‘insiders’, which unlocks another level of understanding, but is not crucial for the reception of the *SHERLOCK* episode. However, the thesis that metafiction is no longer applied only in so-called high culture but also in popular culture, often as a source of comedy, proves true here.

Undoubtedly, pop culture influenced *SHERLOCK* as well. While one can still question whether Mycroft’s way of talking about wines is based on James Bond’s (e.g. “They have a few bottles of the 2000 St Emilion, though I prefer the 2001”, TEH 16:50-56), the shots showing Sherlock looking down at the city (TEH 17:19-38, 31:13-16 and 1:28:12) closely resemble the shot with Bond in *Skyfall* (Mendes, 2012: 2:09:32-2:11:17).²⁵ At the end of HLV, Sherlock even is brought back because “England” needs him again (HLV 1:28:13).



The plot of a planned bomb attack at Guy Fawkes Night on the Palace of Westminster (TEH 01:05:02-15) is similar to the one in Guy Ritchie’s first *SHERLOCK HOLMES* film (2009). Sherlock saying to John “No, I prefer my doctors clean-shaven” (TEH 58:15) sounds like a reference to *DOCTOR WHO*, also produced and partly written by Moffat at the time. In the episode “The Wedding of River Song” (Moffat, 2011), the Doctor (Matt Smith) also has grown a beard. The lyrics of the song *¿Dónde Estás Yolanda?* (Pink Martini, 2012: s.p.) which is played during the reunion scene (TEH 17:39-23:10) seem like a comic *mise en abyme*, alluding to Sherlock’s long absence and John’s desperation as well as playing their alleged relationship for fun. These allusions generate further immersion and are often associated with comedy.

5. Conclusion

In his Sherlock Holmes stories, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle already used techniques which could today be termed ‘metafiction’. Having heavily influenced popular culture, it is hardly surprising that *SHERLOCK*, a contemporary TV series, should do likewise. After having differentiated between metafiction that can be understood without contextual knowledge and metafiction that requires contextual knowledge, I identified examples of metafiction in the

²⁵ Executive producer Mark Gatiss said in an interview: “The Skyfall shot? That was honestly just Jeremy [Lovering], the director’s decision. We wanted a shot over London. It’s not exactly the same place, it is a little close” (Plump, 2014: s.p.). But co-producer Steven Moffat stated in the same interview that “Mycroft’s colleague is therefore M”. On the other hand, it is also important to note Bond’s clothing and pose in this setting, which are reminiscent of Sherlock who is often seen in a similar pose in previous seasons (TBB, THOB, TRF).

BBC series *SHERLOCK* and examined their narrative function. It turned out that metafictional elements such as the insertion of writing and other visualisations in the image often allow for more precise and immediate representation of detective work. References to media and storytelling superficially draw attention to the series' status as a fictional construct. Metafiction does not, though — as might have been expected — necessarily have a deconstructive effect, but on the contrary brings about an additional integration of the recipient into the fictional world. Although attention is drawn to the artificiality of certain stylistic devices, this does not have a disturbing effect. Furthermore, a frequent connection with comedy was noted.

With regard to metafiction requiring contextual knowledge, examples of intertextual and fandom-related phenomena as well as pop-cultural references were examined, and a similarly strong immersive effect was found. Basically, metafiction always opens up a 'second level' of understanding, which further involves recipients in the world of the series. Many aspects of metafiction remain to be examined, which is why — similar to Sherlock's words at the end of the third series — "The [Meta-]Game is never over!"

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