# *Lizzie in Real Life:* Social and Narrative Immersion Through Transmedia in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

## By Allegra Tepper

**KEYWORDS:** transmedia storytelling, participatory culture, web series, social television, YouTube, *Pride and Prejudice*

### Twitter and the social TV era

In the age of time-shifted TV and an ever more fragmented audience, how do television series maintain and quantify a fan base? How do fans assert their devotion to a series, or corral the attention of their favorite series' creators to make their praises and critiques known? Which social media giant has the television industry in its clutches, convincing those in the C-suites that they are the be-all and end-all of audience connectivity? Twitter, Twitter and, you guessed it: Twitter. Twitter has all but proclaimed its monopoly over television chatter. With its initial public offering in September 2013, live-tweeting TV became "the number one way that a billion dollar company was going to prove its value" (Walsh 11).

And actually, Hollywood had begun reinforcing Twitter's dominance long before the company's stock market debut. As DVRs spread like wildfire, audiences stopped feeling like they had to either tune in or drop out, and ratings became far less reliable markers of audience share. Twitter filled the data gap, offering quantifiable evidence of the audience's attention (and eventually even teaming up with Nielsen to promote social TV metrics). In turn, TV series worked to find ways to integrate Twitter into their live broadcasts, using official hashtags, prompting tweet-sized plot speculation during commercial breaks, and even running audience tweets on-screen during a show.

Aside from the numbers game, live-tweeting has helped the floundering television industry hold on to its fleeting live roots. After all, to fully experience and participate in Twitter-mediated TV, audiences have no choice but to watch the live broadcast. Twitter integration has also proven its efficacy for validating audience participation and giving fans the opportunity to, as Walsh writes, "insert themselves into the game of television via technology and social networks in order to possibly demonstrate their dominance or superior knowledge over the text; to manifest their ironic or negotiated readings of the show" (12). Now more than ever, audiences are motivated to prove their allegiance and critical dexterity to their favorite show's fellow aficionados. But just how much of a negotiated reading can take place in a mere 140 characters? A tweet that dons an official hashtag is rarely anything more than a bona fide check-in – a piece of grassroots marketing. For the viewers, particularly those seeking prolonged, sophisticated, and narratively immersive connectivity that goes well beyond the ephemeral, dialogue-stunting hashtag, Twitter-driven social TV does not cut it.

So, some have turned to independently-produced web series that embrace a new type of social storytelling, one that boasts veritably limitless possibilities for cultivated audience connectivity: transmedia. Instead of simply using Twitter and other social media platforms for grassroots marketing, transmedia storytellers actually build their narratives across these platforms, rolling together video, audio, text, and social engagement into what Henry Jenkins calls "a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" ("Transmedia Storytelling" par. 3). By bringing their scripted content directly to the second screen and repurposing social platforms as tools for storytelling, transmedia producers are eliminating the divide between the characters and the audience, instigating dialogue from fan to fan, fan to character, *and* fan to creator. Each platform contributes something distinct to the property: YouTube offers up a space for more traditional episodic storytelling; Facebook can directly connect creators with the audience; and, yes, Twitter's real-time accompaniment still contributes to a sense of live viewing, which serves to both connect audiences that are watching the story unfold together and give the characters dimensionality in familiar, "real world" territory. And those three social media giants are just the tip of the iceberg, with such niche platforms as 8Tracks and Lookbook offering further ways to reimagine social networks as tools for storytelling.

There is perhaps no transmedia property that better exemplifies these possibilities for innovative storytelling and audience connectivity than *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012–2013), a YouTube web series developed by Hank Green and Bernie Su that provides a modern adaptation of Jane Austen's nineteenth-century *Pride and Prejudice.* Capitalizing on the distinct storytelling opportunities presented by some dozen social platforms – and using some platforms in imaginative ways that transcend their proposed purposes – this web series does not simply tell a story; it builds a world. In doing so, it revitalizes a narrative that has universal resonance for its global virtual audience, and proves that in this age of adaptation, transmedia could be the last bastion for original narrative redux. Moreover, it proves that audiences are compelled by sustained critical engagement with both narrative content and the people behind it, if only given that opportunity.

### Presenting @TheLizzieBennet

*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, or *LBD*, as fans and creators affectionately call the series, straddles the line between the BBC's by-the-book interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Simon Langton, BBC One, 1995) and the ever so creatively licensed *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001). It (that is, the serialized YouTube videos of the property) manages to modernize the source text while

ABOVE   Figure 1. Left images: *Pride and Prejudice*.
Right images: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

staying astonishingly close to the narrative structure of Austen's novel. In this particular incarnation, Lizzie Bennet is a 24-year-old graduate student studying Mass Communications and living at home in a suburban California town with her overbearing, marriage-obsessed mother. She regales an online audience with tales of her sisters Jane and Lydia's dating tribulations, the financial challenges her family is facing, the solace she finds in her best friend, Charlotte, and the trials of dealing with one Mr. William Darcy.

While each and every one of the characters in *LBD* can be linked back to a character from the original *Pride and Prejudice*, certain characteristics and dramatic situations are reimagined for a more diverse and tech-addled audience. *LBD* may be comparably loyal to the themes and structure of the source text, but it surely has a very different audience from adaptations like the BBC miniseries, which was targeted at what *Boston Globe* reporter Liz Stevens describes as a "sorority of smart, discerning women of a certain age with a relish for literature, period drama, and English accents" (par. 18). In large part, that sorority resided in the United States and the United Kingdom, where the series made its first broadcasts on the A&E Network and BBC One respectively.

Conversely, *LBD* draws a strikingly global audience; accessible to anyone with a web connection, the Los Angeles-based production has gained steam in such far corners as Italy, New Zealand, India, and Sweden, just to name a few. According to the series' Facebook page, its largest contingent of fans resides in Sao Paulo, Brazil. *LBD* lures a diverse new collective of smart, discerning young Austenites

with a relish for web culture, girl power, and a heaping dose of irony. In turn, the writers of *LBD* make meaningful modifications to the source text, giving their diverse young audience more opportunities to identify with the characters and the story. Some of these changes pertain to ethnicity: Charlotte Lucas, for instance, becomes Charlotte Lu, and Charles Bingley becomes Bing Lee, both Asian Americans. Fitz Williams, a character derived from Colonel Fitzwilliam, is black (and gay) (Figure 1). In addition, the writers also sub out an elopement for a sex tape scandal, and a proposal for marriage is replaced by a self-referential proposal for a business partnership in the exciting realm of new media storytelling. This distinct reimagining of *Pride and Prejudice* mirrors some of the current cultural anxieties of emerging adulthood in a looming recession, and the ordeals of the first technology- and media-saturated generation, which is why the web series rings true with both Austen devotees and the uninitiated.

## Boarding the mother ship

*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* reflects television in terms of its production methods and episodic structure, and it is these elements that compel Su, the series' head writer and executive producer, to characterize the transmedia property as resembling TV more than any other medium. But while *LBD* marks an undeniable evolution on the TV format, it cannot be understated how crucial the other components, those that do not reflect the television structure, are to the full experience of the series. Jay Bushman, the transmedia producer for the series, explained in personal correspondences (31 January and 7 February 2014, email messages) that "if you don't consume all of the transmedia content, you haven't seen the full show." The anchoring work, or "mother ship," as Henry Jenkins calls it, is certainly the serialized YouTube videos, which unfold like a linear television narrative in bi-weekly episodes ("The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn" par. 13). But the series could not exist without what Jonathan Gray calls "textual outposts" or "paratexts" – "all those things that surround [a property] but aren't quite the 'text' itself" (Jenkins, "On Anti-Fans and Paratexts" 1).[1]

It would be exhausting for both writer and reader to enumerate every single way in which the paratexts function in *LBD*, but I will give a couple of key examples. In addition to the Lizzie-curated videos, there are offshoot video series from Hank Green and Bernie Su, like *The Lydia Bennet!!* (2012-), *Domino: Gigi Darcy* (2013-), and *Better Living with Collins and Collins* (2012-2013). Some of these serve to move secondary plotlines along; others serve to bring depth, humor, and a sense of realism to the *LBD* universe. Bits of the narrative play out on Twitter, on which characters' accounts interface with one another and also with those of engaged fans, whose input can sometimes draw out pieces of the story. Characters have profiles on social media platforms that reflect their personalities; for instance, fashion maven Jane Bennet has a Lookbook profile where she posts photos of her latest ensembles; the ever-networking Ricky Collins has a LinkedIn page; and bubbly Gigi Darcy uses This Is My Jam to share current chart-topping tunes that reflect what is happening in the narrative. Meanwhile, the two new media companies in the series, Pemberley Digital and Collins and Collins (which sub in for the estates in Austen's novel), have fleshed out websites that share press releases in real time, detailing company developments as they unfold in the story.

One asset of this multi-platform approach to storytelling is that it gives web users multiple entry points by which they can join the world of *LBD*, and thus expands the potential market by reaching different audience segments (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling" par. 7). Given that the tone and producer-to-consumer experiences

on Twitter and YouTube are distinct, users can choose to be more engaged with whichever community suits their social media practices. On YouTube, viewers engage with one another, discussing stylistic and narrative choices made by the *LBD* squad, often drawing comparisons with the source text and flaunting their Austen fandom. Meanwhile, on This Is My Jam, transmedia editor Alexandra Edwards takes on the role of Gigi Darcy to discuss musical choices with fans, ultimately shedding insight on Gigi's emotional state in the scheme of the narrative. There is finesse to the way in which the *LBD* team reveals these paratexts; Bushman describes it as the "rabbit hole technique, where you lay out a large amount of content before alerting the audience to its existence." He goes on:

> These were some of my favorite parts of the show – not just the surprise element, but the way it makes the story suddenly coruscate out into a much wider world … We seeded Gigi's character from almost the very beginning, where you'd get to learn about her journey recovering from Wickham's abuse through her music choices, so when she entered the main storyline (in episode 77) she came with a whole history.

While extratextual elements like company websites, playlists, and fashion portfolios do not necessarily move the plot forward on their own, they create a depth to the world of *LBD* that is rarely achieved in other media properties that focus solely on a singular narrative text. These paratexts, which bleed into the virtual spaces we inhabit outside of the YouTube video frame, serve as a key enhancement to the story. If a fan using Twitter to catch up with friends, colleagues, and breaking news sees an exchange between @ggdarcy and @FitzOnTheFitz, it blurs the line between his or her everyday reality and the *LBD* narrative, which creates an immersive relationship between the audience and the property. This ability to create a real-time continuum for the story is an advantage that transmedia storytelling boasts over film and even television. In a film or a television miniseries, creators are forced to only share the high points; as Bushman explains,

events must be compressed and it's easy to lose the sense of the reality of the world … A transmedia approach lets the story breathe, lets the story slow down, and allows the audience to live in the world and to form deeper and stronger attachments to the characters.

Jenni Powell, who produces the *LBD* series, says that viewers "talk to Lizzie as if she's real. They've made friends with her, they care about what's going to happen to her" ("THE LIZZIE BENNET DIARIES"). The audience members willingly and actively partake in this level of play because it enhances their experience of the series. Ever the mass communications student, Lizzie comments on this effect herself in a conversation with Darcy when asking him to engage in costume theater:

> Lizzie: There's this theory about levels of mediation in media that says it's possible for artificiality to remind the audience both that what they're seeing is a construction while at the same time adding to their level of immersion.
> Darcy: You thought that costume theater as ourselves would remind the audience that this isn't a conversation we would naturally have but because of that, the obviously constructed nature of the scene would by its very artificiality create its own sense of verisimilitude. ("Hyper-Mediation")

## Deeper down the rabbit hole

The paratexts mentioned above are not meant to fool the audience – they are most likely cognizant of the artificial constructedness of the devices. But the "costuming" invites play, invites immersion, and establishes a degree of authenticity into which the audience can buy in. (The conversation above is also an instance in which *LBD* uses a meta-commentary to reveal how it is, in part, meant to connect with a critical audience that is regularly engaged with new media practices and theories.) To this immersive end, it is difficult to determine when the action cuts in *LBD*, or if it cuts at all. Despite striving to go against

the grain of that conventional television, the YouTube videos of *LBD* were in fact highly produced, followed a typical independent production schedule, and were released regularly. But the rest of the content was released often and at random. Arguably, the series was running straight through from April 9, 2012 until March 29, 2013, when Lizzie posted a postscript to the series and said goodbye. So once the characters (and to an extent, the audience) joined the world of *LBD*, they had pledged their participation in this immersive narrative. The audience is a necessary addendum here because to a certain degree, *LBD* could not have grown to the extent it did without the fuel of its audience, who themselves could serve as contributors of paratexts. For example, the Collins and Collins website posted a news release explaining that it was seeking new talent for its *Better Living* series, and requested that viewers submit audition videos. The request drew dozens of submissions, ultimately resulting in one fan, Kelsey Geller, recording a *Better Living* video with the *LBD* production team. That video appeared on the series' website and YouTube channel, wherein fellow fans thanked Geller for her simple and comprehensive tutorial on "Changing Illumination Globes" (a Collins euphemism for changing a light bulb). These fellow fans were at play with Geller and the larger series; they fueled the realism of this world by offering up their own sort of costume theater (Figure 2).

Inevitably, there are skeptical audience members who are not quite ready to buy in. But when they push back, the *LBD* team is ready to aim and fire. For example, a Twitter follower demanded proof after reading that Gigi and Fitz were allegedly having a rendezvous in the courtyard of Pemberley Digital. Almost instantly, @ggdarcy shot back with a selfie of her and Fitz sitting in a courtyard. It is as though the characters never stop living the story. In reality, as Bushman divulges, that picture was just snapped during a break on set as a preemptive move to share it with fans when needed. It is not unlike the behind-the-scenes photos, shared on Twitter and Facebook pages, of such socially-driven TV series as *Pretty Little Liars* (I. Marlene King, 2010-) and *Orange Is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan, 2013-). But the *LBD* team distinguishes itself by knowing exactly when to deploy its social assets. Instead of just dropping the picture into the ether as a means to stir fan excitement, it waits for the perfect moment to capitalize on audience engagement. As a result, it is not only stirring fan excitement, but also enhancing the illusion of reality.

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## Harnessing the hive

It is this flexible approach that has allowed the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* creators to react with agility to audience skepticism, and to bring fan-made elements like Geller's Collins and Collins video into the fold. The same is true with fan-made art that appears on the characters' Twitter pages; likewise, some of the Twitter conversations catalogued on the series' website were started *by* fans. For example, while Lydia was in the throes of her toxic George Wickham tryst, Brazil-based fan Maria Raquel Silva, aka @_mrsilva, tweeted, "@TheLydiaBennet your videos are getting sadder and sadder. I always supported you, but this is getting hard to watch" ("Lydia Responds"). Lydia went on to explain her feelings for George, thus discounting the advice of the small chorus of fans echoing Silva's tweet. The producers could not anticipate these conversations, but they built the *LBD* world around them to include the thoughts, opinions, and questions of fans. As Louisa Stein writes, *LBD*

> acknowledges the vibrancy and richness of fan production. Rather than attempting to rein in all that unpredictability, these web series become hybrid productions … integrating fan creativity in substantive ways while still progressing a particular, defined story and set of performances. (Stein par. 5)

Bushman echoes Stein's point, noting that the *LBD* team was mindful to create frequent opportunities for fan interaction and conversation, but that there were never places for the fans to affect the outcome of the story. In essence, the audience is not invited to co-write the story, but rather to co-create the world. It is to the credit of the producers that they so unabashedly invite this type of fan participation, for as Henry Jenkins explains, certain franchises struggle with the desire to "police and preserve continuity," and see fan-produced content as a "threat" ("The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn" par. 22). This might also speak to the liberties afforded by an adaptation – the creators do not feel compelled to exercise full control over the narrative, because it is not quite their story to begin with.

The invitation to co-create speaks to a point that Jenkins makes: transmedia storytelling is an "ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence" ("Transmedia Storytelling" par. 10). Networked through countless social media platforms, both those regulated by the producers of the series as well as fanfiction forums and blogs, *LBD*



ABOVE   Figure 2. Top: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Bottom: *Changing Illumination Globes – Better Living with Collins and Collins*

fans share their knowledge of the *Pride and Prejudice* source material, their findings in the world of the series, and their interest in piecing together new elements of the narrative in conjunction with the production team, ultimately producing a massive collective intelligence. In this regard, the status of the series as an adaptation actually works in its favor. With the narrative skeleton of Austen's text and the knowledge they glean along the way with *LBD* at their disposal, fans can both work through the extensions as a collective to piece together the elaborate puzzle, *and* pose hypothetical possibilities outside of the *LBD* canon. All of this is fueled by an "encyclopedic impulse" in both content creators and consumers by which "we are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling" par. 5). This differs from the pleasure derived from the enclosed world of Austen's novel and its conventional filmic and televisual adaptations – those "classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling" par. 5) It would seem as though *LBD*/*Pride and Prejudice*

fans can have their cake and eat it too; they are free to roam as far as they can, building out of the world that the *LBD* franchise offers, while always being able to return to the solace of the pre-established closure that *Pride and Prejudice* affords them.

## Drawing outside Austen's lines

While there is comfort in narrative closure, I would argue that the excitement of unknown expansion is far greater. This reveals itself in the *LBD* world particularly in the case of *The Lydia Bennet*, a spin-off series that is shot by Lizzie's younger sister, Lydia, in the same video confessional format as the mother ship videos. *Lydia* can be consumed as a standalone series, though it is both enhanced by, and enhances, *LBD*. Game designer Neil Young calls this "additive comprehension" – the practice of adding new information with each piece that forces the audience to revise their understanding of the larger text (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling" par. 8). The inclusion of *Lydia* (and to a lesser extent, the first person paratexts of other characters) speaks to a profound difference between *LBD* and the *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations

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that have preceded it, a difference only made possible by transmedia storytelling. As Bushman expounds,

> Most interpretations assume that Lizzie is always right, and conflate her point of view with Austen's point of view. But the omniscient narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* has a sly voice, and is just as judgmental of Lizzie as Lizzie is of everyone else. A transmedia take on the material opened up the story and allowed other perspectives to inform the storyworld.

*Lydia* fleshes out the character of Lydia Bennet, seemingly to a gratuitous end at first sight. However, as Austen die-hards know, the elopement of Lydia and George Wickham functions as a dramatic lynchpin in the original novel. The opportunity to build the character of Lydia over the course of the series enlivens this drama when it finally arrives (in this iteration, in the form of a viral sex tape). Moreover, with the use of a spin-off series, Lydia's growth as a character does not compromise Lizzie's position as either heroine or narrator. In the YouTube comments for Episode 85 ("Consequences") of *LBD*, in which Lydia first learns about the sex tape, viewers remark that they had not connected with this character in the original novel, but that the web series had developed the character so well that they are now fully invested in her story and feel deeply for her. This is particularly meaningful in the scope of the greater *Pride and Prejudice* canon because, as Bushman explains, Lydia Bennet had become "a much more reviled character through the various adaptations that made her not just spirited but grating." Knowing that Lydia had this reputation in the Austen fan universe gave the creators "room to subvert that expectation." The *Lydia* transmedia extension is a triumph for the writers of *LBD*, because they have proven deft at expanding not only the environment of the story, but also the characters themselves – a far more challenging feat, especially when writing for an audience that is predisposed not to sympathize with that character.

While further adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* seem all but inevitable, one can only hope that the true legacy of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* will not be furthering an Austen revival, but rather instigating a transmedia renaissance. A humble Bushman concedes, "For me, one of the great successes of *LBD* is that I think we've proven a transmedia storytelling model, one that can be replicated, and hopefully sold, financed, and enlarged to be able to exist on its own." *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* proves that there is so much more potential for social television beyond the mindless check-ins and hashtags. Fans can and will profoundly engage with narrative media if given the opportunity. They will challenge content creators to push the boundaries of the narrative universe. They will stay tuned-in around the clock through their everyday social media platforms, investing themselves in the development of fictional characters as if they were their friends. Television audiences are, in large part, just as hungry for this level of connectivity; they do not want the story to end when the credits roll and the late-night host launches his monologue – and why should it have to?

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## Note

1. In a conversation with Henry Jenkins about his 2010 book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*, Jonathan Gray explains the term "paratext" as follows:

> I draw the word from a book of that title by Gerard Genette, a French literary theorist. He was interested in all those things that surround a book that aren't quite the "thing" (or "the text") itself. Things like the cover, prefaces, typeface, and afterwords, but also reviews… Your readers may be more familiar with "hype," "synergy," "promos," "peripherals," "extratextuals," and so forth … Certainly, paratexts are absolutely integral in terms of marketing, and in terms of grabbing an audience to watch the thing in the first place.

But we've often stalled in our discussion of them by not moving beyond the banal observation that hype creates profits. What I wanted to look at is how they create meaning, how our idea of what a television show "is" and how we relate to it is often prefigured by its opening credit sequence, its posters, its ads, reviews, etc. Meanwhile, "peripherals" [belittles] their importance, since they're not at all peripheral, at least in potential… "[P]ara" suggests a more complicated relationship to the film or show, outside of, alongside, and intrinsically part of all at the same time. Hence my fondness for [paratext] in particular. (Quoted in Jenkins, "On Anti-Fans and Paratexts" 1)

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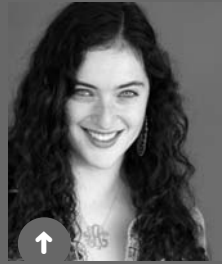
## Author Biography

Allegra Tepper is an award-winning arts and entertainment journalist based in Los Angeles, whose work has appeared in *Variety*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Mashable*, and *USA Today*. She graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts in May 2014, earning a BA in Critical Studies and a Discovery Scholar distinction for producing exceptional new scholarship in her field. As a student in the Media Arts + Practice Division's Honors in Multimedia Scholarship program, Allegra completed a media-rich senior thesis in which she built upon the research in this article and created prototypes that demonstrate how mainstream television can integrate transmedia storytelling into popular, relationship-driven series.

## Mentor Biography

Taylor Nygaard is a postdoctoral scholar and instructor at the University of Denver in the department of Media, Film, and Journalism Studies. She received a PhD from the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. Her work on gender and the media industries has been presented at conferences such as SCMS and Console-ing Passions and has been published in *Feminist Media Studies* and *Spectator*.

## Department Overview

The Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies is engaged with the critical examination of mass media, popular culture, and the art, craft, and industries of film, television, and interactive media. Students explore the social, political, economic, and aesthetic impacts of visual media, and the ways they are used by various reception communities to understand themselves in relation to the rest of the world. The Division of Media Arts + Practice is devoted to exploring the potentials of storytelling, media design, scholarly expression, and emergent digital technologies. It is an ideal program for students interested in harnessing the power of the cinematic arts for communication and interaction across professional disciplines. These are two of the seven divisions at the USC School of Cinematic Arts.
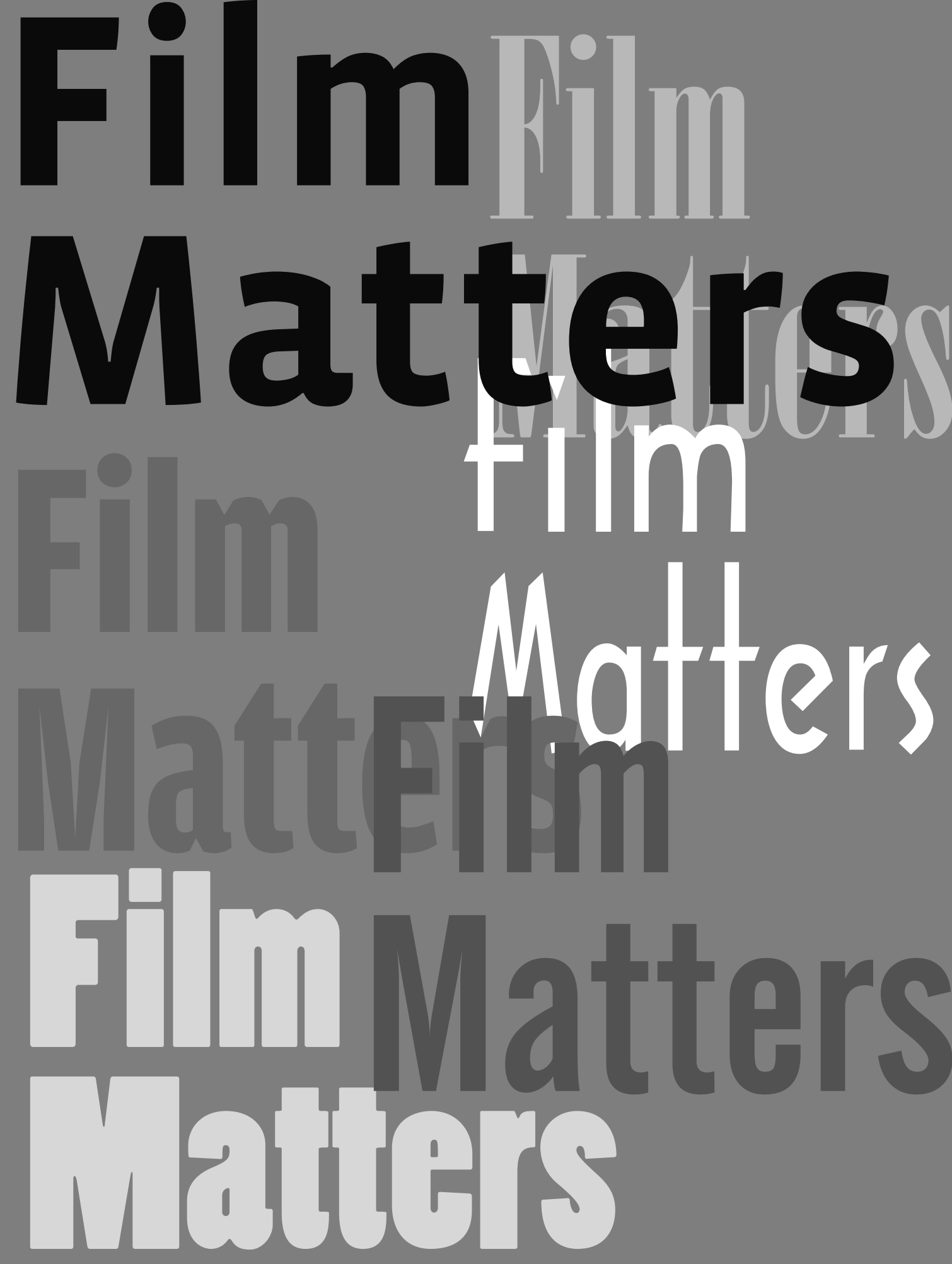
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