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Transmedia as a Strategy:
Critical and Technical Expertise
for Today's Media Galaxy

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Introduction to Transmediality as a Strategy: Critical Skills and Technical Expertise for Today's Media Galaxy

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Today's media galaxy is highly heterogeneous in form and substance. This is so because both centripetal and centrifugal forces are in play. Such forces constantly redefine what is (to be) included in the galaxy from a theoretical and practical point of view. Notably, the heterogeneity of the media galaxy is the consequence of three interlaced forces: (1) the (cross)convergence of media formats and apparatuses; (2) the enmeshing of (spheres of) production, reception, and recirculation of contents; (3) the emergence of innovative media practices that easily spread across the galaxy, but which rarely have the chance to get codified. By building upon points 1 and 2, the contributions collected in this issue are mainly concerned with exploring the third aspect. In fact, albeit taking different stances and coming from different fields, all contributions share a common lens, which constitutes the *fil rouge* of the whole issue, i.e. "transmediality". Transmediality is regarded here as both a concept describing and engaging with the first two forces mentioned above and also a strategy to tackle and innovatively act within today's media galaxy. In other words, transmediality is reconceptualised and put to practical use, that is, tested in its operability through the discussion of several case studies, so as to pave the way to future projects which are inherently conceived as transmedia and make of transmediality its paradigm by default.

Over the last two decades the concept of "transmediality" has grown out to establish itself as an area of enquiry in its own right. Notably, this area is particularly interested in exploring those communicative and representational phenomena which land on different media and capitalise on the unique affordances of each medium (Ryan 2004; Jenkins 2006; Meyer,

Simanowski, and Zeller 2006; Alper and Herr-Stephenson 2013; Jenkins, Ford, and Greene 2013; Elleström 2019; Yilmaz, Nur Erdem, and Resuloğlu 2019). By building on the work of Marsha Kinder (1991), Henry Jenkins has been the first scholar to coherently formalize the concept of “transmedia storytelling” as a “story [that] unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (2006, 293). This definition highlights the intrinsic nature of transmedia storytelling, i.e. its being “transferrable” and “transferred” across media settings (spreadability), while conjuring up a wholly unique media output, nurtured by these same media settings, as well as by a cohort of different actors involved in their production, consumption, and proliferation (convergence).

More recently, Lars Ellstrom has expanded and stratified the definition of transmediality arguing that it can be understood as “different media types shar[ing] many basic traits that can be described in terms of material properties and abilities for activating mental capacities” (2019, 5). Here, not only is the focus on the commonalities that the prefix “trans” brings with itself, but the effects (and affects) of transmedia experience are foregrounded. In other words, transmediality is open up and pushed beyond its own media boundaries in order to stress its pragmatic connotations.

Moving a step further, we can think of transmediality as a strategy at once building upon the core, shared features of storytelling *and* making use of the media-specific resources available at any time for any given project. The notion of “strategy” is meant here at establishing a site of negotiation in which theory and practice recall and mutually influence each other. Put differently, strategy is what practice imposes and theory validates; or also, what theory prescribes and practice reworks. More broadly, to think of strategy in these terms implies to acknowledge that transmediality is simultaneously transdisciplinary (e.g. transmedia storytelling) and interdisciplinary (i.e. applied to different fields, such as literature, game studies, performing arts, visual arts, etc. as the contributions to this issue also show).

In this respect, as Asunción López-Varela Azcárate and Henry Sussman (2017) point out, transmediality is interdisciplinary because it can, and does indeed, mobilize a multiplicity of fields which are put repeatedly in dialogue. Such dialogue is intersemiotic in nature, and it is precisely what allows the emergence of a transmedia specific quality, which can be intended as a “node of consilience”, i.e. an epistemologically-based synthesis of different semiotic sources, which is substantially richer – hence legitimate – than its components. In fact, it is crucial to maintain a semiotic standpoint – that precedes

and moves beyond (but does not exclude; rather wraps up) those practice-based and marketing-oriented approaches to transmediality, which also inform some of the arguments developed in this issue – in order to recognize and then leverage on the potentiality of transmediality. On this point, Jan-Noel Thon's argument about the overarching quality of transmedia narratology – “a genuinely transmedial narratology is not (or should not be) the same as a collection of media-specific narratological terms and concepts” (2016, 15) – manifests all its potential and can be applied to transmediality as an emerging strategy that bears unique traits and leads to transmedia specific outputs.

It is clear, then, that transmediality is not a sub-case – however central – of intermediality (see Bolter and Grusin 1999; Wolf 2008); rather, it prefigures, configures, and gets reshaped by, an entirely unique projectuality that attaches itself to today's media galaxy as, indeed, a chiefly transmedia galaxy. While intermediality, as Asunción López-Varela Azcárate notes in this issue, refers to phenomena that involves the combination of more than one medium (material or technical), the crossing of media borders and the co-relation of media in the sense of mutual influences between media, it is by now necessary to encourage approaches and investigations that directly highlight the very (idiosyncratic) uniqueness of transmedia projects. Originally, the emergence of an increasingly heterogeneous media galaxy has led to a hypostatization of the media a-specificity of communicative and representational phenomena. This phase has favoured – as it is typical of any newly born field of study – both the transfer of concepts across fields, and the quest for unifying principles which may provide the “glue” for the various contributions informing the field. Now, however, we witness the consolidation of transmedia-specific contents, actors, and experiences, which all require new frames and tools, as well as visions, for being effectively understood and dealt with.

This is what this issue aims to do, namely by performing investigations of transmediality, which are able, at once, to define its outer horizon – as a synthesis that moves beyond given media boundaries – and to provide case-based guidelines concerning how to put transmediality to practical use. Mariana Ciancia notes, in this regard that, “should we want to broaden the range of applications of transmedia projects, [...] it thus becomes necessary to single out a design project practice that may generate ‘frames of reference’ through design instruments” (2017, 222). Put differently, in order to legitimize transmediality as a strategy, we need to turn it into an operative framework, which can inform (and be informed) by that ever-changing media galaxy of which it aims to become a critical and technical tool. To pursue this

goal it is crucial to expand the understanding of transmediality for taking into account a whole new set of issues that have been so far largely overlooked: from transmedia competences and skills, to transmedia attitudes and effects, up to emotional and psychophysical affects.

To set the ground, the notorious conceptualization that Neil Postman provides of media ecology is very useful: “[media ecology is] the study of media as environments [...] how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances for survival” (Postman 1970, 161). To consider media as environments allows their unpacking to unpack them as techno-cultural artefacts and, at the same time, their inscription into the broader conception of the transmedia galaxy as described above. In other words, it is the experiential ethos – as the a/effective unity springing out of a variety of media contributions – fostered by today’s transmedia galaxy, which becomes the focus of attention: what can the impact of (the conceptualization of) transmediality as a strategy be? What are the enacted paths and recoils that transmedia contents presuppose? It is from the interlaced replies to these questions that a possible *vademecum* and toolkit related to today’s transmedia galaxy can eventually start to grow.

Luckily enough, we are not moving in a void, as the contributions to this issue also show. Indeed, (trans)media literacy and (trans)media design certainly represent two pillars in view of the present goals. Beyond the mere implementation of (new) digital devices in class, transmedia literacy is concerned, on the one hand, with the fostering of those critical competences and skills needed for navigating today’s media galaxy and, on the other hand, with the definition of teaching-learning practices (to be considered as double-sided, precisely because they are deeply interactive and mutually dependent on teachers-learners cooperation) which make full use of transmediality as both a theoretical concept and a strategy for achieving media-effective experience. As Ciastellardi and Di Rosario put it in the opening issue of this journal, “transmedia literacy offer[s] a set of theoretical and analytical tools to be able to acquire the skills needed to critically understand the characters and the possibilities of the emerging culture” (2015, 12). Transmedia literacy is then regarded not much as a field for defining “how to do things with (new) media in class”, but rather as sets of conceptual and practical tools for “getting hands dirty” and plunge into today’s media galaxy, in order to provide new insights, analytical frames, paths of innovation, and concrete examples of transmedia outputs according to the learning-by-doing approach.

(Trans)media design, on the other hand, can be seen as a way to put transmedia research “to effective use”, beyond context-specific cases. Being awareness of the proliferation of transmedia contents and artefacts, which are irreducible to the mere sum of their components precisely because they create experiences whose value transcends media boundaries and roles, (trans)media design aims to codify those strategies that are at the base of good practices for “presuming” media contents and artefacts. In transmedia design, “transmediality is configured as a practice that acts as a problem solver and as a sense maker” (Cianciá 2017, 226). Hence, transmedia design is, at once, a way of sensing – i.e. perceiving – making sense – i.e. infusing with meaning – and sensualize – i.e. modelling/shaping – media experience and artefacts, being cognizant of the fact that these are conceived and shaped since the outset as transmedia.

At the crossroad of such discussion, the contributions to this issue shed a light, from different fields, on today’s transmedia galaxy. Indeed, not only do they legitimize the uniqueness of transmedia galaxy by capitalizing on its internal heterogeneity and external openness towards interdisciplinarity, but they also breach into the galaxy by providing insightful critical interventions that highlight the fruitfulness of transmediality for the understanding of and engagement with media-centred experiences. Most importantly, all contributions do so by discussing concrete examples of transmedia strategies and outputs.

Stefano Calzati and Roberto Simanowski’s article – “From ‘Is’ to the (News) World: How Facebook Jeopardized its Life-Diary Nature and Occupied the Network” – explores the practices of self-representation on social networks (mainly Facebook) by discussing the findings of a digital autoethnography conducted at the City University of Hong Kong, as part of a larger course on autobiographical writings. The entry point for their analysis is the second wave in narratological studies, which puts an emphasis on small, ongoing and interactive self-narratives, rather than on long and retrospectively written (auto)biographies. From here, the two scholars investigate the extent to which we can retrieve forms of self-narratives on social networks which get close to what we find in traditional written diaries. While their study is rooted in an intermedia approach to the practices of offline and online self-representation, their conclusion is chiefly transmedia. Indeed, Calzati and Simanowski highlight, contrary to previous studies, that it is not possible to retrieve small autobiographical narratives on Facebook because the use we make of it is increasingly shaped by the platform’s news business. And yet,

such retrieval becomes possible when typologizing users and transmedially comparing their postings across different social networks.

In “Proto-Transmedial Narrative Structures: Lewis Carroll’s *A Tangled Tale*” Asunción López-Varela Azcárate explores the serialized collection of mathematical tales created by mathematician Charles Ludwig Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll) as an example of transmedia narrative *ante litteram*. López-Varela Azcárate shows how this hybrid model of narrative fiction, which combines storytelling, games of logic, and mathematical recursive nodes based on the Golden Ratio, can be considered a complex semiotic device that prefigures the breaking down of narrative linearity and foregrounds strategies of transmedia design, shaped by the logic of telling, the logic of counting, as well as a topological understanding of representation as an infinite series of maps. Indeed, Carroll’s serial tale constituted one of the earliest forms of a text “in the making” to be, not only read, but “used”, in the sense of being explored, traversed and solved by its readers.

Michel Otten’s article – “A Broken Mirror Held to History’s Face. On the Narrative Use of Computer Screens, Multi-Screen Experiences, and a Transmedia Theoretical Console in the Popular *Assassin’s Creed* Series” – brings us into the realm of videogames. From here, Ottens looks at the concept of “theoretical console”, by media theorist Nanna Verhoeff, through the lens of transmediality. According to Ottens, the “theoretical console” can be considered, de facto, a transmedia assemblage, i.e. a reified form of transmedia narrative which relies upon a variety of media objects. To make his point, the scholar takes as a case study the videogame series *Assassin Creed*. Notably, by showing how the series makes use of multiple screens, while requiring an active engagement of the player, whose actions inform and are informed, at once, by the diegetic development of the game, Ottens demonstrates the deep transmedia nature both of the constellation of stories and histories – fictional and factual – of the game, as well as of the (enactive) materiality of the digital devices required for playing.

Huertas-Martín’s valuable contribution, titled “Off-Modern Hybridity in TV Theatre. Theatrical, Cinematic and Media Temporalities in Rupert Goold’s *Macbeth*”, unpacks the intermedia and transmedia underpinnings of the transposition from the stage to the screen of *Macbeth* by British director Rupert Goold. While, at the outset, the analysis relies inevitably upon an intermedia framing, having Shakespeare’s piece been “translated” from the realm of performing arts to that of screen productions, Huertas Martín is able to re-inscribe the discussion within a broader transmedia horizon. Indeed,

not only he shows the dense intertextual canvas that supports this production in light of Goold's whole filmic repertoire, but he points concretely to the essential transmedia quality of this Shakespeare's adaptation, based on the hybridization of languages, codes, and media that inform the production. Most importantly, such hybridization finds a reflection in the *mise en forme* of the narrative, with the consequence of opening up and extending the possible interpretations of Shakespeare's work beyond its literary or theatrical understanding. In this regard – Huertas Martín argues – the transmedia nature of Goold's *Macbeth* fosters a nostalgia narrative that multiplies the temporalities of the "text", calling eventually for a discussion of previous performances and productions of *Macbeth*, which come to be included into the whole history of Shakespeare's works.

"Transmedia Narratives of Social Intervention: Affecting Reflexiveness in the Communicative Phenomenon as a Key Competence in Education", by Xiana Sotelo focuses on the potential of transmediality – as both a concept and an approach towards the delivery of media outputs – for pedagogical purposes. More specifically, by drawing upon the "Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge" framework, to be investigated is the role that transmedia concepts and contents can have in fostering communication reflexivity. As a concrete example, Sotelo discusses the experience and the findings coming from an innovative pedagogical project – "Transmedia Narratives of Social Intervention" – led at the University Complutense of Madrid. The goal of this project was to conceive and design – putting students and teachers together – transmedia activities and outputs which were expressly meant to enhance the European Higher Education Area's (EHEA) requirements of competence-based curricula. This experience shows the potential that transmediality bears as not only as a conceptual frame, but also an enactive strategy for reflecting upon and eventually tackling, via the creation of media outputs, concrete social issues affecting everyday life.

In "New Possibilities in Audiovisual Ergodic Narratives" scholars Raquel Crisóstomo and Marc Valderrama Carreño take the lead from Jespen Aarseth's concept of "ergodic literature" and apply it to filmic contents for highlighting the limits and potentials of current productions as transmedia artifacts, i.e. artifacts that are really able to transcend the boundaries of the given medium and call for active prosumerism. Aarseth's ergodic literature refers to those texts that require a non-trivial effort in order to be consumed and "used". Today's filmic productions, such as Netflix's *Bandersnatch* discussed in the article, in which not only the linearity of the narrative is broken

down, but spectators are indeed asked to participate thus becoming *teleusers*, may be considered as forms of ergodic filmic content. And yet, if these contents still fail to provide an all-encompassing and all-involving transmedia experience it is because they remain ergodic at a very superficial level, without deeper emotional and empathic levels being considered or concretely involved by the interactivity and multilinearity of the story. Hence – the scholars argue – these productions might greatly benefit from drawing inspirations from videogames, which – as we have also seen in Otten’s contribution – are increasingly able to create entire and deeply immersive storyworlds.

“Electronic Art: Transmediatic Modern Short Fiction in Japan”, by Evelina Saponjic Jovanovic delves into Japan’s contemporary literary world and, in particular, into one of its most recent and relevant phenomena, i.e. *keitai shousetsu*, translatable as “cell-phones novels”. Saponjic makes the point that this kind of novels manifests transmedia traits and potentials both at content and formal/structural levels. On the one hand, the stories recounted in these cell-phone novels draw upon themes and stylistic tropes that belong to and rework various literary canons (e.g. adolescents love relations or social/personal struggles), as well as on different media-related typologies of communication (emails, chats, social networks’ conversations, with which these novels share the paratactic and visual-based communication). On the other hand, these novels – due to their success – have often been remediated across platforms, arriving to forge a storytelling galaxy made up of several entry points. Most importantly, this galaxy calls for the overt contribution of readers who are encouraged to comment, suggest, and readdress how a particular storyline on a particular support is developed. This is possible because these novels are uploaded/published almost “on the go” by the authors – often young female writers adopting pseudonyms, as Saponjic clarifies – and, for this reason, these are works constantly in the making. Due to the creolization of their form and content and the specific competences (for both production and fruition) they demand, these novels come to be transmedia-specific artefacts that are constantly (re)defining their own artistic boundaries.

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