

Preface: De-Marging Methodologies, Blurring Media-Texts

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Abstract

In this preface I try to briefly illustrate the methodological perspective with which this special issue of *Between Journal*, edited by Hans-Joachim Backe, Massimo Fusillo and myself, analyses the intrinsic complexity of the concepts of inter-mediality, trans-mediality and cross-mediality. The aim of this research is to further extend the field under investigation interlinking directions and perspectives, methods and approaches, to understanding the hermeneutic dimension of inter-trans-cross-mediality.

Concentrating on the complexity of the texts and present-day medial contents, we have tried to contemplate actual methodology, gathering together contributions from different sectors scholars (comparative literature, film, Tv and media studies, game studies, etc.), with particular attention to the innovations brought about by the ubiquity of digital technology and the osmosis between cultural institutions and productive processes.

Keywords

Inter-mediality; Trans-mediality; Cross-mediality; Convergence; Narratology; Film and Media Studies.

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Inter-mediality, trans-mediality and cross-mediality are terms that are being used more and more in academic parlance, with various disciplines (from narratology to media studies, from cultural studies to production studies, etc.) endeavouring to monitor a series of processes within *convergence culture*. A quick glance at cultural production and ways of contemporary communication, with regard to the expressive possibilities linked to a capillary dissemination of digital media, will pinpoint the intense changes at the heart of industrial production and the organization of knowledge, as well as symbolic constructions of the imaginary, political and gender identities.

In fact, the semantics of these three terms rests on a logic founded on synergy and inclusiveness, implemented by the capacity of the media to confound and sort out its own semiotic component. In the case of inter-mediality, several languages merge in a single text, in such a way as to transform the medium into an *intermedium*, as proposed by Schröter (2012), with reference to synergy between the arts. Or in a conglomerate of varying mediality, a *metamedium*, such as the computer (Manovich 2001), which has today, in turn, been *re-mediated* (Bolter and Grusin 2000) by the smartphone. Another feature of the semantics of integration concerns trans-mediality, the way in which narration is spread over several media: narrative elements, characters, events, settings roll by and are extended in accordance with the limitations and formal possibilities of the diverse media involved, in order to build up fictional, multi-articulated worlds. In the words of Paolo Bertetti (2018), we are

not referring to methods of inter-semiotic translation (or transposition), but to the capacity of narration to overflow into several medial areas, in a dialectic between variety and equality. The logic of synergy and integration is flanked by the method of cross-mediality, a term which its semantic oscillates between a wider sense transmediality, and one more precise which indicates the circulation of the same content throughout different media platforms (Phillips 2012). Here, the central matter is not properly referred to the narrative dimension with its ways of extension in different media, but the storytelling as content which is multiplied and rendered ubiquitous and constantly accessible. What has just been described is certainly a roughly sketched semantic inventory but one that interestingly outlines the capacity of these three terms to frame a series of medial objects and complex narratives, in which all the fluidity and unpredictability of contemporary cultural forms emerges.

In the face of the reconfiguration of traditional medial forms and the rearrangement of their contents, there emerges the need for an upgraded epistemological awareness of the elasticity of the languages under examination. In fact, one of the most evident aesthetic aspects in inter, trans, and cross-medial works lies precisely in the ostentation of the confusion and the synergies in play, regarding the insistence on diversity and specificity, as in the acknowledgement of the continuity and refutation of a line of thinking supported by the rigidity of systems of categorization.

Recently, reflecting in general terms on the relationship between narration and trans-mediality, Elleström underlined actual synergy and integration as being among the material components of media and the cognitive components of users:

transmediality should be understood as referring to the general concept that different media types share many basic traits that can be described in terms of material properties and abilities for activating mental capacities [...] physical media properties and semiosis are transmedia phenomena. (Elleström 2019: 5)

This inclusive point of view, as described by Elleström, could be extended to the relationship between narration and media in general, especially if one thinks of how trans-mediality is often considered one of the formal possibilities of inter-mediality, and cross-mediality deemed to correspond to the distributive dimension of the contents. So, in this way, the three terms lend themselves to interpretation as a single, yet fluid macro-phenomenon, whilst still maintaining their conceptual specificity.

Trans-medial narration, cross-medial circulation in varying forms of entertainment, inter-medial, all-embracing and immersive artistic experiences are stimulating numerous critical studies in their attempts, with their own theoretical and methodological tools, to harness the wealth, often chaotic, of contemporary narration and medial content. Concentrating on the complexity of the texts and present-day medial contents, scholars from different sectors have proposed methods and approaches to understanding the hermeneutic dimension of inter-trans-cross-mediality, working on updating previous theoretical paradigms, or, in other cases, breaking in new theories, by approaching the fluidity and flexibility of forms, attempting to grasp the deeper meaning of the innovations and re-coding brought about by the pervasive capillarization of digital technology and the osmosis between cultural institutions and productive processes.

Therefore, from these attempts, there emerges an overall framework, rather out-of-focus, of the expressive forms at the core of digital society; understandably, with theoretical tools being continually questioned, attempts to contain the impetus of complexity and irreducibility, the multiple experimental innervations that characterize the transitory nature of forms, cannot help but boast a certain level of indeterminacy.

The analysis of these three terms cannot exempt itself from taking into consideration the great and heterogeneous variety of the fields of application involved and the methodology that endeavours to lay down boundaries for them. One of the first areas that tried to rework the residue from the paradigm of synergy in the field of media, was narratology.

Thanks to the contributions by Ryan, Grishakova, Thon, Elleström and others, the literary studies have managed to keep a hold on the opportunity to reflect, in a systematic way, on the inter-relationships with other semiotic codes, updating the narrative categories to the digital format (videogames, web-docs and interactive web-series, 360° videos, etc.), addressing virtual potentiality and the material limitations of emerging medial technology, as, for example, in interactive media (Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality). From another perspective, studies into media have begun to reflect on the whole range of innovations carried out through affirmation of the *digital*, by considering the historical recursion present in moments of transition from an old paradigm to a new one, whilst checking out relative productive and economic logic (from vertical to horizontal processes, from franchises to large-scale media conglomerates). Media studies have broadened the scope of what is often a deterministic materiality, by starting to consider media in terms beyond its specificity, i.e. as an *assemblage* in accordance with the various types of contents conveyed and diverse uses (Casetti 2015). This feature, as foreseen by Gray (2010), perceives traditional medial texts losing their own singularity and becoming forms in a state of continual construction. The result of this re-orientation is reflected in the loss of centrality of *language based media* and, ideally in an anti-hierarchical key, a broadening of *screen media studies*, geared towards considering previously subordinate textual forms as constitutive.

These prerequisites hint at the methodological “bleeding” needed in order to grasp the deeper meaning of on-going formal and medial transitions. One of the most striking effects of what has come to be called the “digital revolution” has been the ubiquity of narration, and its re-coding in expanded, interactive and rewritable structures. Digitalization has greatly facilitated the development of hybrid textual constructs, accelerating the concoction of various medial texts (e.g. the relationship of continuity between gamebooks, videogames, interactive digital storytelling), and reinforced the formal and expressive possibilities of the hypertext - “Link Therefore I Am”, in Mark Amerika’s provocatively digitalized words in *GRAMMATRON* (1997), his dystopic digital *gesamtkunstwerk*, a quest for the philosophical centrality of the link’s

video-graphics and the aesthetic enhancement of the hypertext. The role of digital media has contributed to fostering the conspicuous emergence of a trend already present as a *watermark* in many medial texts from the last century, that of becoming a fleeting element in the face of univocal categories, incapable of being diminished by theories from previous conceptual systems.

The endorsement of a digital culture pursued a dual course as regards method: on the one hand, the novel features at the heart of *digital storytelling* were conceived in a euphoric atmosphere that gave rise to the rhetoric of newness; this was geared towards concentrating on the distances and rifts between old and new media, and pushing forward towards imaginary future horizons in our relationships with the technological interface. On the other hand, however, the critics aimed to retrace the recursion of certain “rifts”, re-framing the *digital* and the paradigm of convergence within medial transitions that had already occurred during the last century, rediscovering the historical-cultural moment in which old media were “new”. Works such as the one by Thorburn and Jenkins on medial transition (2003), by Angela Ndalanian on contemporary neo-baroque (2004), by André Gaudreault (2008; 2009; 2011), Tom Gunning (1986; 2006) and Wanda Strauven (2006) (to name but a few), regarding medial experiences merging into “cinema of attractions”, endeavour to reflect not so much on the rifts as on the continuity with previous medial experiences. In this way, a medium is re-framed in its material component as well as its “virtuality”, i.e. the manifestation of its expressive possibilities in relation to material limitations.

From an archaeological perspective, by interweaving the past with the present of not only the medium, but also the formal construction of the narration that it bears, one is permitted «to see how spreadable media extend, reorient, and reimagine existing historical trajectories in the industrial production and consumption of culture» (Johnson 2013). Contemporary production, bought off by promises of immersive and interactive solicitations that are ever more involving and complete in sensory terms, discovers an attempt, in the sphere of experience, to establish the most thorough approach possible to the studying of inter-

trans-cross-mediality. In fact, trans-medial narration, inter-medial works and cross-medial circulation of storyworlds hint at a deeper desire, rendered possible by present-day medial configurations, i.e. experiential totality. This is based on the disintegration of distances, no longer those between various media, but on their ontological perception of the worlds they are building, on the moment in which fiction (virtuality) and reality (materiality) settle on a space of common perception and signification, oriented towards reciprocal interpenetration and emotional continuity.

All this provides extensive food for thought, which this issue of *Between* aims to investigate and highlight through a lively exchange of ideas. This editorial work does not aim to track down and fix absolute categories, nor does it aim to render excessively limpid (to the detriment of profundity) the disposition of the objects of study analysed thus far; it does aim to attempt to figure out the nature and significance of some inevitable theoretical blurring and indeterminacy. In order to achieve this, the special issue editors have tried to contemplate actual methodology, whilst fearlessly gathering together contributions that propose medial objects and approaches that may well differ considerably from each other; the aim is to further extend the field under investigation, to interlink directions and perspectives, in such a way as to illustrate the conceptual importance of inter-trans and cross-mediality in our understanding and relationships with the imaginary, with expressive forms, and the knowledge with which to orient ourselves amidst our multiple refracted visions of the present.

The papers in this issue come from ICLA Research Committee on Literatures/Arts/Media (CLAM). Established in 2018, as a result of the converging research fields between the University of L'Aquila and the University of Tartu, the CLAM deals with the new roles and the new configurations of literature in global polymorphic imagery, including the dissemination of literary techniques (narration, empathy, point of view, various rhetoric strategies) in every aspect of contemporary culture. Since literary texts are becoming a part of a complex galaxy of media, languages, cultures, the aims of the CLAM are geared towards investigating the comparative tradition of inter-art studies, and offering

a medium-aware analysis of various hybrid genres, from the most widely-studied to new media: musical theatre, theatrical performance, filmic adaptations, TV series, graphic novels, computer games, video-art, video-clips, advertising.

In accordance with the research objectives of CLAM, this issue also includes a lavish special section (focus) devoted to Dante's Intermedial Reception, edited by Caroline Fischer and Mattia Petricola, and the interviews to Lars Elleström, chair of the board of the International Society for Intermedial Studies (ISIS), edited by Massimo Fusillo and Mattia Petricola, and to Motus theatre company, edited by Doriana Legge and Mirko Lino.

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