Remediality: Cultural Discourse in the Era of "Technological Neo-Enlightenment"

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1. The story of a Conceptual Shift

Following in the footsteps of postmodern cultural studies, which tried to theoretically legitimize the cross-breeding of high-brow culture with consumerist symbolic practices, recent literary studies turned to media culture as a key focus. Integrated in a developing and multi-sided media network, literature faces a challenge from new communication technologies in their latest guises. This is a good opportunity to assess the potential opening of established literary theories towards new interdisciplinary approaches and to review some key-concepts, such as *intertextuality.*

Although Julia Kristeva has been credited with its international scholarly career and with its generative capacity the category of *intertextuality* is an appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin's hypothesis on dialogism by French semiotics-focus literary theory. The ongoing reassessment of Bakhtin's theoretical legacy has been consistent with a wide array of epistemological agendas, which "interpreted" him in every possible sense of the word: from translation to exegesis, from paraphrasing to rewriting and, inevitably, to misreading. The late reception of Bakhtin turned him into a pioneer of postmodern plurality and pan-anthropologism, who has left his mark on the contemporary intellectual discourse. He coined and promoted a series of epistemological categories, which unfortunately left room for conflicting interpretations. Nonetheless all of them, *dialogism*, *heteroglossia*, *speech genres*, *and voices* are firmly grounded in the linguistic soil, at the crossroads between the empirical and the speculative, between induction and deduction, text and context (Bakhtin 1991).

At the very core of his system, the most widely interpreted and the most frequently misunderstood concept, now practically identified with Bakhtin, remains the umbrella-category of *dialogism.* It which refers to the opening of any utterance towards the indeterminacy of cultural discourse and, as such, it is relevant to both the formal and the social facets of the same reality (Bakhtin 1984).

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Translated by Kristeva as *intertextuality*, the term triggered one of the key contemporary movements towards challenging the closure of the text: "Any text – Kristeva argues – is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least a double" (Kristeva 1980: 66). Her reading of Bakhtin fueled modern speculation on *intertextuality*, which grew into abundant contemporary assumptions on the *pre-/trans-/or arch-text* (Genette 1979, Genette 1982).

The shift of this category away from French formalism-structuralism and into the area of media studies is something we owe to British Cultural Studies. Later, John Fiske was the first to attempt a systematic approach to *intertextuality*, as well as taxonomy of its various types (Fiske 1987: 87–108]. Although Fiske still operates within the basic meaning of intertextuality, the shift of this category into a different cultural area involved a re-evaluation of the central role played by the medium in this process.

Subsequently Fiske's transplant opened the door to the transformation of this concept from *intertextuality* to *intermediality* and transmediality (which is the most widely used now) and, in certain cases, *remediality* (Ryan 2008; Bolter, Grusin 1999). From several points of view these newly arrived concepts converge around the media network, which emerges as a self-sufficient universe, positioning itself either as a closed, self-referential, *alternative world* or as a hyperreality, a substitute for *Reality*. In what follows we will try to explain the constant swing in transmedial culture between Scylla and Charybdis: between the push and pull of challenging Reality or just replacing it.

2. Between Scylla and Charybdis

Transmediality operates mainly as cooperation between products circulated by the same medium or by different media, which foster and promote each other and which share a particular audience segment.

In its primary form, *transmediality* is a *win-win* type of relationship between products of the same medium. It is worth mentioning here the tight thematic bonds between the soap opera and TV talk shows, such as Oprah Winfrey's or Phil Donahue's and their echo-like effect, enhanced by the promotion of the talk show during the series, or even by the presence in the show of the main actor of the soap as a "real life witness". Also worth noting is the mutually supportive relationship between the soap genre and advertising. The mini-series of eight narrative spots promoting the coffee *Nestle* brand, revolving around the emerging romance between young neighbors Sharon and Tony was created by [advertiser] McCann Erickson specifically for soap opera advertising slots.

In film, one of the most effective aspects of *transmediality* is parody – a hard paradigm of verbal *intertextuality*. A good illustration is *Play it again Sam*, Woody Allen's deferential spoof of the famous *Casablanca*, or the veritable chain of transmedial echoes between *My Fair Lady*, *Pretty Woman* and *Maid in Manhattan.* In this respect, the study of *transmediality* could be relevant to Linda Hutcheon's

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important argument that parody can be seen as a reception contract which actively engages the public rather than a particular type of text (Hutcheon 2006).

A more elaborate type of *transmediality* transgresses the limits of a single medium, striving to meet the yearning of the consumer to escape from reality into a culturally made world. We are all familiar with the recent circulation in all directions to and from books, films, TV genres, cartoons and video games. The current perception is still that the book is best able to act as a Source, and to feed various transmedia adaptations on the radio, on TV, in film, comics, video games etc. One of the best examples is the transmedial epidemics generated by the writings of the two British and Oxonian friends J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, *The Lord of the Rings* and *the Chronicles of Narnia*. The former even used cultural tourism to step out of cultural networks and into the real life of consumers – but more on this later on.

Although on the transmedial market video games used to be just a recipient for content, mainly reprocessing a material originating from fiction, films or cartoons, they have recently emerged as a generator and a key element in the network. One of the early and most illustrative examples is *Lara Croft, The Tomb Raider* which resulted in several novels and succeeded in overturning the classic relationship between books and other media. The game also generated popular films, cartoons, and videos – adverts for Seat cars, and various foodstuffs, as well as music hits – and finally actual objects on sale in supermarkets. The so called "Lara Croft phenomenon" (see: *http://www.tombraider.com*) is proof that today the media network is more and more articulate, operates by its own rules and deserves to be called a "transmedial universe" or "transmedial world".

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that, on the side of this *win-win relationship* a new form of *transmediality* was born: the *ancillary relationship* between one medium, and another, subordinate, which is supposed to serve it. This innovative development, with no parallels in the classic area of verbal *intertextuality*, originated with one of the hard paradigms in TV, the soap opera. The outcome of this pioneering maneuver was the "soap press" – now an established genre of ancillary press. Its initial purpose was to cater for addicted audiences trying to keep up with complex plots across several soaps. Its winning recipe is a clever mix of soap star biographies with fashion and beauty advertising, lifestyle and relevant travel columns, and letters from devoted fans. In an extension of this kind of transmediality, Facebook and Twitter, among the new media, also took on subordinate roles, supporting a medium or another, not to mention the promotional impact of blogs, forums, and discussion groups hosted by the social networks like My Space and Facebook.

All these shifts occurred in tight correlation with *a new type of hyper-active reception*, including various forms of radical recontextualization and reprocessing of transmedial material by fans (Jenkins 1992). Also referring to these phenomena, Michel de Certeau described recent media products as a *supermarket* and its consumers as textual *poachers* (Certeau 1984). Following the same argument, we must note how quickly the networked cultural production and consumption – which originally started with the occasional endorsement of one medium by another, ends up running these relationships according to contractual norms, and even

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institutionalizes them (Marich 2005: 55–81; 81–107). Subsequently, the entire area is currently addressed according to the norms of a symbolic type of marketing (Belch, Belch 2008).

The advent of successful media franchises grew from the significant changes in the established relationship between a so-called "source" and its transmedial "adaptations". As Marie-Laure Ryan puts it, we now need to distinguish between the familiar "snowball effect" generated by the transmedial adaptations of a successful book and multiple transmedial platforms:

> The first pole is what could be called the "snowball" effect: a certain story enjoys so much popularity, or becomes culturally so prominent, that it spontaneously generates a variety of prequels, sequels, and fan fiction and transmedial adaptations. In this case there is a central text that functions as common reference to all the other texts. *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* are good examples of the snowball effect: they started out in the medium of the novel, created by a single author, and they expanded to film and computer games by popular demand. The other pole is represented by a system in which a certain story is conceived from the very beginning as a project that develops over many different media platforms. Story worlds become commercial franchises, and the purpose of the developers is to get the public to consume as many different media as possible (Ryan 2006: 93).

One of the first to catch on to the theoretical repercussions of this shift, Henry Jenkins warned that

> we need a new model for co-creation-rather than adaptation-of content that crosses media […]. The most successful transmedia franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control over the franchise (Jenkins 2007: 1–2).

Jenkins' really important point highlights the status of *self-contended worlds* of successful transmedia franchises, underlining the clear analogy between them and some of the most widely acknowledged, coherent and self-reliant fictional universes previously created in literature:

> Many of our best authors, from William Faulkner to J.R.R. Tolkien, understood their art in terms of *world-creation* (my emphasis) and developed rich environments which could, indeed, support a variety of different characters. According to Hollywood lore, a good pitch starts with either a compelling character or an interesting world. We might, from there, make the following argument: A good character can sustain multiple narratives and thus lead to a successful movie franchise. A good "world" can sustain multiple characters (and their stories) and thus successfully launch a transmedia franchise (Jenkins 2007: 3).

As we saw from the above, one of the key drivers of transmediality *results in closure*, building a self-sufficient alternative world which is able to challenge reality. At the opposite pole, transmediality fosters a different development which *lands up in everyday life*, shapes it and strives to merely supplant it.

In its incipient forms, the process seems benign and confined to a commercially focused transfer of goods from the media world into reality. Film franchises such as *James Bond* and *Sex and the City* successfully sold to their addicted audiences Bond cocktails, Bond wrist watches, Bond cigars, Sex and the City furniture, as well as Manolo Blahnic shoes, etc. As the process picked up speed

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and momentum, media-generated goods created media-induced behaviors and, in the end, theme parks and a media hyperreality, as Umberto Eco pointed out (Eco 1986).

My intention is not to elaborate on the many aspects of this process here. I will only look at what is known as *film tourism*, one of the most popular forms of media-induced cultural behavior.

It is worth noting that its earliest manifestations take us back to literature. The so called *Grand Tour* – which gave its name to what we now call as *tourism* – described the quasi-ritual seventeenth and the eighteenth century travels by young British gentry, largely to the south of continent (especially to Florence or to Naples), following a cultural route drawn up by the Great Books (Hibbert 1987; Watson 2006). The media age and especially its transmediatic network, gave new life and a new role to this old trade.

Reviewing the interceding role of films in film tourism from a semiotic point of view, Jonathan Culler coined the concept of "marker" as a suitable descriptor:

> A marker is any kind of information or representation that constitutes a sight as a sight: by giving information about it, representing it, making it recognizable (Culler 1990: 5).

According to Culler, the main role of the marker is to endow ordinary reality with signification or, in other words, to validate the Real: "The real thing" must be marked as real, as sight worthy; if it is not marked or differentiated, it is not a notable sight" (Culler 1990: 6).

Although it is the film which sets the "marking" process in motion, only a transmediatic convergence can successfully perpetuate its dynamics, generating a package of posters, film museums, promotional videos, music, theme parks and souvenirs. "Lord of the Rings Tourism" is an excellent example in this regard. The *Lord of the Rings* transmediatic franchise made New Zealand, the shoot location, into a popular hyperreality-cum-tourist hot spot. In this case it is the topographic reality itself – New Zealand, a territory in no way similar or coincident to Tolkien's fictional universe – which deliberately adopted this state of "media reality".

As Culler substantiates, this system of integrated markers displaces reality for today's tourist:

> We have already noted the dependency of sights on markers: 'empty' sites become sights through the attachment of markers. An unremarkable piece of ground becomes a tourist attraction when equipped with a plaque reading 'Site of the Bonnie and Clyde shootout', and as more markers are added – informative historical displays, a little museum, a Bonnie and Clyde amusement park with shooting galleries – the markers themselves quite explicitly become the attraction, the sight itself (Culler 1990: 9).

Some film producers could even see their films as packages of markers to be sold to tour operators, with films sometimes entirely masterminded by the latter, as has already happened to a series of films located in historic Scotland (Martin-Jones 2009). This highly developed process reveals the key ability of media culture to fuse with reality and to be confused with it, highlighted early on by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and by Michel de Certeau (Certeau 1984). Although

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these pioneering theorists uncovered this functional vocation in media culture, they did not also to foresee the creative and highly developed forms it was going to take, devised by contemporary producers thanks to advanced technologies, but also to structural changes in society.

This brief survey of transmediality has revealed at its centre a basic swing between two opposing poles. At the one end, there is *the arrogant self-display*, the effort to create its own patterns and its materials, disregarding and challenging the world. At the other, there is a push *to make its mark on the world*, to shape it and, finally, to fully engulf it.

3. From Transmediality to Remediality

Following in Jenkins' footsteps, Ryan defined transmediality as "the flow of content through multiple media platforms" (Ryan 2006: 2), reflecting the way in which it stimulates all media to constantly reprocess and adapt a product acknowledged as a starting point or as a "source". This is the most familiar, and also earliest, face of transmediality.

Its newest aspect, usually called *remediality*, has been seen as a response to the high redundancy rate of standard transmediality, which eventually annoys its audiences through endless and predictable repetitions:

> Redundancy between media burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty (Jenkins 2007: 2).

Contemporary receivers expect a lively and integrated consumption, which prompts them to quickly transfer their knowledge and skills across a range of media:

> Audiences want the new work to offer new insights into the characters and new experiences of the fictional world. Nobody wants to consume a steady diet of second-rate novelizations! (Jenkins 2007: 2–3).

We can therefore infer that *remediality* is *consumer-focused*, in that it opens the door widely towards a radical *empowerment of the Reader*. It is from this point of view that the concept of *convergent culture*, as coined by Jenkins, should be understood and evaluated in order to fully understand what is regarded as the highest level in contemporary cultural production and communication:

> By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. (…). This circulation of media content – across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders – depends heavily on consumers active participation (Jenkins 2006: 7–8).

It seems that the new paradigm for understanding media advocated by Jenkins is not as new as advertised.

What makes the difference however is Jenkins' theory regarding the functional shift in consumption engendered by today's participatory culture. According to him,

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> convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others (Jenkins 2006: 9).

To be more precise, in our time of hyper abundant knowledge, generously supplied by the new technologies, no monopoly of information can last, since none of us can handle or even understand everything. Convergent media push audiences to build an interactive and highly networked collective, developing fresh person-to-person communication skills.

> Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume (Jenkins 2006: 9).

In other words, the contemporary culture generated by *remediation* appears to have revived and broadened an older social dream: *Enlightenment.* In more than one way, ours is a time of "Technological Neo-Enlightenment". Although the cultural consumer of this quasi-utopical era can afford unlimited information, he faces the challenge to absorb, to asses and to tackle it. In such an unprecedented context, the only breakthrough would be an alternative system of reception, labeled by Jenkins as collective intelligence:

> Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions within convergence culture (Jenkins 2006: 9).

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Abstract

Integrated in a developing and multi-sided media network, literature faces a challenge from new communication technologies in their latest guises. Our study takes this opportunity to assess the potential opening of established literary theories towards new interdisciplinary approaches, and to review some key concepts such as *intertextuality*. In what follows we will look at the gradual transformation of this concept, from *intermediality* to *transmediality* and, in certain cases, to *remediality*. We will also try to explain the constant swing in transmedial culture between *Scylla and Charybdis*: between the push and pull of challenging Reality or just replacing it.

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