

**TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING:  
PARADIGM SHIFT IN LITERARY STUDIES. NARRATIVE,  
ADAPTATION, TEACHING AND LEARNING.**

FILIPPO GILARDI AND JAMES REID

The aim of this article is to analyse the theoretical changes that Transmedia storytelling is creating within literary studies, and consider the social consequences that these developments are bringing with them, including the ways we represent and perceive the world around us, and how we teach and learn. We will trace the history of Transmedia storytelling and disambiguate its meaning from similar terms such as intermediality and cross-media. Then we will show the conceptual changes it is producing on classical notions of narrative as active consumers –participants rather than spectators – expand their knowledge of fictional universes through various media platforms. We will also look at how this new notion of narrative influences and modifies the concept of adaptation. We will do this by emphasizing theoretical differences between adaptation in terms of fidelity/intertextuality, and Transmedia adaptation in terms of synergy. Finally, we will underline how synergistic productions are linked with the notions of “Participatory Culture” and “Multiple-Intelligences”, and how these concepts can influence teaching and learning.

## TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Stories across different media has been variously termed as multi-media, intermediality, cross-media and transmedia. The term multi-media refers to the multiple modalities used to convey a narrative. Similarly, with intermediality the content being related on different media platforms may be essentially a process of adaptation; i.e. the same plot being expressed in a different format. In cross-media, communication of content can be expressed through different media that when accessed in turn make up the whole, so that one would not be able to appreciate one mediatic representation by itself. The term “Transmedia Storytelling” has a more specific definition: it is a process in which each medium is a self-contained product which “makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101”).

George Lucas’s Star Wars cosmology is one of the earliest examples of such world-making, where the universe imagined was so compelling that almost all available media were used to enter it: comics, books, video games, action figures, trivia games, and board games all revealed extra components of the rebel alliance and galactic empire; their genesis and battles.

Another example of creating world, rather than character driven narratives, was David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks*. Although the initial entry point was undoubtedly the TV series, TV ties-ins were avidly consumed by fans that had become willingly immersed in the bizarre fictional universe. These included an autobiography of FBI agent Dale Cooper (Frost), the secret diary of murder victim Laura Palmer (Lynch), a guidebook to *Twin Peaks* (Lynch and Frost), and a prequel movie leading up to her murder (Lynch). Had there been widespread use of the Internet in 1990, it seems likely that the *Twin Peaks* cosmology would have generated far greater audience participation.

A decade later the Matrix franchise provided the benchmark example of Transmedia storytelling as “key bits of information [were]

conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games” (Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101”).

The Wachowski siblings employed new media technologies to create and market their Matrix universe: web comics and anime sustained the fans’ interest while they waited for the second film; preview videos of *The Animatrix* (Chung et al.) were made available online before being released as a DVD; and an online computer game was created to “turn the whole mythology over to the players” after the final film came out (Jenkins, “Convergence” 95). As Henry Jenkins points out, “each step along the way built on what has come before, while offering new points of entry” (“Convergence” 95).

The Wachowskis understood that their audience could deftly switch from one medium to another to gain access to the cosmology, which covered genres as diverse as cyberpunk, film noir and samurai action. Not only is there not just one storytelling genre, there is also not “one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the Matrix universe” (Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101”). This fundamentally replaces the notion that single-entry points to a fictional world need be the norm.

Before discussing further how Transmedia storytelling is used to market entertainment projects and has changed classical narrative concepts we can trace its antecedents back to the Palaeolithic and by so doing explain its potential to engage.

The artist Dick Higgins pointed out that “intermediality has always been a possibility since the most ancient times” (52). For at least 40,000 years humans have narrated stories, creation myths and law across “multiple cultural channels” from the song-lines, dance, painting and music of Aboriginal Australia to the hymns, sermons, texts and stained glass windows and tapestries of Medieval Europe. There appears to be an innate creative human need to construct representations of complex worlds, which seems to have begun with the propagation of religious cosmologies across all available media. By doing this,

ancient cultures were able to codify their laws and beliefs and employ magic to conjure desires and ward off evil. In early societies it may have been intuitively understood that cross-media representations were an expedient way to aid memory and hence strengthen collective understanding of the creation myth. Clearly, a song is easier to remember than a sermon, a sermon easier than a gospel and the Bayeux Tapestry can be “read” by the illiterate. Early societies may also have prefigured Korzybski’s formulation that “a map is not the territory it represents” (58). That is they may have understood that just one mediatic representation of the world is merely an abstraction, just the insubstantial flickering of shadows on a Platonic cave wall, and not the thing itself. Employing multiple media to tell a creation myth would strengthen its perceived reality just as a multi-layered and well-constructed narrative allows us to voluntarily suspend our disbelief. The act of participation involved in expressing these myths would have contributed to their co-creation as people sang, painted, sermonized, played music and danced their cosmology into being. These three ancient concepts: the innate creative drive to explore new storytelling devices; the intuitive understanding that stories told across multiple media strengthen memory, and the knowledge that immersion in a world view is aided by the ability to participate in telling and re-telling it, are crucial to the understanding of how successful Transmedia projects have recently been deployed in entertainment.

The potential for cross-mediatic narratives has exploded in the last century as technology has provided new storytelling devices: from telegram to telephone, fax, email and text; from movie to radio, TV and podcast; from arcade to multi-player online games; and from online forums to Google maps, chatbots, and even matrix barcodes readable by dedicated camera phones. It has been argued that technologies may operate as “temes” – a neologism representing technology and genes – not necessarily because they are useful but because they replicate due to our fascination with employing them, perhaps for purposes unrelated to their original intention (Blackmore). An example

of this may be the use of Google maps, designed primarily as a navigational aid, as a way to interact with *The Sopranos* (Chase) TV series through a number of Transmedia mysteries produced by the program creators (Brownell). A comparison can be drawn here with the ancient Aboriginal songlines that not only helped the singer participate in bringing the world into existence, but also allowed navigation over vast distances as the lyrics indicated topographical features such as rivers and inclines.

This facility of humans to ascribe multiple usages to technology is extraordinary. Whenever a new medium has presented itself creatives have sought to add it to their artistic arsenal. László Moholy-Nagy was one of the first to use telecommunication artistically in 1922 in his work *Telephone Pictures* (Moholy-Nagy). Ten years later Bertolt Brecht envisaged using the radio to wrest artistic control from corporate media by transforming the public from spectators to participants (Willett). Telematic art projects in the 1970s used satellite technology and a computer-conferencing project to remotely connect people thousands of miles apart to render artistic exchanges “more participatory, culturally diverse, and richly layered with meaning” (Shanken 63). In the decades since it has become *de rigueur* for TV quiz and magazine shows to allow viewers to participate by phone, email, text and video messaging.

The advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s has seen this interactive process been further democratized, allowing those with no artistic title to participate online and create new modalities through online forums and fan-fiction projects.

Transmedia storytelling and Transmedia marketing are responses to the emergence of Internet-based participatory cultures that have flourished with the proliferation of Internet-enabled devices. Online fan forums and message boards, sampling and re-mixing of video and audio content on sites such as Youtube and the ability of young people to access multiple media concurrently have all attracted the interest of the media industry. Transmedia creators seeking to engage a multi-

media savvy generation have begun to create projects that fundamentally fail to follow classical narrative arcs. There has been, therefore, a paradigm shift in the classical concept of narrative that could affect, if it is not affecting yet, the future of literary studies.

## CLASSICAL NARRATIVE VS TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE

The definition of narrative in literary studies is shot through with ambiguity, “the narratologists who have attempted to divide narrative into constituents have come up with vastly different catalogues of basic elements” (Ryan 24). There is, however, a common agreement on the general definition of the structure of narrative that harks back to Aristotle in seeing narrative as a whole in which there is a “beginning, a middle, and an end . . . So, well-plotted fables must not begin or end casually” (27). This idea is closely linked with the place that time “has always played . . . in theories of narrative [in that] we tend to think of stories as sequences of events” (Bridgeman 53). It is clear that this is the dominant narrative structure since there have been repeated attempts to destroy it: Laurence Sterne, the author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* disturbed the narrative flow with random chapter insertion; William Burroughs pioneered “cut up” literature, which involved cutting up texts and then reassembling them to create new meanings; *Choose Your Own Adventure* books allowed readers to participate in choosing a narrative by turning to different page numbers depending on the answer given to various multiple-choice questions posed on other pages (Miller 15). Similarly, Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* operates as a stream-of-consciousness novel with multiple narratives that can be chosen by the reader as participant.

Transmedia storytelling is the latest example of a mode of creative expression that seeks to break down this classical narrative structure in terms of entirety, linearity and participation. It is therefore interesting to note Wallace Martin’s comment that, “Perhaps we study

the skeleton because that is all that remains when oral tales are printed in a book. What is lost is the complexity of the teller's interaction with the audience, which anthropologists have only recently started to restore" (107).

*Entirety.* In terms of entirety, a good Transmedia project allows for interaction because each media entry point is a self-contained product that does not require the consumer to have experience of another to understand the product engaged in. This means that a consumer could access the computer game first before being inspired to watch the film or read the comic book, or interact online in a fan forum. The ability to create self-contained products that foster engagement is a product of the structuring of a Transmedia story where there are not "individual characters or specific plots" which drive the narratives "but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple inter-related characters and their stories" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101"). Jenkins explains that this creates "an encyclopaedic impulse in both readers and writers [which] is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101"). Thus Transmedia projects allow for the expression of a multiplicity of potentialities and hence lead to enormous levels of fan interest since the universe can remain alive in the imagination ready to inhabit new forms. It opens up narrative spaces that can be later expressed by those "semiotic incarnation[s]" (Gaudreault and Marion 59) in other media that best fulfil a particular creative vision and is, therefore, a far more transparent invitation to engage in synergistic co-creation of narrative.

*Linearity.* In terms of linearity, Transmedia storytelling allows us to actively enter time and space locations non-sequentially. For instance, flashbacks and flash-forwards are not necessarily embedded in an ur-text but can be created and accessed interactively. Examples of this include the one minute website sequences for the *Lost* TV series (Miller

159) and the *ibelieveinharveydent.com* website for Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* in which active consumers could post their own videos supporting the election campaign of Gotham's "White Knight" prior to his transformation into super villain. In the online versions of sophisticated computer games attached to these universes, consumers may have even more freedom to "extend or demolish" the narrative arc (Montford 172).

This conceptual shift has been explained by Carolyn Handler Miller in her book *Digital Storytelling* where she points out that analogue narratives are essentially "continuous and unbroken," whereas digitized narratives can be "readily reassembled in an almost infinite number of ways" (4) and approached on interactive interfaces. There is then a requirement for a new definition of narrative that does not favour the written form and has no need for Aristotelian denouement. As long as the fictional cosmology remains compelling, as it has with *Star Wars* for instance, then Transmedia productions can result in an endless variety of stories.

## ADAPTATION

Since Transmedia narratives are propagated across multiple media platforms there is a need to locate such projects in theories of adaptation. There is here a clear difference that must be underlined between adaptation in terms of fidelity/intertextuality, and Transmedia adaptation in terms of synergy.

*Fidelity.* Before showing how new concepts of narrative influence and modify the concept of adaptation we must first look at the problem of "fidelity." This idea has its origin in the Aristotelian assumption that "the essence of the story can remain constant despite changes in the medium . . . of representation" (Martin). We agree, however, with Robert Stam who refutes this by stating that "it is questionable whether strict fidelity



is even possible. An adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium” (3-4). Finally with the “structuralist and poststructuralist suspicion on ideas of purity and essence and origin” the idea of fidelity and the theories developed around it has been losing influence with adaptation theorists who are increasingly focusing on intertextuality as their method of analysis (Stam 4).

*Intertextuality.* “The intertextuality theory of Kristeva, rooted in Bakhtinian ‘dialogism’, [stresses] the endless permutation of textual traces rather than the ‘fidelity’ of a later text to an earlier one, and thus [facilitates] a less judgemental approach” (Stam, 4). Essentially this means that however much a text proclaims its originality, it can be analysed as being, in some cases unconsciously, dependent on other texts in terms of allusion and reference. “The term intertextuality denotes this transportation of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another” (Kristeva, “Revolution” 111) meaning that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, “Word” 37). Thus concepts of pure fidelity are invalid since as Bakhtin reminds us, text is by necessity a “hybrid construction” - a “mingling of ones words with others” (Stam 4).

Therefore, even when adaptations aspire to fidelity it is clear that intertextuality is in operation. This can be seen when more compelling or widely accessed adaptations replace initial literary or religious texts as the main ur-text and entry-point to the cosmology. For instance, the filmic adaptations of the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ have replaced the Bible as central ur-texts in the minds of millions of viewers (Grace 47). As Pamela Grace points out, “Of all films based on written texts, those about the life of Jesus may make the loudest claims of ‘fidelity’ to their source” (46). She shows how three film-makers have portrayed the betrayal of Jesus Christ and the anti-Semitic New Testament charge that Jesus’ blood be on the Jews and their descendants. Cecil B. De Mille’s *The King of Kings* - 1927 - was one of the most screened movies of the first half of the twentieth cen-

tury and clearly mirrors the pre-holocaust anti-Semitism of its time, but fails to remain completely faithful to its Gospel inspiration in that the blame for Jesus' betrayal is centred on one individual, the wicked Jewish High Priest Caiaphas, rather than the Jewish people as a whole. (Grace 50). Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* – 1961 –, more sensitive to charges of anti-Semitism, inaccurately portrays Herod (who in the scriptures is described as the son of a Samaritan and a Jew) as a cruel Arab with no redeeming qualities. The film therefore replaces one infidelious ethnic stereotype with another (Grace 51). Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* – 2004 – “revived some of the anti-Semitic imagery and language that has long been associated with passion plays” and only under pressure did the director delete the English subtitle translating the “blood curse” from Aramaic. However, this anti-Semitic statement still exists in the Aramaic and is therefore “available to be subtitled in other languages” (Grace 56).

*Synergy.* A distinction can be drawn here between those adaptations that stress fidelity to an original source, despite imposing the values of their creator and culture with the new project, and those that admit only to inspiration. This is also where a distinction between conventional and Transmedia adaptation can be detected. For instance the re-booted franchises of Batman, Spiderman and The Incredible Hulk depart in characterisation and plot elements from their comic book inspirations, whereas a Transmedia project like Tim Burton's adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* attempts to retain a synergistic fidelity to Lewis Carroll's original work. The content is self-contained, but the universe remains the same. Tim Burton has understood in his adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* that “a compelling sequel offers consumers a new perspective on the characters, rather than just more of the same” (Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling”). Burton's film is therefore a synergistic Transmedia adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll) and not merely a re-imagining. The apparent differences between Carroll's original novels and Burton's film are reconciled by the explanation that as a young girl

Alice had mistaken certain elements of a coherent universe; for example, she had misheard the name of the realm she visited as Wonderland when according to Burton it is in fact Underland. As in the re-telling of religious cosmologies mentioned above, this acts to strengthen the validity of the imagined world. Instead of becoming redundant as merely the inspiration for Burton's movie, Carroll's original work of fiction is revived as another entry point for the consumer. Jenkins describes this process as "a new model for co-creation-rather than adaptation of content that crosses media" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling"). Burton's film represents a possible future direction for synergistic Transmedia adaptation since it takes a classical literary source and attempts to create a new entry-point without invalidating the universe of Lewis Carroll's original conception. This is likely to be an ever popular trend, as it benefits corporate media who can own rights to each entry-point - books, films, cartoons, comic books and computer games - and connects with the avid fan's encyclopaedic desire to master the fictional world. One can foresee future synergistic projects that revive other literary classics as the Transmedia generation matures.

## CONSEQUENCES

The world is becoming increasingly interdependent in terms of globalised media and telecommunications and it could therefore be said that Transmedia projects are a symptom of this trend. Successful Transmedia projects have been made possible by advances in Internet communication that have allowed like-minded users to create informal "affinity spaces" in cyberspace called participatory cultures. These include "Affiliations" such as Facebook, message boards and metagaming; "Expressions" such as digital sampling, fan video making and fan fiction writing; "Collaborative Problem Solving" such as Wikipedia and alternative reality gaming; and "Circulations" such as podcasting and blogging (Jenkins et al. 3). Anthropologists refer

to cyberspace as a “liminal zone . . . [where] normal rules and social constructions are suspended, allowing brief explorations of alternative ways of being” (Fox 226), thus they allow participants to feel free to express themselves artistically, feel socially connected, engage in civic discourse and receive strong creative support and informal mentoring from the most experienced member. It is this ability to access information on parallel platforms instantaneously that enables users/consumers to understand different concepts and worldviews from multicultural and multidisciplinary perceptions. In terms of entertainment, it is now possible to concurrently access source texts (book or movie), parallel stories (adaptations), and satellite stories (computer games), and then contribute to creating user generated content (fan fiction). The Internet revolution has led to governments and corporate media losing their monopolies on information and thus their political and cultural dominance. It has democratized film-making; the low-budget 1999 film the *Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez) successfully and cheaply advertised online as though it were a real event is a clear example, but it has also created opportunities for corporate media. However, although the entertainment industry has noted the potential of these new social spaces as powerful drivers for consumption, it is only with the co-creation of a truly compelling Transmedia universe that this desire can be fully realised. The Marvel Avengers franchise is a prime example of how fictional world-making can translate into enormous box office and merchandising returns.

The days of the passive consumer spoon-fed by government or corporate media are numbered. Those able to deftly access almost infinite sources of information to form their own opinions are growing in power. They are beginning to understand that those who want to control perception intervene in narrative.

Therefore, it is clear that the shift from spectator to actor and from consumer to creator represented by Internet-based participatory cultures and actualized by Transmedia projects may help to democratize narrative and worldviews, just as social-networking sites may

help the oppressed to participate in reforming corrupt dictatorships. Hence, “a definition of narrative should therefore work for different media . . . and it should not privilege literary forms” (Ryan 26). This means that narrative may be defined as that which it is not and the innumerable ways it can be: it is non-linear, does not represent entirety and if digitally represented can be co-created in an infinite number of ways.

*Teaching and Learning.* When applied to Howard Gardner’s notion of “multiple intelligences” and numerous studies on the increasing ability of the younger generation to multi-task across media, the potential for Transmedia to become an effective educational tool is clear. The affinity spaces created on the web allow for expression of all eight of Gardner’s categories of intelligence: linguistic, logic-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinaesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal (Gardner). While most school and colleges predominantly cater to the first two on the list, a Transmedia education could be produced that allowed the learner to engage each of their competencies and challenge those they feel weak in. For instance, it is conceivable that a Transmedia project may be created that really sought to elucidate the historical and religious accounts of the crucifixion instead of deceiving the viewer with impossible claims to authenticity. Using multi-media and their multi-tasking capabilities students would be able to approach the topic “from multiple directions all at the same time” (Jenkins et al. 36). A teacher could blog simultaneously with a lecture to provide relevant links to the topic in question. Materials could be transferred from the school’s servers direct to students’ MP3s, as happens at the Brearley School in Manhattan, which allows students to access learning media at their convenience such as when walking between class, rather than having to dedicate specified study time at home (Jenkins et al. 36).

Perhaps a criticism of these pedagogical tools would be that educators might need more funds and expertise to implement them. However, this need not be the case as one of the key aspects of the participatory

generation is their experience in creating or sampling existing media in their cyber-social lives. For example, we designed several Transmedia projects that helped students understand key teaching points, but it was the students that actually created products ranging from videos, karaoke adaptations, computer games, and online comics (Gilardi and Reid “E-learning”; Reid, Hirata and Gilardi “Student-Centred”; Gilardi and Reid “How Internet”; Reid and Gilardi “Transmedia Pedagogy”). We have begun to quantitatively assess whether participation across media leads to greater retention of the learning concept and qualitatively evaluate participant perception of the process. Preliminary results indicate that although participants do not necessarily learn key concepts better than highly-motivated traditional learners, they do enjoy the constructive process much more and they report that their collaborative problem solving skills and knowledge of digital media improves as a consequence.

Since the competencies acquired and developed in co-creating Transmedia projects are transferable, we believe it is time that education in the humanities and arts recognises that learning in these contexts furnishes students with a variety of skills that are increasingly deemed desirable in the global work place.


## CONCLUSION

The worldwide crisis of literary studies is evident. Martha C. Nussbaum extends this crisis to all humanities and describes it in these terms:

The humanities and the arts are being cut away . . . Seen by policy-makers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children. Indeed, what we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science –

the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought – are also losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making (2).

Imagination, creativity, critical thinking, empathy, sense of community and culture, cross-cultural awareness and intercultural ability are skills literary studies and comparative literature teaches. These competencies are similar to those practiced in accessing Transmedia narratives and in the use of Transmedia methods for teaching and learning, as well as essential requirements for navigating a globalised world. We have emphasized that the concept of narrative plays a central role in Transmedia storytelling and that from an adaptation point of view literary texts are losing their place as ur-texts and therefore literary studies must negotiate new territory and limits. The question is whether the discipline is able to recognize this new environment and accept that although it is losing centrality, it is not necessarily losing power. As Jonathan Culler points out, “Literature may have lost its centrality as a specific object of study, but its modes have conquered: in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences everything is literary” (41).

Educators of comparative literature must be able to inhabit these new territories if they do not want them to be led by business and commercial interests. Is it not one of the purposes of comparative literature to compare literary texts with other cultural products? So, why not, for example, compare Shakespeare with comics, TV series and video-games? Indeed why not create Transmedia projects that help to do this? The age group that the creative industry engages through Transmedia storytelling is young. Literary studies departments should propose studies of narrative in its wild perspective and engage students in Transmediatic learning experiences through books, movies, video-games, blog, , fan-fiction and comics. Thus, by mirroring in education the way young people actually makes sense of the world,

Transmedia approaches to literary studies may encourage students to discover the pleasure of literary pursuits. After all, Transmedia storytelling is still in its infancy and who is to say, as Tim Burton's film shows it may, that it will not grow with its audience to engage in further experiences of literary synergy?

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