

Cooling Down Transmedia Storytelling

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Abstract: In this article we propose a reading of "Dead End Street", one of the most successful songs of one of the most popular British pop groups of the 60s, The Kinks. However, we will not discuss the song as such, but its remediation as a music video (a practice that did not have to wait for MTV to make its appearance in mass media culture). The analysis will briefly contextualize the group, the song and the clip, but its major objective is to use the Kinks example to open a new question in the larger debate on intermediality and transmediality (the twin notions that represent for us the essential aspects of remediation and convergence culture). The article will start with some terminological clarifications, before moving to its central question, which has to do with the rhetoric and the aesthetic aspects of intermediality and transmediality (and this move is strongly relying on McLuhan's thinking on "hot" and "cool" media and their respective impact on the audience). On the one hand, it is no longer possible to avoid these mechanisms if one wants to be commercially successful. On the other hand, certain techniques of intermedialization and transmedialization may have a negative impact on the intrinsic power and quality of a given work, as we demonstrate by the close reading of "Dead End Song."

Jan BAETENS and Domingo SÁNCHEZ-MESA

Cooling Down Transmedia Storytelling

From Meaning to Use

In the larger context of a research project on transmedia storytelling (Sánchez-Mesa), and facing the terminological pitfalls that characterize the current state of the field, we have argued that it is possible to narrow down the wide range of competing and conflicting notions and concepts to the fundamental opposition of *intermediality* versus *transmediality*, the former term referring to the study of the relationships between the literary text and its "others" as well as the study of the literary as a heterogeneous material that conveys a more or less radical "semiotic rupture" within itself, the latter term referring to the fact that more and more works tend to appear in various media with a further distinction between transmediality in a broader traditional sense and the convergent notion of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins) as distribution or/and expansion of a storyworld in different media (Baetens & Sánchez-Mesa). We then expanded this research to reframe from a narrative point of view related concepts such as *demediation*, generally associated with other disciplines such as visual arts (Baetens & Sánchez-Mesa). In the following pages we would like to address issues of inter- and transmediality from a different perspective, no longer that of conceptual or terminological definitions but that of the pragmatic interplay between encoding and decoding – a perspective that emphasizes meaning as use and that we thus might consider pragmatic, if not rhetoric (rhetoric being a dimension too often overlooked in theoretical debates on word and image relationships as well as media in general).

As we already argued, the debates on intermediality, as triggered by the groundbreaking essay by Irina Rajewsky and the no less influential book on convergence culture by Henry Jenkins, have produced a somewhat counterproductive terminological complexity that is in need of a tactical standstill. Hence our proposal to drastically reduce the current (and still increasing) conceptual richness to a binary opposition, that between *intermediality* and *transmediality*. Just as brief reminder, this is how we envisage the definition of these two terms.¹

Intermediality, on the one hand, is not only the general term that defines the relationships between autonomous media, it is also the term that identifies the internal plurality of each medium. The intermedial study of literature therefore does not only refer to the study of the relationships between a given work and its "others" (for instance the videoclip "illustrating" a pop song, to already give the example that will be elaborated later on), it also includes the study of the literary as a heterogeneous material that conveys a more or less radical "semiotic rupture" within itself (for instance when we interpret aspects of typography, from typeface to page layout and book design, as aspects of the text's visuality – a dimension of literature that has always been at the center of visual and experimental poetry, or, to return to the case study at the center of this article, when we "imagine" mental pictures listening to a piece of music, regardless of the fact that it also exists as a music video).

As for the other key term, transmediality, on the other hand, we suggest that it be used to refer to the fact that more and more works tend to appear in various media. The key word in this depiction of transmediality is "tend to:" the reappearance of a work in another medium is a possibility, not a general law; moreover, its presence and impact depend on its historical context. Yet as the studies by Kalifa and Murray convincingly demonstrated, transmedial adaptation has become a kind of default option in modern mass culture (which originates in the 19th Century). Without the possibility of exploiting a given work (often described now in terms of "content") in other media, it proves extremely difficult, if not commercially impossible to produce, market, distribute and sell it in a sustainable way.

This process is more evident in cyberculture, where a number of factors come together: massive digitizing of cultural texts and global spread of new media languages (Manovich); a strong competition among media entertainment corporations; the proliferation of popular culture reception and distribution platforms and the enhancement of the subjects' creative intervention in the emerging cultural landscape. Various forms of transmediality occur in a context of increased media mobility where all forms of adaptation, recycling and extension are combined. In certain periods, cultures, environments, genres, etc., transmediality will be more present than in others. In principle, however, transmediality is a universal phenomenon.

As in the case of intermediality, which is both internal and external, it is necessary here to make a further distinction between two aspects, or even *phases*, of transmediality. First, transmedialization is the mechanism that adapts a given work to another medium. The result of these operations is called

¹ The rest of this paragraph is based on Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa.

snowball transmedial narrative worlds (as for example in the reuse of comics characters for advertisement purposes, a phenomenon that already started in the nineteenth century, as shown by Roger Sabin in his study on the well-known Ally Sloper figure (Sabin). This process, as we know, is not one-sided (a song can be adapted into a poster; a poster can be interpreted in musical terms, think of Moussorgsky's "Pictures of an Exhibition" –once again one notices that the principle is anything but recent or modern). However, not all adaptations are equal. Second, there is also the fact that certain works are not first elaborated in a given medium and then adapted into other media, but produced more or less simultaneously in various media, none of them being the "source" of the other ones, by means of a multiplatform production design where a fictional/narrative world emerges through a complex planning of multiple media contributions. This second dimension or *moment* in transmediality can be called "hard transmedia" and it is defined as follows by Robert Pratten:

Transmedia storytelling' is telling a story across multiple media and preferably, although it doesn't always happen, with a degree of audience participation, interaction or collaboration. In transmedia storytelling, engagement with each successive media heightens the audience's understanding of, enjoyment of and affection for the story. To do this successfully, the embodiment of the story in each media needs to be satisfying in its own right while enjoyment of all the media should be greater than the sum of the parts. (1)

Although the notion of transmedia storytelling clearly covers the two aspects of transmediality (traditional adaptation on the one hand, the transmedialization of demediated content on the other hand), the dramatic implications of this distinction for the notion of storytelling are not always acknowledged. In the former case, transmedia storytelling will be closer to story adaptation as it unfolds in traditional franchises (i.e. to the adaptation of a story that has already been embodied and materialized in a narrative discourse, hence the difficulties of adapting it easily or seamlessly into another medium). In the latter, transmedia storytelling will have more to do with adding a storyline to a story world (and here the verbal realization of the story will be less elaborate, in order to avoid problems of medium migration as much as possible).

In the following pages we would like to address issues of inter- and transmediality from a different perspective, no longer that of conceptual or terminological definitions but that of the pragmatic interplay between encoding and decoding. Such a perspective emphasizes meaning as such and we might thus consider it pragmatic, if not rhetoric (rhetoric being a dimension too often overlooked in theoretical debates on word and image relationships as well as media in general). The aim of this approach is comparable to our previous work on inter- and transmediality: just as we have tried to bring some conceptual clarity (frustratingly simple as it may be) in the lively (and healthily chaotic) discussion, we want to open now a new line of research that specifically addresses questions of artistic value. Although we strongly believe in the necessity of continuous adaptation and remediation of given works, we also think that neither adaptation nor remediation suffice to add aesthetic value. In a certain sense, this is actually a way of reintroducing a very old discussion, but one that the current hype on adaptation and remediation for adaptation and remediation's sake has somewhat pushed to the background, theoretically speaking at least, for from a practical point of view the success or failure of this kind of medial transformation cannot be separated from issues of rhetoric, aesthetic qualities, and communities of taste. With the help of a very specific example, but an example we consider highly representative of a lot of work that is currently being done in the cultural industries, we would like to highlight both the opportunities and the threats of intermedialization and transmedialization. In other words, it never suffices to add an intermedial aspect to a given work or to remake it in a different medium to guarantee its artistic success. One has to carefully evaluate what is won and what is lost when expanding the media scope of a given work. One must also have the courage, at least from an aesthetic point of view, to resist the commercial temptation to build an intermedial and transmedial network that in the short term may be useful to market a certain product, but that in the long run may prove harmful (we should never forget the fundamental rule of all good designers: do not harm).

Being Stuck in Dead End Street

A short example may illustrate the rhetorical problems raised by certain uses of inter- and transmediality. It concerns the way in which a pop song of the 60s, "Dead End Street" by The Kinks,

was intermedially as well as transmedially repackaged in order to circulate in popular media culture at large, with results we do not always believe to be rhetorically felicitous or efficacious.²

Before attempting a closer reading of the Kinks' videoclip, we should remind ourselves, following Oliver Sacks' book *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* that, maybe, musical communication is not only about music, since we all use not only sounds but also visual and tactile signs and devices to produce an all-encompassing musical experience. Antonio Méndez Rubio, one of the most conspicuous Spanish cultural critics working on popular music, has called our attention on the relevance of a theoretical and critical study of musical communication not only as languages interplay, but also as a social and cultural practice. As far as we are concerned here Méndez Rubio's proposal is particularly stimulating from the very title of his chapter on videoclip in his book *Comunicación musical y cultura popular*, "El procedimiento audiovisual" ("The audiovision device"). According to him, the correlation (basically intermedial) between sight and hearing cannot avoid a negotiation logic within the music industry where the screen effect (*pantallización*) over music operates a domestication of the critical and collective dimension of the popular (rock & roll included) by the massive in television. This tendency reaches its summit (80s) after a process developed between the 50s and 70s where this interaction between both dimensions of musical culture, popular and mass, was definitely inclining towards the latter. Even if the videoclip that transmedializes "Dead End Street" is clearly ahead of the configuration of the musical videoclip as a cornerstone of the music industries as we reach the 80s and 90s, it is important to bring in the strategic function that this genre will perform in an increasingly globalized consumer culture through television. As Ana Sedeño indicates, videoclips provided television with verbal heterogeneity and constant acceleration as it pursued exclusive attention from the spectator. Moreover, the videoclip entailed the programmatic model of the television grid with its fragmentation and extreme velocity (Sedeño 79).

The Kinks are a typical example of the *British invasion*, that is "a cultural phenomenon of the mid 1960s, when rock and pop music acts from the United Kingdom and other aspects of British culture became popular in the United States and significant to the rising "counterculture" on both sides of the Atlantic" (Wikipedia 2019a). The Kinks were a group that, contrary to, for instance, The Beatles or The Rolling Stones, did refuse to go global and to abandon their Englishness –from the accent of the lead singer, Ray Davies, to the locally rooted themes and topics– in order to cater to the tastes of US audiences. Still well-known for songs as "You Really Got Me", "Sunny Afternoon" or "Lola", the group did not, however, refrain from exploring intermedial and transmedial forms of communication (sticking to Englishness has never been incompatible with a minimal degree of business spirit). If the success of pop music in the 50s and 60s cannot be separated from the rise of the transistor radio (invented in 1947, commercially released in 1954) and the hegemonic format of the 3 minutes 45rpm single in the music record of the 1960s, the visual component of the pop song became increasingly important in the same years. This significance can be attributed less to the development of the first video clips (for instance the *Scopitone*, a visual jukebox that had some success around 1960) than to the appearance of specialized television programs (which soon became the dominant communication channel for the promotion of pop songs, long before the start of actual music television channels such as MTV). Like all other groups of that period, The Kinks recorded short promotional films to support both the (huge) sales of their records and the (relative) success of their tours.

"Dead End Street" is a song dealing with the poverty and misery found in the lower classes of English society. Music, video and text can be found today on youtube (The Kinks 1966). Wikipedia describes the clip as follows:

A mimed promotional film (precursor to the modern music video) was produced for the song in late 1966. It was filmed on Little Green Street, a diminutive eighteenth century lane in North London, located off Highgate Road in Kentish Town. [...] The film was shot in black and white, and featured each member of the band dressed as an undertaker, as well as playing various other characters throughout. With a length of roughly 3:15 in total. Dave Davies [*band member and brother of Ray Davies*, JB & DSM] says that the BBC disliked the film, with the group dressed as Victorian pallbearers and one of their roadies in a nightshirt suddenly leaping out of the coffin as they put it down on the pavement, claiming it was in bad taste. (Wikipedia)

² For a critical view on the impact of industrial or "canned" music on traditional forms of popular music, see the classic essay on working class culture by Richard Hoggart.

The problem of the music videoclip is not just bad taste, however, at least not for contemporary viewers who have learned to cope with this kind of alleged or apparent disrespect. Granted, the nostalgia culture that today surrounds much of the British Invasion, between Elvis and Woodstock, may prevent viewers from noticing what does not really function well in this music video *avant la lettre*, but the diagnosis is easy to make. First, the visual material does nothing but uneventfully illustrate the lyrics. Second, the montage equally duplicates in a quite mechanical manner the rhythm of the song. Third, the combination of staged fragments (the group members acting as caretakers) and found footage (documentary photography on urban poverty) overlaps with the divide between stanza (staged fragments) and chorus (found footage), which inevitably reduces the unity of the song –not a detail for a 3 minutes work ideally to be experienced in one gulp.

All this may seem “too much of the same”, and rhetoricians might use the word redundancy to qualify the basic aesthetic of the clip –with the fictionalizing tendency (the group members playing a role, one of them even cross-dressing) as a second best in the twofold process of intermedialization (images are added to words) and transmedialization (the song heard on the radio can now be seen also on television).³ The real problem however is not that these techniques do obstruct the impact of the song much more than they reinforce it, but that they are often chosen as a default option at the moment of reshaping sounds in visual formats. We have learnt to criticize this matching of movement to music as *mickeymousing*, that is as a boring form of synchronizing image and sound, but Disney does not have the monopoly of this kind of mirroring or parallelism between sign types in intermedial constructions when it comes down to offer a transmedial expansion of a certain work. The “Dead End Street” clip is symptomatic in this regard: fictionalization as well as redundancy are features found in many musical clips and, more generally, in many attempts to use intermediality at the moment of transmedialization. To a large extent, by trying to “enrich” the original material most clips break the basic rule of visual design: “less is more”.

Learning From Marshall McLuhan

From a medium-theoretical point of view, the (relative) failure of the “Dead End Street” music clip can be analyzed with the help of Marshall McLuhan’s distinction between “hot” and “cool” media and the corollary opposition between “heating up” and “cooling down” (30-31). Hot media –and it is permissible to think that McLuhan’s metaphorical terminology is somewhat counterintuitive– are media that combine various sign types to communicate the same message and which therefore tend to reduce the public’s attention and participation. Cool media on the contrary are media that channel their message through signs, often signs belonging to just one sign type and that can only work if the public is actively participating. A text without any image is cooler than an illustrated image, a television program that one follows by just listening to it (while washing the dishes, for instance) is hotter than a similar program that asks for both viewing and listening, etc. Hot and cool are however not only static features, their relationship is permanently and fundamentally challenged, if not altered, by media changes, which McLuhan powerfully frames in terms of trauma. Media changes expose us to media that are experienced as either too cold or too hot, and in that case there is need to either heat it up or cool it down, so that the traumatic experience of new media, which inevitably emerge and supersede each other given the teleological drive of the mediasphere, can be transformed into a positive familiarity with the new environment.

Intermediality and transmedialization are both as inescapable as media change, and they are themselves among the major drivers of media change in general: all media are, to a certain extent, already mixed media and the craving for stronger and more explicit forms of intermediality is a perfectly normal one, as is the need to communicate via more than one medium (in principle, there are no quantitative limits to the range of media that can be used or covered in transmedia storytelling, for instance). The question therefore is not to brake or slow down the joint tendency to increased intermediality and larger transmedialization, but to examine whether the way in which a medium is shaped and reshaped and by doing so goes toward more intermediality and more transmediality is a way that is satisfying or not at the level of the actual experience of the public –and this question is pragmatic and rhetorical, not abstract or theoretical. Medium users *judge* the way in which media are used, and they may have good reasons to criticize a given use and ask for either heating up or cooling down of intermedial and transmedial structures. In the case of “Dead End Street”, contemporary

³ In the third place, there is also the intended humoristic effect, but this is less “more of the same” than something that is really different from the lyrics and musical atmosphere, which are neither funny nor satirical (although there is unmistakably a strong political dimension in the song).

audiences have the right to think that the attempt to "heat up" the song is not very felicitous in this case. Here, cooling down –in practice by just listening to the song, and simply imagine all the rest– seems to be a tenable position. In other cases, the same cooling down techniques may result in excessive coolness and prove in need of an opposite injection of heating measures –and it will not suffice to merely cut fictionalization and visual redundancy, as shown by the recording of television shows in which the group is performing life (or play backing, one never knows) the song.

In media practices, it always depends and all type of generalization must be avoided at all cost. Even in the present case, our analysis should remain open to debate, for other viewers may find good reasons to actually like the creation of a fictional world that is grafted to the lyrics and the sound. It is for example perfectly imaginable that viewers with a great knowledge of hyper-sophisticated recent video clips may feel attracted by the somewhat primitive properties of the inter- and transmedialization of "Dead End Street" (and as stated above, nostalgia is a key player in today's pop culture). Others may consider that what we have decoded as fictionalization is actually a way of bridging the gap between arty and life, bringing the fictional pop song back to the real place and the real people that inspired it. Once again, hot and cold, heating up and cooling down are no essentialist or transhistorical concepts and procedures, they are instead ways of seeing (and listening) that highlight the importance of the unique and always context-dependent experience of media.

Old and New according to Robert Pratten

The use of additional forms of intermediality as well as the strategy to transmedialize as much as possible may be sound practices from a general yet real-world point of view. Either of these elements make a medial production more visible, perhaps also more attractive, and definitely easier to market – and it would be absurd to overlook the necessity to communicate a work as broadly and efficiently as possible, certainly in the field of popular culture which is not a set of tiny upscale niche markets for selected and wealthy audiences. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the *a priori* appreciation of increased intermediality cum transmedial exploitation and the actual reading and viewing of highly intermedial and strongly transmedialized works, which may reveal a tension between encoding and decoding (Hall), that is between intended meaning and different forms of actual meaning, ranging from acceptance to rejection (the two extremes) over negotiation (the middle ground), while also disclosing sometimes rude shifts in appreciation over time, either by taking into account age differences at a certain moment in time (our reading of the "Dead End Street" clip has a totally different take on the issue of nostalgia than that of young people who have never heard of The Kinks) or by measuring permanently fluctuating ideas, positive or negative, at different moments in time. Our own reading of the music videoclip under scrutiny has undoubtedly been modified by the theoretical debates on transmedia storytelling and its emphasis on "world building", for example, and it is easy to predict that new tendencies in this field will also impact and change this reading. It is definitely transmedia storytelling's interest in the matching of storytelling on the one hand and story world on the other hand that draw our attention to the possible mismatch between the story as told by the song and its further elaboration via the combination with a real-world environment (Little Green Street) where a new fictionalized event (the transportation of the coffin) is inserted.

Transmedia theorists and practitioners are obviously very much aware of this kind of problems and their reflection unquestionably nuances and improves one of the underlying assumptions of much remediation theory as developed after Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, which tends to believe that given the ideal of the sign as the perfect mimetic sign, there is an intrinsic and a priori added value attached to intermediality and transmedialization. Given the fact that "good" signs should try to come as close as possible to the "world" they refer to, and given the fact that this world cannot be reduced either to "pure" media or to just one medium, the mimetic impulse of media change, at least in modern Western societies, has to foster this double tendency toward intermediality and transmediality. Remediation theory argues that good media are new media that are stronger than the old ones, which are both superseded by and integrated in the newer ones (an idea already defended by McLuhan), it does not come as a surprise that these newer media are generally more intermedial than their predecessors, whereas they prove also capable in functioning more easily in transmedial settings: painting becomes photography becomes silent cinema becomes sound film becomes virtual reality becomes augmented reality, etc. In other words: since reality is multimodal and plurimedial, signs too have to become increasingly intermedial and transmedial.

In (relative) contrast with these general theses, certain transmedia theorists and practitioners have advanced models to better grasp the internal complexity of transmedia storytelling, which does not always go as smoothly as it is claimed. The following diagram, which refers to transmedial structures but which can also be applied to questions of intermediality, clearly folds out the difference between

what is perhaps misleadingly called "old" and "new" forms, that is between less felicitous and more successful interactions between the various media that are involved in intermedial and transmedial practices. In the former case, the media expansion does not go beyond mere juxtaposition; in the latter case, the media combination produces a new and superior complex unity (Pratten 3).

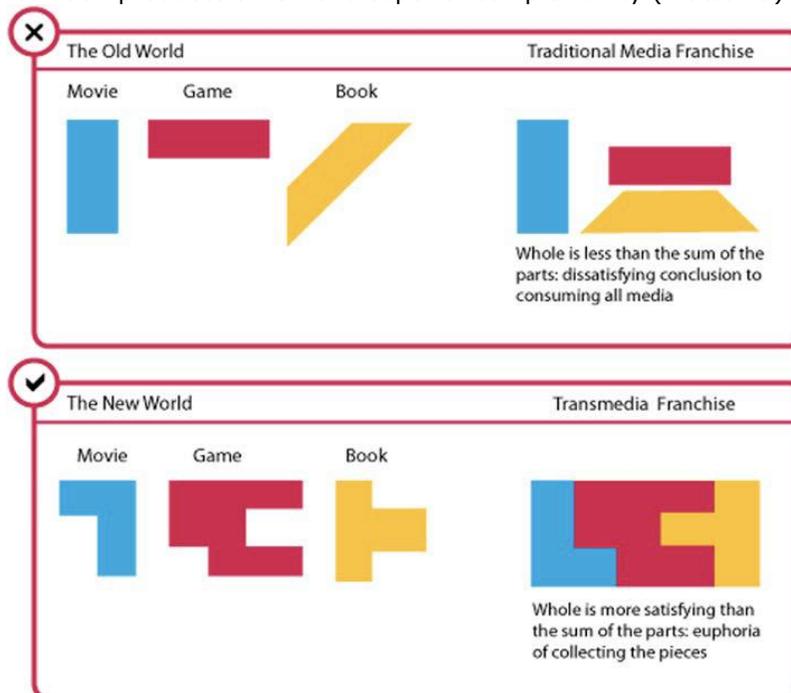


Figure 1: Old and New Media Forms; Pratten, Robert. *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. CreateSpace Amazon. 2015.

And since the "do not harm" rule should apply no less than the "always intermedialize, always transmedialize" rule, the example of the "Dead End Street" clip, a clear illustration of the "old" (according to Pratten's terminology), one should have the right to ask what has to be preferred: an imperfect use of the general remediation principle of increasing inter- and transmediality as much as possible (and since nothing is perfect, one should live with these imperfections) or a sound use of simpler, that is less intermedial and less transmedial forms (in spite of the practical and commercial limitations of, for instance, just sticking to sound when working in the field of pop music). Once again, universal answers do not exist, but at least there should be room for questions and debates.

In Praise of Minimalism

These questions are anything but new. We all remember the famous outburst of Gustave Flaubert, in a letter to his notary Ernest Duplan (12 June 1862): « Jamais, moi vivant, on ne m'illustrera, parce que la plus belle description littéraire est dévorée par le plus piètre dessin » (*As long as I live, I refuse to see my work illustrated, for the most beautiful literary description is torn apart by silly drawings*, our translation) (Flaubert 1). Flaubert's position is far from unique, and the issues it raises are not purely aesthetic or philosophical; it refers as much to the desire to control the reception of the work as to highly contextualized literary-historical questions (in the years *Madame Bovary* was published (1856), illustrations were often seen as low-brow, for instance, and one understands why Flaubert did not want to be associated with the typical publication format of, for instance, pornographic novels, which were meant to be seen as much as to be read). Countless modern and recent examples could be added to Flaubert's complaint, for instance, the uneasy relationship in the field of contemporary poetry between the focus on spatialization (a major tendency in modern poetry since Stéphane Mallarmé) and the institutional obligation to reproduce this kind of work "life on stage", in an oral performance that is often at odds with the fundamental ambitions of their work (Baetens).

If one agrees to link the increased use of intermediality and transmediality as a form of maximalism –and this kind of aesthetic has a rich and ongoing tradition–, the craving for minimalism is a no less powerful mind-set in art and communication. The fundamental question here is not to oppose

minimalism and maximalism but to see how they can interact (Dawans) and, more specifically, how minimalist concerns can be introduced in the larger debate on transmediality.

One of the reasons to do so is without any doubt the return to decreased forms of intermediality and intermediality within the medium that is often considered to be the supermedium programmed to swallow and combine all existing sign types and all media structures in one single medium environment, that is the computer (the ultimate representative of this way of thinking being Friedrich Kittler, see Winthrop-Young). The "super-integrative" capacities of modern computer technology do certainly allow to dream of this kind of media synthesis, comparable to a certain degree with McLuhan's musings on light as the endpoint of media history (if not history at all), but this is not always what happens in the creative work done in the field. Two simple but far-reaching examples may suffice to give an idea of the importance of minimalism within this theoretically speaking hyper-intermedial and hyper-transmedial environment.

The first one is the experimental visual poetry by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (aka YHCHI), which apparently discards most of the medium's affordances, resisting the countless technical gadgets offered by the computer to rely upon one single protocol. As Scott Rettberg argues:

Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' (YHCHI) poems similarly use a very limited set of Flash's capabilities in a highly effective way. The two artists in the collective, Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, use the capabilities of Flash primarily to sync texts usually black text on white backgrounds) with musical soundtracks. Texts are usually displayed as single words or shorts phrases shown in quick succession in a single typeface in a large font. The use of typographic effects is minimal and controller, but the pace at which the words are displayed is often very rapid, pushing at the limits of how quickly we can read and absorb the meaning of the words (140)

This minimalist approach –with of course maximalist effects– diverges from previous periods' inclination towards ever expanding inter- and transmediality, but it confirms the broader effort in the field to discover simple and efficient "killer applications", capable of setting a certain standard and matching the expectations of new audiences. Similar tendencies can also be observed in the field of digital comics, for instance, which has rediscovered after numerous unproductive attempts to exploit computer software and hardware the virtues of a technique as simple and old-fashioned as the *slide show* (Baudry).

The second example is that of the audiobook, which has not been invented but actually imposed by the internet (the turning point being 1996). As long as audiobooks were commercialized as cassettes, intended for instance to be listened to by commuters, their success remained rather limited. The repurposing of the medium by its encounter with computer technology did however not produce what might have been expected, namely a further intermedial and transmedial sophistication of something that had remained after all dramatically simple. What happened instead were two things: first, the refocusing of the digital audiobook on the very essence of the medium, namely the voice (there was no shift toward drama, as one can notice in recent developments in the larger podcast field or in the more specialized field of locative media); second, the spectacular success of the until then more or less slumbering medium (audiobooks have become big business, and their production is no longer the monopoly of niche publishers). To a certain extent, the success of the audiobook, which reduces the medial complexity of texts and books to mere speech, is another example of the attractiveness of minimalist formats, as mentioned before. According to John Cayley, however, the audiobook exposes a real paradigm shift in reading and writing, which has to do with what he calls "aurality", a dimension that new forms of speech technology have brought once again to the fore (orality, in this sense, is no longer the typical almost archaeological feature of pre-writing societies, but one of the new dimensions of language that is being reshaped by digital culture):

Putting it far too plainly: as the course of human history and culture proceeded, language in aurality was not able to participate as effectively as writing –as language in persistent visibility– for the constitution and maintenance of civil and imperial institutions. Until, that is, just about now, at this time of writing, in the 2010s. This decade has witnessed the advent of transactive synthetic language in aurality. Contemporary computation has finally achieved robust voice recognition and acceptable speech synthesis, all implemented over network services having access to vast corpora of natural language material with NLP affordances. Historically, I argue, this is a turning for our –the language animal's– practice of language in the world (...) (Cayley 216)

The use of ostensibly simple applications such as the audiobook, a medium that is infra-intermedial and sub-transmedial, so to speak, is therefore not incompatible with the expansion of digital technology, a broad cultural change that at first sight seems to push in the direction of super-intermediality and mega-transmediality. In certain contexts, at certain moments, in certain media, with certain audiences, etc., issues of intermediality and transmediality are solved in this or that way, and these processes are never linear or one-sided.

Never Say: Too Little, Too Late

As a (very provisory) conclusion, or rather as a way of opening a new debate, we would like to stress the idea that intermedial and transmedial issues should not only be considered in maximalist ways, but also in minimalist ways. Sometimes, the sky is the limit, but sometimes, it is better to refrain, trying not to harm. Crucial in this regard is of course the dialectics between the two forces, which can only be settled by including a strong pragmatic and rhetoric perspective. One has to see how things really work, and that is, to quote the title of an essential book by Judith Schlanger, a matter of striking the delicate balance between "saying too much and not enough". Intermediality and transmediality are not in themselves on the side of "too much", on the contrary. In certain cases, actual forms of intermediality and transmediality can be "not enough" and further work on increasing them, provided it is done in a way that is both artistically and rhetorically satisfying.

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