

## From Intermediality to Plurimediality: Deleting the Lines of Medium Essentialism in Creative Media and Digital Rhetoric

Dr. Michael Odichi-Dan Ugorji

*UFR Langues et Communication, Université de Bourgogne, France*

*\*Corresponding Author: Dr. Michael Odichi-Dan Ugorji, UFR Langues et Communication, Université de Bourgogne, France*

### ABSTRACT

*Adopting an inter-disciplinary meta-semiotic approach this article studies the inter-medial framing of creative media narratives and cogent arguments in the process of successfully leveraging individual narratives in and across various media channels. It does this with a keen gaze on the interplay of intermediality and its corollaries in digital simulacra. It also explores the psychosocial agency and the pedagogical potentials of this phenomenon and further explicates the concept of intermediality as its interpretive model. Thus, intermediality is also reviewed through the lens of its emancipatory aesthetics even as it is firmly located at the centre of narrativity in digital rhetoric.*

**Keywords:** *Intermediality, digital rhetoric, creative media, digital media, contemporary Advertising, narratology, medium essentialism*

### INTRODUCTION

The performance environment, as earlier observed by Philip Auslander (1999), is increasingly and progressively mediated with the growth and dominance of television and digital technologies. This trend has emphasised the tangent role of intermediality and also generated other concepts allied to it such as; multimediality, transmediality and hybridity (or hybridization). For emphasis, multimediality refers to the meeting of two media in one and the same object, while transmediality describes media change or transfer from one medium to another, and hybridity means the combination of the forms and the interaction of the artistic products across media channels. Irina O. Rajewsky (2005: 44) identifies an extended list of multifarious affiliate terminologies and concepts associated with intermediality including; plurimediality, cross-mediality, infra-mediality, media-convergence, media-integration and media-fusion, etc. Of all these seminal corollaries of intermediality, plurimediality stands out in the context of digital rhetoric in this paper. Silke Jandl (2017) describes it in the following lines,

Plurimediality, thus, describes how a range of media might co-exist to make and add to meaning in any particular work. *Grace's Guide* is quite obviously plurimedial: it includes lots of pictures, as

well as screen shots from her YouTube videos and makes use of several different modes, such as changing background colors and fonts. All of these components make the whole book into a plurimedial experience that relies on visual and textual elements almost in equal measure.

All of these sub-concepts refer to the various manifestations of intermediality in the contemporary world of a digitally driven mediatic system and by implication in the entire narratological enterprise. Irrespective of the mode of its manifestation in any given situation, intermediality functions as a meta-medium by which narratology navigates through and traverses the boundaries of form and genre from the original or framing medium to other media and back again. This interaction of genres and media channels therefore essentially shatters every notion of essentialism by which a piece of narrative could be solely ascribed to a particular genre and to that genre alone.

Hence, what would for traditional convenience be described as a piece of theatrical performance, could now find its way into the television advertising scene as part of the content by which a marketer connects to their targets and at the same time becomes expressed in the electronic format, which in itself attracts the paraphernalia of that medium. In a similar way, the same piece of theatrical narration could

also find its way into digital advertising scenes such as YouTube, thereby also adopting the trappings of that media space. It could eventually return to the original framing medium (the theatre scene) with some of the attributes of those other media genres where it has been exposed and then be expressed afresh as an advertorial or even as a live demonstration in an open theatre stage. The energy that intermediality and its corollaries have brought to narratology and rhetorical communication compels a deeper understanding of the interaction between rhetorical narration and digital cultures. What then is the link between rhetoric and digital mediality?

James Zappen (2005: 319) in his seminal essay, “Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory”, demonstrates how traditional rhetorical strategies of persuasion operate and their processes of reconfiguration in digital spaces. He further suggests that digitization has brought along a big challenge to the age-old persistent view that simply associates rhetoric exclusively with persuasion (Zappen, 2005: 321). Douglass Eymann (2015: 12-13) also posits;

If nearly all human acts of communication engage rhetorical practice (whether explicitly acknowledged or not), then rhetoric-as-a method can be applied to all communication events. While I do take a very broad view of the scope of rhetoric, I also believe that articulating a definition of the field provides a focus for future deliberation upon the acceptable methods (derived from the epistemological assumptions underlying such a definition) and practices that may constitute digital rhetoric as a field.

In tune with the foregoing argument, this paper advances the notion of intermediality as the connecting tissue that binds rhetorical narration to digital cultures by demonstrating how a creative media narrative or a rhetorical construction transcends any particular medium and could effectively be expressed and represented interculturally and also in other media channels that are non-traditional to its original medium of representation. Hence, theatre norms and form can be effectively deployed in film, advertising media, animations, and other digital formats in tune with the rapid evolution of media technologies. This paper also importantly explores the underlying pedagogic methods of applied intermediality (and by

extension digital rhetoric) in order to determine how sociocultural values and cognitive styles influence the development of intergroup interaction and behaviour change.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article utilizes an inter-disciplinary meta-semiotic approach to study the framing of creative media narratives rhetorical communication across media channels. This is done with an understanding of the ‘meta-semiotic’ as that which relates to the description or analysis of any given semiotic system. Hence, this paper embarks upon the description and analysis of intermediality as a semiotic agent and catalyst in media convergence and cross-fertilisation of narratives across media boundaries. The paper also explores some cogent arguments that either support or oppose the practice of leveraging individual narratives in various media channels. It also forays into important arguments made on the practice of merging different media channels to constitute a singular narrative, especially via the digital media. The highpoint of this study is the reading of the psychosocial agency and the pedagogical potentials of intermediality and its corollaries as valid emancipatory social agents. Drawing inferences from existing research and instances from some known narratives in contemporary popular culture, this paper also further explicates the concept of intermediality as an interpretive model. Therefore, intermediality is eventually seen in this paper from the perspective of its emancipatory or liberating aesthetics, even as it is firmly rooted in the core of narratology and within the praxis of digital rhetoric.

## **INTERMEDIALITY: THE CONCEPT AND THE DEBATES**

The concept of *Intermediality* and theories propounded on it are central to this paper. This key concept describes the interconnectedness of the various modern media of communication. It has also been described as the incorporation of digital technology into theatre practice and the presence of other media (film, television and digital media, etc) in contemporary theatre productions (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2007). Mikko Lehtonen (2001: 76) portrays this concept as “intertextuality that transgressed media borders”. Thus, elements of popular culture and the sociocultural intertexts that emanate from public spheres can also easily form the core of other modes of creative media

production. These elements and intertexts generate narratives that can be leveraged across media boundaries, manifesting in film stories, theatrical productions, comedy sketches and advertising concepts, etc. A good instance is the endless parodies and satire focused on the mannerisms of US President Donald Trump. These parodies and satirical narratives operate within the paradigms of intermediality, especially those of transmediality and plurimediality. Mr. Trump's idiosyncrasies and peculiar speak have so far generated a multiplicity of enactments in various comic sketches, stand-up comedy, mimicry, clownery, cartoons, social media memes and even in advertising concepts that spin off from the man's unweaning relevance in popular imagination. Imprints of his characterisation have lately flooded various digital media spaces including YouTube. Trump's character has not been spared by YouTube content producers. It has featured in speech performance parodies, comic sketches, stand-up comedy and YouTube music memes, in which different components of various media forms are often combined to tell holistic stories that speak to Trump's unique characterization and that also connect with YouTube audiences. Some of the top music memes featuring this character include those with: Trump and former President Barack Obama singing Aqua's *Barbie Girl*, Trump's character singing Camila Cabello's *Havana*, and Trump's character singing Ed Sheeran's *Shape of You*, among many other parodies. There are also some parodies featuring Trump's character making ludicrous speeches such as *Do You Wanna Build a Wall* among others. It would not be long before Hollywood makes a full movie based on this 'Trumpomania', going by the connectedness and revolving nature of these almost trite representations of Trump's character across media spaces. Hence, Trump's character has effectively transformed into the Cinderella or Dracula of contemporary performance scenes and the digital media has not been left out of the ongoing frenzy. The above example would be a classic case of plurimediality in action. In a slightly similar context, it could also be described simply in terms of any of multimediality or transmediality, or in the words of Lehtonen "intertextuality that transgressed media borders". One element that stands out within the web of intermediality, as described above, is the intersection and interjection of its sub-concepts with one another; which in itself perfectly describes the typical discursive nature

of intermediality as a disruptive concept in media studies.

Chiel Kattenbelt (2008) conceives intermediality as "the correlation of media in the sense of mutual influences between media". He acknowledges that the arts and media should not be studied in their own historical developments and with their own rules and specifications but rather in the broader context of their differences and co-relations. He proceeds to describe how this definition relates to his definitions of allied concepts of *multimediality* and *transmediality*, while distinguishing *intermediality* as one aspect that involves resensibilization. According to him, these three concepts (inter-, multi- and transmediality) interrelate on different levels in the same discourse and are perspectives from which media phenomena can be studied with respect to their mediality, where the different artistic expressions are regarded as media. This conception of intermediality corroborates the earlier view expressed by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (2007) which locates theatre and performance at the heart of the 'new media' debate. They conceive 'intermediality as an integration of thoughts and media processes'. Thus, the intermedial is situated in a space where the boundaries soften and we are in-between and within a mixing of space, media and realities, with theatre providing the staging space for intermediality (Ugorji, 2017). This staging space could also in many other circumstances be any other media of representation functioning as the framing medium, while incorporating others in a way that boosts its own capacity to effectively convey its narrative goals.

Friedrich Kittler much earlier stated his aversion to this translatability or transformability of media by defining media in absolute terms; "A medium is a medium is a medium, thus cannot be translated" (Paech, 2000). Another theorist who theorized against the use of one artform in another medium not traditional to it is Noël Carroll who clings to 'medium essentialism'. While asserting his views on what he terms *media specificity*, he posits that "each artform has its own distinctive medium, a medium that distinguishes it from other art forms" (Carroll, Noël, 1996). As a film theorist, he maintains his notion that the definition of the medium determines the aesthetic value of any artform. He alludes to Kracauer and Arnheim's film theory which drew from the doctrine of 'media-specificity' to reinforce the medium of film at

its infancy. In tune with Carroll is the semiologist Christian Metz (1977) who conceives film as a textual system that constitutes its own original singular totality with no significant authorial involvement (Paech, 2000). In the views of these apostles of media specificity or medium essentialism the free-flowing intermedial simulacra of Trump's performative megalomaniac character in various media would be a taboo, since it could not be confined to a singular medium. This kind of a restrictive creative order would seem unimaginably anachronistic, impracticable and above all anti-creative in the prevailing decentralised world of media democracies. Thus, the Kitleian code of "A medium is a medium, thus cannot be translated" would fall flat in the face of contemporary non-essentialist creative media practice.

However, despite its close links to the discipline of film, *media specificity* is still not an invention of film theory. According to Balme (2004), it finds its roots in Lessing's *Laokoon* essay of 1766, which famously critiqued the old formula of *ut pictura poesis* (one artform being a model for another) and distinguished between temporal and spatial arts. Even modernists such as Clement Greenberg held tenaciously to this notion of medial purity as the ultimate goal for every modernist artform. This view of the apostles of *media specificity* and essentialism sharply contrasts with those who believe in *Intermediality*, such as André Bazin, Peter Greenaway, Christopher Balme, Marshall McLuhan, Chiel Kattenbelt, Freda Chapple, among others. The latter believe in 'hybridity'; the combination of the forms and the interaction of the arts across media channels, which would be closely linked to plurimediality. It is the perspective of this latter group on media that has seminal relevance to the central argument in this paper.

André Bazin in the 1950s noted that films were in principle works by authors who at certain times and with certain technical and aesthetic means had managed to create certain distinctive cinematic artworks. Hence, he conceived film in the light of what would later be described as intermediality. Taking the concept a little further, Marshall McLuhan classified intermediality into two categories; the 'symbolic' and the 'material'. According to him 'symbolic intermediality' occurs with all forms of medial inscriptions of older media such as photography into newer forms such as the

digital media, as long as they function as a subject or theme on the level of narration or depiction. 'Material intermediality' occurs where the representational layer itself (mechanical dispositive, painting, etc) reappears constitutively in a different medium (Paech, 2000).

Christopher Balme in the introduction to *Beyond Aesthetics: Performance, Media and Cultural Studies*, (Balme & Wagner, 2004: 7) observes that theatre is changing rapidly in response to what can be called media culture. He emphasizes that theatrical performances can still be just plays performed on box sets, but increasingly they are not. Balme goes ahead to distinguish intermediality under three fields thus:

- the transposition of diegetic content from one medium to another;
- a particular form of intertextuality;
- the attempt to realize in one medium the aesthetic conventions and habits of seeing and hearing in another medium.

Christopher Balme further reviews Lepage's efforts in using his production company (*Ex-Machina*) to establish how different media can interact and influence one another. In the review of Lepage's *Seven Streams of the River Ota* (in which theatre performance integrates film, television, photography and video), Balme conceives theatre as a 'framing medium', with the ability to frame other media within itself with one particular medium standing out as the 'thematic medium' (the central motif). Also working on Lepage's 'intermedial theatre', Aristita Alaban (2004) examines what she and Lepage call 'cross-breeding' of media conventions, while engaging her study with the knotty issue of how intermedial performances reconfigure audience perceptions. She affirms Lepage's firm belief in *hybridization* or 'cross-breeding' as a method of constructing contemporary performance. She therefore defines hybridization as "the merging of two different media or artistic conventions in order to enhance the meaning or the way of expressing meaning", in a manner not obtainable by a simple juxtaposition of those two elements (Ugorji, 2017).

Similarly, Philip Auslander (1999) sets out to interrogate the subject of live performance and its proponents' rigid ascription of it solely to the theatre. In his view, the growth and dominant posturing of digital technologies and television



is increasingly and progressively mediatizing the evolving performance environment. He thus categorically situates performance of cultural forms beyond strict adherence to the theatre, thereby extending its spheres to the 'economically superior mediatized forms'. As Douglas Eyman (2015: 26) puts it,

As digital technologies have continued to develop (at an amazingly brisk pace), the possibilities of constructing hypertext work that includes a variety of media-video, audio, animation, interactive processes-has further marked the departure from our traditional notions ... Thus there has been an increased interest in exploring the possibilities of visual rhetoric(s) as they are foregrounded in digital media.

Thus, in the face of the digital onslaught, live performance strives to become like the popular media as much as possible. This contrasts sharply with the notion of Peggy Phelan (1993) that firmly believes in the resistance of live performance to market forces and the mediatic system. Yet to scholars such as Kees Epskamp (2006) mediality is a perceived reality influenced through the media that one is exposed to. Perhaps the most relevant explication of the concept is that given by Asuncion Lopez-Varela Azcarate and Steven Tötösy De Zepetnek (2008: 65). They describe intermediality as the employment of theoretical presuppositions in application together with the application of new media technology in action for the betterment of society against essentialisms and towards inclusion and interculturalism; thereby replacing resignation with resistance and participation (Lopez-Varela Azcarate & Tötösy De Zepetnek, 2008: 65-82).

Typical of most revolutionary histories and grand liberation acts, the growth of intermediality did not only make a huge positive impact on unbridled creativity, but also shattered the strongholds of essentialisms that had hitherto hindered free interaction of different media platforms and the inherent artistic expression thereof. It has also created an atmosphere of creative democracies and liberated the entire creative enterprise from arbitrariness and narrowness of options. In tune with the prevailing decentralized media environment as typified by the digital media, intermediality encourages the exploration of various kinds of narrativity, thereby embracing

the mixing of forms, styles and media in ways that may be arcane to essentialist narrativity, but that are effectively creative and also communicative. In such a liberalised and deregulated mediatic system, authors and producers are encouraged to express themselves in ways and in combinations of ways that would best represent their narratives and connect with their target audiences. Loyalties to form and genre are then replaced by loyalties to storytelling and other diegetic content. Aggregate contributions to the goals of communication and entertainment, and not allegiance to generic aesthetics, become the main purpose for which the non-diegetic content are constructed. The growth and impact of intermedial narrativity in creative media and digital rhetoric within the last two decades has become so mainstream that it is now almost inconceivable to restrict creativity and narration to any particular narrow window of expression. Thus, the emancipatory role of intermediality also encourages the rejection of and resistance to all forms of essentialisms, in order for society to make progress.

### CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, intermediality has proven to be the essential string that binds creative media narratives (and also rhetorical communication) to digital cultures and gives them the verve to revolve and traverse spaces that are ordinarily unfamiliar to their original forms. It is also important to note that the persuasive powers of rhetorical communication energized by dynamic digital cultures and driven by intermediality have the potential to effectively convey sociocultural values and cognitive styles that could in turn influence the development of intergroup interaction and eventually motivate behaviour change towards social emancipation. Finally, the liberating or emancipatory aesthetics of intermediality and digital rhetoric is a call to action for society to eschew essentialisms and advance towards inclusion, inter-culturalism and a more meaningful social engagement.

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