

Transmediality vs. Intermediality in a Transcultural Context

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to investigate the role that transculturality plays when moving across different media, with a specific focus on rising media on international platforms and convergence, in the context of recent critical theory. The final decade of the twentieth century saw the unfolding of a revolution in television, the outcome of which is what Mittell has called “complex TV”; this has yielded increasingly complex television series. TV series have become the leading form of storytelling, able to stretch along lengthy narrative arcs, over extended periods of time; in several cases, such series also manage to remain locally connoted. In this light, current transmedial Italian Crime fiction can be considered a strong case study, specifically given its ability to develop stories by inserting specific local customs within an ample, international horizons. Transculturality and transmediality/ intermediality will be evaluated in the context of this sub-genre, also in light of the international acclaim garnered by several such series; for example: *Inspector Montalbano* (Rai 1, 1999–), *Gomorra* (Sky, 2014–2021), and *Suburra* (Netflix, 2017–2020). Transculturality will instead be used to evaluate the extent to which the categories of transmediality and intermediality overlap or remain conceptually separate.

Keywords: transculturality, intermediality, transmediality, storytelling

1. The Time of Convergence and Storytelling

The aim of this article is to investigate the notion of transculturality from a theoretical perspective so as to understand whether there is an overlap between the theoretical frameworks of intermediality and transculturality or whether these are conceptually separate. To do so, transculturality will be considered within the context of the expansions and crossings among media which characterize contemporary storytelling, especially when the latter is in serial form. Multimedia projects’ movement towards interactivity, which has recently been both encouraged and practiced widely, pushes to go the boundaries of a given text. This not only favours transmedial production, but it also ruptures cultural frontiers, encouraging transculturality. (Benvenuti 2018, 109).

The most immediate step is reaching an understanding of the theoretical tools that can be used to study the negotiation between medial and cultural differences. The notion of medium has recently been reconfigured, moving beyond its early definition in the late twentieth century, so as to include processes of remediation. This has led to the use of new methodologies, which are generating a novel understanding of previous media as these attempt to reinvent themselves in light of contemporary needs (Bolter e Grusin 2000, 15).

Current TV series are being shaped by a variety of centripetal forces. As a result, they can be reframed in multiple, decontextualized, and reappropriated ways. This in turn invites a reconceptualization of the methodologies used thus far to study the genre. In this light, it is important to consider the way that the interconnectedness of culture and media repurposes products within a new media system.

Contemporary tendencies towards convergence have undoubtedly had an impact on narrative techniques; the simultaneous presence of grassroots approaches coming from bottom-up growth and top-down demands has raised issues in terms of both narrative structures and the analysis of the narrative which are specific to mediamodernity and, in turn, TV seriality. Such convergence is a process which takes place as a result of two pushes coming from opposite directions: “convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence” (Jenkins 2006, 18). When it comes to media in contemporary culture, the idea of convergence is matched by the idea of remediation, meaning that a single medium is unable to work in isolated fashion and appropriates techniques, forms, and meanings that belong to other media, reshaping them. According to Bolter and Grusin, in feeling threatened by new technologies, over time, traditional media, be these electronic or print, have tried to affirm the need for their existence, reaffirming their role within the cultural horizon (Bolter e Grusin 2000, 5). All these contingencies lead to the possibility of constructing narratives that reflect the contemporary medial apparatus in their complexity.

As a result, storytelling has become faster and more diverse in that it works on the extension or expansion of the story-world that revolves around its original matrix and upon which something new is added each time the medium shifts. Each expansion then is a new textual expression that adds complexity and depth to the original text (Mallamaci 2018, 47). As a result, each individual product also constitutes a window into the complex world of the full narrative (Jenkins 2006, 95), expanding the scope of its fruition. This is particularly true given that certain media are more suited than others to specific audiences. According to Giovagnoli, for instance, the purpose of contemporary storytelling is to create ‘imaginative universes’ that evolve across story-worlds which are, in turn, built through different stories across media, in large production projects managed across complex communication systems. These are “content orchestras” whose sheet music is played at the same time by texts, audiovisual material, videogames, interactive games, graphic tales, sounds, both physical and digital, experienced either in the real world or virtually, alone or in interactive mode (Giovagnoli 2000, 139).

In this light, in the context of TV series, each contemporary narrative would be configured within transmedial storytelling in a more or less obvious manner. According to Jenkins, this “represents a process where integral elements of a fictional story are dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins 2011). Convergence can thus be situated at the heart of each change or movement in the horizon of new media; so much so, that Jenkins defines contemporary culture as a culture of convergence (Jenkins 2006, 2-3). De Sola Pool already defined convergence as a series of processes that are blurring the confines between media (de Sola Pool 1983, 23). Cultural convergence is a comprehensive process: “there will be no single black box that controls the flow of media in our homes. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunication technologies, we are entering an era where media will be everywhere” (Jenkins 2006, 16).

It can be argued that the advent of new media has compelled storytelling itself to reconsider its nature: contemporary seriality is able to develop very long plots, allowing the agents within such plots to morph over a long, highly intricate narrative arc; further, since a serial show is usually experienced within the intimacy of a home, the viewers can develop a bond rooted in familiarity and intimacy with the narrative (Sepinwall 2014, 461-475). This novel framework has caused a sort of revolution in television; within it, a contemporary series must: be original, i.e. experiment with language or narrative patterns; have a narrative structure which includes memory of itself; have a textual complexity that feeds on meta-textual and self-referential allusions; have an engaged audience, one not limited to the condition of the viewer but engaging as an agent in the series’ development through different media (Maio 2009, 16); refute the need to adhere to conclusive plots; give life to stories that span across genres; and produce a cumulative narrative that expands over time (Mittell 2017, 47).

Contemporary narratives have thus changed; it seems that a noteworthy preference for television over other media is emerging. If previously the demarcation between a TV series (consisting in self-contained episodes) and a serial show (with a continuous story) was clear, over the past 30 years these two fields have begun to bleed into each other (Mittell 2017, 14); this is the consequence of the birth of a complex serial narrative model. In this respect, the storytelling stems from the idea that a TV series generates a lasting narrative world, peopled with a coherent group of characters who live through events in a specific temporal arc (Mittell 2017, 24). Given the medium's easy, daily access to episodes, the characters become an integral part of the audience's lives; this is true to the point that a deep level of empathy is created between audience and characters, driven and amplified by the specific characteristics of metamodern storytelling (Vittorini 2017, 201). Television seems to be most congenial to such narratives, especially when these are of noteworthy complexity, such as those within which transcultural overlapping occurs.

2. Glocalism and adaptations

In the field of media studies, there is a dominant tendency to recognize the relative supremacy of the United States (Benvenuti 2018, 111); the latter implies the risk of a relative cultural imperialism which could slowly drive towards an increasingly homogeneous culture (Schiller 1976). The renewed narrative and serial structures mentioned previously seem to be edging towards representations that are both local and global; so much so, that recent studies speak of glocalization (Robertson 1995), or rather, a simultaneous push towards homogeneity and national specificity (Manzato 2018). This is probably the outcome of the changes caused by the rise of new media and the remediation of old media; both have had an impact on television since the late 1990's, favouring the circulation of global formats while establishing a variety of procedures to adapt such formats to national contexts.

The combination of global formats, national production companies, and local adaptations has generated what is now defined as "indigenous paradigm" or a process through which forms and expressions belonging to foreign cultures elaborated in foreign societies are appropriate, reshaped, and shared across specific, different local communities in a manner that is consistent and synoptic with autochthonous systems of meaning (Buonanno 1999, 5).

TV series therefore exist in flux between local and global TV, often spawning hybrid products, within which foreign and native elements can coexist. Such adaptations bend the original content to fit local forms matching the tastes of local audiences.

Within the Italian TV series' market, there is a tendency to import products from abroad and then reconfigure them to fit the needs of an internal market. The adaptation that thus takes place requires the search for a balance between loyalty to the original story and variations that are consistent with and can enhance its core. In this light, a respect for the original core is a strength, which renders the localization process effective. The adaptation, therefore, is not a process encouraging cultural homogeneity; rather, it is a process through which different cultures interact, exchanging information and perspectives in a chain of indebtedness. We are faced with a kind of "critical transculturalism" (Smith 2008), which values the elements in each culture while generating a hybrid.

There are four types of transnational production in contemporary television (Hilmes 2013; Perkins e Verevis 2015) which are represented in products they generate: *imported series*, which are produced in a national context and sold internationally, broadcast in their original form; *reality television* (such as game shows and lifestyle programs) in which the central core remains intact but secondary elements are recreated; *adapted series* which are further subdivided into *creative* and *controlled*, depending upon the degree of adherence to the original core; and, finally, *format fiction*, which implies a high degree of re-creation while adhering to a guiding text.

Telling stories is becoming an increasingly complicated activity, this is further stretched by the audience's demands, which are increasingly varied and pressing. Stories today are imported and exported, adapted, and retold, in continuous multiplication: storytelling seems to have reached its

peak, becoming central in contemporary medial society, breaking free from strictly literary confines (Meneghelli 2013, 9). This seems to be configuring a turning point in narrative forms, which is reshaping both the methodologies and the objectives of media studies (Meneghelli 2013, 29).

3. Intermediality vs. Transmediality

Within this renewed and highly transcultural framework, two terms, often used interchangeably, appear: intermediality and transmediality. These terms also yield further permutations leading to the rise of an intricate, at times impervious, terminological jungle (Rajewsky 2018, 1). Intermediality and transmediality are often undifferentiated and used as synonyms. According to Rajewsky, the concept of intermediality rests on the idea of *in between*; this is found in its prefix *inter*. This creates a subtle difference with respect to other correlated terms (such as *trans*-mediality, *multi*-mediality, *con*-vergence, *re*-mediation). In these cases, the prefixes touch upon different nuances of meaning within complex medial relationships (Rajewsky 2018, 6).

In terms of differentiating use, instead, intermediality was the term that seemed more useful in earlier years, garnering attention in critical discourse in the final twenty years of the past century; this was a reflection of its versatility (Rajewsky 2014; Fusillo 2015). It was already used by German academics in the early 1980's (Hansen-Löve 1983) and it gained popularity on a larger scale in the following decade. Three different theoretical categories fall under the umbrella term intermediality (Fusillo 2015): intermedial transposition, which consists in cinematic adaptations of literary texts; medial combinations or multimедiality, which consists in blending two or more media together; intermedial allusions, or references to a different, specific medium, within a literary text (Rajewsky 2018, 7).

More recently, instead, terms such as convergence, crossmediality and transmediality are gaining prominence and are being used more frequently; this is also a result of the recent studies by Jenkins e Mittell mentioned earlier. The important attention received by studies on *transmedial storytelling* also seems to have played a hand in this shift. The latter is also the effect of the commercial success of specific franchises which have promoted the use of terms such as transmedia, transmedial, and transmediality (Jenkins 2006, 334).

It would therefore seem that the dominant current tendency is to replace *intermediality* with *transmediality*¹: in many cases, however, the term transmediality is used independently from the term intermediality (Herman 2004; Jenkins 2006) or as a complementary term (Rajewsky 2018). These two semantic fields – intermediality and transmediality – are expanding in response to new media (especially when used for an existing story) and are therefore constantly in need of new definitions:

The assumption underlying Barthes's mythography is that the metamorphic quality of literature consists in and is developed through historically-varied narrative frameworks, through the story's anamorphic potential, whose openness to being assigned to any matter and supported by any language would render the overcoming of any semantic boundary possible (*inter*-). A story is ubiquitous and eternal in that it extends in spacetime as much as humankind does, transcending and in a way overcoming the limitations set by a given culture or medium. To the media indicated by Barthes, one must add TV, videogames, stories on the web and all cross-medial hybrids of these (Vittorini 2019, 8).

In this regard, *postclassical narratology*, also known as transmedial narratology, has witnessed a change in perspective: unlike traditional scholars of narratology, whose focus was primarily the study of literature and, more specifically, what anglophone culture refers to as fiction (novels; short stories; novellas; fairy tales etc.), scholars of transmedial narratology tend to widen the field of inquiry. As such, they consider narrative forms across their different phenomenological manifestations: literary and non-literary texts; film; documentaries; plays; comic strips; graphic novels; videogames; blogs; as well as the narrative potential included in paintings; sculptures; architecture; music without forgetting the narrative strategies introduced by transmedia storytelling (Rajewsky 2018, 4).

Transmedial storytelling is a narrative form that crosses different media but within which each single expanded text or product contributes specifically and importantly to the whole: each medium can give access to the full franchise (Jenkins 2006). In this respect, differentiating between transmediality and crossmediality becomes relatively simple in spite of an apparent conceptual overlap. This is due to the fact that the logic underlying crossmediality, which finds its prime expression in digital culture, is that its content is developed through a web of promotion and allusion which each medium creates with respect to the others, thereby increasing the brand thus constituted. Conversely, it does not produce an extension of the narrative; this indeed is a characteristic of transmedial storytelling, where each new product distributed across media produces a narrative extension of the core, enriching the audience's experience (Mallamaci 2018, 48). Unlike crossmediality, transmediality aims to expand the narrative. This process is defined by Jenkins in terms of oppositions. *Spreadability vs drillability*, reflects the audience's capacity to spread media content in the first case, and the expansion of its economic and cultural worth in the second. *Continuity vs multiplicity* reflects the presence of a coherent narrative thread in the first case, and the potential for possible alternatives and variations in the second. *Immersion vs extractability* reflects the immersive quality of the experience in the first case, and the potential for its confines to be breached, bringing its elements into the real world in the second. *Worldbuilding* reflects the transmedial extensions that serve the purpose of deepening the narrative world to which they belong; *seriality* reflects the interruption of a long narrative arc into fragments; *subjectivity* reflects the potential for the narrative to be viewed from different perspectives to portray alternatives; and, finally, *performance* reflects the capacity for the narrative extensions to involve the fanbase making the audience part of the transmedial experience (Jenkins 2009).

The studies presented thus far clearly indicate intermediality's specific focus on all interactions or interferences that constitute relationships *between* media, while transmediality relates to interactions and interferences that happen *across* media and are hence relevant to a similar degree across various media, or, better, that are perceived or understood by the viewer as similar or comparable (Rajewsky 2018, 9).

There is hence a poignant difference between intermediality and transmediality, although the categories are related and there is a grey area between the two. It can be useful, therefore, to use them as overlapping terms so as to examine media products from both perspectives. Intermediality and transmediality are not mutually exclusive; conversely, a combined approach can be conducive to more precise analyses, depending upon the line of inquiry.

4. Contemporary Italian Transmedial and Transnational Crime Fiction

There are several examples of intermedial transpositions that include a transmedial approach. The adaptation of a novel, for instance, is an intermedial product that raises questions in terms of the use specific narrative structures within television seriality and, in this respect, crosses into transmedial narratology. Adaptations of novels for TV often stem from the text itself and refer to it, thereby constituting an intermedial process. From a transmedial perspective, intermedial references can be considered a relevant practice; similarly, from a transmedial perspective, the inclusion of intermedial processes is always possible (Rajewsky 2018, 16).

More generally, the narrative structure is the part that emerges as most distinctive in the adaptation process, in that different segments are developed in relation to a specific national model. In this light, Italian contemporary transmedial crime fiction, including series such as *Inspector Montalbano* (Rai 1, 1999-), *Gomorra* (Sky, 2014-), and *Suburra* (Netflix, 2017) can offer an interesting field of studies both in terms of transculturality and transmediality. Interestingly, the notion of glocalism, as theorized by Damrosch (2009), was used in a recent volume entitled *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, edited by Damrosch Theo D'haen and Louis Nilsson (2017). The three Italian series listed

above have been rated by audiences as “quality series” (Re 2020); the elements they have in common are: an origin in literature; remarkable writing and directing; and a wide-spectrum focus in production (Manzato 2018).

Contemporary crime fiction seems to tend to use two divergent patterns simultaneously: elements of local colour to attract an international audience and formal structures typical of the genre on a global scale to garner the attention of local audiences (Pagello 2020, A32). This has resulted in the rise of glocalism which, given its expanse, includes both the intent to export local customs and that to import global issues into a national context (Hedberg 2017, 20).

Both of these glocal elements characterize the series *Inspector Montalbano*. The TV series has a prestigious literary origin, giving it authorial strength; the latter is matched by the choice in director – Alberto Sironi from 1999 to 2019 (year of his death), followed by Zingaretti, who also performs as the titular lead. Within the series, both Sicily and Italy take a prominent role as part of a larger space, the Mediterranean, seen as the seat of a type of cultural hybridization founded on the encounter and contrast between different peoples, on colonization, migration, and commerce” (Pagello 2020, A36). The very choice of the protagonist’s name, Montalbano, places the work in conversation with the series set in Barcellona, featuring detective Pepe Carvalho written by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, who has been identified as a forerunner of the “Mediterranean noir” (Izzo 2006; Pagello 2020). Three elements from Montalbán’s stories recur in Camilleri’s: the celebration of the Mediterranean – in the first case, Barcellona, in the second, Vigata; the importance given to the political context – in the first case, a lingering memory of Franco, in the second, the present; and, finally, the value given to local gastronomy² (Pagello 2020, A37).

The value that Camilleri gives the transcultural potential of Mediterranean culture emerges as a result of the synergy between the three elements listed above and the language, he invents which, by simplification, can be said to consist in a mixture of Italian, Sicilian dialect, and an invented tongue. Such use of language is the typical outcome of hybridization in regions found on the confine between nations, in an open space between southern Europe and North Africa (Mauri 2016). The work’s intermedial footprint is broached by Camilleri himself in the final leg of the literary volumes featuring Montalbano, *Riccardino* (2020). Here, Montalbano defines himself as ‘real’ with respect to his counterpart on television. Alongside the main conflict, the novel develops a stringent confrontation between its protagonist and his double on television. The idea of the double, on both a diachronic and diatopic level, has always been central in literature; however, in this case the transmedial dimension makes this idea more compelling. This aspect allows for the works to address specific issues raised by the use of the medium itself: literary Montalbano feels that he is at a disadvantage when competing with his television double specifically because of the medium within which each exists. In the story, Livia, Montalbano’s long-term partner, and he have an argument about a choice of location for their holidays and, to strike him where it hurts, she mentions his double:

“Stavo pensando che il tuo alter ego televisivo, che è più giovane di te, invece è rimasto fedele a se stesso. 'Na cutiddrata 'n mezzo al petto sarebbi stata meno dulurosa. “A proposito, Livia, ma a te non ti scoccia vedere in televisione un’attrice che ti scimmiotta”. “No, perché? Non mi scimmiotta per niente. E comunque ti ricordo che non sono stata io a raccontare all’Autore i fatti tuoi e miei”³ (Camilleri 2020, 102).

Camilleri also intervenes in the narrative to comment on the relationship between the two Montalbano:

In altre parole, hai voluto fottere il personaggio televisivo, negandogli la possibilità di arricchirsi di certe sfumature. Non è così?”. “Mi hai chiamato per dirmi che hai fatto questa grande scoperta? Che io voglio differenziarmi dall’altro?”. “Non si tratta solo di questo, Salvo. Io in un certo senso ti capisco, tant’è vero che all’inizio di questa storia ho fedelmente riportato la tua insofferenza, il tuo disagio verso il Montalbano televisivo, mentre potevo benissimo non parlarne. Però t’ajo ad avvirtiri che ti stai mittendo supra ‘na mala strada”: “Spiegati meglio”. “Paragonarti a lui o, peggio, sfidarlo non è cosa”. “Perché?”. “Perché tu sei tu e lui è lui”. “È facili per tia che campi supra a tutti e dù! Certo che ti conveni tinirici siparati e diversi!”⁴ (Camilleri 2020, 121–122).

Montalbano's case is certainly not unique in Italy, here, the distribution of TV series internationally is always developed through a web of different layers, including production, screenwriting (Anselmi 2022, 8-9), directing, and marketing strategies all targeting foreign markets. These elements distinguish series that aim to enter an international market from those that are developed exclusively for the national market (Re, 2020). The former are categorized as 'prized' products (Lotz 2017, 37), products that attract the audience because of these special traits (Pagello 2020, A39).

Inspector Montalbano, *Gomorra* and *Suburra* all share such special traits; they also all come from highly successful literary works. In the case of *Gomorra*, the original text comes is a fictionalized version of a piece of investigative journalism, having immediate transmedial (Benvenuti 2018) and transcultural resonance. In the case of all three series, their strong local elements are workable on the foreign market. Prior to *Gomorra*, *Criminal Novel – The Series* (Sky, 2008-2010), had a similar impact; it too was born as a novel which was subsequently turned into film and, later, into TV series (Boni 2013) garnering success in across media. This same transmedial process brought to the cinematic renditions of *Gomorra* (2008) and *Suburra* (2015), which were both distributed on an international market.

The success obtained by these franchises derives from the fact that these products aptly represent a kind of glocalism which mingles the communication of local situations internationally with the use of patterns recognizable on a global scale but set in Italy.

The Italian crime fiction series discussed above have a prominent glocal character; this is due in great part to the participation of a transcultural production, aiming to attract an international audience, thus targeting its tastes while keeping precise local elements in place. The transmedial transposition products born as novels reach a level of expansive transmedial storytelling which makes each individual medium a different portal onto the franchise, while keeping the whole cohesive through the different modalities and platforms employed.

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Notes

¹ The same occurred in the case of interculturality a transculturality cfr. Meyer, Simanowski, Zeller 2006.

² This is done not only with the inclusion of the main characters' passion for food but, in Montalbano's case, also with the publication of a book of recipes (Pagello 2020, A 37).

³ "I was thinking that your alterego on television, who is younger than you are, is still the same person". A blow to my chest would have been less painful. "By the way, Livia, are you not bothered to see an actress parroting you on TV?" "No because she does not parrot me at all. I would like to remind you that I was the one to tell the author all my secrets". My translation.

⁴ "In other words you wanted to mess with the television character by denying him the possibility of making use of specific nuances. Is that so?" Did you call me to tell me you discovered this great secret? That I want to be different from that other one?". "No it is not just this, Salvo. I understand you to a certain extent; so much so, that at the beginning I dutifully reported your annoyance, your discomfort, with the TV Montalbano, while I could have kept my peace. But I have to warn you, you are on a slippery slope": "I need more details". "Measuring yourself against him, or, worse yet, challenging him, is dangerous". "Why?" "Because you are you and he is him". "Easy for you to say; you profit from both of us! Of course you want us to be separate and distant!". My translation.

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