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Transmedialization: An interart transfer

By Karin Wenz

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Abstract

The term transmedialization describes the transfer of text from one medium to another. It is a special type of "remediation" (Bolter& Grusin 1999), but not used in the broad sense, as transmedialization is closely related to a specific text and not to e.g. narration in general in written text compared to narrative possibilities in film or computer games. Transmedialization may parallel or develop the source text. The question is: Which aspect is foregrounded and which is hidden by the transmedialization? If the two media systems are relatively close to each other we have different cases of transmedialization, if they are distant we speak of translation, which means that entirely new signs are created. ◢Bruhn (2001) distinguishes the following cases of transmedialization in musical ekphrasis which can be applied to digital text as well: integration, inflection, adaption, and enactment.

1. Integration

One of the most important conceptual elaboration of multimedia is Fluxus' idea of intermedia. As defined by Dick Higgins, intermedia is the "art form appropriate to people who say there can be no artificial boundaries between art and life. If there can't be a boundary between art and life, there certainly cannot be boundaries between art form and art form. For purposes of history, of discussion, of useful distinction, one can refer to separate art forms, but the meaning of intermedia is that our time often calls for art forms that draw on the roots of several media, growing into new hybrids" (Friedman 1989). Derived from reflections on intermedia are the contemporary oppositions of mixed-media and intermedia, to distinguish the illustrative mixture of text, image and sound from the organic combinations as in visual poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. Important developments of these concepts can be found in the theoretical discussion on experimental poetry from the 1960's on, as stated in Friedrich Block's "The form of media: the intermediality of visual poetry" and Philadelpho Menezes "Poetics and Visuality".

In hypermedia hybrid combinations and new possibilities of codification are possible: "One surface fits all" (Beressem 1999). As the development of the audio-visual media show, there is an increase of visualization but at the same time an increase of semanticization (cf. Schneider 1997). It is the most important development, caused by the audiovisual media, that the attention especially in artistic contexts is turned to processes of sign production and that these processes are more and more perceived as aesthetic functions. Signs do not refer as symbols to meaning but refer selfrefentially to themselves and make the reader aware of his or her own perception.

Machiná by Philadelpho Menenez combines the image and function of a calculator with sound and text.


We can type in a combination of numbers (612309), which will start a sound file pronouncing the sound of single letters. When we finally choose the "="-symbol, the voice starts to combine the single sounds to the word "POESIA", which appears at the same time as the mirror image of the calculator, turning the numbers into letters. The integrative effect of this example can be described as a doubling: first, an electronic medium has been transferred onto the desktop of the computer - the calculator we all have used several times as one of the standard tools our computers offer. Second, the numeral sign system has been interconnected to the alphabet, not because of a semantic relationship but because of a mere visual similarity between numbers and letters. This example highlights, the numeral basis of digital literature in general and focuses on the limited possibilities of interaction digital media provide.

The user produces a new form of media poetry within a very limited environment. Besides a playful and interactive approach towards literature the reader should gain an awareness about the control and limitation which is inherent in digital literature at the same time. We are not dealing with a transformation of form and content from one medium to another, but instead with a sort of synthesis. In such an intermedial form individual components complement one another but could not stand on their own.

2. Inflection

One important aspect in the field of digital literature is the difference between digital and virtual technologies. In digital documents, the main features are related to non-linearity, very often described as spatial. Experiments with VRML give us the impression of a textual space which is not only a metaphor for the text. The idea of digital geometry and text as space is constructed in Econ by ✎Silvia Laurentiz.
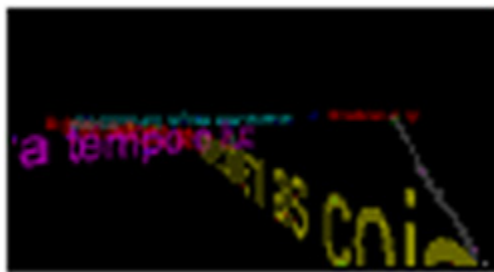
Text is transposed from the printed medium to the digital without changes of the content or the integration of new sign systems. Econ is based on the poem "O eco e o icon" by E. Melo e Castro, constructed as a virtual space the reader may navigate. The use of VRML for computer games is already well known, but there are only few examples for its use in a poetic context. In Econ the single verses are marked in different colors to allow a linear reading as well as jumping from one area to another. Whenever a poetic text is set into another medium without changes of its content, the original medium is inflected rather than transformed. All aspects from syntactic composition, vocabulary, metaphor and allusions used to the mode of expression remain untouched. This is a new approach towards digital literature which refers to Jeffrey Shaws interactive installations as for example his "Legible City". Space in VRML is a software construction which creates the environment for interaction. You may navigate from place to place, which is from verse to verse in the example of Econ. This spatial, poetic form integrates various forms like literal and pictorial space, virtual space, the metaphorical space of the poem and the

space of the artwork. The technical problem of a smooth movement in VRML especially in a file provided on the internet, makes the reader to a player as in flight simulations, navigating around in the colored space of the poem. Reading and comprehending what the poem is about, is extremely difficult without knowing the original by Melo e Castro. Melo e Castro's poem is inflected in a way by the use of VRML. Somehow it becomes the background for a playfull interaction of the reader. It is transformed into space, freed from its linearity, but at the same time in part freed from its semantic content.

3. Adaption or the text as a database model

A transmedialization from a visual medium (video) to a dominantly textual one is the case of the "Woman in White" by Friederike Anders ✎. "The Woman in White" is an example of a video installation transferred to the WWW and thereby transformed into a hypertext. The work consists of a photonovel, a narration in images and words and two databases connected to this novel: the identilador, which gives information about the possible identities of the woman and the eventilador, which is an archive of events. These databases connected to image and video databases are at the center of the online version of the "Woman in White". The mere visual presentation of Anders' video installation has been extended for this internet project and changed its focus totally. A primarily audio-visual presentation becomes a dominantly textual one by adding theses databases to the "Woman in White". At the same time the video part, music and animation has to be reduced to make the project accessible online. This example highlights the textual dominance of the internet, besides all discussions of visuality and multimediality. This transfer can be described as a specific case of ekphrases, as a verbal representation of a visual representation. Clüver (1997: 26) defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of a real or ficticious text composed in a non-verbal sign system". The result is an iconic projection of one sign system into another. This is only partly true for Ander's project. She transferred some of her files to the digital medium without any change on the surface. She added the photonovel as a narrative part, which is the adaption of the filmed story in the video to a textual medium and highlights the closeness of hypertext to print, but highlights at the same time the multilinear reading possibilites of a hypertextual, networked text.

The visual composition of the photonovel reminds us on the outer appearance of a tv with a huge central screen and its other parts like speakers and buttons on both sides and beneath the screen. A new component, which is typical for the digital medium, is added: the database. The transmedial processes of this example develop the original video installation further, highlighting on the possibilities and limitations of an internet project. Both, its range of register and its compositional elements transgress the possisbilities of printed text and of a video installation. The video installation was used as a source for this new artistic transfer. It is still visible in parts of the new project, but the result is a re-presentation in another medium. The discussions about the radical openness of hypertext are put into perspective by highlighting the necessary closeness of a database.

4. Enactment

The transmedialization of a print novel into a computer game and a MOO is a case, where the reader is forced to change her role and becomes a player and - in the case of a MOO - acts on the public space of a stage.

"When transformation of an artwork is brought onto the theatrical stage and blended with the miming aspect of the genre, the result is a case of enactment" (Bruhn 2001).

An example is ◪Nika Bertram's Kahuna Modus. Only some theoretical presuppositions shall be outlined here. The analysis of MUD's (Multi User Dungeons) and MOO's (Multi User Dungeons Object Oriented) show that modes and genre of oral and written communication are merging. The leading hypothesis can be formulated as follows: medial literacy in computer-mediated communication is combined with new forms of conceptual orality. The distinction between conceptual and medial orality and literacy stems from the research of Koch and Österreicher (1994) to show that there is a continuum between both modes of communication. A personal letter to a friend, which obviously uses the medium written language, is conceptually more comparable to face-to-face communication than a lecture, which is mostly conceptually written and uses the medium oral language. Therefore, Koch and Österreicher propose to distinguish between medial distinct forms of representation but conceptual continuous forms, which are blending. A main function of the medium computer is mediation in communication between human-beings. But this is not new or surprising, because this is the function of signs in general, independent from the chosen medium of transmission.

The capacity of the medium to condense dimensions of time and space is grounded in its immediacy and in its dynamics. One aspect of this dynmaics is the possibility of the participants in a MOO to "play out scenes from the novel" in the case of the Kahuna MOO, "based on the story and not the narrative technique of the novel" as ◪Nika Bertram puts it. This leads to an enactment of the narrative in a new environment and a very specific case of transmedialization. Transmedialization in general means the transfer of signs from one medium to another. This leads to a different semiotic relevance of the textual components and reception in a new environment.

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