

Marie-Laure Ryan  
Defining Media from the Perspective of Narratology

Narratology, the formal study of narrative, has been conceived from its earliest days on as a project that transcends disciplines and media. In 1964, Claude Bremond wrote:

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story. (Quoted from Chatman 1978:20)

Yet the fact that a story can migrate to some extent from one medium to another does not mean that all media offer the same narrative resources and that the transposition has no effect on the story. A core of meaning may travel across media, but its narrative potential will be filled out, actualized differently when it reaches a new medium. When it comes to narrative abilities, media are not equally gifted; some are born storytellers, others suffer from serious handicaps. The concept of narrative offers a common denominator that allows a better apprehension of the strengths and limitations in the representational power of individual media. Conversely, the study of the realization of narrative meaning in various media provides an opportunity for a critical reexamination and expansion of the analytical vocabulary of narratology. The study of narrative across media is consequently beneficial to both media studies and narratology.

This essay explores the theoretical foundations of transmedial narratology in both their negative and positive components. The negative component describes the positions that are incompatible with transmedial narratology, while the positive component explores the concepts of narrative and of medium that are compatible with the project.

### **1. Positions hostile to transmedial narratology**

The main obstacle to the transmedial study of narrative is a position that comes from within narratology itself, namely what I call the language-based, or rather, speech-act approach to narrative. This position (represented by Prince 1987, Genette 1972, and Chatman 1978) defines narrative as an act of storytelling addressed by a narrator to a narratee, or as the recounting of a sequence of *past* events (Abbott 2002). In these definitions, the condition for being a narrative is the occurrence of the speech act of telling a story by an agent called a narrator. The semantic content of this speech act must be events that already occurred, either actually or in make-believe. This conception of narrative as a language-based phenomenon not only rejects the possibility of visual or musical forms of narrative, it also excludes texts with a language track that do not use an overt narrator, or texts that do not represent events retrospectively. For instance, Gerald Prince writes in his *Dictionary of Narratology*: “A dramatic performance representing many fascinating events does not constitute a narrative, since these events, rather than being recounted, occur directly on stage” (1987: 58) According to this view, the

transmedial study of narrative is limited to the distinction between oral storytelling and written literary narrative. Some theorists endorse a milder form of this position that uses the speech-act based definition as a metaphorical model for the analysis of non-verbal texts. In contrast to the radical approach, the mild version accepts the possibility of visual or dramatic narratives, but only if these texts can be fitted into the verbal mold. This approach would analyze drama and movies as the utterance of a narratorial figure, even when the film or the play does not make use of voice-over narration. Its advocates include Metz 1974, Chatman 1990, Gaudrault and Jost 1990, and its opponents Bordwell and Thompson 1990.

Another position incompatible with the study of narrative across media is the doctrine of radical media relativism. Though I cannot associate it with specific names, it is latent among critics influenced by Saussurian linguistics and deconstruction. Radical relativism regards media as self-contained systems of signs, and their resources as incommensurable with the resources of other media. Just as two languages cannot convey the same semantic values under the doctrine of linguistic relativism, two different media cannot convey similar meanings or use similar devices under the doctrine of medial relativism. This view comes in a strong and a weak form. In the strong form, the signified cannot be separated from the signifier. Since a transmedial concept of narrative presupposes a distinction between narrative meaning and the signs that carry it, the strong interpretation kills in the egg the project of transmedial narratology. In its weaker form, medial relativism accepts common meanings but insists on the uniqueness of the expressive resources of each medium, thereby forcing the theorist to rebuild the analytical toolbox of narratology from scratch for every new medium. This approach ignores the fact that the conceptual tools of verbal narratology are often borrowed from other media: for instance, theme from music, perspective from painting, and camera-eye narration from the cinema. In some cases borrowing seems inevitable: for instance when a medium tries to imitate the effects of another medium, or when two media share a common channel. The alternative to medial relativism is to recognize that theoretical concepts can be either medium-specific, or applicable to several media. For instance, the distinction story / discourse seems to apply across media; so do the notions of character, event, or storyworld. On the other hand, montage is a technical concept native to film; but literary critics have borrowed it when language-based narrative began imitating some of the techniques of the cinema.

## **2. Defining narrative**

In the past ten years or so, the term “narrative” has enjoyed a popularity that has seriously diluted its meaning. Jerome Bruner speaks of narratives of identity, Jean-François Lyotard of the “Grand Narratives” of a capitalized History, Abbe Don of the narratives of interface in computer software, and everybody speaks of cultural narratives, meaning by this not a heritage of traditional stories but the collective values that define a culture, such as belief in free speech in Western societies, or latent stereotypes and prejudices, such as narratives of race, class and gender. The dissolution of “narrative” into “belief”, “value,” “experience,” “interpretation”, or simply “content” can only be prevented by a definition that stresses precise semantic features, such as action, temporality, causality and world-construction. A transmedial definition of narrative

requires a broadening of the concept beyond the verbal, but this broadening should be compensated by a semantic narrowing down, otherwise all texts of all media will end up as narratives.

As I have already mentioned, the main problem facing the transmedial study of narrative is to find an alternative to the language-based definitions that are common fare in classical narratology. As a point of departure (to be modified later) I will use a definition proposed by H. Porter Abbott. Representing a common view among narratologists, Abbott reserves the term *narrative* for the combination of story and discourse and defines its two components as follows: ‘story is an event or sequence of events (the *action*), and narrative discourse is those events as represented’ (2002: 16). Narrative, in this view, is the textual actualisation of story, while story is narrative in a virtual form. If we conceive representation as medium-free, this definition does not limit narrativity to verbal texts nor to narratorial speech acts. But the two components of narrative play asymmetrical roles, since discourse is defined in terms of its ability to represent that which constitutes story. This means that only story can be defined in autonomous terms. As we have seen, Abbott regards stories as sequences of events, but this characterization ignores the fact that events are not in themselves stories but rather the raw material out of which stories are made. So what is story, if, as Hayden White has convincingly argued, it is not a type of thing found in the world (as existents and events are) nor a textual representation of this type of thing (as discourse is) ?

Story, like narrative discourse, is a representation, but unlike discourse it is not a representation encoded in material signs. Story is a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities. Torben Grodal comes much closer to the nature of story than Abbott when he writes: “a story is a sequence of events focused by one (a few) living beings” (130); here I take “focused” to mean “mentally represented.” Narrative may be a combination of story and discourse, but it is its ability to evoke stories to the mind that distinguishes narrative discourse from other text types. I propose to define the cognitive template constitutive of story through the following features:

1. Story takes place in a world populated with individuated agents (characters) and objects. (Spatial dimension)
2. This world must undergo not fully predictable changes of state that are caused by non-habitual physical events: either accidents (‘happenings’) or deliberate actions by intelligent agents. (Temporal dimension)
3. In addition to being linked to physical states by causal relations, the physical events must be associated with mental states and events (goals, plans, emotions). This network of connections gives events coherence, motivation, closure, and intelligibility and turns them into a plot. (Logical, mental and formal dimension)

This definition consists of hard and fast rules that specify minimal conditions. One of the conditions listed under 2 appears however more controversial than the others: is it necessary for a story to involve non-habitual events, or can it concern fully routine actions, such as the stereotyped scripts which constitute in part our general knowledge of

the world? This dilemma points to an area where the issue of narrativity is particularly difficult to disentangle from the issue of what makes a story worth telling. Should a definition of narrative involve aesthetic principles, defined through preference rules, in addition to hard and fast conditions, or should it outline a bare wireframe common to all stories? Some theorists (Jerome Bruner) argue that a story must have a point, and that principles of tellability are therefore an integral part of a definition of narrative. Others will reply that there are good and bad stories and that storytelling is not necessarily performed for the sake of entertainment. We may for instance produce narratives as a response to questions from a doctor, a prosecutor, a teacher, or a parent who wants explanations for our behavior, and these stories can satisfy the questioner without fulfilling the felicity conditions that pertain to what Mary Louise Pratt calls “narrative display texts,” such as conversational storytelling or the production of literary fiction. I believe that there is a continuum that runs from strict conditions of narrativity to conditions of tellability, and from tellability to full-fledged aesthetic principles, such as the Aristotelian principles that recommend exposition, conflict, climax, and a resolution brought up by a dramatic turns of events. A definition of narrativity cannot be limited to the great masterpieces of literature, and it must therefore draw a line, however contestable, somewhere between the two poles. This is why I haven’t included precise guidelines under 3 on matters such as coherence, conflict, and closure.

Each of the conditions listed above implies the preceding one. We can therefore have non-narrative texts that fulfil (1) only (e.g. the static description of a world, as we find in ethnographic works or in Borges “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius*”), mildly narrative texts that fulfil (1) and (2) (e.g. chronicles of random or unrelated actions, reports of dreams, or certain incoherent stories told by children), and fully narrative texts that fulfil all three condition. But we cannot have (3) without (2), unless the actions of (2) are purely virtual (as is the case in novels that focus on the ruminations of Hamlet-like characters who are unable to take action), nor (2) without (1), since there cannot be changes of state, and consequently history, without concrete entities that undergo metamorphoses.

The division of my definition of narrative into three components means that the degree of narrativity of a given text cannot be evaluated by simple algorithms, such as computing the proportion of static and active propositions. While all three conditions must be fulfilled for a text to be widely accepted as narrative, individual narrative texts will give variable emphasis to the features specified in the three conditions. With their detailed construction of an imaginary world, science fiction and fantasy over fulfill condition 1, and they often treat the plot as a mere discovery path across fictional space. The demand for action and changes of state that makes up the second condition is the dominant feature of thrillers and adventure stories, while the third condition, by insisting on causal connections and on the mental constructs that render actions intelligible, rules over detective stories and heavily plotted narratives, such as comedies of errors. Neglect of the third condition leads by contrast to the low narrativity of many postmodern novels. While these novels create a world, populate it with characters, and make something happen (though they often take liberties with condition 2), they do not allow the reader to reconstruct the network that motivates the actions of characters and binds the events into an intelligible and determinate sequence.

The definition proposed above presents narrative as a type of text able to evoke a certain type of image in the mind of a cognizing subject. But it does not take a text to inspire the construction of such an image: we may form stories in our mind as a response to life itself. For instance, if I observe a fight on the subway, I will construct in my mind the story of the fight, in order to tell it to my colleagues when I get to work. To account for the narrative potential of life, I propose to make a distinction between “being a narrative,” and “possessing narrativity.” The property of “being a narrative” can be predicated of any semiotic object produced with the intent to evoke a story to the mind of the audience. To be more precise, it is the receiver’s recognition of this intent that leads to the judgment: this text is a narrative, though we can never be sure that sender and receiver have the same story in mind. “Having narrativity,” on the other hand, means being able to evoke such a script, whether or not the author of the text intended to do so, and whether or not there is an author. For instance, if a random pattern of cracks in a rock happened to resemble writing, and if the writing could be read as a story, the pattern of cracks would not be a narrative, but it would certainly possess narrativity by the present definition. The idea that life as well as texts can possess some degree of narrativity does not mean that narrative plots are the sort of thing that are found in the world, a view that Hayden White successfully put to rest. I am rather saying that the cognitive construct typical of narrativity can be a response to affordances and stimuli that originate within the world. Making stories out of life experience is neither picking up ready-made objects that somehow lie out there, nor constructing these objects out of any kind of materials, but finding a fit between what life offers, and the cognitive pattern that we try to fill in. Sometimes life provides adequate raw materials, sometimes it does not, and sometimes the materials are created by the imagination.

The fullest realization of narrative occurs when we have a text that is both intended as narrative, and possesses sufficient narrativity to be construed as such. But the properties of being narrative and having narrativity can be dissociated in a variety of ways. The standard case of dissociation occurs when the story is so poorly presented that the audience cannot reconstrue the proper script, even though it recognizes a narrative intent. In this case the text is a narrative of low narrativity. The opposite case is the already-mentioned case of a life situation that the cognitive subject interprets in narrative terms. The property of being a narrative is much more clear-cut than the property of having narrativity, since it depends on the sender’s intent, but it becomes fuzzy in a number of situations. For instance, what do you call a text that uses narrative scripts in an instrumental way? A sermon or a philosophical text typically resorts to parables and narrative examples on the micro-level, but the global purpose of the text is certainly not to tell a particular story. Computer games present a similar situation: they may use a narrative script to attract the player, but once the player is immersed in the game, he usually forgets whether he is fighting terrorists, car thieves, or evil aliens, or whether he is a terrorist himself. All that matters is winning the game through clever use of resources. The question “is it a narrative” is even more problematic when the text embodies the artistic intent to both arouse and frustrate narrative desire. Many postmodern texts present themselves as bits of pieces of a narrative image but prevent the reader from ever achieving the reconstruction of a stable and complete narrative script. This explains why narrative theory has never been comfortable with either including or excluding postmodern literature.

### 3. Narrative modes

If narratology is to expand into a medium-free theory, the first step to be taken is to recognize other narrative modes than the standard way of evoking narrative scripts: telling somebody else that something happened. I do not take this term of mode in the traditional narratological sense defined by Genette 1973 (who uses it as a rather vague umbrella term for concepts such as frequency, direct and indirect discourse, perspective and focalization), but in a personal sense, to mean a distinct way to bring to mind the cognitive construct that defines narrativity. Let me illustrate this concept of modality through a list of concrete examples. This list, which I regard as open-ended, consist of binary pairs. In each case the left term can be regarded as the unmarked case, because the texts that present this feature will be much more widely accepted as narrative than the texts that implement the right-hand category. (Discussion of modes from Ryan 2004:13-15.)

*External / internal:* In the external mode, narrative meaning is encoded in material signs; it is textualized. In the internal mode, it does not involve a textualisation: we can tell ourselves stories in the privacy of our minds. (Cf. Jahn 2003)

*Diegetic / Mimetic:* This distinction goes back to Plato's *Republic*. A diegetic narration is the verbal storytelling act of a narrator. As the definition indicates diegetic narration presupposes language, either oral or written; it is therefore the mode typical of the novel and of oral storytelling. A mimetic narration is an act of showing, a "spectacle". In forming a narrative interpretation the recipient works under the guidance of an authorial consciousness, but there is no narratorial figure. Mimetic narration is exemplified by all dramatic arts: movies, theater, dance, and the opera. But each of these two modes can intrude into a narration dominated by the other. The dialogues of a novel are islands of mimetic narration, since in direct quote the voice of the narrator disappears behind the voice of the characters; and conversely, the phenomenon of voiced-over narration in cinema reintroduces a diegetic element in a basically mimetic medium.

*Autonomous / Illustrative:* In the autonomous mode, the text transmits a story that is new to the receiver; this means that the logical armature of the story must be retrievable from the text. In the illustrative mode, the text retells and completes a story, relying on the receiver's previous knowledge of the plot. The illustrative mode is typical of pictorial narratives, for instance of medieval paintings of Biblical scenes. Halfway between these two poles are texts that offers a new, significantly altered *version* of a familiar plot, such as a modern retelling of a classical myth.

*Receptive / Participatory:* In the receptive mode the recipient plays no active role in the events presented by the narrative: he merely receives the account of a narrative action, imagining himself as an external witness. In the participatory mode the plot is not completely pre-scripted. The recipient becomes an active character in the story, and through her agency she contributes to the production of the plot. This mode has been practiced for quite a while in staged happenings, "improv" theater, and scripted role-

playing games (e.g. “Dungeons and Dragons”) but it has flourished with the advent of interactive digital media. In many computer games, for instance, the user is represented in the game world through an avatar. By solving problems in the real time of the game session she determines whether the life-story of this avatar will end in success or failure, or how long the avatar will live.

*Determinate / Indeterminate.* In the determinate mode the text specifies a sufficient number of points on the narrative trajectory to project a reasonably definite script. In the indeterminate mode, only one or two points are specified, and it is up to the interpreter to imagine one (or more) of the virtual curves that traverse these coordinates. The indeterminate mode is typical of narrative paintings that tell original stories through the representation of what Lessing calls a pregnant moment. The pregnant moment opens a small temporal window that lets the spectator imagine what immediately preceded and what will immediately follow the represented scene. But a full-blown story normally covers an extended stretch of time, and every spectator will probably imagine the remote past and the remote future in a different way.

*Literal / Metaphorical:* What constitutes a literal or metaphorical narration depends on the particular definition given to narrative. While literal narration fully satisfies the definition, the metaphorical brand uses only some of its features. The degree of metaphoricity of a narrative thus depends on how many features are retained, and on how important they are to the definition. The great advantage of recognizing a metaphorical mode is that it enables narratology to acknowledge many of the contemporary extensions of the term “narrative” without sacrificing the precision of its core definition.

Here are some examples of what I consider metaphorical types of narrative. If we define narrative as the representation of a world populated by individuated characters, and if characters are intelligent agents, the following relaxations of the definitions should be regarded as metaphorical: scenarios about collective entities rather than individuals (e.g. the “Grand Narratives” of Lyotard, as well as their heirs, the “narratives of class, gender and race” of contemporary cultural studies); narratives about entities deprived of consciousness (e.g. Richard Dawkins’ exposition of biology as the story of “selfish genes”), and dramatizations that attributes agency to abstract objects. Here is an example proposed by the mathematician Ken Devlin: “Mathematicians deal with a collection of objects—numbers, triangles, groups, fields—and ask questions like, ‘What is the relationship between objects x and y? If x does thus to y, what will y do back to x?’ It’s got plot, it’s got characters, it’s got relationships...a bit of everything you can find in a soap opera” (Quoted in *The Denver Post*, January 9, 2001, p. 2A.) In other words, mathematics is a story! This is certainly an extreme case of metaphorical narrative.

If we want to stretch the metaphor to its limits, we can apply it to art forms deprived of semantic content, such as music and architecture. In the case of music, the metaphor can be invoked to analyze the structure of the work in terms of narrative effects or narrative functions. Narrative terminology is indeed common in music theory: relations between chords are described as exposition, complication and resolution. Given a specific exposition and complication, only certain chords will provide a satisfactory resolution. In this metaphorical interpretation, all music becomes narrative, while if we use an illustrative interpretation, narrativity is a feature that occurs in only some

compositions—those that allude to a narrative through their title, such as the *Don Quixote Suite*, by Telemann, or the *Apprentice Sorcerer*, by Paul Dukas. In the case of architecture, a metaphorical interpretation would draw an analogy between the temporality of plot and the experience of walking through a building. In a narratively conceived architecture, the visitor's discovery tour is plotted as a meaningful succession of events. This occurs in Baroque churches, where the visitor's tour is supposed to reenact the life of Christ.

#### 4. What are media?

The concept of medium is no less problematic than the concept of narrative. Just as structural linguists face the task of defining the units of the language system, transmedial narratologists must decide what counts as a distinct medium from a narrative point of view. This problem is not specific to transmedial narratology but affects the general study of media: as Joshua Meyerowitz observes, "it is a glaring problem for media studies" that "we have no common understanding of what the subject matter of the field is" (55). This may seem a strange problem for the layman: don't we all instinctively know what media are? And yet, if we ask specialists of different disciplines to propose a list of media, we will receive a bewildering variety of answers. A sociologist or cultural critic will answer: TV, radio, cinema, the Internet. An art critic may list: music, painting, sculpture, literature, drama, the opera, photography, architecture. An artist's list would begin with clay, bronze, oil, watercolor, fabrics, and it may end with exotic items used in so-called "mixed-media" works, such as grasses, feathers and beer can tabs. An information theorist or historian of writing will think of sound waves, papyrus scrolls, codex books, and silicon chips. A philosopher of the phenomenologist school would divide media into visual, aural, verbal, and perhaps tactile, gustatory and olfactory. In media theory, as in other fields, what constitutes an object of investigation depends on the purpose of the investigator.

These various answers reflect the ambiguity of the term. The entry for medium in Webster's Dictionary (1991) includes, among other meanings, these two definitions:

- (1) A channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment.
- (2) Material or technical means of artistic expression.

Type (1) regards media as *conduits*, or methods of transmitting information; and type (2) regards them as *languages*. (I am borrowing these terms of comparison from Joshua Meyerowitz.) Media of type (1) include TV, radio, the Internet, the gramophone, the telephone -- all distinct types of technologies --, as well as cultural channels, such as books and newspapers. Media of type (2) would be language, sound, image, or more narrowly, paper, bronze, or the human body.

In the conduit, or transmissive conception of medium represented by type 1, ready-made messages are encoded in a particular way, sent over the channel, and decoded on the other end. Before they are encoded in the mode specific to the medium in sense 1, some of these messages are realized through a medium in sense 2. A painting must be done in oil before it can be digitized and sent over the Internet. A musical composition must be performed on instruments in order to be recorded and played on a gramophone. Medium in sense 1 thus involves the translation of objects supported by media in sense 2 into a secondary code.

Some media theorists (for instance Walter Ong) have objected to the transmissive conception of medium, arguing that it reduces them to hollow pipelines, through which information passes without being affected by the shape of the pipe. It is almost an axiom of contemporary media theory that the materiality of the medium -- what we may call its affordances, or possibilities -- matters for the type of meanings that can be encoded. On the other hand, if we regard meaning as inextricable from its medial support, medium-free definitions of narrative become untenable and we fall back into the doctrine of radical medial relativism. This doctrine, as we have seen, makes it illegitimate to compare messages embodied in different media and to view them as manifestations of a common narrative structure. To maintain the possibility of studying narrative across media we must find a compromise between the hollow pipe interpretation and the unconditional rejection of the conduit metaphor. This means recognising that the shape and size of the pipeline imposes conditions on what kind of stories can be transmitted, but also admitting that narrative messages possess a conceptual core which can be isolated from their material support. Insofar as they present their own configuring properties, channel-type media can be simultaneously conduits and languages. Take for instance the case of television. As a transmissive medium it can play any kind of movie, but as a means of expression it possesses its own idiosyncrasies, which have led to the development of new forms of narrative, such as the soap opera or the reality show. Moreover, the experience of watching a movie is significantly different when it is shown on a small screen in the home and on a large screen in a dark theater that holds spectators prisoner. The only transmissive media that lack expressive properties of their own are those that use technology for purely reproductive purposes, such as the gramophone and the xerox machine, as opposed to radio and to photography. Media may or may not be conduits, but they must be languages to present interest for transmedial narratology. This leads to another question: what do these medium-specific languages consist of, and what kind of features distinguish them from each other? The answers of the imaginary informants quoted above suggest three possible approaches to media languages: semiotic, material/technological, and cultural.

The *semiotic approach* looks at the codes and sensory channels that support various media. It tends to distinguish three broad media families: verbal, visual and aural. It is only our habit of not ranking cuisine and perfume among media—probably because they do not transmit the proper kind of information—that prevents this list from including olfactory and gustatory categories. The groupings yielded by the semiotic approach broadly correspond to art types, namely literature, painting and music, but they extend beyond the aesthetic use of signs; language for instance has both literary and non-literary uses; pictures can be artistic or utilitarian. In its narratological application, the semiotic approach investigates the narrative potential and limitations of a given type of signs. Werner Wolf (2002) asks for instance to what extent sound and pictures are able to narrate, and he ranks the three major media families, or art types, in this decreasing order of story-telling ability: verbal, visual and musical. In a similar vein, Lessing's groundbreaking study *Laocoön* investigates the differing storytelling affordances of painting, a spatial medium, and poetry, an art form supported by the temporal medium of language.

Left by itself, the semiotic approach yields only broad families. To bring further refinement to media theory, we must ask about the *materials* and the *technologies* that support the various semiotic types. Within each semiotic group of media, we must

distinguish raw material supports, such as clay for pottery, stone for sculpture, the human body for dance, or the human vocal apparatus for music, from supports that are elaborated through technological means. It is further necessary to distinguish technologies of pure reproduction, such as sound recording or xerox copying, from technologies that create new media objects and open new expressive possibilities. Only the latter present interest for transmedial narratology. Moreover, not all technologies that bring expressive diversity in a media family do so in narratively significant way. In the sound category, for instance, diversity is created by the various musical instruments developed through the ages, but none of them has significantly increased the limited narrative potential of music. Much more consequential for narrative are the technologies that affect language-based and visual media. In the language category, these technologies correspond to the various ways to inscribe verbal signs (manuscript writing, print, and digital encoding), as well as to the various methods of encoding and transmitting spoken language (radio and telephone). In the visual domain, the most narratively significant technologies correspond to methods of capture, such as photography, film, and television. The digital encoding of images has also brought new expressive possibilities, but their narrative impact is questionable. The technological approach not only refines semiotic categories, it also cuts across them and reorganizes media into different families: media of long distance communication, media of the moving image, and above all, “old media” versus “new media.” The classical example of an approach to transmedial narratology based on technological categories is the work of Walter Ong on the impact of the invention of writing on narrative form

The third important dimension of media is their *cultural use*. This dimension is not entirely predictable from semiotic type and technological support. In fact, some ways of disseminating information are regarded as distinct media from a cultural point of view, despite their lack of a distinct semiotic or technological identity. Newspapers, for instance, rely on the same semiotic channels and printing technology as books, but “the press” is widely regarded by sociologists as a medium in its own right, on par with the other so-called “mass media” of TV, film, radio and the Internet. By far the majority of media studies have been devoted to cultural use. These studies will ask for instance about the social impact of film violence, Internet pornography, television news reporting, or multi-users computer games. In a study of cultural use, consideration must also be given to the network of relations among media, a network commonly described through the metaphor of media ecology (Heise). For instance, the cultural role of the cinema shifted after the invention of television, though the technology itself did not undergo significant changes. In the pre-television days, movie theaters showed a variety of features: news reels, documentaries, cartoons, and a feature film. They combined reality-based and fiction films in a continuously running show. This diversity and continuous running has been taken over by television, and nowadays movies specialize almost exclusively in the fictional, with a distinct preference for the fantastic, while TV favors reality (or reality-effects), in the form of news, documentaries, and fictional representations of everyday life. It has even turned the real into a spectacle in the increasingly popular genre of “reality TV.”

## **5. Defining media from the perspective of transmedial narratology**

For students of narrative, what counts as a medium is a category that truly makes a difference as to what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated, and how they are experienced. Narrative differences may concern three different semiotic domains: semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. In narrative theory, semantics becomes the study of plot, or story; syntax becomes the study of discourse, or narrative techniques; and pragmatics becomes the study of the uses of narrative. On the semantic level, different media favor different variations of the basic cognitive template: for instance, film prefers dramatic narratives shaped according to the Freytag triangle, TV prefers episodic narratives with multiple plot lines, and computer games prefer quest narratives with one plot line, but several autonomous episodes corresponding to the levels to be passed. On the discourse level, media may produce different ways to present stories, which will necessitate different interpretive strategies on the part of the user. For instance, narrative is broken up into distinct frames in comic strips, while it is represented by an image that seems to evolve continuously in film, at least until the next camera take. On the pragmatic level, finally, different media may offer different modes of user involvement and different “things to do” with narrative. An example of these new things to do is the the posting of private diaries on the Internet, a phenomena known as “blogging.” With digital media, it is now possible to share narrative of personal experience with millions of strangers. In summary, a medium will be considered narratively relevant if it makes an impact on at least one of these domains.

This approach implies a standard of comparison: to say for instance that “radio is a distinct narrative medium,” means that radio as a medium offers different narrative possibilities than television, film, or oral conversation. “Mediality” (or mediumhood) is thus a relational rather than an absolute property. To test the idea of the relativity of mediality with respect to narrative, let us consider the respective status of the gramophone and of daily newspapers. From a technological point of view the gramophone stands as a prototypical medium. When it was developed at the end of the nineteenth century, it did to sound what writing had done to language. Thanks to the new technology sound could now be recorded, and it was no longer necessary to be within earshot of its source to apprehend auditory data. But from a narratological perspective, the gramophone did not make a noticeable difference, because it was primarily used for the recording of music or opera. This means that it was used as conduit and not as language. It wasn’t until the development of wireless telegraphy that a purely auditory type of narrative was popularized, namely the radiophonic play. In other words, the gramophone missed it chance of becoming a narratively significant medium. Daily newspapers represent the opposite situation: historians of technology would regard them as a manifestation of the same medium as books, since they rely on roughly the same printing techniques, but narratologists would defend their medium status with respect to books by pointing out that the daily press promoted a new style of reporting news, which gave birth to an autonomous narrative genre. Daily newspapers also differ pragmatically from other types of communication channels in that they must be delivered regularly at 24-hour intervals. The coverage of a time-consuming crisis must therefore begin before the crisis is resolved, and the daily reports lack the completeness and retrospective perspective of other types of narrative (for instance, history books). All these characteristics suggest that newspapers support indeed a distinct type of narrativity.

For a type of information support to qualify as a narrative medium, it must not only make a difference in the areas of story, discourse or pragmatics, it should also present a unique combination of features. The following list presents an overview of the kind of media features that affect the experience of narrative, besides the semiotic, technological and cultural factors already discussed:

- Spatio-temporal extension. Media fall into three broad categories: purely temporal ones, supported by language or music exclusively; purely spatial media, such as painting and photography; and spatio-temporal media, such as the cinema, dance, image-language combinations, and digital texts. One could however argue that oral storytelling and print narrative involve a visual, and consequently spatial component; this would leave only long-distance oral communication such as radio and telephone as a language-supported example of the purely temporal category.
- Kinetic properties. A spatio-temporal medium can be static (i.e. combinations of still pictures and text) or dynamic (moving pictures, or media relying on the human body as means of expression, such as dance or the theater). By contrast, all purely temporal media are dynamic, and all purely spatial media are static.
- Number of channels. In the spatial category there is only one channel, unless one considers that sculpture and architecture have a tactile dimension. In the temporal category we have either one-channel media (language or music), or combinations of the two temporal media, language and music, in songs and sung forms of poetry. Most media of the spatio-temporal category have multiple channels, but mime and silent pictures use only visual data. Combinations include: image-language (in illustrated books); image-music (in silent films); or image-music-language (in film, the opera, and digital media).
- Priority of sensory channels. Thus the opera should be considered distinct from a theater production that makes use of music, even though the two media include the same sensory dimensions and semiotic codes, because the opera gives the sound channel higher priority than the theater.

Another issue to resolve for the definition of medium from the perspective of transmedial narratology is the delimitation of medium with respect to genre. Both medium and genre exercise constraints on what kinds of stories can be told, but while genre is defined by more or less freely adopted conventions chosen for both personal and cultural reasons, medium *imposes* its possibilities and limitations on the user. It is true that we choose both the genre and the medium we work in. But we select media for their affordances, and we work around their limitations, trying to overcome them or to make them irrelevant. For instance, painters introduced perspective to add a third dimension to the flat canvas. Genre by contrast deliberately uses limitations to optimise expression, to channel expectations, and to facilitate communication: for instance, tragedy *must* be about the downfall of a hero and use the mimetic mode of narrativity; and sonnets *must* consist of fourteen lines, organized in two quatrains and two tercets with a certain rhyming pattern. These conventions are imposed as what Jurij Lotman has called a second-order semiotic system on the primary mode of signification. Genre conventions are genuine rules specified by humans, whereas the constraints and possibilities offered by media are dictated by their material substance and mode of encoding (Ryan 2004:19). It is not always easy to distinguish genre from medium; but I would like to suggest a

criterion based on the old question: what comes first: the chicken or the egg. Let the text be the chicken and genres and media be the egg. With genres, the chicken comes first. Genres originate in innovative texts that create a desire to duplicate their generative formula. With media on the other hand the egg comes first, since a text can only come into existence when the material support for its signs and the technology for their transmission are already in place. Insofar as media are sets of affordances, or possibilities, new media give birth to new forms of text and to new forms of narrative, which in turn may be codified into genres.

Far from being narrowly conditioned by the properties of their supporting medium, narratives have developed various ways to handle these properties. First, narrative may go with its medium and take full advantages of its affordances. This would be the case of a computer game in which players manipulate an avatar and create its destiny through their actions. Computer games are so dependent on the interactive nature of their digital environment that they cannot be taken out of the computer. Second, narrative can ignore the idiosyncrasies of the medium and use it purely as a transmission channel. This is what happened when Stephen King posted one of his novels on the Internet. The text was meant to be printed, and it took no advantage whatsoever of the artistic resources of a digital support. Third, narrative can actively fight some of the properties of the medium for expressive purposes. For instance, a print narrative with multiple branches subverts the linear reading protocols typical of novels distributed in book form, and it anticipates the possibilities of electronic textuality. Here we can say that the text yearns for another medium. And fourth, a text may expose latent properties in its medium, properties that expand its expressive potential beyond current practice. This happened when postmodern print novels began playing with graphic layout, and made us aware of the spatiality of the print medium, a spatiality that is forgotten when print is considered to be nothing more than the translation of spoken language. The diversity of games that narrative can play with the resources of its medium is one of the many reasons that make the intersection of narratology and media studies, an area still largely unexplored, into a productive field of investigation.

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