



**TRANS-MEDIALITY,
MEMETIC TRANSMISSION, AND TRANSMEDIA EDUCATION**
How stories travel through time

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Abstract

(EN) Stories have always tried their way in humans' brains in order to being transmitted through time; this process can be defined as memetic transmission, theorized by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*. Memetic transmission produces transmedia narratives and megatexts, and the educational system can leverage on the narrative products of the memetic transmission of stories in order to foster new generations' interest towards classics starting from different doorways to the classics' transmedia megatexts. Jane Austen's megatext is proposed as a case study.

KEYWORDS: Memetic transmission; Trans-mediality; Megatext; Transmedia education; Jane Austen.

(ITA) Da sempre le storie adottano diverse strategie per trasmettersi nel tempo; questo processo può essere studiato alla luce della trasmissione memetica teorizzata da Richard Dawkins nel saggio *Il gene egoista*. La trasmissione memetica nel tempo genera prodotti narrativi transmediali e megatesti, e in campo educativo è possibile sfruttare questo patrimonio di storie per stimolare l'interesse delle nuove generazioni nei confronti dei classici, dal momento che il megatesto transmediale di ciascun classico offre diversi punti di accesso. Il megatesto relativo a Jane Austen è proposto come modello di questo studio.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Trasmissione memetica; trans-medialità; megatesto; formazione transmediale; Jane Austen.

1. The memetic transmission of stories

Both individual lives and peoples' cultures are shaped by stories. Narratives are the means by which our personal self is constructed, collecting bits from the reality as perceived, and reorganizing them into a coherent tale: as William Storr puts it, «We're all fictional characters. We're partial, biased, stubborn creations of our own mind. [...] Our brains are hero-makers that emit seductive lies. They want to make us feel like the plucky, brave protagonist in the story of our own lives» (Storr 2020: 92-93). The neuroscientist and fiction writer Professor David Eagleman defines human perception of the outside world as the interpretative effort performed by a brain that is «locked in a vault of silence and



darkness inside your skull» (Storr 2020: 21): a story is the human way of trying to make sense of the chaotic mass of signals that is filtered by our senses.

At the same time, stories are the basis for the very existence of a collective self, from small groups to national and transnational societies sharing beliefs and founding myths (Gottschall 2021). Origin stories are the foundation of religions, as, for instance, summarized by Storr about the Judeans («The story provided [them] with a heroic narrative of the world in which they were god's chosen people whose rightful homeland was Jerusalem. It filled the exiles with a sense of meaning, righteousness and destiny», Storr 2020: 154), and sharing stories helps defining groups of people as themselves and in opposition to other groups; as Simon Bacon observes:

Humans are social animals, and we create familial and communal bonds through the stories we tell ourselves and about ourselves. [...] this involves stories of who is included in 'us' and who qualifies as 'other', what is 'pure' and what is 'abject'. (Bacon 2021: 1)

If *inventing* stories is one of humanity's distinctive features, to the point that human beings can be defined as «storytelling animals» (Gottschall 2013), *transmitting* them is pivotal. In transmission lies even the survival of our species: according to Michele Cometa, it was narrativization that allowed the interpersonal passing of instructions as to make tools, which lead to the evolution of peoples (Cometa 2017). At a larger scale, stories are the basis of a culture: every society is defined by the survival of the fittest myths, beliefs, and tales.

The transmission of narratives through time and space mirrors the biological natural selection: only a small percentage of stories succeeds in passing from one generation to another, and it comes to the price of being sometimes radically transformed (Dawkins 2016). In his seminal *The Selfish Gene* (1976), British scientist Richard Dawkins compared cultural transmission to genetics: if *genes* transmit biological information from animal to animal, *memes* transmit cultural units such as gestures, sayings, proverbs, and stories. Both genes and memes spread themselves through time and space in order to survive as long as possible and thrive, shaping peoples' bodies and minds, forging cultures and infusing them with the sense of what is 'us' and what is 'them', what is wrong and what is right, providing interpretative tools to make sense of collected bits of information.

The premises of memetics, which is the science sprouted from Dawkins' suggestion (see, for instance, Situngkir 2004, Heylighen, Klaas 2009) are that a cultural unit tends to infect as many brains as possible in order to spread itself: just like a virus, an idea or gesture would try and find its way to gain the highest number of infections, in order to impose itself over other ideas and gestures. Memetic transmission applies perfectly to narratives: it makes stories and characters travel through time, from generation to generation, but memetic transmission also entails mutation and blending, which are inherent conditions of life. When a story or a character travel through time, it is constantly re-read rewritten, retold and re-enacted; in order to become a classic, it often requires the efforts and creativity of writers, directors and actors. At the same time, a classic needs the spontaneous engagement of readers, viewers and players, and also, more importantly, the efforts of the educational system – whose only fault is that of being often in opposition to spontaneous engagement.

Since memetic transmission entails transformation as well as preservation, when applied to stories, it concerns a trans-medial corpus of narratives dispersed on different media through ages of retellings. Memetic transmission results in the snowballing of stories, and it is the process through which a community is interwoven. Heylighen and Chielens observe that

[...] a meme reaching an agent, if it is reproduced at all, will typically be transmitted in a changed form, possibly recombined with other information learned earlier. [...] cultural evolution is Lamarkian: characteristics acquired during the lifetime of the meme's carrier can be transmitted to later carriers. Lamarkian evolution, while not being Darwinian in the strict sense, is still subject to the principle of natural selection: acquired characteristics too will be passed on selectively, depending on their fitness. Natural selection by definition will pick out the memes who survive this process relatively unchanged. Therefore, the fittest memes, such as certain songs, religious

beliefs, scientific laws, or brand names, will have a stable, recognizable identity, even though they may differ in appearance, as exemplified by the many renditions of a song or joke. *All such memes together define the culture shared by a community* (Heylighen, Chielens 2009: 7, emphasis added).

It is possible to apply the concept of memetic transmission to narrative transmission, especially in regard to classics: as a meme, a classic is a narrative that have been capable of (*i.e.*, fitting to) transmitting itself through time, and whose transmission have entailed several mutations, each one of them became part of the classic ‘megatext’, the *highest* common multiple of every retelling and derivative narrative.

2. Cross-mediality, inter-mediality, transmediality, and megatexts: transmedia palimpsests

The theoretical frame of transmission is currently rich to the point of been almost chaotic, with several definitions overlapping (see Zecca 2020).

The *adaptation* (Hutcheon 2013), or *intersemiotic translation* (Jakobson 2000), refers to the shifting from a medium to another medium, and it’s how a classic is updated to new supports. It pertains to what is currently theorized as the larger field of *cross-mediality*, that concerns the circulation of the same content throughout different media platforms (Phillips 2012) and, consequently, encompasses the circulation of that content as translated in different codes. In the *long durée* of narrative transmission, long lasting narratives have been capable of being adapted from orality to literacy, and are now at ease in the audio-visual era; more recent stories were born in the era of literacy, as is the case of novels, that could only be created by and on written media, since a written text is a *sine qua non* for linearity, more complex characters, and flawed protagonists, all things impossible in the era of orality (see Ong 2002). Novels which have become classics have been adapted in movies and TV series, travelling from literacy to audio-visuality. Adaptation pertains to classics as such and, at the same time, is what allows a story to become a classic; it is the constant retelling of a story that roots it in a culture and contributes to shaping that culture. *Inter-mediality* is alternatively used to refer to the transfer of a content from a medium to another medium (see Bertetti 2020; Philips 2012), and a landmark study by Bolter and Grusin proposes the term *remediation*, focusing on the practices of transferring a content from one medium to another and the dialectics between transparency and opaqueness of the medium, fostering respectively transparency and hypermediacy (Bolter, Grusin 2001).

Trans-mediality (Jenkins 2007, 2008, 2009; Bertetti 2020; Lino *et al.* 2020) is the still larger frame that, when applied to storytelling, defines a story spread on different media, each contributing with a unique part of the narrative. It pertains to narrative invention and disposition (to use Cicero’s and Quintilian’s terms as to Latin rhetoric theorization), but it applies to a transmedia transmission of a pre-existing narrative as well. Carlos Scolari, in fact, proposes to include adaptations in the field of trans-mediality, since even the most faithful adaptation adds details that enrich the adapted storyworld, it creates new texts on different media, and becomes a brand-new doorway to an established fictional universe (see Scolari 2013 in Bertetti 2020: 24-25).

The trans-media result of the expansion of a classic narrative is what can be referred to as a *megatext*: Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock pertinently borrows the term from science fiction studies. The concept of megatext refers to the creation of an encyclopedia of tropes that have become common ground for writers; referring to science fiction, Sherryl Vint explains that a megatext «reveals the way that [science fiction] explicitly refers back to earlier instances of itself, each text adding to and playing with the larger body of signs, images, and scenarios that make up [science fiction]’s shared world» (Vint quoted in Weinstock 2021: 23). A megatext is the result of intertextual references, a palimpsest of meanings and tropes layered through centuries of use and quotation.

It is possible to embrace the suggestion that cross-mediality, inter-mediality, and trans-mediality, each with its peculiarity, constitute the contemporary equivalent of intertextuality, that has

been thoroughly analysed by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1982) and in *Seuils* (1987) or of Genette's transtextuality (1992). Genette's inter- and transtextuality can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to a hyper-mediated scenario, in which several media convey narratives constantly overlapping and contributing to a shared encyclopedia of stories. Bertetti (2020) recalls Genette's *Seuils* when analyzing movie trailers and television's 'previously on', and Fusillo, as well, applies the concept of focalization to the transmedia context (Fusillo 2020), proving that trans-mediality can be historicized and profitably rooted in Comparative Literature, a field that has already been expanded as "comparative narrative", just looking to Marie-Laure Ryan's, Jan-Nöel Thon's and Marina Grishakova's works (see Ryan 2004; Grishakova, Ryan 2010; Ryan, Thon 2014).

From the point of view of stories, the transmission across media is a memetic transmission: stories spread themselves as invasively as possible. Stories have different ways of travelling through time in order to reach a new audience and being transmitted to the next generation, both forging it and being molded by it. The western culture is founded on shared myths, beliefs and narratives, and classics are among the pillars of our society; a classic is defined by its capability of transmitting itself through time, and at the same time, it's its transmission that makes it a classic.

As characteristic of memetic transmission, the transmission of a classic always entails mutation, and the sum of the derivative products of a classic creates a palimpsestic megatext that offers several doorways to the knowledge of the classic; as a result, trans-mediality entails the endless possibilities of transmedia education.

3. Upstream education: from trans-mediality to classics

This paper intends to suggest that, since stories tend to be inherently trans-medial, teaching them should take into account their trans-mediality and exploit it in order to organically engage the traditionally difficult audience of high school and undergraduate students – but it can prove itself useful as to adult education as well.

Adaptations and trans-media narratives can be fruitfully employed as educational tools, in order to foster intergenerational transmission from different starting points; as Linda Hutcheon pointed out, «we may actually read or see the so-called original *after* we have experienced the adaptation, thereby challenging the authority of every notion of priority. *Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically*» (Hutcheon 2013: XV, emphasis added).

If the point of view of stories is memetic transmission, from the production side it requires the efforts of writers, directors, and actors in the constant adaptation and expansion of stories in new media. Conversely, in terms of reception, a parallel effort is performed by the educational system; education is the means by which a society organizes the intergenerational transmission of the culture that defines it.

Production and reception can be happily intertwined by using contemporary adaptations and derivative texts as educational tools in order to convey the knowledge of a classic. The latest adaptation of a novel, a revised version in a different code – whether a modernization or a domestication (Eco 2003) –, a derivative work (Bertetti 2020), be it an internet meme, a fan fiction novel, or a parodization, can become the gateway to the discovery of a story whose original language at a first approach may have become hard to understand or being enjoyed by a new generation.

In theorizing transmedia education, there is the risk that the emphasis should fall on the necessity of using different codes and platforms in themselves in order to create a common ground with the newest generations of so called "digital natives" (see Garavaglia 2015), as if transmitting the knowledge of a classic novel can be more easily attained only when the same content of a textbook is delivered from digital contexts or scattered through multiple platforms.

There is no question that a multimedia approach to teaching can be advised; in fact, educational theorist Heidi Hayes Jacobs wonders

If many of our students feel like they are time traveling as they walk through the school door each morning. As they cross the threshold, do they feel as if they are entering a simulation of life in the 1980s? Then at the end of the school day, do they feel that they have returned to the twenty-first century? (quoted in Apkon 2013: 217)

The most famous advocate of trans-mediality, Henry Jenkins, approached the topic of transmedia education too, underlying the necessity of taking into account the different sources of information in a hypermediated world:

Obi-Wan Kenobi is a transmedia character, so is Barack Obama. In both cases, readers put together information about who this character is and what he stands for by *assembling data that comes at us from a range of media platforms*. In such a world, each student in our class will have had exposure to different bits of information because they will have consumed different media texts. [...] we need a way of understanding where they came from, and *we need to help students expand the range of media sources* through which they search out and assess information about what's happening in the world around them. To some degree, teachers emphasis [*sic*] similar skills when they tell students to seek out multiple sources when they write a paper, yet often, they mean only multiple print sources and not *sources from across an array of different media*. All of this suggests to me that *we need to make the process of transmedia navigation much more central to the ways we teach research methods through schools* (Jenkins 2010: online, emphasis added)

Apart from simply fostering a multi-media approach, Jenkins proposes to take into account how information is spread across media, and fully exploiting the transmedia context in which we live provides for still further suggestions; Max Giovagnoli defines «exogenous dynamics» the use of preexisting contents in teaching as opposed to the «endogenous dynamics», that includes the creation of original contents (Giovagnoli 2017: 224).

The knowledge of a classic can be transmitted by leveraging on exogenous dynamics, by treating the original narrative as a node in the transmedia network of a megatext, so renouncing the notion of priority.

As proposed in Fusillo *et al.*, «in order to tune to the newest configurations of the imaginary [...] it is necessary to opt for anti-hierarchical methods. [...]. Comparison should be multi directional, and it should enhance the creativity in reception and its retroactive effect on the original» (2020: 10, my translation). A transmedia education model could use each adaptation or derivative narrative based on a classic as a doorway to the knowledge of the classic source, then moving upstream to the source, but in a rhizomatic path in which every derivative text contributes to the acquaintance of students to the story and the characters of a classic – be it a legend, an epic poem or a novel. Apart from using different codes and platforms, transmedia education can draw fully from a narrative's megatext, which is continuously expanding and up to date as to the palatability for contemporary audiences.

Such an approach uses 'spoilers' at its own advantage: the previous knowledge of a plot, of main characters' qualities and flaws and even of the story's ending, gained through trans-media narratives, far from spoiling the pleasure of reading a classic, can enhance the pleasure of recognizing a story and a character, and consequently can minimize the friction deriving from facing the long grammatical constructions and outdated lexicon of a two-century novel.

Italo Calvino defines 'classic' a book whose first reading is actually a re-reading, since classics «come to us carrying the signs of the readings before our reading and leave behind the signs that they have left in the culture or cultures they have travelled across (or, more simply, in the language or costume)» (Calvino 1995: 8, my translation). A trans-media education can leverage on those signs and start from them – from the «pulviscolo di discorsi» (*ibid.*) – in order to propose an upstream journey to the actual reading of the classic.

4. A case study: the Jane Austen megatext

Jane Austen's memetic transmission through two centuries is textbook (see Pennacchia Punzi 2018, Meneghelli 2014).

On the reason why certain stories succeed far better than others in being transmitted, Ortoleva suggests that it can depend on the openness of the story, in its polyphony, and in its being based on «many silences, allusions, or missing links» (quoted in Ceccherelli, Ilardi 2021: 11, my translation). Jane Austen's novels fit this hypothesis, and their openness can partly justify their pervasiveness in contemporary culture, starting from the lyophilized formula of the internet meme.

The internet meme is the most elementary form of memetic transmission, it has a content, a form and a stance, each part of a larger memetic transmission (Shifman 2013): the same image (form) can be replicated as a frame with different content and stance; the same stance can be replicated in different forms and contents; and the same content can be replicated with different form and stance. Internet meme are viral contents: apart from being largely shared (among niche audiences that are in possess of the information to make sense of it), they are varied by a proactive audience, according to the importance of the axis of performance in trans-mediality as theorized by Jenkins (2010).

A simple search for Austenian meme on line returns thousands of results, mostly images from the film adaptations of Jane Austen's six novels with various text superimposed. That adaptations are themselves a basis for further derivative contents proves the snowballing of trans-media transmission (see Cardwell 2002). For instance, a whole category of meme is referred to Mr Darcy's awkward first proposal to Miss Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): the form can be a frame from a film, the stance, as well as the content, is usually a mockery of Mr Darcy's scarce sense of propriety; a still from the 1995 TV series adaptation with Colin Firth playing Mr Darcy reads: «Hey girl, I heard you had a Headache, So I thought this Would be a good time to propose». Austenian internet memes can be parodistic and ironic, but come also in the form of contents for special occasions, such as Valentines cards portraying Austen's male protagonists with their iconic love declarations as captions (see Old Fashioned Charm: online).

Extensive studies can be devoted to Austenian's memes (see Kitsi-Mitakou 2022), but the point of this paper is to provide for samples of a classic megatext, and in this case the Author in her wholeness is the classic whose memetic transmission has generated countless access points to teaching Jane Austen's works – and her historical framework. This paragraph will only provide for samples from different categories.

Apart from internet memes, adaptations come, on the one hand, in the form of domesticated audio-visual narratives, such as the 1995 TV series *Pride and Prejudice* from the homonym novel, and the 2005 film starring Keira Knightley, and, on the other hand, deeply modernized films, as the 1995 *Clueless*, in which Austen's *Emma* (1815) is set in a contemporary Beverly Hills and its characters are high school students. The comic-book Italian Disney adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Radice, Tuconi 2021) can be in a category all by itself, since Disney parodies have a peculiar way of merging classics and the well-established storyworld of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse (see Argiolas 2013); the resulting *Orgoglio e pregiudizio* is an enjoyable parodization in which the novel is told by intradiegetic author Jane Ducksten and the male hero is a Donald Duckcy.

Austenian derivative texts encompass fantasy rewritings such as Winters' *Sense and Sensibility and Seamonsters* (2009, that credits Austen as a co-writer), and Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), in turn adapted in a film (2016). Other relevant derivative narratives are produced by Pemberley Digital, «An innovative web video production company that specializes in the adaptation of classic works onto the new media format» (Pemberley). Pemberley Digital released on YouTube some web series that deeply modernize Austen's work: *The Lizzie Bennet Diary*, «the first YouTube series to win an Emmy, receiving the 2013 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media-Original Interactive Program» (*ibid.*) portrays a 24-year-old reimagined and contemporary version of *Pride and Prejudice*'s protagonist Elizabeth Bennet whose financial problems derive from student debt, while *Emma Approved* is a 86-

episode YouTube series that makes main character Emma Woodhouse from Austen's *Emma* a life-coach and matchmaker for work, with Mr. Knightley as her business partner. The two derivative narratives closely relate to the source books by Jane Austen even if deeply reimagining their setting. Plots and characters from the original novels are memetically transmitted both preserving themselves and mutating in order to better fit changed contexts and audiences. Jane Austen's storyworld is at the basis of countless fan fiction novels, starting from 1913 Sybil Brinton's *Old Friends and New Fancies: An Imaginary Sequel to the Novels of Jane Austen* (see Dew 2014), and molds the imaginary of several other fictional characters, as in *Austenland* (Hale 2007) or in *The Jane Austen Book Club* (Fowler 2004) – both stories deal with protagonists whose worldviews are filtered by the Austenian romance.

Each of the abovementioned transmedia products are part of the ever-expanding Austenian megatext and contribute to the memetic transmission through centuries of Jane Austen's novels, characters, plots, and to the transmission of the author herself, since she is currently a pop icon to the point of having her own 'Funko Icon Pop! Vinyl', a collectable figure created by Funko. Inc, next to countless movie characters and prominent people (but not so many other writers).

Internet meme, adaptations and derivative texts could provide for a first approach to Austenian's novels in a more intelligible language for young students, and classic plots and characters can be reread in different versions that can be eventually compared to the original text. The confrontation will not be forced from the source to the adaptations, at risk of losing students' interest in the first step; on the contrary, the source text can become a desired goal, and it can be approached and craved for as the founding text of a cult (as the one that has 'I love Mr Darcy' for motto, printed on the most various merchandise).

5. Conclusion

This paper is based on the assumption that stories define us both as individuals and as parts of a community, and that the transmission of stories is pivotal to the very existence of humanity. Since the educational system is key to the transmission of stories, it can leverage on the natural process of transmission through ages, the memetic transmission. The sum of each narrative created in the process of memetic transmission constitute a megatext that provides for doorways to the understanding of the classics, whose knowledge is at the foundation of our society. A transmedia education, apart from exploiting contemporary codes and platforms, can structure teaching modules starting from derivative texts, even in the elementary form of the internet meme, in order to foster a genuine interest for the original source, and make students themselves a node in the endless stream of the memetic transmission of stories. Not only consumers of stories but producers as well, a new generation of students is the latest player in the millennial passing of the narrative torch.

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