A Note on “Demediation”
From Book Art to Transmedia Storytelling

JAN BAETENS AND DOMINGO SÁNCHEZ-MESA

This article discusses two opposite meanings of the concept of “demediation”: on the one hand, the very specific and strongly materializing reading given by Garrett Stewart, who coined the notion in an essay on book art qua visual art; on the other hand, the general and more intuitive reading of the term, as sometimes used in the broader debate on digital culture as immaterialization. Putting a strong emphasis on the (broad) notions of materiality and medium-specificity, the article offers a critique of certain immaterializing tendencies in transmedia storytelling theory, while ending with the brief presentation of an example (the collaborative network Général Instin) that tackles, within the framework of ghost theory and dust theory, the dialectic relationship of materiality and immateriality.

In comparison with the abundant literature on remediation [1] and intermediality [2], publications on demediation remain quite rare. This may have to do with the fact that, contrary to remediation and intermediality, which appeared in the already well-established yet terminologically hyperchaotic field of adaptation studies, the concept of demediation was first coined in a very specific context, which helped keep the terminological impulse and imagination of most academics under control. In his article “Bookwork as Demediation” [3], book and art historian Garrett Stewart scrutinizes a recent tendency in visual art, namely the exhibition of books as purely visual/tactile objects in the art gallery and museum circuit. Stewart calls these items nonbooks and stresses that they should not be confused with previous forms of book art in which the interplay of the verbal and the visual/tactile did not exclude the actual reading of the text (Stewart mentions the livre d’artiste tradition popularized by Picasso and Matisse). Demediated books are, in short, books that are transformed into works of visual art by the artist’s focus on the materiality of the object at the expense of the very content and even readability of the text. Stewart finally labels this phenomenon of the nonbook in more general terms as demediation: “What I am calling demediation peels away the message service, leaving only the material support” [4].

Stewart’s analysis of a new art form can be fruitfully linked with the more general discussion on medium and remediation as addressed in Bolter and Grusin’s Remediation [5], via the fundamental tension between immediacy, which tends to highlight the (relative) independence of a medium’s content, and hypermediacy, which stresses the (temporary) opacity of the medium’s material structure.

Making the claim of the possible dissociation of content and medium, “medium” defined here as the host medium that enables content to be communicated in material form, Stewart’s definition makes very clear that the concept of demediation should not be limited specifically to contemporary art (which is the field under scrutiny in his article) but that it is something that may prove key to a better understanding of what happens in other fields as well. In what follows, we would like to transfer the debate on remediation in contemporary visual art to the critical analysis of literary writing, more particularly to the field of transmedia storytelling, a form of both intermedial and cross-platform networked writing [6]. We do realize, however, that such a transfer will have to take into account other aspects of media culture and theory in general. In this regard, one should immediately underline that Stewart does not discuss issues of digitization, while the link between demediation and digitization is frequently mentioned in debates on digital culture [7].

In Stewart’s analysis, two elements come to the fore: firstly, the possibility of uncoupling message and materiality (in this case by deleting the former to the benefit of the latter); secondly, the possibility of converting the material dimension of a work into a new and independent work (albeit in a different cultural circuit). Stewart’s definition is therefore the exact opposite of immaterialization, and this makes it particularly interesting in critically addressing a kind of writing, transmedia storytelling, where the growing impact of digital culture has given birth to ideas of media migration and remediation.
Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa, A Note on “Demediation”

There is, however, a problem here. Linguistically speaking, *demediation* can also be seen as a synonym for *dematerialization*, or more exactly for *immaterialization*. From a lexical point of view, there are even good reasons to think that Stewart’s use of the term *demediation* is a violent appropriation that ignores—we suppose on purpose—the intuitive meaning of the word. This “spontaneous” meaning of demediation vindicates, however, a key idea in digital philosophy. The conversion of almost anything to os and is as well as the possible migration of this kind of information from one medium to another are indeed typically considered mechanisms of immaterialization. When moving as bits and bytes from one medium to another, objects are seen not only as simply demediated but above all as de- or immaterialized. Stewart’s very physical and material approach of demediation that ignores—we suppose on purpose—the intuitive meaning of the word. This “spontaneous” meaning of demediation vindicates, however, a key idea in digital philosophy. The conversion of almost anything to os and is as well as the possible migration of this kind of information from one medium to another are indeed typically considered mechanisms of immaterialization. When moving as bits and bytes from one medium to another, objects are seen not only as simply demediated but above all as de- or immaterialized. Stewart’s very physical and material approach of demediation—he clearly insists on the fierce disclosure of materiality in and thanks to the process of demediation—can counter this idea of demediation as immaterialization while helping us understand how transmedia storytelling is deeply rooted in many forms of historically determined materialities, even in an environment as apparently immaterial as the Internet.

Demediation’s materiality, however, is not “purely” material either. As Stewart’s analysis convincingly shows, the peeling away of the message service is also a mechanism that makes room for new forms of meaning once the demediated object is appropriated in other contexts. In this way, Stewart’s vision of demediation helps take a critical stance regarding certain types of contemporary storytelling that put a strong emphasis on both convergence and immaterialization of writing practices. To put it more bluntly, what the persistence of materiality in Stewart’s definition stresses is the illusion that one can get rid of a medium’s materiality.

In that regard, it becomes possible to hint more specifically at the problematic nature of some too-easily-accepted claims on transmedia storytelling à la Henry Jenkins—mainly the idea that one can easily materialize the story of a given medium in another medium. In practice, however, the scope and nature of the story may seriously change according to the medium in question. Moreover, one should be no less aware of the fact that the migration of content from one medium to another is above all the consequence of a series of explicit or implicit material choices. In the world of transmedia storytelling, one will inevitably select the techniques and contents that resist as little as possible the subsequent migration from one medium to another—hence, for instance, the gradual transition from the study of concrete narrative plots to the abstract study of story structures that one can observe in many handbooks and theories of transmedia storytelling. As argued in his oft-quoted statement by Jenkins:

Most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story [8].

This shift toward world-making—and thus away from narrative in the traditional (but probably more complex and multilayered) sense of the word—is not a coincidence but the very condition of possibility of transmedia storytelling [9]. Story worlds and abstract story structures are easier to transfer from one medium to another than are concrete and already-materialized narrative plots. The idea that transmedial storytelling is therefore, together with database narratives, for instance [10], well acclimated to the immaterial and demediating features of digital writing is symptomatic of the way Jenkins’s convergence theory approaches cultural production.

This tendency toward immateriality in the theoretical reflection on writing is the outcome of certain forms of self-censorship. Transmedial migration “works,” but only if one succeeds in peeling away not the message but the medium—and one of the most efficient ways of doing so is to take the notion of “fictional world” as the alpha and omega of storytelling. As a matter of fact, the well-known book by Ryan and Thôn on transmedia storytelling [11] builds the following argument: While at the center of “media convergence” we have “narrativity,” at the center of narrativity we have “content” (“the abstract type of content that all stories share,” as Ryan and Thôn define it) and, finally, at the basis of that “content” lies the notion of “storyworld,” capturing “the kind of mental representation that a text must evoke in order to qualify as narrative” [12]. Transmediality, for these authors, is thus “the representation of a storyworld through multiple media” [13], the terms “transmedia storytelling” (borrowed from Jenkins) and “transmedial worlds” (borrowed from Klastrup and Tosca [14]) being the most influential ones to refer to the basically logical and imaginative, almost dematerialized, concept of transmediality.

Should we conclude then that demediation, in the general sense of loss of materiality in the case of media migration, is a good key to the understanding of what is happening in contemporary culture (which we think is a largely digital culture)? Not really, since it would suppose a dramatic blindness to various forms of resistance to immaterialization that might be conveyed in the same concept as cultural practice(s). In the contemporary theoretical debate, this resistance mainly takes two forms. On the one hand, there is a powerful return of different forms of medium-specific thinking, often from a strongly materialist or semiotic point of view [15]. On the other hand there is the critique of the “deskilling” of art [16]—one of the many flip sides of the dematerialization of art, where the concept or idea involved in the work takes precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Here it is above all, but of course not surprisingly, art historian Rosalind Krauss who has taken the lead in the
antideskilling campaign [17] and whose work on Marcel Broodthaers, allegedly a champion of neo-conceptual art, is also a strong plea for a medium-specific approach in art [18].

It is now time to go beyond the crude opposition between demediation as increased materiality, as coined by Stewart, and demediation as immaterialization, as often tacitly accepted in the context of transmedia storytelling. An interesting proposal in that regard is made by Jeremy Wade Morris in a recent study on the commodification of popular sounds [19]. Often presented as the superlative example of digital immaterialization, the shift from material records (but also CDs, which are still material items, in spite of the fact they contain digital files) to so-called immaterial audio files is analyzed by Wade Morris as a dialectical process of "detuning" and "retuning": On the one hand, digital audio files do indeed lose most of the traditional material features of commodified music (the actual vinyl record, the cover and its artwork, etc.), yet on the other hand the very necessity of their commodification forces producers as well as users to progressively invent new forms of materiality (new kinds of metadata, new interfaces for online or offline digital music players, etc.). This processual approach helps reframe the whole issue of immaterialization versus medium-specificity:

Rather than suggesting that digital music represents a complete dematerialization, or, conversely, that it shares the same materiality as physical objects, I propose that music as software is, to borrow from David Berry, "differently material, tenuously material, almost less materially material" [20].

The emphasis on the processual, which is certainly not absent from theories such as that of Jenkins, is a way of exceeding the sterile debate on material versus immaterial in literary analysis as well. It also converges with recent debates in new materialism on ghost theory, which allows for the acknowledgment of the active presence of materially absent figures, objects or ideas [21], as well as dust theory, dust being the smallest recognizable entity of material change that, according to Jussi Parikka, "takes us—and our thinking—to different places and opens up multiple agendas. In this case, I use dust to talk of global labor, media materialism of digital culture" [22].

In the context of transmedia storytelling, Général Instin, a collaborative multimedia and cross-platform writing project [23], is a fascinating example of both ghost theory and dust theory as well as a convincing test case for the intertwining of material and immaterial elements in an expanding network of medium-specific works produced across virtually all possible media and permanently growing in a continuing dialogue between works online and works in situ (most of them ephemeral, which does not mean without impact or consequences). General Hinstin (with H) was a forgotten French
officer (1831–1905) whose tomb is in Montparnasse Cemetery in the center of Paris (well known to city-dwellers as well as tourists, given the large number of celebrities’ tombs there). Nearly two decades ago, the chance discovery of the almost-undecipherable portrait on his tomb (Figs 1 and 2) triggered a collective creative project combining word and image; fiction and nonfiction; and print and digital creation, including works online and offline, fixed and ephemeral (graffiti, paintings, performances, public readings).

Inextricably linking the purely imaginary (actually, we hardly know anything about General Hinstin) and the intensely material (as demonstrated by the rapidly expanding network of creative appropriations), Général Instin exemplifies a form of bottom-up transmedia storytelling, open to all kinds of appropriations and new initiatives, that offers an alternative to certain views on the immaterialization of medium and signs and the a priori preference given to abstract world-making, which is only eventually materialized top-down in concrete works. The general’s story may be forgotten and his picture may have become almost unreadable, but this almost-complete de-materialization does not prevent an intense and dramatically creative process of continuous reinvention and remediation.

References and Notes


5 Bolter and Grusin [1].


7 For a fundamental critique of the idea that digitization tends to de-materialize media and culture, see N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).


9 This is the basic principle underlying Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thön, eds., Storyworlds across Media. Towards a Media-Conscious Narratology (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).


11 Ryan and Thön [9].


16 John Roberts, The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade (London: Verso, 2007). Deskilling is not per se linked with the immaterial, as shown for instance in the role given to untrained expression in many historical, nonconceptual avant-garde movements eager to restore certain forms of spontaneity and authenticity.

17 See the special issue of the journal October, No. 77 (1996), “The Interdisciplinary Project of Visual Culture?“


21 Ghost theory or “hauntology” (a portmanteau of haunting and ontology) was initiated by Jacques Derrida, Spectres of Marx (London: Routledge, 1994), but its current use surpasses in many ways its original philosophical signification.


23 The most “centralized” information on this work in progress can be found on www.remue.net/instin (accessed 11 August 2016). Two recent side projects have been issued in print: Général Instin, Climax. Une fiction, encore? (Paris: Le nouvel Attila, 2015) and Anthologie Général Instin (Paris: Le nouvel Attila, 2015).

Manuscript received 27 June 2016.

JAN BAETENS is a professor of cultural studies at the University of Leuven. He mainly publishes in the field of word and image studies and poetry criticism. He is editor of the journal Image (&) Narrative (www.imageandnarrative.be) and coeditor of PLACE (www.place-plateform.com).

DOMINGO SÁNCHEZ-MESA is a full professor in literary theory and comparative literature at the University of Granada. He has published five books on literary theory and new media studies and is director of the research project Narrativas Transmediales. Two new edited volumes are forthcoming: Claudio Magris, las voces de la literatura y el pensamiento (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2019) and Narrativas Transmediales: Las Metamorfosis del Relato en los Nuevos Medios Digitales (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2019).