

Video Didn't Kill the Radio Star – Transmediality Against the Notion of a “Blind Medium”

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Abstract This paper interrogates the persistence and transformation of the audio fiction format within the transmedial landscape of contemporary culture, challenging the recurrent notion of radio drama as a “blind medium.” Building on the theories of McLuhan, Baudrillard, Rajewsky, Wolf, and Jenkins, it argues that the significance of transmediality lies less in content migrating across platforms than in the collision and interplay of media themselves. The study considers both historical and contemporary case studies—from Orson Welles to the radio-pollinated war-time myth of Tokyo Rose completely shifting the trajectory of the living human being Iva Toguri - to the resurgence of fiction podcasts such as Welcome to Night Vale and The Amelia Project—to illustrate how audio narratives not only endure but thrive through transmedial relations, sometimes even breaching reality. Rather than being displaced by video or the internet, radio and its descendants have been revitalized within a globalized, syncretic media environment. By reframing radio drama within the dynamics of media fusion, the paper dismantles the reductive critique of its supposed blindness, demonstrating instead its capacity to generate multi-sensory, culturally resonant, and globally networked experiences. Ultimately, transmediality emerges not as a novelty of the digital age but as a constitutive principle of storytelling itself, wherein media perpetually reshapes itself.

Keywords: transmediality, intermediality, “Blind Medium”

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Introduction

If we understand Transmediality as the intersection of distinct forms of media and Intermediality as the bridging of content (of a work, of a narrative universe) through multiple medial lives, then Transmediality must be a given in an age of fusion, synthesis, synergy and cultural syncretism. Radio, video, TV, film – they're all holding hands in the age of the Internet. Jenkins (2006) portrays transmediality as a narrative strategy where a story is told across various media platforms, each adding a unique layer to the overall narrative, thus enriching the audience's experience by providing a multifaceted and coordinated storytelling mosaic. Rajewsky (2005, pp. 43-64) interprets intermediality as the intricate interplay among various media, manifesting in the transformation, combination, or referencing of one media form within another, thereby underscoring the dynamic and reciprocal influences they impart on each other. While Rajewsky (2005, pp. 43-64) focuses primarily on intermediality, her work indirectly contributes to understanding transmediality. Rajewsky's examination of media combination and intermedial references highlights how different media can interact and complement each other. These interactions, while central to intermedial studies, also form a foundational aspect of transmedial narratives, where different media collaborate to advance a cohesive story - from Rajewsky's perspective, transmediality can be seen as an extension of intermedial practices, where the collaboration and interaction between various media forms serve to create a unified, multi-layered narrative. Wolf (2002), on the other hand, views intermediality as a broad spectrum of interactions between various media forms, whether contained within a single media product or spanning across multiple platforms, emphasizing a holistic understanding of the multifaceted ways media can interconnect and influence one another. Wolf's (2002) analysis suggests that transmediality involves a nuanced interplay of media, where various forms of media engage and complement each other to construct a comprehensive and multi-dimensional narrative fabric – this definition is closest to this paper's approach but not identical - the focus will be on the effects of Media themselves colliding rather than that of Content breaching across the medial gaps.

Media Collisions and Theoretical Frames

When McLuhan (1964, pp. 254-267) speaks of Games as Extensions of Man, does he speak of Video Games? When he discusses the medium of electricity as an extension of our central nervous system (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 5-6), turning the whole world into a Global Village, does he speak of the Internet? When McLuhan (1964, pp. 324-336) addresses the tribal power of Radio, does he also talk about Podcasting? When he addresses the Telephone (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 289-300), does he anticipate the impacts of the Smartphone? He does not and yet he does. In regard to Film, McLuhan makes the following controversial statement:

At the present time, film is still in its manuscript phase, as it were; shortly it will, under TV pressure, go into its portable, accessible, printed-book phase. Soon everyone will be able to have a small, inexpensive film projector that plays an 8-mm sound cartridge as if on a TV to screen. This type of development is part of our present technological implosion. The present dissociation of projector and screen is a vestige of our older mechanical world of explosion and separation of functions that is now ending with the electrical implosion. (1964, pp. 322-323)

It is hard not to interpret this statement as prophetic in regard to the tablet or smartphone or hand-held device in general – yet it is not quite *spot on*.

Print, as a product of the printing press, is a different medium than the Newspaper or the Manuscript – Comics as well are a different medium, and McLuhan would certainly think of Streaming as perfectly distinct from Television. To McLuhan, each mutation within one medium affects all media and hence all consumers, what he calls the sense-ratio becomes altered (McLuhan, 1964, p. 25). There comes a time when this multiplicity of media becomes confusing to the consumer – as we accidentally or unconsciously over-extend ourselves and we spread out into the decentralised, multipolar world of contemporary streams of information clutching to our devices as extensions of our bodies and minds, we might find that McLuhan's prophetic anticipations are lurching us into Baudrillard's (1994, p. 159) idea of hyperreality – according to Kellner and Gennaro (2023), Baudrillard provided a critique of Marshall McLuhan's work "Understanding Media," arguing that McLuhan's famous statement, "the medium is the message," essentially encapsulates the essence of estrangement within a technologically

driven society. He disapproved of McLuhan's approach, suggesting that it inadvertently normalized this sense of disconnection. Initially, Baudrillard's perspective was in line with the neo-Marxist view that criticized McLuhan for having a simplistic and deterministic view of technology's role. Nonetheless, as exposed by Kellner and Gennaro (2023) the decades progressed into the 1970s and 1980s and Baudrillard began to adopt McLuhan's principle as a central tenet in his own theoretical framework. Whilst we do live in a world of copies of copies of copies, this is more than just an imitation game – for the medium is the message and the content comes after the message and this message today is diluted in a cacophony of media formats whose effects and characteristics we scarcely fully grasp, especially in terms of interpolation and symbiotic relationships.

Transmedial Narratives: From Radio to Podcasting

The Podcast could have never survived without the Radio – in a way, it has freed Radio from some of its previous duties. It has taken the role of the dramatist – Radio's digital brother, taken as a global phenomenon, shows us a variety of fiction shows reminiscent of the 20th century's Golden Age of the Radio Drama – nods to Orson Welles are often given in these trendy youthful fiction podcasts such as *Hello From The Magic Tavern* (Niekamp, Jacover, DiGiorgi, 2017), suggesting the link is not lost to the creators, many of whom have studied degrees in New Media, Film, Theatre, Music and Sound – like the creators of *The Amelia Project* (Thorne & Thorne, Brager, Baden, Burgon, 2024) or their American sister-shows, *Midnight Burger* (Fisher, Stevenson, 2024) and *Greater Boston* (Danner, Van Dreason, Stillman, Raymonda, Ponders, Sianez-De La O, Wolf, 2024). In the age of the Fiction Podcast, can Radio Drama still exist? Of course – the experiment of *Suspense's* revival is a perfect example (Alsedek, Perry-Hayes, Blue Hours Productions, 2012) – the original *Suspense* ('*Suspense*', 1942-1962) ran for decades, one of the largest Radio Drama programmes worldwide – the 2012 revival ran on more than two hundred radio stations worldwide. Nothing is eliminated, merely dethroned – it becomes an image in the rear-window mirror and only in that hindsight can we see more clearly what it meant (McLuhan, *Medium is the Message*, 2005, p. 73-75). When a medium is new many of its effects are lost to us – according to McLuhan (1964, p. 192), the effects of Print were still largely being ignored in the 1960s, alongside the effects of most media. What about media such as the Fiction Podcast,

seeming revivals of the Radio Drama? Are we referring to reincarnations – variations on the theme of the Audio Drama, with appendices reaching into the world of Radio as well as into the world of Streaming? In this sense, there is the medium of Audio Drama, reaching into Radio, Streaming/Internet – and the medium of mainstream Talk Radio and News-Radio, reaching from the airwaves into the same areas – Radio, Streaming, Internet. Fiction has nonetheless taken a preference to the digital medium – whilst attempts have been made at rekindling Radio giants like *Suspense* as addressed before (Alsedek, Perry-Hayes, Blue Hours Productions, 2012), arguably the fiction giants of today's Audio Drama reside on the Internet – in the medium of the Podcast. Projects like *The Amelia Project* are intriguing as they are not based in a single location at all – with points of interest and studios spread all over the world, artists and creators likewise. They are a perfect example of resilient fiction-storytelling in the time of a Global Village significantly more developed and homogenised than the Global Village which McLuhan felt he was experiencing in the 1960s/1970s. Demographics of the show reveal how democratically spread their engagement is across the globe. This is no longer a Global Village but rather a Global House – harbouring a wide tapestries of subcultures, all operating by their own conventions - everybody is with us and within us at all times – the tactile physicality of the Smartphone, the unification of that tactility with the visual aspect of the tablet-type screen – this centralisation of functions into small, handheld devices would have seemed as interesting and predictable to academics like McLuhan as they did to science fiction writers like Isaac Asimov. Academia and art have hypothesised on the effects of highly advancing media technologies as extensions of ourselves – likewise academia and art have pondered the effects of fusion and intersection of media formats.

Across media, into reality: The Case of Tokyo Rose

Transmediality is a given of our times but it could be theorised that it is a given of all times – merely amplified today. Fiction always danced between forms – stories arched themselves in-between the modal patterns of the channels they were being delivered on, Harry Lime walked from the Cinema screen into the Radio and stayed there for years (*The Third Man*, 1949), (*The Lives of Harry Lime / The Adventures of Harry Lime*, 1951-1952) – his effect on the European and American audiences were quite different. To the Europeans, Harry Lime was a wistful nod to

the corruption and hardship (Jaglom, Welles, 2013, p. 163) they had to face with humour and nonchalance to stay sane – to the Americans, Harry was a hustler, a global phenomenon, a nostalgic villain who wouldn't have been allowed back on screen by the Hays Code but was welcomed on the airwaves. In *Twenty Thousand Hertz* (Defacto Sound, Taylor, 2018), within the episode discussing the Theatre of the Mind as the Audio Drama, creators and theoreticians of this medium such as author Richard J. Hand address the lack of censorship applied in the U.S. during the Red Scare – it was as if the cadres in power considered Radio as less subversive than it actually was in what was then the Age of the Talkies – perhaps the reason was technological and had to do with practicality – the sheer amount of Radio Drama content coming from U.S. radio stations across the entire nation was ludicrously large. This transmedial phenomenon isn't even limited to fiction – there is always the urge to reveal auditory figures – what Chion (1994, pp. 124-134) calls “*Acousmêtre*” – a sort of voice-character specific to cinema that derives mysterious powers from being heard and yet not seen – he is mostly referring to the need to reveal the sources of sounds we cannot identify, especially voices – and he is referring to Reality as much as to Film. This reveal can be a visceral, even violent process, especially when anticipated for long. In this sense, it would be interesting to consider an inherently transmedial character whose existence and reveal lies between these medial borders – Tokyo Rose (FBI, undated; Andrews, 2017; Iovino, 2020; Crotty, 2010; Biography.com Editors, 2014), the Japanese propaganda figure from World War II. At the beginning of World War II, Stranded Japanese-American Iva Toguri D'Aquino isn't allowed to return to the U.S. by neither Powers during the conflict – she remains in Tokyo, tries to avoid working with Japanese authorities – ends up involved in a radio show titled “Zero Hour”. The radio show had a simple premise – presenting News, Fiction, Entertainment and Western music to the enemy soldiers on Japanese soil – they drafted up various Prisoners of War, Americans, Englishmen – amongst them the stranded Iva Toguri. Because of the ambiguity of language and the Japanese officials having minimal skills in the English tongue, the shows often came off as sarcastic and quite Anti-Japanese in their subtleties, but the concept quickly spread and there were a dozen other Japanese women playing similar *Femme Fatale* acts on the airwaves. Iva Toguri was no longer an individual voice – but part of the collective character of Tokyo Rose, who seductively and sensuously told American troops they were doomed to die or surrender. To the public, Tokyo Rose became a singular character, fictional and real

at the same time – at no point was the name Tokyo Rose used by Iva – the collective christening of these women was undertaken by none other than the U.S. troops stationed around Japan. Tokyo Rose was born out of the interaction of medium and consumer. This is another situation in which medium takes precedence over content – by the time Iva returned to the U.S. as an individual American she was a traitor and a villain. Tokyo Rose had become part of the medial matrix – in Cartoons and Comics, she was a familiar Japanese antagonist villainess. On the Radio, she was a sensual voice heralding American destruction, a siren of the invader – in the Press she was a Propaganda Machine. Various confusing incarnations of Tokyo Rose spread out all over the American Media Structure – with no cares at all for the individuality and facts and uncomfortable nuances of Iva Toguri's life, who returned home from Japanese enthrallment to be thrown into an American prison. The pardon came much later - it came years after she had served her sentence. It took the American Presidency decades to understand their mistake – a mistake ruled by the effects of over-reaching Media in distorting fact and creating new realities. What is this tale if not a tale of Transmediality as inherent in all forms of Media? If we understand Transmediality as the relationships between Media rather than Individual Content with incarnations in various forms of Media (which would be Intermediality), then Transmediality is a given of our times. Nothing can exist for long within the confines of a single structural field or medium – eventually, the Bible becomes Jesus Christ Superstar (Jewison, 1973). Woody Allen's Tom Baxter walks from the Cinema Screen into Reality in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Allen, 1985) – perhaps that is the destiny of all fictional characters, irregardless of where they spring from – Iva Toguri walked out of Reality and into Fiction as Tokyo Rose - spawned out of the medial void as a singular yet multifaceted entity from within the radio-waves and from the emanations of a dozen Japanese girls and one Japanese-American girl – she spawned from the convulsions of the Japanese Imperial Propaganda Machine and from its interaction to the Allied troops and Allied public via Radio, Film, Press, Cartoons, Comics, etc. Tokyo Rose *was* Media. It is no surprise that a few decades later the Canadian band Idle Eyes (1984) would release a song inspired by the myth.

Against the Notion of a Blind Medium

A variety of critical works in regard to the medium of the Radio Drama or Audio Drama accuse the medium of being blind – they consider it doomed to large disregard due to its strictly sonorous nature. Even some creators of Radio Drama gave in to the temptation of this argument - like Arch Oboler (1945, p. 308). Traynor and Hand dismiss this idea by stating a painting is not criticised for being deaf, invoking critique by Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998, p. 75) “whilst paintings, posters and photographs lack sound, their silence ordinarily goes unnoticed” – a sound argument indeed. Tim Crook (1999) devotes an entire chapter to this discussion in his book *Radio Drama: The Theory and Practice*. What should also be considered today and what should perhaps take precedence in this argument is the mesmerizing way in which the walls between formats of Media are becoming uncanny and bent. You can always play an Audio Drama in your headphones as you take a stroll on a beach in your Virtual Reality headset. Audio drama creators host theatre shows across Europe and America, often sold-out – as in the case of *Welcome to Night Vale* (Fink, Cranor, Baldwin, Disparition, 2024). Books have been written in the Night Vale universe, available to buy in major libraries worldwide and on the Internet – deaf people have interacted with the show through written transcripts and myriad types of graphic art can be purchased by fans worldwide at any given time with a single click. It simply cannot be said that the world of Night Vale resides within a single Medium – and this is perhaps the destiny of all works of art today. Other shows employ Intermediality (and intramediality – many of these shows fuse together on occasion, with characters leaping from one world to another – crossover episodes are plentiful) in other creative ways. The peculiar mix of recorded spontaneous real-life interviews from across Boston, mixed alongside the fictional tale, makes *Greater Boston* (Danner, Van Dreaseon, Stillman, Raymonda, Ponders, Sianez-De La O, Wolf, 2024) a very interesting experiment in audio storytelling, breaching the gap between reporting and fiction – in a similar manner to what Hunter S. Thompson’s *Gonzo Journalism* did for Journalism. The idea of a blind medium becomes ludicrous because all media now involve all Senses – their unity is becoming complete – screens are tactile, cameras are digital or film, you can buy a new vinyl record online at any given time or if you prefer you can watch a hi-fi audio-video recording on YouTube - showing a vinyl playing on a cozy pick-up in someone’s home on your 4K

monitor and home-built ATMOS system. You can put the Mona Lisa in a Virtual Reality Museum and envelop it inside an interactable 3D sculpture – animate it with Artificial Intelligence and have the painted woman answer questions. The possibilities are limitless, and this is not an exaggeration anymore – hence, Transmediality as a given reality of our times makes the concept of a blind (or deaf) medium ludicrous. This is the age of Media syncretism, where all media invoke all senses at once.

McLuhan (1964, pp. 324-336) wagers that in most auditory, tactile or ear cultures, the role of Radio can be that of retribalisation - amplification of tribal tensions inherent in multiple cultures – however, even before the time of his writings, Radio Drama as a sort of sub-medium of Radio can serve the function of spreading literacy - the spoken, auditive, mystical nature of a word doesn't make it any less of a word. Orson Welles, alongside many others, adapted Shakespeare, Dickens and myriad others into radio drama convention - the effects of such productions was that of spreading high culture and art via this new popular hot-medium of the time. In way, it was spreading literacy – the effects are long-lasting, for even today people access these Media via the Internet, and they have been well preserved. McLuhan (*Understanding Media*, pp. 331-332) declares that the renowned radio broadcast by Orson Welles about a Martian invasion exemplified the immersive and encompassing nature of radio's auditory experience – he continues by stating that Hitler “gave radio the Orson Welles treatment for real”, unleashing dramatic potential in a real-world context. He thinks that Hitler's rise to political prominence can be largely attributed to the influential power of radio and public-address systems, although the content of his message was not the primary factor. Instead, radio introduced a significant shift in the experience of media, transforming the traditional trajectory of Western civilization rooted in literacy. This shift, described by McLuhan (*Understanding Media*, pg. 331-332) as an 'implosion,' was felt differently across various societies. For communities deeply embedded in tribal or family-centric structures, the introduction of radio was a profound and disruptive force. Conversely, societies with a strong foundation in literacy and individualism, where business and politics often overshadowed family dynamics, were more adept at integrating and mitigating the intense impact of radio. In contrast, societies with limited or superficial exposure to literacy found the introduction of radio not just disruptive but explosively transformative. In *Understanding Media* (1964, pp. 324-336), McLuhan talks about Radio as a tribal

drum – he essentially theorised that Radio broke Asia, amplifying various existing tribal tensions – in essence, blaming Radio for the War on Vietnam, amongst other causes. Here, McLuhan reveals his own prejudice, an Orientalism which is to be understood given the nature of his time– which is particularly identifiable in his TV interviews where he simply states that United Nations transistor radios provided to various Asian communities only lead to the explosion of violence (McLuhan, 1970). It might be important to note that Ho Chi Minh studied in Harlem, travelled across Europe and was quite an elevated, literate man (Chandler, 2016). During the Vietnam War, it would have been impossible to coordinate such a massive war effort against a Power such as the United States without the power of Radio, not as a tribalizing tool but as an internationalising tool – it brought Vietnam closer to the time’s idea of Marxist Internationalism, which was not tribal communalism. In fact, it actually brought Vietnam closer to the Global Village which McLuhan envisioned – American veterans of Vietnam today go back there for their pension – for some, it is a cheaper and far more fashionable way to spend your old age (Rummler, 2019). During the Vietnam War, Radio also helped the process of spreading literacy – looking towards this in hindsight, something which McLuhan couldn’t have done, we notice how the Medium of Radio helped the Vietnamese educate and organise an apparently divided population, spreading Nationalism and Internationalism rather than Tribalism – and, more importantly, paving the way for widespread Literacy. It was Vietnam who intervened against the misguided pseudo-communist murderous project of Pol Pot (Pradhan, 2022). These attitudes couldn’t have been developed in Vietnam without the freeing effects of Radio – Radio was not a “tribal drum” as much as it was a revolutionary communications network.

Conclusions

In conclusion, even more so today than yesterday, the Audio Medium overall is a liberating force – Audio Medium understood as Radio, Podcasting, Streaming – all merging into the Internet or rather *through* the Internet – all multi-faceted aspects of the same coin - when books are often consumed as audio-books, perhaps these appreciations of McLuhan should be recontextualised or repurposed. Transmediality is inherent in all media today - one click and you can listen to the book you were holding in your hand and whose paper you were fondling; one slide and you go onto the next simulacrum of a page on your e-book device. Put down

your Kindle or your book and head into a train – open your smartphone and go onto your Kindle App – keep reading the book there. Were you listening to Audible, but the noise around you became overwhelming? Turn on the transcript function and keep reading the text instead. Where does the content, then – the particular text – reside? Does the origin point matter anymore, or has it been lost in the digital matrix? All notions of hyperreality aside, perhaps the origin point of a work matters less in the discussion of Transmediality. What matters is the process of Transmedia itself – all works of art holding hands with each-other, at once reaching into all Media, and all Media reaching into Man. McLuhan (1964, pp. 5-6) understood Electricity as a Medium which acts as the extender of our Central Nervous System – he also addressed auto-amputation and extension, concepts he took from Medical Studies – an organ under stress might be decontextualised by the victim, they might “tune it out” so-to-speak (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 52-53). This is an auto-amputation in the perceptual sense. However, an extension – for instance, extending one’s body through a tool or a medium – let’s say a portable radio or a smartphone – is also a case of auto-amputation. The medium or tool alleviates a variety of problems for the consumer. Consider the anxious teenager reaching out for their smartphone in the middle of an uncomfortable interaction – many say it helps them “centre themselves”. In the age of Virtual-Reality headsets and Social Media, serious discussions of media are hard to engage in if we were to apply McLuhan’s thinking – they are emerging channels, to be understood, if at all, in the decades to come, when we will be looking back – McLuhan’s rear-window analogy (McLuhan, *Medium is the Massage*, 2005, pp. 73-75). Perhaps the nature of Audio Drama can be fully explored both as an expression of the times and as a convulsion against them. This is a hyper-tactile, hyper-visual, fast-paced world determined by the Internet and Social Media – in this world led by cold media, hyper-participant media technologies, the hot medium of the Audio Drama is not only enduring but persevering. After-all, Video didn’t kill the Radio Star – neither did the Internet. If anything, the Internet infused the “radio star” with new-found vitality. Convulsions within one medium are convulsions within all others, and hence within our collective and individual consciousness – this is one of McLuhan’s ideas from the past century which is nonetheless indispensable to our times, as we “march backwards into the future”.

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