TRANSMEDIA DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Design-Oriented Approach to Transmedia Practice

Mariana Ciancia

DESIGN INTERNATIONAL SERIES

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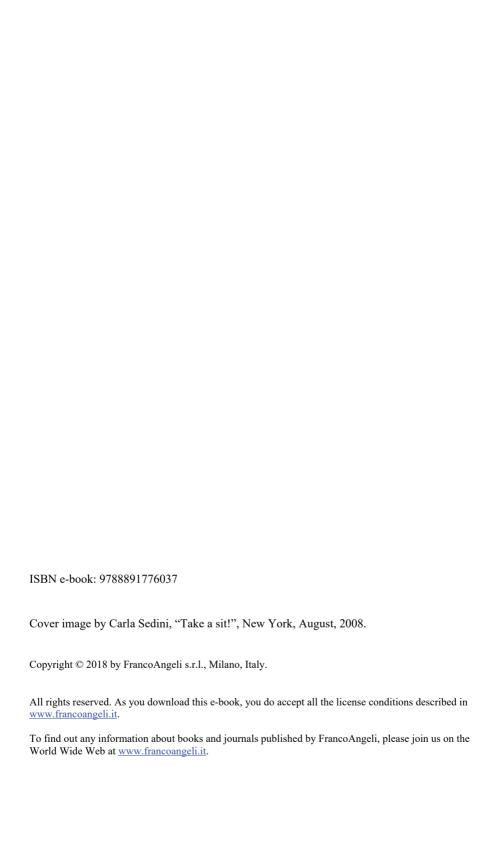
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Cover image by Carla Sedini, "Take a sit!", New York, August, 2008.

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Communicative Procedures in the Digital Era

by *Marisa Galbiati*[1]

This short essay aims to outline a framework inside which we may place some of the questions regarding communication design in digital media. This is not intended as an easy topic – much has already been written on the subject – and its objective is not, therefore, to create a sort of thorough picture of the situation. Its objective is, on the other hand, to identify certain problems that all those involved in the planning of communications face today – an area of rapid transformation and change.

I have thus reduced the area to three functions that I believe are of central importance as far as these new digital objects are concerned: **communicative procedures**, the **narrative dimension** and the **participatory project**.

I will not go into the technical questions or project procedures themselves but I will attempt to offer the reader an interpretation which will enable him or her to understand the conceptual horizon that is the background to the new multichannel and transmedia projects that are the object of this book.

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On the subject of digital communication Marisa Galbiati has published: *Movie Design. Scenari progettuali per il design della comunicazione audiovisiva e multimediale*, Milano, POLI. Design, 2005; with Piredda F. (2010), *Design per la WebTV. Teorie e tecniche per la televisione digitale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano; with Piredda F. (2012), *Visioni Urbane. Narrazioni per il design della città sostenibile*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, as well as many essays and articles on digital culture and the digital design project.

(Digital) communication

The digital medium represents the very backdrop to contemporaneity. We are totally submerged in a constant flow of images, information and data inside which we are trying to find our way, looking for a direction in this constellation that is building new, fleeting, ephemeral and crumbly worlds. Our presence in social networks underlines our need to be seen and recognised by other people, a need to take part in a public *conversation*.

Nevertheless, the highest level of visibility does not necessarily entail the highest level of participation. On the contrary, the modern subject is moving further and further away – thanks to the net – from the modern world and from those relationships that imply a direct contact with other people. We are consigning to the digital medium the communicative potential that Mankind has always employed and administered through the body and in his analogue expressions: the spoken word, glances and posture places in which emotions surface where we cannot lie.

According to Byung-Chul Han[2] «we are enraptured by the digital medium yet unable to gauge the consequences of our frenzy full. The crisis we are now experiencing follows from our blindness and stupefaction»[3]. A crystal-clear, sharp definition that leaves no doubt about the risk of a deviation to which we are all potentially subject.

However, since we are aware of such a risk, we cannot back out of the need to understand the logic and the mechanisms of the digital project, especially in those cases where the design project becomes a concrete activity aimed at solving problems on a local and a global scale. Indeed, an informed designer studies and singles out possible solutions, aware of the cultural architecture in which he operates. A designer who operates in the digital world, therefore, should know the limitations and the potential of languages and technologies and thus try to operate in the name of public advantage and of project quality in order – eventually – to improve the quality of life.

When we talk of a "digital project" a multitude of scenarios open up before us, from the more technological to the more visual or textual. In this particular case, I am referring to that group of planning approaches, typical of the design world, which, by using digital media, produces communicative

[2] Byung-Chul Han, South Corean philosopher examines issues related to ethics, phenomenology, mass communication and correlations with contemporary scenarios characterised by globalisation.
[3] Han Byung-Chul (2017), *In the Swarm. Digital Prospects*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, position 58.

artefacts of varying complexity. Graphic design, interaction design, movie design, infograhics, game design, multimedia, animation and transmedia – these are just a few of the terms which refer to areas of the project in which digital expertise represents an inescapable principle.

Nevertheless, at this point I would like to dwell on some common aspects that affect the various disciplines of communication design and the digital constellation in which they exist: the communicative procedure, the narrative dimension and the participatory project.

The Communicative Procedure

The first aspect is a reflection on the meaning of the communicative procedure since each and every digital object is a communicative object both when it is an information vehicle (smartphones, radio, television, clock, computer, the internet of things applied to the vast world of objects) and in that very moment in which it becomes an icon, an image equipped with certain aesthetic or functional features which define it as a communicative object (for example, the Apple world). We are so immersed in a communicative dimension that we often forget that communication is a very dense and fragile experience with its own working rules since, first of all, it represents the connective fabric of society. People interact with each other through communicative models that use analogical and numerical processes and an oversight or a violation of the communicative past may create problems, incomprehension and failure. This is made more complex by the presence, in our daily lives, of communicative devices which are continually intertwined with the methods of interpersonal communication. It is for this reason that we need to understand the mechanisms involved since our life is studded with relationships with people and relationships with those objects in the technological landscape that populate our habitat.

Back in the 1960's a group of experts from the School of Palo Alto in California (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson) had already singled out some of the rules that human communication is based on, starting off from the theory of information in which syntactics, semantics and pragmatics define the very basis of communicative behaviour. To this we might add an eye-opening intuition according to which "a phenomenon remains unexplainable as long as the range of observation is not wide enough to include the context in which

the phenomenon occurs"[4]. Experts highlight the importance of the context in which phenomena occur and claim that human behavior is decipherable only when the context in which behavior develops is known. We will discover how this observation is so extraordinarily contemporary even in a landscape where interconnection with digital objects appears to transform the whole system of human relationships.

The authors start off from the claim that individuals are equipped with a body through which they interact – communicate – with the external environment by speaking, by listening, by gestures, by the expression of the eyes, by posture and by movement etc and each and every action that is developed from the body assumes a communicative value. Thus, behaviour influences communication just as it is communication that conditions behaviour: "Thus, from this perspective of pragmatics, all behavior, not only speech, is communication, and all communication-even the communicational clues in an impersonal context-affects behavior"[5].

From analysis undertaken by American scholars five rules have been singled out (axioms of communication) that govern communicative interactions, simple rules that enable us to understand the workings of interpersonal communication.

The first of these axioms, of exceedingly high conceptual significance even today is: "one cannot *not* communicate". This means that individuals communicate whatever they are doing – when they converse, when they walk, when they produce images, when they elaborate strategies and when they are silent. They also communicate through processes with which they relate to the surrounding environment, with which they move in a crowded situation and with which they prefer *WhatsApp*-type communication instead of personal confrontation. Nowadays, younger people increasingly prefer to break a relationship with a message, or an emoticon, not to mention the pathological condition of the *Hikikomori*, young Japanese people who totally isolate themselves from society for long periods of time dedicating themselves only to communicating by internet and video games. Along with this particular consideration there is an axiom according to which every piece of communication contains an aspect of content, or transmissive information, and an aspect of relation, or the way in which the information is transmitted, the way that complies with the system of non-verbal communication.

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[4] Watzlawick P., Beavin J.H. and Jackson D.D. (1967), *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, W W Norton & Co Inc, New York, pp. 20-21.
[5] *ivi*, p. 22.

Each communicative interaction between two or more people contains both of these aspects. However the aspect of relation has greater value than the aspect of content and this is the cause of many misunderstandings or communicative disturbances. Each communication implies a commitment and defines the way in which a sender considers his relationship with the receiver (it may be deduced from this that it is the way of the relation which attributes a sense to the content).

Operators of contemporary communication, from advertising to the cinema and from the press to Facebook are entirely aware of the way in which communication acts and they seek to transmit the contents by paying considerable attention to the model of the relation they are creating with their audiences. The models of the relation have infact become participatory, engaging and, often, fascinating. Examples of this are *flash mobs*, communicative performances in which the message being transmitted (advertising or social) is enacted in the medium of physical space in order to build a relation with a real public (not virtual) and with the objective of directly involving people in creating relationships.

The complex system of communication is further characterised by the action of two ways of communicating: analogically (non-verbal language, body language and the place of the emotions) and numerically/digitally (verbal language, information and data). It is obvious that each one of us always communicates with both ways and this renders our communicating both much richer and more multifaceted. This is why some scholars believe that a shift towards digital communication deprives the individual of that indispensable vocation for direct relations in which we are able to look into each other's eyes and use language to fix a relationship with another person.

The supremacy of digital communication could therefore bring about a reduction (or, a termination) of that **relation** of closeness that typifies our **relationships** in favour of a relationship that is weaker, according to Byung-Chul Han, superfluous and without that sensorial dimension that lies at the very base of how we like to live our lives. Nevertheless, we are immersed in this scenario and the better way to experience it is to be aware of the risks but also aware of the opportunities that it offers, trying to understand its implicit laws, trying not to be absorbed into it and trying to find a ready balance that enables us to be active protagonists in the public space.

The Narrative Dimension

According to Giorgio Agamben[6] the concept of a "story" is tied to times in the distant past, times in which humanity, having lost touch with its own traditions – connected to those ancient rites that took place around a fire, symbol of mystery – consigned to stories the role of keeping those traditions alive. Thus, telling stories represents something which is able to put us back in touch with an ancient mystery that permeated the lives of our ancestors. Perhaps this is the reason why – even today – narrating stories is still fascinating territory, practised on a daily basis, in all areas, firstly in literature and in the cinema but also in advertising, in architecture, by city planners, by art historians and by designers.

As stated by Davide Pinardi[7], narrating means building images of reality and transmitting them to other human beings, and narratives help us to live and live together because they are tools for communication.

Our very existence is a narrative: each one of us could write the story of his or her life just as great writers have told us of the lives of great personalities and historic eras in literature's greatest masterpieces. History itself is a great *story* just like ideologies, religions, revolutionary utopias, a concept examined by the philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard in his text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*[8] in which he sets the beginning of post-modernity with the end of the great narratives (Illuminism, Marxism…).

A story is such if it is told within the experience of time[9] and space since it is created by the connection of events that are locally and temporally situated. Narrative, understood as the activity of telling small or long stories, is an activity that is nowadays much loved and appreciated (perhaps due to that ancient flashback of fire mentioned by Agamben) in all areas so much so that communication operators are encouraged to transform messages into stories, events into narrative and representation into storytelling. And it is precisely this storytelling that has become a *leitmotiv* today, the main engine to use when seeking to build a relation with audiences, with the public and with a specific target.

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[6] Agamben G. (2014), *Il fuoco e il racconto*, Nottetempo, Roma.
[7] Pinardi D. (2010), *Narrare. Dall'Odissea al mondo Ikea*, Paginauno, Milano, p. 10, p. 21.
[8] Lyotard J.F. (1984), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
[9] Please see, Ricoeur P. (1984), *Time and Narrative, Volume I*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London; Ricoeur P. (1986), *Time and Narrative, Volume II*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London; Ricoeur P. (1988), *Time and Narrative, Volume III*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

Storytelling is about telling a *story*. As a matter of fact, it is all a bit more complex than it initially appears since telling a story implies an architecture of elements that have in no way been assembled by chance (*topos*, *logos*, *ethos*, *epos*, *genos*, *telos* and *cronos*) and that assume a real sense only if they are inserted inside a narrative world which legitimises their existence[10], thus bearing out the intuitions of the scientists at the School of Palo Alto, according to whom it is the context which imbues the text with sense. Without the construction of a narrative world it would be unthinkable to fully comprehend the thousand shades of meaning of a story.

Just think of those great historical novels such as *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo in which the intertwining of the stories of the various characters are very closely connected to the social and political environment in Paris after the Restoration or the more recent tale by Elena Ferrante[11], in which she narrates the story of two women who were born in the same run-down area of Naples and who were brought together and then separated by different destinies. The power of the novel (its magic) lies in its ability to lead the reader into a narrative world and its effectiveness is substantiated in the ability of the narrator to involve the reader, inviting him to take part in the story as if he was a virtual character who is going through the same emotions as the real characters in the novel.

In his essay, Davide Pinardi clearly states that a story acquires a sense and is attractive only if it is set in a narrative world that provides us with the instruments to understand the context in which it is created. Both novels and films represent places in which the narrative world provides us with indispensable information for the deciphering of events. Every single detail, from how a house is built, to how a character is dressed, to how people move inside a particular area, to the technological apparatus present, speak to us of the narrative world that is a platform for the story.

It would be impossible to place a film like *The Ten Commandments* by Cecil B. DeMille (1956, USA) into contemporary society (there would be a rupture of the pact between text and context in which it is usually the context which gives significance to the text), just as *Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001, USA) could not be set in the Middle Ages. Individuals are trained, from

[10]   On this particular subject, among many of the volumes dealing with the art of the narrative, I recommend the useful manual by Pinardi D. and De Angelis P. (2006), *Il mondo narrativo*, Lindau, Torino; and by Pinardi D. (2010), *op.cit.*

[11]   Ferrante E. (2011), *La bambina geniale,* edizioni E/O, Roma; id. (2012), *Storia del nuovo cognome,* edizioni E/O, Roma; id. (2013), *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta,* edizioni E/O, Roma; id. (2014), *Storia della bambina perduta*, edizioni E/O, Roma.

when they are small children, to build a connection between text and context so that they can fully comprehend all the elements inside a story.

Obviously, there are exceptions to this. The film, *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986, USA) tells the story of the life of the great artist who lived in the 1500's. Some details hark back to the period in which Caravaggio lived: the lack of electric light subsituted by candles, the clothes, the environments, the city and the characters of the various personalities. However there are other details that burst into the film and disorientate the viewer: in one scene an electric lightbulb appears and a typewriter (they had not yet been invented at that time); in another scene the artist is wearing a cap similar to those worn by building labourers in the 1950's, made with a sheet of newspaper which, in Caravaggio's time, was a habit not yet practised. One of the final scenes of the film takes place in a modern garage (obviously, cars were invented at the beginning of the Twentieth century, so the scene was purely anachronistic) and many characters in the film wear contemporary clothes. The director intended, in this case, to let the viewer experience a potential contemporaneity of the story: the story that unfolds is one of love, jealousy, passion, antagonism, revenge and murder. It is a story that has always permeated society, beyond those cultural models that have informed it. The same is also true for the written novel, for theatre and for an advertisement.

Nevertheless, whilst it is easier for us to understand and interpret the narrative structure of a novel by Tolkien or a film by Woody Allen (since these stories are told by words or images) it becomes more complicated to shift the narrative requirement towards objects of a different nature.

Can we speak of a city as a "narrative made of stone"[12]? Can we say that the way in which places of worship, hospitals and schools are organised represents stories of the culture to which they belong? *Space speaks and also speaks when we do not want to listen to it*, Umberto Eco states in his preface[13] to the Italian version of the volume *The Hidden Dimension* by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall published in 1963, a treatise on proxemics, in which the meanings of personal and social spaces are explored within different cultural models and it is based on the concept that culture is communication.

Furthermore, can we speak of the narration of a brand? Can we say that a fashion show is an aesthetic narrative? Or that a project for car sharing represents a segment of a narrative that speaks to us of new ways to experience

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[12]   Term used by the philosopher Dino Formaggio in a conference on city aesthetics, in the 1980's, Faculty of Architecture, Politecnico di Milano.
[13]   Hall E.T. (1968), *La dimensione nascosta*, Bompiani, Milano.

and use the city? I believe that the operation of transferring the narrative requirements from those pre-ordained and more practised areas – literature, cinema, theatre – to multi-dimensional areas, seemingly lacking in narrative ways, spatially and temporally hard to identify and broken up, is possible.

Yes, it is possible because many scholars have demonstrated that communication is the vehicle with which people converse amongst themselves and with the environment and that all those actions that people undertake share a communicative value. Narratives may be confidently placed within the function of communication. Each cultural phenomenon may be analysed by means of the instruments of syntactics, of semantics and by pragmatics: each cultural world creates trends that represent narratives which are equipped with their own codes and conventions and that we may interpret with those instruments at our disposal. The trend of food (the shift from traditional foods to new foods such as sushi or new trends such as veganism or foraging); the trend of ways of living (from houses made of rigid subdivisions to lofts); the trend of different sports (from the traditional gym to Pilates) and the trend of spiritual practices (from Catholic masses to Zen meditation) etc.

Therefore, we are becoming used to using stories in increasingly different contexts. In this light, an abundance of examples is provided for us by the system of brands, whose objective – in more and more competitive markets – is to intercept their targets with more and more engaging ways and techniques. The explosion of digital instruments, the web, the internet of things (IoT), social networks and streaming have enabled brands to create new strategies in order to reach audiences that are no longer the passive receivers of a message but protagonists of the dialogue inside the markets.

Markets are becoming increasingly similar to conversations[14] and the dimension of the conversation has become the pivot around which new communicative models are being re-designed. There are tales of brands that are set up to achieve a particular purpose and that only inhabit the internet, web storytelling run with a bottom-up logic by the users, narratives using different media – multichannel distribution –, events creating stories within stories by managing a narrative dimension that is multiplied from an idea that it will be then spread over different media with its own narrative identity Hence, transmediality. These are only some of the aspects of a landscape – of advertising and entertainment communication – which is in a state of rapid evolu-

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[14] The *Cluetrain manifesto* is a group of 95 theses compiled in 1999 by Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Searls and David Weinberger, on the trends of the new markets, on the behaviour of companies and consumers, in relation to the development of the internet.

tion, a landscape made of fragments, suggestions, images, events, games and performances that the final user has to be able to reconstruct and imbue with a shared meaning.

The aim of this accentuated narrative dimension would appear to be in a reconveyance to brands – and to the sphere of entertainment – of those symbolic meanings and that experiential dimension that an over-market oriented management had dulled.

The web[15] is full to bursting with a whole host of cases in which users have contributed in creating new stories, at times towards enhancing the features of a brand and, at other times, emphasising a message in a paradoxical fashion like, for example, the much-celebrated experiment achieved by putting Mentos sweets into a bottle of Coca Cola thus producing a sort of explosion – an experiment which was reproduced by thousands of fans who posted their videos on-line, creating those viral phenomena that are so widespread nowadays on the internet.

It is just as if we were still around that fire – today more and more virtual – where millions of people constantly connected want to be part of the stories of their times, entering into a sort of global meta-narrative.

We are currently living in a state of what Linda Stone[16], in 1998, defined as a "Continuous Partial Attention". Each one of us is taking part in a variety of activities at the same time but, differently from multi-tasking (an attitude that implies that what we are doing is motivated by an urge to be more efficient and productive – dining with someone and talking about a contract, reading an email, answering the telephone, casting a quick look at what's going on in the social networks, all made possible at the same time by setting into action consolidated cognitive processes) this continuous partial attention syndrome stems from the desire to be a living crossroads of the internet.

A question therefore of being constantly connected so we do not lose the opportunities that pop up before us, being connected so we are recognised, feeling alive, significant so we do not lose anything that is happening in the world around us.

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[15]   Please see, Sassoon J. (2012), *Storie virali*, Lupetti, Milano; and Sasson J. (2012), *Web storytelling*, FrancoAngeli, Milano. Both volumes offer a theoretical approach to the subject and many examples that help us to better understand the geography of the new brand narratives.
[16]   American scholar and expert of multi-media and web culture, a writer and consultant for large groups like Apple, Microsoft, WWF, MIT media lab. The phenomenon of continuous partial attention is the object of the lecture given by Alberto Contri on the occasion of the HC Degree (see note 20).

According to Stone, this induces people to be in a situation of constant stress, continually on the alert, continually striving to be visible at each and every moment and in each and every place. It is what Byung-Chul Han[17] calls "an achievement society", a society that creates depressed and frustrated subjects after being exposed to an excess of stimuli, heading towards an exhaustion of the soul in which "Perception becomes fragmented and scattered"[18], a society that is losing its ability to listen and thus to communicate.

This is a real risk and in order to reduce such a risk it is necessary to shift our attention back onto the analogical qualities of communication where relations are physical and where the message is not mediated by a technological device and where we may witness the beauty of the experience that hails from the body, from a glance, from a word and within a physical space.

The Participatory Project

The scattering of messages into a large number of channels, the continual connectivity and the interaction that digital media enables have put communication operators to the task, in the sectors of commercial communication, social communication, entertainment, television and information.

The uni-directional communicative model (the brand which communicates in a one-way direction with homogenous targets, through structured and codified advertising channels) is disappearing in favour of a communicative approach that pulversises the message and that strives to single out more and more focused targets which are increasingly included in continuous and interactive dialogues with companies. This communicative "noise" offers both advantages as well as opportunities for the brand and the audience such as, for example, the sensation of being omnipresent and connected with the great network of information but, on the other hand, a feeling that it is not so easy to manage in an intelligent manner the enormous cognitive heritage at our fingertips thus bringing about that continuous partial attention phenomenon suffered by a large part of those people who are *connected*.

Brands are constantly involved in singling out ways to attract and seduce the public. They do it by fully exploiting the narrative system through stories in which the brand is represented and in which the brand builds worlds inside which people may find an identity, share collective visions

[17] Han Byung-Chul (2015), *The Burnout Society*, Stanford briefs, Stanford, California.
[18] *ivi*, p. 12.