

New Approaches to Transcodification

Transcodification: Arts, Languages and Media



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Simone Gozzano

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New Approaches to Transcodification



Literature, Arts, and Media

Edited by

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Table of Contents

Mattia Petricola

On Transcodification: A Proposal for a Code-Oriented Approach to Adaptation and Intermediality — 1

Section 1: Theories

Raffaele Chiarulli

“Various Are the Incidents in One Man’s Life Which Cannot Be Reduced to Unity”. First Aristotelian Lesson on Transcodification — 13

Marina Grishakova

Transcodifications of the Real: ‘Presence,’ Nature, and Artifice in Historiography and Art — 23

Ágnes Pethő

Cinema’s Affective and Metaleptic Intermediality — 37

Marie-Laure Ryan

Telling Stories with Objects: Narrative and Materiality — 53

Dario Tomasello

The Impossible Transcodification. What if Performance Does Not Deal with the Mediascape? — 65

Bartosz Lutostański

A Poetics of App Fiction — 71

Section 2: Words and Images

Márcia Arbex-Enrico

The Survival of Painting: Cinematic and Literary *Tableaux Vivants* — 83

Silvia Kurr

Ekphrastic Transformations of the Nude in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and Nuala ní Chonchúir's *Nude* — 93

Yael Balaban and Naphtali Wagner

Musical Metaphors as Intermedial References — 103

Mattia Arioli

Framing a Shot: Intercode Adaptations and Ethical Remembrance of the Vietnam War — 113

Laurence Riu-Comut

Recycling Film Genres: Transcodification of the *Film Noir* in the Contemporary Anglo-American and French Novel (Martin Amis, Robert Coover, Tanguy Viel) — 125

Miriam de Paiva Vieira and Joicy Silva Ferreira

***How to be Both* through Overlapping Ekphrastic Layers — 135**

Silvia Albertazzi

Nostalgia of the Present: Pauline Boty From the Swinging Sixties to Post-Brexit UK — 145

Gianlugi Rossini

The Unlikeable Woman: *Olive Kitteridge* and the Invisibility of the Adapted Screenplay Text — 153

Section 3: Screens and stages

Paolo Pizzimento

Liturgy and Theatre at the Gates of Dis. The *Divine Comedy* as a Transcodification of Medieval Performance — 167

Sieghild Bogumil-Notz

Turandot – A Feminist Heroine Crossing Codes and Media — 177

Massimo Fusillo

Sublime Voices, Tragic Identifications. On Two Opera Re-enactments in cinema — 189

Serena Guarracino

Transcodification as *Hantise*: Opera and Memory in Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien — 197

Anna Chiara Corradino

Corporal Transcodification(s): Mark Morris' Dance Adaption of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* — 205

Doriana Legge

A Performance Of Sound for an Immersive Theatre — 219

Giovanna Santaera

***Black Mirror* – *Bandersnatch* and/as Intermedial Performativity through TV Series, Cinema and Digital Transcodification — 227**

Umberto Rossi

From V to V: The Problematic Adaptation of Alan Moore & David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* — 237

Giorgio Busi Rizzi

Digital Comics as Participatory *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck* — 247

Section 4: Cultural transfers

Sean Cubitt

Dissonance, Anachrony — 263

Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih

The Egyptian Enigma in New Media Art. Haytham Nawar's AI Human-Machine Installations — 279

Kathleen L. Komar

The House of Atreus in Cyberspace: Transmediality of Classical Materials — 289

Yorimitsu Hashimoto

Suspended or Suspenseful? Orientalism, Rat Torture, and Transmedial Fantasies — 299

Giuseppe Previtali

The Gamification of Terror: The Imaginary of Videogames from the War on Terror to the Islamic State — 317

Lora Markova

Transcoding Migration: On the Transcultural Aesthetics of Socially Engaged Creativity across Europe — 327

Mario Tirino

The Same Film or Another One? Fansubbing as Resistant Transcodification Practice in the Postcinema Age — 337

Chiara Scarlato

Inside of the Technology of Surveillance: Notes on Shu Lea Cheang's 3x3x6 — 347

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

Japanese Space Opera and Intermediality — 357

Contributors' bios — 367

Author index — 375

Subject index — 381

Giuseppe Previtali

The Gamification of Terror: The Imaginary of Videogames from the War on Terror to the Islamic State

Abstract: In the last decades, various scholars began to address the issue of the so-called gamification of warfare. Contemporary wars, according to this perspective, visually resemble the structure and the aesthetics of videogames (as the vast debates around the use of drones seems to demonstrate). Videogame has always been a crucial medium in the symbolic and visual economy of contemporary warfare and this process became even more apparent after 9/11, within the so-called War on Terror. The essay will analyze the role played by videogames in this context following two different but intersecting path. On the one hand, it will be argued that videogame played an important role in the process of legitimization of Bush's war, both in term of recruitment and of collective imaginary. On the other hand, the essay will show how jihadist organizations promoted a reappropriation of this medium in various and still widely unexplored ways.

Keywords: Visual culture, terrorism, war, videogames, Islamic State

The media battlefield

In his quintessential study on the connections between visual media and military technologies, Paul Virilio¹ highlighted the existence of a long and complex interplay between these two fields, that since Marey's *fusil photographique*, seem to share the same set of gestures and procedures. After all, the double meaning of the verb "to shoot" etymologically confirms that the act of seeing someone and the ability to preventively kill someone are part of the same "scopic regime."² Moving from this theoretical premise, still crucial for all the research at the crossroads between visual culture and military studies, it is possible to identify various possible connections between visual media and contemporary warfare technologies. Take for instance this striking example, provided by Stahl, that highlights how a game console could be used as a military technology:

1 Virilio 1989.

2 For the definition of this crucial concept, see the classic remarks by Metz 1982 and Jay 1988.

In March of 2000, the release of Sony's new PlayStation 2 hit a minor snag. The Japanese government classified the game console as a general-purpose product related to conventional weapons on the ground that it was powerful enough to be used as an actual missile guidance system.³

While the function of images in contemporary warfare has been widely explored by an ever-growing amount of literature,⁴ the role of videogames has been somehow less analyzed, regardless of continuous references to this medium in the context of drone warfare.⁵ Nevertheless, in a mediasphere that is more than ever convergent, transmedial and interconnected, the importance of videogames in defining the cultural imaginaries of conflicts cannot be underestimated, both in terms of justification of specific military actions and in terms of providing a set of visual and narrative references for war communication.

Let's consider, for instance, the strategic handbook *Joint Vision 2010*, released in May 2000 by the US Defense Department. In this crucial and still somehow unexplored document, the US army defines a plan of strategic development for future military interventions, trying to imagine the physiognomy of war in the upcoming century and to think ahead of their potential adversaries. In this context, the final objective to pursue in every instance is the so-called "full spectrum dominance", a condition to be obtained through a set of new strategic concepts such as dominant maneuver, precision engagement and focused logistic. The use of these tactic ideas will provide the US army with the possibility to dominate in every possible warfare scenario, ranging from deterrence operation to direct military involvement (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2010). Another crucial element of this new approach towards military operation has to do with the involvement of common citizens in the symbolic economics of warfare. While soldiers conquer the battlefield, every citizen is required to become part of what we might call an "extended army": in this respect, the document provides a new definition of what can be labelled as "military", where every individual that helps to legitimize and make relevant military operations in the political agenda becomes relevant. In this process, different cul-

3 Stahl 2006, 112; see also Stahl 2018.

4 See at least the classical studies by Mirzoeff 2005 and Mitchell 2011.

5 One of the main ethical issues in the debate on drones in armed conflict has to do with the feeling of disconnection between the drone operator and his acts, given the distance and the videogame-like setting in which, according to some scholars, he operates. In this context, the study by Cole, Dobbing and Hailwood (2010) became extremely popular due to its ability to summarize this problem with the definition of a "PlayStation mentality". However, both the theoretical value of this concept and the problem of the pilots' sense of unaccountability, are still debated (see Lee 2017).

tural products such as movies, tv series,⁶ and videogames, become quintessential and help to performatively generate this new “militarized” citizenship. As Der Derian pointed out in an extremely timely and relevant study, what is at stake here is the definition of what can be labelled a new “military-industrial-entertainment network.”⁷

Videogames go to war

In this networked ecosystem, the role of videogames cannot be underestimated, especially due to the immersive quality of their images and the consequential ability to generate a sense of simulated presence that highly strengthen the engagement of the player. It is especially in the context of the so-called War on Terror that the protagonism of the medium became evident, because many interactive texts were designed or used to justify American military effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, somehow updating the cultural role played by cinema in previous conflicts (from WWII to the Vietnam and Gulf War).⁸ In this context, the proliferation of military metaphors and the strict polarization of public discourse favored the commercial success of war-themed videogames that helped to naturalize the conflict's narratives and to embed the players in a precise political position.⁹

Videogames tended to focus more and more often on narratives about (more or less) fictional events that had to do with the development of the war in the Middle-East, giving the players the possibility to experience it in a vicarial way, going through situation and problems that were lived by the soldiers, such as the supposed threat of Saddam's nuclear weapons (*Conflict Desert Storm II*), the military capabilities of Iran (*Kuma War's* mission *Assault on Iran*) or the capture Osama bin Laden (*Fugitive Hunter: The War on Terror*).¹⁰ In so doing, videogames became a highly politicized territory, that continuously reinforced and contributed to replicate the image of the War on Terror as a just and necessary conflict, a sort of Crusade to purge Afghanistan and Iraq from barbarian dictators.

This was made possible by some specific features of videogames: in an intriguing and often overlooked essay, Šisler highlighted that war-themed videogames seem to produce a “schematized image of the world,”¹¹ especially in the case of

6 Prince 2009; Hammond 2011; Page and Lacey 2015; Pope and Bryan 2017.

7 Der Derian 2009.

8 See at least Jeffords 1994; Westwell 2006; Donald 2017.

9 Stahl 2006, 118.

10 Riegler 2010.

11 Šisler 2008, 206.

Middle Eastern scenarios and characters. This highly simplified vision of the world is based on a reiteration of orientalist¹² stereotypes, that continuously propose the same set of schematized material (clothing, weapons, skin colors) and psychological (madness, brutality, atavism) attributes. Take for instance the well-known war simulator *Kuma/War*, that from 2003 to 2014 provided its players with realistic replicas of contemporary war scenarios, reproduced with an extreme attention for details and the military background. Here, the player was requested to fight as a heroic US' soldier against a group of stereotyped demonic aggressors, driven only by an insane and barbaric atavism.

Here and in other similar videogames, the role of the player is to counter an obscure force that threatens democracy and to do so he is justified to act with brutality, often going beyond the law (as the case of the ethically questionable TV-series *24* clearly highlighted). The realistic but ultimately fictional narratives proposed by many war-themed videogames played therefore a crucial role in the process of naturalization of problematic issues that are commonly referred to as forms of "black warfare."¹³ In these cases (I am thinking for instance of the series *Rainbow Six*) the key point is the unavoidable necessity of secrecy, a feature that is deemed crucial to protect citizens' freedom and the ideal of democracy itself. The possible outcome of this politics of legitimation may be recruitment, that is one of the main uses of videogames in war contexts, as the case of *America's Army*, developed by the US Army specifically for this purpose, highlights. Once again, however, it should be stressed that the vision of contemporary war proposed by the videogame is far from realistic and is on the contrary highly sanitized to promote an idealistic and heroic advertisement enlistment.¹⁴

Terrorism and videogames

As a crucial part of the contemporary interconnected and transcultural media-sphere, videogames have been also used by insurgent groups to promote their vision of the world. Although commonsensically and stereotypically reduced to primitive and barbarian organizations, jihadist groups have proven to know extremely well how to participate in the contemporary image warfare. The use of Internet as a medium to disseminate the jihadist vision of the world¹⁵ has been extremely use-

¹² In the sense outlined by Said 2003. For an application of this and other concepts of critical and postcolonial theory in the field of game studies, see at least Mukherjee 2017.

¹³ Riegler 2010, 57.

¹⁴ Stahl 2006, 123–4.

¹⁵ Tsfat/Weimann 2002; Awan 2007; Stenersen 2008.

ful to recruit disaffected members of European and Middle Eastern youths. In this sense, from the mid-00s', the ideal of jihad progressively migrated in the online space, also updating its visual models and strategies¹⁶ to be more appealing to young Muslims. As pointed out by various scholars,¹⁷ the fascination experienced by many young people towards jihadist visual rhetoric had to do with its ability to provide them with a sort of existential framing, the possibility to experience a sense of belonging that was normally frustrated in the countries where they lived, where they were exposed to systematic forms of social, cultural, and economic subalternity. In this sense, jihadist narratives can contribute to produce a new sense of agency in the younger generations, that make them feel entitled to act in every possible way to defend the Islamic community (Ummah).

Videogames have always played a part in this process, although their relevance, compared to other forms of media production (such as videos or printed magazines), often appeared marginal. Nevertheless, their presence in the jihadist media ecosystem cannot be underestimated, especially because it has been demonstrated that interactive media can act as useful learning tools for trainees, thus fostering an "open-source" attitude towards jihad.¹⁸ The use of videogames by jihadist groups began as early as 2001, when *Under Ash* was released in Syria. The game, that was successful enough to encourage the release of a sequel (*Under Siege*, 2005), promoted a sense of harsh hostility towards Israel and the violence of which its government was responsible. The events portrayed had to do with the Second Intifada (2000–2005) and were therefore extremely relevant for the Arab players (non-casually, the game was released only in Arabic).

Even more radical was the decision of the Lebanese party Hezbollah to release, in 2003, the game *Special Force*. The project was extremely innovative because the game could be purchased not just physically, but also digitally. The game was more explicit than *Under Ash* in promoting jihadist actions and ideology, especially because it presented "a training mode, which allowed the player to practice shooting skills on pictures of Ariel Sharon, as well as other high-profile Israeli political and military leaders [...]. Moreover, instead of ending credits, the game presented Hezbollah's martyrs killed by the IDF."¹⁹ In this sense, the game acted as the perfect recruiting tool, that provided the player with rhetorical justifications for his actions while giving him the possibility to virtually pursue his vengeance against the political and military ensemble that violently influenced the lives of

¹⁶ El Difraoui 2013.

¹⁷ Drissel 2007; Seib/Janbek 2011, 61–74; Benslama 2016.

¹⁸ Lakomy 2019, 386.

¹⁹ Lakomy 2019, 388.

so many Muslims in the Middle East. As in the case of *Under Ash*, also *Special Force* inspired a sequel (*Special Force 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge*, 2006), released only in Arabic and “tailored to the tastes of children and teenagers in the Middle East for inspiration and recruitment purposes.”²⁰ The main limit of this first generation of jihadi videogames had to do with their low production value, that impacted on the quality of the final products. To overcome this issue, in various and illuminating cases, it was preferred to apply jihadist “mods” to already existing games, as in the cases of *Quest for Bush* (2006) and *Iraqi Resistance* (2006). Here, rather than producing a new game, jihadist groups modified the code of Western games to rewrite their narratives, thus adopting that transmedia²¹ approach that is typical of the contemporary mediasphere (and that once again reminds us the necessity to stop considering jihadist visual culture as something completely disconnected from ours).

The idea that jihadist visuality needs to be fully integrated in the global perspective of the contemporary mediascape has been crucial for the systemic approach to media production promoted by the Islamic State (IS) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at least since late 2013. The unprecedented trait of IS’s propaganda, in fact, has precisely to do with its ability to produce a widely coherent and organic message while also being able to adapt it to the various media contexts and to the evolving geopolitical situation.²² According to Ingram,²³ three main traits helped to make IS’s media production extremely effective and valuable for recruiting purposes: the definition of a precise and immediately recognizable “brand identity”; the promotion of a “multi-dimensional, multi-platform approach” where messages are addressed simultaneously to supporters and enemies; and the merging of narrative and military action.

In this context, videogames proved to be important for IS’s media project, especially in terms of visual imaginary. In 2014, news about an Islamic State version of the well-known videogame *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*, 2013) began to circulate online through trailers and other promotional materials. To this day, it is still unclear if the game was produced or not, but the trailer originally uploaded on YouTube had a certain circulation even on mainstream media. The game was called *The Clanging of the Swords* and presented itself as a modified version of *GTA V* in which the player acted as a young jihadist and pursued violent actions. It is immediately clear by the trailer that the game was designed to attract young people that were familiar with the visual syntax and the codes of contemporary video-

²⁰ Lakomy 2019, 389.

²¹ In the sense highlighted by Jenkins 2006.

²² See Bayele/Boyd/Coan 2020.

²³ Ingram 2014.

games, granting them the possibility to experience first-hand the fascinating experience of war if they decided to join IS's ranks.²⁴

The trailer was composed of a series of in-game images that showed the character firing at police forces, making vehicles explode and sniping soldiers from a distance. Both the themes of these images and the ways in which these short, juxtaposed scenes were "filmed" are typical of IS's visual style and replicated stylistic features that can be easily found in every operational video produced by the organization. In this sense, the imaginary of videogames seems to play an important role in the visual definition of many themes in IS's media production. Ostovar studied for instance the visual *topos* of the Islamic State's soldier (mujahid), focusing specifically on his iconographic features. Dressed in black and presented as an intimidating and violent figure that recalls the past while projecting the Ummah towards a utopic future, the mujahid becomes a heroic and mythical subject, whose visual identity has a lot to do with cinema and videogames:

The jihadist [is seen] as a shadowy, but impressive, military fighter. He looks like he could be part of an elite special forces unit and would not be out of place as a character in any popular first-person-shooter video game. He is an idealized figure, one meant to portray strength and resolve, as well as to strike fear in the heart of his stated enemy.²⁵

Once again, this process of mythologization involves a recruiting subtext: the young spectator that experiences IS's propaganda recognizes the references to videogames narratives and iconographies present into its media production. This continuous reference to something so well-known is crucial in order to produce a sense of familiarity that ends up strengthening the potential fascination for these violent contents, especially when the idea that the participation of the Islamic Ummah is also in play. Through processes of transcodification and remediation that take place in a by-now completely interconnected and necessarily transcultural mediascape, IS is able to capitalize on the generational and subcultural value that videogames and their narratives may have on disaffected young people. While today the Islamic State is no more than a small and deterritorialized group, the importance of videogames in insurgency and war communication should not be underestimated, especially considering the role that virtual reality may play in the next future, especially considering its power to generate immersive simulated scenarios.

²⁴ Al-Rawi 2018. It is important to note, in this regard, that the trailer begins with a black chart in which this invitation to the viewer is written both in Arabic and English: "Your games which are producing from you, we do the same actions in the battlefields!".

²⁵ Ostovar 2017, 97–98.

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