

Conan the Transmedial. Identity and Metamorphoses in a Transmedial Character

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Abstract

The goal of our work is to investigate, from a sociosemiotic point of view, the status of character (and serial character in particular) in transmedial storytelling and the persistence of his identity through the different medial platforms. In this paper (part of a larger study) we will examine what we consider an exemplary case: Conan the Barbarian. Conan is in fact a hero who has a long history of remakes and translations from one medium to another: it was originally created as a literary character by Robert Howard on the page of the pulp magazine «Weird Tales»; after his creator's death, the life history of Conan was completed by several tales written by L.S. De Camp and Lin Carter, then the same two writers and several other authors «continued» it in a long series of apocryphal novels. Finally the character was translated and replicated by most other media: illustration (from the pulp covers of the '30s to the drawings of Frank Frazetta, who has somehow established his canonical iconography), comics (Marvel Comics, then Dark Storm), movies (2 films, and a third in production) and also — what is less known — television (the TV serial «Conan», and two series of cartoons), computer and role playing games. What is left of the character, in this sequence of translations, remakes and rewritings? Vanished a figurative identity (partially modified over time), and changed, of course, even his narrative attributes; does at least his modal identity (in the sense of Greimasian semiotics) still remain? Paolo Bertetti is professor of Semiotics of audiovisual text at the University of Siena, and of Philosophy and theory and of languages at the Polytechnic of Turin. He has been secretary and vicepresident of AISS, (Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici). He is editorial coordinator of the magazine *Carte Semiotiche* and Italian correspondent of *De Signis*, organ of FELSA. Among his recent books: *Semiofood. Comunicazione e cultura del cibo* (2006; ed. With Giovanni Manetti and Alessandro Prato), *Mediamerica. Semiotica e analisi dei media in America latina* (2007; ed. with Carlos Scolari).

The concept of *Transmedial storytelling* was first proposed by Henry Jenkins (MIT) in an article on «Technology Review» in 2003, and it was later developed in *Convergence Culture* (2006). The idea is based on the existence of fictional worlds to which are related various narrations on different media platforms. Every narration contributes to enrich the fictional world. As Scolari (2009) points out this is a different idea from the one of *intersemiotic translation*, because it's not only a replication of a close series of events from one language to another (like the filmic adaptation of a novel), but every media/platform shows a different aspect of a larger fictional universe. Transmedial storytelling is an empirical notion, based on the observation of multimedia franchisings like *Matrix*, *Star Wars*, etc; as Scolari said in his presentation, to analyze transmedial storytelling we need to rethink and adapt the theoretical and methodological models of semiotics and narratology.

Then, in my opinion, from a narratologic and semiotic point of view *Transmedial storytelling* involves:

1. Different media platforms; i.e.
 - a. Different substances of expression
 - b. Different forms of expression; or, if you prefer, different types of discourses;
2. A serial narration.
3. A fictional world (a diegetic world, or a possible world in different theory paradigms).
4. Finally, transmedial storytelling could be considered a particular case of textual transcendence.

In this paper I will focus on the last two aspects.

I will start from the idea of *fictional* (or *diegetic*) *world*: transmedial narrations describe a fictional world. Now, a fictional world is not only a common background, a shared universe of things, of places, but it consists also of the totality of actions and events that happen inside it. In other words, we could say that transmedial storytelling doesn't involve only a shared world, but an *acted* shared world.

Every different text of the *franchise* can extend storytelling, exploring different aspects, showing different courses of action of the shared world (or focusing on events only noted in the main text). As Jenkins says «In the ideal form of transmedial storytelling, each medium does what it does best-so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play» (Jenkins 2003). However each different medial text should avoid showing courses of action contrasting with each other. If the narrative world is not only a state of things, but it also includes the transformations (actions), then the concept of narrative coherence becomes a central topic. In fact, following the counterfactual logic, every different course of action origins unavoidably a different possible world.

Now, according to Jenkins, one main feature of transmedial storytelling is its participatory nature: this means that everyone should have the possibility to contribute to the expansion of the fictional world, as it happens for example in the so called *fan fictions*. This could be a problem for the maintenance of narrative coherence: as Jenkins observes, «the most successful transmedial franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control

over the franchise» (Jenkins 2003), but this control clashes with the fictional drift unavoidable in a participatory culture — as the same Jenkins (2006: 131-178) remarks referring to the franchising of *Star Wars* — and the use (in the sense of Eco 1979) of original fictional materials in the practice of fan-fiction.

And now we get to the concept of textual transcendence. I use this expression (in opposition to that of textual immanence that in last decades was a dogma, for example, of Greimas school) to indicate the idea that the sense couldn't be confined into a single text, but the text is a field of interactions of semiotics sense constructing practices (of reception and production) that occur inside a yet significant semiosphere, a sensed world. Thirty years after that the so called «textual turn» pose the notions of text and textuality at the core of semiotics, so that Semiotics became (at least in Italy and France) in essence Text Semiotics, the new forms of textuality grounded in the media systems (such as transmediality) has shown evidently that sense can't be circumscribed inside a single text, but it spreads from the *relations* between texts, arising from the translations, the transmutations and the adaptation.

As observed by Gianfranco Marrone (2003), this so called *sociosemiotic* point of view allows to rethink the traditional semiotic concept of character intended as an immanent textual entity, and considered as «a cultural element that finds its own being or 'making sense' in a wider socio-cultural dimension, in the serial repeats, in trans-textual and transmedial changes and in intersemiotic translations; a semiotic object that form itself among and through texts» (Marrone 2003: 25-26)^[1].

Something similar, Marrone notices, to the concept of myth in Levi-Strauss, never completely enclosed in a single text. It's the case of legendary heroes (such those of the old German legends studied by Ferdinand de Saussure), or the modern serial and transmedial characters, from the yet classical Tarzan or Zorro, to Harry Potter e Spiderman, from the Commissary Montalbano studied by Marrone, to our Conan the Barbarian. They are cultural rather than textual entities, semiotic constructions not arising from a single text but from a web of inter-textual relations:

1. The totality of texts (of one or various author) that remakes, rewrites, modifies and translates (in the *same media*) the character. It's the case of serial characters.
2. Texts in *different media* that remake, rewrite, modify and translate the character; it's the case of *transmedial characters*.
3. The peritext, i.e. the totality of texts and interpretative discourses related to character. For example: news, reviews, critical studies etc.

So there are not only transmedial worlds and narrations, but also transmedial characters, whose adventures are told on different medial platforms, each one giving more details on the life history of character. Thus, for example, a live action or cartoons TV series could tell us the youth of Luke Skywalker or Leia Organa, something that George Lucas' films have neglected

[1] Translation is mine.

to do. As Jenkins remarks «A good character can sustain multiple narratives and thus lead to a successful movie franchise. A good «world» can sustain multiple characters (and their stories) and thus successfully launch a transmedial franchise» (Jenkins 2003).

However there is not direct correspondence (mutual implication) between transmedial storytelling and transmedial characters. And this for two reasons: the first, quite obvious, is that in a shared narrative world different characters can live and act, and every story could focusing on a different one. The second reason, less obvious, is that the presence of the same character in different texts on different medial platforms (or, better, on different semiotic systems) doesn't necessary implies the same shared world. It's the case, for example, of Charlot, a mask that could appear in different social, and even historical and geographical backgrounds totally different one from each others. Other examples are the characters of the Disney franchise: Mickey Mouse, Goofy, or Donald Duck have features, background and life histories often quite different depending on each cartoons series or on each national comics production.

This could be extreme examples, but in general, transtextuality proposes some problems to the status of character, in particular concerning his identity, that not always could be univocally defined. It's the case of Conan the Barbarian.

Conan is in fact a hero who has a long history of remakes and translations from one medium to another: it was originally created as a literary character by Robert Howard on the page of the pulp magazine «Weird Tales»; after his creator's death, the life history (and the narrative world of Conan was firstly completed by several tales written by L.S. De Camp and Lin Carter (that edited a new editions of Conan stories in 13 volumes, mostly apocryphal), then the same two writers and several other authors «continued» it in a long series of apocryphal novels. Finally the character was translated and replicated by most other media: illustration (from the pulp covers of the '30s to the drawings of Frank Franzetta, who has somehow established his canonical iconography), comics (Marvel Comics in the '70 and Dark Storm today), movies (2, both with Arnold Schwarzenegger, *Conan the Barbarian* by John Milius and the less known *Conan the Destructor*, and a third in production) and also — what is less known — television (the TV serial «Conan», and two series of cartoons), computer and role playing games.

Now, what is left of the character, in this sequence of translations, remakes and rewrites? Vanished a figurative identity (partially modified over time), and changed, of course, even his narrative attributes; even his modal identity (in the sense of Greimasian semiotics) is completely different. However, his identity is granted by same recurrences at different textual levels, firstly by his *name*, this permits to relate sometimes very different versions of Conan to a unique *diachronic* identity.

Unfortunately, I have no time to show you the details of a wider research that will be by itself the object of a book to be published soon^[2]. What is important for our proposal is that different stories and incarnations of Conan don't refer to a unique fictional word. That's true for the literary Conan (and partially for the comics), but not yet considering also the other media platforms. All Conan versions are backgrounded in the pseudo-mythical Hyborian Age

[2] The publication is expected in 2010. See also Bertetti 2003.

created by Howard (even if the live action TV serial use backgrounds and toponyms totally unknown in Howard universe); however, as we said upper, a fictional world is not only a state of things, a common background, but also it includes the transformations (actions) acted inside it. Now, the problem is that many of the different versions of Conan, show us different profiles, different life histories of the character, often contrasting by each other. For example the description of Conan Childhood is very different in Howard stories and in Milius Movie: according to Howard, Conan grew up in Cimmeria and left his native land at the age of 19 to join the southern civilized kingdom looking for fortune. In Milius film Conan is reduced in slavery with all his tribe when he was child and grew up as a slave. He became a powerful gladiator, before he could be a free man.

If all the work of De Camp & Carter goals to build around Conan a coherent diegetic universe, following the example of Tolkien, arriving to rewrite some stories of Howard to avoid incoherencies and errors. Howard, in effect, didn't have the intention to write a complete and coherent life history of Conan: in the terms of Eco's (1985) typology of seriality, the stories of Conan develop a *serial*, not a *saga*. De Camp e Carter created the Conan *saga*, and their work is at the basis of all apocryphal novels and (with many liberties) of the Marvel Comics' series. However Conan Properties (owner of the right of Conan) was not able to maintain the control of the coherence of diegetic universe passing on different media. Probably, this loose of diegetic coherence is at the basis of the decline of Conan success in the '90.

Vice versa, the relaunch of the character in the last years (starting around 2000, when Paradox Entertainment bought the rights) is based on a rigorous transmedial approach. Paradox Entertainment maintains in fact a strict control on different medial platforms using a marketing strategy that promotes the character in a transmedial way: from the new Dark Horse Comics, to computer and role games, to the *Age of Conan* novels, till the forthcoming new movie *King Conan*, every different medial products presents different aspects of a coherent universe. Sometimes the focus is on parallel histories: in the *Age of Conan* MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) Conan is not the main character, on the contrary, he does not intervene directly in the actions and only after having passed many levels, the player is allowed to the presence of the Cimmerian, by them sitting on the throne of Aquilonia.: the related novels even avoid to show Conan in person, but, as all the other products of the franchise, they present brand new characters and tell new adventures situated in the *Age of Conan*, exploiting the narrative potential offered by that broad landscape of imagination that his the Hyborian Age created by Robert Howard.

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