

Nineteenth-Century Transmedia Practices



From 30th January to 1st February 2020, the University of Vienna was host to an international symposium on *Nineteenth-Century Transmedia Practices*, which was organized by Prof. Monika Pietrzak-Franger, one of the newest members of staff at the Department of English and American Studies in Vienna, supported by Ulrike

Zillinger, and her former colleague, Prof. Christina Meyer (FU Berlin). Considering the novel theme of the conference, it seems hardly surprising that the call for papers was answered by a great variety of exciting research projects, ranging from the transmediality of tattoos to the invention of the electrophone. Going back in time, what this conference showed was that transmediality – widely regarded as a contemporary phenomenon – is also evident in historical practices and is certainly omnipresent in the Victorian era. The fact that multiple developments in the long nineteenth century (ca. 1780–1920) encouraged and inspired transmedia practices allows for a wide range of different research topics of which the small but content-loaded conference provided a varied selection by scholars with diverse academic backgrounds and experiences.

Thursday, 30th January 2020

The conference started on Thursday with a warm welcome from the Head of the Department, **Ute Smit**, as well as from the organizers, **Monika Pietrzak-Franger** and **Christina Meyer**, who introduced some of the leading questions, such as ‘Why transmediality and why historically?’, ‘Why the nineteenth century?’ and ‘What do we mean by transmedia practices?’, to be addressed



and answered over the course of the following days. Furthermore, the changes in production, distribution and consumption of media as a result of technological advancement in the Victorian period were emphasized along with the conception that transmedia practices are conversive and systematic rather than isolated. On the note of transnationality, they also confessed to have long wished to organize a conference with participants from Siegen to Singapore before giving the floor to the first speaker.

Keynote I

The subject of the initial keynote by **Roberta Pearson** (University of Nottingham) was Sherlock Holmes, presented as “THE transmedia character”, who, apart from appearing in the original stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, could be found in a variety of advertisements, theatrical performances and screen adaptations and whose popularity is still widespread. According to Roberta Pearson, the foundation for the character’s independence as a transmedial phenomenon was the fact that people actually believed that Sherlock Holmes was a real person. This was illustrated by letters written to the Arthur Conan Doyle, asking his supposed friend, the detective, for help and advice. Over the course of her talk, Roberta Pearson addressed key aspects, such as increasing literacy rates, changes in transport and copyright debates. These elements did not only determine the development of the famous character, Sherlock Holmes, but generally shaped transmedia practices in the nineteenth century.

As was fitting for a proper Viennese welcome, the first keynote, which took place in the main building of the university, was accompanied by intense classical background music from the adjacent room, where a rehearsal of the university’s orchestra was in progress. Not appearing distracted in the slightest, Prof. Pearson gave a presentation that was both informative and entertaining, and encouraged a lively discussion afterwards. This opening evening was then concluded by the Conference Warming with animated conversations over a few drinks at the nearby Café Eiles.

Friday, 31st January 2020

Transmedial Crossroads: Science and Art

After a successful start on Thursday evening, an ambitious schedule was awaiting the conference participants the next morning. The focus of the first panel, kindly chaired by **Kirsten A. Sandrock** (University of Vienna), was on transmediality as an interconnection between science and art. **Ralf Haekel** (University of Gießen) elaborated on his research on

Humphry Davy and the way in which transmedial practices – from poetry to theatrical scientific lectures – and aesthetical conventions of the Victorian Era contributed to and defined the chemist’s creation of various self-images and notions of himself as scientist. This presentation on self-fashioning practices was followed by an intriguing talk by **Roxana Elena Doncu** (University of Bucharest) on the symbolisms of tattoos, which constituted a link between medicine and art in showing that this kind of body art reflected personal stories as well as history. One of the points that she stressed was the importance of regarding the concept ‘medium’, a term integral to the conference’s theme, less as a tool but rather associating it with notions such as ‘practice’, ‘interaction’ and ‘process’; a thought that proved to be prominent over the course of the whole conference.

Transmedial Figures

Following a welcomed coffee-break, the second panel of the day, chaired by **Julia Lajta-Novak** (University of Vienna), was dedicated to characters that were spread across different media, such as the Golliwogg or Uncle Sam. In her contribution “Transmedia Trajectories: The Golliwogg and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture,” **Susanne Reichl** (University of Vienna) discussed the conventions around the (once) popular Golliwogg figure, which appeared in the form of dolls, in books as well as on postcards. The roles of affordability and collectibles in transmedial processes were explored as Golliwogg dolls were frequently collected or easily self-made, and postcards presented inexpensive art and decoration to the middle classes. **Lukas Wilde** (University of Tübingen), who examined transmedial iconography based on the figure of Uncle Sam, and **Michael Connerty** (IADT), with his research on the comics *Film Fun* and the *Kinema Comic*, then demonstrated in their respective talks on cartoons that humour has always worked as an excellent drive for transmedia practices.



Dolls, Toys, and Stage Performance: Sites and Motors of Transmedial Spread

After the lunch break, **Marie Léger St.-Jean** (Independent Scholar), gave a vivid presentation on production and consumption practices surrounding the phenomenon of toy theatres in the nineteenth century. She discussed the practice of transforming real-life stages and performances into templates to build miniature versions of theatres that could enter every household, touching on the role of collectibles and the concept of fashioning – a topic that had already emerged in the previous panel in connection with the dressing up of Golliwogg dolls. Moreover, the example of the toy theatre, which, according to Marie Léger St.-Jean, aided the preservation of the early Melodrama, helped to illustrate the variety of elements involved in the process of transmediation. Multiplicity was also the subject of the paper presented by **Alex Fitch** (University of Brighton) dealing with the many different forms in which the transmedial character of Ally Sloper appeared and the diverse roles assumed by the people involved in the production and realization of these forms. **Ian Gordon** (University of Singapore) also addressed multiplicity in connection with the Kewpie figures, created by Rose O’Neill, which appeared in the form of dolls and in advertising, and furthermore explored the impact of serialization as a driving force in the transmediation and popularity of these figures at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Keynote II

Introduced by Monika Pietrzak-Franger, the second keynote speaker, **Eckhart Voigts** (TU Braunschweig), offered an interesting angle on world-building and the transcending of literature based on George Chesney’s “The Battle of Dorking” (1871) and Walter Besant’s “All Sorts and Conditions of Men” (1882). In the context of the latter, the transformation from written word to real-life objects was illustrated by the example of the construction of People’s Palaces that can, for instance, be found in Glasgow and London. The following discussion then revolved around the



fact that in the presented cases, architecture and its functions had become such an integral part of people’s lives that the buildings’ origins in literature was easily forgotten. Hence, the century-year-old tradition of architecture can be viewed as transmedial practice.

Conference dinner

Towards the end of a busy day, which provided new perspectives on a variety of aspects around historical transmedia practices, the attendees made their way to glamorous Restaurant Stefanie, where the conference dinner was to take place. After the international conference participants were treated to a traditional Wiener Schnitzel, the second conference day was wrapped up with good conversation over Apfelstrudel as desert.

Saturday, 1st February 2020

Circulation Venues in the 1840s

The last conference day started with a presentation by **Manon Burz-Labrande** (University of Vienna) on “Sweeney Todd’s 1847 Transmedial Trajectory”, in which she discussed the mutual influence the popular penny blood and the 1847 stage version by George Dibdin Pitt had on each other. Though claiming to be an adaptation of the



periodical series, the play was staged before the series ended, which suggests that the ongoing story was influenced by the theatrical production. Thus, Manon Burz-Labrande proposed to regard the stage version as ‘reinterpretation’ or ‘transmedia recreation’, rather than ‘adaptation’ or ‘transmedia storyworld’. As the second speaker of the day, **Lisanna Wiele** (University of Siegen) continued the theme of the session with her analysis of “Transmedia Circulations of the Antebellum City Mystery Novel”. Considering the international popularity stemming from the transmedial practices surrounding the genre, she addressed the question of how transmediality and transnationality fostered each other, as the narratives were crossing borders and oceans.

Technology, Culture, and Democracy

The presentations of the final panel concentrated on the effects of the emergence of certain technologies on the development of transmedia practices and society in the Long Nineteenth

Century. Both speakers, **Martin Lütke** (FU Berlin) and **Heidi Liedke** (University of London), discussed the transition to the electronic age defined by such novelties as the telephone or the electrophone, which represented a change in (trans)media as well as in media consumption. Such devices, which enabled telephone conversations and live broadcasting of, for instance, theatrical performances, can be regarded as symbolic of social connectivity during a period of social shift when people were longing for orientation and guidance. However, as both scholars pointed out, these new technologies defining modern life simultaneously caused gratitude and scepticism since they were also considered as uncanny and intrusions into the home. This dichotomy between excitement and anxiety was also the subject of the ensuing discussion during which comparisons with today's views on and attitudes towards electronic devices were drawn.

Since **Matthew Freeman** was not able to attend the roundtable discussion in person, he kindly recorded a presentation for the conference addressing questions such as *How can transmedia as a practice be shaped?*, *What does it mean to study transmediality from a cultural perspective?* and *Just how intrinsic to Victorian culture was transmediality?*. The questions he raised and examined were then – among others – discussed during the roundtable discussion led by the keynote speakers, Roberta Pearson and Eckhart Voigts, and the organizers of the conference, Christina Meyer and Monika Pietrzak-Franger.

Excursion

Thoughts on the last contributions to this productive symposium were shared over lunch at the sun-drenched English department. Afterwards, the unseasonably bright weather saw off some of the conference attendees as warmly as they were welcomed while it joined a group of motivated participants on their excursion to Leopold Museum, where some of Vienna's finest artwork ranging from Schiele to Hundertwasser can be admired.

