Transmedia and Activism: Engaged Buddhism & Arab Spring Protests as two exemplary Transmediality cases of study in the XXI century.

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Transmedia and Activism:

Engaged Buddhism & Arab Spring Protests as two exemplary Transmediality cases of study in the XXI century

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to research transmedia in its applications to the universe of engaged Buddhism and in the uprisings of the Arab Spring Protests. This paper intends to respond Marie-Eve Carignan's (2019) proposal for further research on transmedia and religion[1]. Her premise is that there is a link between religion and extremist movements and between the way they both resort to transmedial social communication tools as propaganda to attract audiences in their pursuit of violence and terrorism. In contrast, transmedia can also be applied to activism in new ways of social awareness and of spirituality to foster mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Transmedia and Activism, Transmediality, Arab Spring, Buddhism

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[1] Carignan (2019, p. 550) states at the end of her paper: "In academic circles, this land of transmedia religion seems particularly fertile and I invite more research to be done on the ways in which various religious practices are being developed as transmedia practices. It would be interesting, not only to look at the strategies put in place by religious groups, but also to consider the social impacts of these strategies and at their efficiency in communicating different sets of beliefs." (Transmedia and Religion in Transmedia Change. Pedagogy and Practice for Socially-Concerned Transmedia Stories. Routledge.)

According to Jenkins (2006), "Transmedia storytelling is the art of world-making" (p. 21). Jenkins developed the principle of world-building as inherent to transmedia, which can arise from fantasy and science fiction but has also been applied to documentary or historical fiction which investigate and map existing worlds. Kurtz and Bourdaa explored the rise of transtexts, a term they define as "both industrial transmedia storytelling and fan-produced transmedia texts" (p.3), which reinsert the "agency of power of engaged audiences with the concept" (p.3).

The social mobilization that the Arab community has made through the media in the Arab Spring made the Arabs raised their voices through different media platforms starting a transmedia revolution. Moreover, the engaged public of renewed Buddhism has expanded its content after the passing of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn with the intention of spreading Nhat Hahn's message for world peace. According to Denzel Richards (2017, in Kurtz and Bourdaa, 2017), "the extent of storytelling's historical cultural power—and its ability to influence real world sociopolitical action and behavior is clearly illustrated through the example of organized religion[2]" (p.19).

This argument about transtexts and religion goes in line with what Carignan stated about religion spreading its message to reach audiences in a transmedial way. According to Carignan, religion leads to extremist movements such as IS in their furtherance of violence. However, in the study case of Engaged Buddhism, the message of "freedom from all ideologies, even Buddhist ones"[3] clearly opposes fanatism and intolerance becoming a world call for peace to answer the war that was taking place in Vietnam. Likewise, the first Arab Spring was initiated by civilians who demanded democracy in militarized countries. Both cases seem to contradict Carignan's (2019) assertion of religion and extremist movements, therefore replacing it for a message of greater good for humanity: namely, world peace, freedom of thought and democracy. According to Donna Hancox (2019), "transmedia storytelling can contribute to social change by both creating and sharing personal narratives" (p.458),

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[2] Moreover, in an interview with Henry Jenkins[2], Kurtz (2017) states that "transtexts must be understood through a complex framework involving a history and development of this form and use" with an ancient one proved by Denzel Richards (2017, in Kurtz and Bourdaa, 2017) who explains that there are examples of transtexts in history dating back to Biblical times, something which is also related to organized religion and state propaganda in Ancient History.

[3] The most compelling part of the segment of the documentary chose is Thich Nhat Hahn's peace declaration: "… if you read the First Mindfulness Training, you know that this is the practice of non-attachment to views and the freedom from all ideologies. This is a direct answer to the war. The First Mindfulness Training reads: "Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology—even Buddhist ones… This is the lion's roar."

which may be the case of the biographical documentary selected as it retells the personal story of the life of a Buddhist monk who advocated for world peace.

Transmediality is presented by Evans (2011) as an umbrella term which introduces the industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information through different textual forms. It is also the evolution of stories across different media as one of the consequences of convergence between literature and technology (Sánchez Martín, 2017).

Jannson and Fast (2019) add that the concept of "identity" is considered in its sociological understanding as a complex and negotiated interface between the self and the society. Anthony Giddens' framework describes the relationship existing between the self and the society as *transmediatized,* which also shoots the *liquidization of lifestyle sectors* and triggers a state of *ontological vulnerability*. The social implications of transmedia should be targeted to connect media change to the structural transformations of modern society. The claiming of voice, civil rights and recognition among certain social groups, especially minority groups, and marginalized communities are enabled through the concept of *social mobilization*.

A case that applies to transmediality and social mobilisation is the one of Morocco's Arab Spring Protests, which was a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests in the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2012, which has been reinforced as from 2020. Social media[4] played a major role enabling communication and interaction among participants of political protests (both pro- and anti-governmental), dissemination of information, and raising of local and global awareness of ongoing events. Online revolutionary discussions preceded mass protests.

Therefore, "Road to Revolution"[5] (2014) was released and centred on the revolution that affected the Middle East and the Maghreb countries. As a transmedia documentary, it tells the story of the journey through various platforms, including a book, a mobile app, a feature film for theatrical release and television documentary format split in two episodes.

In 2022, Moloney introduced the notion of socially concerned communication and storytelling which include genres that seek to inform, educate or advocate, such

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[4] General info about the role of the social media on the Arab Spring:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media_and_the_Arab_Spring#cite_note-Arthur-5

[5] https://www.mynewsdesk.com/ie/beactive/pressreleases/road-to-revolution-a-different-view-of-the-arab-spring-arrives-to-miptv-977217

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as, documentary production, education, fact-drive social change movements. To achieve goals of audience engagement, transmedia stories need to resonate with their intended publics.

Thich Nhat Hanh[6] developed new ways to apply ancient wisdom to the challenges of modern life. On his official website, there are multiple channels, as well as books, podcasts, tweets and audios, interviews and videos. With over 90 books of poetry, Buddhist narratives expanded into different platforms reaching nowadays meditation apps (plumvillage App), Youtube channels, Instagram accounts, newsletters and a publishing house Parallax Press.

The question of "identity" is relevant to the identification of Buddhist practitioners and Arab civilians' quest for social change as a way to counteract the current ontological vulnerability. Both cases can be included as Moloney's study of non-fictional transmedial narratives which can be seen as examples of *socially concerned transmedia*. They have amalgamated with transmediality as a means for transmedia and as an agent for activism becoming proof of the convergence between literature and technology for social change. To conclude, we resort to Donna Hancox who stated that

Transmedia activism brings new life and understandings to the role of identity and representation in social change … with big data as the holy grail to changing hearts and minds. The social change projects remind us that people and their stories are at the core of social justice and to achieve that activists need to touch and connect with our shared humanity (p. 467).

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