

Memory between old and new media.
Rethinking storytelling as a performative
practice to process, assess and create
awareness of change in the world of secondary
orality

Elena LAMBERTI
Professor, University of Bologna, ITALY
elena.lamberti@unibo.it

Abstract: Storytelling is old, but in our digital age its means are new. When an event of huge cultural significance occurs (such as the sinking of the Costa Concordia, the “Occupy Wall Street” Protest, or the coming of Boat-People to Europe) stories ricochet from TV to Internet, from cell phone to text message with a speed and proliferation unknown even a decade ago. We need new and effective ways to understand the making of cultural processes in a multi-media environment in order to learn and develop strategies to make sense of cultural shifts in a reduced and very limited span of time. My essay draws on research in both Memory Studies, Literary Studies and Media Ecology to open up the study of storytelling to old and new media psycho-dynamics so to start to develop a methodology of investigation that will facilitate a deeper understanding of the role of multimedia storytelling in the ways in which both individuals and groups cognitively and emotionally navigate profound cultural shift, as well as in the ways in which they create and preserve their memories through time and technological change.

Keywords: iconic events, new media, secondary orality, storytelling, Tetrad

La mémoire entre anciens et nouveaux médias: repenser le storytelling en tant que pratique performative de traiter, d'évaluer et de prendre conscience des changements dans le monde de l'oralité secondaire

Résumé: L'art de raconter (ce qu'en anglais on appelle *storytelling*) est ancien, mais ses modalités d'expression sont nouvelles. Lorsqu'un événement important a lieu (par exemple le naufrage de la Costa Concordia, les protestes « Occupy Wall Street », ou l'arrivée des Boat-People en Europe), des histoires prolifèrent à la télévision, sur Internet, sur les téléphones portables par l'intermédiaire des SMS avec une vitesse de diffusion qui semblait inconcevable dix ans avant. Dans ce contexte, une manière nouvelle de rendre compréhensible la naissance des processus culturels dans l'environnement multimédia devient nécessaire.

Cet article fondé sur des recherches menées dans les champs des études sur la mémoire, des études littéraires et de l'écologie des médias se propose d'ouvrir l'étude du *storytelling* aux psycho-dynamiques des anciens et nouveaux médias afin de développer une méthodologie de recherche qui pourrait faciliter une compréhension plus profonde du rôle du *storytelling* de type multimédia aussi bien dans la manière dont les individus et les groupes traversent cognitivement et émotionnellement les changements culturels que dans la manière dont ils créent et préservent leur mémoire à travers le temps et le changement technologique.

Mots-clés : événements iconiques, nouveaux médias, oralité secondaire, *storytelling*, Tetrad

All mediators of memory use storytelling to construct evolving representations/narratives of traumatic events. When the Titanic sank on April 14th 1912, for example, news of that tragedy was conveyed to a broad audience through the press. Across the ocean, people read the same story at the same delayed pace, following a narrative constructed through journalistic reports that mediated for them what had happened. A century later when the Costa Concordia sank (Pellegrini, 2012), however, people experienced multiple different narratives of the same tragic event at the same time and all coming from different sources and different media; in addition to the press, TV and radio broadcasts of what was happening live, all sorts of so called 'personal media' complicated the communicative, and therefore the

narrative, setting. Both events will inevitably stay in our individual and collective memories as tragedies due to the shocking loss of human lives. However, the ways these two events were processed, both by individuals and by groups, as well as the cultural trauma associated with them, are profoundly different.

The above mentioned events demonstrate a major shift from what the media theorist Marshall McLuhan called “The Mechanic Age” (or the age of the book, following the invention of the printing press, and dominated by “writing” as the main form of communication) into what he called “The Electric Age” (or the age of secondary orality brought by radio and electric media) (McLuhan, 2003; McLuhan, 2011). These terms convey not only a different understanding of our environmental conditions but also a different way of interacting with our cultural and technological setting. The Mechanic Age came to an end in the middle of the 20th century, and we are now in a position to fully assess its socio-cultural implications. For instance, we can now recognise that the narratives about the Titanic’s sinking not only revealed “what happened” (the sinking and the human loss) but also participated in an ensuing and more pervasive cultural trauma. Through that tragedy people suddenly discovered that a blind trust in technological progress was but a false myth; in time, they also discovered that major narratives of traumatic events can be easily manipulated through mediators of memory to mould consent. Similarly, we can now process the side effects of the main form of communication of the time on individual and collective responses to that tragic event: at the time, news in the press was still processed by readers through a one-to-one intimate reading, and only later discussed and shared with others. The first understanding of the narrative was therefore private and connected to each individual’s self; a prevailing narrative was then shared by the community. Therefore, the intrinsic operative structure of the medium employed to convey the original Titanic “story” was also functional to create “an audience” for all ensuing “uses” of that very story and its cultural memories (political discourses, popular culture adaptations, etc.).

While the sinking of two ships share certain characteristics, these two events took place within radically different communicative settings. Storytelling is old, but in the age of social media its means are new. The Costa Concordia sank in a 21st century secondary orality world, and at present we do not have an effective mode to fully capture the complexity of the related fragmented, accelerated and numerous narratives generated by such an event. By complexity I mean here the short- and long-term cultural side-effects of those narratives: not only the way they will stay with us but also *what the overwhelming set of stories implies in terms of cultural change*. The intrinsic operative structure of the so-called ‘new personal (and social) media’ is still being assessed in terms of impact on peoples’ emotional and cognitive responses, and personal media are only one component of a very dynamic media environment that scholars are now starting to process in terms of “media ecology”. Old and new technologies do not alternate following a deterministic logic, but combine and add in different ways within cultural and social settings with inevitable

consequences on the way we perceive and remember events: consequences we still do not fully know and whose mapping is to be encouraged.

We might start to address this timely issue by innovating the idea of storytelling (a tenet within Literary Studies) through a renewed interplay of Memory Studies and Media Studies, (and especially Media Ecology tenets) (Lum, 2006; Strate, 2006) so to work out a new probing methodology which could enable us to turn the multitude of voices perceiving and rendering a traumatic event – amplified through the complex media environment – into a narrative useful to map, face and engage with change and its related cultural side effects, including the creation of shared or divided cultural memories. If we envisage new ways to cross-read previously separate methodologies, we might, in fact, innovate the way we understand the making of cultural trauma also in relation to our fast progressing technological change; in turn, a better understanding would help us to come together as an alerted community quickly and coherently when facing sudden and unexpected change. Even though I have introduced this idea through two tragic episodes of human history (the sinking of the Titanic and of the Concordia), sudden change can also come from positive environmental developments; therefore, we might reconsider the definition of “cultural trauma” and acknowledge that it does not only refer to clearly-cut negative situations, as per more traditional Memory Studies, but also to any event which leads to a quick and impromptu change of a given status quo (such as a revolutionary scientific discovery, migration and relocation, or a new form of government).

1. Old and new storytelling

Discussing Memory in relation to the interplay of old and new media implies to tackle some specific questions: how does the passage to a new technology change the idea of memory and/or the processes connected to the very act of “remembering”? What is the relation between orality (“oral society”) and literacy (‘literate societies’) on the one hand, and collective and individual memory on the other hand? And how does this relationship – which is, by nature, shifting – affect the making of our collective and individual “identities” today, in a global and multicultural world context which media scholars generally define as the world of secondary orality (of which Web 2.0 media are the latest technological expression)? How does story-telling – as well as our perception of story-telling – change through the shift from one form to the other, and with what impact on the way we process History/stories therefore creating cultural memory?¹ As said, here, I address these issues through the constant interplay of Media and Memory Studies, as well as Literary Studies, as I am convinced that it is now important to develop a trans-

¹ For a theoretical discussion of these issues, see also: Lamberti, E., “Oralità, scrittura, post-oralità e funzioni della memoria”, in *Ricordare. Percorsi transdisciplinari attraverso la memoria*, E. Agazzi e V. Fortunati (eds.), Roma, Meltemi, 2006, p. 401-418.

² On these issues see the relevant and seminal studies of Newton, J.H., “Visual Ethics Theory”, in Smith,

disciplinary methodology of investigation which might contribute to reconsider storytelling as a *performative practice* to process, assess and create awareness of change in the world of secondary orality.

Story-telling (mediated through forms such as words, literature, the arts, old and new media) is therefore approached here as a social practice which contains – in and through ‘telling’ (by language, images, sounds, body, technology) – experiences understood as cultural and historical processes, as memories of both the individual and the group. As a social practice, story-telling can contribute to redefine concepts such as active citizenship, participation, civic engagement precisely because the act of telling leads to knowledge and to symbolic identification between the teller(s) and the listener(s). In other words, I argue that to retrieve the active meaning of the practice of story-telling implies stimulating a series of dynamics capable of counterbalancing an attitude which seems still to dominate today’s hyper-reality; that is, mediated participation/voyeurism, understood here as the vicarious participation in hyper-real situations conceived through technological applications, disseminated at a global level, inducing forms of trans-national communities where people seem to be active mostly in an artificially mediated way to the detriment of old forms of civic engagement. In other words: social media do not necessarily lead to a long term effective participation to social processes *tout court*. A conscious understanding of how technology bounces back on users (i.e. in terms of psychodynamic reactions) is needed to fully assess and play with new forms of technologically mediated activities.² For this reason, it becomes strategic to reconceptualise the very idea of story-telling through the interplay of media and memory studies.

Jeffrey Alexander and others have extensively proven that storytelling can trigger a process of personification of either an experience or a trauma, turning it into a universal event (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, Sztompka, 2004). Since events are one thing and representations of these events quite another, storytelling plays a role in what can be defined as the complex processes of cultural memory and cultural trauma; that is, it fills the gap between the event and its representations (LaCapra, 2001; Vogler, 2003). However, storytelling is not a static concept per se: its meanings and function evolve through time and space because the functions and meanings of memory evolve, too. Media Studies can help us to also

² On these issues see the relevant and seminal studies of Newton, J.H., “Visual Ethics Theory”, in Smith, Morarty, Barbatsis, Kenney (eds) *The Handbook of Visual Communication: Theories, Methods and Media*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 2005, pp. 429-443; *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. See also: Hope, D.S., *Visual Communication: Perception, Rhetoric and Technology*, Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2006; Damasio, A., 1999, *The Feeling of what Happens: Body and Emotions in the Making of Consciousness*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999; Manovich, L., *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001; Pasquali, F., *I Nuovi media Technologie e discorsi sociali*, Milano: Carocci, 2003.

map how storytelling has evolved through time following the different function it performed within a given community, depending on overlapping cultural factors.³

For instance, in the wake of Marshall McLuhan's grand narrative on media, we can retrace the dynamic evolution of the very idea of "storytelling", depending on both societal and environmental factors, including technological ones. McLuhan theorizes three different ages of mankind, each characterized by a specific form of communication: the oral age, characterized by speech and verbal or gestural communication; the mechanic age, characterized by the development of literacy and all the related technologies (from the alphabet to the printing press); and the electric age, characterized by the discovery of electricity and the development of electric and electronic media (from telephone to radio, from TV to the internet).

The idea of story-telling is thus originally associated with pre-literate societies or with orally-based communities, inside which story-telling was considered a social practice which brought the group together, created its identity, preserved its traditions and culture, consolidated memories and social practices – including communal processing of traumatic events.⁴ The passage from orality to literacy – fostered by the invention of various types of alphabets and accelerated through the development of various technologies of communications, such as the printing press – brought forth a renewed idea of "community", no longer based on "the group" but on the "individual". The idea of "privacy" was born in Renaissance Europe and related to a society which was hierarchical, inside which each individual had a specialized function and where story-telling was conceived as a practice directed and controlled by various authorities: the nation state; the religious institutions; the guilds; the arts and letters societies.⁵ From the 19th century, the advent of new electric media contributed to re-shape the literate society creating a new environment inside which information and communication technologies have been acquiring a predominant position. Critics have defined this process as the passage from literacy to a new "post-orality" or "secondary-orality", underlining some side effects of those technologies on the way human beings behave, perceive time and space

³ See Lance, S., "Il tempo, la memoria e l'ecologia dei media", in *Ricordare. Percorsi transdisciplinari attraverso la memoria*, E. Agazzi e V. Fortunati (eds.), Roma, Meltemi, 2006, p. 379 – 397; Carey, J.W., *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Boston: Unwyn Hyman, 1989; Schudson, M., (ed.) *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995; Schwartz, B. "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory", *Social Forces*, n.61, 2, 1982, p. 364-42; Gozzi, R. jr, *The Power of Metaphor in the Age of Electronic Media*, Cresskill: Hampton Press, 1999.

⁴ See Ong, W.J., *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, London-New York: Rutledge, 1982; Vygotsky, L.S., *Thought and Language*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.

⁵ See Eisenstein, E.L., *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, New York: Cambridge UP, 1979; Innis, H.A., *Empire and Communications*, Toronto: Toronto UP, 1972; Goody, J. (ed), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968; Steinberg, S.H., *Five Hundreds Year of Printing*, New Castle: Oak Knowll Press, 1996; McLuhan, M., *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, (op. cit.).

categories, and relate among themselves.⁶ The so called “global village” was the image often used to epitomize the “secondary orality” world; it is a term which clearly recalls the ancient idea of pre-literate societies, and in so doing acknowledging the artificial – or technologically induced – recreation of a “tribal world” inside which story-telling seems to retrieve some of the old heuristic functions described above and pertaining to pre-literate societies. However, today, the age of social media is further complicating the relation between individuals and storytelling, as the “discarnate human beings” inhabiting electric tribalism à la McLuhan, are now being replaced by new hyperreal individuals: through social media, in fact, the Self is fighting back and each of us can be an active participant in the communication process. Or, at least, *it seems we can*: we can all “broadcast ourselves”, cannot we?

The personal need of being in touch, of communicating, is what makes social media interactivity so popular: it is a new possibility offered to each of us to be active on communication on a large scale, whereas mass media made us passive listeners/users/content. New social media renew our presence (or “performance of presence”, as Paolo Granata has rightly observed) (Granata, 2009) on a global scenario and in real time; they give us the possibility to act upon history, both as main actors and as alive/live witnesses. In other words: they give us a new possibility to participate in our individual and collective history, therefore creating, selecting and consolidating our individual and collective memories through time. New social media trigger new forms of narratives of our present which are having an impact on how we will remember in the future.

It is a brand new phase which follows McLuhan’s understanding of the global village and which we are still mapping in terms of societal and behavioural effects. In 1977, commenting on large gatherings of music fans or other kinds of mass assemblies, McLuhan wrote: “I have noticed that the real goal of those who go to these gathering isn’t obvious; it could be about isolating oneself by losing oneself in the crowd as much as it could be about satisfying any communal needs” (McLuhan, Szklarek, 2002, 96). He extended that observation to the inhabitants of the then electric global village gathering together through electric *nowness*: on the air, collective and inner experiences melted in a sort of mass hallucination through a participatory mystique which retrieved a mythical approach to the environment: “Instant awareness of all varieties of human expression reconstitutes the mythic type of consciousness, of ONCE-UPON-A-TIME-NESS, which means all time, out of time” (McLuhan, Szklarek, 2002, 88). The medium is at once, the *message*, the *massage*, the *mass age* and the *mess age*. The self goes and people live *mythically* or

⁶ See McLuhan, M., *Understanding Media* (op.cit.); Strate., L., Jacobson, L.R.L., Gibson, S.B., (eds), *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2003; Nyce, J, Kahn, P. *From Memex to Hypertext*, London: Academic Press, 1991; Penrose, R., *The Emperor’s New Mind*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989; Logan, R.K, *The Fifth Language*, Toronto: Stoddard, 1995; Zingrone, F., *The Media Symplex: At the Edge of Meaning in the Age of Chaos*, Stoddart, Toronto, 2001.

on the air. Are we still there? I do not think so, as it seems to me that social media have been triggering a different form of communality which brings us to rediscover the Self (and therefore ourselves); a different form of communality which inevitably affects our way of experiencing life and, therefore, of remembering it.

Generally speaking, media and social analysts tend to define the age of social media as the world of Web2.0. Also, generally speaking, they tend to discuss our age through specific case studies which seldom lead to lasting and comprehensive theories. As a consequence, we have many good books on various components of the Web2.0 world (be it Facebook, Twitter, other Mobile Media and App, E-Communities, etc) but not so many suggesting a broader pattern recognition. In other words: to map our present, we can rely upon a great number of “partial generalisations” (Ortoleva, 2012), an oxymoron which mirrors how, today, technological innovation runs much faster than all analysis trying to contain it, and sometimes even faster than its marketing! After all, Web2.0 is a term which does not necessarily facilitate pattern recognition, isn’t it? It is itself an oxymoron: you have the *web* which is an acoustic concept, and you have *2.0* which is a linear one. Can you really count what is in fact uncountable?

Peppino Ortoleva, the first scholar to establish the study of “Media History” in Italy, has recently proposed a different definition for the age of social media. He calls it the age of Guglielmo Marconi’s second revolution (Ortoleva 2009). He therefore shifts from a numeric paradigm which translates the idea of ‘technological advancement’ (web 2.0) to the “human factor” (Marconi), something which, in fact, we should immediately associate with the very idea of *social* media. Water is unknown to a fish, isn’t it? No matter how simple and ‘old fashioned’ it might appear, Ortoleva’s terminology immediately embeds the ideas of ‘pattern’ and ‘process’, which, in fact, are not simple progressive and numeric concepts (after 1, comes 2). Pattern and process are dynamic terms, taking us *back and forth*. A very young Marconi enabled people communicate across oceans overcoming physical boundaries. That first technology already enabled any user to both receive and send messages almost instantaneously. Today, social media are finally offering us the possibility to accomplish the revolution that Marconi’s wireless started more than a century ago: what we are finally experiencing could, in fact, lead to the prime of a process that might change our way of being part of a trans-national public sphere. I do not know if this will lead to more good or more bad, I guess that it will depend on us and on the good or evil in us. Yet, in terms of social patterns, it seems to me that Marconi’s second revolution is retrieving a certain idea of “medieval culture” which makes the 20th century idea of “mass culture” somehow obsolete. As McLuhan wrote: “Medieval culture based on manuscript allowed for a style of communal life very different from the mass community which appeared with print” (Light 46). The philosophy of that mass community could be summed up in a probe that you can also find in *The Mechanical Bride*: “Do you have a personality? Our executive clinic will get rid of it for you” (McLuhan, 1951, 35). At the same time, the core

philosophy of our *new medieval culture* is still being probed. However, we already might venture to say that, whereas mass society relied on de-personalised individuals and on homogenised thought, social media seem to rely more on individuals consciously sharing in a group, and willingly joining a community. Also, when inhabiting social media, we are invited to respond, to “speak”, to take sides. As a matter of fact, it is not so important if what is questioned, asked, or discussed looks frivolous or useless or uneventful. As *a process*, what matters is that we have to participate directly, therefore learning (even though indirectly) to share responsibilities for the good of our community.

However, it remains difficult to decide once and for all what is the Self in our secondary orality age and, therefore, it remains difficult to map and process its technologically mediated narratives. What is the individual now accomplishing in Marconi’s second revolution? What is the individual inhabiting the world of Web 2.0? We are no longer “real” primitives, no longer Gutenberg’s fragmented men or women, no longer just electric primitives, no just “post-human”; as human beings, we have been through so many different technological ages that it is difficult to say what *it is* that we are, in fact, retrieving. We shape our tools and our tools shape us. We are now retrieving our body materiality through touch screen technologies, and dislocating our thoughts on immaterial e-clouds. We no longer live *in between* earth and sky: we *link them through our technologically retrieved “self”*. We are active catalysers of the interfacing process, in constant communication with each others. How this interfacing is changing us, as well as our ways of experiencing and therefore remembering, is still hard to define.

Approached as a crossroad of Memory Studies, Media Studies and Literary Studies, storytelling can offer a key to that because it can help us to process not simply a given fact, event, idea, that is a given “content” which will be later remembered and retold as part of a shared folklore; it can help us to process the environmental (i.e. technological, cultural, societal) dynamics which make us *feel, experience* and therefore *remember* a fact *that way* and not others. This is why it is important to open up the study of storytelling to new tenets of media-ecology and innovate memory studies through a conscious combination of literary studies and communication/media studies. In the remaining part of my essay, I will juxtapose Patricia Leavy’s idea of Iconic Events and Marshall McLuhan’s Laws of Media to suggest both a theoretical and an operative approach to reconsider storytelling in terms of performative practice linking to a conscious elaboration of cultural memory processes.

2. Iconic events, performative storytelling

While acknowledging the importance of more traditional theories wherein Media Studies, it is nevertheless important to pursue new investigative hypothesis starting from the complex individual, environmental and technological processes which

underpin the way we remember (i.e. the way we experience and process memories) within a multimedia society. I am convinced that today Memory Studies – even though achieving important results – still suffer from an excessive theoretical and methodological fragmentation which tends to give priority to the field of investigation of the observer (i.e. sociology, anthropology, history, literature) to the detriment of an integrated system of analysis which takes into consideration not only the areas of studies, but also *the practices of communication* and the *social and technological environments* forming their communal ground. It is in fact important to map both cognitive and emotional-cultural dimensions of complex and traumatic societies also in relation to the technological and environmental patterns which both express and affect change, and our individual and collective forms of remembering.⁷ It will then be possible to detect common strategies, or differences, to tell when a narrative paradigm shifts, as well as why/how, to then try to model responses to the ensuing cultural trauma also in the light of the technological variable.

Patricia Leavy's idea of "iconic events" is here interesting (Leavy, 2007). She defines iconic events as traumatic events and situations which have been deemed iconic in a given culture and whose mass mediated iconography has had a major impact on the processes leading to the construction of cultural memory. As the name suggests, an iconic event is a mediated 'historical moment' taken as a model to interpret subsequent traumatic events and their impact on society and through which theory legitimates itself (such as the sinking of the Titanic, Pearl Harbor, 9/11 and other iconic events that Leavy discusses in her book. In terms of the passage from the 20th to the 21st century in Europe there is a long list of 'other' significant iconic events we might take into consideration: the fall of the Berlin Wall, refugees leaving Kosovo, young *Indignados* protesting in various EU squares, boat-people entering Europe, and many more). Each iconic event is, in fact, a "cultural process" per se, whose complex "narrative" combines three different phases: "a) the initial interpretive phase, (which includes press and state responses, political uses, and popular culture adaptations; b) myth constructions, (showing the meta-narrative of the event with mythical concepts that develop, become appropriated and translated into other agendas, and are later reduced); and c) the effect of interpretation, (as shown through the represented event, the representational event, and the reinsertion of the event into commercial culture)" (Mattson Lauters, 2008).

Iconic events enable the processing of the traumatic event as a "linguistic/communicative act". In fact, it is the "act of telling" *through time, space, and technology* that makes a traumatic event an "iconic event". Inside our actuality, the choice of the language in which a traumatic event is communicated acquires a new complexity because it relates not only to the traditional ideas of *langue* and *parole*, or to the more traditional literate forms, but also to different codes and forms

⁷ See Smelik, A., Plate, L., eds. (2008) *Technologies of Memory in the Arts*. Palgrave/Macmillan; Levinson, P., *Mind at Large: Knowing in the Technological Age*, JAI Press, 1988.

of communication. Considering this transformation and new ways of representation, the traumatic event cannot but be investigated as *a complex performance* and not simply as *a fact*. If we consider “cultural trauma” as a trauma that we did not necessarily experience as individuals, and whose memory we do not have as personal memory but only as *cultural* memory, we can easily form and transmit it through mediated storytelling: telling across generations; testimonies of eye-witnesses; written, oral and visual reportages; books (fiction/non fiction); movies; documentaries; monuments; media and various symbolic or iconic representations.

Storytelling is a process which can be performed in various ways, at various moments, and by means of different media. While the traumatic event is fixed in time and space, cultural trauma is a shifting process strictly conditioned by the actors performing the storytelling and by the setting in which the performative act takes place. In this respect, cultural trauma can respond also to social and political factors and can be used to convey, achieve, or even cover social and political agendas. Also, the technologies through which the three narrative levels of an iconic event are in turn shaped at different moments in history and geo-locations, play a role in moulding sensibilities, perceptions and, inevitably, different responses through time.

As said, media scholars have taught us that new media do not replace each other, they complicate each other: old media integrate into new media and are re-elaborated into new formal combinations and hybrids.⁸ As literary and cultural critics see it, through time the humanities have offered a mirror to societal and technological change; not only works of fiction have contributed to investigate evolving realities, but they have contributed to “train” people to change through continuous formal innovation: from Homer onwards, fictional forms have shaped our consciousness, as well as the way we look at and through things. They have contributed to shape our cultural memories, to give voice to our cultural traumas.⁹ It is now possible to bring these two fields of investigations together in a new way; in order to do so, it is important to pursue a major change inside the more traditional Humanities. Why, in fact, not to promote a major shift of paradigm by changing the way we approach story-telling and fictional works/representations of realities within Literary (or Cultural) Studies? We could in fact benefit if we approach storytelling and fictional works/representation of realities *not as subjects* of study and

⁸ See Innis, H.A., *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951; Levinson Paul, *The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution*, London, Routledge, 1997; Lum, C.M.H., (ed.), *Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication*, op.cit.

⁹ See Havelock, E., *A Preface to Plato*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard U; Hayles, K., *The Cosmic Web. Scientific Fields Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984; Hutcheon, L., Mario J. Valdés, *Rethinking Literary History: A Forum on Theory*. NYC: Oxford University Press, 2002; “From linear to acoustic space: modernist heuristics and the new media-induced environment”, in *MODERNISM, A Volume in the International Comparative Association (ICLA) series. Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages (CHLEL)*, a cura di Vivian Liska e Astradur Eysteinnsson, John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007, p. 431-448.

investigation pertaining to a specialised area of study (literature, but also visual arts, film studies, etc.), but as *functional and complex media* acting within complex and dynamic environments whose intrinsic function, if detected, can reveal causal operations in history. I use here the definition of medium/media as per McLuhan: a medium is all what extends a human physical or intellectual function, in turn having an impact on both the individuals themselves and the environment they inhabit.

Therefore, why not re-assess the idea of story-telling in oral, literate and secondary-orality representations/narratives no longer on the basis of the *visible form* shaping them (voice; paper; digital, etc.), but instead on the basis of *the mode of fruition of a fictional work through time*? How can we pursue that?

Inevitably, we would end by proposing new definitions for old productions, no longer ascribable to traditional canons or classifications commonly used to map representations/narratives (i.e.: historical period; typology of narrative – poetry, drama, prose; form typology – books, movies, TV productions, plays, installations, digital realisations); a new terminology would enable to express and take into consideration also the way audiences interact with the work at stake, following its *intrinsic operative structure*. This is where the work of the Canadian media explorer Marshall McLuhan, which constitute a tenet of Media Ecology, can help us to find new cognitive and formal patterns to map a different “story of storytelling”, encouraging a *new idea of performative storytelling* useful to grasp patterns of storytelling through time and within our evolving media culture and literacy (i.e. it can offer us patterns to process the making of old and new iconic events). From McLuhan, in fact, we can learn how to approach old and new forms of storytelling embedding new technological developments so to grasp ongoing deep cultural shifts. His ‘mosaic-like’ form of writing and his laws of media and “tetrad” offer at once a theoretical and an operative system which can lead to innovative results in our understanding of dynamic and evolving environmental patterns. I am not focusing here on McLuhan’s ideas on media (i.e. *what* McLuhan said), but instead on *how* he engaged with old and new mediascapes. What the world still celebrates as an innovative “media guru” was in fact a sound humanist: Marshall McLuhan was a professor of English who got his PhD from Cambridge University with a dissertation on “The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time”. As a Professor of English, McLuhan considered language as a performative tool to access reality; he retained that idea also as a media “guru” and elaborated a probing method based on an ancient idea of storytelling as a way to experience reality and therefore process, elaborate, retain and communicate it through time.

In 1988, Eric McLuhan published Marshall McLuhan’s posthumous book, *Laws of Media. The New Science*, in fact a father and son collaboration (McLuhan, McLuhan, 1988). The *tetrad*, the operative model that Marshall and Eric McLuhan introduce in that book, combines literacy and orality, knowledge and art; it turns readers into explorers, and encourages a mode of investigation which is participative

and based on language. When operating, the tetrad shows us that communication is not simply the passage of data from one point to the next one; communication is a process which transforms all its actors: senders, receivers, data, and the environment which contains them all. Communication is what creates a network of correspondences - also including the used medium or technology - which can be all valid at the same time. By asking four simple questions (McLuhan's four laws of media), the tetrad offers an easy-made model of investigation which brings into the foreground the intrinsic narrative of each explored medium:

| | | |
|---|--------------|-----|
| <i>What does a medium enhance or intensify?</i> | | |
| <i>What does it render obsolete or displace?</i> | ENH | REV |
| <i>What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?</i> | -- medium -- | RET |
| <i>What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?</i> | OBS | |

The tetrad not only enhances storytelling but also contributes to connect form and content while pursuing the exploration; *it makes us aware of what is observed as well as of its operational modes*. That is, it shows us how old and new media work on us.

Since literary productions are extensions of our individual and collective sensibility, it is possible to apply the tetrad model to assess fictional works *as media*; therefore, representations and narratives can be assessed for their being not only either *literate* or oral or *post-oral* or *digital*, but also *linear* or *acoustic*, *intensifying* reality or *extending* it, *hot* or *cool*, depending on the way audiences *experience* them. All these terms have been developed within the field of Media Ecology and refer to the psycho-perceptive dynamics that each medium implies, that is to the cognitive and emotional responses they trigger into the audience. For instance, a “cool” medium (i.e. the telephone) demands higher participation than a “hot” medium because it processes information in “low definition” and forces its audience to activate all senses in the communication process; instead, a “hot” medium (i.e. photography) “extends” one of our senses therefore facilitating our understanding of the conveyed information.

Inevitably, to apply McLuhan's laws of media to storytelling and literary studies implies to be ready to meet criticism and to propose new definitions for old productions, no longer ascribable to traditional canons or classifications commonly used to map representations/narratives (i.e.: historical period; typology of narrative – poetry, drama, prose; form typology – books, movies, TV productions, plays, installations, digital realisations) because we take now into consideration mostly *the way audiences interact with the work at stake*, following its *intrinsic operative structure*. The analysis of story-telling in different fictional works assesses the latter on the basis of the psycho-dynamics they trigger on the individuals' *sensorium*, and

leads to a classification now based on the *perceptive modes* that they imply; that is, that type of analysis can facilitate the mapping and grasping of broader societal factors conditioning the way we experience and remember. For instance, in this sense an Imagist poem is no longer simply a *visual* or a *literate* form (as it is either “seen” or “read”), but must be defined as an *acoustic* one, as it aims at rendering the complexity of newly conceived space-time perceptions, implying a multiplicity of points of view, sensorial synaesthesia, inclusion of all readers/spectators as dynamic vanishing points. Following a similar reasoning, before the advent of the digital revolution, cinema was perceived as “the final fulfilment of the great potential of typographic fragmentation” so much so, that movies assumed “a high level of literacy in their users and proved baffling to the non literate” (McLuhan); those movies can therefore be approached as *linear* and *literate*, even though they developed through an electric medium.

I am aware that this aspect might meet serious criticism, as it implies a major epistemological shift. However, we should not longer consider the humanities just as “subjects” to be investigated according to previous paradigms; what I suggest leads, in fact, to a major shift of focus and, therefore, of “scholarly mentality” based on our renewed media culture. The interdisciplinary approach combining Media Studies, Memory Studies and Literary Studies needs therefore to be explored to its full potential, that is by investigating all literary productions not as *content* of different forms of communication or genres, but also as *performative narratives* in turn conditioned by the various media. T.S. Eliot wrote that the main function of poetry is what the poem does to you while you are distracted by its content (Eliot, 1936); similarly, Marshall McLuhan wrote that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 2003). I think they were both right: each medium triggers different psycho-dynamics at the individual level and the collective level precisely for their differing intrinsic characteristics. Following pioneering explorations in this field, why not try and develop an integrated operative approach to story-telling which, I am sure, will contribute new insights to the way people processes deep cultural change within a complex media environment?

By investigating the intrinsic *dynamics* of interplay of different acts of storytelling – instead than the traditional *category* of the related representation/narrative – we will be able to better understand the potentialities that the very act of storytelling has to preserve, modify, enhance, or render obsolete communal and behavioural practices of inhabiting our world, therefore grasping new insights on our evolving sensibility. This understanding is a fundamental step to map storytelling *as a performative practice inseparable from communal existence*, and to work out operational patterns of storytelling also in relation to all those variables which condition it through time: form and technology of communication, environmental dynamics – that is cultural, societal, biographical, biological dynamics – individual and collective responses. McLuhan’s innovative approach to

literary studies, as well as his innovative understanding of media culture can still train us to develop awareness of media literacy.

Knowledge of story-telling processes in various cultural and technological contexts will in fact help to better understand the role of story-telling in the making of cultural memory and trauma, the final goal being to understand and probe individual and collective identities living in our high-tech world. Critics have shown that cultural trauma is closely linked to cultural memory and, at the same time, that cultural trauma is more a collective issue than an individual one.¹⁰ Against such a theoretical setting, it is now important to investigate how, as a social and performative practice, storytelling can play a role in triggering two different and opposing results: it can cause cultural trauma to emerge; it can contribute to the healing process. Knowledge of storytelling as a social practice or process can contribute to probe if/how storytelling – and therefore all “mediators of memory” – can truly be used to facilitate the psychological identification and the symbolic “extension” of the traumatic event (Alexander). Storytelling enhances empathy and self-identification with the subjects of traumatic events, as it leads the audience to vicariously share the same traumatic experience and all that it embeds. But in fact storytelling can do something much more complex than that, as in time it can introduce a subtler change in our collective approach to that trauma: first, it turns the “audience” (readers, citizens, spectators, etc.) into actors forcing them to take side and to acknowledge the shock of the revelation of a given historical, social, political or even personal trauma; then it gradually forces them to acknowledge that such a revelation changes the “communal body”, the community *forever*. Hence, storytelling can change our role and turn us from simple audience into active players in the dynamics enhancing or healing cultural trauma; it forces us to critically assess both the environment and the community in which the traumatic experience takes place. It can, therefore, facilitate our awareness of a change in progress, helping us to map and navigate profound cultural shift and its ensuing individual and collective memories.

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¹⁰ See Creet J., Kitzmann, A., *Memory and Migration. Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, Toronto, U of T Press, 2010; King, N., *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2000; Middleton, D., Edwards, E., eds, *Collective Remembering*, New York, New York UP, 1990.

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