New media technology, interculturalism and intermediality

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ABSTRACT. The author discusses the importance of new media technology and the concept of intermediality with regard to the relevance of interculturalism in today's society. Intermediality refers to the blurring of generic and formal boundaries among different forms of cultural practices and in the field of pedagogy. The trajectories of intermedial spaces, actions, and processes of types of new media including the World Wide Web, hypertextuality, online publishing, blogs, interactive media, etc., suggest possibilities and potentials to work toward interculturalism. Interculturalism is understood as a practice of social life including government at all levels, education and pedagogy, as well as all instances of every-day life towards active recognition and inclusion of the Other and a commitment against essentialisms. In this process, the potential roles of new media suggest as of yet un-tapped resources and possibilities.

Introduction

In a ten-point proposal for the theoretical and applied framework of "Comparative cultural studies", I propose as the framework's second principle that comparative cultural studies is "the theoretical as well as methodological postulate to move and to dialogue between cultures, languages, literatures, and disciplines. This is a crucial aspect of the framework, the approach as a whole, and its methodology. In other words, attention to other cultures - that is, the *comparative perspective* - is a basic and founding element and factor of the framework. The claim of emotional and intellectual primacy and subsequent institutional power of national cultures is untenable in this perspective. In turn, the built-in notions of exclusion and self-referentiality of single culture study and their result of rigidly defined disciplinary boundaries are notions against which comparative cultural studies offers an alternative as well as a parallel field of study. This inclusion extends to all Other, all marginal, minority, border, and peripheral and it encompasses

both form and substance. However, attention must be paid of the "how" of any inclusionary approach, attestation, methodology, and ideology so as not to repeat the mistakes of Eurocentrism and "universalization" from a "superior" Eurocentric point of view. Dialogue is the only solution" (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998). It is this principle that my discussion of the potential of new media usage and practices towards interculturality is based on. Further, the practice of intermediality and its corollary of knowledge transfer facilitated by new media such as the World Wide Web represent potential factors towards interculturality against essentialism (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2007a; 2007b).

It is clear that the Western world is increasingly digitalized and thus the relationships between cultural practices are undergoing in-depth changes. The practices of reading, for example, are undergoing changes, although the question of whether there is, indeed, a loss of reading or a change of practices of reading including subject matters and types of media remains undecided. What we can be certain of is that communication as a whole is increasingly digitized and is taking place in various types of new media. The clear result of this is that education - whether pedagogy or institutional forms and processes - must harness new media thus taking advantage of the capacities offered in same. Further, as suggested, the capacities of intermediality can also be harnessed to attempt to counteract the stringent problematic of the inclusion versus the exclusion and marginalization of minorities by an essentialist main stream in society. With regard to Europe and its cultures in particular, the above definition within the framework of comparative cultural studies is based on explicit ideological and practical premises where interculturality/interculturalism stands in opposition to "essentialism" - the concept that best describes the various forms and practices of self-referientiality, nationalism of varied types, and altogether its built-in exclusion of the Other. And examples of essentialisms abound world wide and keep rising: the December 2005 riots in Paris showed the misguided thinking and practice and the opportunities the French governments - and French culture altogether, indeed - missed when it comes to the integration of its immigrants and the situation is no different whether in Germany, Austria, or any other European country (with some positive attempts in place in the United Kingdom, perhaps). Whether policy making, education, government, or scholarship, intercultural communication - a basic

ingredient of integration - is still unexplored in Europe. Here is a recent quote by a Pakistani teacher in the US who returned to Texas after an extended period of lecturing in Europe, Dr. Shemeem Burney Abbas: "The attitude in Europe is still very colonial... It doesn't allow this kind of scholarship to flourish. There's more innovation here, more curiosity, more interest in learning about other cultures" (in Applebome, 2006). And this is in the US where, as we know, things are not all wonderful and where racism and exclusion do exists; the substance of the matter is the comparison with the situation in Europe, of course. Why, for example in Germany and in Austria, the discourse in general and in scholarship does not allow for the designation of *Türkisch-Österreicher/in* or *Türkisch-Deutsche(r)*; instead, the designation is *Migrant*, a term and concept that effectively prohibits the recognition of a Turkish person to be recognized and accepted as an Austrian or German of Turkish background. Of course there are real "migrants", people who maintain residences in both countries and who spend 50% in one country and 50% in the other, but we are not speaking about this minority of commuters. Rather, the issue is the integrative recognition of individuals and groups of immigrants of no matter what type who have an other cultural/linguistic background than the majority culture but have lived for a long period of time in their adopted country.

The concept and practice of multiculturalism is, today, often derided, for example in Germany and in Austria, and more recently also in the USA and in Canada as a failed approach (in France, for example, the issue did not get even that far...); it should be noted, however, that there are substantial differences in concept and in the practice of multiculturalism between the US and Canada (see Kymlicka 2001, 1995 a-b; Tötösy, 1996). What participants in this discourse do not see, in my opinion, is the fact that it is not the concept and practice of multiculturalism that are "at fault" but the "how" of its practice! In other words, if in the concept of multiculturalism it is a built-in requirement that the newcomer must be fluent and culturally adapted to German and to German culture in order to become a citizen (which does not necessarily mean acceptance, unfortunately) and this requirement is not paralleled with an inclusive attitude by the host culture/people and by integrative practices, multiculturalism is obviously not going to work. If, however, there is an inclusive attitude present and there are practices of

integration at all levels of government, education, the work place, etc., in place, the newcomer becomes interested to integrate and will learn German... Unfortunately, what has happened and is still happening - generally speaking - in Europe instead of integration is the ghettoization and exclusion of immigrants with the results of hostilities such as the Paris situation of 2005. Acculturation instead of the demand of assimilation is not practiced: I am aware that in order to undo the thinking and practices in place across Europe since the 1960s presents a difficult task, especially when there is a complete lack of thinking in the context of interculturalism and integrative multiculturalism in Europe even in scholarship and at all levels of education. Why, the basic idea of integration as a policy and practice on governmental levels has been begun only in the last couple of years in Germany, for example.

Or, let us consider the latent and often public anti-Semitism and anti-Roma in place in today's Hungary, a newly admitted member of the European Union (Marsovszky, 2006; Tötösy, 2005) or the non-allowance of ethnic rights of Romanian Hungarians in Romania, etc. While this rejection, implicitly and explicitly, of any Other as a cultural attitude based in the said essentialist ideology has many curious, unfortunate, and unsavoury results, perhaps the most recent and prominent example would be the objection by a substantial number of "true" and "authentic" Hungarians to the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to the Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész (Vasvári, Tötösy, 2005). In sum, a Europe that insists on the maintenance of national cultures and thus based in ideologies of essentialisms will remain mired in border disputes and exclusion with the obvious negative results including violence and the ghettoization of immigrants, thus on-going social instability. A Europe, however, that learns to accept the Other and that adopts and practices interculturalism and integrative multiculturalism where a Turkish individual becomes a Turkish-German (thus German), Turkish-Austrian (thus Austrian), Polish-French (thus French), or Algerian-French (thus French), etc., individual who is not only fully integrated but at the same time is also accepted by society at large including on the street where he/she lives, would be a progressive Europe. In my opinion, the ideology and practice of interculturalism remains of tantamount importance everywhere, including Europe. Europe would do itself great service to abandon all types and versions of nationalism and (cultural) essentialism and adopt,

instead, interculturalism based on a regional approach instead of the sovereignty of nations approach. Should this be possible, ethnic conflicts still in place in many European countries (as Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, the Baltic states, etc.) would dissipate by design because instead of the emotional attachment to their own versions of history, all "nations" would become ethnic and cultural groups living side-by-side in a unified Europe.

While the European Union attempts in various ways to acknowledge and implement the inclusion of the Other on the administrative levels of the Union and its Brusselsian centers, the structure of the EU remains based on the principle of national sovereignty which predicates that the standards of the nation state - and thus cultural essentialisms in place - determine government policies, educational practices, as well as public discourse and this especially in a post 9/11, post-Madrid, post-London world. At the same time, the practice and its various implementations of the ideological framework component proposed above would, ideally, occur in different and varied loci and processes. And here it is where intermediality via the potential of communication in new media could/would counteract the said status quo.

The paradox occurs that neither social theories concerning modernity, modern publicity or the media, nor humanities theories regarding different cultural forms, types of texts or genres have paid sufficient attention to the fact that "the past and present of contemporary culture and media are indeed part and parcel of multimodal and intermedial culture and media". Thus, the option of interculturalism with intermediality in cultural participation and its processes including education, pedagogy, and the various categories of audience (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2000) would and should offer itself an obvious potential. Culture is multimodal as it makes use of symbolic forms that employ simultaneously several material-semiotic resources: "intermediality is about the relationships between multimodal media. … Intermediality is defined as the ability to critically read and write (in the widest possible sense) critically across varied symbol systems". D.N. Rodowick has explained that thought is concerned only with linguistic expression and that even if we live in an extremely sophisticated visual culture the shapes and processes of discourse, as they are shaped in and through new media technologies, are crucial for understanding symbolic exchange and cultural interaction. As such, intermediality is related

to certain critical media literacy (López-Varela Azcaráte, 2006b). Therefore, "intermediality is intertextuality that transgresses media borders" and thus by design intercultural or at the very least offers the potential of interculturality. Intermediality understood as communication with and via new media with the potential towards interculturalism has become part of a global phenomenon that has the ability to create new forms of artistic and critical innovation, to find ways for their distribution and knowledge transfer, to link cultural communities in cyberspace, or to be used as vehicle for innovative educational practices. Discursive practices and images form the complex intermedial network of signifying practices that constructs realities rather than simply representing them. Socially constructed meaning or what we call "culture" takes place through the negotiation of stories, images, and meanings, that is, through jointly-constructed agreements, power relations, and their authorization and legitimization of social positions (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998; 2007a). Public discourse and communication are achieved by institutionalized means of transmission that always precede the content of what is communicated. Individual and social identity is accomplished, at best, by dialogue communicated through a given set of practices, spoken, written, and visual communication, and inscribed in particular supporting materials that change over time and that can be used/employed in their own distinct ways (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998). One of the most important factor in communication whether individual or societal is memory processed via both old and new media, books, television, cinema, software, and digital media which, in turn, offer the potential via intermediality avenues toward interculturalism (López-Varela Azcaráte, 2006; López-Varela Azcaráte, Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2008). In Europe and in North America (the USA and Canada), (im)migrant communities employ increasingly the internet and the World Wide Web to find a space of social belonging in their struggle to produce new identities while in diasporas, thus a stringent focus on intermediality as suggested here is most relevant for the individual as well as for society at large.

However, there are caveat: some of the paradoxes of connectivity in intermediality, for instance the fact that an excessive use of net technologies may disconnect the individual from the active political sphere of real space and from embodied interactions surrounding her/him, remain, thus diminishing the sense of social and personal

responsibilities to others. The more individuals look to new media in their capacities for acquiring as well as sustaining cultural identity, the less they look for social solidarity in their new loci with the mainstream. The paradox of increasing mobility is the greater individualization it creates, as people can communicate and interact at a distance regardless of their physical situation. Even more than mobile telephony, the internet enhances this individualization by providing means of fast asynchronic communication (Langer, 2003). In political terms, new media allow the expression of public opinion in the personal/individual sphere while lacking the possibility of real direct interaction and very often massive control of the media by private interests that distorts systematically the content of public discourse (López-Varela Azcaráte, Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2008).

In conclusion, the bases for a constructive conceptualization of social change against essentialisms can be mediated through technology and the practice of intermediality as vehicles of socio-cultural needs. In addition, the understanding and implementation of culture policy needs to be understood as mediated and re-mediated by public as well as scholarly discourse including knowledge transfer in new media. As scholars and educators, our efforts ought to be directed not only at our students, but also society at large, aware of the cultural codes and the competing discourses, of race, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnic, and gender formations, all of which impact on our positions as subjects of experience and on our loci in society (López-Varela Azcaráte, Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2008).

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Sintesi

I concetti di "intermedialità", "interculturalismo" ed "essenzialismo" culturale e le loro reciproche connessioni costituiscono un campo di notevole interesse per la riflessione pedagogica, la pratica e la programmazione didattica intese in modo ampio e trasversale. In questo contesto, il termine "intermedialità" è utilizzato per indicare il superamento dei confini fisici e formali tra i diversi supporti e le diverse pratiche culturali in campo educativo. Si tratta di una modalità che istituisce una relazione

virtuosa nei confronti dell'"interculturalismo" e, al contrario, si contrappone ad ogni forma di "essenzialismo" culturale. L'interculturalismo, a sua volta, è inteso come l'insieme di pratiche di interazione sociale e di convivenza quotidiana, e l'insieme di attività trasversali che coinvolgono il livello politico così come quello pedagogico e didattico, in modo da favorire l'inclusione delle minoranze nella moderna società globale. Al contrario, per essenzialismo si intendono quelle pratiche autoreferenziali, di stampo nazionalista, di esclusione o di non accettazione dell'altro come pari, che si basano sull'idea della superiorità costitutiva di un modello culturale (spesso su base nazionale piuttosto che globale) assunto come dato immutabile.

Il principio ispiratore per le politiche interculturali è il dialogo, e proprio in questo snodo si realizza la connessione con le nuove tecnologie informatiche. La digitalizzazione della cultura, soprattutto nel mondo occidentale, costituisce un fenomeno ormai consolidato e in costante espansione, spesso, però, carente di regolamentazione e di guida a livello pubblico. Un simile intervento, sul versante della programmazione e della gestione politica dell'intermedialità e dell'intermodalità, dovrebbe mirare a rafforzare lo sviluppo interculturale. A livello europeo, sarebbe pertanto auspicabile l'abbandono dell'approccio nazionalista ed essenzialista in favore dell'interculturalismo su base regionale.

Del resto, la cultura è multimodale in se stessa, poiché usa forme simboliche che utilizzano simultaneamente risorse semiotiche plurime. In questa prospettiva, l'intermodalità come comunicazione attraverso i nuovi media diventa parte di un fenomeno globale capace di produrre innovazione sul piano culturale, identitario e artistico per la condivisione della conoscenza. In Europa e nel Nord America, per esempio, si è riscontrato l'incremento dell'utilizzo del Web da parte della popolazione immigrata nel tentativo di creare nuovi spazi di appartenenza sociale e di produzione di identità nuove. La mediazione dell'intervento pubblico a livello politico ed educativo diventa dunque un fattore cruciale per attutire il rischio che tali pratiche si risolvano in un individualismo che mini la solidarietà reale tra gruppi sociali.