Strange Loops and Wagging Dog Tails: Heuristic Frameworks for Intermedial Practice

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I live in Hollywood where truth is a speech defect.  
(Larry Beinhart, American Hero)

1 *Wag the Dog*, Barry Levinson’s 1997 screen adaptation of Larry Beinhart’s novel *American Hero*, opens with a question projected on a black screen: “Why does a dog wag its tail?” Just as soon completed with the laconic answer that the animal does so “[b]ecause a dog is smarter than its tail,” the image fades to the next frame: “If the tail were smarter, the tail would wag the dog.” My article will consider this prologue as the film’s thesis, and the work itself as a proving ground for a heuristic framework that addresses some of the challenges posed by the multi-medial context of Western popular culture.

2 Today communication occurs through a multitude of channels, each of which functions along a specific operative language. The emergence of new technologies constantly redefines discursive modes and receptive frameworks. Older media, in order to retain a sense of relevance, will ‘re-mediate’ – or, in the terminology of the entertainment industry, ‘re-purpose’ – those elements considered instrumental to (re-)affirm their own specificity in a changing field. After all, a medium, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin famously argued, “is that which remediates” (65). In fact, our contemporary culture of mass-medial communication is fuelled by “a double logic of remediation” (5) where innovation leads to new applications that – paradoxically – are designed to erase their own traces. Seemingly contradictory though mutually interdependent, these two incestuous imperatives for contemporary relevance are as old as communication itself (45). To media theorist Friedrich Kittler, “Technical media do not arise out of human needs, as their current interpretation in terms of bodily prostheses has it, they follow each other in a rhythm of escalating strategic answers” (121). Because no medium ever functions in isolation, all must adapt in order to survive in a changing context. Especially
so, since every innovation comes with the promise of greater authenticity. This pursuit of ‘transparency’ – or ‘immediacy,’ as Bolter and Grusin have it – implies a ‘refashioning’ of extant media, which intrinsically makes every medium a hypermedium.

The dominant status of television in popular culture, however, challenges this “analog model” (Ryan 52). Its unique blend of charismatic ‘transparency’ derived from its integration of older communicative channels, with a sense of proximity and immediacy, both related to its penetration into the private sphere, crudely remediates generic conventions by means of the moment-to-moment gratification of primary impulses. True, by reducing critical ‘space,’ denotations can be enforced and connotations suppressed. But while television epistemologically is a composite, it is equally subject to the referential excess of individual interpretation. In a cultural context characterised by “hybridisation” (Bolter and Grusin 77), an interdisciplinary perspective on poly-systemic frameworks that calls for continuous cognitive re-assessment provides a constructive alternative to the tyranny of relentlessly flickering visual impulses luring audiences to endorse the “seeming truth of appearance” (Blau 234). The opening of Wag the Dog, subtitled “A Comedy About Truth, Justice, and Other Special Effects,” ironically illustrates this principle. After its provocative prologue, the black screen dissolves to a shot of the White House where Conrad Brean, a ratty-looking spin-doctor played by Robert DeNiro, is led through various underground corridors and past several checkpoints to attend a secret crisis meeting. Even before the audience is informed that the president has sexually assaulted a 12-year-old firefly-girl in the Oval Office, the rendition of Brean, whose resolution alternates between that of filmic shots and CCTV footage, further interrupted by a televised campaign advertisement, kinetically introduces a concern that transcends the mere level of plot. As it transpires, in order to avoid scandal while simultaneously boosting the president’s ratings, Brean has no option but to exploit Baudrillard’s hyperreal ‘in-voluntary suspension of disbelief’ (Baudrillard 268).

Historically, the simulation of a non-existent conflict has proven a successful strategy to deflect attention from sensitive domestic issues. Still, to stage the “appearance of a war” with, in this case, Albania, a little known country with vaguely roguish connotations, Brean requires the know-how of Hollywood producer Stanley Motss, an expert entertainer and master illusionist. As Brean’s overriding argument goes,

| BREAN | [w]e remember the slogans, [but] we can’t even remember the fucking wars. Y’know why? Cause it’s show business […] Who Killed Kennedy…? I read the first draft of the Warren Report, said he was killed by a Drunk Driver. You watched the Gulf War. What did you see? Day after day, the one ‘Smart Bomb’ falling into a building. The truth, it was shot in a studio, Falls Church Virginia, 1/10th scale model of a building. |
| MOTSS | Is that true? |
| BREAN | How the fuck do we know? You take my point? |

Motss, a caricature of Robert Evans played by Dustin Hoffman, is tempted, yet throughout the enterprise increasingly seeks credit for his creation, which, as Brean warns, is impossible because it would undermine the public’s naïve faith in visual media’s aura of unmediated truthfulness. Against all odds Brean and Motss succeed, yet the moment Brean compliments Motss on a job well-done, the information platform they both successfully manipulated suddenly backfires. What during a televised digest of the past events first appears as an indirect tribute to the interdisciplinary triumph of Motss
and his team featuring a costume designer, a ‘fad king’, a songwriter, and special effects artists, turns out to be a mere celebration of the political commercial. Infuriated by this lack of appreciation for his craftsmanship, Motss’ vanity causes him to blow his top and threaten to go public. Just as soon, however, Brean has him assassinated by the secret service. Thus, aside from the rather evident satire on the body politic’s immorality, *Wag the Dog* presents its audience with a humorous rendering of the machinery of illusion making, as well as a more bitter depiction of the popular media’s tendency to oversimplify complex matters for the sake of precisely those commercial interests that benefit from the illusion of causality and the charisma of ‘transparency.’

5 The parallels in *Wag the Dog* between warfare and advertising echo another one of Kittler’s tenets that “[w]ar, as opposed to sheer fighting, has been for a long time an affair of persuasion” (117). Supported by Brean’s observation that they are “going to war, [...] not declaring it” since the United States, so he says, “have not declared war since WWII” (original emphasis), the premise of the president’s sexual misconduct then appears but a concession towards the audience to integrate a complex argument into a mass-medial framework. For, as confirmed by Marie-Laure Ryan, “[o]nce the audience is informed of the what, [...] a curiosity develops for the how and the why” (84). Aided moreover by incredibly fortuitous timing — with a release only days before the Lewinsky-scandal and Paula Jones’ lawsuit hit the media — the film, through its insistence on the artificiality of the illusion, _de facto_ parodies its own ‘transparency.’ The widely-documented anecdote that president Clinton one day appeared on the set to have his picture taken with Hoffman and DeNiro and unwittingly asked them what their picture was about, only further blurred the fictional divide (Vincent).

6 *Wag the Dog* is actually a very loose adaptation of Beinhart’s 1993 novel. Since the film, unlike the book, revolves round the hybridisation of communicative media, it defeats traditional genetic comparisons between a ‘proto-text’ and a ‘meta-text.’ Instead, *Wag the Dog*’s insistent cross-references between intratextual features, and its intertextual context draw attention to the nature of inter-medial ‘dialogue’ and its implied socio-semiological “automatic difference[s]” (Stam 18). Traditionally, conceptual assessments of this slippery phenomenon capture its extrinsic contingency, yet fail to describe the structuring mechanism behind it while ignoring the intrinsically “goal-oriented” (Hofstadter 52) dimension of perception. The parallel machinations of cognition and the performing arts, though, imply that the spectator’s involvement is organized across different frames of reference — i.e. ‘inter media’ — through the evocation of isomorphic correlates. Indeed, the interpretative Leerstellen created by the partial overlappings of signifiers, contexts, and individual connotations function as syncretic purveyors of meaning potential (Iser 168-178; 231). To Patrice Pavis, media intrinsically do not favour activity or passivity by virtue of their technological possibilities alone. Conversely, it is rather their specific mode of structuring and transmitting messages that directs the cognitive involvement of the interpreter (Pavis 1991: 22). ‘Inter-mediality’ itself, by extension, is neither a static concept but rather a conceptual metaphor. In practice it evokes the liminal crossings between communicative media and cultural conventions while analogously recreating this dynamic in the ‘performance’ of a given text, be it functional or artistic (cf. Chapple and Kattenbelt 24).

7 Since communicative frameworks themselves are functional and perception is ‘goal-oriented,’ a system’s objectives may appear sufficiently stable to trigger a process of ‘optimisation’ along the ostensibly ‘closed’ circuit of the ‘feedback loop’:
However, as an input-based model for the assessment of performativity by ‘debugging designs through use,’ the ‘feedback loop’ relies on a series of negotiations. Because the linear and proportional ‘improvement’ of all constituents is impossible, objectives shift and compromise appears inevitable, which actually reveals techno-performance as “satisficing rather than optimizing” (Vaughan qtd. in McKenzie 116). By analogy, perception actively ‘interlocks’ various “conceptual repertoires” (Hofstadter 83), despite the intrinsic passivity behind the mere reception of visual impulses. Accordingly, perception describes not a linear ‘feedback loop’ but what Douglas Hofstadter termed a ‘strange loop’, i.e. an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upward movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive “upward” shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one’s sense of departing even further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop (102).

An abstract process celebrating analogy as the basis of ‘meaning’, Hofstadter’s ‘strange loop’ may function as a heuristic framework when applied to a multi-medial cultural context:

[...]the passage leading from vast numbers of received signals to a handful of triggered symbols [appears as] a kind of funneling process in which initial input signals are manipulated or “massaged”, the results of which selectively trigger further (i.e., more “internal”) signals, and so forth. This baton-passing by squads of signals traces out an ever-narrowing pathway in the brain, which winds up triggering a small set of symbols whose identities are of course a subtle function of the original input signals (76).

By providing a constructive yet relativistic platform for a ‘goal-oriented’ integration of seemingly unrelated signifiers, systems, and concepts, the strange loop highlights the essentially metaphoric and isomorphic nature of perception and, incidentally, communication. Or, as Joseph Tabbi laconically put it in his book Cognitive Fictions: “Rather than having an opposition between conscious knowing and material doing, we have a situation where knowing does something” (xvii). Hofstadter’s concept describes an associative pattern rather than attempting to map it exhaustively, as illustrated by the ‘shocking’ metalepsis provoked by the projection of a wagging dog-tail on the screens of Motss’ special effects artists when morphing a burning village. In studies of inter-medial signification processes, a semiological approach therefore imposes itself. Analogous to the heuristic ‘strange loop’-concept for the assessment of performativity, the ‘performance’ of artistic ‘texts’ cannot be credibly addressed without considering the cognitive agency at the root of creation and interpretation (cf. also Baumann and Briggs 69). After all, the tension between convention and invention that shape intra-, inter-, and trans-medial creations alike derives from man’s motivation to make meaning out of randomness.

Wag the Dog, a meta-medial satire by a “bunch of entrenched movie business guys” (Strauss), revolves around the need for critical distance and cognitive humility, which is precisely what the Motss-character lacked. After TriBeCa, Robert De Niro’s production company, bought the rights on Larry Beinhart’s American Hero as well as Hillary Henkin’s screen-adaptation, it hired well-known director Barry Levinson. Since the latter was unimpressed by both the novel and its transposition, a committee was formed to hire a screenwriter who would develop only the basic premise of mounting a war to divert
public attention from domestic issues and secure re-election. The new version penned by David Mamet, a prize-winning dramatist, screenwriter, and film director whose work across media and genres added theoretical depth to the project, is remarkably self-contained. Given the film’s emphasis on the machinery of illusion making, compared to the novel’s fictional yet highly referential and politicised interpretation of the build-up to the first Gulf War, it is all the more interesting that the critical and public acclaim of *Wag the Dog* caused *American Hero* to be re-issued ten years after its original release under the title of its filmic adaptation, thereby actualising a pertinent question raised in the book: “[d]o movies make us or do we make the movies?” (12). It is equally ironic that a screenplay pivoting round the notion of credit in the elusive contexts of authorship, ‘hybridisation,’ and simulation caused a row between its director and the Writers Guild. Barry Levinson in fact threatened to resign his membership over the Guild’s decision to award David Mamet only the second screen credit behind Hillary Henkin, whereas it was reputedly Mamet’s sole creation and in no way faithful to either Henkin’s draft or Beinhart’s novel except for the general premise (Fleming). On the other hand, the conflict underscores the fundamental role of analogies in intersemiotic translation, as well as the taxonomic difficulties these keep engendering. After all,

> the closing of the strange loop of human selfhood is deeply dependent upon the level-changing leap that is perception, which means categorization, and therefore, the richer and more powerful an organism’s categorization equipment is, the more realized and rich will be its self (Hofstadter 209).

12 Mots’s frequent references to his professional background in the theatre, which echo the screenwriter’s own antecedents, could equally be understood as a variation on the tension between reception and perception. In *Wag the Dog*, both film and television conspicuously bank on cultural commonplaces to maximize audience response, whereas the stage’s capacity for the ‘immediate’ transmission of heterogeneous sensory stimuli serves as an ironic deterrent against the pitfalls of complacency caused by the charismatic illusion of ‘transparency.’ A theatrical performance demonstrates that power is transient because its presence is fleeting. Jon McKenzie, for one, has argued that open-ended systems progress through the focused integration of contingencies, which of course validates André Helbo’s promotion of theatre semiotics as conceptual benchmark for interdisciplinary practice (3). Given that none of the theatre’s components is ‘ontologically connected’ to it (Mukarovsky 83), its capacity for hybridization and innovation is sheer endless. Essentialist readings and absolute distinctions, conversely, make little methodological sense in a situation where “to describe is always to destroy” (Pavis 1982: 122). Addressing the stage’s hypermediacy therefore confirms that distinctions between signifying systems are relative, and hence that analogical thinking may bridge epistemic divides by constituting a ‘strange loopish’ Gestalt.

13 Television’s appeal, too, thrives on innovation. Competing with domestic distractions and a panoply of other channels on offer, the medium’s compelling need to hold the viewer’s attention forces television executives to keep experimenting with programming schedules, visual presentation, and generic formats. In practice this has led to a blend of tried-and-tested ingredients with predominantly stylistic adjustments, aimed at satisfying the perceived demand (Kilborn 109). What appears as hybrid new genres more often than not amounts to conventional dramatic strategies applied to a ‘high-concept’ theme and sublimated by judicious editing. While it is inevitable that television cannot command the degree of cognitive immersion found in the cinematic or theatrical experience, some productions nevertheless have famously succeeded in marrying high
and low, artistry and commercialism, while being both innovative and popular. No matter how much it is at odds with his egotism, Motss’ absurd creative optimism when dealing with successive setbacks - the ‘annulment’ of the war by the CIA, the president’s refusal to cooperate, a plane crash in the middle of nowhere, and the death of the mascot war hero, who incidentally was created to revamp public interest after the official termination of the ‘hostilities’ with Albania - then actually celebrates the generative potential of interpretive ‘excess’ and, as such, partly redeems his character and the television medium alike. For, according to David Mamet himself, Hollywood film and television are flooding the market with trash. [Therefore] the taste and the need for a real theatrical experience, which is an experience in which the audience can commune, not so much with the actors but with themselves and what they know to be true, just increases (qtd. in Roudané 50 – emphasis added).

As Marie-Laure Ryan rightly observed, it is no coincidence that film and television are precisely the two visual media in which the distinction fiction/nonfiction is the most solidly entrenched (37) to safeguard an aura of ‘transparency’ that the theatre long ago has dismissed because it is essentially reductive. In fact, theatre’s reliance on analogies actualizes the ‘strange loop’-principle by pointing at the metaphoric rather than absolute quality of signifiers to stimulate active interpretation and discussion rather than forcefully impose signification. Narratively, Wag the Dog describes a strange loop by staging the physical deaths of both a (pseudo-)simulacrum (the dummy war hero) and the simulacrum’s demiurge (Motss), which actually implies that here the ‘fiction-within-the-metafiction’

reaches a level of complexity that can no longer be sustained by the narrator [i.e. Motss], and so the narrator jumps (not necessarily “up”) to a different conceptual level, a leap out of the hall of mirrors and an invention out of solipsism (Tabbi xxii).

Towards the end of the film, with the crash in an Oklahoma field of the plane that was supposed to return the conspirators and the ‘dummy war hero’ to Washington for the apotheosis of the Grand Scam, Wag the Dog’s meta-medial argument reaches its full complexity at precisely that moment in the plot which critics have well-nigh universally rejected as most improbable. While Brean and Ames, the presidential press officer, report the crash from a public phone, Motss enters a run-down gas station with Schumann, the ‘dummy war hero’ who turned out to be a psychiatric patient interned in a Special Army Prison for having raped a nun. Inside, an old attendant sits transfixed by a T.V.-screen, which features the president’s challenger denouncing Schumann’s existence as a fraud. When Motss casually addresses him, he does not even lift his eyes. Meanwhile, Schumann has snuck out to ravish the attendant’s granddaughter. Alarmed by her cries, this rugged Midwesterner pulls out his shotgun and shoots Schumann on the spot. In a flash, the entire scheme seems to collapse, as if the viewer’s initial unwillingness to differentiate between the ‘televised’ and the ‘real’ would necessarily call for death and disaster. Still, the film’s essentially theatrical morality of “fiction as reality” (Beinhart 2004 xix) escapes moralizing by being cynical without becoming smug. After all, it is not the old man who is killed.

An ‘intermedial’ flow of signifiers, such as presented in meta-medial works like Wag the Dog, interpellates the interpreter’s cognitive acknowledgment of various interconnecting frames and rhetorical strategies:

Intermediality manages to stimulate exceptional, disturbing, and potentially radical observations, rather than merely communicating or transporting them as messages, as media would traditionally do (Boenisch 115).
Nonetheless, Bolter and Grusin rightly observed that hyperconscious recognition of mediation might itself lead to cynicism, or, alternatively, a scholastic illusion that problems can be ‘solved’ through mere consciousness (38, 148). Even if then the subsequent understanding reveals the ontological instability of visual distinctions, it need not imply their obsolescence:

[Intermedial practice’s] play with boundaries of postmodern hybrids does not bring down a repressive dichotomy but, on the contrary, heightens our awareness of an epistemologically responsible distinction (Ryan 58 – emphasis added).

A self-referential metaphor in its own right, Douglas Hofstadter’s strange loop recalls that amid panoplies of fluctuating signifiers the individual perspective must remain incomplete, thereby echoing Walt Whitman in ‘Song of Myself’: “I am large, I contain multitudes” (qtd. in Hofstadter 354). It is precisely the joint presentation of insufficiency and its generative potential that keeps opening up new perspectives while circumventing essentialist excesses:

We live in a state of blessed ignorance, but it is also a state of marvelous enlightenment, for it involves floating in a universe of mid-level categories of our own creation – categories that function incredibly well as survival-enhancers.7

Ultimately, to avoid being wagged by a virtual tail, the ‘material’ dog must rely on the heuristic qualities of the strange loop to bark louder than its simulacrum.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES
1. In particular theatre, photography, film, and radio.
2. Cf. also Geerts 106, Mersch 163.
3. Original emphases.
5. Like story, form, and structure.
6. Lothar Mikos has even argued that the term ‘genre’ is no longer used with regard to television programming while executives, producers, and marketeers tend to prefer ‘format’ as means of ‘optimizing’ the perception of a product’s specific distinctiveness (258).

ABSTRACTS

This essay illustrates, by means of an analysis of the film, Wag the Dog the relationship between medial hybridization and cognitive “strange loops”. As defined by Douglas Hofstadter, the ‘strange loop’ is a concept rooted in the subjectivity of individual perception that integrates different levels of abstraction. Applied to “intermedial” practice it provides a heuristic platform for the integration of ostensibly heterogeneous methods or concepts.

Cet essai illustre à travers une analyse du film Wag the Dog à quel point l’hybridation médiatique relève de « strange loops » cognitifs. Ce concept défini par Douglas Hofstadter est ancré dans la subjectivité de la perception individuelle et intègre des stimuli provenant de divers niveaux d’abstraction. Appliqué à une pratique « intermédiaire » le modèle fournit une plateforme heuristique pour l’intégration de méthodes ou concepts à première vue hétérogènes.

Este ensayo ilustra, a partir de un análisis de la película Wag the Dog (Wag el perro), hasta qué punto la hibridación popular depende de “strange loops” (extraños bucles) cognitivos. Este concepto definido por Douglas Hofstadter, el cual se sitúa en la subjetividad de la percepción individual, integra los estímulos provenientes de distintos niveles de abstracción. Aplicado a una práctica “intermedial”, este modelo procura una plataforma heurística para la integración de métodos o conceptos a primera vista heterogéneos.

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