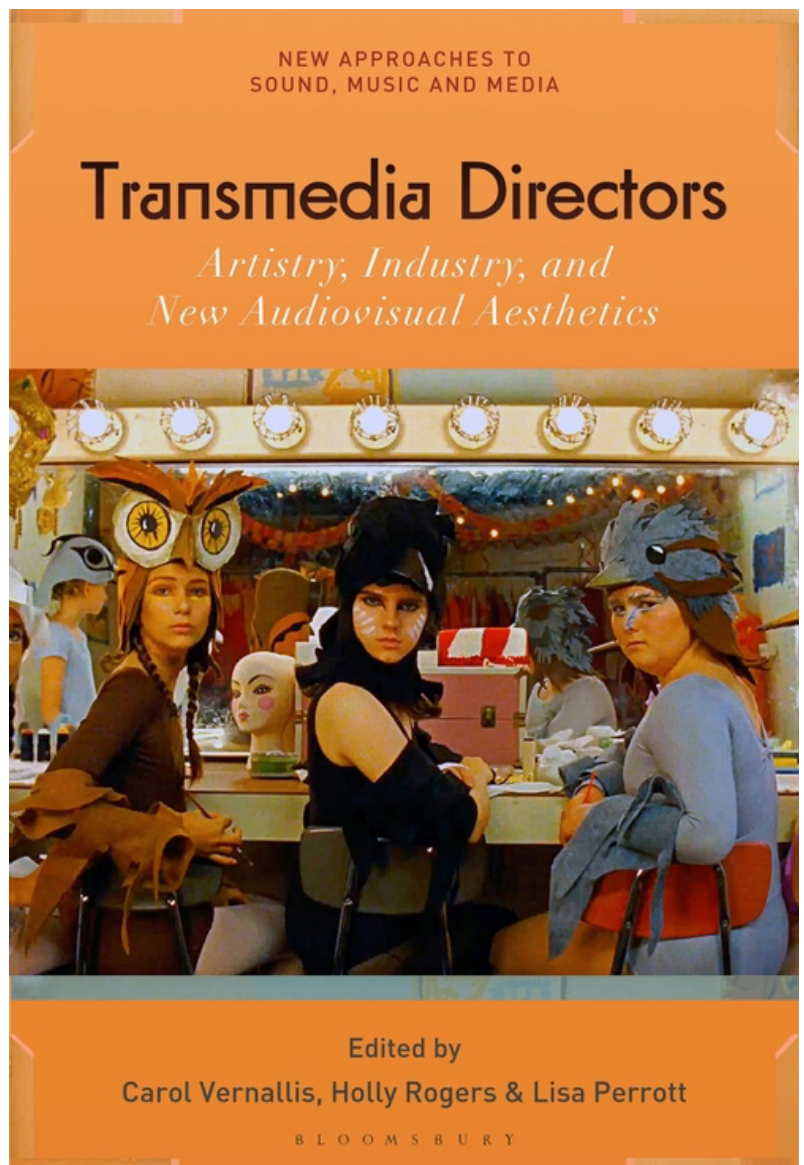## Seeking Definition: A Review of *Transmedia Directors*

Jordan Stokes

Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics, edited by Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

"Transmedia" in film studies refers in the most basic sense to the way that big media franchises such as S*tar Wars* spread their narratives across multiple media, each contributing to a shared storyworld: films, television, novels, and so on.[1] Even simple definitions of transmedia raise a cascading series of questions. And although the example of a big media franchise is paradigmatic, transmedia scholars have evinced a certain discomfort with this, arguing (or hoping) that an understanding of transmediality would be less nakedly beholden to capital. Nevertheless, this is the basic meaning of transmedia in the existing literature. I expected a book with "transmedia" in the title to grapple with these issues. While this one does not, it is nevertheless an excellent book that brings to bear numerous authorial standpoints on the question.[2]

The editors of *Transmedia Directors* take up the accepted definition of transmedia just long enough to discard it, and rather than arguing for a clear alternative definition, they float a constellation of possible meanings. A transmedia director might be one who works in many media: film, TV, music video, and beyond. Or, a transmedia director might be one who pays unusually careful attention to the multiple media that film comprises: the written word, the photographic image, sound, and film music. Or, a transmedia director might be an artist whose creations do not neatly fit into any of our established media categories. Or, a transmedia director might be one whose auteurist stamp are detectable less in the film as a finished text and more in the filmmaking process itself, outside of any artistic medium, but inside the web of money, power, technology, and talent that gives rise to art.

A Review of *Transmedia Directors* (cont.)

But although none of the essays collected here referenced a traditional definition of transmedia, I found that the book came into focus most clearly when I kept that traditional definition in mind.[3] Most of the authors in the collection focus their attention on some kind of text that is projected across multiple media—it's just that the texts are not fictional narratives or story-worlds. Instead they are, variously, the auteurist text of a director's signature style, or the star text of a performer's persona and reputation, or the irreducibly multimedia text of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or some other *sui-generis* text that escapes simple categorization.[4]

With nine parts, twenty-seven essays, and 396 pages (not counting endnotes), *Transmedia Directors* is on the long side for a collection of its kind—and the editors make full use of that space, creating a focus that is at once both broad and deep. On the one hand, the topics are wide-ranging, covering arthouse cinema, Instagram feeds, music videos, and the *Transformers* franchise. On the other, each part is tightly focused, allowing for an effervescent interplay of ideas. This makes *Transmedia Directors* a handy volume for teachers of film music: if a student wanted to write about a Wes Anderson film, one could do worse than to assign this book's entire Wes Anderson section as background reading. The book features similarly rich sections on Barry Jenkins, David Lynch, Emil Nava, and Lars von Trier, along with a handful of thematically organized sections.

I. Collaborative Authorship: Wes Anderson

Warren Buckland argues that Wes Anderson's films are primarily driven by "new sincerity," defined as a vacillation between sincerity and irony. In Anderson's work this manifests as a tension between the emotional behavior of the characters and the mannered artificiality of the cinematic language, especially with regard to music and narration. Theo Cateforis argues that both Anderson's films and the music of his longtime collaborator Mark Mothersbaugh are marked by a vacillation between the world of childhood and the world of adults. This is a good example of the kind of synergy that arises within the individual sections. Surely, sincerity is a constant theme in our culture's depiction of childhood, and vice versa. Are Buckland and Cateforis two facets of Wes Anderson's output, or one facet from two perspectives? The juxtaposition enriches both essays.

II. Cross-medial Assemblage and the Making of the Director

In Part Two, Jeff Smith offers a rich analysis of Sofia Coppola's films, advertisements, and music videos, arguing that her distinctive style arises from her ability to work in all of these forms, but also that her ability to move freely between them is a matter of historical contingency—a kind of extension and ramification of the "high concept" era as defined by Justin Wyatt, in which the film industry pursued cross-marketing to the point of horizontal monopoly, and filmmakers focused on style and image to the exclusion of narrative coherence.[5] Mark Kerins makes similar claims of Michael Bay, arguing that the director's distinctive (if much-derided) narrative strategies and visual rhetoric can be traced to his career as a director of music videos.

The juxtaposition of Coppola and Bay lays bare an interesting pattern. Smith and Kerins both claim that their chosen directors are special and unique, not just as transmedia directors but as transmedia auteurs.[6] Yet so many of the traits that they describe are shared! One could scarcely pick two more dissimilar filmmakers; but, as Smith and Kerins point out, Coppola and Bay both devote a fetishistic level of attention to "stuff" (cars in *Transformers*, pastries in *Marie Antoinette*). They both use shared cultural archetypes to flesh out characters that their screenplays barely define. They both make heavy use of ellipsis in the construction of their narratives. And what's more, as readers of *Transmedia Directors*' first section will know, we find these same features in the films of Wes Anderson. Can these shared features be part of any one director's signature style? This criticism can be generalized: many of the traits that the writers in this collection ascribe to one director in particular could be seen as examples of broader trends.

A Review of *Transmedia Directors* (cont.)

III. Transmedial Relations and Industry

Part Three briefly shifts the focus of the book to industrial history. J.D. Connor maps the connections between intellectual property, tax policy, and auteurish charisma that went into Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer*, while Graig Uhlin explains how David Fincher's creative process is shaped by technological and industrial forces. The essays offer fascinating details and observations, but both are marred by attempts to suggest that these poietic features are legible on the filmic surface. For example, an important plot twist in *Snowpiercer* is delivered by telephone, and many details of the intercontinental production were arranged over Skype. Connor wants this to be a significant resonance. But leaving aside the questions that this raises about the phone calls in, say, *Dial M for Murder*, would it be superfluous to point out that Skype is not a telephone? These interpretive flourishes, however, don't undermine either essay's central claims about the ways that technology and globalism have changed film production, or about Bong and Fincher's navigation of this new landscape.

Plot twist delivered by phone in Snowpiercer

IV. Music Video's Forms, Genres and Surfaces

Its title notwithstanding, this section focuses narrowly on the music video director Emil Nava. Carol Vernallis contributes a free-flowing interview with Nava in which she tries to draw him out on the subject of his creative process. (Nava proves a somewhat reticent subject, but the interview is still quite illuminating.) The remaining essays in the section include Brad Osborn's formalist analysis of Nava's video, "This is what you came for," discussing how the musical form of the song interacts with the narrative of the video, and a more wide-ranging discussion of Nava's visual technique and color grading by Jonathan Leal. Osborne's essay is technical in a way that most of the rest of the collection is not, perhaps pointing to the music video as a natural vehicle for formalism in multimedia analysis, or perhaps simply reflecting his training as a music theorist.

V. Music Video's Centrifugal Forces

Part Five addresses music videos through a lens more comparable to the rest of the book (i.e., treating an artist's persona or a director's signature style as a metaphorical text that unfolds transmedially across multiple concrete artworks). Carol Vernallis traces themes and images across the music videos of Dave Meyers, attempting to carve out a space for director-focused criticism of the music video. Lisa Perrott's divided essay is a highlight of the collection. The first half establishes David Bowie's star persona as a collaboratively-authored transmedia text, and the second focuses on the way director Floria Sigismondi puts her own auteurist stamp onto this David-Bowie-text in her music videos. It was after reading Perrott, I think, that the collection's extended definition of "transmedia" came into focus for me: where traditional transmedia properties are linked by an ongoing narrative or a shared storyworld, here the constituent artworks are united by a metaphorical text—in this case, David Bowie's star persona.

A Review of *Transmedia Directors* (cont.)

VI. Audiovisual Emanations: David Lynch

Holly Rogers writes about the sonic eeriness in David Lynch's work: electronic drones, static, vocal distortion, strangely pulsating music, and so on. We could call this one of Lynch's style markers, but Rogers wants to say that it is more. These sonic traces tend to mark not an uncanny realm within the diegesis, but rather a kind of uncanny boundary or limit to the diegesis: a place where storytelling itself breaks down. But because the same sonic signs are used to mark these borders in work after work, it's as though Lynch's films and TV shows (and even potentially artworks by his collaborators, such as Julee Cruise's albums) form a kind of sonic non-space that, while non-diegetic with regard to any particular film, is still a meaningful part of Lynch's fictional creation.

The second essay, by Greg Hainge, has two themes: the first explains the use and representation of time in Lynch's work; the second explores the ways that our common-sense understanding of time is challenged by, variously, quantum physics, or Gilles Deleuze, or granular sound synthesis. It is clear that these themes are connected, but I am not sure precisely how. At times it seems like a simple analogy, with Hainge using abstruse concepts from physics and philosophy to explain Lynch's cinema (or perhaps using Lynch's cinema to explain physics). At other times, however, Hainge seems to claim that Lynch's weird cinematic language really does lay bare the hidden workings of time: that watching Lynch's films allows us to feel the temporal consequences of the Planck scale, according to which space and time are not an infinite flow but a quantized and striated set of divisions. But if this really is more than an analogy—if Hainge thinks that Lynch is not merely letting us feel what Planck time would be like, but letting us actually feel Planck time—then it fails. After all, the experience of time that the Planck scale gives rise to is, in fact, our ordinary experience of time. The essay is a fascinating read, but for some may be a frustrating one.

By contrast, John McGrath's essay on the use of varispeed over the course of David Lynch's career resonates like a perfect punk rock album: a brief six pages of unpretentious, vigorous, and unassailable truth. Varispeed is an audio processing technique that shifts the duration and pitch of a sound simultaneously. (Think Alvin and the Chipmunks—although in Lynch's case it's always used to make sounds slower and lower.) Lynch has used it throughout his career, in films, TV shows, and commercials. McGrath describes a representative sampling of these moments, and analyzes the aesthetic and ideological effects of each, with attention to the ways in which each medium colors our understanding of the technique.

The last chapter in the Lynch section, by Elena del Río, delves again into the metaphysical, but with clearer purpose. Del Río employs a set of philosophical concepts drawn from Gilbert Simondon, specifically his rejection of hylomorphism, to explain certain curious features of Lynch's cinema, most notably the shaky and provisional definition of his characters.[7]

VII. Multi-vocality, Synchronicity and Transcendent Cinematics: Barry Jenkins

Kwami Coleman's essay on *If Beale Street Could Talk* and Dale Chapman's essay/interview with *Moonlight* composer Nicholas Britell work together to show that time, and more specifically the sonic representation of time through music, is a major theme in the work of Barry Jenkins. Chapman discusses the way that the chopped-and-screwed aesthetic—incidentally a varispeed technique—shapes both source music and score in *Moonlight*, drawing meaning from the ways that the sounds are temporally distorted at different points in the film's echoing timeline and narrative structure. Coleman, on the other hand, describes a fundamental difference between source music and score, arguing that the first is inherently and inevitably linked to mechanistic clock-time (a recording is released in a certain year and lasts a certain number of seconds), while the second is linked to our flexible sense of time as a lived experience due to the privileged connection of underscoring and the

characters' emotions. I would have pushed back on both of these claims: have film musicologists not established that source music is just as powerfully linked to emotional experience as underscoring? Isn't our experience of recorded music still an experience, and therefore temporally flexible? But somehow this doesn't detract from the essay as a whole. I would qualify Coleman's thesis heavily, but I doubt I will think of *If Beale Street Could Talk* again without thinking of it through his terms.

VIII. Community, Identity, and Transmedial Aspirations Across the Web

Part Eight contains two striking but unrelated essays: Lori Burns on Jess Cope's stop-motion video for Steven Wilson's "Routine," and Gabrielle Veronique on the Jay Versace's Instagram feed. Burns applies something very close to the traditional definition of transmedia as she untangles the vagueries of text and timeline in Cope's video. "Routine" is taken from a narrative concept album called *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* Accordingly, Cope's video both shapes and is shaped by the frame narrative. The protagonist of the video is, or becomes, the protagonist of the album. This complexity is reflected in the looping, ritualistic timeline established by the video and the song.

Veronique's fascinating essay tries to do justice to the internet celebrity Jay Versace, yet Versace is hard to pin down. Is he a comedian? A dancer? A filmmaker? A star? He's certainly all of these things, but he's also more than the sum of his parts. Veronique merely scratches the surface: large parts of the essay are devoted to descriptions of Jay Versace's work, although written in sharp-eyed, probing detail. But given the state of the field of cinema studies (let alone film music studies), Veronique's approach is probably the right one. Many readers will be unfamiliar with Versace, or will not have seriously engaged with his work. Veronique's essay prompted me to pay attention; hopefully it will do the same for others.

IX. Diagramatic, Signalectic, and Haptic Unfoldings Across Forms and Genres: Lars von Trier

The final section explores the cinema of Lars von Trier, with a focus on his later work. Although von Trier made a few highly-regarded television projects in his early career, he is essentially a film director, and thus "transmediality" in his work is a matter of allusion and quotation. Vivaldi concertos bridge the scene changes in *Manderlay*; tableaus are modeled after

Tableaux from The House That Jack Built*, modeled on Delacroix's* The Barque Of Dante (1882)

Delacroix and Botticelli in *The House That Jack Built*. Whether or not the word transmedia applies to this tendency, it is a notable feature of von Trier's work, and helps unite an otherwise wide-ranging set of essays. Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen traces a heightened "haptic" cinematographic style through von Trier's career; Linda Badley engages von Trier in dialogue with the ideologically compromised remnants of German Romanticism (Wagner, Speer); Donald Greig takes up, and ultimately rejects, the idea that von Trier's use of stagey artifice is a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*.[8]

As this whirlwind tour through the book's contents shows, *Transmedia Directors* leans more heavily on the second word of its title than the first.[9] While the book's definition of transmedia constantly shifts, the essays are typically director-focused. Directors select the music that they place in their films with a careful eye to its historical and ideological significance (as Badley shows of von Trier), that directors collaborate actively with

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their composers (as shown in Chapman's interview with Britell), that directors cultivate signature soundworlds (as Rogers shows of Lynch), that even non-melomane directors develop consistent methods of working with music (as Kerins shows of Bay), and that, insofar as a director's auteurist reputation is first and foremost a construct in the minds of the audience, music will get swept up into that construct even when the director has no part in its creation (as Cateforis shows with regard to Mark Mothersbaugh's music for Wes Anderson). I would even go so far as to say that, if Gorbman lays out a general theory of how auteurist criticism can apply to film music, *Transmedia Directors* puts that theory into practice. It is gratifying to have so many excellent pieces of auteurist film music criticism gathered into a single volume.

Notes

1. Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An Annotated Syllabus," *Continuum* 24: 6 (2010): 943–58.

2. There is another way in which the title is potentially confusing. Although the title mentions "new audiovisual aesthetics," it doesn't really prepare the reader for the fact that the vast majority of these essays focus on film music and/or film sound. Nobody reading this review is likely to mind this surprise very much! But I can imagine that some film music scholars will pass over the book because they don't know how much it focuses on music, while some pure media studies types may pick it up and be disappointed, especially because this focus is probably mainly a function of *Transmedia Directors* having been as published as part of Bloomsbury's "New Approaches to Sound, Music and Media" series.

3. There is perhaps one: Lori Burns's "Multimodal and Transmedia Subjectivity in Animated Music Video: Jess Cope and Steven Wilson's 'Routine' from *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (2015)," 331–48.

4. For example, Warren Buckland suggests that Wes Anderson's most distinctive creation is not a particular film, or even a body of films, but a "supersystem" (23), a sort of idea of what it is for something to be a Wes Anderson project. And it's this—the Wes Anderson auteurist stamp—that constitutes the transmedia text. Wes Anderson's supersystem is to *The Royal Tenenbaums* as the Star Wars franchise is to *The Empire Strikes Back*.

5. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (University of Texas Press, 1994). The high concept era is a chapter in film history that arises in the 1980s (following the collapse of the studio system and the chaotic rise of New Hollywood). As Wyatt defines it, high concept is both a set of industrial practices and an aesthetic: wide release openings and media-saturation ad campaigns are features of the high concept era, but so are high-contrast lighting schemes and training montages set to non-diegetic pop music. Paradigmatic high concept films would include *Top Gun*, *E.T.*, and *Flashdance*.

6. To say that a filmmaker is an auteur is to make three claims: first, that they are an Artist rather than a mere technician, second, that they are responsible for every detail of their films, and third, almost as a consequence, that their individual artistic genius leaves a legible trace in these details, which can be experienced and understood by a well-trained viewer. Criticism that discusses film in these terms is called auteurist, or is said to follow the auteur theory. Classic accounts of the auteur theory include Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1972), 74–115; Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford University Press, 2009), 451–54; and François Truffaut, "Une Certain Tendance du Cinema Français," *Cahiers du cinema*, 31: 1 (1954), 15–28.

7. Hylomorphism, which dates back to Aristotle, defines objects as a combination of matter and form: a wooden cup has certain properties because of its cup-like form, and certain properties because of its underlying wooden substance. As Del Río explains, Simondon rejects this, arguing that what we think of as matter and form are both material forces, working against each other in a particular moment. (294)

8. Brecht famously wanted to jar his audiences out of their emotional engagement with his plays so that they could be forced into a more intellectual posture. A *Verfremdungseffekt* (literally, "distancing effect") is a strange or off-putting element introduced for this precise purpose.

9. One can never touch on every essay in a review such as this. My apologies to the scholars who I left out; please rest assured that your omission does not reflect on the quality of your work.