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## The media, i.e. ...? : The notion of the media with regard to Polish territories before WW II

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Mirośław Filiciak

# The media, i.e....?

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media with regard  
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Thomas Elsaesser in his recently published article titled *Media archeology as symptom* analysed the relationships between film studies and media archaeology. His discussion revolved around the question: 'what is the cinema (good) for?', but his primary focus lay on the reasons for the popularity of this discipline in the field of cultural studies. The author notes that in spite of the inconsistent methodology and the inconsistent nature of the object of study, media archaeology has been a booming discipline for about a decade. In his view, it has had two major keystones: one is a critical approach to the simplified linear historical narrations and the other is the search for the obsolete variants of changes concerning the media. Moreover, this discipline has had its impact on books which are important in the field of media studies, even if it was not explicitly mentioned in the discussion (the quoted examples include 'The Language of New Media' by Lev Manovich and 'Remediation' by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin). In studying media archaeology as a symptom of other phenomena, Elsaesser discusses the academic, technological and even political contexts into which it has been incorporated. One of these contexts is the *poetics of obsolescence*. i.e. the fact that the discipline of film studies, which has been a crucial impulse for the development of media archaeology, is focused on the medium which is ever more visibly becoming outdated and awkward in use, and yet nostalgically material. The author of *Media Archaeology as Symptom* reveals the paradoxical character of the discipline which is opposed to normative judgments, even though, in a sense, it has been leading film art to becoming little more than a matter for museum exhibitions. Thus, in doing so, media archaeology is fulfilling one of the foundational fantasies of the traditional film studies which has served as the opposing principle in its development, namely that film should acquire the status of an art.

In his final remarks, Elsaesser wrote: 'does this answer my question "what is the cinema (good) for"? Probably not in any exhaustive way, and possibly not even to anyone's satisfaction: but hopefully it supplies enough "conceptual friction", enough "reading against the grain" and "food for thought" to put the question on the agenda' (Elsaesser, 2016: 209). In Elsaesser's view, film art and its study provide impulses for critical reflection on research tools: even if these tools do not become undoubtedly 'better' than the older conceptual frameworks, they are certainly updated to serve the needs of contemporary problems. It is difficult to contend with an argument expressed in this way, but it has to be noted that this is a perspective of a scholar specialising in film studies. On the other hand, when observed from the perspective of study of other media, the archaeological approach simply helps to broaden the reference frame for the phenomena under discussion, certainly not with a view to endowing them with a noble pedigree. Instead, it helps to better understand how the phenomena categorised as media are incorporated into various spheres of everyday life. This is particularly important in the context of the theoretical crisis with which media studies have been grappling for at least a decade and which makes it necessary to reconsider the category of a 'medium'.

In recent years, the notion of medium has become radically blurred, which may be observed, for instance, in the conceptions of mediation and mediatisation, i.e. the process in which all spheres of social life are 'impregnated' with media to such an extent that the latter become an integral part of social institutions (Livingstone, 2009; Hjarvard, 2008). The ambitious research work on the processes related to the 'possible and actual mediation of everything' (Livingstone, 2009: 9) involves taking an important stance

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(in the political sense as well), but also poses an analytical problem, for in this perspective the role of the media is played by almost everything, including ourselves. To quote Marek Krajewski, 'we will be hard pressed to find anything which is not a medium, or, potentially, could not become one' (Krajewski, 2015; *We have become the media*). The panmediality discussed by Krajewski shifts the research on media into the centre of reflection in the humanities, a situation which in itself seems to be worthy of attention and should be critically approached by scholars. This shift might be considered in the context of power struggles taking place in academic institutions. More importantly, however, these processes involve the risk of making the media appear to be an unconstrained metaphor, a catch-all notion, which is useful for describing adopted perspectives and carrying out analyses on the macro-social level, but too clumsy to become a viable analytical tool. Panmediality works on the presumption that the relationships between us and the media and between the media themselves are almost infinitely interconnected and form a network which makes it difficult to carry out analyses taking into account the specific conditions of various forms of communication. It has to be noted that panmediality is a breeding ground for language characterised by generalisation and universalisation. This observation has led to a critical discussion centred on the concept of a medium, clearly noticeable in both Anglo-Saxon media studies and in German media theory. This discussion has been tremendously influenced by the work of Friedrich Kittler, whose materialistic approach to the history of media provided an important incentive for the reflection on this category. Today, we may observe the discussion concerning the replacement of the category of 'technical media' with the notion of 'cultural techniques'.<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to provide even a brief report on this discussion, so I will only make a reference to this topic with a quote from Siegfried Zielinski, a scholar who broadened the scope of reflection on media by pursuing research in what he called 'variantology'. The aptly titled book, '[...After the Media]', defines the notion of media by drawing attention to the historical circumstances which have determined this category: '*The media* refers to a specific historically and systematically deducible discourse, which has incorporated concrete entities. This discourse encompasses in principle the technical materials of communication, and at the same time instructions for their use. When we speak of "media", we are only citing an umbrella term for heterogeneous phenomena of a primarily technical nature' (Zielinski, 2013: 23).

Zielinski's work is a good illustration of the tension between, on the one hand, the reluctance to become entrenched in the arbitrarily defined boundaries of the notion and, on the other, the need to study the historical context of the terms we use. In this article, I should like to expand the scope of study and in addition to the temporal context of media, which has been a part of the archaeological reflection, discuss also the related spatial context. In order to express this idea even more clearly, I shall refer to the 'travelling concepts' of

1 Bernhard Siegert argues that there are three phases in this discussion. Firstly, the philosophical concepts are replaced with empirical technical objects. The second phase involves, broadly speaking, a quest for material carriers which enhance reading, writing, and counting (the post-hermeneutical phase). In the final phase this category is expanded to include all cultural processes where objects play an important role, for instance by suggesting categories and distinctions (such as the inside and the outside; in this perspective even a door may be seen as a medium). 'When we speak of cultural techniques, therefore, we envisage a more or less complex actor network that comprises technological objects as well as the operative chains they are part of and that configure or constitute them' (Siegert, 2014: 11).

Mieke Bal: ‘They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ’ (Bal, 2002: 24). In the context of the quoted examples of research work it may be stated that media scholars are more interested in how the notion of a medium travels in time rather than space. This is all the more interesting to me because I am particularly intent on studying the history of media in my native Polish context. In the perspective of research work, this task is no less daunting than striving to avoid presentism in historiography. In the text in hand I will therefore try to illustrate the problems with using various terms related to media, particularly the cases where they are used across different historical periods and outside the local spatial context. This observation is also valid for technologies which may seem to have spread around the world without major modification. My second objective will be to study the status of Poland, a country where the cultural industries were developing in strikingly different conditions than those of the ‘West’, and the diffusion of the industrially produced cultural content in the specific conditions of limitation and deficiency.

## Transmediality: historical and local approaches

In studying the proposed topic, I shall be making references to two notions in particular: convergence and transmediality. Not only have these terms played a vital role in the discussion on the ways in which the media operate today, but they are also being adapted for historical analyses in the framework of ‘perspective correction’ proposed by Thomas Elsaesser (2004: 86). In making references to media convergence, I will be primarily using the work by Henry Jenkins, who defined convergence as the ‘technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media circulate within our culture (...) Perhaps most broadly, media convergence refers to a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them’ (2006: 282).<sup>2</sup> The latter issue, i.e. the flow of content across various media, has been further discussed by Matthew Freeman, who also problematised the question of viewing this phenomenon as a novelty correlating with the development of interlocking digital platforms. To quote Freeman: ‘Convergence has been most typically contextualised as a product of the contemporary media landscape, understood in relation to technological convergences along with the horizontal integration of media conglomeration. These transitions have accelerated the production of similarly converged and branded forms of media content, in turn enabling such content to flow more freely across the borders of media platforms. Industrialised media phenomena such as transmedia, cross-media strategies, media branding, and franchise entertainment have thereby all come to occupy systems of production in and across the contemporary media landscape’ (Freeman, 2014: 2365). The flows between the media occasioned by convergence – i.e. transmediality or transmedia storytelling produced with the conscious use of convergence – are labelled by Jenkins as ‘new aesthetics’

2 I present the historical context of convergence elsewhere, see: Filiciak, 2013, 173–184; also books by Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, Robert C. Allen ‘Going to the Cinema’, and Robert C. Sickels, ‘American Film in the Digital Age’, 2008.

which set new tasks to media users: 'Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience' (2006: 21).

Nevertheless, Freeman argues, the 'novelty' nature of such solutions may be questioned; in doing so, he exemplifies his argument mostly by referring to 'The Wizard of Oz' (which will become significant later on). Thus, however indirectly, he questions the underlying tenets concerning the 'analogue' media system, developed at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the contemporary system, based on the figures of convergence and interconnectedness and analysed primarily from the perspective of change rather than continuity. In Freeman's view, the study of archival materials makes it possible to discover 'cross-media characters, fictional story-worlds, and indeed media branding at the turn of the 20th century' (2014: 2363). When seen from this perspective, the transmedial system constructed by L. Frank Baum makes it possible to carry out yet another 'reconfiguration of modernism' (Majewski, 2009), for it may be viewed, in Freeman's words, as 'emblematic of this turn-of-the-century transition from the United States as a rural economy into an urbanism of industrialised mass culture' (2014: 2364). This system is described as a symbol not only of the development of modern media and advertising industry, but also of coordinated large-scale projects, which have been made possible owing to the development of cultural industry.

Certainly, similar examples may be found in earlier historical periods, especially if we do not impose too strict categories of transmediality and centralised coordination of storytelling. One such example is mediaeval theatre, about which de Kerckhove wrote: 'Transmedia share a number of key features with sacred plays that were performed outside the church on the town square. These performances involved the public, using the media available at the time. They involved participation, games, storytelling, local news and politics, and their various stages would operate simultaneously. There presented too a kind of hypertextual layout in that people could choose to go from place to place without any particular order unless they preferred to follow the Magister Ludis. Like transmedia today, they were based on a world, the Earth in relationship to Heaven and Hell, and allowed for much improvisation on the part of the actors' (2015: 5). Also Lisa-Marie Klap, in discussing the practices of the Catholic church in the Middle Ages, has identified some analogies reminiscent of the present-day practices of cultural industries. The discussion offered by Klap deals not only with the ways of organising narration or devising its aesthetic features, but also the inclusion of new technologies into the process (such as the printing press, which facilitated distribution, but debilitated centralised control and made the narration even more fragmented). These references to the Middle Ages, however, carry the risk of making the category of transmediality dissolve into a metaphor or reducing it to a mere anecdote, which is here beside the point: I have no intention of bloating this category only to demonstrate what can be possibly subsumed into transmediality when this notion is expanded.

The problem which I aim to address in this article leads to seeking answers to a different series of questions. Firstly, to what extent can the category of transmedia be referred to the beginnings of mass culture in Poland? Is it possible to replicate the innovative approach of Freeman, who applied this

category to analyse the media system functioning over a hundred years ago, and adapt this approach to different locations, especially those peripheral to America? In this perspective, the article in hand subscribes to the postulate of transmedia archaeology formulated in the book by Carlos Scolari, Paolo Berletti, and Matthew Freeman titled 'Transmedia Archaeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction'. There is, however, yet another issue which I would like to ponder, one which has been mentioned already: the specific nature of research carried out in Poland, which means beyond the cultural and economic centre of the world. It will most probably spoil the dramatic impact of this text, but most readers will find it barely surprising – the second question is this: if the odds are low that this research will prove successful, what is the ultimate reason for this failure? How should we translate the category of early transmedia into local contexts (and I believe that it is not limited to that of Poland) without skidding into that self-colonising discourse, which would most probably lead to the conclusion that 'here' media were quite simply less developed than 'there' (i.e. in America)? Is it worthwhile to modify this particular concept after considering it in a specific context and treat the expansive nature of this category as a tool for discerning the differences between the analysed situations? In what follows, I shall discuss the above questions. The proposed chronological scope covers the two decades between the First and the Second World War, which offers the opportunity to capture a distinct period in the history of Poland, a single political entity (despite the obvious internal differences resulting from the partitions) which had emerged as an independent state in 1918 and came to an end with the outbreak of war in 1939. Choosing this particular period is also due to the fact that the processes of culture industrialisation were well under way in the West at that time (and this is reflected in the research of Western scholars), but, as I will attempt to illustrate, were not as evident in the context of Poland in the inter-war period.

## Local modernities

Two issues come instantly to the fore during the study of the archival material and contextual data related to searching for transmedial phenomena in Poland from the time before rapid industrialisation, i.e. the two interwar decades. Firstly, the relevant information is in short supply. Secondly, the data concerning the economic development and directly related to the media market demonstrate that Poland was significantly underdeveloped in relation to Western Europe and the United States.

In spite of the idealisations of the interwar period, which for a variety of reasons occur in Polish public discourse, the actual situation in Poland in the early years of its regained independence was far from ideal. Zbigniew Landau and Jerzy Tomaszewski in their book titled 'Gospodarka Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej' ['The Economy of the Second Republic of Poland'] describe the multitude of difficulties resulting from the necessity of aligning the economic systems and social structures which had been developing independently during the time when Poland was partitioned. Amongst the troubles which Poland faced at the time one has to mention in particular the damage caused by the war, especially noticeable in Galicia, the evacuation of industry by the partitioning powers, the dynamic rate of natural increase and the limitations imposed by the countries which welcomed Polish immigrants before 1918. As

a result, 'education at schools was not available to all children and for many adult citizens it was very hard to find a job and fend for themselves' (Landau, Tomaszewski, 1991: 2). The Second Republic was a predominantly rural country where the social structure as of 1931 (approximate figures, including family members) presented itself as follows: entrepreneurs and self-employed (608,000), non-manual workers (1,534,000), the middle classes (3,536,000), workers (except agriculture; 6,548,000), agricultural labourers (2,992,000), peasants (16,531,000) (Landau, Tomaszewski, 1991: 37). The countryside in Greater Poland [Wielkopolska] was relatively modernised, with large-scale production and synthetic fertilisers, but the East was emphatically pre-modern: the traditional methods of farming prevailed, the role of cash in trade was minimal, and misery was ubiquitous. It can be seen clearly in legislation, such as the regulation introduced in 1932, i.e. in the midst of the global economic crisis, which allowed peasants to settle their accounts in kind (and also turned out to be ineffectual). The natural rhythm of the year had a greater impact on the conditions of life of many Poles than might have been expected in the 20th century. For instance, in the poorer regions children living in the countryside would stay away from school in the colder months: 'it was not unusual for a number of children in a peasant family to share one pair of shoes – they would wear them in turns and walk to the school, provided that the teachers worked in several shifts' (Landau, Tomaszewski, 1991: 41). The staple diet was composed of salted potatoes. To protect children from cold at night, the parents would tie them up in bags filled with straw.

I have no intention of evoking a feeling of shock with this information, I am doing so to provide the context for studying the phenomena related to the development of mass culture, which for the most part was an urban phenomenon. In 1921, only one out of four Polish citizens lived in a city, by 1938 the figure rose only very slightly to a mere 30%. These numbers are radically different from the urban populations of other European countries, especially when compared with Great Britain (75,5%), Germany (69,9%), or France (52,4%; Żarnowski, 1999: 44). Only one third of Poland's rural households had access to electricity, while the number of urban buildings connected to the electrical grid averaged 38%. Still in 1924, the number of cars in Poland was around 7,500 – not too many for a country of 33 million inhabitants. According to Janusz Żarnowski, 'In 1938 there were 50 cars per thousand inhabitants in Great Britain, while in France even slightly more than that. Poland would reach such figures only in the late 1970s, while in 1938 the number of cars was about one fiftieth of the respective value in these two countries at that time' (1999: 50). All of this had an impact on quality of life. It is hardly surprising to find that before the outbreak of WWII the average life expectancy in such countries as Great Britain, Germany, and Sweden was in the range of 60–64 years, while in Poland it was less than 50 years (Żarnowski, 1999: 39). Another problem in the development of mass culture was the competence hurdle: the 1921 census revealed that one third of the population (exclusive of children below the age of 10) were illiterate. The authorities succeeded in diminishing this figure by the late 1930s, but still in December 1938 as many as 18% of the inhabitants lacked the ability to read and write. By 1939, the number of registered users of radio had slightly exceeded the one million mark (c. 327,000 in rural areas), which translates to 3 users per one hundred inhabitants. Moreover, one third of all active radio receivers were primitive crystal radios. Also the book market was clearly underdeveloped: although in 1937 it saw the publication of about 8,000 titles,



the average print run was barely in excess of 2,000 copies. In 1931, there were 182 daily newspapers, out of which 22 were distributed in more than 20,000 copies and only two (*Kurier Warszawski* and *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*) sold more than 100,000 (Kłoskowska, 2006: 417).

As observed by Ludwik Stomma, it resulted in the multi-tiered isolation of Polish folk culture which was so important to Polish culture as a whole (1986: 65). In the early years of the 20th century, the words of Jan Stanisław Bystron, quoted by Stomma, carried much weight: 'A peasant [...] would hardly ever leave his immediate vicinity and was dumbfounded at the sight of anything he had not seen in his native village' (1947: 35–36). Thus, the isolation did not refer only to the space where they lived (according to Stomma, in the late 19th century no more than 4% of Polish peasants ever made it to travel any farther than 20 kilometres from their village; 1986: 65–72), but also to their worldview. It was shaped primarily by the church, the manor house, the inn, and the school: 'Still in 1900, a peasant subscribing to the newspaper *Gazeta Świąteczna* commented on the quality of its articles: "it is as if one sat in church and listened attentively to a beautiful sermon". It was as if he had known no greater compliment than this' (Stomma, 1986: 73). Further in his account the author wrote that similar statements could have been found in peasant memoirs as late as in the mid-1930s!

The process of modernisation was bolstered by the efforts of the government, particularly strenuous during the economic crisis of 1929–1934, and grassroots initiatives: especially the heroic work of educational organisations, which were often affiliated to political parties. For example, the Catholic Association of Young People (connected to the National Democracy) numbered about 250,000 members. The 'Wici' Association, active mainly in the countryside, gathered c. 100,000 people, while the youth section of the Workers' University Association (with links to the Polish Socialist Party) had c. 8,000 members. Even though the technical media did contribute to the modernisation-oriented efforts, particularly those made by the government (see e.g. the plan of developing Poland's radio network implemented since 1929), the key role in these changes was played by the press and books, mainly on account of the economic factors (for instance, 'Wici' organised a network of reading rooms in rural areas). It is worthwhile to consider not only the economic, but also the infrastructural factors – in Germany at the time there was a vibrant network of so-called itinerant cinemas, while in Poland they were so few and far between that it is hard to estimate their number. Most probably it is owing to the fact that the eastern parts of Poland did not have a viable network of paved roads. The example of 'The Wizard of Oz' discussed by Matthew Freeman was based primarily on print (the publication of the novel, the maps of the Oz country, and fictitious newspapers), but also, to some extent, on theatre shows and film production. In the Polish context, however, this could not have happened in a similar form on two accounts: the limitations of the potential public and the dispersed nature of the industry. The Polish transmedia of the interwar period were not dealing with conjuring up fictional worlds. The rare flows between the media occurred mainly in advertising; see for instance the advertisements of Morwitan (tobacco accessories), which included films and audio recordings, or Polish Fiat cars, promoted in a 7-minute video and an audio recording with a song and a short talk on the future of the automotive industry. Instances of interlocking media can be found in comics, but it seems that in this case it was limited to reproducing the content imported from abroad, or making bootleg copies and playing with figures known from film, without the consent of the

authors. From 1931 *Ekspres Ilustrowany* published comic strips presenting the figures of the famous Danish comedians Pat and Patachon. A Disney-related magazine for children, *Gazetka Miki* was appearing before the war, for several months of 1938–1939 (Rusek, 2001: 30). Polish cartoonists drew comics featuring Laurel and Hardy, published in the *Świat Przygód* in 1935–1936. The leading role in this was played by Jerzy Nowicki, who most probably would simply redraw the American comics (Rusek, 2001: 89). The relations between the comics and film were so evident that they became part of the language: the ‘120 przygód Koziołka Matołka’ were termed ‘comic movies’ (Rusek, 2001: 35). As I have noted above, these rare findings make us form a narrative where the local examples are far removed from the American ones, both in terms of scale and conceptual sophistication. However, if we expand the definition of media and concentrate on the massive reach and the broadly understood material infrastructure and, in doing so, expand the scale of the search for transmedial flows, we will most probably find more instances worthy of being called a medium in considering the question of ‘peripheral transmedia’.

This approach seems reasonable, given that in Poland the reach of such media, like cinema, was fairly limited. It may be estimated that in the 1920s Poland had not more than 500 cinemas. Theatre remained as an elitist form of entertainment; for instance, some estimates say that in 1929 the audience in municipal theatres did not exceed 200,000. There were territorial limitations regarding access to professional films and theatre plays making up part of the cultural offer. So what was there for the vast majority of the then population of Poland living in rural areas? ‘The popular amateur theatre was one of the most vibrant cultural phenomena of the interwar period. It is estimated that there were about 5,000–7,000 theatre groups that worked on a regular basis and gave about 20,000–30,000 performances per year. To this one should add the amateur groups in the cities and a fair number of occasional initiatives, which make the figure of grass-roots, non-professional theatrical projects rise to about 10,000. Thus, it was a considerable group of people and the active artists together with their public constituted a six-digit number’ (Okraska, 2010). According to Piotr Dahlig, owing to such artists as Jędrzej Cierniak, interwar Poland could boast c. 20,000 village theatres. Seweryn Wisłocki wrote that these vibrant activities were purposefully included in the ‘cultural and educational projects for village people and later on also for workers and artisans, which took the form of a specific “mass mobilisation” of the Polish intelligentsia’ (1991: 91). I am referring to village theatres to demonstrate that such ‘non-medial’ phenomena (in a technological sense), even in the 1920s and 1930s, could indeed have played the role of mass media to a degree not much inferior or even on a par with the technical media and professional cultural institutions. This refers to the aspect of scale, which is certainly not the only possible form of legitimising the object of this study. Of course it may be argued that the sketchy picture I present here is distorted, imprecise, or outright tendentious. It depends to a great extent on the accepted reference point and the fact that part of this information is quoted from studies by film historians, who might have ignored other organisational forms (for instance, itinerant cinema) because of their preference for taking account of the institutional vision of cinema prevalent in academia. Cinema is not the only object for consideration; it seems worthwhile to quote from the study of Janusz Żarnowski, who compared Poland and other European countries and wrote about the beginning of the twentieth century and the interwar period: ‘If indeed we may dedicate only a little attention to the underdeveloped

countries [including Poland], it is partly due to the fact that quite simply we know less about them. In particular the quantity and quality of statistical data was fairly accurately correlated with the degree of civilisational development (1999: 21). Nevertheless, I believe that these remarks and consequently the necessity to study the above figures rather cautiously can hardly change the general picture which they reveal, nor can they affect the corrective measures concerning the conception of a 'medium' situated in the local historical context, which is of pivotal importance for this study.

## Other media?

It has to be emphasised that the locality of the category of a medium is not limited to the question of the massive reach. One should also problematise the question of how society conceived of the other component of this notion, namely the technological dimension. The context of the way in which the term 'medium' emerged in the nineteenth century has been thoroughly analysed, not only in the historical studies of media carried out by the German scholars mentioned above. These studies demonstrate the distinctive links existing between the sphere of inventions which were to become a common element in everyday life, and the discontinued development path which linked technology and spiritualism. Spiritualism did not entail a rejection of technology: instead, it provided an environment in which people could voice their concerns about the increase in the role of machines and their hopes of discovering their spiritual dimension. Friedrich Kittler wrote that the spiritual beings communicated with people by means of messages transmitted in Morse code (1999: 12). Anthony Enns in his text *Spiritualist Writing Machines* presents various publications from the second half of the nineteenth century according to which telegraphy and typtology were seen as similar methods of communication over distance based on transmitting electric impulses, not only from far removed place, but also from the beyond (it is worth noticing that in the USA there was a periodical titled *Spiritual Telegraph*). The instructions for spiritualists made use of the language of technology (and called the joining of hands 'battery forming'), while newspaper publishers (such as Horace Greeley of the *New York Herald*) offered prizes for spiritualists who would prove to have been able to transmit information from Europe before the transatlantic telegraph cable was laid. It is well known that great inventors were interested in spiritualism. For instance, Edison was convinced that the voices of the dead resound around us, but they need to be amplified to become audible to humans.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Latham Sholes, the inventor of the typewriter and the founder of the group Excelsior Church, was a devoted spiritualist. 'At the same time that the typewriter was becoming essential to business communication, therefore, spiritualists also conceived of this writing machine as essential to spirit communication, as it promised to enable the integration and automation of transmission, translation, and transcription' (Enns, 2015: 14).

This is yet another topic which enables us to find new contexts for the analysis of the category of transmediality in a given time and at a specific place. It is rooted in the spectral turn, which for the last two decades has been a particularly popular notion. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren in

3 This question is discussed in the film *Edison – the realms beyond* by Jonathan Dailler, <https://vimeo.com/126302369>

their introduction to the monumental 'The Spectralities Reader' wrote that hauntology devised by Derrida 'reshapes history by disrupting its conventional structure of chronology' (2013: 14), but it does more than that: it helps to cope with history and the traumatic aspects of it – mourning, remembering one's faults, the necessity 'to live with ghosts' and reconcile history with memory. In the spectral turn, ghosts are not a mere metaphor, but an element of the socio-cultural tensions which occur around the emerging media, which are associated in a number of ways with the supernatural powers, spectral media. If according to Kittler the media give us various tools to think about ourselves, then the transformations of modernity come in a package in which (following, amongst others, Akira Mizuta Lippit) an x-ray generator, psychoanalysis and a cinematograph may be subsumed into the 'phenomenologies of the inside (...) which changed the terms by which interiority was conceived, imagined, and viewed' (Kittler, 1999: 271). In the case of the new media of that period, this transformation was not the only phenomenon as it entailed a continuity, a connection to the past: it meant that the events which in the simplistic view were incompatible with the changes in technology could be experienced in a different way.

Polish political and cultural elites of the interwar period were fascinated by spiritualism and seeking contact with the dead, as is documented in the book by Paulina Sołowianiuk 'Jasnowidz w salonie' ['A Seer in the Drawing Room']. This spiritualism was elitist also in the sense that it involved summoning the spirits of famous figures (according to Sołowianiuk, in conservative Cracow the most popular spirit to 'talk to' was Kochanowski and his untimely deceased daughter Urszulka who appears in his poems [2014: 14]), but also in the fact that it tried to match the fascination with paranormal phenomena with science. This dilemma can be illustrated by the case of the autographon, a machine which was supposed to facilitate communication with the spirits. It was advertised in the Polish press in this way: 'The autographon is designed for clairvoyance and is a replacement for triangles, plates, seers and other media that fail... The autographon will never cheat you. It is a new, precision-built and patented invention and is intended to connect the visible and the invisible worlds. The device will be sent with a brochure explaining the scientific grounds for its functioning at the stated address at the price of 12 zlotys in cash on delivery' (*Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny*, 1927, No. 349; quoted in Sołowianiuk, 2014: 12).

It is not surprising that also scientists were keen to make use of paranormal capabilities. One of the most famous Polish mediums at the time was Stefan Ossowiecki who supposedly was able not only to communicate with the dead, but also to use bilocation in order to take part in a scientific conference in Vienna. 'The engineer wanted to listen to several lectures, but could not travel abroad due to some previous arrangements. This opportunity, however, was not to be missed, so he was persuaded to carry out an experiment. In the presence of some of his friends and a doctor, he went into a trance... How astounded the sceptics were, when a couple of days later a delegation of Polish architects confirmed that they had seen him in Vienna! It is said that even the list of the attendees contained the signature of Ossowiecki' (Sołowianiuk, 2014: 81–82). Another important Polish scientist who joined the media with technology and spiritualism was Julian Ochorowicz, the model for Ochocki, a character from the novel 'Lalka' by Bolesław Prus. One of the pioneers of psychology, he worked with much success on loudspeakers and telephones – his patented devices were sold on the French market. It is worthwhile to note his publication of 1878

in the magazine *Kosmos* in which he discussed the question of transmitting images over distance. Eusapia Palladino, a famous Italian medium, came to Warsaw at his invitation. His inventions included also a device for measuring individual capability of undergoing hypnosis. However, it was not only the elites who made use of the media in the nineteenth-century meaning of the term. Perhaps the nineteenth- and twentieth-century meanings of 'medium' were not neatly separated also from the perspective of other social groups.

At this particular instance I wish to make a reference to the category of culture circulation proposed by Stefan Żółkiewski, who might have been the first to introduce to Polish scholarship so orderly a reflection on the reception of the texts of culture. This circulation in his approach referred to the relationships between the texts, their recipients and the social institutions which were dealing with their content. In analysing the literary culture of Poland in 1918–1932, Żółkiewski distinguished several tiers of circulation: high culture, popular and vulgar, folk, and fair-like. The last of these is particularly important at least on two accounts. Firstly, for the most part of Poland's rural population of the interwar period it was still important despite being an evidently archaic remnant of the pre-modern order. Żółkiewski described this circulation and referred to the distribution of brochures and leaflets during religious feasts (the texts were rather short, which reflected not only economic factors, but also the limited reading competence of a part of the potential recipients). Thus, the other aspect of its importance is the fact that popular literature benefited from the forms involved in this circulation. This remark refers to dream dictionaries, divinations, and devotional texts with moralising content.<sup>4</sup> What is particularly important in the context of this article, is that paper was not the only physical carrier of this content – we should also take into account the seller: the fair beggar.

## The beggars' transmedia

The book 'Karnawał dziadowski' ['The beggars' carnival'] opens with an introduction by Julian Krzyżanowski, which offers an analysis of the reportage by Stanisław Wasylewski published in *Kurier Poznański* in September 1930. Wasylewski wrote about his visit to the sanctuary of Jasna Góra, where he witnessed a performance by a fair beggar: 'By profession he is in fact a pedlar of songs, but who would buy a slip of paper with two or three songs printed on it for thirty groszy? The fair bookstalls are empty, no one is buying. Then the pedlar turns into a performer' (St. Wasylewski, "Niespodzianka" na odpuście' ['A "Surprise" at the Fair'], *Kurier Poznański* 1930, No. 410, 6 September, in: Krzyżanowski, 1977: 6). The journalist relates that the beggar attempted to attract the audience by singing a love song addressed at some girls who were emphatically unimpressed: 'The dissatisfied girls pout their lips. They have already heard the same at home, in a much better performance' (Krzyżanowski, 1977: 7). Perhaps the radio or gramophone are implied; the interlocking spheres of modern entertainment and the tradition of fair beggars can be observed also in other questions. Wasylewski wrote that the

4 These circulations interlaced also before that; according to Piotr Grochowski the fair leaflets before they were offered to the uneducated villagers and the poor in the cities were bought mainly by aristocrats and wealthy city dwellers. They made their first appearance in Poland in the sixteenth century, but owing to the new public, they became immensely popular in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. See: Grochowski, 2009: 202–203.

performer did not look like a 'classic' beggar, but rather a cabaret singer. An even better example of the relationship between these spheres can be found in another piece. In today's academic parlance we might call this convergence or remediation. The piece presents a truly tabloid-like story of a son, who returns to his home after twenty years in America only to be killed by his mother. She recognised him only after the fatal blow and this is only the beginning of the vicissitudes which form the subject matter of the song. The father dies too: 'his heart burst in pain, he dropped dead right beside his son; the mother saw the grief/ and took her own life'. Wasylewski includes this story in his account, because it is an evident adaptation of the play by Karol Hubert Rostworowski titled 'The Surprise', which premiered one year before the events described in the reportage and was one of the most spectacular theatre plays of the interwar period.

It is certainly difficult to trace with any precision the circulation of these motifs and state to what extent Rostworowski was inspired by folk songs and vice versa. We know from other accounts that some details in the songs were different (especially concerning the circumstances of the parents' death: for instance, the father shot himself with a handgun and the mother 'hung herself from a ceiling joist'). The premiere of the theatre play must have been related to the performance of the song at fairs. Moreover, according to Krzyżanowski a similar story (although the main character is a miller) appears in the Czech anthology of kermess songs published in 1937 (*České písně kramářské* by R. Smetana and B. Václavek). This is perhaps a symbolic example of the search for specific, 'air-tight' and autonomous phenomena, 'authentic' songs which might have been a result of pop-cultural inspiration (in the implied context of the development of technical media and mass culture). Some media scholars might be found repeating this mistake by mirroring the methods of work of Czech ethnographers: they observe the medial phenomena, but take a narrow perspective in which some phenomena are interesting to them (such as the press, radio and film, all based on technology), while others, although related (such as the songs mentioned above or the leaflets, which are hard to find after so many years), are of no relevance to them.

It follows from the analysis of Julian Krzyżanowski that the examples of this sort may be treated as an element of the phenomenon which with reference to the processes of digitisation occurring a century later was termed 'media in transition' (Jenkins & Thornburn, 2003). Apart from singing the songs inspired by the events described in literature, it is evident that the fair beggars played the role characteristic of the press: they propagated sensational stories, but also informed about important events in world politics (such as the assassination in Sarajevo of 1914). Krzyżanowski wrote that in the late nineteenth century 'the epic folk song evolved into a sensational chronicle, a parochial account of family feuds, such as the ill-treatment of children by their reprobate stepmothers, children murdering their parents (or the other way round), suicides, and lovers killing their loved ones' (1977: 11). Stanisław Nyrkowski proposed similar conclusions: 'Fairs and feasts featured the performances of itinerant beggars and song authors, who also sold leaflets with the texts of their songs. In a sense, collections of storytelling songs, usually printed on two sheets of paper, played the role of newspapers. They would change hands and people would learn them by heart. Not only did they expand the repertoire of folk songs, but also shaped the morals of the population and taught the wisdom of life' (1977: 25–26). Even though the history of storytelling songs may be traced to the Middle Ages (which gave

the genre an invocation, an opening song), it was in the interwar period that some evident changes were taking place. It was then that the beggar's song had to 'fend off' such competitors as the press, radio, and gramophones: 'In the final years of the interwar period the traditional poetics of storytelling songs gradually unravelled because of the impact of urban singing. The songs more and more often take the form of a literary ballad divorced from authenticity: its plot is based either on imagination, or popular novels. In order to save the storytelling songs, which began to lose their value as a source of information and thus became less attractive, the editors of various collections of popular and sought-after "novelties" published them under the general title "Pieśni zdarzeniowe" ["Event-referring songs']' (Nyrkowski: 26). These brochures remained popular in that period, with the print runs reaching thousands of copies, in spite of the scornful attitude of the authorities who saw them as a sign of backwardness.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the changes in the repertoire, which meant the growing popularity of entertaining and informational elements as well as borrowings from theatre of film productions, I wish to draw attention to the specific function of the beggars, who were simultaneously mediums of both spheres: the spiritualist and the 'mundane'. 'Coming from far afield, wandering and attending various fairs and feasts, the beggar plays also the role of an intermediary between the isolated rural community, of which he is himself often part, and the broader world. In this sense he is a welcomed guest in all Slavic lands, because he brings information and knowledge about the unknown places and events to peasants who as a rule rarely leave their isolated rural environment' (Michajłowa, 2010: 112). Katia Michajłowa emphasised that the beggar is an intermediary between 'the native and the foreign, the close and the remote, the known and the unknown, and also between the town and the village' (2010: 112) and explicitly compared this role to that of postmen and couriers. Thus the beggar is also a medium, because he makes it possible for urban culture to circulate to rural communities, which are isolated from it in terms of infrastructure and competence.

## Conclusions

The questions under consideration concerning the expansive nature of the category of a medium (but also the analytical reasons for this consideration) depend on the reflection on local modernities, the search for the elements which may have had something in common with the processes taking place in the world centres of cultural modernisation, and the local discontinuities. I am well aware of the exaggerated claims I decided to include in this text. Perhaps such provocations may bring us closer to a better understanding of the specific natures of local modernisations, which were taking place in a different social and economic context, with limited resources in both an economic and a cultural sense (concerning the competences of the audience). The category of transmediality may be viewed in a similar way. The primary meaning of this term may be used in two ways, despite the fact that, according to both Jenkins and Freeman, it is related to the top-down planning and devising of the strategies of big businesses and countries (Freeman argues that the

5 On 8 March 1935 the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education issued a decree (1v Ns-1012-35) which required the librarians to throw away the fair leaflets with songs for waste. See: Nyrkowski, 1977.

final phase of the development of analogue transmedia emerged from the US government propaganda). Firstly, transmediality may be treated as an indicator of development (here perhaps conceived of as ‘keeping up’ with the cultural centre). In this view, it will be another way of analysing culture, about which Antonina Kłoskowska wrote that ‘despite using the mass media, the culture was still not-so-mass’ (2006: 418). In Poland, it was not until after WWII that it became possible to cross the second threshold of entry into mass culture, i.e. not only using the mass media, but also developing sizeable institutions which could be identified with the developed industries of culture. For this reason the first transmedia attempts in Poland can be found in the late 1960s and 1970s and include such titles as *Cztery pancerni i pies* (*Four tank-men and a dog*; apart from the book and television series there were also comic strips in press, fully-fledged comics, and even fan clubs), *Stawka większa niż życie* (*Stakes Larger Than Life*; television series and comics, but also television plays), or the series of crime stories, television episodes and comics *o7 zgłoś się* (*o7 Come In*).

On the other hand, the presumption of intentionality, i.e. the centralisation of mass culture, may be excluded from the construction of transmedial connections. It is even more pertinent because discovering mass media is always problematic – in the case of the series *o7 zgłoś się* it is important to note the decision of the communist authorities to support productions which aimed to lighten up the image of policemen. But is this institutional frame, which must have had an impact on the opportunities to secure funding, equivalent to a commission? The artists assert that this context had no direct bearing on their work (Piotrowski, 2013). Perhaps their declarations are not objective, but if so, what other sources might be held as decisive? John Hartley, amongst others, argues that control is another blurred term which fits with the presumption (which is reasonable to some extent) that media industries are rational subjects, made up of elements resulting from the creative work of individuals, but also subject to chaotic coincidences which are a natural part of the production process. I am convinced that the expansion of the definition of media, as well as that of the notion of transmediality (which is related to the analysis of connections between various phenomena), may prove particularly useful. And this is not only because of the fact that in this way this particular term will become applicable to phenomena from beyond the sphere of the American cultural industries: I believe that if in the peripheral contexts one may use such terms as ‘pirate modernity’ (Sundaram, 2010), then we may also speak about pirate and wild transmediality: this transmediality, is in a way similar to the pirate modernisation, the planned and top-down designed clashes with the improvised, spontaneous and wild. Last but not least: this approach (coming back to Thomas Elseasser’s observations quoted above) may become a source of ‘conceptual friction’, ‘reading against the grain’ and ‘food for thought’.

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