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**THE INTERMEDIALITY
OF NARRATIVE
LITERATURE**

Medialities Matter

Jørgen Bruhn



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Introduction

Abstract What I hope to demonstrate in *Intermediality of Narrative Literature: Medialities Matter* is that narrative literary texts very often, if not always, include significant amounts of what appears to be extra-literary material—formally and in content—and that we too often ignore this dimension of literature. It is as simple, but also as complicated, as that.

Consequently, the pragmatic thesis behind this book is that we can gain new understanding of central areas of narrative literature by using an approach focused on what I prefer to call medialities, which may be briefly defined as tools of communicative action inside or outside the arts (which I shall define more in detail in the next chapter). Media (or medialities) is a central term in intermediality studies, which concerns the study of the combination and transformation of art forms and medialities. What is new in my approach may be summed up in three points:

- (1) I offer what I believe to be an efficient as well as manageable working concept of medialities and intermediality.
- (2) Therefore, I am expanding the perspective of what is normally considered to be within the scope of intermedial studies and literary studies—in particular by understanding medality and intermediality in a broader sense, meaning that much more than conventional art forms or medialities will be included in my analytical framework.
- (3) As a consequence of this, I modestly suggest a methodology of intermedial analysis that can be applied to narrative literary texts.

My proposed methodology is a result of teaching introductory and advanced courses in intermediality, as well as literary history with an intermedial focus. When teaching these courses, I have been struck by the fact that my students are able to grasp the basics of intermediality theory, and that many of them have a relatively clear idea about how to analyze a literary text from earlier training. However, I have found it difficult to explain to my students how to combine these two competencies and apply intermedial theory while performing literary analysis. So whereas textual analysis is well founded in earlier learning for my students, the analysis of texts from an intermedial point of view seems to fit poorly into my students' cognitive frameworks. This is why I have decided to develop a working method for combining the theoretical field of intermediality with the specific field of literary analysis.

Needless to say, I am not the first to combine theories of intermediality and textual analysis. To a certain extent, the very field of intermediality studies—developed from earlier interart studies and philosophical and aesthetic ideas on the relations between the arts—has been created and further developed more or less in order to be able to analyze complex aesthetic texts. Innumerable valuable case studies exist, as well as more systematic investigations of particular intermedial relations in literature, but as yet, to my knowledge, no attempt has specifically combined theories of intermediality with a more well-defined and comprehensive model of textual analysis.

Commentators interested in contemporary culture, the arts, poetry, or fiction often notice that the occurrence of more than one mediality in artistic objects, as well as in non-artistic products such as ads or mass media news, is more the rule than the exception, and that thus has been the case for quite some time. In "New and Novelty in Contemporary Media Cultures," for example, German media theorist Yvonne Spielmann (2010) discusses the veritable invasion of mixed-media phenomena, primarily transmitted by digital technology, into the art world, as well as into our everyday lives. According to Spielmann, the mixing and transformation of conventional, distinct media forms characterize the massive inputs of contemporary mass media and technology, with the result that these intermedial products stupefy and alienate media consumers and media users. As a suggested antidote, Spielmann introduces and discusses contemporary visual artists who create "pockets of resistance" around, beside, or beyond what she sees as the attempt from global communication networks to monopolize human life.

In a related, recent article, which also takes as its starting point the contemporary mixedness of medialities in the arts and in mass media, German media theorist and film scholar Jens Schröter (2010) frames the current situation via the well-known dichotomy of a Laocoonism or medium specificity position, represented by art critic Clement Greenberg, versus a *Gesamtkunstwerk* tradition, represented by artist and theoretician Dick Higgins. Higgins (1997) argued that medium-specific art forms were signs of old-fashioned authoritarian societies: “intermedia” was, for Higgins, the only artistic answer to the democratic politics and culture of contemporary Western societies. This dichotomy constitutes, according to Schröter, a “politics of intermediality” in twentieth-century thought. Schröter quotes Higgins’ ideological opponent Clement Greenberg who found that “intermedia” should definitely be avoided, and as late as 1981, Greenberg, quoted by Schröter, stated: “What’s ominous is that the decline of taste now, for the first time, threatens to overtake art *itself*.” Greenberg continued, “I see ‘intermedia’ and the permissiveness that goes with it as symptom of this. [...] Good art can come from anywhere, but it hasn’t yet come from intermedia or anything like it” (Greenberg 1981, quoted in Schröter 2010, 110; for a more substantial version of his position, see Greenberg 1993). For Greenberg, then, the mixing of media tends to limit art’s ability to go against the grain of commercialism and kitsch; it is art’s capitulation to “capitalist spectacle culture” (Schröter 2010, 112).

One might object that Higgins and Greenberg are discussing different phenomena: The art critic Greenberg was interested in (and even worried about) the future of the arts, whereas Higgins himself was an artist and editor who created performance art and published works in the avant-garde tradition. Nevertheless, Schröter’s examination clarifies that medial mixedness is a central aspect of modern and postmodern art and critical thinking, here represented by Greenberg and Higgins. Furthermore, and equally importantly, Schröter demonstrates the ideological implications of the mixing of media.¹ So, according to these two commentators who represent a much larger tendency, the development of contemporary, digital medialities—as well as the supposedly growing influence of mass media—necessitates a discipline to study this intermediality in an appropriate way. However, the utopian hopes of the new media studies from 20 years ago have largely been replaced by a political skepticism toward the underlying, ever-present, and global consumerism and surveillance aspects of the Internet, meaning that the Internet has, in the words of one noted commentator, turned out to be just another medium: “What was once a

subversive medium is now a spectacle playground” (Galloway 2012, 2). However, the understanding of our contemporary moment as a time for mixed medialities prevails.

In this book I am, however, less interested in attempting to describe, let alone *explain*, our contemporary medial situation that has been described with terms such as the “society of spectacle” (Guy Débord), partly producing a pictorial turn in thinking and the arts (W.J.T. Mitchell). Socially, descriptions of post-Fordist capitalist economy and network organizations are sometimes lumped into the even more comprehensive late-Marxist diagnoses of the cultural destiny of late- or postmodern Western society by Rosalind Krauss and in particular Fredric Jameson.

Media theorist Friedrich Kittler famously opened his influential book on the history of media, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, by stating: “Media determine our situation” (Kittler 1999, xxxix). However, as Kittler himself stressed, our media-determined situation is not a new thing, and his analysis of a much wider historical material—going at least as far back as the French Revolution and the German Romantic movement—is meant to demonstrate a more accurate way of understanding our contemporaneity. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen’s anthology *Critical Terms for Media Studies* has taken up Kittler’s baton, and shows that our reflections on medialities may extend back to the early history of the human species and the tools used by these people as the necessary and essential mediations between subject and object, body and surrounding world. One of the contributors to *Critical Terms for Media Studies* even states the following: “C[c]onsciousness—and consciousness of medium—is born through friction and difference, through forcible estrangement from the media to which mammalian senses adapted and evolved” (Jones 2010, 94).

That is probably correct, but I won’t go *that* far back in this book. What I do want to challenge is the idea that literature has only recently been overrun by numerous non-literary forms and content. Intermediality, inter-art, or mixed media—or whatever the combination and transformation of medialities have been called historically—have *always* been a focal point of discussion and strategic debates. On this point, the reader will find that my argument partly differs from influential theories of “mediatization” discussed by Stig Hjarvard (2013) and other sociologically inclined media and communication scholars. There is, from my point of view, no doubt that this invasion of medialities in everyday life has resulted in changes of the form and content of what we call “literature”—but I want to suggest

that this has been a gradual process, and that literature has always been under the influence of other medialities, even well before the digital era.

Literary theory and comparative literature have asked important questions related to the interrelationships between literature and medialities, and renowned literature research disciplines have focused upon creative pairs such as word and music studies, word and image studies—and these have also resulted in a number of interdisciplinary fora all over the Western world and in Latin America. Literary theory and comparative literature have asked how we can describe literature in terms of medial materiality and medial form(s). They have described at least parts of the relation between literature and the other arts, including music, visual arts, film, theater, and other communication medialities, and they have discussed the appropriate analytical and theoretical tools for describing the relations between literature and other arts or medialities.

Sophisticated theoretical thinking on these questions has been developed, discussed, and published since at least the 1950s, when a discipline called interart studies, which later would become intermediality studies, began having a growing influence in many Western countries' teaching and research (see Clüver 2007). But even if brilliant research is being and has been published, and important teaching is being conducted almost all over the (at least Western) world, intermediality is still largely invisible to the general field of literary theory and thus also to students of literature, as well as the "general reader." A brief look at some of the better-known Anglophone² introductions to literary theory, which are at the same time very often entrances for students trying to find their way into *analyzing* literature, illustrates this curious lack. Terry Eagleton's widely read *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983, reprinted several times), for instance, discusses "Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory," "Structuralism and Semiotics," "Post-structuralism," and "Psychoanalysis."

The same usual suspects are basically covered by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* from 1990 (specifying terms like gender, race, and cultural studies); the same is the case with Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan's *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (from 1998 with reprints), where "Colonial, Post-colonial, and Transnational Studies," as well as "Ethnic Literary and Cultural Studies, Critical Race Theory," are among the newer chapters. There is, however, basically nothing about interart or intermediality perspectives in any of these works.³ Curiously, these influential overviews of literary theory have ignored and

still tend to overlook the lively—and for literary studies very useful—theoretical and methodological field of intermediality or interart studies. Only in 2015 was I able to find a chapter on “Interartistic Comparison” in César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Darío Villanueva’s *Introducing Comparative Literature*, where the mediality and interart perspectives receive a useful historical introduction, even if the discussion of contemporary research is highly selective.⁴

My own book is born, apart from the didactic problems described above, from a wish to place the mediality aspects of literature and intermediality studies in a stronger position in the broad area of literary theory and literary analysis. I do so, not so much by offering a deeper theoretical critique of other theoretical positions (which could be the subject of another study), but rather by demonstrating in specific case studies how mediality analysis is able to provide valuable interpretations of literary texts. Furthermore, I aim to show that it is possible to construct a working model for literary analysis from the heterogeneous, and often internally divergent, field of intermediality studies. In the division between the research discussing and slowly establishing the basic concepts of the field on the one hand, and the rich harvest of detailed case studies of isolated phenomena or concepts on the other, I want to place myself in the middle. I intend to do that by offering a model that is based on contemporary, updated theoretical positions of intermediality studies, while at the same time using this model to exemplify the usefulness in specific analyses that eventually will add up to a methodology for analyzing narrative texts.

I have in mind three major groups of readers for my book: First of all, teachers of literature at colleges and universities who seek access to didactic tools and useful terminology capable of opening up often well-known or new narrative texts by way of a method that is relatively simple while all the same also effective and productive. Second, my book can be read by college or university students looking for inspiration for bridging the gap between theories of media or intermediality on the one hand, and methods of literary analysis on the other. The third target group comprises researchers interested in the four case studies specifically, or in intermediality studies in more general terms, who may benefit from reading the texts utilizing my method, since I have not attempted to find cases where my method is easily applicable (the conventional approach in too many works of didactic orientation), but rather texts that fascinate me as literary works in themselves, and literary texts that need to be read in new

and productive ways. I hope, in other words, not only to present didactic *examples* but also to contribute to the critical discussion concerning the texts I have chosen.

CHOSEN CASE STUDIES

Finally, I present some thoughts on the selected literary material. I have in this study chosen to restrict my field to the study of so-called realistic narrative texts in prose. This is not because I believe that poetic or dramatic texts do not have any mediality aspects that ought to be highlighted and interpreted, quite the contrary. The reason is, instead, that I find that realistic prose texts offer certain challenges that demand certain medial analytical devices to reveal these aspects. Furthermore, narrative prose is probably the literary form which is, at least on the surface, only marginally subjected to medial influence, which makes it even more stimulating to demonstrate the presence and function of medialities in this type of texts. Due to technological and consequently medial changes, contemporary literature, whether prose or not, clearly demonstrates that the print book as the sole medium for distributing literature was (always) a historical solution and never a natural fact. Literature, including narrative literature, therefore tends to put pressure on the borders of the conventional book format and to try out new forms—either in book-born forms like the graphic novel, or in more radical experiments, which may be characterized as attempts to investigate the physical materiality of literature as meaning-bearing devices.

However, I have chosen to focus my interest on the representation of medialities in relatively conventional narrative texts, instead of looking at the many contemporary examples of narratives in, for instance, digitalized literary forms. Again, this is because my selling point in this book, first and foremost, is that mediality is present in texts that seem to be conventionally monomedial; and second, I save my intermedial analysis of more radically medialized texts for future studies, where I intend to demonstrate a more comprehensive interpretation of a text that includes both the material mediality of the given text and the represented medialities of the text.

When it comes to the period from which I have chosen my examples, I have limited myself to texts from the era spanning from the first half of the twentieth century to the second decade of the twenty-first, and all of my examples have been written in (or translated by the author himself) English. In terms of epoch, this choice mainly reflects my wish to do textual analy-

sis without having to sketch for the reader unknown and therefore complicated historical contexts. In terms of language, I wanted in this study to work with texts that needed no (further) translation. That means, that even though the question of mediality in narrative texts goes all the way back to Homer's sophisticated ekphrastic description of Achilles' shield in the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*, and could definitely also be found in eighteenth-century Asian literature or in European medial romances, I have never the less chosen to work with relatively modern Anglophone texts, because my aim is analytical rather than historical.

Nevertheless, my four chosen texts exhibit a number of crucial differences, while also being examples of the fact that all narrative texts seem to be utterly impregnated with the representation and consequently the thematization of medialities.

My first test case discusses a short story written by a much studied and highly admired (and debated) author, whose texts have been only sporadically discussed from an intermedial point of view. In analyzing Vladimir Nabokov's "Spring in Fialta," I demonstrate how the surface features of an apparently Proustian literary poetic is in fact hiding a very strong reliance on not only painting but also cinema and music, which turn out to be the most efficient gateways for the protagonist to get in touch with lost time.

After analyzing the highly refined and complex psychological narrative symbolism of Nabokov, I turn to two texts that, in very different ways, are often regarded as being directly opposed to the rich and sophisticated style of Nabokov, namely the so-called Dirty Realism of Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff. However, the two short stories that I discuss differ widely from each other in both form and content, but—perhaps surprisingly—both texts share a profound and deeply troubled relation to mediation and medialities that I try to pull forth from underneath their surface realism. "Dirty realism" turns out, in my reading at least, to depend strongly on extra-literary medial reflections, which partly go against their explicit aim of describing a real and recognizable world in the simplest possible, accessible form.

With my final case study, I move forward in time to our immediate and most proximate past. Compared with Nabokov's, Carver's, and Wolff's texts, Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* poses new challenges to my attempt to conduct relatively comprehensive mediality analyses of narrative literature. First of all, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is a novel, which makes it problematic to establish a more or less exhaustive

list of medialities. Furthermore, Egan's novel is distinguished by the way in which it does not transgress the generic conventions of the novel, and therefore mobilizes at least a handful of different forms and discursive styles; this in a sense puts the question of mediation at the foreground, but at the same time makes the task of establishing a relatively simple mediality structure quite demanding. The main reason why I selected Egan's novel is because it challenges the method of my first three cases, as the analysis of *Goon Squad* necessitates an understanding of not only the represented medialities but also the more radical medial aspects of the text. Hence, my fourth case study challenges my own method and hopefully opens new perspectives for future readings.

Taken together, the four case studies are meant to offer a relatively broad testing material for my three-step method, but as mentioned above, each case also demands different approaches, and this is also how the method is meant to be used. In some cases, the critical reception of the works provides a useful entry to the discussions; in other cases, a more general question (memory, or representation, for instance) provides a gateway to the more detailed discussions. All in all, I hope my chosen texts will prove useful for my attempt to smooth out the difficult road between, on the one hand, media theory and intermediality studies, and on the other hand literary criticism and textual analysis.

In the first chapter after this Introduction, I offer a presentation of the theoretical concepts and traditions that I feel are necessary for the main project of this book, namely, to construct a method of analysis and to exemplify this method's use. The first chapter will therefore introduce basic terms like the three dimensions of medium, the modalities of media, and the combination and the transformation perspectives on medial mix. The chapter introduces my two main terms—"mediality" and "heteromediality"—and it offers a brief historical overview on the different ways of approaching the question of medial mixes.

The method and my theoretical basis are described in Chap. 2, and the outline is meant to be simple enough to be of immediate use for teachers and students to apply, but still sufficiently complex to be of use also when discussing sophisticated literary texts in a research context. As I will return to and discuss more in detail in the methodology part of Chap. 2, I consider my method to be an extension of conventional methods used for cultural analysis throughout the humanities, exemplified by Erwin Panofsky's iconology—but with the key distinction that the main focus of interest is the presence and function of medialities in narrative literary texts.

The method, in short, consists of three steps: first, searching for and then writing a *register* of medial presences; second, structuring this register into a meaningful mediality *relation*; and third, interpreting the possible causes, often relating to text-external discussions, behind the medial presence and relations.

NOTES

1. For an exemplification of these trends in contemporary Scandinavian literature, see Bruhn 2014.
2. It seems to be slightly different in at least the German context, according to Werner Wolf's brief remarks in Wolf 2008, 16.
3. We find a comparable if not identical situation in film studies, according to Agnès Pethő: "[M]ost mainstream theoretical writings, (almost all the Film Studies or Film Analysis handbooks available, for instance) treat film as a monomedial entity, without taking into account its intermedial aspects even in newer works which deal with cinema's transition from the analogue to the digital" (2011, 46).
4. Domínguez et al. (2015, 107–124), followed by a chapter on the technology of literature. This question—the materiality and technology of media—has a history of its own, going back to, for instance, Walter Benjamin's (2008) reflections concerning the ontological and social status of the art work in the "age of mechanical reproduction."

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