The Turbulence of the Fin de Siècle: Arts Through the Looking-Glass of Intermediality

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The paper addresses the *fin-de-siècle* period as a time when most intermedial processes became more visible, fruitful, and started playing a more substantial role. The epoch is investigated through the prism of intermediality which manifested itself as a valuable tool, process, and phenomenon in the development of arts and media – particularly through the birth of photography and cinematography. Overall, these changes led to placing intermedial processes among the key ones impacting arts and moving forward subconscious and self-reflective intermedial techniques and media-based experiments that would culminate with modernism and postmodernism. The role of intermediality in the *fin-de-siècle* epoch and the reverse impact of the period on intermediality (in particular, syncretic processes) is assessed through the turbulent events of the time, i.e., the key economic and historic developments, as well as cultural and artistic "turnaround" processes. The paper concludes that the turbulence of the epoch and the spreading of various new artistic movements, new aesthetics and philosophies, including decadence aesthetics, impacted the development of mixed (intermedial) arts, stimulated their multiplying, as well as active exploration of intermedial forms and genres in all arts. The period also stimulated the growth of the role of a literary medium due to the introduction of mass publishing and the growth of literacy rates, which set the basis for future theories on intertextuality, text as a dominant form of recording, and "canvas" or "fabric" created by all media.

Keywords: Art Studies, Fin de Siècle, Intermediality, Media Studies

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Introduction

Intermediality has been a subject of scholarly attention since the 1980s, yet, even though its objects of study – intermedial artefacts – have existed since the early art forms in the ancient world, the theory is not yet refined and scholars from various research "clusters" share different, sometimes contradicting, approaches. Hence, for this paper, intermediality is seen as "(the study of) specific relations among dissimilar media products and general relations among different media types" (Elleström, 2017).

Historically, the term "intermediality" appeared in 1983, when Aage A. Hansen-Love published his research on problems of correlation between verbal and pictorial arts in Russian modernism (Hansen-Löve, 1983). There, he opposed the newly coined term to intertextuality and Dick Higgins's "intermedia", having investigated the phenomenon rather from a semiology perspective. However, most studies that followed and used the newly-coined term were dedicated to modern and postmodern works, new media, mass media, and cinematography of the XX century, thus ignoring the heritage of the previous epochs that directly impacted the development of the concept and provided the fruitful basis for its growth and multiplying during modernism and later on.

However, whether modernism is to be seen as "the expressive domain of modernity" (Susan Stanford Friedman, qt. in Moody & Ross, 2020) or literature that "registers" modernity (Immanuel Wallerstein, qt. in Moody & Ross, 2020), it is nevertheless the response to the novelty of the world, which makes it critically close to the turn of the century, decadence and *fin-de-siècle* history and aesthetics. Aesthetics-wise, modernist genii "burgeoned across Europe" in the 1860s-1930s (Bell-Villada, 1996), which makes the turn of the century an aesthetic precursor of what is nowadays seen as "true" modernism. The aestheticizing of life itself under the forces of new media has only deepened since the end of the XIX century (Guillory, 2022) leading to the domination of social and other media in individual's life, which requires re-calibration of the *foci* of literature studies to respond to lack of understanding, misinformation faced by scholars, educators, readers. Moreover, certain past ideas are too valuable to sink into academic oblivion and, thus, they require re-cognition.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to draw attention to the broad *fin-de-siècle* epoch as a period when yet unknown under this term but already existing intermedial processes intensified due to the birth of photography, cinematography, phonograph, telephone, radio and mass publishing of literature and fully blossomed in the form of modernist artefacts. The methodological approach comprises elements of literature review, context analysis and historical research.

Pre-Context: Romanticism and Realism

Before speaking of the actual reasons for making *fin de siècle* a critically important period for intermediality and related processes, it would be beneficial to highlight the matter of an integral medium. Thus, romanticism which from a theoretical and aesthetic perspective preceded the turn of the century tendencies worshipped artistic activities as a basis of life and art aimed at the transformation and creation of the world (Kagan, 1972) – this allowed G. W. F. Hegel and F. W. J. Schelling to formulate and objectivize a new intermedial paradigm, which defines the intermedial search in the art history from antiquity to modernity. Thus, the philosophers spoke about the sequence "*architecture/sculpture > painting > music*

> *poetry.*" Here, antiquity and the medieval period are seen as artistic epochs when architecture and/or sculpture served as a key integral medium, the one praised by artists and philosophers and the one trying to unite all other media around itself; painting is the avatar of the renaissance; music is the romanticism's key medium; whereas literature (poetry) is seen to be a dominating art for all the forthcoming epochs – post-romanticism, realism, modernism, postmodernism and whatever may follow in the future.

Romanticism is also crucial in terms of attempting to cross borders between styles (classical and romantic), religions (Christianity and pantheism), arts and sciences (literature and natural studies) (Nivala, 2016), as well as distinguishing a new category of art – mixed or complex arts – which was opposed to the previously known technical//mechanical/non-depictive and muse/liberal/depictive arts. The initially recognised mixed arts included music-dramatic art, music-choreographic art, architectural-depictive synthesis, theatrical art, synthesis of music and poetry, and pictorial-poetic synthesis (Kagan, 1972).

Owing to the possibility of cheap and fast mass publishing due to the introduction of new presses and stereotyping technologies in the 1840s and 1860s (Altick, 1999), the realism epoch that followed manifested literature as a dominant medium capable of directing other media and turned it into the key instrument of creative communication. The growing literacy rates in Europe – for example, in England and Wales from 1800 to 1900 the literacy grew from sixty per cent for men and forty per cent for women to ninety-seven per cent for both sexes (Lloyd, 2007) – supported the spread of verbal genres and forms, newspapers and journals, which were no longer exclusive or inaccessible to a wide audience. The enormously enlarged readership and urban growth established a concentrated market for literature as a commodity (Altick, 1999). Sharing information through the telegraph, newspapers or publication of literary works through journals and pamphlets supported free or cheap access to verbal artefacts, making word-based experiments easier. Serialised fiction actively exploited illustrations and other pictorial forms to support the readership's imagination, which laid a strong basis for intermedial experimenting. In addition to that, realism's aesthetics also started perceiving arts as non-absolute forms that had no stable boundaries – this launched and facilitated the constant transformation of arts, searching for the continuation of one art in another (Takho-Godi, 1982), which eventually characterised the art-related processes during the *fin de siècle* and the following periods.

Historical Context: The Picture of Turbulence

The decadent period, *fin de siècle*, the second half of the XIX century, for the intermediality and media scholars may seem remote from modernist aesthetics with its vision of the world, yet, while speaking of this epoch as a prefigure for the birth of intermediality as we know it now, one should think of a distinction "between the *fin-de-siècle* as a chronological period, and *fin-de-siècle* as a unique attitude or response to this period" (Nottingham, 2015). It is this exact response that continues throughout modernism and gives birth to various intermedial forms.

Thus, society, including artists, philosophers, scientists and technicians, faces and responds to multiple crises and changes, allowing Heidegger to call the century from 1850 to 1950 "the darkest of all centuries in modern times" (qt. in Franks, 1994). As proposed by the authors of *The Fin-de-siecle World* (Saler, 2015), one may speak in this regard of decadence literature and the rapid development of cities, move from rural areas to urban settlements (both

physically and within arts), industrial revolutions, change in the concepts and perception of time and space, seeing it as Bakhtin's unified *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1981), the birth of new nationalism and a new imperialism, new politics of "higher individualism". Changes in mass culture included the above-mentioned mass publishing, acceleration of transport, the birth of consumer culture, spreading of advertisement, which went hand in hand with the development of human sciences, new philosophy, eugenics, mind-breaking developments in psychology and psychiatry, and medicine. People started understanding their selfhood differently – there was a shift in the perception of gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race, religion and atheism, and aesthetics. New challenges stimulated new music, new visual arts, and new realism, whereas new arts, in particular cinematography, stimulated a new spiral of artistic development and troubled the minds of people through the unique moving picture which so deeply corresponded to the speed of the history around them.

These turbulences and rapid developments, when changes happened within one generation, evolved into and echoed modernism, as it faced even worse wars (World War I and World War II) and economic crises (worldwide Great Depression), unrest in the society (equality movements, class changes, spread of socialism and bolshevism), politics (collapse of most empires), and culture (birth of new music, domination of Paris in artistic scene and its shift to New York, spread of visual culture, growth of architectural scales, revival of Olympic games). Political nationalism developed actively and served as a constituent of a wider trend to adapt old forms into new and different ones, it had a deeper degree of self-consciousness and explicitly relied on defining "the other" as opposed to own, national (Baycroft, 2015). The refining processes, when the national self was to be grasped through awareness of national characteristics and cultures, echoed the internal processes when people encompassed various practices concerning the body, which later developed in modernism's description and normalisation of self-perception in view of "efficiency, productivity and health" (Killen, 2015).

The *fin-de-siècle* crises facilitated the reflexive practices and the establishment and cementation of binaries and oppositions, dividing the world into enemies and friends, external and internal aliens, whereas modernism grew on these binaries and transformed them into the juxtaposition of cultures and national discourses through its own, modernised and upgraded self-reflexion. While the literature of decadence adopted an anarchistic style, when "everything was sacrificed to the development of the individual parts" (Gagnier, 2010), the self-reflexion at the turn of the centuries was a wider process and included various constituents. An increase in "individuation led to the disintegration of the whole" (Gagnier, 2010), which was eagerly accepted by modernists as a tool for artistic, economic, political, and social re-evaluation and re-assessment of processes around a person and, consequently, finding a new self. At the same time, the turn of the century and modernism have been united by the aesthetic doctrine of art for art's sake (Bell-Villada, 1996) which tied into one intermedial knot various artistic streams, genres, approaches and generations.

The pain of going through the unknown and unpredicted turbulences, like the fear of Dorian Gray to grow old and die, is what unites *fin de siècle* and modernism like parents and children. They face different experiences but they are equally tough and painful, and the response to rapid changes is similar – rejection, questioning, re-inventing, recycling, re-writing, and adapting only multiply links in the intermedial fabric and lead to the creation of new intermedial artefacts and other prolific intermedial processes.

Both decadent artists and modernists searched for new creative forms reflecting both the interior world of the artist and the dramatic external events and rapid changes. The creators required new synthesis and dialogue at all levels to keep their sanity in the twisted world – they existed at the borders between cultures, civilisations, arts, and social classes and reflected on them. Hence, art became the voice of change, the voice heard by millions. And the need for these new voices and new creative forms would mostly rest in the demand to respond to the variety of new media that were tearing the artists apart. And, while *fin de siècle* had prepared a solid base of knowledge, practices and experience, modernists gathered it all together to dare turn around the existing processes and re-invent arts and present new medial forms, having grounded it in literature as an ever-growing and dominating form due to the ultimate authority of the verbal media in human communication processes.

Medial Context: The Flowers of Change

As a transition between XIX and XX centuries, *fin de siècle* perceives art synthesis critically. On the one hand, it crowns literature as a new (or first-ever) mass art, on the other – praises the achievements and experiments of painting. Moreover, along with the change in communication brought by the railroad and telegraph (Plunkett, et al., 2012), improved lighting in the dwellings and consequent ease of reading as time-spending activity (Altick, 1999), the new arts and technologies push the traditional way of living to such an extent, that they cannot be ignored by artists any longer. The cultures of art and science tend to disagree, yet the artistic horizons get extended by scientific inventions and the scientific ethos at the turn of the century profoundly influences modernism (Bell-Villada, 1996). The inventions of photography (1839), cinematography (1878), phonograph (1877), telephone (1876) and radio (1895) change the world of art and technology by giving people access to new dimensions – recording and transmission of sounds and images, the opportunity to keep things that before that were non-preservable, non-documentable, which challenges the literature and its documenting functions through enlarging the role of aestheticism in lives of people and the role of media in general (Guillory, 2022). Thus, photographic imagery impacts the entire system of artistic vision and creativity and facilitates the birth of new genres and techniques through the development of new documentalist features; cinematography, as a synthesis of verbal and photographic mediums, is born at the junction of new visual "moving pictures" techniques and literary fables, stories, and motifs; phonograph allows recording voice and sound, and its replication on secondary devices, whereas telephone and radio allow transmitting it all over the world.

This media explosion and consequent variety of *fin-de-siècle* genres and forms eventually led to modernism: whereas these technologies appeared during the broad *fin-de-siècle* period, a time of pessimism and decay when one could perceive these new technologies as a new evil, mostly ignoring them or adapting to them at a slower pace, modernists witnessed their growth, spreading and ultimately growing domination. On the one hand, there was a strengthening literary tradition supported by mass publishing, which reinforced the position of the novel (Plunkett, et al., 2012), on the other – the new media seeded confusion, rejection, and fear, similarly to the fear of the new century and its rapid developments. Speaking of the growth of new media, the very first radio interchange happened in 1895, whereas the first commercial radio broadcast was in 1920; opposite to that, Auguste and Louis Lumière showed the first film to the mass audience in 1895, while in 1896 multiple cinematographic theatres were built all over Europe, whereas in 1902 there appeared a first film with the natural colour process and in the 1910s most films had sound integrated to them in a certain

way. The rapidness of certain media-related processes was insane and psychologically destructive. Thus, for instance, Queen Victoria, a symbol of British stability, ascended the throne in 1837 before any of these technologies and media appeared, and by the time of her decease in 1901, there were half a dozen of absolutely new media forms, using new mediums, new processes, new techniques, producing the outcomes and artefacts that none would ever expect.

The growth of key modernist writers, their childhood and younghood years coincided with the turn of the century. They bore the *fin-de-siècle* cultural traditions from their birth and had to face the spread of new media. Thus, James Joyce owned Ireland's first cinema and borrowed cinematographic tradition in his writing, while Virginia Woolf publishes her essay *The Cinema* (1926) stressing the simultaneously existing archaism, primitivism and newness of cinematographic art. As modernists, they were concerned with everyday life, perception, time, and "kaleidoscopic and fractured experiences of urban space" (Marcus, 2016), they borrowed cinematic techniques of close-up, flashback, and montage to shape their experimental works. This can be said of other modernists as well – some researchers would argue that modernisms are the individual responses to the media that appeared and started re-shaping the lives of people; some would say that analysis of decadent literature is a valuable tool for the exploration of the works of Joyce, Woolf and other modernists (Boyiopoulos, Choi, & Tildesley, 2015); others would stress that modernist masterpieces emerged from the colonial world of the XIX century (Bell-Villada, 1996) – altogether linking the pre-modernist XIX century and modernism into a unified artistic, political, historical, social and cultural fabric.

At the same time, while speaking about the two artistic epochs, one should bear in mind the vagueness of the border between modernism and pre-modernism, especially regarding the appearance of the new media forms, as it is not clear whether the modernist techniques and works appeared after the turn of the century or actually during its peak. Global modernism has multiple, asynchronous timelines reflecting specific experiences and developments in various cultures and historic discourses (Moody & Ross, 2020). Thus, for instance, John Ruskin's theories, Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophies, and Sigmund Freud's approaches were formulated and publicised before the "official" modernism chronology in Europe, but the modernist-type response followed immediately. The close link between *fin de siècle* and modernism is like an umbilical cord between a mother and her child – at a certain stage, they are so closely tied together that any delineation is impossible. However, the notion of the aestheticization of life through new media obviates the need for this rupture between the *fin de siècle* and modernism. Thus, sometimes one must speak about non-modernist works raising modernist topics through non-modernist language. Was Oscar Wilde a modernist? No. Was the focus of his writing modern? Yes. Besides, one may see significant differences between the novels of E. M. Forster (which are far from being experimental and resemble Wilde's writings or Somerset Maugham's "pop literature") and the works of Samuel Beckett, who is a representative of late modernism. Comparing the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Elliot, or D. H. Lawrence published in the 1920s would also be impossible as they represent different modernisms. On the opposite side of the intermedial fabric, modernism in pictorial art may start its chronology from Édouard Manet (1890s), or pre-Raphaelites as his foreshadowers (1850s), or even J. M. W. Turner's studies of light, colour and atmosphere (1830s-40s). In addition, there were many historical delays in terms of "uneven politics of language" (Moody & Ross, 2020), thus, for instance, Karl Marx's works are a product of the early *fin de siècle*, yet, his *Das Kapital* (1867) reached the English-

speaking world twenty years later, in 1887, and fuelled the minds of anti-realists and supported the modernist processes when German-speaking cultures already developed its response to it.

This allows speaking of new media as synthetic forms that required no documentation through literature, were easy to spread, conquer the minds of the masses and unite people from all countries that reached a certain level of technological advances. While *fin de siècle* fathered such media, modernism used them as a tool, as a reinstatement of experimental forms, and as a stimulus. Cinematography, phonograph, radio, and later on television would be an evident element showing that the borders have been broken – the countries have not been that far and exclusive any more, and almost everyone could see foreign landscapes or "exotic" people without going there; many people could hear the voices of prominent singers or listen to operas without the need to travel to Italy or the nearest theatre. The borders, broken physically and mentally, questioned the external oppositions or re-instated them, however, forced the artists to go deeper into themselves and think more of their own bodies, health and mind. Some products of such exploration would be rejected, such as Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleur du mal* (censored in 1857), Oscar Wilde's works (which led to his runaway to France), and D. H. Lawrence's sensual novels (the 1920s). Some would be praised, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), yet, the depth of its provocation would not be easily seen due to the experimental techniques employed. While the processes of assemblage and collection, triage and sorting would be born by the turn of the century mediums (Moody & Ross, 2020), modernists would make these processes central to their perception.

Rupture: In Search of Lost Art

Here comes the question of intermediality and why it is important to go one step deeper and seek its seemingly (post)modernist origins in *fin de siècle*. Undoubtedly, one may always go as deep as Homer's *Iliad* and Book XVIII describing the shield of Achilles, which remains the most well-known case of ekphrasis. Not to underestimate the role and merits of the previous epochs for intermediality and the medial fabric of references, quotes, re-writing, inventing new forms, etc., diving into *fin de siècle* gives arts a significant new push. It re-instates the role of the Middle Ages and its epic cycles, the Renaissance and its pre-Rafael/ Leonardo/ Michelangelo painters, romanticism and its new perception of art and life, its aesthetics and philosophies; it also revives the importance of fragmentation principle. Altogether this is merged into a cauldron of new potion that stimulates the artists to respond to the crises and turbulence around them, digest them and produce a new product, of intermedial nature in most cases. On the one hand, the artists attempt to create new artefacts, new concepts and new art in general, yet, on the other hand, they draw from the legacy of the previous artistic epochs. *Fin de siècle* attempts to combine individual-sensitive-internal with inherited-communal-external that comes in the forms of historical and mythological archetypes, legends, and epics. It marks a crucial turn to re-assessing the roles of text and image (Emden & Rippl, 2010) which continues nowadays and facilitates the reassessment of literature's role in the global context.

Thus, methodologically, modernism should be seen as a phenomenon of multiple scales and dimensions (Moody & Ross, 2020), with its historic, political and cultural legacy being one of the fundamental axes. Like Marcel Proust searches for lost time, modernists continue the *fin-de-siècle* tradition of searching for lost arts, yet, more surreptitiously. They are not making dozens of paintings of literary characters as the pre-Raphaelites did, but they

integrate the archetypal qualities of these characters into their works, and plant semi-veiled references, obvious for the reader or not. James Joyce's *Ulysses* directly refers to Homer's Odysseus and his wandering on the way back home after the Trojan War, although in other cases the links are not that obvious and require deciphering from the side of an informed reader. E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) may be seen exclusively as a modernist novel with multiple ekphratic depictions of Italian Renaissance painting, or as an interpretation of the Endymion myth – both approaches making it intermedial through the use of ekphrasis or adaptation of one literary form into another. D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) is named an interpretation of the Oedipus myth by the writer himself in the *Foreword*, yet, both chronologically and thematically, this *Foreword* rather refers to Lawrence's next novel, *The Rainbow* (1915), which has its sequel *Women in Love* (1920), thus allowing all three novels to be studies through the prism of an intermedial adaptation of the Oedipus story, which makes it a re-cycling of an ancient drama into modernist works. Samuel Beckett's novels make an even more complex intermedial knot, as they can be seen both as allusions to ancient myths and parodies or echoes of James Joyce's works, primarily *Ulysses*.

Examples of such intermedial intensification are plenty, yet, it is modernism that openly reflects on media, is impacted by media and, therefore, seeks to integrate media or experiment with it in the literary forms more intensively and extensively than any other epoch, building it on the legacy of the previous two or three generations of artists, philosophers and scientists. The popularity of such experiments is justified by the ever-growing dominance of literature, accelerated self-reflective artistic search transferred primarily into the novel. Hence, revealing (in most cases) conscious, purposeful intermedial elements would mean both reading and re-reading the literature closely, as a fragment of a larger context of arts' separating and unifying, at the same time being aware of the historical context and conventions around the artists, as "dialectic of art resembles the social dialectic" (Adorno, 1984) they exist in.

Thus, while speaking of intermediality and its multiple phenomena, researching them in the works of art in the turbulent period, it is necessary not only to draw parallels with other epochs, search for the origin of the specific fable, plot, archetypal character, their development, detect and explain the use of specific medial elements, their borrowing and incorporation, synthesis but to take into account the transition of arts through the *fin-de-siècle* epoch with its crises and turbulences and its impact on the arts and artefacts created by romanticism, realism, modernism or post-modernism artists (or in parallel to them for artists whose works cannot be easily attributed to one specific period). This mere consideration may help reveal additional features and characteristics, go deeper and see the subconscious legacy inherited by the writers and other artists in their childhood, adolescence or laid upon them through their parents and grandparents. The link with *fin de siècle* and its turbulences can make the research more intense, interdisciplinary, intercultural, and international by depriving it of the borders.

Moreover, the alignment of cinematography and literature, and the interplays between these two media at the turn of the century are "among the most crucial factors that shaped what came to be called modernist literature and culture" (Marcus, 2015). Literature's serving as a key material resource and inspiration, involvement of novelists and playwrights in the cinematographic business (Trotter, 2007), as well as literature's ability to contest the new mediums (Schmid, 2019) and to integrate them into itself, their unity in terms of poetics of

montage (Stewart, 1999) and self-aware search of new forms "at once fragmentary and encyclopaedic" (Trotter, 2007) allow seeing intermediality and its processes as a mother of cinema. Whereas, given the most significant role of cinema in the development and progress of modernisms, one may assume that, in a mediated manner, intermediality is to be seen as a phenomenon that facilitated the birth of modernism as an epoch out of the womb of *fin de siècle*. At the same time, despite the closeness of the new media and modernism, one should bear in mind that the "cross-breeds" were conscious and artificial, as new media were recording mediums, while literature is a representational medium (Trotter, 2007) and they vary in nature, form and purposes.

Conclusion

The turbulence of the epoch and the spreading of various new artistic movements, new aesthetics and philosophies, including decadence aesthetics, impacted the development of mixed (intermedial) arts, stimulated their multiplying, as well as active exploration of intermedial forms and genres in all arts through serving as a basis for modernist developments and re-invention of the arts and creative processes, as based on the legacy of the *fin de siècle*.

The period also stimulated the growth of the role of a literary medium due to the introduction of mass publishing and the growth of literacy rates, which set the basis for future theories on intertextuality, text as a dominant form of recording, and fabric created by all media. New media, *inter alia*, facilitated the introduction of new techniques to verbal forms and stimulated the experimental writing of key modernists, which facilitated the birth of new literature-based synthetic, intermedial forms and genres. The pressure of time and space, the acceleration of the world and events around them, the much faster spreading of information due to the invention of the telephone and the radio, documenting of life elsewhere beyond – through photography, cinematography, phonograph – facilitated the collapse of borders that were built previously, externally and internally, which guided the modernists towards the deeper study of the interior self in relation to others, which is also based on *fin-de-siècle* heritage.

Altogether, *fin de siècle* and its crises and turbulences created the basis for modernist trends and catalysed the intermedial experiments and birth of new forms and genres – the fact of which should be considered during the research of literary artefacts established after the 1840s, as they are expected to bear a significant intermedial load or be directly influenced and/or impacted by the treatment of media.

Acknowledgements

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