Intermediality as a Moving Force in the Arts: Canvas, Fragments, and Binaries[1]

Mykyta Isagulov

What drives the development of the arts? This essay argues that intermediality, as not only a theoretical field but a structural condition of cultural production, functions as a driver in artistic evolution. It provides three key arguments for such importance of the intermediality: the initial syncretism of arts and the consequent search for the unity of arts by artists of various generations; fragmentation principles employed by artists since Renaissance; the change of key drivers of the artistic epochs, i.e., shifts in aesthetics, philosophies, perception of the arts and consequent revision of the legacy of the previous epochs, wide commercialisation of arts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which stimulated 'recycling' and adaptations, the need to solve certain innate plot issues, which can be done through the application of the intermedial toolbox. It concludes that intermedial phenomena stimulate various processes in the arts; they ensure the variety of genres, forms, and styles, facilitate development and changes, as well as the faster manifestation and spreading of certain creative ideas. At the same time, the role of intermediality in the ever-accelerating processes of the current age is growing due to the commercial value of intermedial forms.

Keywords: artefact, art synthesis, canvas, intermediality, intertextuality

* * *

It is a well-known fact that the moving force for science is data collection, analysis, and experiments, for the humanities, mostly interpretations and observation, for political processes, it is economy and people, their ambitions, while culture is driven by people, society, habits, knowledge, and heritage. Hence, what should be considered the moving force for the arts? Some people say it is creativity, the artists themselves, their vision of the world, and self-reflexion; however, one may prefer to merge it all into the hypernym and umbrella term of 'intermediality' (Rajewsky, 2005).

Intermediality as a theory and subject of research was born around forty years ago; however, its theory is still under development. In general, it can be perceived as a study of "specific relations among dissimilar media products and general relations among different media types" (Elleström, 2017). It is much more than that, though. Intermediality studies, especially those related to semiotics and poetics, attempt to investigate and explain the nature of intermedial processes, i.e., to explain when, how, and why intermediality is born. Whilst answering the 'when' and 'how' questions means talking about specific historical events and social and economic developments that stimulated artists to create specific artefacts with the intermedial

---

[1] This essay was prepared in 2022 as a conference paper. As I was not able to attend it, I decided to post it as an essay. Please reference it as an unpublished paper.

components, the answer to the 'why' question means going deeper into the backstage of intermediality, i.e., viewing the same 'regular' processes from the perspective of media, art unity and synthesis, as well as through the prism of art separation. Such 'regularity' of traditional things around us (e.g., works of art) becomes opposed by intermediality as a 'deconstructive' element, an attempt to re-codify the arts through adding additional layers, contexts, and meanings, as all intermedial forms are complex, synthetic, and developed in response to traditional art and media forms and genres. In addition to that, intermedial arts are mixed/complex arts and are opposed to the traditional categories of liberal (muse, non-technical, depictive) arts and mechanical (technical, non-depictive) arts. Not to make this argument unfounded, certain explanations are required on why intermedial phenomena push the arts forward and deserve our attention.

First, there is a ***binary of syncretism and separation*** that existed from the moment in Antiquity when the arts separated from the mythology (Kagan, 1972), which stimulated a consequent search for an initial mythology-based artistic unity. Besides, there is the ***'fragmentation' principle*** that was made crucial by artists and aestheticists of the Renaissance and Romanticism. Fragmentation in the (post)modernist meaning shall be understood as follows: like the intertextuality of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva sees the entire world as a text and a combination of various texts, intermediality in its broad sense (and particularly through semiology-based vision) perceives everything as media and sees everything as a canvas, tissue of linked and intermingled media, a fabric. One may, for instance, speak of a literary medium, a pictorial medium, or a musical medium, the combination of which produces any work of art, any product of humanity, or characterises any process and phenomenon in life, culture, or historical timeline. As medium "is the master of modern culture" (Murphet, 2009) – in fact of any culture and time – and an 'extension of men' (McLuhan, 1964), a literary medium has a particular ability to describe anything; as long as you name something or put it into words, the discourse, media landscape, a literary (verbal) text is created, thus adding certain information to the canvas of our world expressed in media.

Whilst this canvas is built by all media (texts) and their inter-relation, seeing it from a particular moment means going both horizontally (within one moment, synchronously) and vertically (through epochs, anachronously), tracing the complexity of relations between a particular medial artefact (work of art or another product) and various other medial texts (and, consequently, media as a whole). Thus, as mentioned above, the primary syncretic art of Antiquity was born as a result of the split. As soon as this happened (not at once, but gradually over centuries), the separation–unification relationship was born and set alive: new arts, genres and forms tended to become independent, self-sufficient, and holistic, at the same time lacking the 'primaeval' unity and seeking links to their sister-arts, thus, creating intermedial works (artefacts), forms, and genres.

For instance, the theatre of the Hellenic period is often regarded as a product of intermedial unity of literature (poetry), music, staged arts, and mechanical arts (cf. *Deus ex machina*). Later genres, like opera or oratorio, can be seen as 'deeper' combinations of media, as they unite a synthetic art of theatre with ballet, orchestrics, and musical composition. The birth of

photography in 1839 and cinematography in 1878 adds another twist to the development of arts through intermediality-based processes, as photography adds new pictorial qualities to all other arts, whereas cinema is a product of literature and photography synthesis – as a combination of separate film shots (photos, in fact) reflecting a literary artefact (a script, which is in many cases an adaptation of a novel or another literary form).

Going through the history of art and the artistic epochs, one may see that the ***intermedial layers*** are complex and innumerable. For instance, one may illustrate over fifty sub-terms and components linked to intermediality by taking one famous plot only, e.g., the story of two lovers, who transgressed from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 AD) to Italian authors of the sixteenth century and then into Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) (Isagulov, 2019a). These intermedial works, sometimes limited to a specific number of basic plots defined by the literature scholars (Figgis, 2017), feed all the arts – in a synchronic and diachronous way – to form the above-mentioned canvas. One does not need to invent anything new, when there exists a seemingly perfect plot of Romeo and Juliet that can be easily transformed, deepened, re-written into something new, or 'recycled' into a new medium, for example, an operatic version by Charles Gounod (1867), a ballet by Sergei Prokofiev (1935/1940), or a painting by Joseph Wright of Derby (1790) that became the masterpieces of their own, with no one doubting their value added to the world of arts.

Nevertheless, these 'new' intermedial interpretations of older works of art are fragments of the larger canvas of media: they are linked to each other through intermedial references, use of the same characters, the same plots, or actual direct links. Similarly to fragmentation principles of Renaissance and Romanticism, contemporary artists may (and often will) use intermediality – subconsciously or through self-reflexion – to extend the scope of their work by linking additional medial layers. A mere mention of Romeo will evoke a whole range of feelings with the beholder and create a certain mood, thus saving the artist a need to give lengthy explanations of what is love, how cruel it can be for young lovers, how complicated may be the external factors that impact the love story and move it away from a happy ending. In this sense, as Charles Dickens discusses with an imaginary painter Dick Tinto, each added fragment becomes like a brush stroke in painting – unique and serving the overarching purpose of the artefact (Dickens, 1819).

Second, there exists a process which can be called a ***binary of 'modernism' and 'anti-modernism'***. It is grounded in a remarkably simple but logical principle that every new generation of artists tries to re-assess the legacy of previous epochs through accepting it or rejecting it. Such re-thinking allows seeing the artistic epochs as syncretic when there dominated a tendency to find/build the lost synthesis of arts (Hellenic period, Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque and Rococo, Romanticism, turn of the century/*fin*, and modernism); or normative periods in between them (Middle Ages, Classicism, Realism, Postmodernism) when there prevailed the search for a new norm, new standard, new artistic dominants (Isagulov, 2017).

The alteration of such long artistic epochs and dominating tendencies in the aesthetics of art allows speaking of the change of modernistic and anti-modernistic tendencies, when one period

logically builds on the art of previous epochs and creates new artistic (and intermedial) forms, whereas the following epoch rejects its achievements, criticises them and attempts to re-assess everything, creating their own (often intermedial) forms. Such borders and 'turnarounds' are not easy to trace, but as long as one starts studying the epochs, their philosophy, and aesthetics deeper, they will see that the artistic generations always speak of acceptance or rejection and, whatever they declare in manifestoes and discussions on the nature and future of arts, in their practical creative processes they either continue deepening the achievements of the other epochs or tend to (re-)invent something. Such rotation of approaches can also be proved by the reflexions on art by artists – the way they speak of it (cf. art reflecting nature, art reflecting life, life reflecting art).

Altogether, these processes are very crucial for intermediality, as the more artists tend to reflect on their arts, the more experimental their works seem to become, thus multiplying the number of intermedial forms and genres. Romanticism, *fin de siècle*, modernism, and postmodernism – all paid special attention to art and artists' self-reflexion on its nature, which consequently led to the appearance of new intermedial forms. On the opposite side, as soon as a new intermedial form appears and claims its place in the epoch, it stimulates other artists for the new iteration of the search: the more the better.

New intermedial forms stimulate new artistic forms and developments, whereas new artists re-assess them and propose novel approaches and visions, thus leading to a new round of ***medial alterations*** – in the form of 'recycling', adapting, and re-writing, enlarging the universe of the artistic work. Here, one may think of the rapid development of medial forms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when the commercialisation of the arts led to the broad adaptation of 'artistic universes' to other media. Thus, successful books for children on Winnie-the-Pooh or Paddington the Bear became multi-billion-dollar franchises and transferred the characters of the literary medium into cinematography, comic books, TV commercials, and other media domains. At the same time, the success on the screen also led to a retroactive process – writing of more literary works on the characters, so that to widen the franchise material – think, for instance, of the literary spin-offs to *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars* after the commercial successes of the films.

Thus, intermediality turns from an unnamed phenomenon and subject of aesthetical discussion and semiology studies into a valuable tool which is eagerly embraced by artists, who want their works to be seen, spread, and succeed commercially: "every artist hopes that their works will find a thankful customer and provide the artist with roof and food" (Isagulov, 2015). The commercialised nature of contemporary art is among the factors stimulating a conscious reference to intermediality. Sometimes it is a result of poor imagination or readiness to re-create the 'forgotten' masterpieces of older generations, the search for easier income based on existing fan audience (cf. multiple re-makes filmed recently), a noble attempt to make an old work 'perfect' in the modern times, the urge "to fill in the artistic gaps" or the above-mentioned "permanent strong separation-integration ties between all the arts" and ever-growing commercialisation of arts (Isagulov, 2015).

The third argument is less obvious; however, there are many other binaries established through intermediality and artistic fragmentation that drive the development of the arts and creative processes. Thus, looking at the modernism(s) of the twentieth century (and the preceding turbulence of the *fin de siècle*), one may be initially confused by some novels or find them 'simple', 'boring', or 'overcomplicated' and 'outdated'. However, once the novel (or any other artistic artefact) is read a bit deeper and closer, once 'readers' attempt to decipher the multiple intermedial links 'planted' by artists, they see that the intermediality is actively used as a subconscious or self-reflexive tool to build multiple ***oppositions and binaries in the plot***, linking through the medial fragmentation the unlimited number of conflicts, contradictions.

A curious reader may be surprised to find out that the 'simple' plot bears a multitude of semi-veiled conflicts: of arts, cultures, mentalities, civilisations (Isagulov, 2019b), conflicts between genders, social conditions (Gagnier, 2018), or even intra-art conflicts of genii and filisters, the Apollonian and Dionysian arts. From the position of a current epoch of post-modernism (or the second stage of postmodernism, as some say), this is very logical, as all artworks are expected to bear a second layer, to have a cupboard of skeletons behind what the reader sees at the very beginning. These 'skeletons' may tell additional stories and serve as fragments, but for the purpose of deepening the plot and the conflicts of a specific work of art. For instance, if E. M. Forster wants to depict the difference between English and Italian mentalities, mock Englishness and praise Italianness, oppose theatre and life, or champion Italian paintings, he eagerly uses available intermedial toolbox to do that in his *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) – through intermedial references, conventional intermediality, media-synthesis in the novel (Isagulov, 2011). Alternatively, the writer may use a framework of Antiquity's epic myth and place it in their time, which will help bring to the surface quite an unexpected range of topics and problems (cf. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, 1922).

To put these three arguments in a more pragmatic context, an informed beholder would know that a true artist "as the true bearer of the depths of art and primaeval artistic instincts, cares about the only single thing" (Isagulov, 2015): getting rid of the artistic (creative) burden, to self-express and clear up the mind full of ideas and creative thoughts – to release the so-called inner demon aloft, in a form of a new artefact presented to the world. Artists may feed their demons, try to strangle them, make friends or partners, or oppose them – successfully or not. Some artists may be deprived of such 'demons' and internal creative Geist at all. Their way into the arts is different – they usually refer to other arts for inspiration – and, in fact, 'recycle' the works of others. If they find the vision of their fellow artist acceptable, matching their internal feelings and spirit (even if the fellow produced their work two thousand years ago in the form of a cave art or rock painting), they re-work it – sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously (as no one can remember everything they saw, faced, met during their life and predict when the brain will evoke the processed image). Whatever is changed – a genre, form, fable, plot, medium – it will become intermedial and, thus, intermediality would feed the artistic processes through centuries and millennia.

In this regard, there is a theory that cinematography gave birth to modernism as an epoch (Wiseman, 2021), and, whereas cinematography is a complex, mixed, intermedial art, this

allows one to conclude that intermediality gave birth to modernism. Whilst current postmodernism is a period born as a rejection of modernism values and processes, in such a case, it is also an indirect product of intermediality. Less obvious but important influences of intermediality on the arts' development may be found in other epochs as well, although that would require more explanations and theorising and 'digging' through philosophies, aesthetics, and artists' biographies.

To conclude, intermediality as a phenomenon motivates many processes in the arts – at a minimum, it provides for a variety of genres, forms, and styles, facilitates development and changes, as well as faster manifestation and spreading of some ideas. In the ever-accelerating world of the twenty-first century, one cannot hide away from intermediality and say that it is just an artistic fraud, plagiarism, or recycling of the ideas of others. It should be accepted that intermedial processes have always underpinned cultural evolution and impacted the arts, cultures, and humanity as a cultural product. Whereas it is obvious that the rules of art have changed significantly, and the theatre, sculpture, or painting have been replaced by digital media, multimedia digital forms, and new media as dominant media, the results remain unchanged: it is a structuring force, a generative logic that feeds aesthetic changes from ancient theatre to modern digital collage. If one artist refers to the work of another (or even their own work), this intermedial 'reference' creates another fragment in the canvas and opens a new door for other artists, contemporaries or not – to adapt, re-assess, re-work, re-cycle – thus, multiplying the medial links and pushing the arts further in their mutual development.

2022

References

Dickens, C. (1819). *The Bride of Lammermoor.* Edinburgh: Archibald Constable.

Elleström, L. (2017). Adaptation and Intermediality. In *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (pp. 509-526). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Figgis, M. (2017). *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations.* Faber & Faber.

Gagnier, R. (2018). *Literatures of Liberalization: Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Isagulov, M. (2011). *Поэтика интермедиальности в английском романе начала XX века (Э.М. Форстер, "Куда боятся ступить ангелы"; С. Моэм, "Луна и грош") [Intermedilaity Poetics in the English Novels of the Early XX Century (E.M. Forster's Where Angels Fear to Tread; W.S. Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence)].* Donetsk: Donetsk National University.

Isagulov, M. (2015, 10 23). *Plagiarism as the Moving Force of Art Development.* Retrieved from Unplag.com: https://unplag.com/blog/plagiarism-and-art-development/

Isagulov, M. (2017). Intermedial Dominants: from Antiquity to Modernity [Интермедиальные доминанты: от Античности к современности]. *Antiquity -*

Modernity (Matters of Philology) [Античность - Современность (вопросы философии)](5), 172-184.

Isagulov, M. (2019a). Intermediality as an Umbrella Term: Approach to Classification [Интермедиальность как зонтичный термин: попытка классификации]. *Word Culture [Культура слова]*(1(2)), 28-39.

Isagulov, M. (2019b). "Own - Strange" Opposition: Extending the Artistic Context of the English Novels [Оппозиция "свой - чужой": расширение художественного контекста английских романов]. *Antiquity - Modernity (Matters of Philology) [Античность - Современность (вопросы философии)]*(6), 82-88.

Kagan, M. (1972). *Morphology of Art: Historical and Theoretical Study of the Internal Structure of the World of Art: [monograph, parts I, II, III] [Морфология искусства: Историко-теоретическое исследование внутреннего строения мира искусств: [монография, части I, II, III].* Leningrad: Iskusstvo.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* McGraw-Hill.

Murphet, J. (2009). *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-garde.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rajewsky, I. O. (2005). Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality. *Intermédialités*, 43-64.

Wiseman, B. (2021). Intermediality and the Origins of Cinema. In *Cinematic Intermediality: Theory and Practice* (pp. 121-135). Edinburgh University Press.