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**THE INTERMEDIALITY  
OF NARRATIVE  
LITERATURE**

Medialities Matter

**Jørgen Bruhn**



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*Medialities Matter*

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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 mediality 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Clöver 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 Anglophone<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 heterogenous, 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