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Abstract

The author argues that intermediality is a metaphoric relationship between signifying systems. Transmediality is defined as the sharing of formal properties that are not specific to a single medium. The author offers suggestions for future study of the poetics of intermediality that goes beyond formalist poetics.

Virgin of Guadalupe

In the dusty square in front of the church, the villagers of Teotitlán del Valle were celebrating the fiesta of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The dancers, wearing brilliantly coloured costumes with tall, feathered headdresses, re-enacted scenes from the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The music from the band was loud, raucous, and brassy. The aroma of steaming tamales drifted across the square. Jostled by the crowd, breathing in the acrid smoke from fireworks, reeling from the effects of mezcal, my senses were saturated and my mind confused.

The multiplicity of experience is a condition of life and confusion is commonplace. Life does not neatly compartmentalise the constituents of experience. In the course of events or in memory we cannot easily disentangle the stream of experience. One sensation - even in the imagination - can, as it did for Proust, re-awaken the memory of the others. We can direct attention to particular sensations from our ears, our eyes, our bodies, but we cannot wholly detach those sensations from one another.

The River of Heraclitus

Attention is a sleight-of-hand by consciousness. The cocktail party effect shows that we scan sensory input for relevant information without being aware of it. Even the peripheral input of each sense has an effect on us. We may selectively direct our eyes towards a particular thing or focus our listening attention on one sound source, but everything in the visual or audible field retains the possibility of influencing us, if only subliminally. And that influence extends beyond one stream of sense data to every constituent of experience, including internal bodily states and emotions. The metaphor of separate sensory streams is misleading, and we should rather speak of currents in the stream of experience. Paying attention to sound, we swim - perception is an active process - in the auditory current. Around us the other currents flow, in and through one another in a constant state of flux -

Ideas for a Poetics of Intermedia

the river of experience. And we never step into the same river twice.

Weaving

Experience cannot be reduced to the simple total of sensory inputs and perceptions. The dances, music, food, costumes and rituals of the Mexican fiesta form a dense network of symbolic or signifying systems, as intricate and tightly woven together as the carpets for which the village is renowned. As an outsider I can only decipher those systems through conscious effort and with assistance. I feel comfortable enough with the music, which is mostly subject to conventions I am familiar with. But other elements in the performance are mysterious, and the connections between all these symbolic systems I can only vaguely intuit. For the villagers who are thoroughly immersed in them they form the ever-present stage of culture on which their lives are enacted. The sensory stream and the network of signifying systems are bound together. The latter cannot be experienced without the former. But symbolic systems and cultural practices powerfully condition what can be experienced and how it can be experienced.

Of Rings and Circuses

Daily life is multi-sensory and engages multiple symbolic systems. A Mexican fiesta, a shopping mall, a symphony concert, a football match - multiplicity is the nature of life itself in its totality. The desire to emulate and control this totality motivated the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner's *Ring*, Scriabin's unrealised *Mysterium*, and the *Gesamtdatenwerk* of Roy Ascott [Ascott, 1989]. All such ventures skate riskily along the boundary between totalisation and totalitarianism. A ringmaster of a different kind, Cage in his 'circus' works evaded the charge of totalitarianism by "getting out of the way", delivering a media-saturated environment in which the absence of authorial control will pass unnoticed and unregretted.

Return to Eden

A medium can only be understood as a relationship of some kind. Life considered as the totality of human experience is not a medium in any meaningful sense. A totality cannot enter into relationships; as Bertrand Russell might have observed, it is legitimate to assert that 'John is an uncle' (though it may be untrue), but when you assert that 'Reality is an uncle', you are in trouble. Nonetheless the idea that life itself is a medium appears

in art movements of the 60s that promoted ‘the merging of art and life’ - a project to recover a unity that was presumed lost. Born in the 19th century (The Arts and Crafts Movement, Symbolism) from Romantic nostalgia for a pre-industrial past, it seeks redemption, after humanity’s fall from grace in the Industrial Revolution. ‘The merging of art and life’, as articulated in the 60s by Allan Kaprow [Kaprow, 1993] and Fluxus artists [Higgins, 1984], is a critique of the social order that had produced the concept of the ‘pure’ medium. Intermedia and multimedia are contrasted with the oppressive concept of the ‘pure’ medium. The Utopianism of the 60s was revisited several decades later in the form of techno-Utopianism, characterised by the belief that computer technology can provide the means to achieve the re-synthesis that has hitherto proven so elusive.

O Happy Day¹

The plausible suggestion that a ‘pure medium’ is directed towards a single sensory input ignores the real debate about purity, which has been of quite a different kind. Painting and sculpture are pure visual media, but their purity is tainted by representation. Representation necessarily involves relational thinking (comparison of the image/object with the real world) and association (arousal of emotion associated with what is depicted, interpretation of cultural codes associated with the subject.) In the early 20th century the happy day dawned when abstraction - according to its high priests, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich - washed away the sin of representation by taking visual art into a realm of pure form previously inhabited by music alone. ‘*De la musique avant toute chose*’ – Verlaine expressed the aspiration towards musicality that was invoked as an ideal across the arts, from poetry to painting to silent cinema. The purity of music does not consist in its direction towards human hearing, but the extent to which it can be considered autotelic – that it results from the impulse to express, or simply to make, for its own sake: *techné poiétiké*, the technique of production for no other reason than to produce [Cf. Nancy, 1997]. Hence the idea that became a central tenet of formalism – that poetics is the study of that which is made for the sake of making it. The object of attention is the message itself - the function of sound in music, of language in literature - not something beyond. Thus it distinguishes itself from doctrine of “art for art’s sake”, a proposition about the social purpose of art.

The best movie show in town

The autotelic character of the artwork is an abstract category that can only be grasped through the perceptible phenomenon. It is not the result of direct perception, but of reflection. Direct experience of any medium is ‘impure’. It is ‘contaminated’ by other currents of experience that consciously or subliminally influence us. We may focus attention on what we hear but, even when listening to music under the most artificial conditions, it is not possible to eliminate all other physical sensations. Close your eyes and listen to music in a darkened room and you still experience internal and external bodily sen-

sations, including hypnagogic vision, which Stan Brakhage called ‘the best movie show in town’.

Please remain seated

The formal conditions of the concert hall provide a framework in which music is – for most of the audience for much of the time – the main focus of attention. But the concert hall is subject to social conventions ranging from the dress of the performers to the obligation on the audience to remain seated quietly during the performance. These factors shape the nature of the concert listening experience. Concerts of computer music, often taking place in a darkened theatre with no human performers, are no less subject to their own conventions than other forms of social listening. Even solitary listening lying on a couch in the living room is conditioned by the feelings of security and comfort associated with home. Pure listening is ‘contaminated’ by cultural practice, which determines both what we hear and how we hear it.

The Bride Stripped Bare

Cage’s injunction to let sounds be themselves suggests a special mode of listening, an attention that negates all relations to other sounds and to anything beyond. Music is defined not by its content – sound and silence – but by a mode of listening, and anything and everything can be listened to in musical way. Cage embraced the multiplicity of sounds when he spoke of ‘listening to the field’. Proceeding from a philosophical standpoint that merged Protestant Puritanism and Zen psychology, Cage advocated a mode of listening that intentionally denied intentionality. He had nothing to say, and he said it. By saying nothing, he said what he had to say. Listening, in Cage’s sense, is close to Schaeffer’s *l’écoute réduite* (‘reduced listening’), which strips sounds bare of causal and semantic significance. Schaeffer proceeded from structural linguistics and phenomenology to evolve an elaborate theoretical framework for the classification and ordering of sounds, which would form the basis of formal musical language. In the Utopian world of ‘pure listening’, the presence of sound can only be experienced through absence, in particular the absence of the very things – causality and meaning - that make sound of vital interest to us in everyday life. In order to liberate sounds we must experience loss.

Listening to the field

The idea of ‘pure listening’ has its shadow, a form of listening that also strips sounds of causal and semantic content – listening that is non-listening. ‘Listening to the field’ only seems possible in two ways. Either attention is focussed on nothing in particular, a state of non-attention, if not inattention; or we adopt a mobile form of attention, focussing from time to time on different sounds in the field, without making any causal or other connection between those sounds other than to note their simultaneous or successive presence. The concept can be extended to a multimedia environment in which we could speak of ‘perceiving the field’ – in which we either attend to nothing in particular, or shift focus from one medium to another. Non-attentive listen-

ing closely matches the most prevalent forms of musical engagement of the present day. In these situations music is not the primary focus of attention. Music accompanies us in lifts, shopping malls and car parks, forms part of the nightly rituals of television viewing, clubbing or going to the movies. It is there when we play computer games and when our mobile phones ring. Owners of iPods and Walkmans follow a model provided to them by the entertainment industry, constructing personal soundtracks to their daily lives. We attend to these sources of music from time to time, but never for extended periods. Their primary purpose is functional and mostly directed to mood regulation. This form of (non-) attention extends to all the media in our media-saturated environment, and is evident in the behaviour of media-adept young people who skilfully negotiate that environment with a mixture of highly mobile and non-attentive modes of perception. Common editing practices in film and video embody this mobile attention, the constantly changing camera angles and cuts resembling the interminable movement of a restless eye constantly shifting its attention. [Cf. Aumont, 1989] Against this must be set the implacable, motionless eye of the surveillance camera, the webcam and some video art practices, which exemplify the indifference of the camera to everything in its field of vision.

Peer Gynt's Onion

Pure, direct perception of the autotelic medium, if it exists, is ineffable, something whereof we cannot speak – a Zen moment of enlightenment – so we return to the idea that a pure medium is an abstraction, the product of reflection on perception rather than an act of direct perception. Investigation of the autotelic nature of music has historically centred on the score as a set of symbols representing abstract relationships between terms. In this endeavour musicology has mimicked a crude conception of science as an activity that must begin with abstract symbols and quantifiable measures. But a work of music is not identical with its score, nor is a work of computer music one and the same with the algorithm that generated it. Musicology has been rightly castigated for its obsession with the score; one should not wish to replace the fetish of the score with an equivalent fetish of the program. Abstraction is unavoidable; merely to speak of these things is to enter into the realm of abstraction, whether we are aware of it or not. But abstraction does not exhaust the content of any artwork. An artwork is part of the social edifice and of cultural practice and is experienced in a multiplicity of ways by artist, performer, listener, consumer, critic; its identity is perpetually being reformed by this multitude of experiences. Like Peer Gynt's onion, an artwork has many layers; if we peel them all off we are not left with an abstraction, but with nothing.

Neckar Cube

A medium can be considered a system of signification. New terms – from raw materials to complete works – are constantly being introduced, causing the system to reorganise itself to accommodate them. The introduction of sounds hitherto considered 'noise' and 'unmusical'

led to a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationships that constitute the musical system of signification. Simultaneously, the conditions of experience are constantly changing, realigning the medium in its relationship to the world. The advent of the phonograph record changed the nature of musical experience, not merely by introducing a new form of experience – every other pre-existing form of musical experience was changed as well. The Internet has reconfigured musical experience again. The fluid form of a medium can be extended to the meta-system that we call the media. A medium is one of a set of terms – media – that are all constantly being redefined, and hence re-arranging themselves in relation to one another. We can understand intermedia as a complex and fluid meta-system of signification. By bringing two symbolic systems together we produce a new layer of meaning. We can examine a single physical entity ('work') that employs two quite separate systems of signification, for example a computer program that is also a poem, or a poem that is also a work of graphic art. Such work can only be perceived like a Neckar cube; we can switch our perception from one reading to another, but not see both forms at once. Although experience is a multiplicity, attention is singular. Upon reflection, we can understand the relationship between the two 3-dimensional interpretations of this 2-dimensional figure. And upon reflection we can understand the relationship between the program and the poem; in that relationship is a new layer of signification, a 'meta-signification.'

On Wings of Song

The impulse to sing is deeply instilled in humans. Unaccompanied song – Australian Aboriginal song, Vedic chant – is the most ancient form of music we know of. It can be described as containing two systems of signification, one musical and the other linguistic. And something can be learned from the formal analysis of each. Possibly we can perform a 'Neckar-cube-like' shift of attention from one to the other while listening, but this is surely not normal. For the performer and listener, melody and words are one. They exist for one another and are inconceivable without one another. It could be that we are staring at a deep mystery here – one that reaches back in time to the origins of music and language, which perhaps were one and the same.

Of Umbrellas and Sewing Machines

Bringing together of two things to create a third – that is the classical definition of metaphor. (It is also the definition of the tertium quid of alchemy – a useful reminder that art is part science and part magic.) In rhetorical theory, metaphor is a function of language. By calling one thing another (transposition) a new meaning is created; that meaning lies in the relationship established between two hitherto unrelated things. It was always assumed that there was some rational relationship between the two things compared. Lautréamont shattered that presumption when he brought together an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table, prefiguring the Surrealist exploration of the metaphor as an irrational figure. The classical metaphor takes place between terms of a single system of signification. When we bring to-

gether two systems of signification (music and film, sound and video, poetry and programming) we create another kind of metaphor, another realm of metaphorical meaning inhabiting the realm of the media, but not within a medium. Intermediality is not a new media form awaiting solidification into a medium in its own right. The realm of intermediality is the realm of metaphor.

The Demon of Analogy²

The poetics of intermediality will study the mechanisms by which new meanings are formed through the simultaneous presentation of symbolic systems. Discussion of this has often focussed on perceptual analogies (synaesthesia) or on structural or formal analogies (montage theory). These may be fruitful avenues of artistic experimentation but the theory of intermedial metaphor does not require any of them. There is no necessary relationship between sound and image, or between any other systems of signification; that the same algorithm or the same data set generates both may be interesting (or not), but it is certainly not necessary. Stanley Kubrick's choice to accompany scenes of extreme violence in *A Clockwork Orange* with Rossini was not necessary, but it was certainly meaningful. In contrast, Eisenstein's notorious analysis of the relationship between music and image in *Alexander Nevsky* [Eisenstein, 1994, pp379-399] led him to the conclusion that the notes advancing from left to right across Prokofiev's score could be equated with the cavalry advancing from left to right across the screen. The analogy evidently seemed entirely logical to him, yet he appeared oblivious to the way in which he had precluded the possibility of any 'logical' accompaniment to a cavalry charge from right to left. Eisenstein was entrained by the demon of analogy, which blinded him to the flaws in his analysis. An analogy may be tested for validity, and found wanting; a metaphor does not have truth-value and can only be interpreted.

Montage-or-bust!³

The investigation of metaphor is an inquiry into meaning. An intermedial investigation of metaphor studies the mechanisms and the meanings that arise from relationships between media. In the process we may discover formal properties that appear to be common to different media. We can describe this as the realm of transmediality. Structural and formal properties are abstract and do not adhere to any single medium. This throws light on the urge to 'musicality' that was felt so strongly in the early 20th century. Rhythm, structural repetition, and variation are formal aspects of music that are transmedial precisely because they are not unique to music. This is somewhat different to the equation between musical timbre and visual colour, which is based primarily on analogy. One can assert that musical timbre occupies a similar position within the signifying system of music as colour does in the signifying system of painting. Transmediality is the realm of abstract concepts that transcend individual media. In the 1920s Eisenstein found montage everywhere. Carried away by an excess of enthusiasm for a technique that he believed

was essential to cinema, he sought out montage in every field of artistic endeavour, demonstrating that it was a transcendent structural principle, not a property that was specifically cinematic.

If we generate music and image from the same algorithm or data set, the result is transmedial rather than intermedial. It is a representation of formal properties that can be displayed visually and audibly. Data visualisation and sonification are literal processes rather than metaphorical ones. But transmediality, although distinct from intermediality, still remains a legitimate area of study for intermedial poetics. The simultaneous use of indeterminacy in music by John Cage and dance by Merce Cunningham certainly has meaning (perhaps the meaning of non-meaning).

Broadway boogie

The spirit of formalist poetics limits the poetics of intermedia to the autotelic aspects of different systems of signification. The acts of perception, reflection and analysis that are required to apprehend the autotelic qualities of a medium happen multiple times in an intermedial context. How can separate autotelic analyses of media be synthesised into a poetics of intermedia? Formalist poetics puts a frame around what it examines to exclude impurities from contaminating the 'pure' analysis. The moral – even religious – discourse of purity (equated with 'virtue') contrasted with impurity and contamination ('sin') is unmistakable. But intermedia is per se the realm of 'contamination', it revels in and celebrates 'impurity'. Confronted with intermedia, the well-oiled engine of formalist poetics starts to splutter and belch forth black smoke; its fuel has been contaminated. The poetics of intermedia must come to grips with this contamination, from whatever source it comes. Signifying systems contain both arbitrary signs – whose meaning comes purely from their position in the symbolic order – and motivated signs that have other, concrete meanings founded in psychology or culture. Even art of the most formally determined kind – such as algorithmic art – must engage with other, culturally determined symbolic systems. The transformation of formal relationships into sound or image requires the transformation into *something*. In *Music for 88*, Tom Johnson demonstrates some elementary mathematical theorems through a series of piano pieces and explanatory text. The strict formalism of the algorithmic processes employed is ironically undercut by cultural references. One piece unmistakably alludes to classical Indian music, another to a rock-and-roll bass line. Similarly, Warren Burt recently performed a generative audio-visual work⁴ that used the sounds of a church organ; the scene of his performance was Adelaide's sleaziest street and the ironic relationship – a deliberate choice by the artist – between the sounds and the environment was evident to anyone who cared to listen. Formal processes have to be embodied in – mapped onto – something, and are inevitably drawn into the web of social and cultural signification. This is true of a Bach canon and it remains true today even in the most esoteric fields of computer music. There is no such thing as a neutral material. In the sphere of culture even non-relatedness is a form of relationship, the refusal to communicate is a communica-

tion, and meaninglessness has meaning. Beyond that, meaning in the intermedial realm of metaphor often lies precisely in the 'contamination' of one medium by another; by the perceptual, cognitive and interpretive confusion caused by one system of signification acting with another or even against another, creating an interference pattern of intriguing complexity. Here perhaps lies the most interesting area of intermedial poetics.

It's alright, Ma...

I am still in the Mexican village. After a fitful night sleeping on hand-woven rugs laid over a hard stone floor (each rug formed of abstract designs that have deep cultural significance to the Zapotec Indians who wove them and whose house I am in), it is time to reflect on the experience of the night before. Beyond the memory of the overwhelming rush of sensations, I become more aware of the intermedial dimensions of the fiesta. There are layers of meaning that arise from the simultaneous expression of communal feeling in dance, music, food, drink, costumes and fireworks that are not and cannot be expressed in any one of those alone. In these layers are the metaphors that sustain culture. They can be studied and analysed, and that is the task of an intermedial poetics. But in the end we must give them back to the place they belong, the sphere of experience in its bewildering multiplicity. When all is said and done, "it's life, and life only."

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⁴ Street Cinema, Friday March 10, 2006, part of Project 3, Adelaide Bank Festival of Arts 2006

¹ See Charles Ives, *Scene Episode*, in *Set of Five Take-offs for piano*, Peer, New York, 1991.

² See Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p15.

³ See Metz, *Film Language*, p 44.