From the “Mutual Illumination of the Arts” to “Studies of Intermediality”

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an overview of the development of the interdisciplinary study of the interrelations of the arts and media during the past one-hundred years. From a focus on the binary relations of literature and the visual arts, music, and film these investigations turned into what came to be called “Interarts Studies” with a new tendency to include the interrelations of non-verbal arts and also to study configurations of a decidedly non-artistic nature. In the 1990s this would lead to the reconception of the arts as well as the applied arts and some non-artistic genres as media and their interrelations as intermediality. Simultaneously there began full-fledged attempts to construct a theoretical foundation for the study of intermediality (and transmediality) as a humanistic field, emphasizing media combination, intermedial reference, and intermedial transposition, especially adaptation. This article highlights developments in the German- and English-language discourse on these matters.

KEYWORDS

Adaptation, Interarts Studies, Interdisciplinarity, Intermedial Reference, Intermedial Transposition, Intermediality, Media Combination, Transmediality

INTRODUCTION

Wechselfeitige Erhellung der Künste, translated into English as The Mutual Illumination of the Arts, was the title of a book published by the German literary scholar Oskar Walzel in 1917. Its subtitle has been rendered as A Contribution to the Appreciation of Concepts of Art History; it signals the indebtedness of Walzel’s thesis to the work of the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, his exact contemporary, whose Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Principles of Art History) had appeared two years before. It was the title as well as the argument that made Walzel’s work symptomatic of a tendency which began to assert itself in German academic circles at the beginning of the 20th century, when literary history had firmly established itself at universities as a scholarly discipline, followed by art history and finally by music history. Wölfflin’s was an attempt to give his field a solid methodological foundation. He proposed five antithetical pairs of basic concepts for contrasting High Renaissance and Baroque art: linear vs. painterly, plane vs. recession, closed vs. open form, multiplicity vs. unity, and absolute vs. relative clarity of form. Walzel felt that these concepts could be fruitfully applied to the formal analysis of literary texts, and not only to texts of the periods studied by Wölfflin.

The German scholar not only referred to similar tendencies among his contemporaries to borrow terms and concepts used in the study of the other arts, but repeatedly quoted pronouncements by German Romantic thinkers concerning artistic interrelations. He also cited the saying attributed to the Greek philosopher Simonides of Ceos (556–468 BCE) that “Painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture” and thus referred to the ancient history of a discourse that has linked painting and poetry as “sister arts,” as they came to be viewed in the 17th century. That discourse is best known...
under a phrase borrowed from the Augustan poet Horace’s “ars poetica” (19 BCE), the phrase “ut pictura poesia,” mistakenly taken to mean “as is painting, so is poetry.” These two arts, understood as practices, were primarily seen as concerned with mimetic representation. Plato and Aristotle had explored that view, many centuries later Leonardo da Vinci had stylized it as a rivalry in a comparison of the arts, a “paragone” in which he had given painting the advantage, and it was still the concept that prompted Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s distinction, in his Laokoön of 1766, between sculpture and painting as spatial arts and poetry as a temporal art, basic conditions that required different modes of representation.

There is no comparable history dealing with the relations between music and poetry (or literature, as we call it today). In the classical scheme of the seven liberal arts music was one of the arts of the quadrumvium as a mathematical art dealing with relations, close to architecture; the arts of the basic trivium were concerned with the verbal, with grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, dealt with the effects of speech on the listener. This interest also informed another aspect of theories concerning the visual arts besides that of mimetic representation, and until the eighteenth-century issues of the effect on listeners were also crucial in theoretical discussions of music.

But in that century conceptions of the nature of the arts changed profoundly. A study published in 1746 by the Frenchman Charles Batteux, Les Beaux Arts reduits à un même principe (The Fine Arts Reduced to One and the Same Principle) not only established the idea of thinking of “the arts” as comprising painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry, but also suggested that there were common characteristics to “Art” in general, no matter in what medium. Later in the century the understanding of Art, and of the arts, changed even more profoundly. Human needs, besides a healthy body, were now conceived as concerned with “the true, the good, and the beautiful.” Of the traditional schools or faculties at the university, medicine dealt with the body; theology, the supreme faculty, with the true; jurisprudence with the good, with right and wrong; philosophy, already comprising the natural and humane sciences, now re-developed a field that already had a tradition, that of aesthetics. Among the theories concerning the nature and function of beauty developed by thinkers in England, France, and Germany, Immanuel Kant’s 1790 study of aesthetic judgment was probably the most influential and helped to reconceive Art in terms that are still familiar to us. Works of art came to be conceived as aesthetic objects satisfying an innate aesthetic need. They possessed a “purposeful purposelessness,” as opposed to products of the “applied arts.”

Consequently, the artist assumed a new position in society, and works in any of the arts were received as expressions of artistic sensibility. In Romanticism, music, the art least given to mimetic representation and rhetorical persuasion and appealing more to feelings than to the rational mind, became the leading art. For over a century one tendency among the arts in Europe was the aspiration to achieve the condition of music. “De la musique avant toute chose” proclaimed Paul Verlaine at the opening of his “Art poétique” in 1874. At the same time, however, Romanticism spawned a counter-tendency toward a fusion of the arts, postulated by a number of thinkers and indicated by Ludwig van Beethoven’s inclusion of words, of sung passages, in his last symphony, and then emphatically exemplified in the work of Richard Wagner, who considered his operas extensions of the symphony and not only wrote their libretti and scores but also staged them, with décor, costumes, and lighting. The striving for achieving a Gesamtkunstwerk, a “total work of art,” still motivated an Arnold Schoenberg and a Wassily Kandinsky at the beginning of the twentieth century and passed on to quite a few filmmakers.

The Romantics also developed a new historical consciousness and saw a period as dominated by shared values, beliefs, and tastes, in short, by a “spirit of the age” (“Zeitgeist”), a concept associated with the philosopher Friedrich Hegel. The nineteenth century created great historical narratives, and as we have already heard, the new academic disciplines studying literature, the visual arts, and music were originally conceived as historical disciplines. Somewhat earlier another concept had arisen, which had profound consequences for the study of literature: it was the idea that the speakers of one language were all imbued with a “Volksgeist,” a spirit of the people, or freely translated a
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