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## Writing on Walls: Intermedial Qualities of the Wall in Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*

### ABSTRACT

This article considers the position of the wall in media and literary studies. It posits that the wall encompasses qualities that justify its examination as a medium. The widespread presence of the wall in fiction suggests this structure is an important, yet neglected actor in the transmission of material communication in literary studies. When the wall functions as a medium, its endurance, visibility, and materiality actively influence the messages it channels. As demonstrated through a close reading of Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*, the study of the wall represents a unique opportunity to engage in a novel approach to the study of media in fiction.

Keywords: medium, wall, fiction, intermediality, *Famous Last Words*

### 1. Introduction

“The medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 13). If one believes Marshall McLuhan's impactful axiom, the role of the medium is a pivotal element in the understanding of the message it bears. The medium is more than the mere material embodiment of a communication; it plays a decisive role in various stages of the creation and the reception of the text or image it delivers. The choice of a certain medium for one's message is thus a claim in itself, and the present article approaches the role of one medium in particular: the wall. Whether it channels political messages or base insults; whether it is painted with gangs' territorial markings or with poetic lines, the wall is a particularly eclectic medium, whose scrutiny can complement the field of media studies.

In this article, I examine the role of the wall as a medium in fiction. I posit that the study of the wall in literature allows us to have a more complete understanding of the uniqueness of the relationship between the wall as a medium and the messages it can channel. The materiality, solidity, and visibility of the wall condition how characters use it as a medium to communicate. The corporeal presence of a message inscribed on a material wall is intrinsically more enduring than a message on a delicate piece of paper or an evanescent screen, but it is also vulnerable to threats that are specific to this medium. Following McLuhan's assertion that “the medium is the message,” I argue that the wall, when it is understood as

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a material means of communication within literature, creates a unique relationship among the message, its author, and its medium. Together, the medium and the message become a complex, deeply rooted, signifier, whose materiality and endurance I study in this paper<sup>1</sup>.

The structure of the present study is twofold. First, I introduce the theory of intermediality, the study of media, by reviewing some of the major works that have shaped this field in recent decades. I suggest that the application of intermedial methods to the study of the wall as a physical means of communication leads to a more complete understanding of the concept of the material medium as a fundamental participant in the transmission of a message. Second, I suggest that the study of the mediating nature of the wall is particularly relevant in literature. I offer a close-reading analysis of Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* (2001) to demonstrate that the examination of the wall as a medium can complement literary studies, too. Findley's novel engages with the wall's materiality, its endurance, and its publicity in a manner that supports the assertion that the scrutiny of the wall as a medium can result in rejuvenating approaches to both media and literary studies. Throughout the essay, an emphasis on the visibility and sturdiness of the wall will allow me to show how the use of this medium can result in exceptionally enduring messages.

## 2. The Wall as an Intermedial Intersection

“Walls turned sideways are bridges” (Davis, 1974, p. 347)

Intermediality is the branch of media studies that is dedicated to the relationships that exist among different media. Traditionally, scholars of intermediality agree that a strict definition of the concept of the medium would result in rigid categories, which would not reflect the dynamism of the field of media study. To avoid

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<sup>1</sup> I invite readers to think of the term *signifier* in a somewhat non-Saussurian way. The Swiss semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) describes the sign as a combination of the *signifier*, which he defines as an acoustic image, and the *signified*, the concept. He argues that the *signifier* and the *signified* are the two parts of the sign that allow the sign to achieve meaning. In this paper, I posit that the medium plays a crucial role in the creation of meaning, which justifies a broadening of the term *signifier*, so it includes the material medium. The *signifier* becomes more than an acoustic image; it becomes a material image. In fact, in a notable metaphor, Saussure describes the *signifier* and the *signified* as two sides of a sheet of paper: “A language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound. To separate the two for theoretical purposes takes us into either pure psychology or pure phonetics, not linguistics” (de Saussure, 1916/1986, p. 111). The double-sidedness of the wall, which is comparable to that of a “sheet of paper” validates a slightly adapted use of the term *signifier* for the purpose of the present study.

restricting the concept of the medium by enclosing it in an exclusive definition, the majority of scholars of intermediality have focused their attention on media's similarities and dissimilarities in order to examine how they can be compared with one another rather than strictly defined. In "The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations", for example, Lars Elleström argues that "media definitions that deal only with the physical aspects of mediality are too narrow, as are media definitions that strongly emphasize the social construction of media conceptions. Instead, [Elleström offers to] emphasize the critical *meeting* of the material, the perceptual and the social" (Elleström, 2010, p. 13). When Elleström presents the concept of the medium as a space of "critical *meeting*" (p. 13), he supports the idea of the medium as an in-between object, a bridge between the producer and the receptor of a communication. In her introduction to the *Handbook of Intermediality*, Gabriele Rippl reminds her readers that etymologically, the term *medium* refers to little more than that which is in the middle (Rippl, 2015, p. 6). One can assume that every object, person, structure, surface, or even symbolic concept can be perceived as a medium, as long as it acts as an intermediary. The wall, then, because of its physical in-betweenness, and because it can be the surface on which communication is materialized when it is perceived, can serve as the starting point of a medium-specific investigation of media studies.

Rippl admits that "there is not one definition of 'medium' which scholars working in the field of literary, cultural and media studies would agree on" (p. 6). Thus, rather than producing a potentially polemic definition of media, most scholars of intermediality have focused on the relationships among different media rather than on the nature of the medium. But lack of definition can result in a heterogeneous field of study. Some scholars follow a tradition that started in the Italian Renaissance and think of art forms, such as literature, painting, and sculpture, as media. Others, notably scholars of book studies, focus on the material embodiments of media, such as the book, and scrutinize watermarks and marginalia in order to better understand a text (Depledge, 2018). The result of these dissimilar approaches to the concept of the medium is that some studies are based on the premise that the art form and the medium are synonymous, while others differentiate the medium (e.g., the book) from the art form (e.g., literature). I suggest that a definition of the medium does not result in exclusive typologies. Rather, the description of individual media is a decisive part of the study of their respective qualities, and it is an essential first step of intermedia comparisons.

Katerina Krtilova (2012) shows how most objects can act as media, but how listing them does not permit scholars to define the concept of the medium: "A street lamp, film, a mirror, a drawing, paper, money, art, or a laboratory can be described as a medium. However, it is unlikely that anyone would understand what a medium is looking at this list: it is not at all clear what these 'things' have in common" [parenthesis original] (p. 39). Krtilova focuses on the *mediating power* of

media. She argues that “[m]edia provide tools to handle, perceive, and reflect the world and at the same time, act as mediations” (pp. 37–38). Media make art apprehensible. They give the artistic message the body it needs to be perceived and interpreted. Media ought to be studied according to the effect they have on the messages they channel in addition to their relationships with one another. “Media are not mere (passive) objects – they are rather reflective structures” that actively influence the art they mediate (p. 38). Krtilova’s observation validates a focus on the relationship between the medium and the message along with the connections among media.

In this article, I loosely follow the example set by Krtilova (2012) and focus on the relationship between the medium and the message. Rather than looking for intersectional points among different media, I propose that the wall itself is a pivotal medium which ought to be seen as a critical point of intersection among the material medium, the message that it bears, and the audience who perceives the meaning that is created by the message and the medium. The wall encompasses a substantial number of narratological, hermeneutical, and semiotic characteristics of scholarly interest that can allow the field of intermediality to move into a novel direction by adding a more material dimension to the study of media.

I contend that the material nature of the wall and its versatility make it a unique medium that can display various forms of art.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of the present study, I propose to think of the concept of the medium as a combination of the message itself and the material substance that supports the message. Considered together, the medium and the message make communication tangible. Whether the communication be of graphic, textual, or visual nature, the medium is the intersection between the material embodiment of the message and its interpreter. The physical wall, for instance, only becomes a medium when it provides a message with the material body that will sustain the message. The medium is the physical surface on which the sign is materialized when it meets its interpreter. It is the intersection between the sign and its interpretation. When it channels communication, the wall, like the paper of a book, the stone of a sculpture, or the canvas of a painting, provides the message with its physical form and becomes more than mere support for the message; it takes on communicational properties and becomes a medium. The wall actively influences the messages it bears. It transfers some of its inherent qualities, such as its endurance and visibility to the art it mediates. The durability and perceptibility of a message that is mediated by the wall are different from messages that are mediated by a book.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term *versatility* to refer both to the fact that the wall can bear a variety of forms of art (from short textual messages to extensive murals) and to the fact that, at all times, the wall both fulfils its purpose of separating two spaces while also creating connection by bearing instances of communication.

Beyond the wall's exceptional materiality and durability, the uniqueness of this medium also lies in the fact that its primary purpose is not to be a medium. Unlike a sheet of paper or a canvas, the primary role of a wall is not to bear a textual message or an image but to mark separation. Consequently, the wall has been left out of traditional media studies. Walls are built to separate different spheres, achieve protection, and support architectural creations. Their original role results in their utterly physical nature; the wall is a concrete structure that creates a division between two different spaces. Unlike other material media, such as the book or the canvas, which are specifically designed to be the material channel for one specific art form, the wall constantly performs its main purposes of separation and structural support. Even when it is used to channel communication, the wall still divides.<sup>3</sup> The wall is an active, multipurpose structure, which is not limited to the performance of one single function. Its study as a medium shows how media can be of various natures and how they do not have to be limited to the mediation of one singular form of art or one singular purpose. Accepting the wall as a medium is a unique opportunity to further develop the field of media studies by showing how versatile media can be.

### 3. Walls in Fiction

In literary studies, too, the wall plays a significant, yet neglected, role. The number of works of fiction that involve instances of wall writing is substantial and justifies why scholars of both intermedial and literary studies should investigate this topic. Linda Hogan's *Solar Storm* (1995) shows how cliff walls can mediate narrative frescoes. The wall can also be used by characters to write their life story on an enduring medium, as in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* (2001), and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife* (2018) is an example of how a child's writing on the wall can be both innocent and ominous. The wall can bear gangs' territorial marks that challenge the feeling of protection from the wall, as in Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* (2019) and T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995). In Ivan Vladislavic's *Portrait with Keys* (2006), Johannesburg's walls are covered in mural art in an attempt to soften the marks of separation that still plague post-apartheid South Africa. In *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), Chris Abani portrays the tension between anonymity and absolute exposure to the public, as experienced

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<sup>3</sup> It may be argued that the Berlin Wall is a counterexample that invalidates this observation. Upon its fall in 1990, the primary purpose of this wall became obsolete; it stopped physically separating East Berlin from West Berlin. Today, some parts of the wall are still standing and function as a long canvas for street art. Although what is left of the wall no longer achieves political division, it nonetheless prevents free physical passage from one of its sides to the other for stretches of several hundred meters (notably in the Ostbahnhof area). Even if the Berlin Wall has become more of a symbol than an actual barrier, it still fulfils its purpose of physical division.

by a street artist who uses the wall to express himself. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892) shows the psychotic effects of a decorated wall with no intended communicative purpose. And finally, Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) also illustrates how pernicious the wall can be when its mediating potential is not fulfilled by engaging with the paralyzing effect of the blank wall. Though far from being exhaustive, this list of literary examples suggests that the wall, even if it does not always occupy a center-stage position in the narrative, is a common narratological element whose study can result in fascinating analyses. Often, the scrutiny of the wall in fiction reveals intermedial dynamics that go beyond literature. The intermedial quality of the abovementioned novels lies in their representation of another medium within the medium of the book and using the *language* of the book. The act of reading about the wall as a medium in fiction requires the use of the medium of the book. Some of the wall's qualities need to be *translated* in order to be conveyed by a book. Such features of the wall as its solidity, its immobility, and its specific texture, among others of its inherent characteristics, can only be textually described on the fragile, mobile, and smooth page of a book<sup>4</sup>. According to Jens Schröter (2011), this type of intermedial relation would qualify as "transformational intermediality," which he describes as an "intermedial relationship [which] consists in the representation of one medium by another" (p. 6). Irina Rajewsky (2005) calls this form of intermedial relationship "intermedial references" (p. 52). She defines it by explaining that "[r]ather than combining different medial forms of articulation, the given media-product [i.e. the book] thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium [i.e. the wall] through the use of its own media-specific means" (p. 53). Such representations of a medium through another medium somewhat show the limitations of the representing medium. The book is limited to textual tools to represent the wall. Readers must accept the transformations that are required by the medium they hold in their hands in order to immerse themselves in the fiction through the representation of another medium. As the following analysis of Findley's *Famous Last Words* suggests, the study of the representation of the wall in literature can pave the way to a novel approach to intermedial qualities.

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<sup>4</sup> Today, the book has several shapes, including, but not limited to the audiobook and the e-book, neither made of paper. But since the purpose of this article is to study the wall rather than book forms, I limit the concept of the book to its classic, paper form. For more information about the relationship between media and their digital remediations, I encourage readers to read Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 1999).

### 3.1. *Famous Last Words*: "My mark that I was here"

"In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand,  
and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall  
of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote"  
(*The Bible*, KJV), 1611, Daniel 5:5).

In our western, Christian culture, the tradition of using the wall to leave an impactful message is deeply connected with a sense of doom. The Bible's "Writing on the Wall" represents how the sturdy wall can be used as a medium to remind us of the inescapable fragility of human nature. In a perhaps paradoxical manner, the wall was one of the first media that preliterate populations used to leave messages tens of thousands of years ago, and whose traces are present to this day. Prehistoric cave walls have been bearing human marks for millennia, suggesting that the wall is among the most time-resistant media one can choose for one's message. As Timothy Findley's historical fiction *Famous Last Words* illustrates, the wall is a medium that has been allowing human messages to go down in history for thousands of years.

The protagonist of *Famous Last Words*, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, is a fictional American author whose proximity to fascist figures during World War II has allowed him to fill his notebooks with sensitive notes that incriminate historical figures including Ezra Pound, former British King Edward VIII, and Benito Mussolini<sup>5</sup>. The narrative opens *in medias res* as Mauberley escapes an assassin sent by Axis forces to kill him and destroy his notebooks. The author takes refuge in a deserted hotel in the Austrian Alps and, conscious that his notebooks, containing incriminating details for Axis leaders, are the main target of the person sent after him, Mauberley starts writing his testimony on the walls of four unused rooms in the isolated hotel. Shortly after Mauberley has completed his famous last words, the assassin finds him and eliminates both the author and his compromising journals but does not notice the writing on the wall. The utter visibility which the wall offers the text, added to the fact that the wall is not conventionally recognized as a medium, allows Mauberley's words to hide in plain sight. When World War II comes to an end, American soldiers find Mauberley's dead body lying close to the ashes of his destroyed notebooks. The soldiers are more attentive than the killer.

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<sup>5</sup> The name of the protagonist, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, is an obvious reference to Ezra Pound's poem of the same name, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). It is widely agreed among critics that Pound's poem has autobiographical undertones, which creates an obvious connection between the poet and his lyric protagonist. However, it is my opinion that in *Famous Last Words*, Findley seeks to free his fictional Mauberley from Pound. I interpret this novel as Mauberley's chance to be more than Pound's autobiographical speaker and to write his own story, his own *Famous Last Words*.

They discover the message on the walls, and the narrative follows Lieutenant Quinn as he reads the message left by the author.

Mauberley was inspired to use this unconventional medium to bear his mark during his visit of the Spanish caves of Altamira, where he found prehistoric marks that have survived long after the demise of their author:

And out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of something irresistible above my head, seen in the ebb and flow of the swinging light: the imprint of a human hand.

God only knew how long ago it had been put there. Maybe ten – and maybe twenty thousand years before. *This is my mark*; it said. *My mark that I was here. All I can tell you of my self and of my time and of the world in which I lived is in this signature: this hand print; mine* [emphasis original] (Findley, 2001, p. 172).

Findley's fictional account of the real cave paintings, which can be found on the coast of Cantabria, suggests that the primary motivator for someone to paint or write on a wall is the human fear of disappearing. The prehistoric man who left his handprint was driven by his need to secure his place in history and make sure he would not be forgotten. The wall, unlike any other media that may have been accessible to him at the time, has born the mark of his existence for millennia after his passing. Later in the narrative, when Mauberley realizes that members of the Axis have sent the assassin, he also understands that his fragile paper notebooks are not a durable medium for his words and, inspired by the prehistoric man, he decides to use the wall to bear his message.

The transfer from paper to plaster proves to have been efficient when the soldiers find the wall writing intact while the notebooks have been reduced to ashes. Not only is the wall more solid than the notebooks, but its overtness and its immobility prevented the assassin from even considering it as a potential medium. The obviousness of the writing on the wall saved it from destruction and allowed Mauberley's words to live on. The ubiquitous usualness of walls as weight-bearing structures, rather than media, saved the writing on the wall from being seen and destroyed. The walls allow Mauberley's testimony to survive its own author, and they cancel the silencing effect of their author's death. Just like the prehistoric handprint, Mauberley's words are carried by the wall in a manner that neither his body nor his paper notebooks have achieved. The wall prevents the artist's existence from falling into oblivion.

The intermedial quality of Findley's novel goes beyond the relationship between the notebooks and the wall within the novel. The use of Lieutenant Quinn as a reading figure adds an intermedial dimension to the novel that goes beyond the book. Readers of the novel depend on the officer's act of reading to access the text that appears on the wall, and which constitutes the plot of the novel. When Quinn starts reading the writing on the wall, he translates the wall writing into the language of the book. Quinn's in-between position turns him into a form of



medium himself. After having been transformed from the notebooks to the walls, Mauberley's words are transformed by Lieutenant Quinn into the book that the reader is holding. But unlike the wall, Quinn is a scient medium, who can actively influence the transmission of the message:

Quinn had thought to begin his reading of the walls where Mauberley himself had obviously intended – over to the right of the epigraph from the Book of Daniel. But his eye was caught by a second epigraph, inscribed on the ceiling; a sentence scrawled outside the disciplined alignment of the others and set there like a bear trap to catch the reader unaware.

“All I have written here,” Quinn read, “is true; except the lies” (Findley, 2001, p. 59).

As an actively mediating entity, Quinn can influence the order in which the message is presented to the reader, but his choice is strongly influenced by the wall. Rather than being linear as the book, the wall offers a dynamic quality to the message it bears. When Quinn enters the room whose walls are covered in Mauberley's words, he is surrounded by the narrative and needs to figure out where to begin. Unlike a traditional book that has a clear beginning and end and that only shows two pages at a time, the walls allow Quinn to see the whole narrative at a glance. The author's words take on a unique, enveloping quality which challenges the notions of beginning and end; Quinn gets to decide where to start reading.

The officer chooses to begin with a sentence that stands out: “‘All I have written here,’ Quinn read, ‘is true; except the lies’” (Findley, 2001, p. 59). On a narratological level, this statement challenges the dichotomy of fiction and reality, and on a medial level, it shows how the wall does not present text in the same way a book might. The author was able to write beyond the wall. Through his use of the ceiling, Mauberley pushed with the flexible limits of his chosen medium and rendered this line particularly remarkable. To the readers of the novel, this line does not stand out in the linear text of the book. We rely on the description of Quinn's immersive experience to understand how the sentence goes beyond the limits of its medium<sup>6</sup>.

The comparison between the wall and the book is thus not limited to the depiction of the fictional notebooks and walls. Mauberley's words are transformed a first time when the author translates them from his notebooks to the walls. As a result of this first transformation, the Mauberley's testimony takes on qualities of the wall as a medium: its endurance, its deceiving obviousness, and its immersive quality. The second transformation goes beyond the fictional world that was cre-

<sup>6</sup> The adjective *immersive* is to be understood in its literal sense. Quinn finds himself in a room covered with the words he is reading. He is thus physically immersed in Mauberley's story. While a good book can also be described as immersive, this immersion is figurative rather than literal: a reader does not physically find themselves in the book they are reading.

ated by Findley and takes place when the account of what Quinn discovers on the wall is transformed into the medium of the book that real-life readers are holding.

#### 4. Conclusion

I hope that the present study of the intermedial qualities of the wall in fiction has demonstrated how the scrutiny of this material medium can reveal complex intermedial dynamics in and beyond literature. Defining the medium as the material embodiment of the message need not result in sterile lists of media. Rather, it is an opportunity to focus on the qualities of one medium to show how each medium plays an active role in the production and in the apprehension of meaning. As Schröter suggests, media are defined by their differences: “the definition of the ‘specific character’ of a medium requires the differential demarcation from other media” (Schröter, 2011, p. 5). The wall’s unique qualities demarcate it from the book, and the study of these differences can speak to both media and literary fields of studies. When one accepts the wall as a medium, it becomes an intersectional surface on which intermedial and literary studies can meet. The study of the wall as a medium also allows novel approaches to a variety of fields of study that are not limited to literature and intermediality. The social and political aspects of writing on a wall, for instance, could further contribute to the understanding of the impact of wall writing in cultural and political studies. When it is understood as a medium rather than an obstruction, the wall no longer solely separates; it unifies.

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