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## Beyond Language: On Intermediality (and Multimodality) in Literature

### ABSTRACT

The article questions the traditional application of intermedial categories to literature. It aims to show that the thinking in modes and clear-cut categories suggested by Lars Elleström, though systematic and presumably universal, when taken plainly, is likely to narrow down the intermedial potential of literature. The literary examples discussed – Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence* and Patrick Gale’s *Notes from an Exhibition*, as well as other examples provided in the article – illustrate how the primacy of language in literature can be questioned and how the presumptions we have concerning literature and books can be challenged. Thus, the model proposed by Lars Elleström needs to be expanded.

Keywords: literature, intermediality, multimodality, museum collection, cabinet of curiosities

To define literature accurately is an arduous task. Following the definition provided by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Baldick, 2001), literature can be understood as “a body of written works related by subject-matter (e.g. the literature of computing), by language or place of origin (e.g. Russian literature), or by prevailing cultural standards of merit” (p. 141). Etymologically, the term “literature” is derived from the Latin word “littera” for letter, that is, “the smallest element of alphabetical writing” (Klarer, 2004, p. 1). Hence, literature has always been strongly associated with language and writing: it “has been nearly synonymous with written texts and books, but not with every text in every book” (Atã & Schirmacher, 2022, p. 42). What distinguishes literature as a qualified medium from other written texts are particular “criteria of imaginative, creative, or artistic value, usually related to a work’s absence of factual or practical reference” (Baldick, 2001, p. 141). The predominant focus on the linguistic aspect which conveys the theme, concepts and discourse facilitated by the literary

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work often neglects its oral and visual dimension (Gibbons, 2012; Klarer, 2004)<sup>1</sup>. Formalism and structuralism have a strong position among the dominant trends in literary studies, despite the fact that although thinking in modes and fixed categories helps to grasp and explain phenomena in a systematized/systematic way, as suggested for instance by Lars Elleström (2010, 2014, 2018, 2021), it may seem limited and somehow hamper the intermedial potential of literature, if not expanded. The following paper demonstrates how literature as it is traditionally understood, described by means of Elleström's modalities, can go beyond his established categories and become a complex intermedial phenomenon.

The two novels discussed here, namely, Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* and Patrick Gale's *Notes from an Exhibition*, share several features with a peculiar form of museum collection known as the cabinet of curiosities or the Wunderkammer. The novels' use of this seemingly chaotic form of collecting challenges literature from the intermedial perspective as the predominantly temporal medium of literary narrative acquires features of a spatial one, that of a museum collection already indicated in the titles of both novels. Through the strong presence of things (material objects) in the virtual space (spatiotemporal modality) of both novels, and by the nature of the Wunderkammer collection, i.e. how exhibits are selected and the connections between items on display are made, the traditional causality of events is challenged in different ways described below. The selection of items and the process of compilation in particular are undervalued in semiotics, as the cabinet of curiosities denies the distinction between form and content. But before the two novels and the related ideas are discussed, some general observations concerning the expansion of the material and the sensorial modality of literature will be made.

## **1. Expanding material and sensorial modalities of literature and its technical medium of display**

As far as material and sensorial modalities are concerned, while reading a book readers typically interact with the flat surface of a page (or a screen) by means of the eyes that follow the text and the fingers that turn the pages (even if that means tapping or swiping the screen). Among the aspects which are frequently marginalised while discussing literature as a medium, however, there are the acoustic element and the effect of the spoken word, which can be traced back to the oral tradition and which point to the performative aspect of literature. Audio-literature (voice recordings of primarily printed works), radio-drama and podcasts conveying original stories (the broad category of audio-drama) challenge the prevailing

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<sup>1</sup> Except for drama, in which „the union between the spoken word and visual expression survives in a traditional literary genre” (Klarer 2004, p. 2), and which „combines the acoustic and the visual elements, which are usually classified as non-literary” (p. 2).

understanding of literature as works written down and printed on paper. They usually contain all the elements typical of a narrative— characters, plot, setting, ideas – constructed by means of numerous both literary and non-literary devices. The latter include music, silence and background sounds or noises. However, the story is delivered by auditory means and not visual ones. The narrative is to be listened to, and not perceived visually.

Another example of broadening the traditional material and sensorial modalities of a book are “locative narratives” (Hayles, 2008; Hight, 2006), such as Janet Cardiff’s *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* and *Her Long Black Hair*; or Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton and Naomi Spellman’s *34 North 118 West*. Locative narratives allow a person to listen to an audio narrative and/or look at images on their mobile phone or other PDA while walking a specific route within London, New York’s Central Park or Los Angeles, to name a few places from the examples above. One experiences not only going beyond looking at the flat surface of the book, but frequently also going outside the confines of a traditional museum as the narratives tend to present the history of a particular location (Hight, 2006). Locative narratives are a particular case of intermediality that combines and integrates “real-world locations with virtual narratives” (Hayles, 2008, p. 12), and hence they also involve senses other than sight as well as strongly affecting spatiotemporal modality.

What is more, as indicated by “locative narratives” and observed by Pedro Atã and Beate Schirrmacher (2022), literature’s technical medium of display (the printed book) has also been challenged by electronic devices that display text, i.e. all kinds of screens: computers, phones and e-readers. The concept of analog literature has been supplemented by the notion of e-books (Atã & Schirrmacher, 2022), electronic literature and hypertext or interactive fictions (Hayles, 2008). All these types of digital media “enable new ways of interaction with the text” (p. 43): easier navigation and search of the text, and hence enhanced possibilities of making connections in the process of interpretation in the case of e-books, and “a multi-sensory reading experience that involves visually perceived text, auditory text, sounds, and moving images” (p. 46; see Hayles, 2008) in the case of electronic literature. New technical media of display engage the reader in more interaction with the literary work, drawing attention to the performative aspect of literature (Atã & Schirrmacher, 2022).

To make a smooth transition to the discussion of Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence*, it ought to be observed that literature successfully makes its way to the public sphere outside the space of the book. Parts of Pamuk’s novel, especially its epigraphs (quotations from *Celâl Salik* and *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*), fragments of chapter 68 (“4,213 Cigarette Stubs”) and excerpts from other chapters describing Fusün smoking can be found on the walls of the museum in Istanbul and in particular in the cabinet no. 68 displaying 4,213 cigarette stubs (Pamuk,

2012). Such encounters of literary quotations in public spaces challenge paper or screen as the primary technical medium of display associated with the private space of reading. Other examples include fragments of poetry painted on walls of a building and steps of a public stairway, or short story stations: cubes and dispensers that print fragments of literary texts on eco-friendly scrolls resembling bus tickets or shopping receipts and that adjust the length of the story to the length of one's journey by public transport<sup>2</sup>.

All the arguments above point to the fact that the seemingly fixed and stable material modality of literature should be extended and should no longer be limited to the flat surface of a paper page in a book. Consequently, the change in material modality may lead to changes in sensorial modality, for instance, to the dominant role of hearing in the process of podcast or audiobook reception, as well as to other changes in the spatiotemporal modality, which will be discussed in the next part of this paper.

## **2. Broadening the spatiotemporal modality of literature – Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence***

In the intermedial discourse (Elleström, 2010, 2014, 2021), time and space relations of literature can be generally discussed on three planes: as time and space manifested in the material interface; as notions related to the reader's cognition and perception of the literary work (cognitive space and perceptual time); and as part of the world presented, i.e. virtual time and space. While the spatial facet of a book and the reading time may vary depending on the version of the book and the reader's reading skill, the cognitive space and the virtual time-space are of particular interest for the study of intermediality in literature.

The general impression of *The Museum of Innocence* is that the story is told by a museum guide in the eponymous institution who happens to be the collector, the curator of the exhibition and the protagonist of the story himself (but it turns out in the final chapter that throughout the novel Pamuk – the fictional writer whose name coincides with the real writer's – is speaking in Kemal's voice), and that the story is very much determined by the objects gathered in the museum. It is the objects from Kemal's and Füsün's lives that navigate the story. Their accumulation – Kemal compiles thousands of random items related to his life and his love for Füsün – reflects the nostalgia for the Istanbul of the 1970s and 1980s, as illustrated, for example, by the quotation:

Here I display an exact replica of the loaf I bought from the grocery store across the street. Its function is sentimental, but also documentary, a reminder that millions of people in Istanbul

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<sup>2</sup> More information about the project can be found on the website: <https://short-edition.com/en/p/a-new-kind-literary-pulse> (retrieved on 31.7.2022).

ate no other bread for half a century (though its weight did vary) and also that life is a series of repeated instances that we later assign – without mercy – to oblivion (Pamuk, 2009, para. 39).

The past is evoked in the present and stored as cultural memory in the object. What is more, exhibited items point to the material details of everyday situations and common activities, such as smoking a cigarette, having dinner, watching TV or going on a picnic:

[...]the picnic basket displayed here – the thermos filled with tea, stuffed grape leaves in a plastic box, boiled eggs, some Meltem bottles, and this elegant tablecloth passed down to Zaim from his grandmother – evokes our Sunday excursion that may offer the visitor some relief from the oppressive succession of interior settings, as well as my own agony (Pamuk, 2009, para. 27).

At the same time, the narrative emphasises that time is linked with emotions and what the characters feel in particular moments and throughout the course of action – a dimension not indicated or discussed by Elleström. What is more, in their materiality physical objects capture and represent memories, linking cognition or thought to immaterial feelings and emotional states related to particular events or circumstances, for instance:

Here I display the damp and broken stones of the back garden and the shells of snails that crawled over them, along with our solitary friend, the panicky lizard (now petrified), who disappeared during the rains – all represent the abandonment of *yali* life by the nouveaux riches with the approach of winter, and the attendant melancholy of the season (Pamuk, 2009, para. 42).

It is from the very common, ordinary things and natural processes that the story is derived. The fictional world is built on the basis of these objects, and not the other way round: that is, the objects are not placed in the story for the sake of the reality effect (Barthes, 1969, as cited in Wahl, 1989, pp. 141–148), merely to ornament it and fill up the presented world with meaningless trivial objects. With special emphasis on cigarettes and ashtrays, items of clothing and accessories, cosmetics, stationery and letters, figures of dogs, saltshakers, quince grater, canary cage, car wreck, photographs and postcards, film posters and magazine clippings, items of furniture, clocks and watches, restaurant menus, maps and the like, Pamuk transforms the linear and temporal narrative (the story of love) into the space of a contemporary cabinet of curiosities, realizing on the grounds of literature his own claim that “[r]eal museums are places where Time is transformed into Space” (Pamuk, 2009, para. 82). In Aristotelian terms, instead of focusing on Time, i.e. “the line that links these indivisible moments” (para. 54), the story prefers relating single moments captured by the objects. This, in turn, is part of the logic of cabinet collection: to retrieve knowledge from the objects gathered, and make connections among those objects which capture and express the complexity and wonder of the universe (Bredekamp, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). In *The Museum of*

*Innocence*, the narrator does that for the reader and the visitor to the eponymous museum, but visitors to the actual museum in Istanbul have to make those connections for themselves.

For the major part of the novel the reader is constantly reminded that the story told in chronological order is in fact (re)constructed and (re)told from the material objects gathered, i.e. it arises from material culture, which is more focused on the practical use of things than on their meaning. This point is demonstrated by metafictional intrusions, expressed for instance by means of the following and similar phrases: “this long, slender glass (see exhibit)” (Pamuk, 2009, para. 24), “I use it [the depiction of the internal organs of the human body] here to illustrate to the museum visitor...” (para. 26), “the picnic basket displayed here...” (para. 27) or “Here I display an exact replica of...” (para. 39). Pamuk (2012) himself explained that “focusing on objects and telling a story through them would make my protagonists different from those in Western novels – more real, more quintessentially of Istanbul” (p. 15).

The apparent “rubbish” gathered for the exhibition, the examples of which include the aforementioned cigarette stubs, old saltshakers, hairpins and empty perfume bottles, not only stands for vanity, transience and fragmentation, but also has value and meaning to the first-person narrator in the novel. Memories concerning his beloved are attached to and reconstructed from different material objects – silent participants in the events described, which are gathered, put on display in the eponymous museum and turned into a story told in the subsequent chapters of the novel. For the narrator, the mundane things become valuable as they store and evoke memories, like the sugar bowl in the following fragment:

The sugar bowl in this exhibit is from the day when a cloud of melancholy darkened our happiness, plunging us into one of our occasional silences, when Füsün, suddenly picking up this same bowl, asked, “Would you be happier if we had met before you met Sibel Hanım?” (Pamuk, 2009, para. 28).

The cabinet of curiosities hence becomes a memory palace: memories are ascribed to the objects within an organised space with the purpose of passing on the story (Yates, 1999). The term memory palace, like cabinet, suggests a more spatial rather than temporal approach to the story told.

*The Museum of Innocence* is a novel which at the same time is a single-admission ticket that grants entry to the physical museum located in Istanbul. The ticket is included in the last chapter of the novel and consists of a specially framed space to be stamped by the guard at the museum entrance. This feature points to literature’s exceeding its basic structure of a fictional narrative and its function of entertaining the reader. This brings us to the final modality distinguished by Lars Elleström (2010, 2014), namely the semiotic modality, which always cooperates with other modalities, and to the question of multimodality.

### 3. Widening the semiotic modality of literature – Patrick Gale’s *Notes from an Exhibition*

While explaining semiotic modality, Lars Elleström (2010, 2014) relies heavily on the creation of meaning by three types of signs (modes of semiotic modality) distinguished by Charles Sanders Peirce: symbolic (based on convention), iconic (based on resemblance) and indexical (based on contiguity). In this model, literature is discussed predominantly in terms of symbolic signs that the verbal language is mostly made of, with some tendency towards iconicity in poetry and graphic novels (Atã & Schirmacher, 2022).

In Patrick Gale’s *Notes from an Exhibition*, the story of an artist’s (Rachel Kelly’s) life is organised around a collection of exhibit labels which originally have informative and documentary functions. Each chapter begins with a note, i.e. an information card containing the name of the object or the title of the work of art on display, information about the material it is made of, its short description, its historical context and its relation to other exhibits. Semiotically, each note in the novel is an indexical sign, as it points to the object it describes. Being an object itself, it is also an iconic sign; and because it evokes a linguistic thought and uses the conventional sign system to pass on information, it is a symbolic sign as well. The multiplicity of being simultaneously indexical, iconic and symbolic foregrounds the materiality of the note and the iconicity of the page in the book where it is placed. Each note is framed – isolated and distinguished from the narrative that follows it – in order to intensify its visual quality. The narrative that follows the note encourages the reader to make the connection between the item described by the note and the artist whom the exhibition concerns. The notes and the fragmented narrative interact to tell the story of Rachel Kelly and her family. In the words of Alison Gibbons (2012)<sup>3</sup>, “the different modes of expression are located on the page not in an autonomous or separate fashion, but in such a way that, while these modes have distinct means of communicating, they constantly interact in the production of narrative meaning” (p. 2). The world presented in Gale’s novel is exhibited as a set of objects (referred to by means of information cards) and the corresponding scraps of the story (containing individual characters’ memories) told from an array of perspectives, i.e. various protagonists related to the artist. The motivation for all protagonists’ actions and the factors determining their behaviour are gradually revealed and reconstructed from the collected items and fragments of the story. Iconic signs (depictions, notes) and symbolic signs (descriptions, story fragments) mingle in the process of communicating the

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<sup>3</sup> While Lars Elleström (2010, 2014, 2018) tends to generalise and provides a generic model that ignores “exceptions”, Alison Gibbons (2012) concentrates on experimental novels (multimodal printed literature) which escape that generalisation and stand out for their inclusion of graphic elements (multimodality).

story. On the one hand, each note (itself an iconic sign using symbolic signs of the verbal language) draws attention to the material object it describes (indexical sign associated by contiguity with the artist), but on the other hand it points to the fragment of the story (in symbolic signs) that follows it. The fragment of the narrative contained in a given chapter, in turn, alludes to the note which opens it. In addition, what is particularly visible in the structure of the novel is the multimodality manifested in mixing text genres (Gibbons, 2012), i.e. combining curatorial notes with literary narrative. The two genres are identified by different textual layouts (Gibbons, 2012) for the framed note and the rest of the chapter, and by varied typography (Gibbons, 2012) manifested in different fonts within the notes themselves and then between the notes and the subsequent chapters. All these features draw attention to the form of the novel and emphasise the material aspect of the book and the written text. While *The Museum of Innocence* emphasises the formal side through elements of metafictional writing, including directly addressing the readers and museum visitors and drawing their attention to the objects, *Notes from an Exhibition* adopts a consistent strategy of providing a note at the opening of each chapter. This framed space gives objects a representative character and opens into a virtual narrative.

As far as virtual materiality is concerned, the eponymous exhibition, apart from Rachel Kelly's works of art – produced on various surfaces and by means of different materials, e.g. oil on tea tray (Gale, 2008, p. 14), red chalk on paper (p. 42) – also includes other random items, like her dress, nightdress and fisherman's smock, her swimming costume, hair clasp, photographs and postcards, exhibition catalogues and an essay concerning her art, newspaper clippings and digital images of her works. These items demonstrate the richness of the artist's world and help readers/visitors understand Rachel Kelly's background and the course of her life. Such an accumulation of various heterogeneous objects, including data on computer terminals, can be regarded as a modern literary cabinet of curiosities (Bugno-Narecka, 2019).

If a cabinet of curiosities is treated as a chamber in the present that contains evidence of the past (Leyton, 1992), which is one of the basic functions of any museum collection nowadays, then even memories of individual characters may acquire the material form of the past's trace: "memory is always some physical object, in the present – a physical object that some observer interprets as holding information about the past" (Leyton, 1992, p. 1).

The consequence of such an approach for the reading of *Notes from an Exhibition* is that the characters' accounts of the late relative [Rachel Kelly], i.e. the stories or memories which follow each exhibition card and the objects described by these notes, become yet another set of objects within the cabinet of curiosities created by Gale: physical objects that contain information concerning the characters' past. These memories are stored and exhibited to the reader in the literary Wunderkammer along with other material items [...]. As a result, visual objects are [...] put



together on the same level with the verbal narrative. They are then simultaneously stored and displayed in the single space: the space of the book (Bugno-Narecka, 2019, p. 191).

Consequently, the story that becomes an item on display and part of an exhibition acquires a new semiotic mode – it is not only symbolic, but also indexical due to contiguity with the artist. The fragmentary, multiperspectival and shuffled structure of the narrative also reflects the structure of a cabinet of curiosities by presenting the reader with the deliberate disorder of the scattered pieces of information. Even the characteristics of the book as a material object, the linear progress of a typical narrative and that of the process of reading cannot bring all the introduced chaos under control before the process of reading is finished. First there are only glimpses into various stages of the artist's and her family's life, indicated by the notes and conveyed by the fragments of the narrative. Only later can the events be put in chronological order and a coherent story be reconstructed by the reader from all the items gathered and displayed on the pages of the book. While in *The Museum of Innocence* the narrator reconstructs the story and provides the reader with the events in chronological order, with *Notes from an Exhibition* it is the reader who must put the elements of the puzzle together in a sequential order: from the earliest to the latest.

#### 4. Conclusion

This short study shows that literature, as a qualified medium, has the potential to be a significant part of intermedial discourse, which deserves more academic attention from literary scholars. The ideas presented here are to be considered as merely a starting point for a more thorough discussion on the intermedial status of contemporary literature that hopefully will follow. Elleström's four modalities used to describe and categorise media, though universal because applicable to all media products, introduce borders and promote generalisations that need to be expanded. As the notion of literature is constantly negotiated and redefined to match changing realities, it frequently escapes the fixed modes and modalities ascribed to it. This is particularly visible with novels which explore the idea of a museum collection, cabinet of curiosities or art exhibition, as illustrated here by Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* and Patrick Gale's *Notes from an Exhibition*.

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