

“THERE AND BACK AGAIN”: FROM MEDIA CULTURE TO LITERATURE, FROM LITERATURE TO MEDIA CULTURE

“Lá e de volta de novo”: Da cultura da mídia à literatura, da literatura à cultura da mídia

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ABSTRACT: The intention of this paper is to share experience from a course in intermedia studies. It consists in two methodological schemes. The first one provides an option for students of various disciplines—philology, aesthetics, cultural and film studies, and so forth. It starts from the concept (and experience) of media culture, multimodality and re/hyper/mediation and pursues the position and meaning of works of literature within such a context. The other scheme is based on the concept of literature-centered intermediality. Its nodal point being a canonical work of Czech literature, it focuses on its further “(trans)media life” and is primarily aimed at students of Czech studies. Media products and genres are inquired into both as modes of representation and communication.

KEYWORDS: Intermediality. Transmediation. Convergence culture. Media culture. Education.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste trabalho é compartilhar experiências de um curso de estudos intermediários. Consiste em dois esquemas metodológicos. O primeiro oferece oportunidades para alunos de várias disciplinas – filologia, estética, estudos culturais e cinematográficos etc. Baseia-se no conceito (e experiência) de cultura midiática, multimídia e re/hiper/mediação e explora a posição e o significado das obras literárias em tal contexto. O segundo esquema é baseado no conceito de intermedialidade focado na literatura. Tendo como ponto focal a obra canônica da literatura tcheca, concentra-se em sua outra “vida (trans)midiática” e principalmente em estudantes de estudos tchecos. Exploram-se os produtos e os gêneros de mídia como modos de representação e comunicação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Intermedialidade. Transmediação. Cultura de convergência. Cultura midiática. Educação.

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A Challenge and the True State of Affairs

Not long ago, after having delivered a lecture on the interdisciplinary and educational potential of intermediality, I was asked by a colleague whether I would consider incorporating the concept of intermediality into the secondary school curriculum in the Czech Republic. I cannot imagine a greater or more exciting educational challenge. But the way the Czech school system currently is certainly would not enable this. Therefore, I am all the more happy to have the opportunity to share my experiences teaching the course "Intermedia and Adaptation Studies" at Masaryk University in Brno in this volume.¹ This course is part of the Literature and Intercultural Communication master's program, which is open to students with bachelor's degrees in different fields of study.

My course in intermedia studies is based on two methodological schemes. The first is intended for students with both literary and non-literary backgrounds (such as cultural studies, film studies, aesthetics, foreign languages and literature(s), etc.) and is based on exploring multimedia culture and conceptualizations of how it is manifested. These students examine media products and genres as means of representation and communication that also serve as cognitive frameworks for different types of audiences. Literature maintains its position as a key reference medium, although it is not the central medium. The backbone of this approach is literature-oriented intermediality (RAJEWSKY, 2019), a revised form of the older concept of literature-centered intermediality (WOLF, 2002a). What this essentially means is that, for example, we respect a cinematic transmediation of one of Shakespeare's sonnets (see the analysis below) as an autonomous work capable of functioning independently of its pre-text. We must realize, however, that the degree to which a work can stand on its own is influenced by the pre-text's cultural circulation and how aware recipients are of it (even if they have a distorted view of it). This means that as we interpret products of transmediation, we consider the specific features of the pre-media or pre-text as in the above-mentioned exemplification of the sonnet (i.e., its genre, the author's poetics, period cultural and artistic conventions, etc.) and its context to the extent necessary in the particular case.

¹ I would like to thank my colleague Stanislava Fedrová for calling my attention to the opera *Violetter Schnee* and for providing comments on this paper.

The second methodological scheme is primarily intended for students of Czech language and literature, and it is the reverse opposite: its starting point is a literary text, and it follows the "afterlife" of canonical works of Czech literature as it is manifested in intertextual transformations and transmediations over time. It also emphasizes the influence that both cultural and political discourses exercise upon the artistic understanding and reinterpretation of canonical works in particular periods, such as during "normalization."² With both schemes, my goal is to ensure that my students, no matter what they studied previously, get the opportunity to apply their knowledge (for example, students of English and film studies in interpreting transmediations of Shakespeare's sonnets). I provide students in the seminar with a working glossary of intermedia terms that includes examples. The exemplifications are updated each semester to cover the topics we explore and to incorporate media products that have become "fashionable" due to current events or societal trends, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown in Spring 2020.

Scheme 1

The first scheme is based on the plurality of contemporary media culture: there is a diversity of distribution channels, genres, and technologies. I have created this description of the first scheme by summarizing several semesters of this course. Although this scheme is fixed in terms of the ideas behind it, it is flexible in terms of content. In the Spring 2020 semester we also examined examples of new and reinterpreted media genres distributed online, which appeared during the coronavirus lockdown as virtual substitutes for in-person forms of distribution and consumption of cultural products, whether they emerged at traditional institutions (e.g., museums) or as the works of individuals.

The Concept of Media Culture

To study intermediality we must be aware of the fact that media culture cannot be reduced to new media or popular culture, which often fully harness the power of digital media. We seek to demonstrate that the situation we are confronted with, and which Henry Jenkins's (2006) concept of convergence culture aptly describes, is a two-way street: elite

² The period following the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, especially the 1970s. Normalization was marked by the return of Communist hardliners to power and the stifling of freedoms.

“high” culture draws from popular “low” culture, and vice versa. We want to avoid separating “media and art” (intermediality offers us the resources to do so),³ and “old media” (which are technologically obsolete, socially out of fashion, etc.) and “new media,” which hold new promises and are therefore interesting. Here, we can rely on the concepts of remediation and hypermediation (BOLTER; GRUSIN, 1998). Therefore, we start by exploring the “easily legible” relationships within different types of art before continuing studying the relationships between different types of art and new media, which are clearly on display in bold multimedia products. Taking an inductive approach, we work our way step by step to the concept of medium. I use the observations that my students make about concrete media products to identify different media modalities (ELLESTRÖM, 2010), which then enable us to define what a medium is.

The Consumer and the Observer

Observation has a prominent place in this course for a simple reason. Although secondary school students are taught to read and analyze literature, they do not know how to think critically about other art forms. Moreover, bachelor’s programs in philology tend to focus on two issues—linguistics on one side and cultural history on the other. There is not much room left to examine the role of media in these contexts. Therefore, in my seminar we use two methods: 1) we directly consume media products as a lay audience would, and 2) we observe them following heavy preparation (i.e., reading a pre-text or a synopsis of it, learning about the particular genre the work fits into, comparing it with another similar media product, etc.). At the same time, we try to master the art of observing each other as observers of media products to find out how we behave and which cultural schemes and modes of evaluation we employ.

Tradition and Innovation in Intra-, Inter- and Multimedia Space

To avoid prejudices, we can first illustrate how the old and the new can coexist using examples of the intramedial transfer of genres, themes, and techniques in the fine arts. Therefore, I have chosen examples of contemporary art that draw on older traditions, such as

³ Stanislava Fedrová and I examined this issue from a diachronic perspective in a study on the genealogy of intermedia studies (2020).

the young painter Leoš Suchan's still-lives: In his *Ryby IV* (FISH, 2019)⁴ by replicating a popular still-life motif (fish) he embeds his painting in two contexts: a traditional, conceptual context, that is, he thematizes the transience of the depicted, and a contemporary context by including lettering that references market prices. Or he reduces the still-life composition to representing a mass-produced object such as paper bags. This artist's work also proves helpful in illustrating mediality as materiality of media in his *Zabaleny obraz* (*A wrapped picture*, 2019).⁵

Another way to reveal the continuity of cultural tradition is to study the visual representation of canonical motifs and characters from literary or oral pre-texts (i.e., biblical, mythological, or historical pre-texts), including how they have been reinterpreted in contemporary art.⁶ In doing so, we are laying the groundwork for being able to differentiate between transmediality as the coexistence of different types of media representations of the same theme (as conceptualized by Wolf and Rajewsky), and transmediation as a change in the media of representation, media transposition.

The recent staging of *Violetter Schnee* at the Berlin State Opera in 2019 provided us with an opportunity to demonstrate the many dimensions of intermediality and multimediality in one work.⁷ This opera is loosely based on motifs from the work of novelist Vladimir Sorokin. We observe how opera, as a traditional composite medium, transforms into a multimedia project: for example, this production makes visual references to scenes from the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006; film 2009, dir. John Hillcoat), alludes to the post-apocalyptic genre in general, and cites traditional works of art using anti-illusional projection techniques and the "material" presence of reproduction of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's famous *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) on the stage. Here we first come to the genre of ekphrasis as "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (HEFFERNAN, 1993), that is, of Brueghel's painting: in the opera, the character describing *The Hunters in the Snow* serves as an intermediary not only between the world of the story and the painting, but also between the stage and the audience, and thus transforms the painting from a

⁴ See <https://youngrealart.com/cs/products/ryby-iv>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

⁵ See <https://youngrealart.com/cs/products/zabaleny-obraz>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

⁶ One such motif is that of Susanna and the elders, whose verbal and artistic representations and reinterpretations I have examined with Stanislava Fedrová (2010a).

⁷ Music: Beat Furrer; text: Händl Klaus, based on motifs from the work of Vladimir Sorokin, translated into German by Dorothea Trottenberg; <https://www.staatsoper-berlin.de/de/veranstaltungen/violetter-schnee.2768/>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

"backdrop" into a key to interpreting what happens on the stage. This multimedia composition works with the theme of small groups of people lost in a snowstorm and its intermedial, generic, and conceptual connections in such a way that interpreters are unsure whether the performance should be viewed only as a metaphor for the current world or also as a metonym for climate change. In interpreting this performance, certain ideas, concepts, and categorizations arise that will help us think intermedially: composite medium, a theater production as transmediation, film genre, digital technology, ekphrasis, and the materiality of media.

Popular and Participatory Culture

I present to my students examples of popular culture so that we can study how cultural products are transformed into "brands" and illustrate Jenkins's ideas about the franchising of cultural products such as superheroes in various media. Together we search for phenomena in students' experience that may be conceptualized as examples of participatory culture, using performance art genres such as happenings, or flash mobs as examples. In such culture, the relationship between creator and recipient is transformed, sometimes even reversed. Due to the pandemic, I substituted analyzing "socially interactive genres" with studying media genres that enable virtual participation. One new form of participatory culture emerged during the Covid-19 lockdown; renowned museums that had to close, such as the National Gallery in London and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, challenged people to recreate famous paintings using only people and objects at their home and to post the photographs online. After a class discussion, one of students wrote an essay in which he tried to categorize these recreations based on several aspects of the works, such as how the recreation depicted the original source and mediated its meanings or iconography (passive recreations merely imitate artworks without searching for meanings, whereas active ones parody or reinterpret the originals) and the use of technology to recreate or imitate artworks (the photographic mimesis of a figurative artwork playing with light; substituting artistic techniques with other materials and so forth). The modes of transmediation revealed the attitudes to art in the people involved.

A Media Product of the Coronavirus Crisis: "High" and "Low" as Reflections of Social Criticism

We explored the internet-based cultural phenomena that proliferated during the coronavirus crisis, during the lockdown, examining both entirely new phenomena and "old customs that had been dusted off," such as readings of classic children's books by famous actors (or parodies of these readings by comedic actors). We selected one that was not just a side effect of the lockdown but also a response to its consequences. The video "A Corona Aria or the Elegy of an Operano⁸," which Miroslava Časarová, a currently unemployed opera singer, posted on the internet, requires us to look at it from two perspectives. First, we must notice how it remediates the aria from Dvořák's well-known opera *Rusalka* (1901), that is, as a professional-quality audio and visual recording of an artistic performance staged in unconventional interiors and exteriors that was produced to be presented on YouTube. Second, we can interpret the artistic transformation of the aria, the purpose of which is—despite its poking fun at the singer's circumstances and the humorous new text—to reveal the existential crisis (both in the philosophical and material sense) of an artist without a theater to sing in and without a source of income during the lockdown. At first, my students were amused mainly by the parodying of a "classic," but they eventually came to the conclusion that the message of the transformed aria features clear parallels to the protagonist of Dvořák's opera, who is divided between two worlds, and under whose feet the ground is crumbling.⁹

By observing phenomena from various cultural milieux we can recognize a set of features that characterize different intermedia categories. We then use them in our analyses of media representations of one motif or the work of one author. In the Spring 2020 semester, we focused on William Shakespeare. I dubbed our focus "Variations on Shakespeare."

"Talking Heads" or Shakespeare Solos

To mark the four-hundredth anniversary of the Bard's death, *The Guardian's* culture desk put together a video series in which leading theater actors perform famous speeches from the playwright's works titled "Shakespeare Solos." First, I selected three videos: Iago's

⁸ Operano is the artist's unique coinage.

⁹ See Miroslava Časarová: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LOMIQUdbCA>; cf. René Fleming (subtitles): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHM3zMBQxTQ&ab_channel=MartialVidz. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

wife Emilia's speech to Desdemona in *Othello* (Act IV, Scene 3),¹⁰ Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar* (Act III, Scene 2), and Portia's speech from *The Merchant of Venice* (Act IV, Scene 1). My students were most interested in the first selection. I will explain why later. Second, we took a conservative approach, preparing ourselves thoroughly by carefully reading the pre-text. The students could choose whether to begin with the original or a Czech translation. To ensure uniformity in our discussions, I provided my students with two translations: one that I consider to be "classic," yet still current, as well as the most recent one, which is often used to stage plays today. Third, the students watched the videos by themselves before the seminar. Fourth, we held a group discussion. Based on the students' intuitive descriptions of these videos and my interpretation of them, we were able to identify the concepts of remediation, hypermediation, and transmediation.

We worked our way from the "outside in"; we began by analyzing the channel used to distribute these videos, that is, the internet as a space where media products are presented, distributed, and discussed, before getting to The Guardian's remediation of these speeches in digital form. We were able to draw on this example to illustrate the two-way nature of remediation, which may manifest as various forms of hypermediation: a digital newspaper may provide live broadcasts like television or offer podcasts, which are similar to "older" radio genres. Opinions about whether each Shakespeare "solo" comprises a video recording of a dramatic text ("a talking head") or is a transmediation of the original differed from video to video: in the case of Emilia's speech, students considered it to be the latter. They understood the staging of this speech in a modern interior, that of an elegant cafe, which suggests an informal meeting between an experienced woman and her younger friend over a glass of wine, to be a reinterpretation of the pre-text. Emilia's speech—a text extracted from its original context and attributed a particular location—seemed to the students to be a surprisingly bold, "modern" statement about women's rights to the same experiences and weaknesses that are usually tolerated in men. However, we also recognized that the "decontextualization" of a snippet from the pre-text may lead to subjective over- or under-interpretation in the non-critical viewer. The students also admitted that besides the charm of Eileen Atkinson, the actress performing the speech, the setting was one of the aspects of the video that led to them choosing this particular "solo": it was visually captivating. Everyone

¹⁰ See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2016/feb/01/eileen-atkins-as-emilia-in-othello-if-wives-do-fall-shakespeare-solos-video>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

agreed that it could also catch the attention of a Shakespeare fan who had not yet realized the potential meaning of this speech. However, my students called into question the old interpretive cliché that such easily accessible, short-form videos can “captivate someone who otherwise is not a theater-goer,” arguing that such recipients likely do not read the culture sections of newspapers.

In our examination of these “solos” we also introduced the topic of the addressee of the media product, that is, the intended or assumed audience. Therefore, we then turned to transmediations, or generic transformations, that adapt a work’s content to target a particular audience.

From Queen Mab’s Hazelnut or Shakespearean Tales

This is the title that Eva Vrchlická (1888–1969), a Czech actress who portrayed many of Shakespeare’s characters, gave to her collection of prosaic epical adaptations of the Bard’s plays for young readers (although no age is given, I presume it was for teenagers) in 1946. We could compare this work to Charles and Mary Lambs’ skilful retellings of selected plays in prose form, *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807). Vrchlická’s adaptations, however, are true short stories, complete with graphic descriptions of the settings and humorous dialogues between characters. The question of what effects adapting a pre-text for a certain audience has was answered easily due to the time that has passed since the “tales” were written, which hinted at what changes we could expect (e.g., the elimination of double entendres and the emphasis on playful seduction). Students compared adaptations of tragedies and comedies and determined which features of the original dramas the epical adaptations preserved, which they eliminated, and which, if any, they added. This comparison of genres led to an important finding: my students, as contemporary “young” readers, found comedies, especially those with magical elements such as *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, more entertaining and thus more palatable.

To explain this preference, I suggested to apply Marie-Laure Ryan’s theory that distinguishes between story-centered narratives and world-centered narratives (RYAN, 2016). The former can be found in genres that get by with minimal descriptions of the worlds they take place in (i.e., tragedies, anecdotes); the latter, in genres such as fantasy and sci-fi, whose unusual worlds and their diverse inhabitants are what draw in the recipient. Hence, such

works are acceptable to (fan) audiences even though they do not tell original stories. Of course, between these prototypical genres there is a broad spectrum of transitional genres. The rich world in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set directly contributes to developing its narrative representation: its story is based on the intersecting of several worlds. First, we have the intersection of the world of people and the world of magic, second, the world of sublime rulers (who for the spectator or reader also represent the world of ancient mythology) with the world of ordinary people, that is, tradesmen as amateur actors. Finally, there is the world of the tragic tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, which the characters in the story want to put on as a play.

This example confirms how effective it is to switch back and forth or to combine the intertextual approach with the intermedial. Thus, we began exploring the methodological problems of transgeneric narratology (WOLF, 2002b) and transmedia storytelling (different aspects of which are addressed by Marie-Laure Ryan and Henry Jenkins).

Transmediation and Interworld Transfer

The limited space of this paper does not allow me to focus in detail on the relationship between film adaptation and transmediation. When it comes to studying intermediality, however, I consider it useful to understand adaptation in a narrower sense, as a modification of the contents, or even genre, of a pre-text (the source media product) that emphasizes different meanings and functions than the pre-text, sometimes to comply with the (presumed) needs and expectations of a certain audience. Therefore, for us, film adaptation is primarily an act of transmediation, which may be, but does not have to be, an adaptation (HUTCHEON, 2006). One of the most famous film adaptations of Shakespeare, director Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*, did not captivate my students as much as Baz Luhrmann's 1996 version (they considered Zeffirelli's picture to be more theatrical than cinematic). This newer adaptation attacks the viewer's senses by presenting the story in a flashy package brimming with special effects. The film fuses two models: a (theatrical) "tragedy about a love affair impeded by obstacles" that provides the script and language, and the "gang war" film genre, which adds a new dimension to the story (thanks, in large part, to the heavy use of film-specific techniques, camerawork, and editing).

Our class discussions concentrated on how the storyworld was modernized, both in terms of its macro- and microstructure. When the film came out, it divided critics: some assailed what they saw it as the vulgarization of the Bard's genius, whereas others admitted that a "Luhrmannized" Shakespeare might be more palatable for the younger generation. My students appreciated the transmediation, referring, for example, to how the power of film as a medium was utilized to grasp the meaning of the phrase "love at first sight" in a series of visually stunning representations. Transposing the story into the world of gangsters also updated the contents of "Queen Mab's hazelnut": In the film, Mercutio's description of Mab's mischievous jokes turns into a terrifying series of drug-induced hallucinations. In our seminar, we discovered that this movie was proof of the clear shift toward the "convergent" understanding of the relationship between high art and popular culture.

One Fictional World, Two Stories: Karel Čapek's *Apocrypha*

Although most known for his works predicting civilization causing its own decline, the Czech prosaist, playwright, and journalist Karel Čapek also produced short stories in the "apocrypha" genre from the 1930s. In them, he amusingly reinterprets or even subverts traditional themes and cultural schemes to address his contemporary readers. Besides biblical and historical stories, we also find three "variations on Shakespeare," including two tellings of the story of Romeo and Juliet in one story. The tragic theatrical version is recounted by a young English nobleman, while an Italian priest, a friend to Friar Laurence, gives his "real-life" account to the astounded young man: he describes Romeo as an unreliable fop, Paris as a wealthy, well-brought-up young man, whom Juliet marries in the end. They have eight children together and live happily ever after. The priest thus inadvertently brings up the discrepancy between art (with its masterplots) and everyday experience.

One Fictional World, Two Stories, a Different Medium: *Shakespeare in Love*

Čapek's work was in way a precursor to John Madden's 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, a grand "apocryphal" reworking of the story of Romeo and Juliet, the ideal material for intermedial study. Students kept track of the elements and components of the film that caught their attention. Because they came from different layers of transmediation and content transformation, we divided them into different groups to study them. I would

compare it to the "reading" of postmodern novel that Umberto Eco proposed in his Postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (1984), i.e., reading the text's individual generic and discursive layers without losing anything. We also performed an intermedial reading: some students focused directly on the layer of contemporary and "intercultural" references and considered how they connect to the story and discourse of the pre-text.

My students observed, for example, that the film's narrative alludes to the literary criticism discourse calling into question the authorship of the monumental oeuvre. Students who focused on the narrative macrostructure and the intertwining of the story of the two lovers from Verona with the story of Viola and Shakespeare noticed how the relationship between "art and life" was thematized, something we already observed in Čapek's works. A film studies student reminded us that one layer of the film revolves around Shakespeare's writer's block,¹¹ that is, not just a specific topic, but a narrative framework that could classify the film as belonging to a certain subgenre.

The students also observed significant parallels between the narrative structures and typical characters found in Elizabethan theater and the theater portrayed in the film (thematization of medium), for example, the popular motif of a young woman disguising herself as a man, and vice versa. Through a simple description of scenes in which the queen appears we finally came to a cultural historical parallel: here, the theater becomes a space in which the "theatricality" of Her Royal Majesty is manifested, or in other words, film enables not only the staging of this theatricality but also manifests it. Thus, we found ourselves at the doorstep of interdisciplinarity, on the edge of new historicism (and hence we touched upon Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1988).

***The Sonnet Project* (NYSX): Verses through Cinematic POV**

The "intermedial skills" and the knowledge of theoretical concepts we had gained throughout the semester now allowed us to analyze the transmediation of Shakespeare's sonnets. To mark the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death in 2016, New York Shakespeare Exchange, a New York City-based theater group, launched an ambitious project to present all of the sonnets as short films. Since then, this project has been expanded and continues to live

¹¹ Including amusing references to contemporary psychotherapy and Freudian psychoanalysis: Shakespeare, suffering from writer's block, visits a charlatan and lies down on a chaise longue to talk about his troubles.

on.¹² As the founder of NYSX and artistic director of this project, Ross Williams, explains each film is driven by the director based on their cinematic vision:

This allows the project to remain solidly planted in cinema, instead of feeling like a theater piece on video. The directors are asked to first interact with Shakespeare's poem in isolation. They study the imagery and begin to determine what their film might entail. Then we assign them a filming location and an actor. At this point they combine the three elements (text, location, actor) into a more fully-formed cinematic treatment. This helps us to keep Shakespeare centered in the work. And the "surprise elements" (location and actor) encourage the director to view the text through an additional lens.¹³

In terms of intermediality, the individual film is not a recording of a theater performance; it is an act of transmediation. Or, in other words, the goal of the creation process is not to provide a reciter with a backdrop but to establish a possible world for Shakespeare's sonnet.

In the seminar, we first read the pre-text in a side-by-side Czech–English bilingual version, whose editor has included notes about elements of Shakespeare's poetics; then we watched the film; and finally we learned about the filming location, its history, and the meanings it has for most New Yorkers.¹⁴

Sonnet 93 was filmed by Dexter Buell on the High Line (2015).¹⁵ The first part of the film, which takes up nearly one-third of the footage, comprises an "indifferent" audiovisual recording of the bustling city. Then a woman in a red blouse appears in the field of view, and the camera focuses on her and her companions, a man with a photography camera and a red-haired girl. It begins to follow their actions, from which we can infer that they are a family on a trip. We can only see that they are communicating; we do not hear or understand them. The characters climb up to the High Line. They each briefly go their own ways as different things catch their attention. However, the camera stages the relationships between them: by alternating the shots of the protagonists from different distances and angles it separates

¹² Cf. <https://nysx.org/programs-2/sonnet-project/>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

¹³ I would like to thank him Ross Williams for taking the time to explain more about the project to me in an e-mail.

¹⁴ I included a detailed interpretation of this film that emerged from our seminar discussion in my diachronic study of the development of intermediality (FEDROVÁ; JEDLIČKOVÁ, 2020, p. 501–2 and 559–62); this section presents an abridged and amended version of the original text.

¹⁵ See <https://sonnetprojectnyc.com/portfolio/play-sonnet-93/>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

them and then brings them together, thus "forcing" upon us a key to interpreting the work. Before the sonnet begins to be recited, the camera focuses again on the woman in red, picking her out of the crowd. But as the first verses expressing suspicions of infidelity are uttered by a female voice, the camera softens its focus again. As the words "love's face" are spoken, the camera is trained on the man whom we suppose to be the woman's husband; this might suggest that it is he who is being addressed. The man is busy taking pictures. But the camera, influencing our deductions, has tricked us: the next two shots suggest that the object the man is photographing with such enjoyment could be his wife.

Then the family, with obligatory smiles, takes a selfie, and the daughter with a kind expression turns to her mother. It is this ephemeral look and the expression in her face that suggest that the girl may be the possible addressee of the verses about "the sweet love" that dwells in a face behind which unreadable thoughts lie. But how could this kind girl be "Eve's apple," the outward appearance of which does not match what is "inside"? Once these lines are uttered and the sound fades away, the camera continues to follow the protagonists: the girl leaves, while the mother lingers, thinking deeply. Then we see them sitting next to each other but not together: the daughter is engrossed with her mobile phone, whereas the mother seems to handle hers like a digital-age prop.

The entire time the camera directs us toward making interpretations, then doubting and correcting them: it suggests to us the small talk of a family on vacation even without an audio track; whereas at first we attribute no significance to the girl's stopping or her leaving, the focus on the husband as verses about infidelity are being recited lead us to think that he could be growing apart from his wife—that is, until the camera focuses on a view of the daughter and mother, revealing the actual addressee of the sonnet. The blocking and the family members' body language, in the context of the recited verses, paint a picture of an adolescent child separating from her parents—that is, a process that does not involve betrayal, but just the desire to become independent. The disconcerted mother, who can no longer read her daughter's thoughts, through the verses takes on the "role" of the potentially betrayed, but still loving husband. The meanings of the pre-text's individual parts do not change; they only refer to the experience of inevitable "alienation," of "the moving away" of an adolescent child from a parent, who has a hard time coming to grips with this fact. The pre-text and the semiotic system of the source are preserved. Here, the camera, and the

cinematic point of view, become what drives the viewer's understanding. If we consider the communication roles in the pre-text, we see that here they undergo a fundamental transformation as the identities of the speaker and the addressee are switched. Hence, the overall meaning of the work has changed slightly. It no longer expresses feelings of betrayal but another equally intense and timeless human experience.

This transmediation of "Sonnet 93" manifests how a cinematic representation can use media-specific means not only to reinterpret a pre-text but also to guide (or mislead) the spectator in how they interpret the final medial product, which, as a work of art, can stand on its own. However, if we are truly to appreciate the depth of this feat of artistry, we must turn back to the pre-text and subject it to a careful reading.

Scheme 2

Scheme 2 focuses on studying the "afterlife" of Karel Jaromír Erben's *Kytice*, a collection of ballads included in the Czech literary canon that is considered a pivotal work in the nineteenth-century process of culturally constructing a national identity. We sought to find out what role it plays, through its many reinterpretations and transmediations, in today's Czech artistic and media landscapes. This popularity confirms the viability of traditional art.

A Description for Foreign Readers

Kytice was first published in full in 1853. Some of the ballads it contains were modeled on folktales and fairytales. The stories deal with existential and moral issues: fidelity and infidelity, murder and atonement, faith and superstition, blasphemy and damnation/salvation, crossing forbidden boundaries (between the worlds of the living and the dead, of people and magical creatures), the law and breaking it, guilt, and punishment. In the ballads, these pairs of opposites are reflected in basic human relationships, for example, those between mother and daughter, husband and wife, stepmother and stepdaughter, and mother-in-law and bride, as well as between beings from two different worlds, one of which represents the certainty of Christian order, the other, the power of dark forces. These ballads are lauded for their clarity of expression, for their linguistic minimalism. The text uses a limited repertoire of poetic devices to achieve maximum effects: a sense of urgency, tension,

and the irreversibility of events and their consequences. A Czech–English bilingual edition, translated by Susan Reynolds, was published in 2014.¹⁶

***Kytice's* Place in Czech Culture**

Erben artistically transformed folklore covering timeless topics, and therefore his work is a firmly established part of the Czech cultural tradition and has been frequently reinterpreted by other artists: for example, in the early days of Czechoslovakia as a modern independent state (as we shall see in the following), during the Nazi era when the nation's existence was under threat, or during the period following the Soviet invasion of 1968 when basic civic freedoms were stifled. Furthermore, *Kytice* has lived on, even been petrified, in the school curriculum, where it was often assigned automatically, too early for pupils to understand its cultural connections. *Kytice's* many transformations work with both the positive and negative aspects of how this work has been received thanks to its being required reading.

How We Analyzed *Kytice* in the Seminar

First, because students often have a certain image of *Kytice* ingrained in their heads, we re-read it so that they can interpret individual ballads in the context of the poetics used throughout the collection. At the same time, we examine *Kytice* in the context of the broader Romantic movement in the West, of which Czech endeavors for cultural self-identification were a part. The roots of the culture were sought out in the deep past, in myth, and in folklore (not just Czech, but Slavic folklore in general). We examine the relationships between elements of folk culture and their transfer from an intertextual perspective as an example of intramediality. The coexistence or slight variations of motifs in the folklore of different nations provides another example for further understanding transmediality.

Pre-texts and Post-texts

We begin with the folk ballad that served as the pre-text for Erben's ballad "The Wedding Shirts". By observing the features of the pre- and post-text we find that Erben,

¹⁶ The Czech title *Kytice* is left untranslated; the first eponymous ballad it contains is translated as "The Posy." See https://issuu.com/jantarpublishing/docs/kytice_sample Access: Oct 27, 2020.

inspired by folklore, created works stripped of any regional connections and redundancies, and structured the text so they expressed timeless messages. Then, we examine its modern post-texts: for example, underground writer Egon Bondy’s poem “Ostrov II” (Island, 1977) transforms the setting of the ballad “The Water Goblin”—in Erben’s words: „Gloomy are those watery realms, / desolate are they” (2014: 189)—into a complex metaphor of the political atmosphere during normalization as a dark, motionless, timeless void. Several motifs, characters, and situations contained in *Kytice* comprise a time-tested depository of meanings, atmospheres, and idioms, touchstones of Czech culture, that are used in both artistic and daily communication. Hence, we can easily differentiate elements of the text that seem to prompt a reinterpretation as well as those that resist it.

Because in the seminar we take an inductive approach, working first with texts before moving to media, and intertextuality before intermediality, we begin with an “easy” example that combines two media forms that can stand on their own: a richly illustrated edition of *Kytice* from 1927, which combines the classic text with modern illustrations by then-already well-established avantgarde artist Jan Zrzavý. This exclusive edition of *Kytice* exemplified the “design book” style popular at the time and was launched at the grand opening of the Aventinum publishing house’s showroom. This combination of media is therefore an excellent example of the circumstances surrounding the creation of a media product—here, the policies of a publishing house the ambition of which is to represent high culture.

There are two ways to approach Zrzavý’s illustrations: by observing, first, how they interpret the ballads’ contents, and second, whether their style can be compared to the poetic form: the highly stylized text of the ballads (covering timeless topics combined with minimalist language) corresponds with how the illustrations are stylized. They are all framed in ovals, which on one hand is a reference to nineteenth-century typography and on the other a shape representing the closed form of the ballad. The repeated use of the decorative frame and its elements mirror the repeating of motifs, verses, and passages of character speech in the ballads. The illustrations within the frame always depict a critical scene from the ballads, or on two separate planes a critical scene and the outcome of the story through symbolism (a coffin = death). The illustration to the ballad “Lily”¹⁷ is a prime case for studying the possibilities of narrativity in visual art (WOLF, 2002b, JEDLIČKOVÁ, 2008). The central figure

¹⁷ See https://sbirky.ngprague.cz/dielo/CZE:NG.K_64578. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

transforming from a lily blossom into a woman may represent the protagonist as such or may refer to two events in the story. On the right, we see a mysterious figure emerging from deep in the background (and perhaps even from another time) that signalizes danger. In the upper plane a hunter pursuing a deer is depicted. In the story, he finds a beautiful lily while hunting. Enchanted by the flower, he takes it home, where it transforms into a woman, with whom he falls in love and marries. The mysterious figure is his mother, the future murderer of her unwelcome daughter-in-law. We can only determine the referents of these images, however, if we are familiar with the text. Here, the students learned that the cliché that "a picture tells a story" is not true; in this case, the picture literally illustrates the story, hinting at the plot. This is the first important realization for being able to think in terms of transmedia storytelling.

Thus, we explore intermedial relationships one by one based on the features of the media products we are studying. We also inquire into the modes of reception, which makes it possible to understand the notion of media modalities (as introduced by ELLESTRÖM, 2010). In selected transmediations of Erben's ballads we observe not only the transformation process and how it unfolds in different media but also the genre conventions of the receiving medium and the influence of the contemporary cultural and sociopolitical situation (e.g., censorship).

In the seminar, we focused on the ballad "The Wedding Shirts," the story of a terrifying meeting between a bride and her beloved from beyond the grave. He appears one night after the forlorn girl, who long ago sewed a wedding shirt for her groom for whom she had been waiting in vain, desperately begs the Virgin Mary for death in an act of blasphemy. The groom hastily drags his bride to a wedding ceremony—at a cemetery. Using trickery, the girl manages to get away and hides in a charnel house. There on a bier lies a corpse, which is commanded by the groom to hand her over. But she convinces the corpse to accept God's will and to lie back down; she repents, and her soul is saved. In the morning, this is confirmed by people coming to mass: the wedding shirts hang in tatters on gravestones.

1970s Stop-motion Animated Film: Medium Specificity in a Time of (Self-)censorship

In an animated version of "The Wedding Shirts" (screenplay by Josef Kábrt, 1978)¹⁸ we both observed the processes specific to the receiving medium and considered those which were selected because they suited the narrative elements of the pre-text. In this animated film, the story's exposition is stylized as the girl's recapitulation of the events; the narration begins with a female voice, but once the groom arrives, their voices switch back and forth. In our discussion, we agreed that its sparse, economical animation style paradoxically corresponds with the ballad's dynamicity: the repetition of scenes and shots corresponds with the repetition of verses, and detailed shots, with the accentuation of key motifs. The visual power of the receiving medium manifests itself most strongly in the depictions of the couple's horrific journey: thanks to the audiovisual representations of the elements of the terrifying atmosphere the corresponding textual passages could be left out, but their repetition and emphasis are preserved (in details, the alternating of light and dark). The text has been substantially cut, however, when it comes to the theme of Christian faith. In the ballad the groom casts away three of the girl's possessions as things weighing her down, material symbols of Christianity, where in the film, there is just one, the cross she inherited from her mother. In the beginning the girl commits blasphemy in asking the Virgin Mary for death; in the end, she begs three times for mercy from God, Jesus Christ, and eventually Mary. The film version leaves out such religious appellations; the girl only addresses the corpse. The final verse containing the moral about the effectiveness of praying for atonement has also been eliminated.

Although the atmosphere of horror in the film captures that of the pre-text, the significant reduction of Christian motifs weakens the logic behind this story about blasphemy and atonement. Here, we encounter the ideological impact of normalization: the transmediation of a canonical work is permissible only at the cost of suppressing Christian symbolism to a minimum.¹⁹

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3FSNhOD1ys> Access: Oct 27, 2020.

¹⁹ Verifying whether it was an act of official censorship or self-censorship would require further research in film archives.

Theatrical Transmediation and Aesopian Language

During normalization, officially sanctioned culture either had to conform politically or avoid censorship by using "Aesopian language" (LOSEV, 1984) as a basic communication code. The latter approach was applied in the transmediation of *Kytice* produced at the Semafor theater (Jiří Suchý, 1972).²⁰ It parodies the pre-text but is also a satire: the full text of the ballads are often accompanied by linguistic and topical references to the life in 1970s Czechoslovakia. For example, Semafor staged the visit of the noonday witch (a wild woman, who according to superstition, takes away naughty children and is the protagonist of the eponymous ballad) as an inspection from a strict social worker. Contemporary audiences understood it as a representation of the state's intruding in people's lives. Even though the noonday witch is not satisfied with the conditions in the household she visits, she decides to stay there and take it over. This could have easily been interpreted as an allusion to the Soviet troops who remained in Czechoslovakia after the invasion. Many elements of this transmediation (and other works from this period) were meant strictly to entertain. But audiences, "trained in Aesopian language," and thirsting for at least implicit political criticism, to the surprise of the creators, often read them as political references. Some theatrical transmediations subvert the moralist messages of the ballads and turn stories that are supposed to be warnings into entertaining, lightly erotic fare with a happy ending. Or the other way around: the girl who is saved by prayer in the "The Wedding Shirts" is, in Semafor's version, destroyed by her irrepressible desire for sex. All these theatricalized ballads include space for inserting musical numbers and intermezzos, running the gamut from romantic songs, opera, ever popular jazz and blues, to mainstream pop. My students, who primarily found the parodic elements funny, noted that the genre conventions of the receiving medium are what guided the transmediation process: the cabaret-esque poetics of theater and the expectations of fan audiences.

I should note here that unfortunately educational institutions have traditionally imparted, and often still impart, in students the idea that "canonical" works are something to be studied to graduate (and always boring). But general knowledge of the pre-text provides

²⁰ This Prague theater, popular from the 1960s onward, was classified as "small-form theater," which was a revival of humorous cabaret performances combined with popular music, stand-up comedy, and short theater genres.

recipients with a framework for understanding, while the theater is provided with a broad leeway for adaptation at the same time.

"The Wedding Shirts" or "the Corps Bridegroom" in Film

The following is yet another example of how *Kytice* is alive and well in contemporary cultural communication. Several of the ballads were transmediated in a 2000 live-action film (dir. F. A. Brabec). The film adaptation of the ballad "The Wedding Shirts"²¹ features horror film elements; its stylization, marked by exaggeration and puppet-like imagery, is reminiscent of Tim Burton's films. But the Czech film is only similar to Burton's movies, not an imitation; Burton's stop-motion *Corpse Bride*, co-directed by Mike Johnson, has a similar theme but came out later, in 2005. The corpse's stylization bears traces of the methods of Jan Švankmajer, a prominent Czech director of surreal animated films.

The generic conventions of the receiving medium play a critical role here. The source media product is processed through the new media form to create a product that will engage contemporary audiences. For film fans in particular, genres and their typical narrative and motif structures function as cognitive frameworks. But this may also lead to typical generic visuals (or even media foregrounding) gaining horror fans' attention so much that the text may be pushed aside. Allusions to iconic films in a particular genre can establish harmony, or in contrast a clash, between the meanings contained in a film and the ones from its cinematic pre-texts it alludes to. Moreover, such allusions enable viewers to properly file the film in their "mental movie database" and are a relatively "easy" means for winning audiences over.

A Comic Book Isn't a Schoolbook

In 2016 a graphic novel adaptation of *Kytice* was published as a crowdfunding project.²² Thus, we had the opportunity to observe the economic aspects of participatory culture in our seminar. Contributors to crowdfunding participate in "deciding" whether a media product will see the light of day and the extent to which it will be distributed. Based on internet comments about the project, we can assume that besides support from comics fans, there were certainly also backers curious to see whether the comic book would be parodying

²¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvU7kGbX7pU>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

²² Cf. <https://www.hithit.com/cs/project/2914/komiksova-kytice-od-ceskeho-grimma>. Access: Oct 27, 2020.

or subverting the ideas of the pre-text. Some contributors hoped that the graphic novel would make this classic piece of literature more accessible to pupils, for whom the original is difficult to read. By comparing the individual transmediations of the ballads we discovered that such expectations were mistaken. The oft-held notion among "grown-ups" that "picture books" are more digestible than "fine literature" was at fault here. The comic book transmediation convincingly demonstrates that this popular medium can contribute mainly to a unique (re)interpretation of a pre-text, which in the end does not have to be "more comprehensible" than the original. Moreover, the publisher requested the artists avoid any verbal means of narration and represent only the character speech in the bubbles. In some places, the comic-book interpretation is visually appealing, even aggressively so, sometimes at the expense of reducing meaning (the representation of "The Water Goblin" uses all the media-specific means of the graphic novel to emphasize the monstrous nature of the sexual relationship between a woman and an otherworldly being) or at the expense of stylization taking precedence over the contents of the stories (e.g., steampunk used in "The Noon Witch"). In contrast, an example of a reinterpretation could be the transposing of a story of betrayal and punishment (the ballad "The Wild Dove") into a modern setting, like Luhrmann's film version of *Romeo and Juliet* (see Scheme 1).

That which may primarily seem to be a meeting between "high" (canonical) culture and popular culture turned out to be more of an open interpretive field: the receiving medium provides the means for re-interpreting the pre-text just as it easily "gives itself away" because it attributes too much importance to its media-specific means (media foregrounding) which may lead to a reduction of meanings.

It is in these findings that the shift from a literary pre-text to culture as a whole and back is manifested: we see that the original text may function, fully intact, in a new environment that is the result of fundamental changes in society and media or it can be thoroughly transformed because it is so well known (or is stored in the cultural memory of individuals, even if they hold distorted images of it). Observing transmediations does not mean that we will strictly verify whether they are true to the meanings contained in the original. Instead, we are interested in verifying how the rules of the original fictional world are configured and transformed, and how the rules of the source work's genre, media and the

culture it was produced in are configured and respected (or not). Most interesting for us is, of course, how they reinterpret the meanings of the original.

Conclusion

Perhaps, this overview makes it clear that literary poetics and the theory of genres comprise a solid basis for intermedial poetics. Genre, both that of the source medium and the receiving medium, provides a set of conventions and principles that control the process of transmediation and the means of mediating or re-interpreting the meanings of the original. Also, it is clear that studying transmediations results in important findings not only about the relationships between modern (including new) media and traditional (old) media, but also about the relationship between contemporary art and tradition, as well as about the sociocultural circumstances surrounding the creation of transmediations: cultural norms, the political boundaries of artistic subversion, and economic factors. Thus, intermediality clearly calls for an interdisciplinary approach to its subjects: sometimes cultural history is more relevant, whereas in other cases analyzing the historical social discourse is more suitable. This all indicates that studying intermediality also teaches university students to combine several methods effectively and creates the foundation for an interdisciplinary bias in their future work as scholars or educators.

Finally, intermedial analyses are an invaluable method for cultivating observation and analytical skills in students, who can also influence other young people, turning mere consumers of culture into careful observers. Our media culture requires such skills, even outside the university classroom.

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