

Intermedial Narrative as a Phenomenon of Contemporary Artistic Communication

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This article explores intermedial narrative, a type of narrative specific to a particular medium. Investigated is the relationship between media and how the narrative form generates meaning through the chosen medium, such as verbal text, photographs, audiovisual works, music, and choreography. An analysis of intermedial narrative across distinct media was conducted through the study of selected intermedial works. One of the pieces is A Dream about Podlasie, an intuitive composition performed by the ensemble Mud Cavaliers. The composition is inspired by a series of 11 photographs by Mariusz Wideryński, which the musicians treated as a contemporary music score. The other piece is Baltic Inphrases, an augmented reality performance art inspired by the Baltic Sea and the Pomeranian region. It was created by Polish performance artists and a music theorist. The initial composition became a source of inspiration for Baltic Inphrases. This article examines the techniques employed by artists to illustrate the significance of visual elements, audiovisuals, music, and performance art utilizing AR technology in both the presentation and perception of dance performance art. The performer interprets the stimulating intersemiotic texts, conveying concealed meanings and feelings through gesture and movement.

Keywords: *intermediality; augmented reality; choreography; live performance; inphrasis*

Introduction. Terminological Assumptions and the Subject of the Study

The emergence of experimental art and art using new technologies prompts inquiry into the category of beauty, a value recognized through aesthetic and artistic perception. Indisputably, contemporary culture possesses iconic and sonic qualities. Swift technological advancements in art have rendered aesthetic values an inadequate means of assessing modern artistic creations. The fusion of art, science, and artificial intelligence enables individuals to witness novel phenomena and sensory experiences. Nevertheless, it is humans who possess the ability to objectively evaluate their inherent values. Humans actively engage in the entire communication process, serving as receivers receptive to the specific sensory encounters provided by the sender. Digital media is currently tailored to the psychophysical abilities of viewers who are able to discover their potential to perceive reality, including emotional engagement in art reception. Hence, it is crucial to meticulously analyze the artistic components such as musical, visual, choreographic, and literary texts to uncover the underlying meaning intended for the viewers. The use of contemporary audiovisual methods – and the signals which

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they produce in a piece of art that communicate emotional content and elicit emotions in the viewer – is increasingly becoming a key objective.

Nowadays, the aesthetics of analog and digital media shape intermedial narrative, resulting in enriched messages due to media interrelationships. We are dealing with a new “creative strategy that primarily facilitates dialogue between particular genres or types of media messages” (Zajdel, 2014, p. 175),¹ resulting in an artistic phenomenon known as media hybrid. According to Jakub Zajdel, media hybrid is an “*audiovisual amalgam* with centripetal orientation towards its reception. This indicates that despite possible associations with other genres, types or media forms during reception, the primary focus is on conveying a sense of connection with the medially unmarked whole” (2014, p. 175). According to Zajdel (2014, p. 180), “the audience’s perceptual experience of the audiovisual amalgamation can at times be likened to viewing images portraying an impossible physical reality.”

Undoubtedly, the rise of new media has narrowed the gap between a piece of art and its audience. The aesthetic value of the latest artworks using new technologies, known as intermedia art, is different for the creator and the audience. Initially, the audience of such a work attempts to solve the intellectual puzzle, and only then do they decipher its meaning and artistic significance. It is worth recalling the observation from Maria Gołaszewska on how

one of art's fundamental properties is its mediality, that is, its ability to transmit values [...] aesthetic, cognitive, ideological, cultural, and religious. But this mediality of art is not merely instrumental – it serves not only to represent something but also has intrinsic philosophical value in the anthroposphere as a means of existing and cognizing. It involves intentional, subjective-objective existence and intellectual, sensory, emotional, and aesthetic cognition (acquiring knowledge of human nature through aesthetic experiences) (2001, p. 84).

At this juncture, it is worth noting the definition of the term narrative proposed by Didier Coste which, distinct from discourse or syntax, relates to the process of narrative communication. As Coste stated, “It is worth repeating: narrative is neither a language nor a chain of events but a particular manner of imposing design on a presented world and of presenting worlds through the operations required by the constraints of this design” (Coste, 1989, pp. 206). Vincent Meelberg, a contemporary music and narrativity scholar, provided a definition of narrative as “the representation of a succession of events that succeed each other in time” (Meelberg, 2006, p. 39). However, in analyzing intermedial works, the notion of representation proposed by Meelberg is deemed “much too narrow as it excludes several media types from the realm of repression” (Elleström, 2019, p. 36).

Intermedial narrative is a unique form of artistic communication that uses diverse media forms; spanning from literary text, imagery and sound to film, dance and digital media, including a non-linguistic facet of expression. This kind of

1. Quotations from Polish authors and Merlau-Ponty are own translations.

narrative can be found in various cultural forms, such as literature, music, film, photography, painting and dance, as well as in philosophy. It provides an opportunity for the audience to actively engage in the discourse and analyze intricate philosophical concepts in greater depth. Gołaszewska points out that such works do not always need to coincide with the criteria of art. Most often, a hybrid creation is produced as a technical and artistic or para-artistic accomplishment (Gołaszewska, 2001, p. 85). Roman Ingarden, a Polish phenomenologist who formulated philosophical ideas by reflecting on film, introduced the term “artistic spectacle” to describe an artistic creation that stands on the border of multiple arts, intertwining with each other to form distinct creations (1958, p. 205). As a result, this study highlights the role of the audience in shaping the process of concretization when receiving an intermedial work of art as an intentional object.

Marcin Sieńko, who analyzes narratives presented across diverse media, has put forth his own definition of intermedial narrative and its defining characteristics. He defines intermedial narrative as

a representation that employs multiple artistic media to present a sequence of events arranged in some temporal and logical order [...]. This narrative is dispersed – it consists of many heterogeneous segments that complement each other like puzzle pieces, and is multimedia – uses many media [...] (2007, pp. 155–156).

This study focuses on an interactive intermedial project that, following Ingarden, could be classified as an “artistic spectacle.” It is appropriate to reference Ingarden to account for the characteristics of an interactive work that constructs a narrative through multiple texts (i.e., various media) without requiring the audience’s activation. According to Dick Higgins, who proposed the concept of intermediality and coined the term “intermedial,” various media are “conceptually united, not just juxtaposed” (Vos, 1997, p. 325), generating a unique artistic outcome and a new dimension. As a result, the audience can witness what is formed between different media, utilizing a range of texts, languages, and discourses. It is important to note that intermedial messages integrate traditional media such as literary text, dance, music, and photographs into the wider context of audiovisual and interactive communication. The combination of multiple forms of media, which at the same time form intermedial relationships, creates an original artifact that can evoke the so-called aesthetic shock in the audience.

Just as contemporary literature uses a range of modern technological solutions, including audiovisual plots and topic presentations within literary works, creative works can also emerge through a powerful sensory experience of reading. This emotional expression triggered by literature serves as a gateway into the world created by the author of the literary work (Radziewicz, 2017, pp. 174–175). It is necessary here to adopt the right practice or tool for examining contemporary works of art that extend the boundaries of a given medium.

The starting point for the analysis and method of describing interactive performance may be a reference to the concept of musical ekphrasis described in the musicological works of Siglind Bruhn. In her theoretical reflections, the American scholar concluded that musical works are musical representations of verbal works and fine art (Bruhn, 2000; 2001, p. 560). Bruhn indicates the categories for the way of functioning of musical ekphrasis, specifying how a composer, like a poet, can respond in many different ways to a visual representation (image) in the form of association, transposition, interpretation, supplementation, or fun (2001, p. 551). On the basis of the concept of musical ekphrasis, I coined a new term – “artistic inphrasis” – to describe intermedia works or its parts,

which conveys emotions through appropriate artistic means, a result of interpreting the literary content or a different work of art (original work). Artistic inphrasis is a phenomenon of the permeation of meta-artistic material, being a reflection of non-verbal (musical, dance, film, visual) material or a verbal one in a non-verbal medium. (Karwaszewska, 2023, p. 29).

Therefore, like ekphrasis, it can be a creative tool for the writers, composers, choreographers and other artists, helping to improve the work of art, bringing out what only the imagination sees of it. Artistic inphrasis, which is a type of intermedial narrative, allows creators to explore the psychological aspect of the work, or to draw on a work of visual art only a part of what was intended by the its creator and highlight it as a theme.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the intermedial narrative of two selected intermedia works: the intuition-based composition *Sen o Podlasiu* (A Dream about Podlasie) by Kawalerowie Błotni (“Mud Cavaliers”), and the augmented reality live performance art *Infrazy Bałtyckie* (Baltic Inphrases) inspired by the former work, which integrated animation and dance. Incorporating a performer into the project – along with musicians and a visual artist – was a calculated artistic decision. The performer weaves a narrative utilizing real and generated motive idioms to impartially convey the human emotions and concealed meaning of the original inspiration to the audience.

The analysis of musical dance by Richard Kislán highlights the fact that the choreographic message precisely corresponds to the verbal and musical message, despite using different symbolism in each system (1995, p. 240). The performer interprets images of an alternate phenomenon, another story, indicating something beyond movement via a chain of gestures that become an integral part of the meaning system. A gesture “can also be a visualization, and in this case a vocalization, a performance, and more often it is an element of the performance, a building block of theatricalization – a spectacle” (Szyszkowska, 2003, p. 266). It is gesture, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, “that constitutes one of the most important phenomena of expression; every gesture, even when left unanswered, co-creates an agreement understood as a meeting of two entities” (2001, pp. 206–207).

The main research objective became the search for an answer to the question of how the creative potential of technology influences the process of shaping the narrative of improvisation in both performers and musicians, and how new forms of expression can be sustained by a fusion of different media, motion and gesture. In such a work, the new technology becomes an additional medium, a dance partner, a stage set. The viewer can follow the sensual interaction between the technology and the embodied inner experience of the performer.

To this end, a study was conducted based on the art created by the interdisciplinary research team. Research of this kind is generally carried out in order to gain new knowledge through practice. What we have here, then, is “art-based research and one or more art forms or processes are involved in the doing of the research.” (Greenwood, 2019). As Janinka Greenwood points out, art “it invites art viewers to interact with representations in ways that involve their senses, emotions, and ideas [...] and one of the characteristics of arts and arts-based research projects is that they engage with aesthetic understandings as well as with discursive explanations.”

The concept of the interactive live project emerged more likely from personal desires, inspirations and explorations of the artists. This artistic research, which can be described as a process of artistic exploration, consisted of several activities, including the composition of the intermedia work *Baltic Inphrases*, rehearsals with the ensemble to assess the coordination of musicians and performers during the implementation of the augmented reality improvisation, and the artistic performance of the work. Based on the original composition inspired by another project, an attempt was made to convey emotions hidden in other works to the viewer by means of observed movement cinematics and a visual layer. The realized project was to prove that different sign systems (acoustic and visual) and references to other narratives convey narrative meaning to the audience. What connects the different media in an artistic work and passes from one to the other is narrative in nature, and the viewer can follow the story that has been intertwined with the audiovisual material.

In this intermedia project, a kind of “silent narrative” is created in which the performer improvises, without the use of verbal media, using her body movements to convey the meaning of the work and tell a musical story. The gestures of the dancer, along with the visual and verbal-musical layers derived from the music, become a non-verbal means of conveying the narrative in the live artistic work. The artists and the performer, however, allow the audience to explore the themes that they have in part initiated. The body movements of the performer become instruments for communicating thoughts, feelings and narratives. Thanks to the immersive technology used (Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality), the audience can also experience a new narrative that introduces them to the virtual world and at the same time comments on the events through live-generated images.

Sources of Inspiration. In Search of Inphrastic References

The chosen art piece for analysis is an intermedial project called *Baltic Inphrases*, a performance art experience using augmented reality and improvised music, without audience participation. It was created through references to other works, resulting in an artistic inphrasis. The artist expresses the hidden meaning of the original work using various media languages. The sources of inspiration for this project are as follows:

1. A Dream about Podlasie from the Cycle *Partytury Fotograficzne* (Photographic Scores)

The objective of *Photographic Scores* is to create, each time, new musical compositions influenced by photography. Light is used to expose selected photographic scores during the show, allowing the audience to discover the images paired with music at a specific moment in time. This type of concert functions as a live exhibition and is always a premiere. The goal of the project is to explore intermedial connections between sound and image.

The work *A Dream about Podlasie* is a musical improvisational analysis and interpretation of a sequence of photographs taken on the Polish-Belarusian border. It delves into various social and cultural issues of the Podlasie region. The project was initiated by a group of Polish musicians who improvised avant-garde electroacoustic music under the name Mud Cavaliers; a provocative gesture in itself. The group of artists, formed by Mieczysław Litwiński, Krzysztof Knittel, Ryszard Latecki, Tadeusz Sudnik and Tadeusz Wielecki, dissociates itself from conventional aesthetic values, instead exploring social tensions to construct emotionally charged scenarios. The piece by the Mud Cavaliers references photographs portraying a cultural expedition into Podlasie, with its structure and narrative determined by the content and sequence of the images. The authors of the work have divided the piece into 13 short segments known as “musical stills” which designated musicians perform *attaca*. Also included in the work are interludes and a coda played independently by the Cavaliers, accompanied by poetic commentary on the photographs. These passages are unique, as they contain verbal elements. In live performances, the audience experiences the interpretation of the photographs via music at specific moments. The intention of the Mud Cavaliers was to create a story that works in unison with images that speak to the audience through words and sounds. The visual layer of the performance² was created by Mariusz Wideryński, while the verbal layer was created by Andrei Khadanovich and Mieczysław Litwiński. The musical layer was produced by the ensemble formed by Krzysztof Knittel on the sampler, MIDI monochord, and ISA

2. The piece was premiered on November 12, 2012, at the Witold Lutosławski Polish Radio Concert Studio, with the participation of a group of invited artists from Belarus.

MIDI harp, Jerzy Kornowicz on the piano, Ryszard Latecki on the trumpet, harmonium, and pseudo-instruments, and Mieczysław Litwiński on singing, harmonium, violin, string zither, early and ethnic instruments, grooveboxes, sound effects – Tadeusz Sudnik, double bass – Tadeusz Wielecki, cello – Ilona Les, flute – Siarhei Machau, and dulcimer – Veranika Pradzed.

2. *The Art Exhibition Glony II (Algae II) by Blanka Byrwa allows Visitors to discover the mysteries of the baltic sea and find inspiration in the sea*

The *Glony* project promotes sustainable development in the context of the Baltic Sea. It focuses on the ecology of the sea, the use of its resources and socio-cultural aspects. [...] Thanks to the generative nature of the songs, [the artists offer – M. K.] a speculative look at the design, attempting to create images that show our future relationship with the sea.³

Motif creations of the performer are inspired by seaweed, algae, and other creatures of the marine ecosystem, both real and virtual worlds, where the performer is transported using a VR headset. Additionally, an improvisational musical layer was created using a song inspired by Kashubian folklore, myths, and underwater recordings from the Baltic Sea that are essential to the exhibition.

3. Shanty, the sailing song; its structure and the content of marine legends. For the purposes of the project, a song was used that tells about demons inhabiting the Baltic Sea. The song and the literary texts inspired jazz improvisation (sung ballads) by Polish jazz musicians and the improvised movement of the performer.

4. The creation of a computer-generated virtual space for the moving performer was inspired by the natural landscape of the Pomeranian region and the depths of the Baltic Sea.

Intermedial Productions: An Inphrastic Story

The concept of the project centers around the intuitive audiovisual composition *A Dream about Podlasie* by the Mud Cavaliers, also based on improvised content created during performance, alongside various sources of inspiration, such as photographs and regional folklore, with the artists traversing the selected region on an internal journey. The form, likewise, serves as a source of inspiration, as the composition discussed in the article is one of the completed Baltic impressions creating a cycle.

3. Wydarzenie specjalne: Glony – TOJEST (Z) MORZA, PPNT Gdynia, Centrum Designu, (accessed 14 September 2023). <https://www.gdyniadesigndays.eu/aktualnosci/wydarzenie-specjalne-glony-to-jest-z-morza>.

The 2023 project in Sopot, carried out in collaboration with performer Beata Oryl, Polish jazz musicians Magda Kuraś, Maciej Świniarski, Tomasz Chyła and Krzysztof Hadrych, VJ Gary Garnowski, Saskia Wojtalewicz (creator of interactive mapping), and music theorist Monika Karwaszewska sought creative inspiration in the sea through the *Algae II* exhibit by Blanka Byrwa. The purpose of this interactive performance is to take the audience on a musical and choreographic voyage into the realm of Kashubian demon songs. The creators utilized improvised dance, where the movements of the performers generate virtual images, to showcase the emotions conveyed in the original piece.

The intermedial project *Baltic Inphrases* is an improvised impression related to the Pomeranian region and the Baltic Sea surrounding the northern border of Poland. Inspiration is drawn from various works, including music, legends, photographs, and intuitive composition, as well as the living landscape. According to ancient folk beliefs, mystical beings and deities inhabit the depths of the Baltic Sea, making them the subjects of numerous fairy tales and underwater mythology. The marine environment and its associated elements, including demons, have historically generated anxiety, mystery, and fictional narratives. These beliefs served as the basis for crafting an appropriate intermedia story within the project, acknowledging the current reality constructed using advanced computer systems.

The imaginary maritime landscape and the content of legends were reflected in all the media used, becoming an inphrastic story. Intermedial narrative enables the audience to experience the story envisioned by the artists, interpreted through musical, visual, and virtual means. The resulting “compositional meta-system” incorporates diverse elements of the dance environment – such as performers, movement, sound, and space – into new configurations (Lissowska-Postaremczak, 2020, p. 124).

This live music performance evokes a sense of nostalgia and pensiveness, while the narrative unfolds at a deliberate pace. The slow tempo of the musical layer enables the performer to move freely, without predetermined choreography, while the accompanying musical material, generated by a computer, complements the vocalist as she sings a heartfelt ballad, evoking sounds from the depths of the ocean. Sung by the jazz singer, the ballad conveys the legend of a sea demon, an emissary of the devil, who causes storms in the northern waters. Expressive vocalizations add to the effect and evoke the features of the treacherous watery abyss. The ballad also touches on the ongoing extinction of the Baltic Sea due to human exploitation. An improvised musical narrative, reflecting the unpredictable nature of the Baltic Sea, accompanies the song (see Figure 1). The verbal and musical layer improvised by the musician serves as inspiration for live improvised movement in an enclosed space with projections (see Figures 2, 3). The visuals respond to both her movements and variations in the music. Using her VR headset, she is transported to a virtual environment and explores and shapes the space through her movements and gestures. Cf. Figure 4. While in the generated space, the performer alters the virtual world image by moving. It should be noted that her

actions are limited in the same way as in computer games. The audience can enter this world through its graphical representation in reality, while the performer expresses her interpretation and emotion associated with Baltic seaweed, algae, or other sea creatures through appropriate dance gestures. However, the image projected in the visual layer remains static or drifting, limiting exploration of the ground plane's potential. The choice of means of expression made by the performer enables us to treat the live choreography as artistic inphrasis, evident in the translation of musical content into bodily movements. According to the Swedish performer and choreographer Mårten Spångberg, choreography provides specific structure to body movements without expressing emotions; only dance is unorganized and allows for pure expression and affect that stimulate the body (2017, pp. 349–393).

The computer-generated visualization creates a virtual space that serves as an interactive set design for the performer. It acts as a virtual partner, guiding her through an imaginary world that changes with her movements and gestures. The improvised choreography is the performer's interpretation of the works that inspired her, presented in a new reality for the audience, and the interactive graphics immerse the user in a vast sea-like space of creative actions, evoking the depths and landscape of the Baltic Sea. Their design integrates visual references to the sea's characteristics.

The intermedia project presented in this study is an example of the use of the modern artistic process as a means of analyzing data – a particular scenario – as well as providing new emotions for the viewer. In the project, the artists illustrate the problem of the marine ecology of today and the use of its resources through an intermedia narrative, which enables the audience to deconstruct the socio-cultural reality.

Figure 1. Jazz Musicians Krzysztof Hadrych, Tomasz Chyła, Magda Kuraś and Maciej Świniarski Perform the Verbal and Musical Layers



Figure 2. Performer Beata Oryl Utilizes A VR Headset for Live Improvised Movement



Figure 3. Performer Beata Oryl utilizes a VR headset for Live improvised Movement



Figure 4. Performer Beata Oryl creates an Image of the Virtual Environment through her Movement in the VR Headset



In this project, the literary content of legends and other works are used in the musical text, choreography, and visual layer, creating an artistic inphrasis that represents a subjective interpretation rather than an accurate illustration of the original content. The interactive work expresses through an intermedial representation the emotions of the artists elicited by reading and perceiving these works, the main objective of the project being to bring back the initial content to the thoughts of the audiences, which will manifest in various mediums.

Conclusions

The intermedial works discussed in the article are instances of *artistic inphrasis*, embodying subjective interpretations of works, where the conversion of one code to another occurs within the symbolic realm. They showcase the growing tendency for the creators to combine artistic expressions from different media. Through interactive choreography and dance, the project offers a diverse range of opportunities to illustrate the emotional reactions of the performers to the original piece, thereby enabling the audience to relate more closely to the work. Using the capabilities of VR to produce sensory experiences represents a distinctive and original concept within installations, not limited to dance performances alone. In the current era, both the artist and the audience must possess an understanding of the basic codes that are part of a specific medium, and be able to decipher individual media that use their unique means of expression, for an active participation in the culture. They possess the capacity to communicate through multiple forms of media, resulting in a unique and significant combination of narratives across different media types. This theory is confirmed by the concept introduced by Henry Jenkins

which “refers to the modern phenomenon of building large narratives as a sum of partial narratives distributed by different kinds of media such as motion pictures, comics, video games, novels, and various forms of Internet-based media” (Elleström, 2019, p. 6). “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 2006, pp. 95–96). This results in the creation of original intermedial narratives, which offer artists unparalleled creative opportunities and are appealing to audiences. Audiences of these narratives must be adaptable and engaged in their analysis and interpretation.

The form of combining various ideas, artistic concepts, knowledge systems, methodologies, different cognitive disciplines and various forms of human activity is an example of how, within an interdisciplinary project, it is possible to transcend the confines of specialization within individual disciplines, also seeking common ground for them, creating an intermedia narrative (Karwaszewska, Oryl, 2023, p. 508).

The activities discussed have provided the impetus for further research into the *Baltic Inphrases* project, which will combine the artists' work with the viewer's interaction to create a new visual and emotional experience. By involving the audience in the creative process, the next iteration of the project will aim to stimulate reflection and dialogue about *Baltic Impressions*. This will create a bond between the artist and the viewer and create an innovative art form for the work. In arts-based research, it is worth emphasising that image, space, sound, body movement, voice and metaphor are as important in the expression and understanding of knowledge as the lexical meanings of words, and are means of communication. Interactive art is considered to be an excellent tool for communication, allowing the free transmission of important messages and the exchange of emotions, impressions and ideas between the artist and the audience.

The use of art-based processes for analysis and interpretation poses new challenges for research audiences, who need to locate themselves not only in subjective expression, but also in the invisible meanings that are embedded in artistic processes and, perhaps, work, both for art researchers and the wider scholarly community.

It is important to note that there are the challenges signal continuing areas of discussion and currently a dearth of appropriate methods for describing and evaluating intermedial narratives. Introducing a novel definition of artistic inphrasis appears to be a suitable approach for adequately describing the resultant effect and influence of this form of artistic expression.

Although the article focuses on the selected artistic project, it is worth noting that intermediality is dynamically developing concept which requires further research. Analyzed and interpreted, the *Baltic Inphrases* project exemplifies how combining media forges new paths for creators and audiences, offering interactive experiences which engage the latter in the process of creating an intermedial narrative.

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