



# Travels from paper to the screen, to the web, to music...

## Intermediality and Children's and Y. A. Literature



Trad. Lic. Soledad Pérez  
(IdIHCS, UNLP-  
CONICET)

Traductora Pública Nacional en Lengua Inglesa y Licenciada en Inglés (Orientación Literaria). Maestranda en Literaturas Comparadas UNLP. Ayudante Diplomada en Traducción Literaria en Inglés 1 (2014) y Cultura y Civilización Inglesa (2015); integrante y colaboradora de proyectos de investigación sobre traducción. Se especializa en literatura para niños.

### Abstract:

The present contribution aims at creating awareness of a fairly recent field of study that, among many things, can be used in language classes as an alternative way of dealing with storytelling: Intermediality. I shall present definitions, concepts and examples in order to help teachers comprehend, question and reflect upon a phenomenon which is gaining relevance in our –and students’– daily lives, as well as in classrooms; and how it can allow a more innovative approach to teaching. Our focus is on Children's and Young Adult's Literature. As we shall see, this is not a completely new trend, but it is growing more and more inventive, and new ways of ‘consuming’ stories –and new ways of telling them– keep appearing.

### Keywords:

Intermediality, Children's Literature, Young Adult Literature, ELT.

The present contribution aims at creating awareness of a fairly recent field of study that, among many things, can be used in language classes as an alternative way of dealing with storytelling: Intermediality. I shall present definitions, concepts and examples in order to help teachers comprehend, question and reflect upon a phenomenon which is gaining relevance in our –and students’– daily lives, as well as in classrooms; and how it can allow a more innovative approach to teaching. As we shall see, this is not a completely new trend, but it is growing more and more inventive, and new ways of ‘consuming’ stories –and new ways of telling them– keep appearing. Besides the fact that the target of the lessons in mind are children or teenagers, my

focus is on Children's and Young Adult's Literature because –as O'Sullivan states– “by virtue of the way in which it engages with mass culture, [it] is perhaps even more markedly distinguished by forms of intermediality than adult literature” (2005, p. 32). I want to emphasize here that I see literature as an expression that opens new paths to the imagination, never closing the possibilities for different interpretations. This is why I need to make clear that my suggestion of its use in the classroom should not restrict literary works only to the transmission of vocabulary or structures, but instead enrich them through the pleasure and power of stories.

Intermediality is defined by Rajewsky as “those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media” (2005, p. 46), which can also be seen as “intertextuality that transgresses media borders” (Lehtonen in Vandermeersche and Soetaert, 2011, p. 3), or as “texts of a given medium [that] send tendrils toward other media” (Ryan and Thon, 2014, p. 10). Wolf (2011, p. 3-5) classifies it into two different types as regards the relationship between those media involved: in his theory, the term “extra-compositional” depicts those relations which take place between media, such as *transmediality*, *intermedial transposition* and *remediation*; and “intra-compositional” intermediality depicts those relations which take place within the work itself, such as *plurimediality* and *intermedial reference*.

In *transmediality*, which is also known as *trans-*



*media storytelling* –defined as “the appearance of a certain motif, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media”– (Rajewsky, 2005, p. 46), multiple media platforms (such as comics, novels, video games, mobile apps, films, and so on) are used to tell a narrative across time (Rutledge, 2015). “Each media piece functions as a standalone story experience (...), [though,] like a giant puzzle, each piece also contributes to a larger narrative” (op. cit.). It is fully participatory because the audience plays an active part in the development of that narrative by moving through media to make sense of the whole. A single *storyworld*, thus, is represented through multiple media (Ryan & Thon, 2014, p. 14).

In *intermedial transposition*, “one medium acted as an origin in a process of medial transfer for either an element or the whole content” (Wolf in Vandermeersche and Soetaert, 2011, p. 3). This is the brand which interests us the most to deal with the transposition of literary works into other media.

In turn, *remediation* is the process by which media merge or become differentiated, hence leading to the emergence of new media. For instance, in video-games, we can find narrativity, derivation (from literature), a combination of different media and references to other media (e.g. imitation of film), etc.

On the other hand, within intra-compositional intermediality, *plurimediality* (Vandermeersche and Soetaert, 2011, p. 3) or “media combination” (Rajewsky, 2005, p. 51) is defined as a single piece of narrative which combines several media, such as a play, an opera, etc., which merge a written story with a (live) performance, music, lighting, costume and set design, and so on. And *intermedial reference* is the allusion in a piece “to another medium, genre, or to an individual work” (Vandermeersche and Soetaert, 2011, p. 3), that is, references in film to painting, or in literature to certain film techniques or music, etc.

Extra-compositional Intermediality	Transmediality
	Intermedial Transposition
	Remediation
Intra-compositional Intermediality	Plurimediality
	Intermedial Reference

Intermediality Studies (an academic area of interest which began to get attention and recognition in the 1990s), then, are concerned with the relationship between literature and other aesthetic forms; and with the study of different cultural codes (in the visual arts, dance, music, cinema, the theatre, etc.). Much is still to


be analyzed and discussed in this field, which is why it is open to so many possibilities and approaches.

We shall begin our itinerary with a milestone in Children’s and Young Adult’s Literature, a book that opened new ways and new views regarding literature’s relationship with children –and children’s relationship with literature– showing that a work of art must be polysemic (i.e. open to several interpretations) and enjoyable (against the trend at the time, and even today sometimes, that made it almost mandatory that books for children should be meant only to teach, be it behavioral attitudes or the contents of the school curriculum). We are referring to *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), by Lewis Carrol. This novel has been the object of intermedial exploration perhaps more than any other literary piece. Ever since its first edition, the written text has been accompanied with illustrations (by John Tenniel) in a plurimedial relation, the pictures adding meaning to the words and the other way around. Thousands of other visual artists have tried their own interpretation of the story throughout the years, and still do.

This novel has undergone innumerable intermedial transpositions, most usually in film –many of them very famous ones–, but here we want to mention two different –perhaps less known– manifestations of its rendering through other media. Both show, in turn, *plurimediality* in their combination of music, performance, storytelling, etc. Both are available in DVD format. First, there is an adaptation to opera bearing the same name as the first book by Carrol –but unifying the plots of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (1971)–, by composer Unsuik Chin, who co-wrote the libretto with playwright David Henry Hwang. It was premiered on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2007 at the Bavarian State Opera as part of the Munich Opera Festival. As triggers for discussion, it could be asked in class how the well-known adventure of this Victorian girl is transmitted in this particular case. The role of music, lyrics, scenography, props, costumes, lights, shadows, gestures, movement on stage, interaction among actors/singers should be observed and reflected upon.

Then, there is the ballet in three acts by Christopher Wheeldon with a scenario by Nicholas Wright, and music by Joby Talbot, which was premiered on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2011 at the Royal Opera House in London. Music is essential here as well, as a way of creating various atmospheres and marking key events in the story. What can be ‘read’ from it? What about the dancing and body language? How does a previous knowledge of the novel –or film adaptations of it– help our interpretation of what is seen and heard there?

We shall continue with another classic, in this case, from the canon of American Children’s Litera-



ture: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a novel by L. Frank Baum, which was first published in 1900, with illustrations by William Wallace Denslow (again, *plurimediality* is present here). Even though it was an immediate success, it took thirty nine years for an intermedial transposition into film to appear, but it became as famous as –or even more famous than– the book. We are referring to the live-action film directed by Victor Fleming and starred by Judy Garland, produced by Warner Brothers Studios. Topics for analysis could be related to how several meaningful dimensions are added to the original tale with the use of black and white for the scenes taking place in the ‘real world’ and color for those of the world of Oz, the special effects (quite advanced at the time), the different camera angles, the choice of the musical genre for this film, the performances, the production design, etc.

Another intermedial transposition we would like to refer to here is the pop-up book by Robert Sabuda, published in 2000, which is a commemorative edition of the 100th anniversary of Baum’s book, and incorporates a three-dimensional visual depiction of the story through what is known as ‘paper engineering’. Besides the effect of wonder in the viewer/reader, we can reflect on which scenes were chosen to be ‘told’ by these movable illustrations and why, what other stories could be told from looking at them, or what other event could be described from making new pop-up pages in class.

And a last rendering of this novel through a different medium we would like to mention is the comic book by Eric Shanower (writer) and Skottie Young (artist), published in 2010 by Marvel. In it, we can pay attention to how the dialogue between words and illustrations creates meaning, how the pictures are displayed on the page, which words are chosen for the speech balloons over other ideas that can be retrieved from the images, how sometimes words become a kind of illustration fused with the pictures, how they are highlighted and what can be interpreted from this fact, etc.

We continue with *The tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), by Beatrix Potter, which has taken so many forms throughout time that it became the focus of study and an outstanding example as regards intermediality for Margaret Mackey in her book *The Case of Peter Rabbit. Changing Conditions of Literature for Children* (1998). It originally showed *plurimediality* with the ‘counterpoint’ between images and written text that characterizes the genre it belongs to, i.e. the picture book, in which words and illustrations must be read as a unit for meaning to be fully transmitted, as opposed to illustrated books, in which pictures accompany the (written) text.

Besides animated films, merchandising, and so many more ‘translations’ it has undergone, I wanted to include here the audio book (2013) read by Emma Messenger, in which intonation, tone, voice quality, and musical accompaniment could open other gates for the interpretation and experiencing of the story; and finally I would like to make a special mention to the interactive website *Peter Rabbit.com* (2015), which offers games, activities, colorable printable sheets, teachers’ resources, an application for mobile devices, etc. This implies the active participation of the audience. Not only is it useful for teaching young children, but also for pondering upon the techniques applied for each intermedial retelling of this journey a small rabbit went on over a hundred years ago.

Another icon in literature as well as in intermedial representations is Peter Pan. This eternal boy was already pictured as an ever-changing character in the mind of his creator James Matthew Barrie, who saw him as literary, theatrical, visual, cinematographic... and spent over thirty years writing stories about him for different literary genres (chapters in a novel [*The Little White Bird* (1902)], a play [*Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would not Grow Up* (1904)], two novels – *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* [1906] and *Peter and Wendy* [1911]–, and a short story –“The Blot on Peter Pan” [1926]–), for a photonovel, and for a film-script. The first edition of *Peter and Wendy* was beautifully illustrated by Francis Donkin Bedford, and uncountable other editions include the work of so many other visual artists who offered their view of this story.

There is an abundance of intermedial transpositions of the tales of this flying boy, among which – besides (live-action and animated) films and series– numerous plays, musicals and “on ice” shows could be analyzed...

We jump ahead in time and get to another milestone in Young Adult’s Literature: ‘the Harry Potter phenomenon’. I randomly chose the last volume of the series of novels by J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), to suggest as topics for discussion how it was transposed into film and videogame, not to mention the different platforms into which it was taken: blogs, wikis, online forums, etc., for instance. The plot of this novel was divided into two parts to make the films *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. Part 1 and Part 2* (2010-2011), which were directed by David Yates; starred by Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, and Rupert Grint; and produced by Warner Brothers. As the closing act for the series, these movies were met with huge success even



before being premiered; and, as part of a series, the cast was already known by the audience. The viewing of this intermedial transposition could lead to discussions regarding the particular tools cinema has for rendering the story (special visual and sound effects, photography, costume and set design, performances, 3-D animation, locations, etc.) and whether the final product shares similarities or differs from the idea readers of the book pictured in their mind. Perhaps some students only saw the film or only read the book: they could share their views and exchange ideas with classmates who experienced both ‘readings’. As regards the plot, we could ask what was left out or kept, what was added, and why, for instance.

And regarding the videogame, some reflection could be suggested about the *remediation* process that gave rise to it, i.e. the combination of different media (narration, literary adaptation, music, sound and visual effects, imitation of scenes of the film, game challenges with full participation of the audience) to make a single product: in our example, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. Part 2* (2011), developed by EA Bright Light and published by Electronic Arts.

Our last stop in this intermedial journey shall be an instance in which the process is reversed: a story is told through music and later taken to the screen by animation. It is *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), Op. 67, by Sergei Prokofiev, a Russian composer. It is a children’s story for which a narrator introduces the characters – that are represented by a musical instrument each– and the orchestra ‘tells’ the tale by playing. In 1946, the Disney Studios turned it into a short (traditionally) animated film, which added moving pictures to the musical tale, respecting the structure of narrator (voiceover) and the orchestra. The studies then published a book accompanied by a record (what we now know as an audio book), which included a brief written text and illustrations of scenes in the film. And, in 2006, a stop-motion animated short film adaptation of Prokofiev’s work was made, whose director was Suzie Templeton and whose producer was Hugh Welchman. The soundtrack was performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra. As a particularity, there is no narrator here. This film won the 2008 Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film (Oscar).

Students could be shown both intermedial transpositions and could be encouraged to compare them regarding what different devices and techniques were used to ‘translate’ this story into film, and –in the case of Disney– how the film gave rise to a book and a record. As a task, perhaps they could be asked to write or

orally tell the tale in their own words. Some pondering on alternative ways of narration should be encouraged as well.

To sum up, we have presented some theories, definitions and concepts to work with intermediality studies in the language classroom; *intermedial transposition* in particular. We have commented on examples from the so-called ‘Golden Age of Children’s Literature’ (1865-1914) and the ‘Second Golden Age’ (1997-), and we have added a reverse process which shows how other media can also manage storytelling in their own right.

Questions such as the following have been offered to deal with intermediality in language lessons: how is the same story told through different media? Is it the same story? What is lost? What is gained? What is really left of the original story? What devices does a particular medium use to transmit that core of the original tale, that “mythical nucleus” (Cech in O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 122)? Which new ways of ‘reading’ appear?... These matters should be mainly dealt with through observation, reflection, imagination, creativity and –most importantly– an open mind.

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