

# FORUM KRITIKA

## STRANGE CONVERGENCES: INTERMEDIAL ENCOUNTERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

### Introduction: Archipelagic Intermediality

**Elmo Gonzaga**  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
egonzaga@cuhk.edu.hk

#### **About the Author**

Elmo Gonzaga is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley specializing in the Visual and Spatial Cultures of Southeast Asia and the Global South. *Monsoon Marketplace*, his current book manuscript, traces the entangled genealogies of consumer capitalism, media spectatorship, and urban modernity in visual and literary representations of Singapore and Manila's important public spaces of commerce and leisure during the 1930s, 1960s, and 2000s. His essay on autoethnographic excess in the global culture industry of poverty porn is forthcoming from *Cinema Journal* in late 2017.

This special forum on intermedial encounters and exchanges in Southeast Asia follows from the confluence of two conditions. The first, being spatial, is the archipelagic topography of the Southeast Asian region, which is composed of diverse ethnicities, languages, and cultures dispersed across islands and peninsulas that branch off from the continental mainland. The second, being temporal, is the technological milieu of the historical moment, with the growing expansion and interaction of a multiplicity of media content being produced, disseminated, and consumed across various platforms, genres, networks, and ecologies.

Theoretical terms need to be situated amid the larger constellations of discourses and significations through which they function. Intermediality could be defined in contrast to intertextuality, which is a concept that gained currency in literary and cultural studies at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by highlighting how textual representations no longer can be apprehended as coherently delineated works in isolation. Barthes famously explains how the intelligibility of cultural texts is derived from shifting networks of meanings, which operate beyond the text in perpetual play (156-157). Diverging from this concept, intermediality could be understood as the transposition and synthesis of components, functions, and processes between different media modalities, which would facilitate and enhance the dissemination of meaning. In a globalized world, which has grown profoundly interconnected through advances in transportation infrastructures and communication technologies, such interchanges have become exponential in regularity and intensity.

If intertextuality takes a singular cultural text as its reference point for a larger network of meaning, intermediality presupposes the dialogue between at least two disparate media modalities. Whereas the study of intertextuality is oriented toward how the intelligibility of discourse is generated, that of intermediality is concerned more with how the efficacy and extent of communication could be amplified. While intertextuality assumes the creation and negotiation of meaning independent of any intention and causation, intermediality reveals the material, embodied act of its transmission. According to its definition, the circulation of information in the public sphere is always accompanied by the production of social relations.

Theories about the interplay of different media modalities, such as those of Marshall McLuhan and Henry Jenkins, often conceive of it as a complex synthesis, involving either “hybridization” or “convergence.” Both McLuhan and Jenkins situate this interplay amid historical changes to the technologies of communication and information, which impact on sensory perception and social relations in an increasingly interconnected and interactive environment.

With emphatic language, McLuhan conceives of the fusion between different media modalities as unleashing a dynamic energy, which produces a new modality (53-61). Because, for McLuhan, the interaction between these disparate modalities extends the scope of reality, it transpires as a revolutionary rupture. Looking at how novel media infrastructures augment and accelerate social and technological processes, McLuhan highlights how this hybridization transforms the speed and scale of physical and psychological activity (8-9).

This idea of hybridization as sudden rupture is discernible in writings about changing modes of literary and visual representation. Walter Ong explains how the transition from oral to written literature involves a transformation in the norms of cognition and communication. Unlike orality, which espouses contingency and flexibility based on the demands of circumstances, writing enforces a strict order when inscribing meaning on the space of the page (Ong 12). In line with this idea, Benedict Anderson argues that the emergence of the consciousness of national community and historical simultaneity corresponded with the shift in the primary means of artistic expression from the amorphous chronology of the epic to the linear causality of the novel (*Imagined Communities* 24-29). For Walter Benjamin, the adjustments and habituations individuals must make in the concomitant transition from painting and theater to photography and cinema are not only cognitive but also somatic. Through film techniques such as close up or slow motion, cinematographic media enable viewers to observe realities that would not have been visible through the naked eye (Benjamin 37). Moreover, the use of montage in the visual representation of the moving image acclimatizes people to the experience of the modern cityscape (Benjamin 26). These different examples illustrate an understanding of how intermedial interchanges are accompanied by a revolution in the dominant frameworks and categories of visual and spatial perception and practice.

Focusing on media convergence, Henry Jenkins explains how content is produced, disseminated, and consumed within a wider, mutually interacting network of platforms, industries, ecologies, and audiences (2-3). Departing from the idea of the sudden emergence of a new modality, Jenkins highlights the continued existence and operation of earlier types of media, which have attained social relevance. Instead of being superseded and marginalized, their functions and protocols are modified as they are incorporated into innovative infrastructures. Building on the preexistent narratives, capacities, and collectivities of other media modalities, new media enhance these infrastructures through their addition.

Looking at the emergence of digital media, similar writings examine how prevalent modes of communication and collectivity are refashioned. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe a situation of greater technological synergy where

intermedial exchanges intensify but without leading to a revolutionary rupture (44). According to them, the juxtaposition of distinct media modalities within the same interface permits the adoption of multiple subject positions, through which a more immediate psychological and epistemological relation with social reality could be cultivated. Lev Manovich explains that media infrastructures should be seen as having flat surfaces in their inclusion and combination of different modalities without any definitive linear arrangement (77). Instead of a new object being created, an existing object is modified in form or scale before being incorporated into the larger assemblage (35). This convergence is conventionally likened to the logic of the database. Contrasting it to the causality of narratives, N. Katherine Hayles emphasizes the horizontality of databases, whose nonlinear categorization shapes how knowledge is shared, collaboration is fostered, and difference is managed. As exemplified here, such alterations and additions of preexistent media aim to impact on reality not through upheaval but through improvement (Bolter and Grusin 60-61).

Assuming the form of either hybridization or convergence, intermedial synthesis therefore involves the orderly and harmonious amalgamation of disparate media modalities. This form of hybridization would diverge from Bhabha's understanding of hybridity as disruption and entropy. Defined by a centripetal orientation, it implies a smoothening out of difference into a flat, systematic horizon of innovative platforms and infrastructures. However, in a situation where conditions are heterogeneous and contingent, the process of synthesis might be more complicated.

Analyzing the introduction of *bahasa melayu* to the Indonesian archipelago through print capitalism, anthropologist James Siegel explains how media modalities and platforms should be understood as being shaped by their particular geographic and historical circumstances. Néstor García Canclini, in his work on the media culture of Latin America, agrees in that disregarding or effacing the tensions and contradictions among incongruent identities and practices can be problematic.

Offering a departure from this impasse, historian Victor Lieberman describes how the dispersal and diversity of people across the islands and peninsulas of the Southeast Asian region produced disparate communities, which often resisted congealment around the dominant authority or culture of a larger kingdom. Instead, the maritime topography caused smaller and looser collectivities to form. Unlike contemporary formations cemented by the rule of a metropolitan capital, political alliances or economic linkages among these collectivities tended to assume the configuration of a "*mandala*" or "solar polity," in which autonomous entities gravitated together without the binding force of an intrinsic core or precise borders. Dependent on the fluctuating capability and influence of a sovereign, alliances and

linkages established between central and peripheral localities were contingent and provisional, and thus had little substantial impact on the overarching character of the network (*Strange Parallels*, vol. 2 40-42). Across the many localities, the prevailing modes of identity, sociality, and communication varied according to the demands of their particular circumstances.

The looseness of the *mandala* configuration is borne out in the contemporary form of archipelagic nations such as the Philippines, with its 7,100 islands, 100 million people, and 150 languages, and Indonesia, with its 13,000 islands, 250 million people, and 700 languages. This remarkable plurality underscores the vital function of media infrastructures in binding together dispersed localities over vast distances. The history of individual visions and collective endeavors to organize such heterogeneous national communities into a regional economic coalition further reveals the complexity of cultural amalgamation. In the past, writers and politicians would imagine the geographical entity of Southeast Asia as being constructed around the Chinese or Malay ethnic unity of Nanyang or Nusantara. Diverging from this homogenizing ideal, Siegel has tried to conceive of the formation of a multicultural and cosmopolitan collectivity through the sharing of a single medium within the public sphere (18). Because of its newness, which would permit its usage absent of preset assumptions, the introduction of a medium could potentially enable a regional community to coalesce without diminishing its heterogeneity and complexity.

Writing about the imagination of the Nanyang in East and Southeast Asian literary culture, Brian Bernards explains how the concept of the archipelagic can expand our understanding of interconnectivity and interchange within an oceanic zone. Instead of describing them with a relationship of hierarchical dependency, Bernards highlights how the network of localities within this geographical area could be seen as constituting a horizontal symbiosis (13). From being a barrier, which circumscribes continent, island, and peninsula, the ocean is transformed into a dynamic site of movement and agency, which facilitates interaction and admixture among miscellaneous ethnicities, languages, and cultures.

Given the complexity of these conditions, a third theoretical term might be necessary. In addition to the smooth syntheses of hybridization and convergence, the configuration of the *mandala* could open the possibility for an alternate term, which might be more workable for grasping the heterogeneity of archipelagic intermediality. Benedict Anderson's seminal conception of power in Java, which has resonances throughout insular Southeast Asia, permits discordant realities to coexist within the same space. Building on the image of the *mandala*, Anderson explains how its sovereign "absorb[s] power from the outside" by concentrating and reconciling "apparently antagonistic opposites" (28). According to this

image, a dynamic and oblique type of synthesis is what would engender potent communication and cohesion among the plurality of ethnicities, languages, and cultures that constitute the archipelago. Instead of an integration or incorporation into a new form, the configuration of a solar polity suggests an amorphous conjunction, which would allow for oscillation among different components and functions without permanently transforming their identity or autonomy.

The conjunction of incongruent media modalities would not entail sudden rupture or irreversible alteration but continual oscillation. Instead of a seamless and harmonious synthesis, which smoothens or reduces difference, it would consist of provisional affinities, overlaps, and linkages. This idea of oscillation differs from that of Bolter and Grusin, whose starting point is digital media. They visualize a technological milieu where preexistent modalities are remediated into an innovative infrastructure, which generates the immediacy of reality through the fusion of multiple modalities. In contrast, an oscillation in line with the *mandala* configuration would presume an archipelagic milieu where longstanding and emergent modalities commingle within the same public sphere while fulfilling a range of needs and expectations. Always open to the addition and withdrawal of components, the reconfiguration of the nucleus and its satellites would depend on the immediate function or objective to be accomplished. The scale of the arrangement would be dependent as well on the envisaged scope of impact.

In his essay about the influence of video art on Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films, Jihoon Kim analyzes how the emergence of a new medium compels a preexistent medium to renegotiate and redefine its generic and aesthetic boundaries. According to Kim's perspective, Apichatpong borrows devices characteristic of visual art such as durational space, elliptical editing, and ambient sound, which together are meant to deepen the optical and haptic experience of the film spectator. Kim visualizes a creative process in which the fragmentary components of one modality are incorporated into another, seemingly disparate modality to enhance its aesthetic effects. One possible shortcoming of studying intermediality from this perspective is that it assumes effacement and permanency within a larger, overdetermining infrastructure. Alternately, looking at Apichatpong's example in terms of conjunction would allow this arrangement to be seen as a provisional concentration of disparate modalities, which are reconciled momentarily to perform a singular function. Despite their incongruity, miscellaneous aesthetic devices could be deployed in synchronicity based on the necessities of the moment without being reduced or simplified.

This special section of *Kritika Kultura* on archipelagic intermediality in Southeast Asia is interested in the complexities of conjunction among disparate realities across a dispersed and diverse public sphere. Its focus is on the dynamic and circuitous



processes by which interactions between media bring together modalities that are not necessarily congruent in configuration, purpose, or temporality. It assumes that intermedial encounters are heterogeneous and oblique, entailing the addition, withdrawal, and modification of components, functions, and processes to enhance the communication of sensory experience. Following Siegel, it is particularly concerned with intermediality as a variegated site of historical passage or cultural interchange.

The forum aims to explore analytical questions about the complex interactions among media modalities and platforms in a heterogeneous milieu: How do different types of media work together without disregarding their distinct particularities? How do they enhance each other's capacity and potential through their juxtaposition, combination, or interpenetration? How are intermedial encounters shaped by the ecological conditions in which they occur? What constraints on negotiation and variation are imposed by specific formal, cultural, and economic properties? How are the boundaries, which demarcate individual functions and processes, effaced and redefined through their commingling? How does the amalgamation of two or more types of media open the possibility for a third configuration? How might this third form be contingent on the function or objective to be realized? How are established practices tied to usage reconfigured with the shift in dominance from one medium to another?

Focused on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at the time of cinema's emergence, Dafna Ruppin's essay uncovers the reiteration of the popular Nyai Dasima folktale as theater and film productions through companies such as the Komedi Stamboel and the Royal Bioscope. Similar to Matthew Isaac Cohen, Ruppin situates her discussion within the diverse, cosmopolitan world of fin-de-siècle Netherlands East Indies on the cusp of the *pergerakan*. For Ruppin, this cosmopolitan world is defined by its intermedial connections. In tracing the reproductions and circulations of the folktale across different media platforms, she aims to overcome the void in the historical archive prior to technological innovations in cultural documentation and preservation. She accomplishes this archeology by assuming continuities of generic convention and audience expectation in the emergence of a new medium. By looking not so much at media content than at shared practices of exhibition and consumption, Ruppin is able to picture intermediality as a space of transnational exchange, where overlaps and linkages are formed among local, regional, and global flows.

Examining the transition from oral to print literature, Sudarmoko's contribution discusses how Minangkabau folktales are reproduced and circulated by the West Sumatran publishing house Kristal Multimedia. If Ruppin's approach is synchronic, Sudarmoko's is diachronic. Looking at the history of their publication, he uncovers

the changes in narrative, addressee, and function that these folktales undergo. No longer merely performed to affirm the social norms of a small village, they are reimagined and rendered in publishable and consumable form as they are disseminated beyond their immediate location. Crafted to address the interests and desires of potential readers, these narratives are altered to suit the publishing house's different audiences and purposes, such as those of the educational system, the expatriate community, and the social media. Disclosing the slippage between the verbal and written iterations of the same folktale, Sudarmoko traces the passage from the fixed customs of the local village to the amorphous flows of the reading public. Made alive through communal ritual and daily consumption, these stories foster continuity across generations.

Exploring the complexities of the passage between stage and screen, Tito Imanda's essay describes the singular case of Tjipta Boedaya, a *wayang wong* group from a remote highland village at the foot of Mount Merapi, which works with filmmakers to create a cinematic portrayal of its theater productions. Adhering to strict tenets of performance and reproduction, the *wayang* group espouses the spontaneity, ephemerality, and sacredness of ritual art in its refusal to transcribe its scripts or record its plays. Imanda explains how the group is persuaded to render their dance dramas into video based on the likelihood that its original customs would disappear through time. With ethnographic thickness, he narrates how the artistic process is redefined through the collaboration between practitioners of contrasting media modalities and social milieus. Uncovering contradictions in their attitudes toward tradition and hierarchy, he examines the difficulties they encounter in negotiating and reconciling dissimilar conventions and expectations of storytelling, choreography, and rehearsal. However, this conjunction of disparate norms and practices is primarily a temporary arrangement, which permits heterogeneous identities to retain their distinctiveness from each other.

Focusing on the configurations and interconnections of different media modalities, the three contributions to this special forum inquire into the coexistence of diverse trajectories and temporalities amid the plurality and contingency of an archipelagic nation. Evincing the imagination of a dispersed cartography, these essays devote scholarly attention to geographical contexts and societal issues that are rendered peripheral by the policies and discourses of the nation-state, which concentrates its authority and resources in its seat of government. In each case presented, innovations to the technologies of production, transportation, communication, and distribution impel dynamic expansion in the parameters and possibilities of identity, representation, collectivity, and agency. Each example demonstrates how the miscellany of traditional values, aesthetic conventions, and capitalist affects in a multicultural public sphere shape the form and function of media content across multiple platforms. Taken as an aggregate in this forum, the essays reveal that the



encounter and negotiation between disparate media modalities are driven either by the desire to preserve cultural knowledge against historical contingency or by the urgency to reach a wider audience amid a burgeoning public.

Embodied in this milieu, intermedial conjunction permits a shift away from the dominion of a geographic, ethnic, or linguistic center, which would have demanded a lasting resolution of irreducible disparities and contradictions. It acts as a binding force, which pulls together social forces moving in different directions for the realization of an immediate, transient aim.

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