The background of the cover is a dynamic, abstract composition of bright blue light trails and streaks against a dark blue background. These streaks appear to be moving rapidly, creating a sense of energy and motion. Some streaks are vertical, while others are horizontal or diagonal, intersecting to form a complex, almost crystalline pattern. The overall effect is reminiscent of long-exposure photography of light or perhaps a digital visualization of data or sound waves.

Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art, from Whistler to Stravinsky and Beyond

Peter Dayan

An **Ashgate** Book

ROUTLEDGE


ART AS MUSIC, MUSIC AS POETRY,
POETRY AS ART, FROM WHISTLER TO
STRAVINSKY AND BEYOND

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PETER DAYAN

University of Edinburgh, UK

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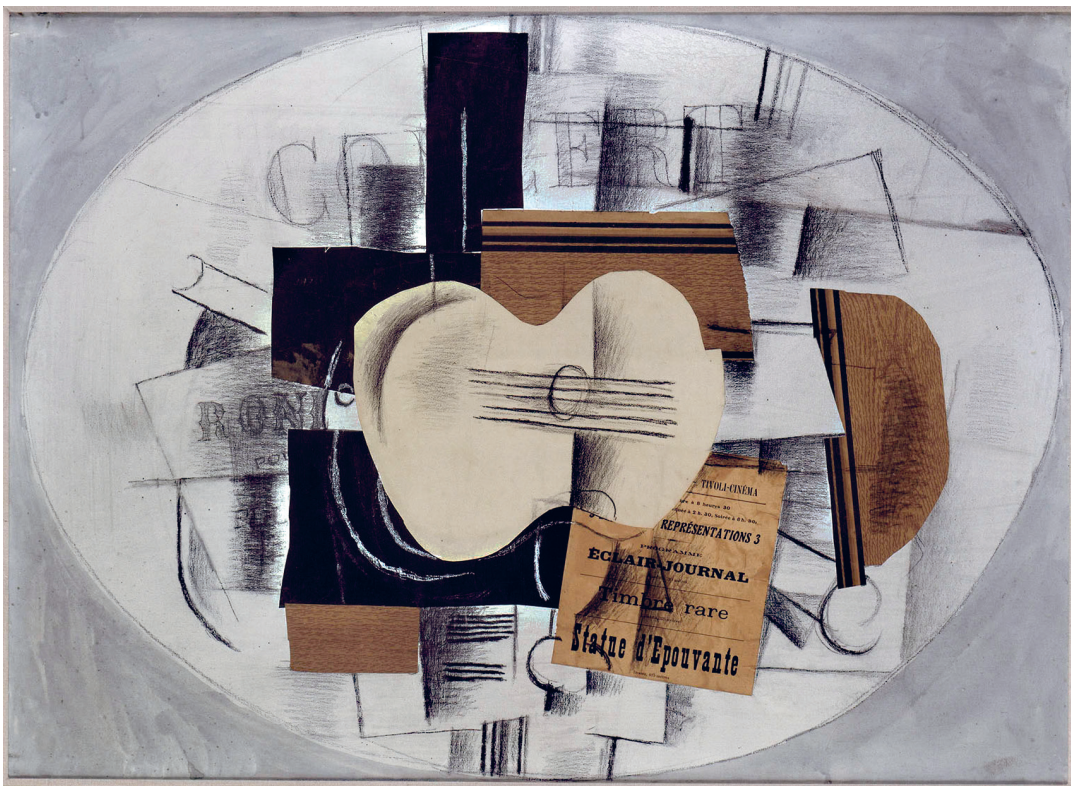
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6 Braque, *Guitare, Statue d'Epouvante*. Photograph: Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris. © RMN/Droits réservés, ADAGP, Paris musée Picasso and DACS, London 2011.



7 Braque, *Vase, palette et mandoline*. Photograph: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

*Il pleut si doucement pendant la nuit si tendre
Tandis que monte en nous cet effluve fatal
Musicien masqué que nul ne peut entendre*

*Je joue un air d'amour aux cordes de cristal
De cette douce pluie où s'apaise mon mal
Et que les cieux sur nous font doucement descendre.*



8 Apollinaire and Braque, page 54 of *Si je mourais là-bas*. Photograph: Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2011.

Introduction

The Five Laws of the Interart Aesthetic

This book is about a strange triangular marriage between music, poetry and painting, which engendered what we still see as the great art of the 20th century in Western Europe.

The marriage vows, so to speak, between the arts appeared exactly the same to composers, poets and painters. Artists in all media set them out in the same terms. The key to their expression is the description of each art as if it were one of the others: poetry as music, music as painting, painting as poetry, and so on. Simple though it is, this principle remained at the time normally hidden from the multitude,¹ and is little understood today; but it underwrote the most generally recognized currency of exchange between artists of all kinds for a century.

Not every artist in Europe, certainly. The aesthetic born of that strange marriage forms a barrier to direct communication between the artist and the public, because it denies artists the right to express themselves or their ideas within their artistic medium. For that reason particularly, many artists, including some of the most famous, to a greater or lesser extent rejected it, and sought other paths, towards understanding of themselves, of humanity, of society, or of religious or political truth. But it remains the case, I think, that those who embraced that aesthetic, and accepted its troubling consequences, long retained the ability to define the centre of gravity of high art. The artists themselves knew it. It gave rise to a sense of fraternity between arts and artists which is one of the most striking and quietly moving features of the tale I have to tell.

The strange marriage, with its 'great art' offspring, went, one might say, through a rocky patch in the last third of the 20th century. In the late 1960s the most commonly held values of artists themselves underwent a radical shift, and the guiding principles of the marriage between the arts went into eclipse. That eclipse of the old principles was also an eclipse of the very concept of great art, which the artists of the new generation saw as a mystification. My Conclusion is intended to demonstrate that this eclipse has not been total, both because an audience has remained faithful, in practice, to the old ideas, and because not all artists (or all nations) abandoned them. At the same time, however, in the 1960s, a second threat to the strange marriage arose, which has proved more consistent and resilient: it is the refusal of the academic community to admit or appreciate those old ideas, because they are, at root, utterly irrational, as well as politically incorrect. They certainly are irrational and politically incorrect, not to say intellectually and morally objectionable. Nonetheless, their continuing power in our culture is such that they deserve to be understood; and understanding is what I aim to give them.

¹ Not surprisingly, since it implies, as we shall see, a certain contempt for the multitude.

Despite their coherence and longevity, they have never had a name. So I will give them one. I will call them the interart aesthetic; interart, because the strangest (and therefore the most diagnostic) of their universal features is the way in which each art refers to the others. Poetry, they say, is painting, or music; music is painting or poetry; painting is music or poetry. This identity between the arts is what creates the unity of art as a universal category; and in pursuit of that unity, any one of the arts can be used to define all others. All art, as Walter Pater famously wrote, constantly aspires to the condition of music. But as we will see, all art aspires just as constantly to the condition of painting and of poetry.

Before going any further, to support my contention that the principles of the interart aesthetic form quite a simple and easily identified nexus, I will set them out in the form of five laws. I will call those whose discourse exemplifies these laws 'intermedialists' – a somewhat barbaric term, admittedly, but 'interartists' hardly seems to serve. All these laws apply equally to art in all media. Indeed, therein lies the 'law of laws' of the interart aesthetic: any rule that is valid for one art must be valid for all.

* * *

The first law of the interart aesthetic is that the work of art should properly be considered as an object, a thing, a 'new reality', as Stravinsky put it,² and not as the conduit or vessel for any concept, message, emotion, or anecdote. Its aim is not to convey the intentions of its creator. Nor does it tell any pre-existing truth; nor yet does it incarnate any idea. The artist does not have the right to tell us what it means, and we should not ask him.³ Its value is not in what it says, but in what it is.

² 'A new piece of music *is* a new reality'; see Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 102.

³ All the intermedialists who form the main subjects of this book are men. Should this be taken to imply that the interart aesthetic necessarily excludes women? Not in principle. As I have argued elsewhere, one of the founding figures of intermedialism was George Sand. There are certainly female French writers and painters (though, I think, few composers) of the first half of the 20th century who inherited her ideas. George Eliot and Virginia Woolf were amongst the greatest proponents of the aesthetic in Britain. And male intermedialists themselves often appreciated the work of their women contemporaries. Apollinaire's regard for the work of Marie Laurencin was clearly not simply a function of the close relationship they once had; Satie's attitude to the music of Germaine Taillefer, or Stravinsky's (and Apollinaire's) to Natalya Goncharova, seems to me little affected by misogynistic principle. However, from the 1870s to the 1960s, three factors tended to exclude women, in practice, from the fraternity of intermedial artists. One was, obviously enough, the social position of women at the time and the limits placed on their activities; Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* makes this point too well for it to be worth my elaborating on it. Another, reinforcing the first, was that the authoritarianism of the interart aesthetic, its devalorization of negotiation and cooperation in favour of the absolute unmotivated affirmation (see my 'third law', below), mapped on to values traditionally gendered as masculine, rather than feminine. As a result, any woman working within the interart tradition would inevitably be seen as masculine (obviously enough in the cases of George Sand and George Eliot) and would have to

The second law of the interart aesthetic is that between art in any two different media (for example, poetry and music), any equivalence must always be *incalculable*. There can be no direct translation, and no unproblematic collaboration. Poetic form, for example, cannot gain any value by imitating musical form; conversely, a piece of music ceases to be music if it aims to model its meaning on that of words. Hence the general loathing, amongst 20th-century intermedialists, of Wagner, who is thought to have committed the sin of believing that words and music could work together in pursuit of a common dramatic aim.

The third law of the interart aesthetic concerns the artistic tradition. All intermedialists believe that true art is of timeless and international validity. However, no intermedialist believes it is possible to say in words, or to calculate in any objective way, what it is that all great works of art have in common (with one exception, which forms the fourth law). That common property exists; but it cannot be defined, it can only be asserted. Hence the intermedialists' scorn for academies, academics, academicism and critics: anyone who attempts to talk rationally in evaluating works of art has simply missed the point. The intermedialist's judgements on art are deliberately (and often provocatively) authoritarian, elitist, high-handed, and ever unjustified in rational terms.

The fourth law concerns the one property common to all works of art which we can in fact define: it is that they are all different, all unique, all original. Each one, indeed, is a *new* reality. This is absolutely necessary, if only because this difference of the artwork is the guarantee that the quality of art can never be defined or calculated. The uniqueness of the work of art is the echo of the uniqueness of art as a whole.

And the fifth law is this: the only way to convey the incalculable relations that pertain between works, or between media, is to describe work in one medium as if it were operating in another – as if all the arts worked in the same way. Art as poetry, poetry as music, music as art and so on, round all possible permutations. That is the interart analogy.

* * *

The reader may have already noticed that in the foregoing, the word 'art' is used in two different senses. The first sense is more or less synonymous with 'painting', which is an art form in one particular medium. The second sense is: art-in-general, in any medium. This ability of art in a given medium to metamorphose into the universal quality of

live with the problematic consequences. At the same time, the first and third laws of the interart aesthetic tended to create a conservative effect. Intermedialists do not believe in the relevance of social progress to art (or of art to social progress); therefore, the interart aesthetic provides, to say the least, no impetus to any kind of positive discrimination. In a patriarchal age, it gave women no encouragement to challenge the dominance of men in the field of art. In practice, therefore, it could be said to have absorbed the ambient patriarchal attitudes, in the same way as it could be generally described as culpably unconcerned with social justice. This is part of what I have called its political incorrectness, which helps to explain its eclipse in the 1960s, and which I do not propose to gloss over. Hence my use of the masculine to refer to the artists discussed in this book.