



Introduction

Intermedialities: A Brief Survey of Conceptual Key Issues

Ginette Verstraete

VU University, Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

E-mail: gee.verstraete@let.vu.nl

“Much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media. This is no accident. The concept of the separation between media arose in the Renaissance ... However, the social problems that characterize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach”

(Higgins 1969, 11).

Forty years after the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins coined the term “intermedia” in New York, the concept has become a buzzword in art theory and media theory. “Intermediality” refers to the crossovers and interrelations taking place between the arts and the media. It also refers to the linkages within and between the various media that have intensified with the arrival of the digital (hyper)medium, insofar as the latter works through the interplay of words, images, and sounds on screen but also through the convergence of film, television, radio, news writing, e-books, photography, etcetera on the web. But these kinds of media interactions, a defining characteristic of the digital medium that some prefer to describe as “remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 1999) are also at work – albeit in a totally different way – in a Peter Greenaway film for example (imitating and incorporating art or digital photography), or in the performance art of Laurie Anderson (with sounds, digital screens, theatre and dance on stage), or in the commercial designing practices of Oliviero Toscani (citing Christian art side by side with documentary photography of AIDS patients). As Higgins’s quote suggests, it would be hard to explain such experiments solely in terms of the possibilities of the digital medium. That would be historical amnesia.

The term “intermediality” has been taken up by academics working in the margins of media studies, right there where media and communication raise

questions about art. In fact, I would argue that most of the research in the field of intermediality comes from disciplines outside media and communications studies, such as literary studies, performance studies, art history, film theory, and philosophy. Faced with the overall presence of digital media in the fields of arts and culture, these critics have turned to the notion of intermediality to reconceptualize their objects of study – literary texts, paintings, films – in relation to the (digital) medium. Seeking out the borders of their disciplines and the crossovers with media studies, they explicitly position themselves in between margin and centre, art and media. Different from discussions of media “convergence” (Jenkins 2006), media “flows” (Williams 1974), and “remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 1999), the study of intermediality takes as its starting point the specificity of the medium/media involved – a specificity not unrelated to the autonomy of art – even while this specificity is being radically questioned through the larger media environment within which it is situated. If “convergence” is the hot item in the world of communications, “intermediality” interrupts the smoothness of that term to address the critical space in-between media, art, and the surrounding world.¹

A quick survey of the field of intermediality studies enables me to discern the following principles at work in the debates:

1. Any discussion of intermediality runs against the problem of defining what “medium” and “mediality” traditionally mean, and how the concept of intermediality differs from it. The definitions of medium and mediality greatly vary according to the disciplinary perspective from which they are viewed. Sociologists (Fagerjord 2003) in communication studies emphasize the social and commercial functions of transmitting messages across media: for them a medium is a channel of communication or entertainment. Philosophers (Oosterling 1998) who are more interested in aesthetic or ontological questions may interpret

¹ Compare this to the question raised by Sage Elwell in *Intermedia: Forty Years and Beyond*: in an age of digital convergence where every medium, thanks to digitization, is already translatable in other media, and where fusion in the arts but also in communication and entertainment is the norm (a general environment) rather than the exception, is ‘intermediality’ – as falling between media – not an anachronistic legacy of the 1960s? Elwell says: not if we hold on to the spirit of permanent experiment and liminality (in-between) that the term has always stood for. It would mean that today’s convergence culture, and the debates about it, is not yet radical enough, that it needs to go further both in the realms of experience that are integrated – beyond the arts, beyond entertainment and into the social/political perhaps – and in the questions that are raised about it. So what intermediality offers to a generalized convergence is the need to recognize its specificity, its limits (I mean the limits of the (new) media focused on, of the questions raised, of the experiences offered) and in recognizing those limits already transcend them. One way to draw out the limits of convergence while transcending them is by putting convergence culture into a tradition which is hardly ever raised: the tradition of the avant-garde, of performance art, etc.

mediation in post-Hegelian terms, as the emergence of a third, critical space of the in-between. Literary critics (Ryan 2004), in turn, easily mobilize semiotics and signification when trying to define the medium. They interpret the medium as a formal carrier of content, or a means of expression in which the material-formal signifier co-determines the signified. Finally, and this is what intermediality is all about, several of the critics will argue that every medium is always already intermedial... Depending on how medium and mediality are defined, intermediality as the interaction between, and within, media, is made to critically re-evaluate the function of communication, entertainment, representation, mediation, meaning, expression... by the (singular) medium. This is, of course, where art – making the usual unusual – comes in.

2. Discussions of intermediality are, then, always conducted from particular disciplinary perspectives and in each case the emphasis on what is important varies. Intermediality in film studies (Spielmann 2005, Carroll 1996), for instance, may involve questions about the status of the moving image once it incorporates static photography generated by digital technology; whereas intermediality addressed in art history (Elwell 2006) tends to focus on the fluidity of art categories and the new meanings and possibilities generated by it. In the first case the notion of movement gets scrutinized, in the second case the immobility of the art object is interrogated. Other differences one could mention here (differences that, however, do not simply run along disciplinary lines): does one look at intermediality from the perspective of the producer(s) and the social-institutional context of production, or does one approach it from the point of view of the audience and the larger context of reception.

3. With the difference in discipline comes a different historiography. Along with the need to define what a medium is, we see critics wanting to write the history of the phenomenon called intermediality. Not surprisingly, the origins are found in various times and places, in accordance with what one seeks to define. A philosopher, trying to deconstruct representation, traces the roots of intermediality in the conceptual art of fusing words and images practiced by Magritte (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*); but an art critic interested in transforming art through a fusion with technology, will turn to the Fluxus movement of the 1960s. Whereas a literary critic (Wolf 1999) looks for the origins of intermediality in intertextuality, film theorists such as Somaini often turn to montage.

4. Chapple and Kattenbelt (2006) have argued that the debate on intermediality comes from Germany (Jürgen Müller 1996, Franz-Josef Albersmeier 1992, and others). In the meantime it has been institutionalized in the Netherlands and

Canada (e. g. journal called *Intermédialités*) as well. I find these presumptions of nationalization peculiar given the international cross-references in the debates (for instance the role of Higgins in New York) and the international mobility of the scholars involved. The German artist Hans Breder, for instance, set up an Intermedia Program at the University of Iowa in the 1960s. Nevertheless it would be interesting to further investigate the national specificity of certain traditions, or schools, of intermediality in relation to the global developments and crossovers that it mostly signifies.

5. There are also the very complex distinctions to be discerned between intermediality, multimediality, and transmediality, all of which designate various relations between arts and media, and between, or within, media. I could not begin to do justice to the depth of the discussion here, but let me try to summarize nevertheless.

Multimediality concerns the co-existence, side by side, of various media within one object, such as an opera, without the various media fusing with each other. Some critics regard websites as forms of multimedia as well to the extent that words and images, or different news and entertainment media occur together, even interact, but do not structurally impact on each other.

Transmediality concerns the translation of one medium into another, as when a novel is turned into a film; or a film into a game. Equally, an author may simultaneously bring out a book along with a movie and a website and require the reader to view them together and in addition to each other.

Intermediality occurs when there is an interrelation of various – distinctly recognized – arts and media within one object but the interaction is such that they transform each other and a new form of art, or mediation, emerges. Here the exchange alters the media and raises crucial questions about the ontology of each of them, as when Greenaway interrogates the status of the moving and static image by integrating in his films representations of photography and of the digital image. “In consequence intermedia in visual culture are best expressed by modes of self-reflection” (Spielmann 2005, 134).

6. In contrast to the previously made distinctions, critics such as Wolf and Oosterling use intermediality in its broadest scope, to designate a general transcendence of medial boundaries at work in culture. Differences between multi-, trans-, and inter-mediality are then a matter of differences in the *degrees and scales* of intermediality manifested in particular cases: are the various media overtly visible within a work, if so which ones (this is sometimes called multimediality)? Or does one medium dominate over the other (as is the case in

adaptations)? Are the mixtures extensively present, or do we only discern fleeting moments? Are they intended or unexpected effects? Are the various media harmoniously integrated or do they alter and transform each other (in some cases one medium may even begin to imitate the other). Are the crossovers institutionalized (as a genre, for instance opera), or radically hybrid? Seen thus, intermediality is a broad phenomenon that manifests itself in different degrees and on varying scales. It is a cultural trend that has accelerated with the arrival of the digital media. In fact, it has become a general possibility that characterizes all forms of art and media in different ways. Hence the need to be specific about which arts and media are involved, the quality of the interaction, the meanings generated. As said, how intermediality works, or is perceived to work, also differs according to the disciplines within which it is studied, the national traditions, the histories traced. But in its most intense manifestation, I find, intermediality asks difficult questions not only about art and media – and their interrelations – but also about the institutional boundaries we draw around them. Boundaries within which we hope to control and distribute what is perhaps not so easily channelled (most simply perhaps, because it is potentially everywhere). This is where to me the question of intermediality can become deeply political.

7. On a final note: given the immense variations in the forms and concepts of intermediality described above, I prefer to speak of intermedialities, in the plural.

The articles published in this volume reflect much of the diversity sketched out above. They are the direct results of an expert meeting on “Intermedialities: Theory, History, Practice” that Ivo Blom, in collaboration with myself, organized with the financial support of the European Science Foundation (The Standing Committee for the Humanities) in Amsterdam in June 2009.² The workshop involved academics with a wide range of nationalities, disciplines, experiences, and ambitions. Together they provided a European platform for exploring ways of dealing with the current intermedial situation in the arts and media. During the presentations and discussions we explored the concepts and practices of intermedia and intermediality and related terms (multimedia, convergence, intertextuality) in different national, disciplinary and historical contexts. In addition to conceptualization, we looked at three other important categories: intermediality in historical research, intermediality in curatorship and intermediality in assessment and funding institutions. The central questions

² The workshop took place at the Rode Hoed (“Red Hat”) cultural centre in Amsterdam. Details about the complete list of participants and the programme of the exploratory workshop can be found here: <http://www.esf.org/activities/exploratory-workshops/humanities-sch/workshops-detail.html?ew=8142> (accessed: 17 March, 2010).

posed to the participants were: how do we understand the convergence between arts and media, how do we curate it, and how do we fund it?

The answers published here reveal how, in the words of Jürgen Müller, it has simply become unacceptable to see “media” as isolated monads, even while it is important to take into account the specificity of the social, institutional, material and cultural context in which intermedial processes occur. Müller’s article on the historiography of intermediality, including its various meanings, materialities, and social functions, provides the basis for the rest of the articles.

After a short survey of the key questions regarding intermediality in cinema and placing them into the context of current debates in media studies and film theory, Ágnes Pethő addresses the key issues of the methodology of studying intermediality in film. She consecutively reviews the normative aesthetic viewpoints in the spirit of cinematic New Laocoöns, the trans-medial theorizing of the moving image, inter-art theories, and parallax historiographies, and ends with a closer look at intermedial figurations in the films of Greenaway and Godard.

Intermediality in specific films is further addressed in the contributions by Annika Wik and Ivo Blom. Starting from the transgressive media environment in which productions such as *The Matrix* franchise (which includes films, games, comic books, and so on) generate a total movie experience while involving the spectator as active participant, Wik then moves to a discussion of contemporary artistic instances in which a similar transgression of boundaries between media platforms (painting, video, television, film) and a permanent repositioning of the viewer are at stake. In his article on the iconology of Visconti’s films, Blom continues the discussion that Wik has initiated about the permeable borders between painting and film. He compares the motifs of doors and windows in Visconti’s films to those in 17th century painting while also highlighting the crucial differences between framing and perspective in art on the one hand and the mobile framing and the blocking of view in film on the other.

That the attempt to draw – or alternatively transgress – borders between artistic and film practices, and between disciplines, may not be a neutral intervention by a disinterested artist or theorist is the theme of the contributions by Jens Schröter, Klemens Gruber and Antonio Somaini. In a contrastive reading of Rosalind Krauss’s *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (1999) on the one hand and Dick Higgins’s *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (1984) on the other, Schröter demonstrates that the whole discussion on “pure media” (Krauss) versus the fusion of media (Higgins) is structurally political. For while Krauss critically interrogates intermediality as a

possible capitulation to the capitalist spectacle, Higgins condemns the pure media as signs of capitalist division of labour and praises intermediality as the dawn of a Communist society. In a similar vein, Klemens Gruber discusses the political meaning of Gustav Klutsis's "Loudspeaker Stands" from 1922. This Latvian Constructivist avant-garde artist produced intermedial theatrical pieces that involved loudspeakers, radios and film screens. The purpose of this technical design was multiply political: not only did it transmit information about the Communist Revolution, it also celebrated in a typically constructivist fashion the functional beauty of the world of machines which made the human presence on stage superfluous.

What this insight in the "politics of intermediality" means in our contemporary image society is demonstrated in a second article by Schröter on the 3D display technologies used by the US army, which we can understand as a fusion of the flat screen of painting and the volumetric display of sculpture. The representation of objects in 3D space enables the military personnel to better grasp the spatial context of the object viewed and thus to better control the position of the enemy in space. In his contribution on the transmedial migration of the surveying eye, Antonio Somaini equally draws a disconcerting parallel between the intermedial crossing of borders and the emergence of total surveillance in space. Analyzing a series of works realized in the media of performance and photography (Sophie Calle), video installation (Dan Graham), and found footage cinema (Harun Farocki), Somaini shows how the act of visual surveillance can be enacted in different media while maintaining its defining characteristic: the disciplining power of an asymmetric gaze which is present across various media in social space, thanks to the proliferation of video cameras, monitors and satellite communication, and the links between them.

In the final essay Maaïke Lauwaert considers intermediality from the point of view of a funding agency, namely the Dutch Mondriaan Foundation for visual arts, design and heritage. The project applications received by the foundation are increasingly intermedial; they mirror a changing cultural field in which collaborations between neighbouring disciplines, fields of knowledge and experts from these fields increase. The article considers the role of new media within this transformation and outlines the ways in which the foundation deals with intermediality when it comes to the assessment of applications.

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