Ginette Verstraete

INTERMEDIALITIES

A brief survey of conceptual key issues

Prof. Dr. Ginette Verstraete is Professor of Comparative Arts and Media at VU University Amsterdam.

Media and their interrelations have been the subject of disciplines ranging from art history to communication theory. This has lead to a diversity of underlying questions, concepts, and methodologies. Ginette Verstraete provides an overview of seven principles that shed light on various roles of intermediality.

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.[1]
— Dick Higgins, 1969

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.[2] '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, et cetera on the web. But these kinds of media interactions, a defining characteristic of the digital medium that some prefer to describe as 'remediation' 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).[3] 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 stu-

dies, right there where media and communication raise questions about art. In fact, I would argue that most of the research in the field of interme-diality 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 reconceptualise their objects of study – literary texts, paintings, films – in relation to the (digital) medium. Seeking out the borders of their discipli-nes and the crossovers with media studies, they explicitly position themselves in between margin and centre, art and media. Different from discus-sions of media 'convergence', media 'flows', and 'remediation', the study of intermediality takes as its starting point the specificity of the medium/me-dia involved – a specificity not unrelated to the au-tonomy of art – even while this specificity is being radically questioned through the larger media en-vironment within which it is situated.[4] If 'conver-gence' is the hot item in the world of communicati-ons, 'intermediality' interrupts the smoothness of that term to address the critical space in-between media, art, and the surrounding world.[5]

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

I

Any discussion of intermediality runs against the problem of defining what 'medium' and 'media-lity' traditionally mean, and how the concept of inter-mediality 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 communi-cation studies emphasize the social and commerci-al functions of transmitting messages across media. They regard a medium as a channel of communica-tion or entertainment.[6] Philosophers who are more interested in aesthetic or ontological questions may interpret mediation in post-Hegelian terms, as the emergence of a third, critical space of the in-between.[7] Literary critics, in turn, easily mobilize semiotics and signification when trying to define the medium.[8] They interpret the medium as a for-mal carrier of content, or a means of expression in which the material-formal signifier co-determines

the signified. Finally, and this is what intermedi-ality 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-evalu-ate 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.

II

Discussions of intermediality are, then, always conducted from particular disciplinary perspec-tives and in each case the emphasis on what is important varies. Intermediality in film studies, for instance, may involve questions about the status of the moving image once it incorporates static pho-tography generated by digital technology.[9] On the other hand, intermediality addressed in art history 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 scru-tinized, in the second case the immobility of the art object is interrogated.[10] 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.

III

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 decon-struct representation, traces the roots of intermedi-ality in the conceptual art of fusing words and ima-ges practiced by René 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 looks for the origins of intermediality in intertextuality, film theorists such as Antonio Somaini often turn to montage.[11]

IV

Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt have argued that the debate on intermediality comes from Germany.[12] In the meantime it has been institutionalized in the Netherlands and Canada (e.g., the journal *Intermédialités*) as well. I find these presumptions of nationalization peculiar given the international cross-references in the debates (e.g., 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.

V

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. Yvonne Spielmann states that '[i]n consequence intermedia in visual culture are best expressed by modes of self-reflection.'[13]

VI

In contrast to the previously made distinctions, critics such as Werner Wolf and Henk 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 that 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.

VII

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
indirect results of the MA class on intermedialities
that I co-teach with my colleague from art history,
Sven Lütticken. Central to our class is indeed the
question: if intermedialities constitute a bridge,
what is it that they do bridge? Without a more pre-
cise understanding of what a medium or mediality
is, one cannot expect to comprehend intermedial-
ity in all its diverse manifestations.[14]

1   D. Higgins, 'Intermedia', in: idem (ed),
     foeweombwhnm, New York 1969, pp.
     11–29 (11).

2   This essay is based on an article previously
     published as 'Introduction. Intermedialities:
     A Brief Survey of Conceptual Issues', *Inter-
     medialities: Theory, History, Practice* (*Acta
     Universitatis Sapientiae. Film and Media
     Studies*), 2 (2010) 1, pp. 7-14. Thanks to
     Ágnes Peth for granting me the right to
     reprint.

3   J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation. Un-
     derstanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA/
     London 1999.

4   H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where
     Old and New Media Collide*, New York
     2006; R. Williams, *Television: Technology
     and Cultural Form*, Hannover 1974; Bolter,
     Grusin, op.cit. (note 3).

5   Compare this to the question raised by
     John Sage Elwell: in an age of digital con-
     vergence 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 anachro-
     nistic 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,

et cetera. J. Sage Elwell, 'Intermedia: 40
     years and beyond', *Afterimage* 5 (2006)
     March/April, pp. 25-30.

6   A. Fagerjord, 'Rhetorical Convergence:
     Studying Web Media', in: G. Liestøl, A.
     Morrison, T. Rasmussen (eds.), *Digital
     Media Revisited: Theoretical and
     Conceptual Innovation in Digital Domains*,
     Cambridge, MA 2003, pp. 293–325.

7   H. Oosterling, 'Intermediality: Art Between
     Images, Words, and Actions', in: J.-M.
     Schaeffer (ed.), *Think Art: Theory and
     Practice in the Art of Today*, Rotterdam
     2008, pp. 89-100.

8   M.-L. Ryan (ed.), *Narrative Across Media:
     The Languages of Storytelling*, Lincoln
     2004.

9   Y. Spielmann, 'History and Theory of Inter-
     media in Visual Culture', in: H. Breder, K.-P.
     Busse (eds.), *Intermedia: Enacting the
     Liminal*, Norderstedt 2005, pp. 131–136;
     N. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*,
     Cambridge, MA 1996.

10   Elwell, op.cit. (note 4).

11   W. Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction:
     A Study in the Theory and History of
     Intermediality*, Amsterdam 1999.

12   F. Chapple, C. Kattenbelt (eds.), *Inter-
     mediality in Theater and Performance*,
     Amsterdam 2006; J. Müller, *Intermedialität.
     Formen moderner kultureller Kommuni-
     kation*, Münster 1996; F.-J. Albersmeier,
     *Theater, Film und Literatur in Frankreich.
     Medienwechsel und Intermedialität*,
     Darmstadt 1992.

13   Spielmann, op.cit. (note 9), p. 134.

14   The last sentence is a slightly adapted
     quote from Lars Elleström, see: L. Elleström
     (ed.) 2010, *Media Borders, Multimodality
     and Intermediality*, Basingstoke/New York
     2010, p 11.