Part V

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Heteromediationality

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In the first part of this essay I will offer a very short description of what has been identified as interart studies and intermediality studies. After this I will propose, by way of Lars Elleström’s model, a new multimodal definition of medium. This, in turn, will lead me to my attempt to rethink the field of intermediality studies by way of a new concept, *heteromediationality*. In the second part of my essay I will describe two future possibilities for intermediality studies: either the field may try to establish itself as an academic discipline by strengthening its formalistic foundations, or, on the other hand, a field of investigation based on a more critical and ideological discourse can be imagined. I shall argue in favour of the second possibility.

First, a few pragmatic definitions: when talking about ‘text’ I refer to the semiotic idea of ‘complex signs or sign combinations’; ‘art’ refers to the conventionally defined forms of music, painting, literature, architecture and so on. I use ‘ideology’ as a term expressing a relatively coherent value system, though not necessarily organized in a political system (consequently it does not refer to the Marxist idea of ideology as merely ‘false conceptions’). ‘Intermedial’ or ‘intermediality’ refers to objects and phenomena whereas ‘intermediality studies’ refers to the activity of investigating intermedial phenomena. The concept of medium, as mentioned above, I shall try to define below.

Part I

Interart studies and intermediality studies

Various strands of cultural studies have, since the beginning of the twentieth century, investigated the relations between the arts. One comparative tradition, often called *interart studies*, with subcategories such as ‘word and image studies’ and ‘music and image studies’ has been an important subfield of both comparative literature and art history. The three arts most often referred to are literature, the visual arts and music, with their presumably basic components of words, images and sound. Interart studies
basically dealt with the relations *between* the arts, and the object of research of such studies has been conceptualized along different lines, but often focus was placed on, for instance, studies of ekphrasis, of the so-called artistic *Doppelbegabungen*, or adaptations from music to poetry. However, under the general impression of both the basic tenets of Cultural Studies from the 1960s and onwards (the critique of the traditional hierarchy of the arts), and the new trends in artistic and technological products (hybrids in the arts such as performance and happenings, the development of new digital media), interart studies has since the 1980s, roughly, been supplanted by ‘intermediality studies’.3

A number of definitions of intermedial studies have been suggested. The shortest is, I believe, that of Mikko Lehtonen, stating that intermediality is ‘intertextuality transgressing media boundaries’.4 Intermediality studies is a rather young field of investigation and consequently the object as well as the theory and methods of the field are still relatively loosely defined, and in conferences as well as in publications, the discussions are still at a fundamental (but often sophisticated) level concerning the basic elements of the field: what is a medium? What is the difference between interartiality and intermediality and multimodality? These are questions which show that it is a discipline still to define its own object and limits.

Despite the relatively weak foundations of the field, several schematizations have been suggested, among others by Werner Wolf in *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (1999) and Hans Lund in *Intermedialitet. Ord, bild och ton i samspel [Intermediality. Word, Image, Sound in Collaboration]* (2002).5 Lund suggests a useful division where the field of intermediality is divided into combination (with the subcategories ‘interreference’ and ‘co-existence’), integration and transformation.6 Interart studies and intermedial studies have created very important work. Siglind Bruhn, Claus Clüver, Hans Lund, Werner Wolf and numerous other researchers have shown the necessity of interdisciplinary work as a revolt against inexpedient academic borders, but these researchers also share what I choose to call a ‘formalistic vein’ in their work.

Despite the impressive list of results, contemporary intermediality studies suffers from two problems which I think may be solved by a change of direction. First of all, by creating a new multimodal theory of medium, the traditional concept of arts or medium in intermediality studies can be rethought in order to establish a solid ground for future studies. This is my main methodological point. Second, and I discuss this in the second part of my essay, I will argue that in order to avoid intermediality studies remaining a rather formalistically biased field of study, intermediality studies should take notice of the ideologically interested trends of modern cultural thinking and contemporary philosophy. In order to suggest a solution to the first problem (creating a definition of medium suitable for future intermediality studies), I turn to Lars Elleström. In Part II of the essay I return to the question of intermediality and ideology.
Defining medium

The important strategic move from interart studies to intermediality studies consisted, as mentioned above, in the broadening of the field of investigation from the traditional arts to, in principle, all existing media. Therefore, intermediality studies can analyse the entire traditional field of aesthetic objects as well as stamps, corporate logos, advertising, the medieval Christian mass and the opening of the Olympic Games.7 Defining ‘medium’ has proved difficult, however. ‘Curiously’, Werner Wolf has noted, ‘problems of definition and typology have not hindered intermediality research. The most obvious among these is the problem of defining “medium” itself.’8 Wolf suggests

a broad concept of medium: not in the restricted sense of a technical or institutional channel of communication but as a conventionally distinct means of communication or expression characterized not only by particular channels (or one channel) for the sending and receiving of messages but also by the use of one or more semiotic systems.9

At first view this is an attractive definition because of the pragmatic idea that medium should be defined by ‘conventions’. The definition tends to be rather conservative, however, because it ends up saying, basically, that media is the same as the arts and that leaves the problem unresolved.

Elleström’s definition of media, described in detail elsewhere in this volume, consists of a mixture of modalities. In his model, the problematic essentialism (theatre is x, painting is y) is avoided, and instead an open and mixed construction is proposed. As shown in his contribution to this volume, Elleström operates with four necessary conditions for every medium: (1) Material modality concerning the material manifestation of the medium; (2) Sensorial modality concerning the human sensory channels affected by the medium; (3) Spatiotemporal modality concerning the time-space ratio of the medium and (4) Semiotic modality concerning types of signification using Peirce’s distinction between iconic, symbolic and indexical signification. The four necessary conditions (modalities) constitute what Elleström calls ‘basic media’, such as still image, written words, oral words and organized sound. These ‘basic media’ will, however, enter into more elaborate culturally and aesthetically conventional forms, which Elleström chooses to call ‘qualified media’.

The implications of a multimodal concept of medium

The idea that every medium consists of a number of elements called basic modalities common to all media (albeit always in specific, concrete constellations) means that these modalities (in a particular combination) also form the basis of other media. Consequently, multimodality is a fact of any conceivable text in any conceivable medium. The idea that texts are not inherently univocal is particularly important when dealing with openly mixed media such as the
mixture of sound, image, words, music in modern cinema or the pictures and words in the picture book. The new and less obvious insight is that the mixed character of texts is also a fact of the texts and media which have traditionally been considered pure, without traces of other media. The main point is that even the apparently monomediaal text always consists of several modalities.

An example may clarify my point: normally, literature has entered intermediality studies via research on traditional ekphrasis, iconic projection (Hans Lund10) adaptation theory or the ‘musicalization of fiction’ (Wolf). My point, developing Elleström’s suggestions, would be that any literary text shares modalities with other media – not only the obvious and important cases mentioned here. Let me exemplify with Iain Banks’ The Wasp Factory (1984), a gothic horror story set in Scotland. Traditional intermedial studies would probably dismiss this text as being out of reach of an intermedial analysis, but a multimodal-media model would be able to identify relevant aspects of such a text. Here I choose not to focus on the (short) descriptions of music in the novel (ekphrasis of music) or the descriptions of the landscape (close to ekphrasis proper): nor will I stress the passages that may have been signs of a ‘fimlization’ of literature, or the crucial passages where the protagonist’s father turns out to behave like not only a tyrannical patriarch but also an artist who has chosen to use his own son as, literally, a model to be sculpted. Instead I quote the final lines of the novel: ‘Poor Eric came home to see his brother, only to find (Zap! Pow! Dams burst! Bombs go off! Wasps fry: ttssss!) he’s got a sister’.

The prose here would not enter any of the traditional categories of intermediality, but I maintain that the passage by way of its multimodality is necessarily what I will define below as a heteromediaal text. In this brief excerpt I would stress the obvious sonic aspects of the sequence ‘(Zap! Pow! Dams burst! Bombs go off! Wasps fry: ttssss!)’. It is a kind of onomatopoeic mixed with ‘normal’, non-iconic prose. The literary text (which is supposed to consist of symbolic signs (in Peirce’s systematization)) suddenly approached the sound-iconic state, thus using traits of sonorous art forms such as music, or spoken poetry, or performance and theatre. I would also refer to the parenthesis in this fragment of sounding and silent words: a parenthesis is of course a symbolic sign signifying a kind of double textual dimension inside the text and as such is a familiar trait in (written) literature.11 A pair of parentheses is also an iconic visual sign: we can see how it effectively fences in and bars off the passage from the surrounding text, so that we read the symbolic sign as well as see the iconic sign, probably because the text wishes to operate in two different dimensions at the same time. Even the added italics and repeated consonants of ttssss create a kind of mixture of visual and sonorous and symbolical sign production.

This example is meant to illustrate my main point, namely that the pure, distinct medium, and the equivalent to this on the level of specific texts, is a
historical as well as an ontological illusion. Such a pure medium or text has never existed, and it even appears to be a logical impossibility. I think that this might be what W. J. T. Mitchell has in mind when he claims that ‘the attempt to grasp the unitary, homogeneous essences of painting, photography, sculpture, poetry, etc., is the real aberration’ and that the conception of purity and unity of media ‘is both impossible and utopian’ and therefore media ought not to be investigated as an existing fact but as the result of ideological construction and evaluation. Pure media may be, and has been, an ideal in specific historical periods, and in particular ideological surroundings, but it is never a real, existent phenomenon. Consequently, research – and teaching – should take as its starting point the fact that ‘all arts are “composite” arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes’. Thus the implications of a new, multimodal concept of medium is that interartial and intermedial models are transgressed and the meetings of media are no longer reserved for the privileged exceptions but become a condition of every text.

**Defining ‘heteromedia’?**

This new, multimodal definition of medium raises not only a number of analytical and epistemological questions but also a basic terminological question: is ‘intermediality’ still the best term to describe the multimodal character of all media and, consequently, the a priori mixed character of all conceivable texts? The term intermediality is too limited to satisfy the demands of the new multimodal theory of medium. Therefore I will suggest a new umbrella term, heteromedia, to describe any conceivable text, whereas I reserve the term intermediality to parts of heteromedia.

With ‘heteromedia’ the focus shifts from the comparisons between media and art forms, roughly consisting of the numerous possibilities suggested in a diagram by Lund, for instance, where music represents poetry, novel becomes movie, words and picture combine on the poster and so on, to a method investigating the expanded field of media relations (in Elleström’s terminology: media modalities) inside the text. With heteromedial studies we shift the focus from relations between media (always concretized in forms, in ‘texts’), to medial relations within texts, in other words. Therefore the prefix ‘hetero’ (Greek, ‘different’ or ‘other’) is more suitable than ‘inter’ for these investigations.

The term heteromedia raises another terminological problem, though, because the term is already in use in Werner Wolf’s schematization of intermedial relations. Wolf does not use ‘heteromedia’ in The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality from 1999, but in a more recent article, in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, ‘heteromedia’ occupies a minor (and purely separating) role and is defined as follows: ‘Intermediality, in contrast [to intertextuality], applies
in its broadest sense to any transgression of boundaries between media and thus is concerned with “heteromedial” relations between different semiotic complexes or between different parts of a semiotic complex’ (p. 252). Heteromedial in Wolf’s definition can thus be translated simply as ‘different media’ in contrast to traditional text-to-text intertextuality, which Wolf calls a ‘homomedial’ relation (p. 252).

My definition of the term differs clearly from Wolf’s. With the prefix ‘hetero’ I wish to signal the internal mixed character being a condition of any text, as opposed to ‘inter’ signalling ‘media transgressing borders’. My proposal, in other words, aims at creating a new, universal concept of text, the heteromedial text. However it will be useful to operate with pragmatic subcategories of the heteromedial text, in order not to create one monolithic concept in danger of not explaining anything at all. Therefore, there will still be a point in using the terms intermedial text (examples of which are listed in Lund’s diagram, where media are defined as conventionally distinct forms in contradistinction to the multimodal definition) and intertextuality (the theoretical concept designating the fact that all text are dialogically connected but without in this concept taking the specific media-specificities into consideration). Intertextuality defines the overall phenomenon of texts being mosaics of other texts (according to the now classic definitions of Barthes and Kristeva); heteromediality defines the existence of several medial modalities in all conceivable texts. Intermediality, then, is my term for one particular subgenre of heteromediality, characterized by the traces of more than one medium (either in combination, transformation or integration following Lund). Therefore all texts are heteromedial, and they will always cite and will be cited by other texts (intertextuality); but only part of the immense category of heteromediality is intermedial in the restricted sense of the word.

In the following I use the term heteromedial studies for intermedial studies as such, thus piously hoping that my proposed terminology may prove useful; when I use the term intermedial studies or intermediality I refer to current or previous research.

Part II

Heteromediality and ideology

Until now I have described and discussed the development and inherent problems of interart studies (the hierarchical and traditional system of the arts) and intermediality studies (the problematic definitions of medium and the tendency to diminish the real extension of intermedial relations) and I have suggested a multimodal-media model that might constitute the basis for what I propose to call heteromedial studies. Perhaps the most crucial question for future heteromediality studies, however, concerns the interesting and with necessary discussion around the Erkennnissinteresse (cognitive
interest) of the field: What kind of knowledge does the ‘discipline’ want to produce?

When I consider the present state of intermediality studies, it seems to me that two possible alternatives for heteromedia studies arise. On the one hand, I see a rather formally focused alternative which might be described as a sophisticated development of the New Criticism idea of the text or the work. Within the frame of this first alternative, heteromedia studies can try to strengthen the analytical foundations of traditional intermediality studies in order to establish itself as a conventional, respectable discipline. This might happen through a sober and scientifically valid construction of a methodology and an acknowledged object of investigation. Such a direction would develop heteromedia studies into a genuinely analytic and historically informed discipline based on solid, formalistic investigative goals.

As far as I can see, this has been the underlying ambition of a number of eminent researchers of intermediality studies who combine an impressive philological or musicological training with an intermediality perspective. Their analysis, based on a semiotic framework, is usually directed towards relations between the inner working and the outer surface of specific, relatively autonomously conceived works of art. This first line of research I choose to call the ‘formalistic’ line of intermediality studies. Heteromedia studies might choose another direction, however. This will be the case if heteromedia researchers engage with positions in modern cultural theory and philosophy which hold particular interests in the ideological dimensions of cultural production and reception.

Investigations into and reflections concerning the ideological and political aspects of form have been crucial to a number of the discussions in literary theory in the twentieth century, with inspiration from German neo-Marxism and British Cultural Studies, while more contemporary trends such as New Historicism and post-colonial studies have been important movements concerning ideology and the arts. Both movements have designed sophisticated theories of the text’s relation to the surrounding world, and both tend to focus on the inner contradictions of literary texts. These contradictions are considered to be (often unconscious) expressions of the surrounding society’s ideological tensions and constellations of power. Kiernan Ryan claims that the deepest aim of New Historicism ‘is to dethrone and demystify the privileged literary work: to destroy its immunity to infection by circumstance and other kinds of texts and to rob it of political innocence by exposing its discreet commitments, its subtle collusions in the cultural struggle for power’ – an apt description for a future heteromedia research strategy, I would say.

Behind many of the analytic and theoretical endeavours in Anglo-Saxon theory we find traces of modern French thinking, and this magnificent tradition of considering art as an ideological fact should enter the reflexive space of intermediality studies. Heteromedia studies should engage with
crucial names in what may be called the (heterogeneous) tradition combining art with a wider ‘critical’ context concerning ideological questions of gender, class, race or struggles between different aesthetic positions. Such a ‘tradition’ may be said to consist of the theoretical writings and the important concepts of the generations following after Jean-Paul Sartre and Georges Bataille. There is a long list of thinkers deeply influenced by psychoanalytical thinking, phenomenology and critical theory, and common to these thinkers is a capacity to work across established academic and epistemological boundaries (psychology, philosophy, literary theory and so on) as well as analysing freely across the traditional boundaries of the arts. Aspects of the work of these thinkers ought to be incorporated into heteromediality studies to such a degree that every reflection on aesthetic questions also entails a critical dimension (in the sense of the word mentioned above) in order to avoid heteromediality becoming a formalistic, descriptive discipline.

My suggestion is that the idea of the inherently mixed conception of medium (leading to my concept of heteromediality) must be combined with the ideological aspect. Therefore my credo directing my own way of practicing heteromedial studies is that the particular constellation of mixed media in a text often expresses a tension which in a more or less opaque way relates to the historical context of the text in question. This, I think, is what heteromediality as a critical concept would be able to facilitate in the study of cultural history, and the distinctive traits of heteromediality studies would be the urgent knowledge of the mixedness of media as well as an investigation of the conflicts or tensions creating the particular mixture.

Cook and Mitchell

I would like to point to a few fruitful positions (outside the self-confessed intermediality researchers) that might help to establish a sound and strong critical version of future heteromediality studies, namely the work of W. J. T. Mitchell and Nicholas Cook.

Mitchell combines the lines I have mentioned above: a multimodality concept of the work of art with an a priori ideological grounding. He works through a number of relations between different media, in particular word and image relations, not in order to compare media but because he wishes to investigate what kinds of non-likeness relations can be established between media, and the ideological implications of these relations. His starting point is that every cultural product is ‘mixed media’ and that this relation expresses a particular ideological and/or philosophical constellation connected to the social environment and history of media. At every moment of history, particular hopes and fears can be detected in the background of media, and according to Mitchell any conceivable art work expresses a tension or a stride between media which mirrors a more comprehensive ideological battle of the social surroundings or the epoch of the work, for
instance, connected to ideological conflicts concerning gender, class, ethnicity or nationality. Mitchell offers a reconsideration of the often claimed essential differences between different media and art forms and he manages to show that the concept of ‘borders’ between ‘pure’ media is a question of ideology, not a matter of essential definitions.19

Whereas Mitchell has tried to construe an analytical strategy (but never a strict methodology) based on avoiding the lazy comparison and the invention of a more fruitful relation between verbal and visual elements of texts, Nicholas Cook has – from a musicologist’s point of view – made a comparable strategic move.20 Cook wishes to contribute to ‘the current reformulation of music theory in a manner that loosens the grip of the ideology of musical autonomy – the compulsory (and compulsive) cult of what Peter Kivy calls “music alone” ‟.21 Consequently, Cook wants to tear down the purist idea of ‘pure’ or ‘absolute’ music. Interestingly, he tries to drive through his argument by way of focusing on aspects that seem to lie as far away as possible from ‘absolute’ music, but when doing this he still manages to reach his main thesis: that absolute music cannot be absolutely pure. Even the purest musical text is a mixed text, to rephrase Cook’s idea in Mitchell’s terms. Analysis of the covers of compact discs, television advertisements of cars and music videos underlines the way that music always, directly or indirectly, bears traces of the multimodal. Thus, as I would state, Cook demonstrates the real but suppressed heteromedial quality of musical products. Cook is fascinated with ‘a hierarchy [of media] whose levels are at war with one another’.22 A thorough analysis of a music video of the pop singer Madonna (’where the effect is to destabilize the hierarchy of media’)23 can in, Cook’s analysis, achieve far reaching results.

Conclusion: the centrality of marginality

In this essay I hope to have shown how a new, multimodal version of medium may imply a substantial rethinking of the discipline of intermediality studies. I propose the term heteromediality to signify that ‘all media are mixed media’ and that the particular mixing of media has its roots in wider contexts (ideological, historical, aesthetic and so on). Furthermore, I have put forward my own suggestion as to how heteromedial studies might be conducted, namely by way of letting French thinking from the period after World War II balance the otherwise formalistic tendency in much of the research that has been done in intermedial studies. The points that I have been trying to make lead me to the following concluding remarks concerning the ‘position’ of heteromediality studies in the future landscape of the humanities.

Since the mid-twentieth century, research of the marginalized, the Other(s), the liminal and the suppressed has, paradoxically, occupied a central role in the humanities. The privileged perspective of the marginalized
has been expressed by a number of different scholars, or rather, some scholars show how the marginal may produce important insights into the centre of a research field. Nicholas Cook’s efficient if also slightly surprising take on this question, in *Analyzing Musical Multimedia* (1998), consists, as mentioned above, in using an advertisement for a Volvo car or a Madonna music video as a lever to create a kind of deconstruction of the high-cultural evaluation and understanding of ‘pure’ music. The centrality of the marginal is almost a trademark of the work of W. J. T. Mitchell. I would like to mention two instances of this rhetorical and epistemological tendency in his work, and both examples have gained a central position in academic discussions, partly following Mitchell’s lead. First I turn to his discussion of ekphrasis in ‘Ekphrasis and the Other’ from *Picture Theory*. In this text Mitchell claims, and he might be right, that research into ekphrasis, despite the voluminous size, is still in a ‘minority’ position and that there is a certain amount of obscurity attached to the term and the research field.24 Despite this, or should I say because of this, the term and concept of ekphrasis might form the foundation for a new theory of description in literary studies, nothing less. The reason is that ekphrasis, itself a description, is typical of all other representations of reality. In another essay25 Mitchell chooses the concept ‘metapicture’, a picture that reflects upon itself as pictorial statement and representation, to do the same job. Metapictures are apparently radical pictures in the history of western representations: from Magritte’s pipe picture to Wittgenstein’s beloved duck-rabbit drawing, to mention just a few. Once again it turns out that the marginal has a central position: ‘The metapicture is a piece of movable cultural apparatus, one which may serve a marginal role as illustrative device or a central role as a kind of summary image, what I have called a “hypericon” that encapsulates an entire episteme, a theory of knowledge.’26 The marginal metapicture turns out to be the typical visual representation.

From the point of view of heteromediacy studies these claims for centrality should cause us to consider, once again, whether heteromediacy studies does not deserve a much more privileged position in contemporary, and future, studies in the humanities. If we once again ponder on Hans Lund’s diagram over relations between the arts one is struck by the clarity of the division and the comprehensive examples of intermedial relations, and most teachers of basic courses in intermediality will probably feel rather satisfied with themselves if their students navigate in a reasonable way in this diagram. Nevertheless the scheme has one crucial flaw, I think, namely that it implicitly states that there exist media and art forms that are ‘un-intermedial’. This is not the case, as I have argued above, where I have referred to the dictum ‘all media are mixed media’ and by naming the study of this fact ‘heteromediacy studies’. When understood in a fruitful way the idea of heteromediacy (that all texts are modally mixed, and that this impure state implies some kind of ideological tension) might influence not
only academic research but even institutional divisions and the unhealthy ‘compartmentalization’ of the humanities. In other words, Lund’s schematization establishes intermediality studies as a marginalized field inside the studies of the humanities, whereas I believe that heteromedia studies break loose from this position and become exactly the opposite: the basic, central conceptual scheme underlying all studies in the (aesthetic part of the) humanities.

Notes


3. See Claus Clüver’s historical overview, ibid.


7. The last two examples are Claus Clüver’s. Clüver believes that these are highly significant (but as yet almost un-analysed) examples of intermediality in contrast to interart phenomena. See the final remarks in ‘Intermediality and Interart Studies’, Changing Borders, p. 34.


11. A standard definition of the content of the parenthesis is that it can be omitted without altering the overall meaning of the sentence.


13. Ibid., pp. 94–5.


15. In Werner Wolf (1999) The Musicalization of Fiction. Werner Wolf distinguishes between intertextuality (being a text-to-text relation) and intermediality (being a ‘special relation between media’) (p. 46). One may appreciate the clear
distinction, but in my definition of medium such a distinction cannot hold, simply because any text is per definition never not only textual.

16. For an overview of this tradition, see Rajewsky (2002) Intermedialität. Perhaps my classification is about to turn into an anachronism: in the present volume both Siglind Bruhn and Claus Clüver do not confine themselves to semiotic or formalistic issues but instead incorporate ideological and religious aspects in their presentations. Recently, Marion Froger and Jürgen E. Müller (2007) edited Intermédiaité et socialité: Histoire et géographie d’un concept (Münster: Nodus) which, despite its title and the interesting contributions, offers little when it comes to changing the overall direction of intermediality studies (‘socialité’ is more or less synonymous with ‘history’ or ‘context’).


20. Mitchell and Cook have not, I believe, referred to each other’s work.


22. Ibid., p. 126.

23. Ibid., p. 125.


Intermediality Revisited: Some Reflections about Basic Principles of this Axe de pertinence

Jürgen E. Müller

Nowadays the research axis or axe de pertinence of intermediality is keeping numerous scholars busy at universities and research centres all over the globe and, in fact, this concept proves to be a broad field, a ‘weites Feld’ for the many disciplines it involves. The variety of aspects of the concept of ‘intermediality’ makes it very difficult or almost impossible to present some sort of general overview with regard to all the options without opening a sort of academic bookkeeper discourse on different terminological, theoretical, methodological and historical items. In this article, I will not undertake such an enterprise, which – as we all know – has been done by several scholars who offer critical volumes on intermedial research or typologies of different sorts of intermedial studies. Instead, I would like to develop some aphorisms on the actual state of affairs of intermedial studies and some perspectives for a historical intermedial approach, which will start from the reflections of one of its almost forgotten ‘fathers’, Marshall McLuhan’s comments on the media in the electronic era.

When is a medium a medium and when is a new medium a new medium?

One of the crucial questions – if not the crucial question – of any study of media encounters or of intermediality is the question of how to conceive of a ‘medium’. We know dozens of proposals to define a medium on the basis of different scientific paradigms ranging from philosophical, social, economical, biological, communicational and technological frames to channels of discourse, simulations and patterns of actions or of cognitive processes – to mention just a few items. McLuhan, for example, uses the notions of ‘medium’ and ‘media’ in a very open, sometimes blurred or blurring way. ‘Medium’, ‘media’ or ‘technology’ cover spoken and written words as well as money, clocks, comics, wheels, bicycles, automobiles, telegraphs, phonographs, light, movies, radio, television, weapons, automation – to mention only the most prominent. All these different concepts of media
and medially inevitably have strong impacts on any research and work in the field of intermediality.

In my eyes a *semiological* and *functional* concept of media, relating media to socio-cultural and historical processes, still seems to be the most helpful framing for any sort of intermedial research. It will be open for aspects of materiality as well as for aspects of meaning. For the moment and with regard to the objectives and strategies of this essay, however, these hints to a theoretical frame should be sufficient.

If one of the most evident and relevant fields of intermedial processes will have to be seen in the *encounters* between old and new media, we will have to ask ourselves: *when* does a medium become a medium and *when* does a *new* medium become a *new* medium? In both cases, complex social, cultural, technological and generic processes of institutionalization have to take place in order to install something we would like to call a medium or a *new* medium. I would like to illustrate this thesis by an example of one of the first representations of a so-called new medium which later was about to become the *Leitmedium* for almost half a century, ‘television’ or ‘farsight’ (to use one of the British terms of the 1920s and 1930s).

**Intermediality as a process – or the test case of television**

Due to its materiality or – to put in Baudry’s terms – to the specific aspects of the *dispositif* ‘television’, there are very few sources for the first transmissions or ‘screenings’ of the new medium which was still to be developed. Formats and functions of the live medium, ‘TV’, could only be preserved in other media, such as written text, photography and film. One of the rare examples of these beginnings of ‘early television’ is a *filmic* ‘document’ of one of the first screenings of television in Germany in the early 1930s in a so-called ‘Fernsehstube’. In this example, we can see (and hear in the filmic ‘documentary’) what an audience could and should find in the live transmission of ‘mechanical’ television, which – amongst other inventions – was based on the Nipkow disk (see Figure 14).

Was it really *television* that the audience was watching? There was a live transmission from some sort of studio, a dark *Abtastzelle* (scanning cell),
which gave enough room for one speaker or ‘entertainer’ to be presented in a kind of American shot to his or her public. On the reception side of the apparatus, there was an audience of some 20 people in a specific spatial arrangement and configuration, in the Fernsehstube (television hall). In this room or small hall, all axes of viewing were centred on the apparatus, called television – in Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s it was also called ‘Bairder’, ‘onlooker’, ‘ingazer’ or ‘farsight’. The spatial arrangement of the apparatus and the spectators clearly refers to patterns of cinematic or theatrical space. In this historical setting, television is neither a replacement of the open fireplace of our living rooms nor a home surrogate of cinema. It is somewhere in-between the spheres of public and private viewing. However, to put it in McLuhan’s terms, not only cinema and theatre are the ‘contents’ of this new apparatus, there are also telephone and radio. The connection between the (dark and small) studio and the public was guaranteed by wire and the barking and clearly visible surprise guest, Rex, a dachshund, evoking patterns of radio techniques and formats.

There is ‘live talk’ between the audience and the speaker or moderator. They have to be convinced of the live character of the ongoing ‘events’ and this specific achievement of the television technology. The apparatus thus allows interactivity between its public and its protagonists, which brings it very close to recent developments of the webcam and the webphone.

Obviously, there are few parallels or common patterns between this demonstration of a new dispositif and the concepts of television we have in mind when we are confronted with the traditional ‘cool’ medium ‘television’ which is undergoing crucial changes today. In fact, the medium we have described above is not television, and this not because of the fact that its content does not correspond to our expectations of the content of this medium; it is not television because, except from the screening of its picture on a glass surface and its live quality, it does not convey any links with the ‘cooling down’ medium ‘television’ as we know it in Europe from the 1960s onwards and as it has been conceived and described by McLuhan in his Understanding Media.\footnote{9}

In my view, there are two aspects worth mentioning. First of all, a blunt conclusion at this point might be that we tend to commit the common error (as, for example, Baudry did when he developed the contours of his cinematic ‘dispositif’ on the basis of a specific historical form of film and cinema, namely of the 1930s)\footnote{9} to generalize a medium on the basis of a specific, more or less accidental form of this medium, which one can find in many theories of television. For example, many of McLuhan’s comments on television were due to the very poor and blurred quality of the picture of television sets in the 1960s.

There is yet another more relevant aspect to which I would like to draw attention: the writing of media histories or intermedial historiologies. A growing number of scholars in this field conceive of intermedial histories as processual and technological developments within certain historical, economic
and social circumstances. By doing this, they explicitly locate media developments and media encounters within different cultural and technological systems and, naturally, we will have to follow them on this track. However, in many cases, they treat new media or technologies as if they fell more or less as ‘finished and polished entities’ from apporative, technological or social heaven, as is, for example, the case in Mcluhan’s Understanding Media. By doing this, their comments on the status and content of new media miss a crucial point, which can be circumscribed by the simple question: when does a new medium become a new medium?

Should we regard the live questions asked in our filmic document of ‘early television’ by the audience and transmitted by the technicians of the Deutsche Reichspost as ‘creatively participant response(s)’ to a new and cold medium? Or should we rather consider them as attempts to grasp the contours and possible patterns of usage of a somewhat loose combination of different, already existing cultural and technological series which might be circumscribed and be located somewhere between telephone, radio, cinema, vaudeville, theatre and others?‘Nobody wants a motorcar till there are motorcars, and nobody is interested in TV until there are TV programs.’ This remark is absolutely correct, but when and under what technological, social and historical circumstances does a demand for a new technology start? When is a motorcar a motorcar and when is television television, a new medium or a new technology? If, at our specific moment in the 1930s, there was not yet any fixed and stable televisions programming, does this imply that the officials of the German post office produced a place for a simulacrum or an imagination of a medium? Our example of the so-called early television demonstrates that media theorists and media historians have to ask themselves what television really is, when it has become television and what sort of modalities have influenced these processes of transformation.

Similar to the history of cinema and of many other so-called new audio-visual media, there is no exact date to be defined in terms of an exact starting point of the new medium ‘television’. Television is the result of a long imaginative and technological process which started at least some two centuries before the screening of the first broadcasts in Germany in the 1930s; it is the result of the meeting of different cultural and technological series or cultural paradigms, as they have been described by Francoeur and Gaudreault, implying different patterns of temporality, of media-encounters, media-interactions and corresponding user activities.

[A] polysystem made of several units of signification (literature, painting, arts and popular tradition etc.) which themselves are subsystems of the former and which have in common the characteristics that (1) they stand in continuous interaction with one another (2) inside a hierarchy with successive growth (3) and with a ‘topping’ work or collection of works
that serves as a first principle of structuring (4) which lasts long enough and has a sphere of concision precise enough to produce a demarcation of spatio-temporal coordinates.\textsuperscript{16}

A media history as a network and rhizomatic history, oscillating between the poles of technology, cultural series, historical mentalities and social practices, would thus lead us to an innovative understanding of the processes of media developments. Following Lars Elleström, technical properties (as realizations of \textit{material modalities}) should be regarded as central factors of the interplay between the ‘senses and the material impact’,\textsuperscript{17} which I would propose to conceive of primarily in \textit{historical} terms and categories. In this sense, an intermedial perspective will make it possible to specify and to differentiate McLuhan’s somewhat crude and global statement that the content of \textit{new} media is the \textit{old} media. Television in the 1930s, for example, meets the rather well established and developed cinema or telephone and the still expanding radio. It will have to undergo complex intermedial processes of differentiation and institutionalization and will have to recycle and reshape traditional genres and formats before it can become the medium we are inclined to locate within specific borderlines.

So McLuhan’s historical perspective would be in need of an expansion and a differentiation in terms of the involved complex processes and modalities which allow the old media to become the content of new media.

\textbf{The history of the concept of intermediality in the scientific community}

\textbf{Intermediality: a completely new approach in humanities and media studies?}

There might be some doubts whether the concept of intermediality really is a completely new approach, research axis or even theory in the field of humanities. This not only because of the coining of the term ‘intermedium’ by Coleridge, by Lessing’s study of the Laokoon sculpture, by Wagner’s \textit{(by the way rather vague) idea of the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’}, by Walzel’s remarks on the ‘\textit{wechselseitige Erhelling der Künste}’ \textit{(the reciprocal illumination of the arts)}, or in earlier days, by Kristeva’s notions on intertextual dynamics, or the revival of the concept of ‘ekphrasis’ and the development of interart studies by Clüver, to mention just the most prominent.\textsuperscript{18} All these, and many other, proposals are indicative of the fact that ‘intermediality’ has a long (not only etymologically grounded) pre-history and, as a \textit{Suchbegriff}\textsuperscript{19} or a \textit{Such-Konzept}, still has to be regarded as \textit{work in progress}. This ‘work’ implies procedures of theoretical framing (but not of closure) as well as historical studies in the field of media encounters and the interactions between these two \textit{axes de pertinence}. Following one of the main trajectories of Roland Barthes’ \textit{œuvre}, I would expect the so-called theoretical approaches to lead
us to history and history to lead us to theory, and by this to bring about a blurring of convenient traditional borderlines of academic activities. In this sense, intermediality is not a completely new academic concept but a reaction to certain historical circumstances in humanities, the media landscape and the arts. It could be conceived of as an answer to the nineteenth-century academic and institutional heritage of our universities and as a starting point for a repositioning of scholars and corresponding research in a situation of decline of the academic world. The history of intermediality and of reflections on intermediality reaches much further than the last two decades in discourses of media studies or literature.

Nevertheless, let us take a short glance at the beginnings of the academic discussions of intermediality in the 1980s. At that period, the isolating tendencies of media theories and histories and the rather banal fact that no medium could be considered as a ‘monade’ motivated me and also some other scholars to direct our attention towards the intricate and complex processes of media interactions or media encounters. The notion of intermediality was based on the assumption that there are no (?) pure media and that media would integrate structures, procedures, principles, concepts, questions of other media which have been developed in the history of Western media and would play with these elements. Consequently, the main objective and challenge of intermedial studies would then have to lie in the reconstruction of these dynamic processes and of their historical and social functions.

Departing from these premises, in the late 1980s I proposed the study of intermedial processes with regard to specific media products or œuvres (if we wish to call them that), of the interactions of different dispositifs and the development of an intermedial approach for media history as central axes of research. Today, some years later, we have to ask ourselves which of these axes de pertinence, or research axes, might have to be corrected, re-accentuated or re-orientated, and how many aspects of these claims, that were then – at least to a certain extent – provocative have been realized. Looking back, for me, two items still seem to be pertinent and worth being further developed: the concept and study of media history in terms of dynamic intermedial networks and the orientation of intermedial studies towards the social and historical functions of these processes, as we have already seen in our short ‘footage’ about the interactions and dynamics in the early phase of the cultural series ‘television’.

Following this line, the ‘newness’ of the concept of intermediality would then primarily lie in its capacity of being permanently reshaped and of reshaping traditional fields of research. Let us first take some further glances at the history of intermediality.

A Short Retrospective into some Theoretical and Methodological Roots

The etymology of the notion ‘intermediality’ refers us back to a play with the ‘being in-between’, a play with several values or parameters in terms of
materialities, formats or genres and meanings. In this sense, the materiality of media is from the very beginning one of the central components of the concept of intermediality; it will have to be linked to the so-called content matter. Looking back on the methodological realizations of the intermedial axis of research, the question of how to grasp these different sorts of intermedial plays seems to have been neglected to a certain extent. In fact, intermediality proves to be a rather fugitive phenomenon or, better, process which – as Paech has shown – is only accessible via the traces which it has left in audiovisions or – as I would like to add – in dispositifs. A search of traces of intermedial dynamics will have to be one of the central methodological options of intermedial studies. In spite of the usefulness of terminological and taxonomical layers, which cannot and should not be denied, such an approach must not necessarily lead to a taxonomy or a coherent descriptive system of all possible intermedial relationships or modalities. The pure algorithmic or mathematical fact that a supposed basis of – let us assume – 50 ‘distinct’ media (what would ‘distinct’ mean in this context?) might lead to 2500 combinations of intermedial interactions of two of them or 125,000 combinations of intermedial interactions of three of them gives an idea of the over-ambition or – on the other side of the coin – the over-reduction of such an enterprise.

During the last decades, many typologies of intertextualities have been proposed by Plett, Genette, Grivel, Riffaterre and others who – on the one hand – directed our attention towards options of textual interplays, but – on the other hand – led to questions about the gist of the taxonomic results. In this sense, ‘intermediality’ would have to be considered as an axe de pertinence, once again, a Suchbegriift, an axis of research which will not aim at the constitution of a meta-theory or taxonomy of all media systems, it will rather imply thorough historical studies of paradigmatic intermedial processes or encounters on different levels with regard to specific modalities to be differentiated in ‘material’, ‘sensorial’, ‘spatiotemporal’ and ‘semiotic’ categories. Thus, les illusions perdues, the lost illusions concerning the concept of intermediality, as they have been described by Eric Méchoulan, for example, would have to be seen in the light of great or exaggerated expectations and of ensuing disappointments which have been articulated during the baisse of the term ‘intertextuality’. Nevertheless today, ‘intertextuality’ – at least to me – would remain a valuable and complementary notion in the field of intermedial research. This research will have to reflect its theoretical and methodological basis and will have to be directed towards historical processes of media encounters and their historical functions which have left their traces in the materialities, the media products or other ‘sources’.

Before continuing our tour d’horizon of intermediality, let us take the risk of three short asides on the neighbouring notions and concepts of ‘intertextuality’, ‘interartiality’ and ‘hybridity’.
Intermediality, intertextuality, interartiality, hybridity

Intermediality and intertextuality

Without any doubt, we can draw some parallels between the history of the notions of ‘intertextuality’ and ‘intermediality’. At the beginning of their elaboration, both concepts were confronted with considerable scepticism and reserve in the scientific community, but subsequently they have been widely accepted and enriched by many elements which – in the end – have led to blurring tendencies. In the early phase (and sometimes even today), there were a number of overlaps of denotations and connotations of these two terms. In the 1970s several phenomena later to be described as intermedial processes were denominated as intertextual processes. Kristeva’s famous notion of intertextualité as ‘transformation d’un système de signes dans un autre système’ or Genette’s system of transtextualité and its five subcategories might be mentioned as paradigmatic approaches which tried to include – to a certain extent – intermedial processes in intertextual reflection.27 However, due to a very strong accent on textual and especially literary aspects in the ensuing analyses, the dynamics of intermedial processes have more or less been neglected. In this respect, the notion of intermediality had to overcome the restrictions of literary studies and to reorient the research axis towards interactions and interferences between different audiovisual and not only literary media. By doing this, it refocused on questions of materiality and the making of meaning, on traces of intermedial processes and social functions.

Intermediality and interartiality

The notion of interartiality can also be seen as a relative of intermediality. It would be going too far to attempt a summary of the many studies which have been conducted or initiated by Claus Clüver and other central scholars within the fields.28 Given the large number of common or different interests or even overlaps, I would like to point to one crucial aspect. In the early phase of intermediality, the art – or media – aspects of the ongoing processes were not always clearly isolated or recognized (at least, this is a criticism I’ve been confronted with as far as my proposals were concerned). Given this fact, the notion of interart or interartiality would help to maintain awareness of the artistic or intermedial accents of our research. An interart axe de pertinence would primarily aim at the reconstruction of the interactions between the arts at stake in the process of artistic production; an intermedial axe de pertinence would also include social, technological and media factors and will have to elaborate on modalities of these processes, the first being closer to a poetological, the latter to a medial tradition. Let us not forget, however, that arts and media do not live on separate planets of our galaxy.
Intermediality and hybridity

The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which a new form is born. The parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses. 29

—Marshall McLuhan.

During the past 20 years, the terms ‘hybrid’, ‘hybridity’ and ‘hybridization’ seem to have become almost as fashionable as ‘multi or intermediality’. This fact could be regarded as one of the many discursive reactions to (post-) modern media developments in the second half of the twentieth century which have often been described as ‘heterogeneity’, ‘eclecticism’, ‘fusions’ or ‘collages’. The mentioned processes seem to be typical phenomena of our society and media landscape.

By making use of the notion of ‘hybridity’, theories of society and media try to cope with these processes which – naturally – are not just new, twentieth-century inventions. With regard to this specific historical background there exist, without any doubt, several parallels between the denotational and connotational profiles of ‘hybridity’ and ‘intermediality’. It is, however, strange to see that, in spite of some common aspects or even overlaps, the notion of ‘hybridity’ has never been put clearly into relation to the intermedial axes of research. Some scholars use this term in a more or less synonymous way for intermedial processes, consider ‘hybridity’ to be a subcategory of ‘intermediality’ or put ‘hybrid media’ under the umbrella of ‘plurimedia media’. 30 These usages of ‘hybrid’ or ‘hybridity’ are more or less symptomatic of a rather blurred or unspecific way of handling this term within the framework of intermedial research.

I shall refrain from an etymological reconstruction of ‘hybrid’ and ‘hybridity’, which would lead us to the Latin iberida (bastard) and the Greek hubris (excess) and thus to interesting processes of hybridizations of language, but just point to the numerous and heterogeneous usages of this term during the past centuries, especially in the twentieth century. Hybridity is used in natural sciences, biology, cultural studies, postmodern theory and media studies, as we learn from McLuhan’s quote at the beginning of this short chapter. In spite of all allusions to ‘moments of freedom and release from the ordinary trance’, McLuhan’s hybridity still implies more or less fixed frontiers or borderlines between the media. As a meeting or clash of distinct media, ‘hybridity’ would then be closer to multi than to intermediality. Recent research tries to overcome the weaknesses of the rather static catch-all term ‘hybridity’ by opening it to the dynamics of media transformations. 31
However, I would still prefer the concept of ‘intermediality’ to ‘hybridity’, because the first opens two relevant options of research:

(a) The actual state of affairs of intermedial approaches allows far more differentiated synchronic and diachronic studies of media interactions compared to the quite general category of hybridity, and

(b) given the fact that the notion of hybridity is nowadays applied to almost all social phenomena and characteristics of postmodern societies, it is in danger of losing its denotational loadings by offering general catch-all categories. Intermediality would also have to include the dimension of social functions of the intermedial processes and this dimension will have to be related to interactions between cultural and technological series of the media landscape. I would not plead for a pan-intermedialization of all social phenomena, however, by labelling movements of migration as intermediality, for example.

Let us now return to our intermedial test case of television.

The test case of television revisited

As is well known to us, one of the most provocative components of McLuhan’s media-reflexive universe lies in the more or less consequent refusal of the specific content of the media. ‘The content blinds us to the character of the medium.’\textsuperscript{2} If we reread this position in a historical perspective of theories of media and culture and remember the dominance of hermeneutic or semiotic approaches and textual readings of the world which had lasted for almost a century in the humanities, or so-called ‘Geisteswissenschaften’, McLuhan’s proposal seems to be very convincing and reasonable. However, some 40 years later, as media scholars, we will have to ask ourselves whether it is not time for a rethinking of the dynamics and interactions between media, materiality and contents of the media, by taking into consideration the modalities of these interplays.

Let me briefly refer to our short example of the television transmission in the Fernsehstube. Not only in terms of Baudry’s model of the dispositif\textsuperscript{3} we could see and how technological qualities and elements of a blurred medium, still having to become television, interact with options of developing a content, and of developing possibilities for messages and social uses or functions. The technological patterns interact with the modalities of demonstrating an apparatus which – in Germany – some 20 or 30 years later will have become institutionalized and could then be named television.

The spatial and technological dimensions of the very small and dark studio and the flickering light rays fostered a vaudeville-like and spontaneous live-action and reaction, that is, the ‘showing of the dog’ in relation to an absent and present public. This aspect also supports François Jost’s research
on the beginnings of television where various types of interaction between cabaret and the developing dispositif can be reconstructed.

When television does not move, it happens often that it reproduces in a studio the decor of a well-known cabaret, such as Le Chat Noir or Le Lapin Agile, on which Radio comments: 'On the new set in every detail similar to the original, the Lapin Company around Paolo came to revive the unique atmosphere of the cabaret famous from the past.'

Tempo-spatial configurations, the framing of the camera, just to mention two elements, did not allow other sorts of ‘performances’ or ‘contents’.

In McLuhan’s terms this fact might be considered as proof of the thesis that only the (new) medium matters, that its fascination is grounded on its media characteristics and that its content is constituted by other old media. However, if we follow this argument, we – automatically – miss a sequence of complex interactions between media and cultural series. These interactions will lead after at least two decades of experimentation on the technological and format level to a phenomenon called ‘television’.

I would like to follow Gumbrecht in that the shift from hermeneutics or semiotics to media or materialities of communication is an indication of the loss of control of the paradigm of the ‘readable world’ over the humanities. Nevertheless, this loss of control must not imply a complete refusal of the content of media and of the interpretation of their formats:

the humanities would miss a perhaps unique opportunity of intellectual complexification if they simply tried to replace the traditionally exclusive concentration on meaning and interpretation through an equally exclusive concentration on media and materialities.

Gumbrecht rightly concludes that for the humanities – and I would like to put media studies under this umbrella too – it will be crucial and imperative to avoid any return to a monistic paradigm. McLuhan’s position and also the position of several other scholars might thus bring about an unnecessary reduction of complexity which misses the contemporary opportunity for the humanities of reaching a higher level of complexity. For McLuhan, the traditional semantic content or (possible) meaning of a medium – to be distinguished by its effects – is like the ‘juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind’. However, as watchdogs or media scholars, we must also remain aware of these pieces of beef hidden in the material of our media hamburgers.

In this perspective, recently developed axes of research, such as intermedial studies, will be able to differentiate McLuhan’s rather global proposals, primarily in terms of thorough historical studies. As our discussion of the documentary of a quasi television apparatus in a Fernsehstube has shown, these
axes will lead us to some level of intellectual complexity which conceives the relation between ‘sense’ and ‘materiality’, between ‘meaning’ and ‘media’, as a relation of tension or of oscillation – and not as a ‘relation of complementarity or as a relation of mutual exclusiveness’ and which could be characterized in terms of historical modalities. A study of the history of television as a history of encounters of different technological and cultural series and of corresponding social functions will thus link physical and spatial conditions of media to the meaning productions of their formats, as, for example, Hickethier has demonstrated for the history of German television from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Following this line, an intermedial and cultural history of the media will have to include the dimension of making meaning understood as a ‘complex relationship with several dimensions of materiality’. McLuhan’s remarks would then lead us to a network cultural history of media and media functions including social processes of the production of meaning. Without any doubt, the digital media constitute the greatest challenge for such a network history. That is why, having almost arrived at the end of our short tour d’horizon, it might be useful to develop some heuristic perspectives and questions with regard to intermediality in the digital era.

When the intermedial meets the digital

Even if – after several years of excitement and hype in the digitalized world – the phenomenon of Second Life seems to have lost a lot of its attraction, it still proves to be an intriguing test case for the applicability and relevance of an intermedial research axis in the era of Web 2.0. In order to give a rudimentary idea of its pictures, below is a still taken from a documentary on Second Life (see Figure 15).

It is interesting to see and to learn that the makers and/or the avatars of Second Life not only lead a double life in the virtual tempo-spatial configurations of the platform (which would be a rather banal statement) but that one of the central elements of this play with (and in) virtual worlds seems to consist in various types of usage of filmic or other audiovisual medial and generic patterns in Second Life. In other words: we can find many cases where the makers/producers/users prepare filmic or television sets with corresponding options for actional and narrative patterns. For example, a married couple ‘doubles’ its world in a bright and luxurious Second Life existence (see Figure 15).

At first glance, the interference of ‘real’ and ‘second worlds’ and the media powers of Second Life for a unifying digital representation of multimodal patterns proves not to be of primary relevance with regard to our intermedial axe de pertinence, but several other processes seem to be very challenging. For example, we should tackle the question of the analysis of the material and semiotic modalities of the interplay between ‘virtual materiality’ and
the ‘content/meaning’ of the actions of different avatars in/or between different sites of the second world. Following this line, intermedial studies will also have to analyse the role and function of the digital nature of the pictures in relation to the so-called live character and to the ‘interactivity’ of the dispositif. For example, what happens to narrative structures and elements of literary, cinematic or television genres when they are transferred into the dynamic virtual spaces and narratives of Second Life? What might be the social and cultural functions related to these and other intermedial processes and how could we distinguish and study the historical functions of certain modalities?

These are just some initial questions we might ask with regard to the intermedial processes in games or virtual worlds. Our search would not have to stop with the (blunt) answer that – in terms of materiality – the digital era will lead to new stratifications and multimodal combinations of formerly separated media in terms of the ‘unifying’ immateriality of digital codes. It will have to ask the question, in which way have the traditional audiovisual media and/or analogue sounds and pictures left their traces in these digital words, what sort of modalities might be reconstructed and what might be the resulting social functions of these processes for the user of the so-called new media? In this sense, the digital era forms the greatest challenge for intermedial research.

Concluding remarks – or what’s the beef of intermedial studies?

Let us return to the starting point of this essay and draw a provisional conclusion concerning the relevance of an intermedial approach. In spite of
some disillusionments or even disappointments with regard to the options of the concept or the concepts of intermediality, which – sometimes – can be very curative, an intermedial axis of research still seems to be very promising. Such an axis would not be a convenient motorway or Autobahn for all sorts of theoretical and methodological travels in the fields of media encounters delivering a broad system of systems or a general methodology or taxonomy of modalities for all sorts of media relationships. It would rather be a narrow and winding path in the jungles of intermedial processes, demanding thorough – especially historical – research. In this sense, the elaboration of an intermedial or network history of media would be my preferred option.

I hope that we could learn from our test cases of television, film and videogames that such an intermedial history or archaeology will also have to include the reconstruction of social functions of intermedial processes. A network cultural history of television, for example, has to cope with these functional aspects, which become more and more complex with the introduction of camcorders, video recorders, personal computers and MUDs (Multi User Dungeons). A study of these processes will lead us to technological interferences of the dispositifs as well as to interferences between different media genres. In the framework of this essay I could only highlight some of the central aspects and had to restrict myself to a few selected examples.

We have to be well aware of the risks of this procedure. There are obviously several other ways of writing a history of intermediality, some of which could and should be added to my proposed network. In spite of the risks taken in this presentation, nevertheless, I hope that the objectives, the outlines and the relevance of an intermedial cultural history of media have become clear on the basis of my theses.

The opportunities of such a history have to be seen in case studies of specific innovative ‘thrusts’ or ‘refractions’ of media (such as the introduction of new technologies) and of specific audiovisual productions which will lead us to the social functions of the intermedial processes and to the interactions between socio-historical, technical and other aspects of the processes of the dispositif.

The historical study of the theories of intermediality might thus help us to develop profiles of modalities and of historical functions of intermedial processes, ranging from specific patterns of aesthetic experience of the recipient to patterns of action and behaviour of individuals or social groups related to intermedial processes of certain dispositifs.

Notes

2. I would like to thank very much Charles Nouledo, Bayreuth, for his commitment in the editorial processing of this article.


4. As Claus Clüver points out in this volume, such a semiological approach still seems to be useful for many types of (inter)media studies.


8. All quotes are from the following edition: Marshall McLuhan (1999) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press); here p. 28. Naturally, the ‘definition’ of television as a ‘cool’ medium has to be questioned.


13. In Germany, the first regular television broadcasts and programs started some 3–4 years later, especially in connection with the Olympics in Berlin in 1936.

14. This also seems to be the case in the short advertising film *Wer führ II A 2992?* where some possible options of the still to be developed medium of television are explained to potential customers and to an ‘illiterate’ public.


17. Lars Elleström, this volume.


22. I use this term in the sense of Baudry's work. I prefer the original French term to the rather misleading Anglo-American translation 'apparatus'.


24. In her contribution to this volume, Irina Rajewsky points to the fact that media borderlines always have to be considered as historical categories and as (relevant, but nevertheless) imagined ideal types or constructs.

25. Cf. Lars Elleström, this volume.


28. See the essay by Claus Clüver in this volume.


31. For example, P. M. Spangenberg (1997) '... and my Eyes are only Holograms': Formen operierender Kontingenz in hybriden Medien' in I. Schneider and C. W. Thomsen (eds) *Hybridkultur Medien Netze Künste* (Cologne: Wienand Medien), pp. 7–12 at p.7.


36. Ibid.


41. *Mein wunderbares Ich* (Film) (2007) (Susanne Jäger, Director, Germany, WDR-TV).