

# Intermediality in Theatre and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships

CHIEL KATTENBELT  
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

---

**ABSTRACT:** This article provides a brief overview of the discourse on the relationships between the arts and media over the twentieth century, with specific reference to the concepts of mediality: multi-, trans- and intermediality set in discourse of arts and media relationships. I discuss the concepts, together with the impact of the growth of media technological developments, on the perception of audiences to the works of Wagner, Kandinsky, Meyerhold, Balázs, Eisenstein, Brecht, and to contemporary theatre and performance-makers, before concluding with a short presentation of my own current thinking about the concept and purpose of intermediality.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** multimediality, transmediality, intermediality, digital media, sense perception.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo presenta una panorámica general del discurso sobre las relaciones entre las artes y los medios de comunicación a lo largo del siglo XX, con una mención especial a los conceptos de medialidad, multimedia, transmedia e intermedialidad. Se aborda el impacto del desarrollo tecnológico de los medios en la percepción de la audiencia, centrándose en el trabajo de Wagner, Kandinsky, Meyerhold, Balázs, Eisenstein, Brecht y el teatro y la representación contemporáneos. Se concluye con una apreciación personal sobre el estado actual del concepto y propósito de la intermedialidad.

**Palabras clave:** multimedia, transmedia, intermedialidad, medios digitales, percepción sensorial.

---

1. Extracted material used in this article was delivered at *Intermediality: performance and pedagogy*, at an event funded by the Higher Education Academy subject area for Theatre, Music and Dance (Palatine) and hosted by the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Sheffield.

## 1. Introduction

A significant feature of recent art and media theoretical discourses is recognition that the arts and media should not be studied in their own historical developments and with their own rules and specifications, but rather in the broader context of their differences and co-relations. What is notable also is that in the discipline of theatre studies a change of paradigm is taking place. One contributing factor to the change in paradigm might be that our contemporary culture has become a media culture, with all the performative features that this entails, which is not to say a mediatized culture (Auslander, 1999). Another feature is that contemporary art practices are increasingly interdisciplinary practices. As has happened so often in the past, artists who are working in different disciplines are today working with each other – particularly in the domain of theatre – their creative work is «finding each other» – not only metaphorically but also literally on the performance space of the stage, and I suggest that this is because theatre provides a space in which different art forms can affect each other quite profoundly. Maybe we could even say: when two or more different art forms come together a process of theatricalization occurs. This is not only because theatre is able to incorporate all other art forms, but also because theatre is the «art of the performer» and so constitutes the basic pattern of all the arts (Kattenbelt, 2006). This holds true as long as the notion of art remains attached to human creativity; to human individuals who stage themselves in words, images and sounds, in order to make his or her own experiences perceptible to the audience; and that this is done with the intention to explore to what extent life experiences are shared with other human beings (Seel, 1985: 127).

In a variety of art and media discourses, a wide range of concepts have been developed in order to characterize specific relationships between the arts and media. What we can notice is that historical contributions to these discourses are usually descriptions of how the relationships between arts and media have evolved, whether or not that began with the intention to deduce rules and regularities in this process. However, theoretical contributions are usually conceptualizations of specific relationships between arts and media (whether or not with the intention to set out the criteria on which specific distinctions are based). This article is mainly a theoretical one, although it is based on some historical assumptions, and so I focus my attention on three concepts of mediality: multi-, trans- and intermediality. To phrase it very briefly, «multimediality» refers to the occurrence where there are many media in one and the same object; «transmediality» refers to the transfer from one medium to another medium (media change); and «intermediality» refers to the co-relation

of media in the sense of mutual influences between media. These concepts are not only used in different discourses, but often also in one and the same discourse where they can operate on different levels. The levels are not always explicitly distinguished from each other, and a consequence of this is that it is not always clear or certain what is or could be understood by these terms. My intention is to provide some clarification about the three concepts by defining these terms as distinctive from each other. However, it is important to state first that the concepts of multi-, trans-, and intermediality do not exclude each other. They stand for three different perspectives from which media phenomena can be studied with respect to their mediality. I also need to make it clear that I regard the different arts *as* media – that is my starting point. Personally, I do not speak any longer about arts *and* media, as in, for example, theatre *and* media, but only *as* media.

In many publications that have occurred in the past ten years or so, which have talked about the arts and aspects of their mediality, and about the relationships between the arts as media, we can find some assumptions that show up again and again, which could be summarized as follows:

1. Media changes and co-relations between media are important tendencies in the development of the arts since the beginning of the twentieth century. These are usually associated with the blurring and crossing boundaries between media; with the hybridization of media utterances; with intertextual relationships between media; with intermedial relationships between media; and with an increasing self-reference and self-reflection of the arts as media.
2. Media changes and co-relations between media have resulted in new forms of representation; new dramaturgical strategies; new principles of structuring and staging words, images and sounds; new ways of positioning performing bodies in time and space; of creating time-space relationships; of developing new modes of perception; and of generating new cultural, social and psychological meanings.
3. Technological innovations have played and are still playing a prominent part in the development of arts and media and in the interaction between all modern and postmodern media.
4. The historical avant-garde created the necessary conditions under which media change and co-relations between media could develop as important features of modern and post-modern art, in particular as far as it is related to the exchangeability of expressive means and aesthetic conventions between media, and to the playful staging of signs from which modern and post-modern arts derive a pre-eminently performative (not to say theatrical) and self-critical aspect.

## 2. **Multimediality**

In art and media theoretical discourses the concept of multimediality is used at two different levels. On the one hand at the level of sign systems (word, image, sound) and on the other hand at the level of different disciplines as distinguished as different (institutionalized) cultural action domains or practices (literature, visual arts, music, theatre, film, television, video, internet etc). At the level of sign systems an utterance, for example, is multimedial because it consists of a combination of words (written, shown or spoken), images (still or moving, graphic or photographic) and/or sounds (environmental sounds, soundscapes, music, speech etc). Similarly, digital objects like websites may be considered as multimedial in so far as they are equipped with words, images and/or sounds. It is interesting to note that computers, in which words, images and sounds are made, processed and played back, are usually referred to as multimedia computers. The term was invented by the computer industry in order to emphasize that the computer can be used for many different aims such as editing video recordings, composing music and playing games. Multimediality is often mentioned as a feature of digital media, which in interaction with the features of virtuality, interactivity and connectivity constitute the specificity of digital media (Raessens, 2001). Thus, at the level of the sign systems, we could consider (analogous to digital media) theatre performances, sound films, television broadcasts and video recordings as multimedial.

The multimediality of media is usually, but not always, restricted to audio-visuality, that is to say, to what we perceive with our so-called «distance senses», our eyes and ears, which are the two senses that are so important for developing our intelligent capacity of structuring the world and ourselves in relation to it, in time and space – a capacity, by the way, which allows us also to keep things at a distance. Time and space are still the two main dimensions by which we distinguish media from each other and determine their specificity. Such a determination of the specificity of media is usually related to their materiality, although we may notice that in the media comparative discourse there is apprehensiveness about ascribing the specific features of a medium to its materiality.

At the level of differentiating between media, the concept of multimediality refers to a combination of different media instead of different sign systems in one and the same object. Strictly speaking, this means that only theatre can be ascribed as multimedial, for theatre is the only medium that can incorporate all other media without damaging the specificity of these media and its own specificity (Kandinsky, 1912/1923) at least as far as the materiality of the different media is concerned. Theatre on film and theatre on television or on video or DVD is, in its mediatized form, no longer theatre but respectively film,

television, video or DVD, and, as such, at most a representation of theatre; whereas film, television, video and DVD are, even as elements of a theatrical performance, still film, television, video and DVD; although the images and sounds that these media provide are not only screened or played back, but also staged, and, in this capacity, not only cinematic, televisual, videographic or digital, but at the same time theatrical.

It is because of its capacity to incorporate all media that we can consider theatre as a hypermedium, that is to say, as a medium that can contain all media. Maybe it is because of this specificity that the theatre has always played and continues to play such an important role in the exchanges between the arts. In contemporary theatre, digital technology functions in the exchanges between the arts as an interface. To think this assumption one step further, we might say that at the level of the medium, theatre is a physical hypermedium, whereas at the level of sign systems the Internet is a virtual hypermedium. It is because it is a hypermedium that theatre provides, as no other art, a stage for intermediality. On this stage, the performer is the player of the different media who acts in the empty spaces between the media. Concluding this section, we may also say that multimediality can also be defined with respect to a project, instead of an individual object, for example, the project *Tulse Luper Suitcases* by Peter Greenaway «[which] includes three feature films, a TV series, 92 DVDs, CD-ROMS, and books» (<http://petergreenaway.co.uk/tulse.htm>- accessed 16-02-2007)

### 3. Transmediality

The concept of transmediality is mainly used in art and communication theoretical discourses for referring to the change (transposition, translation etc) from one medium to another. This transfer may apply to the content (to what is represented, the story) or to the form (in formalistic terms we might say to the principles of construction, stylistic procedures and aesthetic conventions). At the level of the content the concept refers in particular to those media changes which become absent, for example, the way that the specific features of the source medium become lost in the process of transposition. Notably, most feature films that are based on a novel are transpositions of stories, which do not take into account the specific literary features of the original narration. These features are usually ignored: once converted into the other medium very little reminds us of the medium specificity of the literary original. This is connected with the compulsion of transparency that applies to the feature film as a mass medium because the ultimate consequence of a film medium that defines its audience as a mass is that it wipes out its mediality for the sake of an optimal accessibility of the world that is represented in the film. This transparency is, like the classical

mode of film art itself, an invention of the 19th-century novel. In the course of the 19th century the narrator hides himself more and more behind the story that is told - as if mediation is not the case at all. With his disappearance, the narrator deprives himself from the possibility of comments, which also implies that he sacrifices to a certain extent his authority. However, there is also something to gain: on the one hand, the possibility of an accurate and detailed descriptions of the events and actions that are taking place in the story; on the other hand, an extensive description of the experiences through which one or more characters in the story are living – and it is the same with the classical mode of film art.

A transposition of construction principles, stylistic procedures and aesthetic conventions means that one medium takes-up or imitates the representational principles of another medium. As an example that is particularly pertinent to theatre and film we may think of the free exchange of expressive means between different media that are characteristic of German Expressionism. Such a taking-up or imitation by another medium may be considered either as an ideal, or as a shortcoming. Considered as an ideal, I think of Vsevolod Meyerhold's idea of a cinematification of the theatre (Meyerhold, 1930: 254). What he had in mind was a high speed alternation of individual scenes - like in film, which according to Meyerhold, did not necessarily imply that film projections should be used in the theatre performance even though he was one of the first directors who experimented with film projections in the theatre (Murray, 1972). Considered as a shortcoming, we may think of Béla Balázs' characterization of film in its beginnings (let's say until 1915) as «photographed theatre» (Balázs, 1973 [1938]: 150). At that historical moment, film relied on the methods of representation of theatre, at least within the individual scenes, which presented spatial totality and invariability of perspective and distance. Film began to develop its own language from the moment that it broke through the theatrical methods of representation, which meant that the space was no longer shown as a totality, and that perspective and distance could change all the time by changing the position and the framing of the camera.

The taking-up or imitation of the methods of representation of one medium by another medium can also function as a specific, medium-crossing form of intertextuality, which implies that one medium refers to another medium (Balme, 2001: 148-150). In the book *Transmedialität* the concept of transmediality emphasizes, in particular, the process of transition from the source medium to the target medium. Simanowski (2006: 44) defines transmediality as «the change of a medium into another medium as a constituting and conditioning event of a hybrid aesthetic phenomenon» [my translation]. Hybridization stands for the mixture of the diverse. When transmediality is conceived of as the representation of one medium in and by

another medium, we come very close to the frequently used concept of *remediation*, introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999). They define remediation as «the representation of one medium in another» (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 45). They consider remediation as «a defining characteristic of the new digital media» (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 45). They distinguish different forms or grades of remediation dependent on the specific effect that is desired by the artist. They recognize two motives of remediation: tribute and rivalry. In the case of tribute, the new medium imitates the old medium by putting itself aside. In the case of rivalry, the new medium places the old medium in a new context or absorbs the old medium almost completely. These two motives correspond with the «double logic» of remediation: transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. The first logic aims at making the user forget the medium, whereas the second logic aims at making the user aware of the medium. Both logics are inextricably linked to each other and in the end they aim at the same thing, which is to exceed the restrictions of representation in order to intensify the experience of the real, even in those cases in which we know that the real is everything but real, but it could be real (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 53).

#### **4. Intermediality**

The concept of intermediality is, like the concepts of multi- or transmediality, used in different discourses. This is particularly pertinent because over many years the concept of intermediality has been so frequently used in different discourses and in different meanings that it is almost impossible to map out its semantic field or range. Irina Rajewski (2005: 44) is right when she states that everybody who uses the concept intermediality is obliged to define it. As far as the concept is used as distinct from other concepts of mediality, it emphasizes, in particular, the aspect of mutual influence (interaction). For my own contribution to the art and media theoretical discourses I like to use the concept intermediality with respect to those co-relations between different media that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, which in turn leads to a refreshed perception. Intermediality assumes a co-relation in the actual sense of the word, that is to say a mutual affect. Taken together, the redefinition of media co-relationships and a refreshed perception resulting from the co-relationship of media means that previously existing medium specific conventions are changed, which allows for new dimensions of perception and experience to be explored. In making this claim, I recognise that intermediality is an operative aspect of different media, which is more closely connected to the idea of diversity, discrepancy and hypermediacy (in the sense of Bolter and

Grusin) than to the idea of unity, harmony and transparency. Intermediality assumes an in-between space – «an inter» – from which or within which the mutual affects take place.

To give some historical references, the concept of intermediality today can be more closely associated with the *Bühnenkompositionen* (stage compositions) of Wassily Kandinsky (1912/1923) as opposed to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner (1850) because Wagner strived with his music dramas for a reunification and reintegration of the arts under the primacy of music. Wagner's aim for the «artwork of the future» of his day was for the spectator to be immersed into the represented world. Kandinsky on the contrary strived with his stage compositions for a theatre that could function again as «a hidden magnet» that makes the different arts affect each other. The interplay of the arts, as Kandinsky (in Bill, 1973: 125) imagined it, as «a dynamics of musical, pictorial and choreographed movements» was, according to him, only possible because each individual art had developed its own purity of expression in a relative independence from the other arts. Kandinsky's aim was not illusion, but the expression of inner experiences («the vibrations of the soul»).

We may also think of the concept of «montage of attractions» which Sergej Eisenstein (1981 [1923]: 16) developed initially for the theatre and later applied to film: the different elements of the performance should, so to say, crash on each other, with the result that a new energy is released, which directly, that is to say, physically affects a shock experience. We may also think of Bertolt Brecht (2004 [1930]: 102) who advocates in the prologue of his *Mahagonny* «a radical separation of the elements» in order to thwart a melting together of the arts - as is the aim of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* - and by that to prevent the spectator being brought under control of «magic», «hypnosis» and «unworthy ecstasy». The clear borderlines that Brecht wanted to draw should create in-between spaces, which the spectator actively needs to fill in. Moving forward a little historically, we may also think of the montage and fragmentation strategies, which Robert Wilson, Alain Platel, Gerardjan Rijnders and Jan Lauwers - just to mention a few theatre directors - used in order to knock over the traditional interruption techniques of the theatre.

In the course of many centuries, these interruption techniques have been developed in order to escape from the restrictions of the closed continuum of the «here and now» in which the theatre performance takes place, without affecting the coherency of the represented story and the causality of the represented action. Fragmentation, repetition, duplication and slowing down are used in order to intensify the continuity of the performance itself instead of sacrificing this continuity for the sake of an illusion of continuity (namely the continuity of the represented action). In contemporary theatre a notable example is the theatre

performances made by Guy Cassiers, who makes extensive use of new media technologies in his productions in order to represent from different perspectives the inwardness of experience and the outwardness of action. Indeed, in his theatre performances experience and action are separated from each other in order to connect them again in a new way. Cassiers represents different times next to each other (spatialisation of time) as well as different worlds, of which each world is connected with specific modes of perception and experience (Merx, 2003/2006). We may also think of the group Hotel Modern (<http://www.hotelmodern.nl> [accessed 16-02-2007]) and Carina Molier who, by using video in their performances, confront the reality of illusion with the illusion of reality, aware as they are of the difference between live and mediated representations. We may also think of the many theatre performances, films, installations and exhibitions by Peter Greenaway who has, like no other artist, and as an artist who works in many disciplines, examined the possibilities of modular dramaturgy, in particular, in its application to theatre and film. In particular, through his use of digital technologies he has significantly extended the epical methods of representations of theatre and film. Thus, I agree with Oosterling (2003) when he says that in art and culture philosophical discourses today, intermediality refers particularly to the correlation between art, science and ethics (politics) as a conscious striving for a breaking open of the cultural value spheres or action domains. From a trans- and intermedial perspective it is important to examine to what extent these changes and correlations have been decisive for the development of new modes of experience and expression. We need also to question how much the ontology of media is relevant, assuming that the dynamics of trans- and intermedial processes primarily concern the mutual relations between materiality, mediality and aesthetic convention of making and perceiving.

I began this article by setting out some of the assumptions that we regularly find in discourses on media changes and correlations between media. From a trans- and intermedial perspective it is important to examine to what extent these changes and correlations have been decisive for the development of new modes of experience and expression. We need also to question how much the ontology of media is relevant, assuming that the dynamics of trans- and intermedial processes primarily concern the mutual relations between materiality, mediality and aesthetic convention of making and perceiving. However, for research on media changes and co-relations between media, the interdisciplinary arts practice is the main point of reference.

## Works Cited

- AUSLANDER, P.** (1999): *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, London / New York, Routledge.
- BALME, C.** (2001): *Einführung in die Theaterwissenschaft*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Berlin, Erich Schmidt Verlag.
- BOLTER, J. D.; R. GRUSIN** (1999): *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge / London, The MIT Press.
- BRECHT, B.** (1930): «Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*» in **SCHWAIGER, M.** (ed.) (2004): *Bertolt Brecht und Erwin Piscator: Experimentelles Theater im Berlin der Zwanzigerjahre*, Vienna, Verlag Christian Brandstätter. 102.
- EISENSTEIN, S.** (1923): «Montage van attracties» in **EISENSTEIN, S.** (1981): *Montage: Het konstruktie-principe in de kunst*, Sunschrift 175, Nijmegen, SUN. 15-21.
- KANDINSKY, W.** (1912): «Über Bühnenkomposition» in **BILL, M.** (ed.) (1973): *Kandinsky: Essays über Kunst und Künstler*, Bern, Benteli Verlag. 49-61.
- (1913): *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in **BILL, M.** (ed.) (1973): *Kandinsky: Essays über Kunst und Künstler*, Bern, Benteli Verlag.
- (1923): «Über die abstrakte Bühnensynthese» in **BILL, M.** (ed.) (1973): *Kandinsky: Essays über Kunst und Künstler*, Bern, Benteli Verlag. 79-83.
- KATTENBELT, C.** (2006): «Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality» in **CHAPPLE, F., C. KATTENBELT** (eds.) (2006): *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, Amsterdam / New York, Rodopi. 31-41.
- (2007): *Intermediality: a Redefinition of Media and a Resensibilization of Perception*, <<http://www.palatine.ac.uk/events/viewreport/515/>>.
- MERX, S.** (2003): «Guy Cassiers, Proust en het gebruik van video» in *Proust 2: De kant van Albertine, script en werkboek*, Amsterdam, Theatre & Film Books / ro theater. 226-233.
- (2006): «Swann's Way: Video and Theatre as an Intermedial Stage for the Representation of Time» in **CHAPPLE, F., C. KATTENBELT** (eds.) (2006: 67-80).
- MEYERHOLD, W.** (1930): «Rekonstruktion des Theaters» in **BRAUNECK, M.** (ed.) (2001): *Theater im 20. Jahrhundert: Programmschriften, Stilperioden, Reformmodelle*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt. 252-260.
- MURRAY, E.** (1972): *The Cinematic Imagination*, New York, Frederick Ungar.
- OOSTERLING, H.** (2003): «Sens(a)ble Intermediality and Interesse. Towards Ontology of the In-Between», *Intermedialités*, 1: 29-46.

- RAESSENS, J.** (2001): «Cinema and Beyond: Film en het proces van digitalisering» in *E-view: een elektronisch magazine over theater, film, televisie & nieuwe media*, 01(1), <<http://comcom.uvt.nl/e-view/01-1/raes.htm>>, [25-02-2007].
- RAJEWSKI, I. O.** (2005): «Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality», *Intermédialité - Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, 6, (Special Issue: *Remédier/Remediation*, **DESPOIX, P.; Y. SPIELMANN** (eds.): 43-64.
- SCHRÖTER, J.** (2006): «Intermedialität» in *Theorie der Medien*, <<http://www.theorie-dermedien.de>> [01-03-2007].
- SEEL, M.** (1985): *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- SIMANOWSKI, R.** (2006): «Transmedialität als Kennzeichen moderner Kunst» in **MEYER U.; R. SIMNOWSKI; C. ZELLER** (eds.) (2006): *Transmedialität: Zur Ästhetik paraliterarische Verfahren*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag. 39-81.
- WAGNER, R.** (1850): *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, Leipzig, Otto Wigand.