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Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality

Lars Elleström (Ed.), Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, 270 pp., 15 b/w illustrations. ISBN-13: 978-0-230-23860-2, £55 (hardback).

Many readers will surely remember the type of picture book in which each paperboard page, featuring a person or animal, is cut in three parts, which enables the child to turn the “head,” “torso,” and “legs” pages separately and thus create combinations of fantastic, *cadavre exquis*-like creatures. The discipline that is the focus of Lars Elleström’s edited volume is often described with names consisting of three parts. The suffix (-“ity”) is thankfully stable, with only the “-(iz)ation” variety occasionally occurring. The middle morpheme allows minimally the options “-medial-,” “-modal-,” and “-textual-,” while for the prefix there is a larger choice, including: “multi-,” “pluri-,” “mono-,” “homo-,” “trans-,” “cross-,” “inter-,” “meta-,” and “hetero-.” In the context of these combinations one is moreover likely to hit upon similarly complex words, such as “transformation,” “transposition,” “hybridity,” “ekphrasis,” “imagetext,” “homo/heterogeneity,” and “multidirectionality.” If these words were used to name specific concepts, thus amounting to technical terms, users would simply have to learn to master them – as in any community of experts, whether of car mechanics or economists. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and while perhaps inevitable in any young academic discipline, this lack of shared definitions hinders its development.

In his introduction, Elleström explains that the contributions to *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* primarily attempt to answer the question what intermediality is and how this concept relates to multimodality – assuring the reader that the chapters have common, compatible starting points, but warning that “there is no absolute harmony” (p. 5) between them. In fact, only a few of the contributors really confront the really difficult theoretical issues. Unlike the editor, most of them are more interested in discussing specimens of intermedial/multimodal art than in contributing to terminological and conceptual clarity.

In chapter 1, Elleström begins by making the important observation that arts are dependent on “mediating substances” and that “there is a point in not isolating the arts as something ethereal but rather in seeing them as aesthetically developed forms of media” (p. 11). Instead of providing a simplifying definition of medium, he proposes that all media must be considered from three interrelated angles: as “basic media,” “qualified media,” and “technical media.” To avoid both the trap of essentializing media and of conflating a medium’s perception and its materiality, he opts for a bottom-up strategy, first assessing what are the “basic categories of features, qualities and aspects of all media” (p. 15). Elleström distinguishes between the material, the sensorial, the spatiotemporal, and the semiotic modality – the four dimensions characterizing *all* media. For him, text, music, gesture and image are thus no modalities or modes (p. 16) – unlike for instance for Forceville (2006) and Kress (2010). Briefly, the material modality is the physical interface of the medium (e.g., flat surface with changing images + sound waves for TV programmes). This modality comprises the following three modes: animate bodies; inanimate objects; and manifestations of non-material phenomena (sound waves, light). The sensorial modality pertains to physical and mental perception. It comprises three modes: “sense-data,” the bodily receptors that register these data and transfer them to the nervous system, and the resulting “sensation” of this

process. The spatiotemporal modality specifies how movement in space and the experience of temporal change affects the apperception of data (think of the differences between perceiving a photograph, a sculpture, a film, and a melody, which also differ in the degree to which they impose sequentiality in how they are accessed). The semiotic modality, finally, governs the process of attributing meaning to things and events, requiring humans to interpret signs. Elleström considers Peirce's symbol, index, and icon the three most important modes of the semiotic modality.

Assessing the role of the four modalities, however, is not enough for the analysis of a given medium, since interpretations always occur dynamically, in a particular context of use. Elleström in addition presents pragmatic aspects that need to be considered. The first is the "contextual qualifying aspect," described as "the origin, delimitation and use of media in specific historical, cultural and social circumstances" (p. 24); the second is the "operational qualifying aspect," which pertains to their "aesthetic and communicative characteristics" (p. 25). The latter involves questions such as under what circumstances sound is considered "music" and an arm-and-hand movement is understood as a "gesture." Elleström moreover points out that "genre" cannot be discussed without reference to the qualifying aspects. He suggests to call media that are mainly identified by their modal appearance "basic media," and those relying strongly on the two qualifying aspects, such as art forms, "qualified media," the latter potentially consisting of more than one basic medium (p. 27). It follows from the above that media are considered more or less alike depending on the degree to which they share modes and/or qualifying aspects. Furthermore Elleström discusses two types of intermedial relations: "combination" versus "integration," and "mediation" versus "transformation." The uppermost level of his bottom-up approach is that of "technical medium," which is "any object, physical phenomenon or body that mediates, in the sense that it 'realizes' and 'displays' basic and qualified media" (p. 30). The material modality is the "interface that can

be realized in actual manifestations by technical media” (p. 30). A technical medium is thus characterized by which basic and qualified media it can mediate.

Elleström provides a sophisticated set of concepts to characterize the similarities and differences between individual media and to discuss “intermediality.” To what extent the *terminology* he proposes will catch on of course remains to be seen, but his fine-grained distinctions allow for teasing out different dimensions of attributing meaning to (inter)media. Given the complexity of media, it is inevitable that the concepts are not easy to apply. But even their partial use will make discussions of intermediality and multimodality more precise than they hitherto are.

In her contribution to theorizing intermediality, Irina Rajewsky subscribes to Elleström’s rejection of an essentialist and static view of medium. She distinguishes the following dimensions of “intermediality”: (1) adaptation from one medium into another, e.g., novel into film; (2) the combination of Elleströmian “modes” in the service of a single work of art, e.g., opera, film, illuminated manuscript; (3) references in one medium to pertinent information in another medium (that is, intertextuality). The author elucidates these dimensions in a discussion of a dance theatre production (*Bodies/Körper*, Sasha Waltz, 2000), concluding that the various medial border crossings in this production alert us to the constructed, conventional nature of our conceptions of “individual” media.

“Intermedial topography and metaphorical interaction” addresses intermediality in terms of metaphoricity. Drawing on Black (1962) – rather than on the updated model in Black (1979) – Axel Englund argues that musical compositions may derive their meaning from metaphorical connections with verbal texts, or vice versa. His first example is Ravel’s piano piece “Le Gibet,” based on Aloysius Bertrand’s poem of the same name. His second example is Paul Celan’s poem “Anabasis” which uses a phrase from Mozart’s *Exsultate, Jubilate* motet. I consider his approach fruitful; in fact, although different modes are at stake, his

analyses are completely commensurate with my model of verbo-pictorial and other multimodal metaphors in advertising and animation (Forceville, 1996, 2007, 2009a), which also builds on Black's work.

Christina Ljungberg examines Laurie Anderson's *White Lily*, a "complex multimedial restaging of the short scene in Fassbinder's film [*Berlin Alexanderplatz*]" (p. 81), and an interactive art work by Lucia Leão, drawing on Peirce's icon/index/symbol trinity. While her enthusiasm for the art is beyond doubt, Ljungberg does not help much to further theoretical insights into intermediality or multimodality. On the contrary, calling music "predominantly iconic," photography and film "mainly indexical" and painting and verbal communication "symbolic" (p. 82) strikes me as an unhelpful short-hand characterization of these media.

The goal of Sigurd Kværndrup ("Media" before 'media' were invented: the medieval ballad and the Romanesque church") is "to demonstrate a special variant of the spatiotemporal modality" (p. 99). After pointing out that the medieval concept of medium "primarily referred to a spiritual, even a transcendent, communicative function" (p. 102), which contrasts with the modern McLuhanian emphasis on its materiality, Kværndrup argues that the church's nave is the space where sacred and secular could meet and therefore, on certain occasions, allowed for ballad-singing. He considers the ballad a truly intermedial art form, "which integrates four arts that we would probably call media today: chain dance, antiphonal song, poetry and image" (p. 106).

In chapter 6, Håkan Sandgren discusses the verbal, visual, and sonic modes of field guides for bird watchers. He demonstrates the pertinence of Elleström's "qualified media" concept by comparing old and modern versions of such guides (a strategy also adopted by Bateman, 2008, with whose work on field guides Sandgren was apparently not familiar). Particularly intriguing are the passages on the bird's sounds, which have to be rendered either by (musical) metaphors or by onomatopoeia. Sandgren ends by reminding us how, in the

interaction between the three modes, the field guide remains a mere approximation of the real thing – a healthy warning for students of *all* media that supposedly record and describe “reality.”

Sami Sjöberg focuses on incoherence and nothingness in the work of the French Lettrist movement, specifically of its founder Isidore Isou. Inspired by Dada as well as existentialism, the Lettrists exposed the inadequacy of words to convey the individual’s feelings by taking recourse to deletions, unreadable sections, and visually substituting words by pictures. The chapter is presumably mainly of interest to Lettrist *aficionados*, if only because Elleström’s distinctions are loosely or incorrectly applied (for instance, in Elleström’s categorization, the written and the pictorial are not, as Sjöberg states “media” (p.127), but modes within the semiotic modality).

Siglind Bruhn offers a “meditation on various art forms, media and modalities” (p. 137). Her two case studies pertain to music, and she asks how crucial knowledge and awareness on the listener’s part are for interpretation. In a riveting analysis of John Tavener’s opera *Mary of Egypt: An Ikon in Music and Dance* (1991), Bruhn shows how the musical themes interact with its staging. Of these themes, the “musical palindrome” is particularly intriguing. Bruhn argues that human listeners cannot perceive a musical palindrome if it extends – as happens here – beyond nine notes, and that this suggests timelessness and spiritual meaning, hinting at the Divine. Another theme, a drone that wavers between silence and perceptibility, similarly symbolizes Divine presence. Clearly, subconscious awareness of the themes is crucial for the intended effect. Bruhn’s second case study is a poem-cum-musical theme by the composer Olivier Messiaen, triggered by a painting by the British Surrealist Roland Penrose, “Voir c’est croire.” The music is an inextricable mixture of universal (i.e., “symmetrical”) themes, idiosyncratic themes (imitations of birds’ sounds – Messiaen was an ornithologist), and musical “quotations” (of his own earlier work). Bruhn’s

central point seems to be that the overall effect of both pieces depends on a combination of musical effects that are partly perceivable by listeners – and meant to be so – and partly escape their conscious awareness.

The central issue in Valerie Robillard's essay is that of intertextuality across media, specifically of "ekphrasis" – a verbal text (often: a poem) commenting on a visual image (often: a painting or drawing) – and "illustration," its reverse. Robillard begins by acknowledging that, however difficult it may be to develop categories in the description of art, it is nonetheless necessary, pointing to the usefulness of the prototype theory pioneered by Eleanor Rosch and popularized by George Lakoff (1987). She then presents her "differential model" tool, which consists of three categories and seven subcategories (Referentiality, with "naming," "allusion," and "indeterminate meaning"; Re-presentation, with "selectivity" and "structurality"; and Association, with "mythos/topos" and "dialogicity"), all briefly explained. Subsequently, the validity of this model is explored in a discussion of a series of photographs by the Scottish artist Calum Colvin, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (2002). She concludes her analysis of this very complex art work with the battle cry that "the real challenge [...] is to find useful frameworks by which to articulate fundamental differences among the media before we can begin to explore the nature and extent of their interaction" (p. 161) – a challenge that has been at least partly taken up in Elleström's opening chapter.

The focus of attention in Regina Schober's chapter is Amy Lowell's poetic "translation" of Stravinsky's *Three Pieces "Grotesques," for String Quartet*, which she proposes to consider under the heading of ekphrasis: a "verbal representation of a real ... text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (p. 164, citing a definition by Claus Clüver). Analysing Lowell's poem, she concludes that the poem obviously cannot reproduce the music itself, but aims at the reproduction of its effects, mainly by means of rhythm and sound. As other authors in the volume do, Schober points out that the artistic translation self-reflexively

draws attention to the affordances and limitations imposed by the verbal medium, and moreover, in this case, involves cultural dimensions as well.

A multimedia installation by the Brazilian poet and artist Eduardo Kac (*Genesis*, 1999) is investigated in Claus Clüver's chapter. The "biopoem" (p. 175) entailed the translation of Biblical lines into Morse code and having these subsequently transformed into DNA [sic], in the form of bacteria. Exhibited in petri dishes and exposed to ultraviolet light, manipulable by the gallery visitors, the bacteria would reveal "real biological mutations" (p. 176). Clüver analyses the installation's transformative and transpositive processes.

Dubravka Ugrešić's novel, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, contains a photograph that functions as the trigger for the exiled heroine's disjointed memories of former Yugoslavia. Katalin Sándor comments on this unusual feature in terms of, among other things, heterogeneity, multidirectionality, collage, and imagetext (a term coined by W.J.T. Mitchell), but offers no new insights into intermediality or multimodality.

The next two chapters consider film. Hajnal Király signals two trends in filmmaking since the 1990s: the "writer's movie," a self-reflexive, conceptual film genre focusing on writers and their relation with an envisaged audience; and the slow-paced, visually rich and narratively minimalistic movie, often self-consciously referencing literary and painterly traditions. Béla Tarr's 7½ hour *Satan's Tango* (1994), the adaptation of a novel, combines both trends. Király discusses various issues pertaining to its intermediality. Ágnes Pethő regards Jean-Luc Godard's verbose films as exemplifying "cinematic ekphrasis" (p. 213). Discussing a series of instances, she concludes that "the intermedial reference not only underscores the medial difference (a radical alterity) between cinema, literature or painting, but also identifies in these Others of cinema something that is beyond perception, yet essential in the filmic image" (p. 218).

In the penultimate chapter, Jørgen Bruhn first provides a brief historical sketch of how the “interart studies” of the 1980s transformed into “intermediality studies” since then. He acknowledges that the young discipline is in need of further theorization and terminological precision, and considers Elleström’s contribution to the volume an important one toward achieving that goal. A somewhat neglected dimension in intermediality, he thinks, is the invocation of one mode in a text governed by another mode, for which he suggests the term “heteromediality.” His example is the invocation of sound in onomatopoeia. In the final part of the chapter Bruhn addresses an alternative to the Elleströmian approach: “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” (p. 226). It is clear where his heart is when he refers to modern French thinking as “this magnificent tradition of considering art as an ideological fact” (p. 231). If Bruhn here means that the new discipline should not shun important, socio-culturally relevant questions, I sympathize with him. However, I have strong reservations about his enthusiasm. In the first place, while it is valid, and potentially useful, to consider art as a cultural database for discussing ideology, I am concerned that this approach nowadays tends to overwhelm that of studying art for its aesthetic qualities. I agree with Noël Carroll (1996, 2009) that it is necessary to distinguish between finding *patterns* in art (be these caused by cultural conventions or biological preferences) and *criticism* of art. The latter, I believe, should be as ideologically unaligned as possible (see Forceville, 2009b). Both are respectable academic pursuits, but they are governed by different rules. My second reservation stems from having seen depressingly many bad examples of the ideological approach. Too often what happens is that the critical ideas of a famous author in the “magnificent tradition” are somehow applied to a single artistic text in order to expose a hidden, nefarious ideology pertaining to one or more of the usual suspects: ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and

class. The problem is that (a) the application seldom yields interesting insights, since it confirms what the applyer already knew after studying the artistic text; (b) the applyer seldom accounts for how exactly the ideas of the French thinker have been applied.

Indeed, an already existing line of ideological criticism in visual studies and multimodality confirms my pessimism. The work by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), although rooted in Anglo-Saxon rather than French traditions, emphatically promotes socially engaged scholarship, but while offering interesting ideas, their analyses are often methodologically unsatisfactory because of this very engagement (see Forceville, 1999). If ideological approaches are to be taken seriously, they will need to be based on precisely the kind of formalist approaches that Bruhn somewhat hastily relegates to the background.

In the loosely structured final chapter, Jürgen Müller promises “some aphorisms on the actual state of affairs of intermedial studies and some perspectives for a historical intermedial approach” (p. 237). Notable among these is his observation that many theorists make the mistake of generalizing about a medium on the basis of its manifestation in a specific socio-historic context, a point illustrated by one of the first German TV broadcasts. Furthermore, Müller counsels that a semiological approach to media needs to be complemented by a functional one: what is the medium, at a given time and place, used *for*? In addition he warns against too much faith in taxonomies describing intermedial relations. A sober calculation reveals that if there should exist, say, 50 different media drawing on two modalities each, this amounts to 2,500 permutations. In the last part of the chapter, Müller gives reasons for preferring the term “intermediality” to “hybridity,” with which it is often used interchangeably, and expresses his worry (which I share) that in contemporary humanities research the focus on media’s materiality threatens to supplant attention to the interpretation of their contents.

Let me conclude with some general observations. Most authors agree with Mitchell that all media are mixed media, a view that, when adopted, has most far-reaching consequences for media drawing exclusively on the verbal mode. Concepts that are embraced with enthusiasm are (intermedial) intertextuality and self-reflexivity.

Notably, virtually all case studies examined pertain to *art*. In fact, Sandgren almost apologetically begins his chapter by stating that “if a field guide, nevertheless, in some way or other, should be considered a work of art by a recipient, this must be seen as a side effect, not as its primary aim” (p. 111). But in my view it is precisely this dominant focus on art that, from a theoretical point of view, is so problematic in the volume. Indeed, all authors speak with enthusiasm and expertise about “their” art works, and often have interesting things to say about them, but the consequence is that the terms and concepts they use are at best handmaidens to help describe the invariably highly complex art. That is, most of the chapters are samples of intermedial art criticism rather than attempts to clarify intermediality and multimodality “formalistically,” as Jørgen Bruhn would say. As a result, in several cases the terms and distinctions proposed by Elleström or other theorists are used loosely or adapted for ad-hoc purposes of description, and several authors feel obliged to neologise. What is worse, authors sometimes seem to become so enamoured with their adapted or newly coined terms that they forget that giving something a technical name can never be a substitute for an insightful discussion of the phenomenon it supposedly labels.

In my view, the best way to help forward the fledgling discipline of intermediality-cum-multimodality is to focus on intermedial texts’ functionality, as Müller advocates. This entails examining (1) narrative art; and (2) non-art, such as Sandgren’s field guides (for many more examples, see Jewitt, 2009). The further development of the discipline is also helped by the examination of corpora (rather than of single items) analysed in light of a clear research question, with an explicitized method, aiming for a combination of qualitative and

quantitative results (see <http://muldisc.wordpress.com/>). Systematically using Elleström's terms and concepts in the analysis of such corpora will no doubt help test, and perhaps even improve, their value for the discipline.

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