Intermediality and Media Historiography in the Digital Era[1]

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Abstract. This paper approaches the concept of intermediality as a form of operation, as work in progress. A historiography of intermedia processes, including so called new or digital media would have to unfold in a specific social and historical context. On the one hand, it is closely linked to particular artistic, material, media-related and communicative forms of action; on the other hand, it should always be seen in the context of production of meanings that grow from these actions for a particular historical audience or historical users. In short: intermediality is closely intertwined with particular social and institutional practices. Intermedia research is not that new as we might suppose. Following that statement this article presents a short retrospective of the concept of intermediality, of the *axe de pertinence intermédiatique*, where its interactions, overlaps and differences with regard to the notions of intertextuality, hybridity and interartiality are re-constructed and the options or advantages of an intermedia historiography are clarified. An archaeology of intermedia processes should not be reduced to a monolithic paradigm of "materialities" or "meanings," but should rather guide us toward new degrees of complexity in the research of intermediality in the digital era.

1. The Intermedia Research Axis as Work in Progress

The concept of "intermediality" still seems to enjoy high esteem among media theorists. Its success in the past twenty years proves that the concept evidently addresses central research concerns in the areas of media theory and media history.[2] Yet despite or perhaps because of this, we should remain cautious and critical toward a research axis of intermediality, and should maintain a certain reserve – as toward any theoretical phenomenon strongly subject to changing fashion.

[1] Translated from German by Miriam Sentner, M.A.

[2] If we consider the most recent publications of representatives of so-called New Histories, we can now find there a large number of references to the relevance of an intermedia research perspective for media theory.

Such a reserve or distance, in a hermeneutic sense, toward this concept, regarding it as no more than a "Suchbegriff", a search term (cf. Moser 2007), may prove helpful to anyone venturing to take stock provisionally of the *axe de pertinence intermédiatique* (as Roger Odin has proposed). If for no other reason, taking stock is provisional because the concept of "intermediality" is bound up in an ongoing process of development.

In spite of various, recurrently formulated research desiderata, and in spite of all attempts to draft a self-contained body of theory, intermediality research at present does not possess a coherent system which would allow a grasp of all intermedia phenomena (cf. Mertens 2000). Hence it is necessary to reflect in the future also on the theoretical foundations of intermediality research, to further study their mutual relations with other approaches in media studies. Above all, we should not neglect the theoretical perspectives opened by a media history approach. The systems proposed hitherto, be they structuralist or post-structuralist in kind, fail to do justice in almost all cases to the aims formulated in preambles – though they often claim to do so.

Their analytical categories, which cover only a very limited range of intermedia phenomena and processes, often emerge as inadequate, while the fields of "intermedia" which are used as examples in intermediality research are in need of discussion and extension (cf. Wolf 2006).[3] Intermediality research often remains within the shadow of literary theory, dealing mainly or even exclusively with (inter)media relations in literature or being guided by literary theories such as intertextuality concepts. In other words, in these cases there is no consideration of the complexity of mutual relations between audiovisual and digital media.

I strongly doubt that it will be possible to develop a comprehensive media theory system that embraces all processes involved. For this reason, instead of such a super- or mega-system I would propose a historical, descriptive, inductive, and perhaps more laborious approach that leads us step by step toward an archaeology and a geography of intermedia processes, including so called new or digital media (cf. Bolter and Grusin 2002).[4] From this premise, an attempt to approach the concept of intermediality will itself become a form of operation: it is work in progress.

In doing this, we should never forget that the concept of intermediality unfolds in a specific social and historical context. On the one hand, it is closely linked to

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[3] In this context, compare for instance the helpful connection between "frame theory," narratology and intermediality research, as proposed by Werner Wolf.

[4] Cf. the concept of remediation developed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book.

particular artistic, material, media-related and communicative forms of action; on the other, it should always be seen in the context of production of meanings that grow from these actions for a particular historical audience or historical users. In short: intermediality is closely intertwined with particular social and institutional practices. One of the essential factors to be explored further in future will thus be the sociality of intermediality (cf. Froger and Müller 2007).

As a concept and as a term, intermediality must always be situated in a historical, academic, social, and institutional context. Hence the history of intermediality leads us for instance to the development of the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences from the 18th to the 20th century; it leads us to the differentiation of diverse academic disciplines (and division into various "arts"?); it leads us to the ideas of the Romantic period, to modern art (cf. Zima 1998) and to academic institutions, in particular the Western university concept.

Accordingly, the rise of the concept of intermediality can also be interpreted as an institutional and territorial strategy (cf. Cisneros 2007, 15–28) in this sense intermediality would appear as a kind of reflex to ensure the survival of university institutions, ones that can no longer found their academic legitimation upon maintaining a strict separation between forms of knowledge. From this perspective, the concept of intermediality (like that of ekphrasis) would appear at once as a sign of the decline or termination of the Western university as an institution and as a starting point for a research instrument that would allow us to observe ourselves at work as researchers.

Must we then see the history of the concept of intermediality as a symptom for the end of the university? This provocative question raised by James Cisneros (Cisneros 2007) invites us to the following little expedition into the history and toward an archaeology of intermediality.

2. Intermediality: A New Approach in Media Studies?

Let us take a look at the history of this concept – or, better, at the histories surrounding this still developing concept. The starting point for the temporary and provisional way which I suggested in the 1980s to narrow down the topic, and which I would like to recall here, was the dynamic of media relations which called for a suitable analytic concept – as well as the connection between various approaches oscillating between (neo)formalist, post-structuralist, sociological, aesthetic, discursive, and historical foundations.

For myself and for some colleagues, the point of departure for this new approach was the necessity to account for an irrefutable fact: it had simply become unacceptable to see "media" as isolated monads. The familiar media theories and media histories were no longer able to meet research expectations; it had become necessary to turn one's attention toward contemporary audiovisual phenomena and their mutual relations, and to study their complex interactions.

At the time, the concept of intermediality was based on the assumption that any single medium harbours within itself the structures and operations of another or several other media, and that within its specific context it integrates issues, concepts, and principles that arose in the course of the social and technological history of media and of Western visual arts (cf. 1996, 70; 2000, 105–134) The primary task of intermediality research hence appeared to be to elucidate the "unstable relations of various media to each other and the (historical) functions of these relations." The following aims were paramount for me: the analysis of

a) intermedia processes of specific media productions,

b) interactions between various dispositives and

c) a new intermedia foundation of media historiography or historiographies.

Even if the contours and scope of the concept of "intermediality" still needed more precision, it was clear from the outset that media are to be understood as processes in which continuing cross-effects between various concepts occur, and that these are not to be confused with any simple addition or juxtaposition. At the time, it was already taken for granted that an intermedia research approach should not be based only on a synchronous analysis of media, but that it should aim to elucidate the historical development of media and thus prepare the way for a new media historiography. These basic considerations still seem valid to me nowadays, as we shall see below.

3. "Intermediality:" A Short Retrospective

The etymology of the term intermediality leads us back to the game of "being in between" – a game that compares various values and/or parameters. It takes us to the material and ideal differences between the persons and objects represented – the materiality of media. The question how far and with what methodological procedures intermedia processes of audiovisual productions are at all reconstructible was not adequately considered, to be sure, in the context of early studies. From the viewpoint of the present, the assumption that intermediality is an extremely difficult phenomenon to grasp, one that becomes accessible only

from the traces it leaves within audiovisions (Paech 1997 and 2008) seems an important point of departure – regarding the perspectives of studying intermedia works as well as the status of such studies. Accordingly, I consider an intermedia "search for traces" to be a very rewarding approach.

Although some colleagues these days quite justifiably demand an extension of the theoretical foundation of the concept of intermediality, the majority of models that, unlike Paech's search for traces, seek to make the concept of intermediality applicable, appear less convincing to me – whether conceived in a meta-disciplinary, taxonomic, or systems-theoretical manner (Spielmann 1998).

From this angle, the disappointments or *illusions perdues* (Méchoulan 2003, 11 and 15) regarding the possibilities of an *axe de pertinence intermédiatique* would turn out to be mainly results of exaggerated expectations, comparable to the disappointed expectations that we were able to find as regards intertextuality concepts or semiotic systems. My contribution to intermediality is thus designed not so much as a meta-element of an intermedia theory of media theories; it is rather characterized by its opening of the possibility to take a fresh look at media history or histories. This is because the claim to devise a meta-theory of media theories would, precisely considered, be a rather naïve endeavour which would fail to do justice to the complexity of intermedia processes and phenomena – which in turn reveal themselves in the infinite number of possible intermedia combinations and interactions.

Of course, the purpose can only ever be to grasp typical manifestations of intermediality theoretically and taxonomically. But how would it be possible to develop a system for all kinds of conceivable or already realized interactions? Owing to this doubt, I prefer to regard the research axis of intermediality from a historical rather than from a theoretical perspective.

The discussions revolving around "intermediality" have shown, moreover, that it is necessary to demarcate this concept as against "interartiality" (cf. Paech 1996, 17; Moser 2007; Clüver 1996). The features that both concepts indisputably have in common, such as the transformation process of particular artefacts, should not divert our attention away from the fact that both concepts lead us to different research areas: intermediality includes social, technological, and media-related factors; interartiality by contrast restricts its scope to a reconstruction of interactions between the arts and artistic creation processes, and hence inscribes itself rather within a poetological tradition.

It goes without saying that the emergence of an intermedia research perspective is not merely an after-effect of the new, postmodern relations between media and

media productions. The rise of such a perspective owes something also to a new paradigm in the humanities: it bears witness to a paradigm change from textuality to materiality (cf. Gumbrecht 2003, 173–178). In this area, one can indeed discern a change in the general orientation of the humanities: the division of labour that took place between the various disciplines in the humanities and the natural sciences around the end of the 19th century, with an orientation toward "text" and toward hermeneutic readability of various kinds of texts, served chiefly (and inevitably) as fertile ground for a need to reunite the separate academic disciplines – at first in the shape of a "textual reading of the world," later in the 1960s and 1970s in the shape of a turn toward various intertextualities. As we now know, the interpretive potential of such a "textual universe" just had to come to a dead end – one from which the materiality of communication offered a welcome escape (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1988).

Whether explicitly or implicitly, the question of materiality forms the premise for any approach aiming to understand the interactions between various media or media "materialities." That is because interactions of heterogeneous elements allow us to regard intermedia processes as the site of an "in-between," a volatile "between the media" whose traces are to be found only in their materials or media products.

The concept of intermediality thus returns us to the materiality of media as well as to the interaction between materials. These aspects should not, however, utterly exclude the question of social and historical meanings and functions of these processes. Or, in other words, the *axe de pertinence intermédiatique* must not neglect the making of meaning that results from its very materiality, even if materiality is just what it highlights. An intermedia approach that embraces this aspect would then allow us to reconstruct the historical genesis of these complex processes, and to account for the forms of media interactions as well as their meanings (Gumbrecht 2003). This seems to me a promising perspective, which I will explain later with the example of so called digital media.

Before I develop some of the essential possibilities of an intermedia approach for media historiography, I wish to insert a little excursus on the relations between "intermediality," "intertextuality," and "hybridity."

4. Intermediality, Intertextuality, Hybridity

4.1. Intermediality and Intertextuality

In my opinion, parallels can be discerned between the rise of the concept of intermediality and that of intertextuality. Both terms were initially received with some reservation by the research community. As they made their way, however, meeting with growing acceptance, their original concepts were enriched with other approaches – which, however, led to a blurring of their contours. Various overlaps even occurred between several denotations and connotations of both concepts. Thus in the 1970s numerous processes that would later be described as intermedia phenomena were categorized as intertextual (Rajewsky 2002). Let us briefly recall a few central points of contact between both concepts in the course of their history.

By expanding Bakhtin's dialogic principle, Julia Kristeva combined the concept of Russian formalism with the tradition of French semiotics and the postmodern from the group Tel Quel. Thus intertext gained the quality of a cultural phenomenon interacting complexly with other phenomena. The theoretical foundation for a study of the dynamic of (cultural) texts and their "authors" is formed by two of Kristeva's core statements: "nous appellerons intertextualité cette interaction textuelle qui se produit à l'intérieur d'un seul texte; […] pour le sujet connaissant, l'intertextualité est une notion qui sera l'indice de la façon dont un texte lit l'histoire et s'insère en elle" (Kristeva 1969, 443).

According to Kristeva, (cultural) intertexts are distinguished by their constant reorganization and redistribution of different sign systems. This means that these texts contain a "transition from one sign system to another."[5] Production of meaning may occur, for instance, in the shape of a transfer from oral narrative to written text; a transformation of several different sign systems, such as that of carnival, of poetry, and related phenomena, is also conceivable. Any signifying practice accordingly emerges as a field of transpositions of different signifier systems. The result is a pathway leading to sites of enunciation and to objects that always carry the connotation *pluriel* and *éclaté* within themselves. In short: Kristeva's approach leads to the concept of polysemy (Kristeva 1974, 59).

Roland Barthes's famous dictum that we are "swimming in an ocean of intertexts" leads us to a dynamic universe of texts in which the function of intertexts can be understood as a kind of meta-structure of literary production and reception (Riffaterre 1981, 4–7). Starting from this meta-structure, Genette

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[5] "… un passage d'un système de signes à un autre."

proposed the term *transtextualité*, which he divides into five sub-categories (Genette 1982; Müller 1996):[6] *intertextualité, paratextualité, métatextualité, hypertextualité,* and *archi-textualité*. This proposal has proved to be quite useful in the field of narratology (including film and audiovisual media).

Genette's employment of the *axe de pertinence intertextuel*, which for Kristeva was still open to intermedia processes, is in a way symptomatic for the development of the concept. The concept of intertextuality turned out to be a useful instrument for the analysis of literary texts, since it enables an exploration of mutual relations and connections between (more or less literary) texts. Yet at the same time this orientation also led to a situation in which attention was restricted to literary analysis and the study of written texts. The consequence was that specific media aspects, such as materiality or reception of media, were neglected. Intermedia processes were not adequately considered, or, if at all, were regarded as a marginal sub-category of the taxonomic system of intertextuality. Plett, for instance, speaks of a sign transfer in the framework of "media substitutions" (Plett 1991, 20); for him the category of intermediality is, however, subordinated to the forms of intertextual transformations that are oriented toward a "media substitution." In this respect, we have to conclude that Plett's approach neglects the dynamic and interactive quality inherent in the concept of intermediality.

For all that, from the vantage point of the present, intertextuality represents a key concept in the area of cultural and literary studies. Without any doubt it is one that, even if it enjoyed its greatest successes in the 1980s, still proves its usefulness for many forms of analysis. Hence it makes sense to ask ourselves, in the context of the category of "intertextuality," where we might locate the specific usefulness of the concept of intermediality – what might be the advantage or added value of this other *gros mot* as against intertextuality.

In my opinion, the potential of the concept of intermediality lies in the fact that intermediality overcomes the restriction of studying the medium of "literature," that it enables a differentiated analysis of the interactions and interferences *between* a number of various media, thus enriching the orientation of research with the aspect of materiality and the social function of these processes.

Before I go on to explain the relevance of an intermedia research axis with some comments on an intermedia history of the digital, it seems helpful to demarcate "intermediality" for a moment from a further term that has become fashionable, i.e. that of the "hybrid" or of "hybridization."

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[6] For a more detailed discussion of these concepts from an intermedia perspective, cf. the comments in my volume *Intermedialität* (1996, 93–103.)

4.2. Intermediality and Hybridity

Like the terms "multimedia," "intermedia," and "intermediality," in numerous scholarly discourses the terms "hybrid," "hybridity," and "hybridization" are currently in vogue. Speaking of the "hybridity" of social and media-related phenomena clearly opens helpful perspectives for description and analysis of a large number of manifestations and processes (cf. Müller 2006).

Possible reasons for the boom of the "hybrid" are doubtlessly to be found in social and media-related processes of the second half of the 20th century, ones that are closely related to (post)modern developments in Western societies and their media landscapes. "Heterogeneities," "eclecticisms," "collages," "fusions," and the like are regarded as typical manifestations of the current "epoch" revealing themselves in social and media-related areas. Social and media theories take account of these manifestations by attempting to grasp them by means of the concept of hybridization. From this perspective, we cannot doubt that parallels to the historical development of the concept of intermediality ensue. It is not difficult to understand that that concept targets on (post)modern forms and histories of media mixture – or, provocatively speaking, of "media muddle." In most concept drafts for a theory of intermediality, "hybridity" or "hybridization" is used without further reflection as synonymous with a description of intermedia processes (Müller 1996).[7] As an example of this undifferentiated usage and the lack of demarcation in the context of intermediality research, I would point to the definition of "hybridization" in *Lexikon Medientheorie und Medienwissenschaft* (Schanze 2002, 141)[8] as well as the most recent proposals by Irina Rajewsky, who includes "hybrid media" in the concept of "plurimedia media" (Rajewsky 2002, 197) without offering an explicit distinction between "hybridity" and "intermediality."

This fact may serve to indicate the necessity and usefulness of a mutual definition of both concepts, which I will attempt in the following.

The etymological reconstruction of the "alluring" and "dark guiding formula" (Schneider 1997, 7) of the hybrid leads us to a mixed form of two concepts from two language systems, the Latin *hibrida* (bastard, mixed blood) and the Greek

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[7] In my earlier publications, while proposing a distinction between intertextuality and intermediality, I only offered an implicit demarcation and clarification of the relationship between "intermediality" and "hybridity."

[8] "Hybridization can be found throughout the primary intermedialities of communicative practices, both in oral and in literary cultures" (my transl.; "Hybridisierung findet sich durchgängig in den primären Intermedialitäten kommunikativer Praxen sowohl in oralen als auch literalen Kulturen"). It is clear that "hybridization" is understood here as a sub-category of intermediality.

hubris – excess (cf. Samoyault 2001, 175). The term "hybrid" is thus founded on the process it designates. It denotes and connotes moral (later: artistic) and (more or less) excessive transformations of beings and objects. We can already discern this important function of the concept in numerous hybrids of ancient Egyptian civilization. There, by contrast to the more negatively marked valuations of the Latin-Greek coinage, mythological human-natural and human-animal hybrids such as Anubis the god of death (a "human" shape with a dog's head) enjoy high esteem as paradoxical and ambivalent manifestations and mediators between different dimensions of life.

If we glance at current usage of the terms "hybrid" and "hybridization" in the cultural sciences, we will find quite a heterogeneous picture. Meanings range from "multimedia interactions leading to the formation of communicative subsystems (as in newsgroups and chatrooms)" (Schanze 2002, 141)[9] to the disintegration of dichotomous gender roles in gender studies and to postmodern identity diffusions and crisis-laden dissolutions of the subject: "le cauchemar de l'altérité intériorisé dans le moi, qui devient autre à l'intérieur de lui-même ou bien se découvre du point de vue de l'autre, se voit et s'écoute de son extérieur" (Bernadi 2001, 117).

Hybridity plunges the subject into a crisis which makes it aware of its incoherence, its multiplicity, and its own negation. If we focus our attention on the contextual usages and definitions of the concept of "hybridization" in media studies, we can reconstruct these main tendencies:[10] following Schneider, we can find that the terms "hybridity" and "hybridization" are put to use in a large number of discourses, so that from the viewpoint of media studies a need for interdisciplinary clarification and differentiation emerges for these terms as well, to prevent them from falling prey to random usage.

In media studies, it is generally McLuhan who is named as one of the fathers of the (post)modern theory of the hybrid, since he speaks of the tremendous energies set free by hybrids (McLuhan 1964 [1999]). Several decades before McLuhan, whose ideas we will discuss more fully below, Bakhtin already formulated his hardly noticed hypotheses on the hybrid and on hybridization, a logic of "either way" (Bakhtin 1979, 244). The hybrid is to be understood as the ability to generate an orchestration of the image of reality in the novel. This may be done by specific methods such as "hybridization," dialogic interrelations between languages, and pure dialogues. Hybridization thus means "[. . .] a mixture of two social languages within a single utterance, a meeting, in the arena of this

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[9] My translation: "multimediale Interaktionen, die zur Herausbildung kommunikativer Subsysteme (z.B. newsgroups, chatrooms) führen."

[10] I am again following the very informative text by Schneider, "Einleitung."

utterance, of two different linguistic awarenesses which are separated by epoch or social differentiation (or by both of these)" (Schneider 1997, 24).[11]

By contrast to unintentional hybrids in language mixture, intentional hybrids require functionally differentiated societies as well as a momentum of artistic design. Unfortunately we cannot dwell on the implications of this distinction for linguistics and literary studies) (Schneider 1997, 24), and can only add a brief reference to this category's relevance for genre and discourse theories.

As already mentioned, the concept of the hybrid and the bastard plays a decisive role in McLuhan's universe of communication theory. With his category of the "bastard," McLuhan explicitly draws on the etymological roots of the term, integrating it within contexts of functional history: "The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For 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" (McLuhan 1999, 55).

Media-related hybrids accordingly set energies free which liberate our perception from habitualized patterns. Without sharing all of McLuhan's reflections – especially some postulated and problematic interlinkings between procedures using technical equipment (and related forms of our perception), such as the movie image by contrast to the (large-scale?) image of television – we can maintain that his references to connections between hybridizations and turning points in media history appear very helpful. "Hybridization" for him, like our concept of "intermediality," means a historical category that manifests itself in numerous mixed forms of media.

In the current discussion in media studies, the term hybridization is distinguished by denotations and connotations that are not so much media-historical in nature but rather generally theoretical. It is directed toward human-machine relations (Cubitt) (cf. Schneider, 1997, 33ff) interaction between the biological and the mechanical (Haraway), physicalities, technologies, and society (Stone), music and image relations in videoclips (Kaplan), construction of new a-chronological time patterns and links (Couchot), interaction between the real and the virtual (Boissier), code-crossing (Welsch), dissolution of binary gender oppositions (De Lauretis), and overcoming dichotomous categories by rhizomatic formations (Deleuze and Guattari).

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[11] My translation: "[…] die Vermischung zweier sozialer Sprachen innerhalb einer einzigen Äußerung, das Aufeinandertreffen zweier verschiedener, durch die Epoche und die soziale Differenzierung (oder sowohl durch diese als auch durch jene) geschiedener sprachlicher Bewußtseine in der Arena dieser Äußerung."

This short excerpt from the application contexts of the concept of hybridization shows that, with some justice, there is a current demand in media studies that the category of "hybridization" be subjected to a more precise analysis of observation levels, to temporalization and operationalization, to prevent it from degenerating to a general catch-all term (cf. Schneider 1997, 57).

If this term is not directed solely toward hybrid "objects" but increasingly also toward processes and the "logic of either way," it may indeed prove complementary to our notions of "intermediality." The common characterization of hybrid media as a "combination of hitherto isolated media units or materials" moves them closer to our category of "multimediality," which is distinct from "intermediality" owing to its "additive" principle.

Meanwhile, as our short excursus on the concept of "hybridity" and its uses in current media study discourses demonstrates, an understanding of this not so much as static and "object-centred" but rather as dynamic and process-oriented has developed in recent decades. The later application contexts of the hybrid as mentioned above do show helpful parallels to my ideas of intermediality, as for instance in the specific achievements and functions of media transformations.

Regarding our research axis of an interlinked and intermedia-oriented media history, the concept of intermediality does offer two advantages whose value we should not underestimate:

a) The level of development now achieved for the intermedia-related approach enables more clearly differentiated, synchronic and diachronic studies of media interactions than is possible by means of the rather general ideas of the hybrid – even though a small number of illuminating and relevant studies on the "hybridity" of media development exist (cf. Spangenberg 1997).

b) Since the category of the hybrid is transferred explicitly to just about all social phenomena and current conditions of society, it incurs a far greater risk than intermediality of losing itself in social and media-related generalities and random usages. My suggestion of a research axis of intermediality explicitly includes the social dimension and function of these processes, while considering these throughout in relation to corresponding (inter)media processes or interactions between various cultural and media-related series. (This is also to say that I wish to distance myself from current tendencies of a "pan-intermedialization of social phenomena" which seek to subsume such processes as migration movements of the 19th and 20th centuries under this category.) This search for traces should continue regarding other concepts, such as (post-modern?) New History and the role played therein by the concept of "intermediality."

But let us – finally – take a short glance at the options for an intermedia history of digital media (cf. Müller, 2010a).

5. The Digital Era as a Challenge for Intermedia Research

5.1. Digital Media and Intermedia History

Without any doubt, the digital media (in whatever way we may conceive of them) (Bruns 2008, 542ff)[12] turn out to be a great challenge for the intermedia research axis. Some time ago, Lev Manovich described the effects of digital cultures and networks as *cultural totalization*. This means that the still rapidly expanding digital nets would lead to a global network of various individual media, institutions, dispositives and infrastructures, and thus to a digital merging of phenomena that formerly existed independently of each other (cf. Manovich 2001). Numerous media theorists take the view that media forms in the digital age forfeit their materiality and material aspects, and that, having once assumed a virtual form, they become reshaped and recombined. This assumption appears valid, yet does it also inevitably mean that intermediality or intermedia processes (especially regarding material aspects) are deleted or cancelled, as some colleagues assert? (cf. Spielmann 1995, 117). I do not believe that is so.

Concerning this question, at least two arguments are relevant: media, also digital media, cannot and should not be reduced only to their material aspects. Despite all efforts to detach oneself from categories such as "sign," "content," "meaning," "genre" and "format," these continue to play an important role in any discourse on mediality and intermediality.

If we were to agree to this view, it would mean that intermedia processes would not disappear in the "general virtuality of the material," but that they would continue to be effective and return in a changed form or with a shift of focus (cf. Paech and Schröter 2008, 585).[13] "Intermediality" does not stop when it reaches the so-called new media: we find it "in" digital media, where we need to explore and reconstruct new, "re-medialized" forms of intermediality. This task at present appears to be the greatest challenge for our intermedia *axe de pertinence.*

One of the central challenges, in my opinion, for just about any intermedia approach to so-called digital media turns out to be the dynamics and interrelations between media, materialities and contents, as well as a reconstruction of the

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[12] Karin Bruns has rightly pointed out that there is no such thing as a "paradigm proper to the digital."

[13] I agree with Jens Schröter's proposals.

conditions framing these interactions. A historiology or archaeology of intermedia processes should not be reduced to a monolithic paradigm of materialities or meanings, (Gumbrecht 2003, 175) but should rather guide us toward new degrees of complexity in media research. Consequently, the relations between meaning and materiality, between significance and media would be conceivable neither as "complementary" nor as "mutually exclusive," but as a balancing act and an oscillation that needs to be reconstructed with careful consideration of the historical conditions prevailing in each case. In this research perspective, McLuhan's (inadequate) hypothesis that the "old" media diffuse into the "new and digital" media, would need to be updated as a history of intermedia encounters in the digital domain between various technological and cultural series with their historically fluctuating borders, institutional imaginations, formats and contents. Included as a central feature in this historiography would be a reconstruction of the *social functions* tied to the intermedia processes, allowing us to combine physical and spatial conditions of media with a construction of the meaning of their formats (cf. Hickethier, 1994).[14] That in this case we will be confronted with further variations or modalities (Elleström 2010) of intermediality differing from the levels of the "analogic" has been demonstrated by Schröter. This 'new' intermedia level does not, however, imply a termination of intermedia processes, but rather their continuation on a different scale, on one in which *ideas* of genres, formats, functions in re-medialized or recycled form play with the user's imaginative capacity. An intermedia-oriented cultural history of digital media and their social functions would thus have to embrace the social processes of meaning constitution.

   At this juncture, the question when a *digital* medium turns into a *digital* medium (as soon as digital chips/gadgets are used in recording, storage, transmission and reproducing devices or only by assuming other, *functionally* defined *qualities* such as the surely well-known factors of interactivity, sociality, and immersion offers) and the question in what societal-historical functions this "digitality" manifests itself becomes one of the central research axes of this history. Concepts or research axes on the intermediality of the digital would need to take account of these questions. Now, however, in a paradigmatic way three test cases of historical intermediality research of the digital are to be considered.

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[14] As for instance Hickethier has demonstrated for the history of German television in the 1950s and 1960s.

5.2. Internet News Pages – a First Test Case

The internet news offered by journals, television channels, and other providers have become some of the most successful products or formats of the Web 2.0. Long dismissed as a kind of cheap and transient spin-offs from "proper" print or television media, they nowadays appear to have moved to the centre of interest for producers and consumers. During the past few years, the perception of online departments of digital journals has completely changed: in the beginning the work done there was taken to be marginal and a *quantité négligeable* of "true journalism." This, incidentally, is a certain parallel to the beginnings of television, when at least in Nazi Germany only "unambitious" or "politically unreliable" journalists were demoted to television. Meanwhile, internet news has become a very real and significant presence – and editors, schools of journalism, and media theorists need to account for this.

Let us take a quick glance at a page from *Focus Online*. Regarding our axis of questions, I would like to point to two relevant phenomena.

See: Fig. 1. Even if this internet page at first glance seems like a kind of digital ragbag, an accumulation, combination, and ultimately "merging" of media that in our imagination previously existed as *distinct* and *individual* media, this does not by any means delete our *memory* and our *image* of the original media configuration of analogic "individual media" and their correlating *genres* and *formats* (Bruns 2008, 543ff).[15] In other words: the surface of these pages leads to a shift of our knowledge about historical media configurations, about constructed and imagined media borders, while at the same time it enables playing with some essential possibilities of these "old" media. We make decisions and navigate on these pages according to our *expectations* regarding the profiles and the *added value* of the diverse elements, which range from texts and pictures to short videos or television news. In this process, the web pages appear to be a kind of media amalgam (similar to the way Robida in 1883 described the "téléphonoscope," the "television," in his utopian novel *Le vingtième siècle*), which is far more than merely the sum of its individual elements and possibilities. In this perspective, the user-related (further) development of these configurations and of their potential interplay and combinations appears as one of the greatest challenges of the future – both for intermedia-oriented media studies and for online journalism itself (cf. Tholen, 1999, 16 and 22).[16]

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[15] It would surely be a rewarding effort to compare the term as suggested by me (derived from the context of genre-historical and functional theories) with the profile formations proposed by Karin Bruns.

[16] These processes could be understood in Georg Christoph Tholen's sense, as "media-unspecific representability of media-specific forms of representation" ("medienunspezifische Darstellbarkeit von medienspezifischen Darstellungsweisen").

However, a further important aspect needs attention. Quite clearly, these pages play with a large number of historically evolved configurations and formats. This applies to the relationship between written texts and pictures which, despite the phenomenon's supposedly innovate character, is still guided by the patterns of the *first magazines* or *illustrated journals* in the second half of the nineteenth century; it applies to the photo galleries alluding to *public albums*, *pulp* and *glossy magazines* or *mass circulation tabloids*; it applies to video news which refer to *television news formats*; and it applies finally to videoclips which, by showing accidents, airplane crashes or natural disasters, place themselves in the *vaudeville* tradition which offered, and still offers, its viewers the extraordinary frisson of pleasure in confronting menaces and scares of our everyday (and not so everyday) life. The McLuhanesque ideas of a "technological-media cannibalism" are hence in need of an intermedia genre-theoretical and genre-historical revision.

If we follow our intermedia research axis, we should ask ourselves what happens with all these configurations, these genre and format patterns, when they are re-medialized in a digital context. How do they still manage to attract the user's/navigator's attention and motivate her or him to a "reading" of these sites?

5.3. Video and Film as Second Test Case

Video games and their historical functions evidently appear as a new challenge for the intermedia research axis, as I will briefly explain by using the examples of video games and the motion picture *Doom*. [Figs. 2–3.]

Doom is just one of numerous instances in which a game is re-medialized and transformed into a motion picture. Without detailing the contents of the motion picture or the possibilities of the game, we can classify it as "first-person shooter." Concerning our question about the theoretical options of the research axis of intermediality and the concept of "configuration" for studying digital media, I would like to call attention rather to the following processes: in games of this kind, the player/user has to solve a series of problems, such as eliminating aliens or superhuman monsters (Bouwknegt 2008, 101–121). The individual acts in the game are thus generated by a set of rules that enable the players a choice of various options for action, so that they can conclude the game in their own manner.

A film version of this game, or other games, must transform these configurative principles into a new configuration and form of narrative linearity (at least if the film is to follow Hollywood's traditional, transparent narrative patterns). Regarding our intermedia research axis, this leads us to a conflict between

ludological or narratological explanatory options, one that is solvable (cf. Bouwknegt 2009). Remedializing the manifold digital game patterns in a film embraces highly complex intermedia processes which lead, among other things, to a reduction of numerous game possibilities in order to enable a coherent narrative form – without destroying the fascination of the *topos* or the theme. What instruments can our intermedia *axe de pertinence* give us here, to grasp and analyze these processes?

A combination of the concept of *remedialization* and the historically oriented research axis of *intermediality* will guide us toward new insights – regarding both a recycling of narrative patterns in the digital game world and a recycling of game patterns in movies. In this sense, the relevance of intermediality research for the historical reconstruction of configurative processes within and between *games* and *movies* should emerge clearly. Let us then turn toward our last instance of digital paradigms.

5.4. Second Life as Third Test Case

Even if the phenomenon of *Second Life* – after months of excitement and public interest in the digitalized world – has soon lost much of its attraction, it is still a fascinating test case for the applicability and relevance of an intermedia research axis regarding Web 2.0.

It is interesting to see and to experience that the makers and/or avatars of *Second Life* not only lead a double life within the virtual, spatial-temporal configurations of the platform (declaring this would be somewhat banal), but that one of the central elements of this game with (and in) virtual worlds can be seen in the multi-layered use of media-related and generic patterns of *cinematic* or other *audiovisual* kinds. [Figs. 4–5.] In other words: we find many cases in which the makers/producers/ users take cinematic elements or elements of television with the potential for action and narrative patterns that are peculiar to each as starting point for *Second Life*. Speaking with Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1922, 2.0231 and 2.0271), the *virtual* platform would serve here as configurative basis for images from the *real* world (while we prefer to "bracket" in a phenomenological sense the question of an eventual "isomorphic relation" between these worlds).

At first glance, the interference between the "real" and "second" worlds and the media-related energies of *Second Life* do not seem especially significant for a 'unifying' digital representation as concerns our intermedia *axe de pertinence* – unlike some other processes that do indeed represent a challenge.

In this context, a focus will come to be on the question how we can investigate the material and semiological possibilities of interplay between "virtual materiality" and "content/meaning" of the various avatars' actions within or between the different "locations" of *Second Life*. A decisive role should be attached in this context to the aspect of treating historical media configurations, forms, genres, and formats. Also, intermediality research would need to analyze the function of the images' digital nature in relation to the so-called "live character" and "interactivity" of the dispositive. What happens, for instance, with narrative structures and elements of literary genres, or cinematic or television genres, when these are placed in the dynamic virtual space and the narrations of *Second Life*? What could be the social and cultural functions of these and other intermedia processes, and how could we expose and study the historical functions of some modalities?

6. The Potential of an Intermedia Research Axis in the Digital Era

In concluding, let me return once again to the beginning of this article: despite some disillusionments or disappointments (which I actually consider to be salutary, since an introduction of new terms and concepts should be accompanied with a great deal of soberness and a minimum of illusions), the *axe de pertinence intermédiatique* still seems to me a promising research perspective. The history/histories and prehistory/prehistories of this *Suchbegriff* (search term) have shown that there are several pathways we might follow in the jungle of intermedia processes. The concept of intermediality has thus not turned out to be a comfortable highway for any kind of theoretical or historical expedition into the media landscape. On the contrary: it requires considerable effort to develop clearly structured questions concerning theory and history; moreover, it will not deliver the system of systems that so many media theorists have been hoping for. As concerns media historiography, it turns out to be a useful perspective that should lead us to "integrative media research." In employing it, we should always bear in mind the importance of reconstructing the social and historical functions of intermedia processes (cf. Müller, 2010b).

Despite some relevant and interesting reflections on media theory that are currently being offered (and in which I am participating with contributions of my own), I believe that the greatest potential for intermediality studies can be found in the *historical* dimension: in an intermedia archaeology of media within the

networks of cultural and technological series. Such an archaeology should include functional aspects, and should take into account the fact that intermedia processes seem to develop a tendency to increasing complexity – not least on account of growing possibilities to combine media, techno-cultural series, genre traditions, narrations, and the new challenges posed by so-called interactive media.

Regarding concepts of the intermedia research axis, I have done here no more than offer for discussion a few initial questions and aphorisms which I hope can make evident that so-called "old" and "traditional" categories such as that of the "sign," "genre," "format," "content" and "meaning" will still play an important role, too, in the digital-intermedia universe. Our research should thus not rest contented with the (rather too simple) answer that the digital age – with reference to materiality – will lead to new overlaps and multimodal combinations of media each of which formerly existed on its own, in the shape of a "unifying" im-materiality of the digital code. We should rather ask to what extent and how traditional audiovisual media and/or analogic sounds and images have left their traces in these digital worlds, what modalities could be reconstructed, and what *social functions* result from these processes for the users of so-called new media. These functions would embrace a wide range of actions on the part of recipients or users, which may range from an individual's more or less personal aesthetic experience to forms of social action and behaviour of individuals or social groups.

In this sense, the digital age would not trigger the end of intermediality research, but would form a new and big challenge regarding the re-construction of an interconnected *history of digital media*, one that is yet to be tackled.

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Figure 1: Online news on the internet. Multimedia homepage of the German newsmagazine *Focus* (*www.focus.de*).
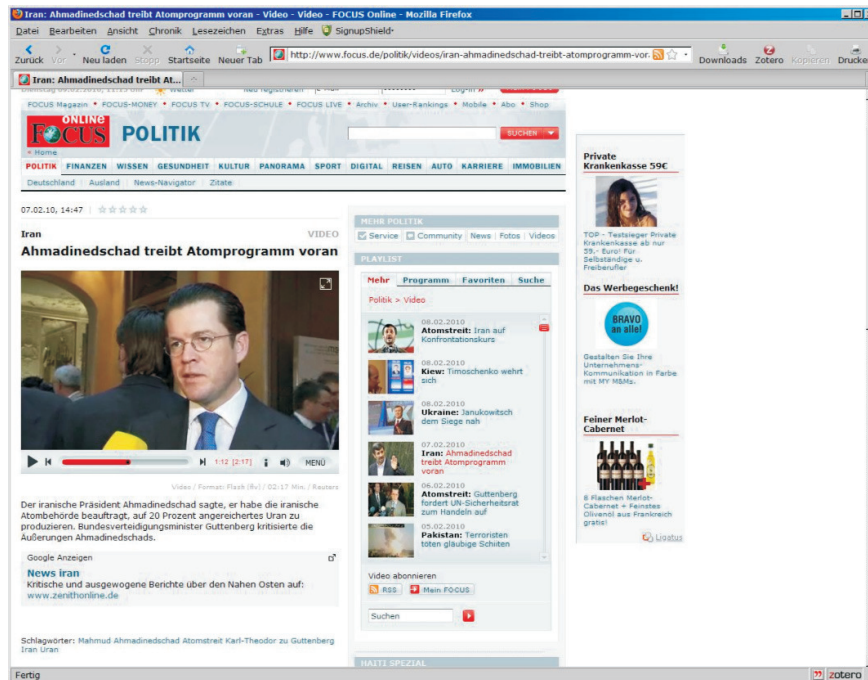
Figures 2–3: Game remediation: *Doom* – the game & *Doom* – the movie.

Figures 4–5: Second Life – A young man's passion in real life: dolphins & realization of this passion: his 'existence' as a dolphin in *Second Life* (Jäger 2007).