

Intermédialités

Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques

Intermediality

History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies

Sens(a)ble Intermediality and *Interesse* Towards an Ontology of the In-Between

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Numéro 1, printemps 2003

Naître

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1005443ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005443ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Centre de recherche sur l'intermédialité

ISSN

1920-3136 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Oosterling, H. (2003). Sens(a)ble Intermediality and *Interesse*: Towards an Ontology of the In-Between. *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, (1), 29–46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005443ar>

Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article, la qualité spécifique de « l'entre » ou de « l'inter » est explorée à partir de la notion d'intermédialité. Dans un premier temps, le *Gesamtkunstwerk* (œuvre d'art totale) et les « arts de l'existence » de Foucault sont analysés du point de vue de l'intermédialité. En retraçant les racines historiques de cette notion, l'actualité de ses perspectives est élargie. Dans un second temps, un questionnement sur « l'inter », fondé en grande partie sur un débat germanophone portant sur l'intermédialité est proposé, afin de critiquer l'herméneutique et la dialectique. Par la suite, cette discussion est retraduite dans les termes d'un débat philosophique sur le sublime et la médiation mené par les philosophes de la différence, Derrida, Lyotard et Nancy. Enfin, les linéaments d'une ontologie de « l'entre-deux » sont définis à partir de l'« inter-esse » kantien et heideggerien.

Sens(a)ble Intermediality and *Interesse*

Towards an Ontology of the In-Between

H E N K O O S T E R L I N G

I n an Internet interview¹ from 1996 Peter Greenaway was asked whether he found his work intermedial. After all, Greenaway's work is pre-eminently multimedial, even hypermedial, interdisciplinary and self-reflective. Trained as a visual artist, he began to write texts, and in collaborating with minimal musical composers like Glass, Nyman and Andriessen and choreographer De Keersmaecker, he transformed TV documentaries into highly conceptual art films. He filmed ballets, produced the opera *Rosa* (Greenaway, 1994)—reworked into a television version in 2002—and the theatrical play *Writing to Vermeer* (Greenaway, 2000), made installations for urban public spaces, used advanced technologies, like the paintbox in *Prospero's Books* (Greenaway, 1991), and stepped into the cyberspace of Internet with his project *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, Tulse Luper being his *alter ego*². In short, if anyone is conceptual, multimedial, interdisciplinary, and aiming at interactivity in his work, it is Greenaway. Yvonne Spielmann, who qualifies Greenaway's oeuvre as "an aesthetic form of intermediality" analyses "concepts of representation [*Darstellungskonzepte*] with which Greenaway on a comparative level gathers images in which the difference between medium and form is mediated"³.

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1. See "Immaculate Conceptions: Interview with Peter Greenaway" by Noel Purdon. First put on the net March 20th 1995 and again in January 1999, before the premiere of *Writing to Vermeer* (1999) in Adelaide, Australia: <http://www.wordarchive.com/articles/312>. No longer available on the net.

2. See Peter Greenaway, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, a Personal History of Uranium*, <http://www.tulseluper.net/>.

3. Yvonne Spielmann, *Intermedialität. Das System Peter Greenaway*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1998, p. 262.

Notwithstanding a widespread agreement on the intermedial quality of his work, Greenaway rejects intermediality as an overall qualification. To him it has propagandistic overtones. As an artistic approach it is infected by a servitude to cultural politics. He refers to the works of Gianlorenzo Bernini to illustrate his argument. This Baroque sculptor and architect, famous for his interior of the St-Peter and the Cornaro chapel, used all sorts of artistic media in order to trigger multi-sensorial experiences, the cultural-political aim of which was to revive a flagging interest in Catholicism. Greenaway sees commercial Hollywood film as a Berninian kind of intermediality with which he refuses to identify⁴.

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My understanding of intermediality—and especially of its micropolitical effects—differs from Greenaway's. In the following I will show how he confuses the political impact of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* with the micropolitical impact of intermedial works of art. I would like to argue that the ingredients of intermediality are not only discerned in the features of an artistic multimedial and interdisciplinary creativity, but also in the production of a (micro)political sensibility and in the application of an innovative philosophical conceptuality and interactivity. Intermediality reconfigures three former separated cultural domains—established in the 19th century—of the arts, politics and science, especially philosophy—enhancing an experience of the in-between and a sensibility for tensional differences.

The crossovers between these domains have already constituted new fields of research⁵. The first deals with artistic intermediality and has an orientation in Art History and Criticism. This research focuses on a genealogy of intermediality in avant-garde art. In retrospect it rewrites—in the Lyotardian sense of “ré-écrire”—artistic modernity from an intermedial point of view⁶. The second field covers micro and geopolitical aspects of intermedial interactions and transactions within

4. See “Immaculate Conceptions: Interview with Peter Greenaway” by Noel Purdon.

5. In 1997 the Center for Philosophy & Arts (CPA) based at the Department of Philosophy of the Erasmus University Rotterdam started a five-year research programme: *Intermediality. On the borders between philosophy, art and politics*. See: Henk Oosterling (ed.), *Intermedialiteit. Over de grenzen tussen filosofie en politiek*, Rotterdam, Centrum voor filosofie & kunst, 2002.

6. See Henk Oosterling, “Intermediality. Art between Images, Words, and Actions”, in Bartomeu Mari and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (eds.), *Think Art. Theory and Practice in the Arts of Today*, Rotterdam, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1998, p. 89-100.

a globalized, media dominated information society. Here mediality is connected with a theory of the new media and the “inter” is interpreted in political terms as an integrating force working in media technology, implicitly imposing politics on collective consciousness. In another context I have labelled the transition of this mediamatic informatization following the dynamics of a Foucauldian “savoir-pouvoir” as “radical medi@crity”.

The third field of research of intermediality—the one I will focus on in this article—deals with the specific quality of the experience of the “inter” that is enhanced in intermedial art practices. Of course, this perspective is connected with criticism, history and political aspects of art, but its main focus is existential and ontological. The philosophical question that I am dealing with here concerns the unstable and non-discursive quality of the being (*esse*) of this in-between (inter) as inter-*esse*. In order to explore and to expand upon this notion I refer specifically to the work of French post-structuralists or, as I prefer to qualify them: philosophers of difference⁸. More than other thinkers, they criticized subjectivity and rationality from the perspective of the “inter” and they systematically developed a discourse of difference. However productive this comparison may be, the implied suggestion that the thinking of intermediality and the thinking of differences are synonymous is not justified.

I will first sketch very briefly the relation between intermediality and both the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and an “aesthetics of existence” (§1). Next, I will explore the positioning of the “inter” in the context of a debate on intermediality which is mainly German (§2). Subsequently this debate will be related to a philosophical debate on the sublime (§3) and on mediation by French post-structuralists criticizing Hegelian dialectics (§4). Finally I will sketch the contours of an ontology of the in-between, or inter-*esse* (§5).

7. Henk Oosterling, “ICTheology or local interesse? Desacralizing Derrida’s chora” in Ludwig Nagl (ed.), *Essays zu Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, Religion*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2001, p. 109-130.

8. I prefer to stress “difference”, because they developed, after their critique on Freud/Lacan and Marx/Althusser in the Sixties, a positive philosophy with its own vocabulary, perspectives and problematics, focused on the notion of “difference”. See: Henk Oosterling, *Door schijn bewogen. Naar een hyperkritiek van de xenofobe rede*, [Moved by appearances. Towards a hyper-critique of xenophobic reason], Kampen, Kok Agora, 1996. An English summary can be found on: <http://www.eur.nl/fw/staff/oosterling/schijn.html>.

I. GESAMTKUNSTWERK AND INTERMEDIALITY

Greenaway's aversion to an ideological use of intermediality can be understood against the background of the pretensions and—what is more important—the failures of the project of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* over the past two centuries. Though different qualifications have been used for the implied artistic intermediality, individual performance and lifestyle, these elements have been decisive features in the project of the total work of art. This did not start with the Factory and Warhol, not even with Bauhaus and Schwitters, but has its roots in art practices at the end of the 19th century.

a. The Ideological Dimension: “*Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*”

32 In its megalomaniac form a *Gesamtkunstwerk* presupposes the primacy of an identifying power, aiming at totality. According to Harald Szeemann, *Gesamt*-experiments of the last 150 years manifest an “inclination towards” [*Hang zum*] as “the wish for salvation”, implying “fantasies and ideas of intended coherency⁹”. Utopian totalizations have dominated the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, Odo Marquard and Bazon Brock¹⁰ have subsequently introduced distinctions between different sorts of total works of art¹¹. One can speak of a philosophical *Gesamtkunstwerk*, such as the philosophical system of Schelling, but also of a self-destructive political *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹², such as totalitarian nazism and Stalinism in which—as Walter Benjamin acknowledges at the end of his famous essay on the reproducibility of the work of art¹³—politics and art are reduced to each other. Instead of a creation of differences in these contexts, exclusive identification is the motivation of these art practices.

Next to these total works of art they discern an artistic *Gesamtkunstwerk* like Wagner's. His effort to revive and reconfigure German culture is given a philo-

9. Harald Szeemann (ed.), *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Europäische Utopien seit 1800*, Aarau und Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Sauerländer, 1983, p. 16.

10. Odo Marquard, “Gesamtkunstwerk und Identitätssystem”, in *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Europäische Utopien seit 1800*, p. 40-51; Bazon Brock, “Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Pathosformeln und Energiesymbole zur Einheit von Denken, Wollen und Können”, in *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, p. 22-39.

11. Bazon Brock, “Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk”, p. 29.

12. Odo Marquard, “Gesamtkunstwerk und Identitätssystem”, p. 44-48.

13. See the concluding remarks of Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit”, in *drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1973 [1934-1935].

sophical legitimisation by the young Friedrich Nietzsche, attempting to revitalize the worn out Christian culture with Apollonian/Dionysian *élan vital*. Just as the philosophical and the political, so too the artistic *Gesamtkunstwerk* is characterized by a conceptual overdetermination by a cultural or political Idea(1) of a diversity of artistic media and disciplines. Intermediality is instrumental. In the final analysis the *Gesamtkunstwerk* never was really successful. The subordination of art to other domains destroyed the openness, so characteristic for avant-garde art. In retrospect, it is not the result, but the “inclination towards” that appeared to have been decisive.

Greenaway is right in rejecting spectacular cinema when it masks the crisis of the metanarratives and reconfigures their fragmented elements, as Bernini did. By literally playing out the self-destructiveness of metanarratives—for instance in *The Belly of an Architect* (Greenaway, 1987) referring to Boullée and Mussolini—and by layering medium upon medium, Greenaway’s work is nevertheless highly intermedial. Intermedial cinema sensitizes its audiences for the experience of the crisis itself. As such it could be an antidote for false Narratives that veil or mask the loss of community.

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b. The Existential Dimension: An Aesthetics of Existence

Western avant-garde artists have always criticized the totalitarian impulse either by individualizing the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or by problematizing the representative functions of art. They refused to present art in political terms or represent politics in aesthetic images. Their refusal implied a critical distance towards political power. The modern synthesis of the arts was more successful on a smaller, more individual scale: from Wilde to Warhol, from Baudelaire to Beuys. Take the example of Charles Baudelaire. Like Wagner, Baudelaire’s project can be understood as an artistic reaction against the fragmentation of cultural life, dating back to the end of the 18th century. This fragmentation engendered autonomous domains of art, politics and science. Before the turn of the century, Baudelaire “performed” an intermedial experiment in his dandyism, acting out a lifestyle focused on literary activities and aiming at an aesthetic refinement of individual performance. In *L’usage des plaisirs*, Foucault refers to this practice as “aesthetics of existence” (“arts de l’existence¹⁴”).

14. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2. L’usage des plaisirs*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1984, p. 16-17.

Baudelaire admired Wagner. Although the scale and the tone of the two experiments differ, both endeavor to bring life and art into a relationship as intimate as it is reflective. Unlike the theatrical composer who set his sights on a mythical and heroic past, the dandy poet mainly mimics urban life with its excessive transgressions. Contrary to Wagner who pursued the inspiration of politico-cultural life in its entirety, Baudelaire micropolitically focused on a life as an interplay or synaesthesia, creating “a life” (“une vie”)—as Deleuze would formulate it: “des entre-temps” and “des entre-moments¹⁵”—as it might be configured conceptually on a plane of immanence.

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Gesamtkunstwerk and an “aesthetics of existence” appear to be two sides of the same coin. Once one acknowledges the historical failures of philosophical, political and artistic total works of art, and one shifts the emphasis to micro-political performances of small-scaled experiments, intermediality turns out to be an operative force. The impossibility of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹⁶ opens our eyes for the aporetic tensions that give intermediality its paradoxical coherence.

The name for the political *Gesamtkunstwerk* nowadays is globalization¹⁷. The metanarrative that legitimizes this all-encompassing project is not McLuhan’s “Global Village” with its networks of virtual communities, but the War on Terrorism. After the 9-11 attack on the WTC in New York, the political “*Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*” has gained a nearly religious zeal in countering the Islam fundamentalism, a zeal that is expressed in its legitimising discourse: the “ICTheology” of market fundamentalism¹⁸. New media theoreticians and anti-globalists counter this project by both criticizing and using the “intermediality¹⁹” that affirms and subverts this metanarrative.

15. Gilles Deleuze, “L’immanence: une vie...” in *Philosophie*, n° 47, septembre 1995, p. 5.

16. Once we transpose this aesthetic figure to an onto-political sphere it is possible to connect notions such as Nancy’s “communauté désœuvrée” or Bataille’s notion of the “informe”. See also note 5.

17. See Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *La religion (Séminaire de Capri)*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, Éditions Laterza, 1996; Jean-Luc Nancy, *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2002.

18. See note 7.

19. In a contribution to the book *Mythos Internet* in which interactivity on the World-Wide Web is re-evaluated, Sybille Krämer explicitly uses the qualification “intermediality” for the interactions on the www. See Stefan Münker, Alexander Roesler, *Mythos Internet*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997, p. 100.

Greenaway plays his part in this world theatre. He too stepped into cyberspace with the Internet projects of *The Tulse Luper Suitcase*, simulating a Hegelian metanarrative of World History in the 20th century, a history hidden in 92 suitcases²⁰. Next to multimediality and interdisciplinarity, interactivity has become part of his intermedial endeavour. And even the “aesthetics of existence” comes to the fore when Greenaway claims that Tulse Luper—a figure already appearing in his first documentary films—is his *alter ego*²¹.

2. INTERMEDIAL REFLECTIONS: AN EXPLORATIVE DEBATE

How does one elaborate the categories of reception-aesthetics within the discourse of intermediality, given the perspective of an impossible *Gesamtkunstwerk*? Samuel Taylor Coleridge already used the term “intermedium” in 1818²². The term was passed on by the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins in a 1965 article for artworks that made use of two or more artistic media²³. In art theory it took another 25 years before intermediality became a topic of debate. In the first half of the nineties some relevant books on intermediality were published in Germany. Since then, mono-disciplinary approaches have no longer been taken as adequate models for analysing and evaluating contemporary art practices. Most of these texts have examined and explored the crossovers between literature, theatre, cinema and visual arts, but none of them have taken the ontological dimension of the “inter” seriously.

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a. Integration and Symbiosis

Franz-Josef Albersmeier has drawn attention to hybrid genres such as the *ciné-roman*, *ciné-poème* and *ciné-drama*²⁴. In his critique on “medial one-way traffic” and his emphasis on the interactions between these genres, however, he has

20. See Peter Greenaway, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, a Personal History of Uranium*, <http://www.tulseluper.net/>.

21. This subject was brought up on numerous occasions in discussions I have had with Peter Greenaway himself, during the last ten years.

22. See T.M. Raysor (ed.), *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, London, Folcroft Press, 1936, p. 33.

23. This text and other texts have been published in 1984. See Dick Higgins, *The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.

24. Franz-Josef Albersmeier, *Theater, Film und Literatur in Frankreich. Medienwechsel und Intermedialität*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992, p. 81.

remained conceptually within the borders of hermeneutics. In the final analysis, the different media converge. A multimedial genius like Leonardo da Vinci shows that by radically performing one art form one inevitably transgresses its limits. This becomes a *pars pro toto* of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. From an intermedial point of view different media complete each other, as Peter Zima states, intermediality focuses on convergence and complementarity. In the final analysis, intermediality aims at a “symbiosis” of words, images and sounds, i.e. of literature, painting, photography and film²⁵. It aims at a unity of art. As such, it is part of the tradition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

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Jürgen Müller refers to Higgins, who had already understood that a medium is never pure but always focused on other media. Yet his notion of “intermedia”, has been criticized for situating intermediality solely between separate media: “a medial product becomes intermedial, when it transfers the multi-medial togetherness (*Nebeneinander*) of medial citations and elements to a conceptional cooperation (*Miteinander*)²⁶”. Conceptualization, cooperation and communication are the—Habermasian—keywords for Müller. He too, hermeneutically, claims that artistic statements are understood and experienced within a *Lebenswelt* (life-world) that has an integrative function: “Intermediality does not mean an adding of different medial concepts nor a situating-in-between-media of separate works, but an integration of aesthetic concepts of separate media in a new medial context²⁷”. Embedded in intentional acts, mediated by signs and socially and historically determined, media are decisively structured by techn(olog)ical apparatuses, especially photography, film and computer.

Notwithstanding his references to Bellour’s “l’entre-images” [*Zwischen-den-Bildern-Liegende*], the tensions of the in-between and the specificity of its reception-aesthetic are not explicitly theorized in Müller’s integrative and communicative approach. Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality, although too restricted because of its literary scope, is adopted by both Müller and Wagner for making an argument for the openness of the interactive texture of images, words, movements,

25. Peter Zima (ed.), *Literatur intermedial*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995, p. vii.

26. Jürgen Müller, *Intermedialität. Formen moderner kultureller Kommunikation*, Münster, Nodus Publikationen, 1996, p. 83. (My translation).

27. Jürgen Müller, *Intermedialität. Formen moderner kultureller Kommunikation*, p. 89. (My translation).

and sounds²⁸. This enables Peter Wagner to define intermediality as “a sadly neglected but vastly important subdivision of intertextuality”. He emphasizes *semiosis* and rephrases intermediality as the “intertextual” use of a medium (painting) in another medium (fiction prose)²⁹. Analysing the interactions between images and texts in so-called “iconotexts”, he stresses more than the other critics cited above, the differences that persist within one medium and between different media. As a result of his emphasis on this deferral, Wagner favors Derrida’s “différance” instead of Kristeva’s textuality. The hermeneutic approach is deconstructed by emphasizing the tensional differences.

b. Punctum, Images and Reflective Intermediality

Notwithstanding this shift, Wagner’s elaboration of intermediality does not provide an explicit account of the reflectiveness of this “inter”. As his German colleagues, he analyses solely from the point of view of a reception-aesthetics. In one of the contributions to Zima’s book, Hubertus von Amelnunxen digs deeper into the matter. He elaborates the reception-aesthetics impact of the “inter” as an experience of the audience that cannot be reduced to singular disciplines, adopting categories from Barthes’ *La chambre claire*³⁰. The locus of the analysis is shifted from intermedial “texture” and “écriture” to an intermedial “lecture³¹”. The emphasis is no longer placed on production but on an ambiguous reception, i.e. the working of the work and its experiential effects. Not the operator but the tensed spectator becomes his main focus. Connotatively playing with the “spectator”, Barthes conceives of a photo as a “*spectre*” that haunts the reality that once was its referent. The spectator is hit: affected and moved by the “*punctum*”. Barthes’ “*punctum*” as an experience of the singular, escaping the studious meditation on the image—“*studium*”³²—is adopted as the impossible experience of the

28. Julia Kristeva elaborates this concept in *La révolution du langage poétique*, Paris, Édition du Seuil, 1974. See also Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi (ed.), New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 37; p. 111.

29. Peter Wagner (ed.), *Icons—Texts—Iconotexts. Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, Berlin, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1996, p. 17.

30. Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Paris, Éditions de l’Étoile, Gallimard, Le Seuil, 1980.

31. Peter Zima, *Literatur intermedial*, p. 210-211.

32. See Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 47-51.

breaks between two media. Hermeneutically inspired reception-aesthetics no longer suffice to analyze this tensional field of signification.

In *Luis Buñuel: Film—Literatur—Intermedialität*³³, the “experiential” dimension is explored in the field of the cinema. Buñuel’s films contain “reflective intermediality”: “it broadens the in-between spaces [*Zwischenraum, interstitium*] between image and text” and “makes visible the invisible and the eerie, the ‘other’ space between the discourses, that Foucault qualified as heterotopy³⁴”. Implicitly, a shift is made from the utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to the heterotopia of intermediality. In order to capture this heterotopic in-between, conceptual reflection alone does not suffice. Buñuel’s artistic reflections on the “inter” of the media transgress discursive thinking. Reflective intermediality goes beyond concepts. In reference to Deleuze’s books on cinema, Volker Roloff dethrones conceptuality as the locus of reflectivity by stressing the relation between thinking, images and bodies³⁵. As a result this reflectivity can neither be theorized with the tools of post-structuralism’s intertextuality nor with those of hermeneutics.

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3. INTERMEDIAL SENSIBILITY

Crucial notions of French philosophers of difference are non-systematically interpreted by theoreticians of intermediality. In his introduction, Peter Wagner rightly remarks that:

structuralist and poststructuralist theoreticians—from Bakhtin, Barthes and Kristeva to Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida—had published a series of studies that should have shaken the foundations of a number of disciplines [...] and put into question such cherished beliefs as the “mutual illumination of the arts”³⁶.

Vittoria Borsò leaves the idea of integration and symbiosis behind. Referring to Lyotard’s *Le Différend*³⁷, Buñuel’s intermediality is focused on “a differend bet-

33. Ursula Link-Heer, Volker Roloff (eds.), *Luis Buñuel: Film—Literatur—Intermedialität*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994.

34. Volker Roloff, “Einleitung: Buñuels reflektierte Intermedialität”, in Ursula Link-Heer, Volker Roloff (eds.), *Luis Buñuel: Film—Literatur—Intermedialität*, p. 4. (My translation).

35. Volker Roloff, “Einleitung: Buñuels reflektierte Intermedialität”, in Ursula Link-Heer, Volker Roloff (eds.), *Luis Buñuel: Film—Literatur—Intermedialität*, p. 6. (My translation).

36. Peter Wagner, *Icons—Texts—Iconotexts*, p. 2.

37. Jean-François Lyotard, *Différend*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1983.

ween media instead of a dialogue³⁸. By introducing the aporetical core of Lyotard's phraseology, reception-aesthetical integration changes into "experiencing" a differend.

However, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality appears to be one of the most persistent references as are Barthes' critical notions of "auteur" and "texte". Indeed, analysing intermediality from the perspective of intertextuality has been very productive. Yet for an understanding of the in-between, I think we have to implement the philosophy of difference more systematically. Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, Lyotard, Nancy, Deleuze and Guattari have, in criticizing dialectics, hermeneutics and structuralism, implicitly forged a vocabulary, more apt to understanding the "inter".

a. The Aporia of the Sublime: The Infigurable, Incommensurable

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On phraseological and micro-political levels, Lyotard's philosophy thematizes aporetical tensions common to postmodern life and thought after the loss of meta-narratives. As a self-undermining tension, the aporia reflects a genuine avant-garde inspiration. One cannot escape the impression that his own philosophical enterprise nurtures and affirms this aporetical tension³⁹. Finally his philosophical project culminates in an "immaterial materialism" in which notions such as "*aisthesis*" and "*aistheton*" take on new meanings⁴⁰. By introducing an irreducible, aporetical tension in the heart of aesthetic experiences, a sensibility for the "infigurable" is forged that is conceptualized in debates on the sublime. In these debates, intermediality is not yet made explicit, but in retrospect its connotations can easily be traced.

For Lyotard, avant-garde art, characterized by the tension of the incommensurable, has sensitized its audiences who are desperately looking for meaning and direction, in other words, for sense. This tension is already a characteristic of

38. Vittoria Borsò, "Luis Buñuel: Film, Intermedialität und Moderne", in Ursula Link-Heer, Volker Roloff (eds.), *Luis Buñuel: Film—Literatur—Intermedialität*, p. 160. (My translation).

39. For a more extensive elaboration of this aporetical dimension of Lyotard's philosophy, see Henk Oosterling, "Philosophy, Art and Politics as Interesse", in *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, Maastricht, Jan van Eyck Academy, n° 9, 1999, p. 87-89.

40. Jean-François Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, coll. "Débats", 1993, p. 209.

Duchamp's *œuvre*. Time and time again, Duchamp “doublecrossed” the thin line between life and art. In his “Déclaration” to *Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp*, Lyotard positions this aporetical experience in epistemological terms:

Je ne dis pas que tout ce qui va suivre est faux ni que c'est vrai ni non plus que ce n'est ni faux, ni vrai, ni vrai-et-faux, ni un peu faux et un peu vrai. Mais se pourrait-il que M. Duchamp ait cherché et obtenu, en matière d'espace et de temps et en matière de matière et de forme, la *contrariété*? Vous préférez dire *l'incommensurabilité*?⁴¹

Duchamp's *Le Grand Verre* does not tell a story nor stages a play, but “joue la possibilité de représenter l'espace imprésentable” (“it figurates the infigurable”) and “se fictionne dans des paradoxes⁴²” (“fictions itself in its paradoxes”). Duchamp's art makes the aporia—and its intra-reasonable functions: paralogies and paradoxes—“sensible”: their aporetical meaning is *mediamatically* sensed.

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These sensible reflections become more dynamic and participatory in installation art and public art. In *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, Lyotard comments on Daniel Buren's installations. Buren marks walls and objects in museal and public spaces with standardized coloured strips. As a result the “invisible” space is itself exhibited: “Mais ce paradoxe est visuel, et non pas de langage. Il consiste à faire voir ce qui dans le champ visuel (notamment de l'institution artistique) est invisible, et cela grâce à une simple marque, celle du matériau⁴³”. In its material reflections, an invisible dimension “presents” itself. This presentation sensitizes “le destinateur” for the unrepresentability of the conditions of possibility, conditions that Kant qualified as “negative Darstellung⁴⁴”. In his *Kritik der Urteils kraft*, Kant qualifies the most fundamental claim of Reason—to encompass even itself—“the claim on absolute totality” [*die Anspruch auf absoluter Totalität*]⁴⁵. Kant's “Anspruch” is aesthetically applied in the “inclination towards” [*Hang zum*] a total work of art. For Lyotard, the Kantian aesthetic Idea, with its

41. Jean-François Lyotard, *Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1977, p. 13. We can hear Barthes's lines resounding, when Barthes describes Zen in his book *L'Empire des signes* (Genève, Éditions Skira, 1970), in the chapter “L'exemption du sens” (p. 95).

42. Jean-François Lyotard, *Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp*, p. 77; 91.

43. Jean-François Lyotard, *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, Paris, Éditions de la différence, 1987, p. 108.

44. Jean-François Lyotard, *Différend*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1983, p. 99.

45. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteils kraft*, Werkausgabe Band x, Wilhelm Weischedel (Hrsg.), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1957 [1790], p. 172-73 [B85/86, A84/85].

regulative role, affirms the necessity of the transcendental illusion. In these analyses the “inter” is present, but not yet thematized. The a-symmetrical, “vertical” experience of the sublime still has quasi-transcendental dimensions.

By playfully configuring the great scheme of things—pseudo-mathematical and pseudo-evolutionary explorations with cosmic and mythical dimensions as in *Drowning by Numbers* (1988), *Zoo: A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), *The Belly of an Architect*, *The Pillow Book* (1996)—Greenaway performs this quasi-transcendental tension in his work time and time again.

b. Sensable Reflectivity: from “Sensus Communis” to the Logic of Sensation

When Lyotard speaks about “passibility” as the constitutive force of *pathos*, we can hear a resonance of Derrida’s proposal, in *Apories* (1994), for an “endurance non passive” as a “condition de la responsabilité et de la décision⁴⁶”. In “Foi et savoir”, readers are reminded of what is needed: “respect, pudeur, retenue, inhibition, *Achtung* (Kant), *Scheu*, *Verhaltenheit*, *Gelassenheit* (Heidegger), la *halte* en général⁴⁷”. This attitude is beyond the active/passive duality and is conditioned by a spacing that implies both contact and distance.

However, both thinkers still favor, notwithstanding their earlier critique, a Levinasian inspiration. The implied a-symmetrical and aporetic experience needs to be secularized and “transversalized”. The “inclination” [*Hang*] or “claim” [*Anspruch*] has to be situated on the side of reception-aesthetics and in terms of intermedial practices. What is respected is neither an object nor an infinite alterity. It is a relating within tensional differences. This could mean that the spectators—in order to “understand” the meaning of linear connections or simultaneous layering of two, three or more media—implicitly anticipate a sense of an in-between, i.e. directing and connecting the meaning in the layering of framed images and movements. The totality of this is only discontinuously “sensed” and can never be, not even hermeneutically, grasped as a whole.

Is the “inter” experienced by the audience “immediately”? Can intermedial reflectivity be understood as an embodied interactive reflection that is triggered

46. Jacques Derrida, “Apories. Mourir—s’attendre aux ‘limites de la vérité’”, in *Le passage des frontières. Autour du travail de Jacques Derrida*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, Colloque de Cerisy, 1994, p. 315.

47. Jacques Derrida, “Foi et savoir”, in Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *La religion* (Séminaire de Capri), p. 66.

by the interactions between media? Answering these questions presupposes an aesthetics beyond production and reception and a transversalized, affective dynamics incorporating the experience of the sublime: “It has to be said clearly: the sensus doesn’t give rise to an experiencing, in the Kantian sense⁴⁸”. *Sensus* as an experience is both mental and physical, i.e. mind and matter, production and reception. Critically engaging with his phenomenological and hermeneutical roots, Lyotard connects “*aisthesis*” to the thinking body: “la pensée corps”. The experiential quality of *sensus* is non-conceptual, but it is nevertheless a capacity to judge an in-between: “A go-between in the process of coming and going, transmitting no message. Being the message. A pure movement which compares, which afterwards we put under house arrest in a seat called *sensus*⁴⁹”. In the Kantian perspective this capacity mediates between transcendental faculties of knowing, willing and feeling, or between understanding, reason and imagination. In Lyotard’s perspective it is a process of coming and going, a movement caused by the “*aistheton*” that animates the sensible body.

Is this reflective sensibility⁵⁰ explicitly critical in a political sense? On the level of production, in multimedial practices and interdisciplinary activities of avant-garde artists, critical reflection is first and foremost mediamatic, i.e. articulated by and constituted in and with the media the artists use. This implies that it is not conceptually critical—although this is of course possible—but intermedially “sensational” in a Deleuzian sense, as introduced in Deleuze’s books on Francis Bacon and on philosophy⁵¹. Artists think in percepts and affects, i.e. sensations. They think in and with their medium: enveloped in and by means of it, i.e. immediately mediated mediating immediacy. Artists are always “*milieu*”. In the final sentence of their “Introduction: Rhizome”, in *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari rephrase milieu: “*Entre les choses ne désigne pas une relation loca-*

48. Jean-François Lyotard, “*Sensus communis*”, in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *Judging Lyotard*, London, Routledge Press, 1992, p. 3.

49. Jean-François Lyotard, “*Sensus communis*”, p. 9.

50. The term “reflective” is coined consciously here. This qualification projects a reflectiveness beyond the mind/body duality and should not be mistaken with “reflexive”, which is too much grounded on consciousness and does not involve sensitivity.

51. See: Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique du la sensation*, Paris, Éditions de la différence, coll. “La Vue le Texte”, 1981, p. 27; Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1991, p. 200.

lisable qui va de l'une à l'autre et réciproquement, mais une direction perpendiculaire, un mouvement transversal qui les emporte l'une *et* l'autre [...]”⁵².

On the level of reception this might correspond to what Lyotard has labelled—referring to Schelling—a “tautegorical” quality: “terme par lequel je désignerai seulement ce fait remarquable que le plaisir ou la peine est à la fois un ‘état’ de l’âme et ‘l’information’ que l’âme recueille quant à son état”⁵³. It is a tension between being moved or touched and knowing: a pathic self-reflectivity, i.e. passibility. “Tout acte de pensée s’accompagne donc d’un sentiment qui signale à la pensée son ‘état’. [...] Être informé de son état, c’est, pour la pensée, éprouver cet état, être affecté”⁵⁴. This reflective sensibility of the audience corresponds to a “sensational logic” of the artists.

4. *INTER-ESSE: BEING IN-BETWEEN*

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Can we further radicalise this interactive exploration of intermediality from the perspective of the philosophies of difference? Do they acknowledge a factuality of in-betweenness that can be conceptualized from an ontological point of view? I think that the French philosophy of difference can indeed help us to formulate the specific quality and status of the in-between, when we reconsider their earlier texts and take into account their philosophical inspirations, especially Hegel and Heidegger. What does the “inter” in *intermediality*, beyond its artistic and political implications, point towards?

The sensible, as a reflective sensibility, balances between presence and absence: going back and forth from one medium to the other, it is a movement in which positions are articulated in the awareness that they are principally relational and provisional. The transversal tension in the anticipation engenders a movement or flux that cannot be totalised or reduced in more informed positions that encapsulate and direct less informed positions. Dialectics therefore is no longer an issue for a philosophy of difference. At the beginning of his *Science of Logic*, Hegel states that “the synthesis, which is a point of interest (*Interesse*) [is an] immanent synthesis, synthesis *a priori*—a self-subsistent, self-determined

52. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1980, p. 37.

53. Jean-François Lyotard, *Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1991, p. 16.

54. Jean-François Lyotard, *Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime*, p. 24.

unity of distinct moments⁵⁵. Once Hegel's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is deconstructed, the nightmarish "bad infinity" as the non-totalizable flux of mediations is transformed into an eternal state of the in-between. Formal-ontological determinations become sensible categories. In his deconstruction of Hegel's system, Derrida has proposed the term "différance" in order to understand the ongoing production of differences in textualized contexts or intertextuality. In *De la grammatologie*, he states, referring to Rousseau, that "l'immédiateté est dérivée". Everything starts with "l'intermédiaire, voilà ce qui est 'inconcevable à la raison'⁵⁶".

If there is a primary principle which can be assigned with an ontological status, it is a productive "voix moyenne", a "différance". In "La différance" published in *Marges de la philosophie*, Derrida circumscribes the quasi-notion of *différance* as spacing. The "ance" of *différance*

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n'est ni simplement actif ni simplement passif, annonçant ou rappelant plutôt quelque chose comme la voix moyenne, disant une opération qui n'est pas une opération, qui ne se laisse penser ni comme passion ni comme action d'un sujet sur un objet, ni à partir d'un agent ni à partir d'un patient, ni à partir ni en vue d'aucun de ces termes⁵⁷.

Différance is a fact. In order to clarify "factuality" in *Hegel: L'inquiétude du négatif*, Jean-Luc Nancy makes a distinction between the mere positive Fact and "Faktum". "Le Faktum est: la chose se donne", and it manifests itself as a becoming, it is "en relation"⁵⁸. This "en relation" reminds us of "être-en-commun", but more so of "être-avec", in which Nancy revalorises Heidegger's notion of "Mitdasein" as a "factualité transcendente ou existentielle de l'être-avec", as he remarked in his video presentation at the CRI in October 2002⁵⁹.

However, the ontological aspects of the in-between can be found in Nancy's and Derrida's inspiration: Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger qualifies *Dasein*

55. G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic*, New York, Humanity Books, 1969 [1812], p. 96.

56. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1967, p. 226.

57. Jacques Derrida, "La différance", in *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972, p. 9.

58. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: L'inquiétude du négatif*, Paris, Hachette Littératures, coll. "Coup double", 1997, p. 48-49.

59. See for a more systematic exploration of Nancy's writings: Henk Oosterling, "From Interest to Inter-esse. Nancy on Deglobalization and Sovereignty", in: *SubStance*, to be published.

as Being-in [*In-Sein*] and Being-in-between [*Zwischen*]. The in-between is the movement that inevitably positions beings. But notwithstanding this inevitable fixation, the movement of the in-between cannot be reduced to positions taken. Heidegger warns us not to make the mistake to conceive the in-between as—in his own words—“the result of the *convenientia* of two beings that are given⁶⁰”. The in-between as factuality “exists” “before” any position, although we can only describe this before afterwards. A discursive explanation focused on presence, representation and linear time is no longer adequate.

In retrospect even Lyotard’s “passibilité” can be found in Heidegger’s discourse, when the in-between is connected with *pathos* and affectivity, i.e. with “mood” [*Stimmung*]. *Dasein* can be moved or affected, because it is always already—to phrase it in popular terms—“in tune” or “in the mood”. The Heideggerian “in-between” constitutes the *pathos*. In the above-mentioned video-conference presentation, Nancy states that the “*cum*”—expressed in: *commun*, *contact*, *contract*, *concrete*, *commerce*—is conditioned by “contact, comme sa condition qu’on dirait ‘affective’: mais l’affect n’est rien d’autre que la capacité à être affecté, c’est-à-dire touché, ou ‘contacté’⁶¹”.

Différance, sensation, passibility, being-with, all this give us a clue to the ontology of the in-between or literally “inter-esse”. In his *Discourse on Thinking*, Heidegger circumscribes in between [*Zwischen*] as “Inter-esse”. Criticizing Hegel implicitly, Heidegger writes, “Inter-esse means: being with and between the things, being in-between and enduring this [*ausharren*]⁶²”. However, he continues, “nowadays ‘Interesse’ deals with what is interesting. Something that enables someone to be indifferent the next moment, something that is followed by something else that is as indifferent as what preceded it⁶³”. Inter-esse as the being of the in-between goes beyond shared interests and excludes indifference.

In the final analysis, however, Heidegger’s “*Fundamental-ontologie*” has to be criticized the same way as hermeneutics. The notion of authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] that still regulates Heidegger’s project is negated by a notion of

60. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927, p. 177. (My translation).

61. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Le peuple souverain”. *Mémoire et médiation*, 4^e colloque du CRI, 10/9-11/2002, to be published.

62. See: Martin Heidegger, “Was heißt Denken”, in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Tübingen, Neske Verlag, 1954, p. 122. (My translation).

63. Martin Heidegger, “Was heißt Denken”, p. 122.

intermediality that takes mediation seriously. In radicalizing this “mediocrity”, every claim on convergence or authenticity is as vain as Kant’s claim on absolute totality. With all this in the back of our minds the topic of intermediality is not only a challenge to aesthetics, but also to political philosophy. Nowadays the intermedial aesthetic experience *par excellence* is perhaps no longer exclusively found in the white cube (the museum) or the dark room (the theatre hall or cinema), but in the public sphere as a spacing of the “inter”, be it physical or virtual. As for globalization, the in-between might be revealed in the tensions between the local-global, more than in the interest in the local, ethnic identities or in a global totality.