

Intermediality and intermedial references: an introduction / *Intermidialidade e referências intermidiáticas: uma introdução*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a brief introduction to the current stage of intermediality research. The first section presents diverse readings of intermediality and media, highlighting different moments in the history of concept, from the first use of the word “intermedia” by Coleridge, in 1812, to Higgins’s in the 60s, Hansen-Löve’s and the current debate. Both intermediality and medium/media are contested terms and have prompted researchers to look for definitions apt to be used across various fields of research. Such variety of approaches, it is argued, is now seen as a potential bonus,

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rather than a problem. Rajewsky's three subcategories of intermediality are presented, with special focus being given to intermedial references. The paper concludes by suggesting that theorizing intermedial relations is essential for an in-depth understanding of the nature of the current reconfiguration of social communication. The main sources for the argument are works by Clüver (2001, 2012); Elleström (2010) and Rajewsky (2005, 2010, 2015).

KEYWORDS: Intermediality; Media/medium; Intermedial references

RESUMO

Este artigo oferece uma breve introdução ao estágio contemporâneo dos estudos sobre a Intermedialidade. A primeira seção apresenta diferentes usos dos termos intermedialidade e mídia, destacando momentos-chave na história do conceito, desde o primeiro uso do termo "intermídia" por Coleridge, em 1812, passando pela contribuição de Higgins, na década de 1960 até chegar a Hansen-Löve e ao debate contemporâneo. Tanto intermedialidade como mídia são vocábulos que apresentam sentidos controversos e despertam em pesquisadores o desejo de construir uma definição apta a atender às necessidades de diferentes campos de pesquisa. Essa pluralidade de abordagens, sustenta-se aqui, tem sido vista, hoje em dia, mais como uma riqueza do que como um problema. A partir desse contexto, o artigo discute as três subcategorias propostas por Rajewsk (2015) para a intermedialidade detendo-se na especificidade da terceira, as referências intermediáticas. Sugere-se que teorizar as relações midiáticas se revela imprescindível para uma compreensão mais cuidadosa ou aprofundada da natureza da reconfiguração que se observa nas formas de comunicação social. As principais referências para o argumento são as contribuições de Clüver (2001, 2012); Elleström (2010) e Rajewsky (2005, 2010, 2015).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Intermedialidade; Mídia; Referências intermediáticas

1 Introduction

We know that technology does not determine society: it *is* society.

Manuel Castells¹

Castells remarks on the identity between society and technology capture, with usual accuracy and depth, the reasons underneath the moment of rupture that shakes contemporary Western societies.² It is not only the means and modes of material and symbolic production that are being transformed; there has been a complete reconfiguration of the ways by which societies and individuals make sense of their own experience.

Such reconfiguration, as Benveniste³ noticed in the 1960s, must necessarily take place in and through language. It is through language, in all its varieties, that society exists and functions, and that subjectivities and intersubjectivities take shape. The process of communication is not only instrumental or practical: it is the arena where social subjects are formed. New modes of being necessarily imply, therefore, new forms of expression.

¹ *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy.*

https://communication.biu.ac.il/sites/communication/files/shared/qstl_castell_d1_3-21.1-80.pdf. Date of access: July, 20th, 2020.

² See Castells, Manuel. *Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

³ See Benveniste, Émile. *Language and Human Experience.* S.l.: s.n., 1965.

It is thus not surprising that the *network society* has developed a vast array of new textual modes (lato sensu), which have quickly become part of everyday communication (e.g. blogs, twitter, whatsapp). The technological revolution has accelerated the pace of communication and, even more crucially, it has changed the quality and dynamics of human expression itself.

The Internet and the thousands of apps, which allow for the democratization or pulverization of the means to produce and broadcast content, coupled with high-speed connection devices, have exponentially intensified the possibilities for communication. The digital revolution has created the conditions for the rise of new communicative strategies and formats which, having traditional genres and media as a starting point (e.g. novels, painting, photography), transform them by means of their insertion into a new media environment.

The new media through which new formats and genres arise and traditional genres and media are transformed have thus become, understandably, an object of great interest. They are the *loci*, the tool and the object of the current processes of communicational transformation. The task of theorizing them becomes indispensable for a deeper or more detailed understanding of the nature of the changes reshaping communication.

It is against this background that academic research on media gains momentum. Studies in inter- and trans-mediality, mediation, remediation and adaptation, just to name a few examples, have in common the interest in studying different media and their relation to new forms of creation of meaning in contemporary societies. Their differences notwithstanding, each of these areas of study aims at understanding the new complex dynamics of today's mediascapes, describing their configurations, examining their implications.

Dialogue among these fields of research is not always easy, given their diverse conceptual frameworks and points of view. The very term which places them within the same broad field of enquiry – *media* – (and which is, of course, central to all of them), has its meaning extensively disputed and debated. The manifold implications of these conceptual controversies have been the target of important scrutiny.

Equally controversial is the definition of *intermediality*, a concept to which increasing importance has been attached. The academy has recently seen a remarkable proliferation of the use of this term. The fact that it refers to a key trait of the transformation in contemporary communication – inter-media relations – makes the debates around its meaning and reach even more important.

This kind of terminological divergence is characteristic of moments of academic research shifts, when different fields appropriate the same term. Such controversies are likely to lead scholars into a quest for definitions capable of responding to the needs of the various academic areas. Such theoretical effort often results in the deepening of the investigations in each of the fields involved in the debate.

The term *intermedia* has been used as early as 1812 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, although he uses it in a sense and in a context which are markedly different from those of today (cf. Müller 2010). Apart from its historical interest, however, this pioneer use by Coleridge helps to understand the long “pre-history” of the concept of intermediality, a topic that, as Müller suggests, deserves specific attention (idem, *ibid*).

Dick Higgins revives the term *intermedia* in 1966, using it to describe a way of approaching works of art whose forms were unfamiliar to readers/spectators: concrete poetry, sound poetry, happenings and other. “Much of the best work being produced today” he famously observed “seems to fall between media.” (HIGGINS, 1984, p. 18). In 1981, Higgins himself renews the use of the term – and now also speaks of *intermediality* –, although he still uses it in his very specific sense, ⁴ to refer to works “in which the materials of various more established art forms are ‘conceptually fused’ rather than merely juxtaposed” (VOS, apud RAJEWSKY, 2005, p. 51).⁵

Hansen-Löve is considered the first scholar who used *intermediality* in the sense that should become relevant for the debate in the 1990s. He makes use of *intermediality* in analogy to *intertextuality* to capture the relations between literature and visual arts. From the mid-1990s onwards, the precise meaning of the term has been the object of much debate among academics, with a variety of approaches and definitions being proposed. This vast array of theoretical stances has caused the term, from the beginning of the intermediality debate, to represent a “termine-ombrello”, in Eco’s sense: an umbrella term’ always used differently, justified by diverse theoretical approaches, covering a multitude of heterogeneous objects, questions and research goals (Erkenntnisinteressen) ⁶ (RAJEWSKY, 2015, p. 28 - translated for this text).

⁴ Cf. HIGGINS, Dick. *Intermídia* in DINIZ e VIEIRA, *Intermedialidade e Estudos Interartes: Desafios da Arte Contemporânea 2*, Belo Horizonte, Rona Editora: FALE/UFMG, 2012, p. 41-50.

⁵ Eric Vos, “The Eternal Network. Mail Art, Intermedia Semiotics, Interarts Studies,” in Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund and Erik Hedling (eds.), *Interart Poetics. Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media*, Amsterdam, Atlanta, Rodopi, 1997, p. 325 apud RAJEWSKY (2005).

⁶ In the original: “[...] le concept d’intermédialité s’est établi, dès le début, comme *termine-ombrello* dans le sens d’Umberto Eco : un ‘terme parapluie’, utilisé toujours différemment, justifié par des approches théoriques diverses et sous lequel on range une multitude d’objets, de problématiques et d’objectifs de recherche (*Erkenntnisinteressen*) hétérogènes” (RAJEWSKY, 2015, p. 28).

In the following decades, the proliferation of the use of the term, and the challenges this entailed, start being noticed. In the early years of the 21st century, several scholars discussed the difficulties attached to the migration of the concept to various academic fields and to the increasing fragmentation of research on intermediality.⁷ Having first arisen in literary studies, the word *intermediality* soon transcended its confines. It is now present in a variety of research areas, which used to center on a single field of research (e.g. theatre, film, or media studies). The approach it prompts served to allow for a more interdisciplinary practice of research.

However, in spite of and, to a good measure, because of the plurality of approaches to, and definitions of, intermediality, the debate has evolved steadily over the past decades. Referential in the field are the works by Claus Clüver (e.g. Claus Clüver, “Inter textus / Inter artes / Inter media”, 2001), Éric Méchoulan (*Intermédialités*, 2003), André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion (e.g. *Transécriture and Narrative Mediatcs*, 2004), Werner Wolf (e.g. *Intermediality*, 2005), Irina Rajewsky (e.g. *Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation*, 2005; *Border Talks: The Problematic Status of Media Borders in the Current Debate about Intermediality*, 2010), Walter Moser (e.g., *L’interartialité: une contribution à l’archéologie de l’intermédialité*, 2006), Jürgen E. Müller (e.g. *Intermediality Revisited*, 2010), Bernard Vouilloux (e.g. *Intermédialité et Interarticité*, 2015).

Claus Clüver, discussing the concept of intermediality, challenges the label *Interart Studies* and points out that *intermediality* encompasses what is “broadly known as ‘arts’ (music, literature, dance, painting and the other visual arts, architecture, as well as mixed forms such as opera, theatre and film)”⁸ thus enlarging an area of studies previously understood to comprise only high art.

The same drive towards larger-scope, more encompassing research, through the use of intermediality, can be seen in adaptation studies. Elleström, for instance, has decisively contributed to such enlarging of horizons, as he expands the conceptual framework of this field by using, as a basis for his research, the findings and repertoire of intermediality research (cf. Elleström 2017).

⁷ “[...] dans le cadres premiers bilans de l’état de la recherche, l’intermédialité ait été désignée comme un “mot-clé utilisé de manière excessive” et qu’ait en outre été affirmé que des “approches de recherche différenciés” et surtout qu’une réponse à la “question fondamentale” de savoir “ce qu’on entend[ait] vraiment par le terme intermédialité”, se faisaient attendre. On critiquait l’éparpillement des recherches intermédiales, leur faible portée théorique ainsi que “la définition précaire de leur objet de recherche” (RAJEWSKY, 2015, p. 21).

⁸ In: SCHMITZ-EMANS, Monika; LINDEMANN, Uwe (Org.). *Komparatistik 2000/2001: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*. Heidelberg: Synchron Publishers, 2001. p. 14-50. This English translation is based on the Portuguese translation of the original text.

This essay aims at giving a short introduction to different ways in which *intermediality* is conceptualized, to the significance of the variance in its meaning and in its use in different research areas. Having presented some proposed definitions of intermediality, it moves in the next section to a brief overview of different conceptions of *medium/media*, then links them to the debate on intermediality by focusing, more specifically, on *intermedial references*.

2. Concepts of media, notions of intermediality

The concept intermediality is necessarily connected to that of medium/media. However, also the concept of medium/media is highly disputed, and the question of what counts as a distinct medium, or of whether we can speak of “individual media” at all, will be answered differently, depending on the academic field as well as on the research objective and approach (see also Ryan 2005, 14; Rajewsky 2010). As Elleström observes:

‘Medium’ [...] is a term widely employed and it would be pointless to try to find a straightforward definition that covers all the various notions that lurk behind the different uses of the word. Dissimilar notions of medium and mediality are at work within different fields of research and there is no reason to interfere with these notions as long as they fulfil their specific tasks (ELLESTRÖM, 2010, p. 12).

Just like Elleström, at the current state of the debate many scholars consider the search for an all-embracing definition of *medium/media* to be pointless (cf., e.g., also Ryan, 2005 who on these grounds argues for a three-dimensional conception of *medium*). However, this does not exempt intermediality researchers from the need to clarify their understanding of *medium/media* and to develop a coherent definition that is capable to anchor their respective concept of intermediality on solid media theoretical grounds.

In this context, there are numerous approaches in intermediality research, which show significant differences as soon as they are examined more closely. We cannot examine them all in detail in the context of this introduction. A few pertinent voices may suffice here.

Clüver, in a 2006 paper on intermediality, adopts a definition offered by Bohn, Müller and Rupert (1988), according to whom a medium is that which “conveys to and between human beings

a sign (or a complex of signs) loaded with meanings, with the help of adequate conveyers”.⁹ Guelton, in his studies on intermediality, defines media as “semiotic supports for works of art.”¹⁰ According to this author, the notion of media “deals primarily with the meanings likely to emerge at the meeting of modes of expression with distinct characteristics”.¹¹ Wolf (2005) argues that, within the context of intermediality studies *media* should be understood as “conventionally distinct means of communicating cultural contents. Media in this sense are specified principally by the nature of their underlying semiotic systems [...], and only in the second place by technical or institutional channels”. (2005, p. 253) Or, as Wolf puts it in 2011:

I propose the following definition: "Medium, as used in literary and intermediality studies, is a conventionally and culturally distinct means of communication, specified not only by particular technical or institutional channels (or one channel) but primarily by the use of one or more semiotic systems in the public transmission of contents that include, but are not restricted to, referential 'messages.' Generally, media make a difference as to what kind of content can be evoked, how these contents are presented, and how they are experienced." (WOLF, 2011, p. 2)

Wolf's notion of ‘individual media’ as *conventionally and culturally distinct* means of communication’ (our emphasis), or, to slightly rephrase this, as media that are conventionally *perceived* as distinct (cf. Rajewsky 2010), has proven particularly productive in the realm of intermediality studies.

Rajewsky suggests that while *intertextuality* discusses the relations between texts, *intermediality* refers to phenomena, which in some way take place between media, implying a crossing of media “borders” (cf. RAJEWSKY, 2005, 2010, 2015). As an analytical category, intermediality can thus provide important insights for the analysis of cultural or artistic practices (e.g., literary texts; films; performances; paintings; installations; comics; video games; internet blogs; logos etc.) – as long as these practices, or medial configurations, manifest some sort of intermedial strategy, constitutional element or condition.

This very brief overview of various media concepts in the context of intermediality research does not intend, of course, to omit critical approaches which, for example, fundamentally question the very delimitability of “individual media” (for more detail, see Rajewsky 2010). However,

⁹ In the original: “[...] que transmete para e entre seres humanos um signo (ou um complexo sígnico) repleto de significado, com o auxílio de transmissores apropriados” (CLÜVER, 2006).

¹⁰ “[...] de supports sémiotiques pour les œuvres artistiques” (GUELTON, 2013, p. 12). Our translation.

¹¹ “[...] se concentre avant tout sur les significations susceptibles d’émerger dans la rencontre entre des modes de signification possédant leurs propres caractéristiques” (GUELTON, 2013, p. 12). Our translation.

generally speaking, what matters for research questions involving these concepts is the understanding that both of them, medium/media and intermediality, receive different definitions, depending on the fields and objectives of research in which they are used. It is on this basis that varying conceptions of intermediality have been put forward within the debate.

In what regards specifically intermediality, a good starting point for the debate is Wolf's well-crafted definition in "(Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature":

As in the case of a medium, (inter)mediality can also be conceived of in both a narrow and a broad way: The narrow sense focuses on the participation of more than one medium within a human artefact (see Wolf, *Musicalization* 37). As opposed to this "intracompositional" definition, I propose a broader one that follows Irina O. Rajewsky's thought (see "Intermediality," *Intermedialität*): intermediality, in this broad sense, applies to any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media ... and thus comprises both "intra-" and "extra-compositional" relations between different media (WOLF, 2005, p.252-253).

Rajewsky suggests three analytical subcategories for the term: 1. Intermediality in the narrower sense of *medial transposition*, i.e. the transformation of a "source text" linked to a specific medium into another medium (e.g., film adaptations of literary texts); 2. Intermediality in the narrower sense of *media combination*, also referred to as *multi-* or *plurimediality*, which implies the combination and, hence, the "co-presence" (Wolf) of at least two media, or medial forms of articulation, that are conventionally perceived as distinct (e.g., illuminated manuscripts, comics, graphic novels, Sound Art, and, from a historical perspective also theatre, opera, and film); 3. Intermediality in the narrower sense of *intermedial references*, which imply the transgression of media borders not by actually, i.e. materially, involving more than one medium or medial form of articulation as in media combination ("co-presence") but by *referring to* another medium, e.g., by thematizing, evoking or imitating/simulating certain elements, techniques or structures of another medium, using one's own media-specific means and instruments to do so.¹² This includes, for instance, references in painting to photography (as in photorealistic paintings which create the illusion of a photographic quality with the means and instruments of painting), references in film to painting, in literary texts to film (so-called filmic writing), to music ("musicalization of literature") or to works of the Fine Arts (*transposition d'art*, ekphrasis), etc.

¹² Cf. RAJEWSKY, Irina O., *Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality*. 2005. Available at http://cri.histart.umontreal.ca/cri/fr/intermedialites/p6/pdfs/p6_rajewsky_text.pdf.

Hence, as also Werner Wolf has pointed out, unlike what one sees in processes of media combination, in intermedial references the other medium comes into play only in an indirect or covert way:

As opposed to plurimediality [i.e. media combination], which spans many variants – from the juxtaposition of relatively separate media to complex syntheses of medial components – the second variant of intracompositional intermediality, ‘intermedial reference’, suggests neither medial hybridity nor semiotic heterogeneity since it does not imply the incorporation of signifiers of other media. Rather, works and performances in which intermediality is present as a reference seem to be medially and semiotically homogeneous, for the involvement of another medium here takes place only covertly or indirectly: through signifiers and sometimes also signifieds pointing to it. In contrast with plurimediality, the other medium enters as a conceptual rather than a physical presence, and the base medium retains the character of a homomedial semiotic complex (WOLF, 2005, p. 254).

In a similar way, Rajewsky argues that it is crucial to distinguish between forms of media combination and intermedial references, since the act of crossing media borders is brought to bear in quite different ways in each case: “In the case of intermedial references it does not affect the material manifestation of various media within a given medial configuration, but rather the specific quality of *the reference itself*” (Rajewsky 2010, p. 58-59); i.e. its *intermedial* quality.

It is this intermedial quality that distinguishes inter- from intramedial references (e.g., from intertextual references, understood as text-text-relations in a narrow sense, or from film-film, painting-painting-references, etc.). However, what is more important in this context is the fact that intermedial references need to be distinguished from forms or processes of media combination.

Intermedial references are a specific intermedial procedure and their study thus requires an analytical stance that is mindful of such specificity. According to Rajewsky, intermedial references are “to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification: the media product uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium (i.e., what in the German tradition is called *Einzelreferenz*, Individual reference), or to refer to a specific medial subsystem (such as a certain film genre) or to another medium qua system (*Systemreferenz*, “system reference”). The given product thus constitutes itself partly or wholly *in relation* to the work, system, or subsystem to which it refers”. (RAJEWSKY, 2005, pp. 52-53)

The corresponding strategies may be functionalized differently in individual cases of medial configurations (i.e. in individual texts, films, paintings, etc.); yet, in any case, procedures of this kind open up additional layers of meaning, which must be taken into account in the analysis of individual artifacts.

3 Conclusion

The processes of transformation in the means and modes of material and symbolic production which have been accelerating since the end of the past century have led to deep changes in the means and modes of communication. Within this new communicative space, the centrality of media as constitutive elements of the very substance of communication becomes ever more prominent. McLuhan's celebrated observation that the medium is the message forcefully resonates in the world of instant communication.

Within the academy, this new context has led to the rise of a variety of research fields, which have, as their core object, the media, their configurations and their interrelations. Investigation on intermediality, media studies, (re-)mediation and adaptation have appeared and gained depth since, at least, the last decade of the 20th century. The process of consolidation of these fields of study has been marked by disputes around key concepts, such as media and intermediality.

This essay aimed at offering a short overview of the most influential perspectives within the conceptual debate around media and intermediality. By briefly contrasting different readings of such concepts, it highlights the wealth of research possibilities represented by these diverse points of view.

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