



Theatre, Mass Media and Environment: A Definitive Discourse In the  
21<sup>st</sup> Century Theatre Experience

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**Abstract**

The convergence of theatre with mass media provides opportunities for new types of viewing experience and engagement to audiences and the environment. Theatre has always been an integrative, collaborative art which potentially and sometimes actually includes all art: music, dance, painting, sculpture. The theatre as a performing art since ages has a notion of gathering people in one venue for the shared experience of theatre performance. The convergence of theatre with mass media has led to this social and cultural activity taking place online.

**Introduction**

A significant feature of recent theatre, mass media and environment theoretical discourses is recognition that the theatre and mass media should not be studied in their own historical developments and with their own rules and specifications, but rather the broader context of their differences and co-relations should be taken into consideration. What is notable also is that in the discipline of theatre studies a change of paradigm is taking place. One contributing factor to the change in paradigm might be that our contemporary culture which has become a mass media culture, with all the performative features that this entails, which is not to say a mediatized culture (Auslander, 9).

Another feature is that contemporary theatre practices are increasingly interdisciplinary practices with mass media and environment . As has happened so often in the past, artists who are

working in different disciplines are today working with each other particularly in the domain of theatre, their creative work is finding each other, not only metaphorically but also literally on the performance space of the stage. This has become imperative because theatre provides a space in which different art forms which can affect each other quite profoundly. Maybe we could even say: when two or more different art forms come together a process of theatricalization occurs. This is not only because theatre is able to incorporate all other art forms, but also because theatre is the art of the performer and so constitutes the basic pattern of all the arts (Kattenbelt, 20).

This holds true as long as the notion of art remains attached to human creativity; to human individuals who stage themselves in words, images and sounds, in order to make his or her own experiences perceptible to the audience; and that this is done with the intention to explore to what extent life experiences are shared with other human beings (Seel, 127). In a variety of art and media discourses, a wide range of concepts have been developed in order to characterize specific relationships between the theatre and mass media. What can be noticed is that historical contributions to these discourses are usually descriptions of how the relationships between theatre and mass media have evolved, whether or not that began with the intention to deduce rules and regularities in this process. However, theoretical contributions are usually conceptualizations of specific relationships between theatre, media and the environment taking into consideration whether or not with the intention to set out the criteria on which specific distinctions are based.

### **Theatre and Mass Media: The link**

In theatre and mass media theoretical discourses the concept of multimediality is used at two different levels. On the one hand at the level of sign systems such as word, image, sound and on the other hand at the level of different disciplines as distinguished as different cultural action domains or practices such literature, visual arts, music, theatre, film, television, video, internet etc. At the level of sign systems an utterance, for example, is multimedia because it consists

of a combination of words (written, shown or spoken), images (still or moving, graphic or photographic) and/or sounds (environmental sounds, soundscapes, music, speech etc.). Similarly, digital objects like websites may be considered as multimedia in so far as they are equipped with words, images and/or sounds. It is interesting to note that computers, in which words, images and sounds are made, processed and played back, are usually referred to as multimedia computers. The term was invented by the computer industry in order to emphasize that the computer can be used for many different aims such as editing video recordings, composing music and playing games.

Multimediality is often mentioned as a feature of digital media, which in interaction with the features of virtuality, interactivity and connectivity constitute the specificity of digital media (Raessens, 21). Thus, at the level of the sign systems, we could consider (analogous to digital media) theatre performances, sound films, television broadcasts and video recordings as multimedia. The multimediality of media is usually, but not always, restricted to audiovisuality, that is to say, to what we perceive with our so-called distance senses, which include; our eyes and ears, which are the two senses that are so important for developing our intelligent capacity of structuring the world and ourselves in relation to it, in time and space a capacity, by the way, which allows us also to keep things at a distance. Time and space are still the two main dimensions by which we distinguish media from each other and determine their specificity. Such a determination of the specificity of media is usually related to their materiality, although we may notice that in the media comparative discourse there is apprehensiveness about ascribing the specific features of a medium to its materiality.

At the level of differentiating between mass media, the concept of multimediality refers to a combination of different media instead of different sign systems in one and the same object. Strictly speaking, this means that only theatre can be ascribed as multimedia, for theatre is the only medium that can incorporate all other media without damaging the specificity of these media and its own specificity (Kandinsky, 13) at least as far as the materiality of the

different media is concerned. Theatre on film and theatre on television or on video or DVD is, in its mediatized form, no longer theatre but respectively film, television, video or DVD, and, as such, at most a representation of theatre; whereas film, television, video and DVD are, even as elements of a theatrical performance, still film, television, video and DVD; although the images and sounds that these media provide are not only screened or played back, but also staged, and, in this capacity, not only cinematic, televisual, videographic or digital, but at the same time theatrical.

It is because of its capacity to incorporate all media that can be considered theatre as a hypermedium, that is to say, as a medium that can contain all media. Maybe it is because of this specificity that the theatre has always played and continues to play such an important role in the exchanges between the arts. In contemporary theatre, digital technology functions in the exchanges between the arts as an interface. To think this assumption one step further, we might say that at the level of the medium, theatre is a physical hypermedium, whereas at the level of sign systems the Internet is a virtual hypermedium. It is because it is a hypermedium that theatre provides, as no other art, a stage for intermediality. On this stage, the performer is the player of the different media who acts in the empty spaces between the media.

### **Media changes in development of theatre**

Media changes and co-relations between media are important tendencies in the development of the theatre since the beginning of the twentieth century. These are usually associated with the blurring and crossing boundaries between media; with the hybridization of media utterances; with intertextual relationships between media; with intermedial relationships between media; and with an increasing self-reference and self-reflection of the arts as media. Media changes and co-relations between media have resulted in new forms of representation; new dramaturgical strategies; new principles of structuring and staging words, images and sounds; new ways of positioning performing bodies in time and space; of creating time-

space relationships; of developing new modes of perception; and of generating new cultural, social and psychological meanings.

Technological innovations have played and are still playing a prominent part in the development of arts and media and in the interaction between all modern and postmodern media. The historical avant-garde created the necessary conditions under which media change and co-relations between media could develop as important features of modern and post-modern art, in particular as far as it is related to the exchangeability of expressive means and aesthetic conventions between media, and to the playful staging of signs from which modern and post-modern arts derive a preeminently performative (not to say theatrical) and self-critical aspect.

### **Transmediality of Theatre, Mass Media and Environment**

The concept of transmediality is mainly used in art and communication theoretical discourses for referring to the change such as transposition and translation from one medium to another. This transfer may apply to the content (to what is represented, the story) or to the form (in formalistic terms we might say to the principles of construction, stylistic procedures and aesthetic conventions). At the level of the content the concept refers in particular to those media changes which become absent, for example, the way that the specific features of the source medium become lost in the process of transposition. Notably, most feature films that are based on a novel are transpositions of stories, which do not take into account the specific literary features of the original narration.

These features are usually ignored: once converted into the other medium very little reminds us of the medium specificity of the literary original. This is connected with the compulsion of transparency that applies to the feature film as a mass medium because the ultimate consequence of a film medium that defines its audience as a mass is that it wipes out its mediality for the sake of an optimal accessibility of the world that is represented in the film. This transparency is, like the classical mode of film art itself, an invention of the 19th-century novel. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the narrator hides himself more and more behind the story that is told - as if mediation is not

the case at all. With his disappearance, the narrator deprives himself from the possibility of comments, which also implies that he sacrifices to a certain extent his authority. However, there is also something to gain: on the one hand, the possibility of an accurate and detailed descriptions of the events and actions that are taking place in the story; on the other hand, an extensive description of the experiences through which one or more characters in the story are living and it is the same with the classical mode of film art. A transposition of construction principles, stylistic procedures and aesthetic conventions means that one medium takes-up or imitates the representational principles of another medium. As an example that is particularly pertinent to theatre and film we may think of the free exchange of expressive means between different media that are characteristic of German Expressionism.

Such a taking up or imitation by another medium may be considered either as an ideal, or as a shortcoming. Considered as an ideal, I think of Vsevolod Meyerhold's idea of a cinematification of the theatre (Meyerhold, 254). What he had in mind was a high speed alternation of individual scenes - like in film, which according to Meyerhold, did not necessarily imply that film projections should be used in the theatre performance even though he was one of the first directors who experimented with film projections in the theatre (Murray, 192). Considered as a shortcoming, we may think of Bela Balazs' characterization of film in its beginnings as photographed theatre (Balazs, 150).

At that historical moment, film relied on the methods of representation of theatre, at least within the individual scenes, which presented spatial totality and invariability of perspective and distance. Film began to develop its own language from the moment that it broke through the theatrical methods of representation, which meant that the space was no longer shown as a totality, and that perspective and distance could change all the time by changing the position and the framing of the camera.

The taking-up or imitation of the methods of representation of one medium by another medium can also function as a specific, medium-crossing form of intertextuality, which implies that one medium refers to another medium (Balme, 148-150). In the book *Transmedialität* the concept of transmediality emphasizes, in particular, the process of transition from the source medium to the target medium. Simanowski (44) defines transmediality as «the change of a medium into another medium as a constituting and conditioning event of a hybrid aesthetic phenomenon. Hybridization stands for the mixture of the diverse. When transmediality is conceived of as the representation of one medium in and by another medium, we come very close to the frequently used concept of *remediation*, introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (19)

### **Intermediality**

The concept of intermediality is, like the concepts of multi- or transmediality, used in different discourses. This is particularly pertinent because over many years the concept of intermediality has been so frequently used in different discourses and in different meanings that it is almost impossible to map out its semantic field or range. Irina Rajewski (44) is right when she states that everybody who uses the concept intermediality is obliged to define it. As far as the concept is used as distinct from other concepts of mediality, it emphasizes, in particular, the aspect of mutual influence (interaction).

Intermediality assumes a co-relation in the actual sense of the word, that is to say a mutual affect. Taken together, the redefinition of media co-relationships and a refreshed perception resulting from the corelationship of media means that previously existing medium specific conventions are changed, which allows for new dimensions of perception and experience to be explored. In making this claim, intermediality is an operative aspect of different media, which is more closely connected to the idea of diversity, discrepancy and hypermediacy than to the idea of unity, harmony and transparency.

Intermediality assumes an in-between space from which or within which the mutual affects take place. To give some historical

references, the concept of intermediality today can be more closely associated with the *Bühnenkompositionen* (stage compositions) of Wassily Kandinsky (12) as opposed to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Richard Wagner (5) because Wagner strived with his music dramas for a reunification and reintegration of the arts under the primacy of music. Wagner's aim for the «artwork of the future» of his day was for the spectator to be immersed into the represented world. Kandinsky on the contrary strived with his stage compositions for a theatre that could function again as that makes the different arts affect each other. The interplay of the arts, as Kandinsky (Bill, 125) imagined it, as a dynamics of musical, pictorial and choreographed movements was, according to him, only possible because each individual art had developed its own purity of expression in a relative independence from the other arts. Kandinsky's aim was not illusion, but the expression of inner experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The integration of theatre, mass media and environment, has given rise to various possibilities. There is a sense that in these days of digital technology and mass mediatization, theatre is losing its relevance; some have expressed a desire to develop strategies to arrest this perceived decline, to somehow avert a crisis. The fear of replacement by the computer may not be as great as it once was but there is still a healthy level of cynicism within theatre and performance circles, such as Steve Dixon's dismissal of popular cyber rhetoric as "fanciful and hyperbolic, reconfiguring the age-old acting practice of adopting a character into a mystical life changing experiences heralding a brave new world.

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