

Intermediality:

Rethinking the Relationship between Theatre and Media¹

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In a recent article surveying the theatre of the last decade the Berlin-based theatre critic Ralph Hammerthaler remarked: “If there is a trend in the theatre of the 1990s, then it is the trend to the theatre movie.”² As the most important representative of this development in German theatre he cites the infamous director of the Berlin Volksbühne Frank Castorf, who in an interview for the *Berliner Zeitung* openly admitted that the theatre he dreams of can be found, “if at all in the cinema, in the films of Quentin Tarantino.”³ In other words, theatre as ‘Pulp Fiction’, a theatre, which makes use of filmic devices such as – and Hammerthaler enumerates them – “Soundtrack, Rhythm, clips, fade overs and the continual play with citations and clichés.”⁴ The neologism ‘Theatermovie’ is symptomatic of the increasingly urgent need to find critical categories and evaluative yardsticks for media products characterized by their hybridization: Video dance, dance film, film versions of plays and so on. It is easy to make a long list of old and new cross-media genres, many of which are quite familiar. Their identification does not pose a problem. Problematic is, however, their appreciation: both from the view of the judgemental critic and the dispassionate theatre scholar. Hammerthaler’s rather positive judgement of such hybrid products is uncharacteristic of the German critical establishment. Hybridity in general and the *Theatermovie* in particular are categories that generate suspicion and rejection in the German mind. As a more representative example of this attitude I shall quote briefly from a review of Castorf’s *Theatermovie Trainspotting*, his adaptation of the

¹ This essay is a revised version of a paper published in German in Christopher B. Balme and Markus Moninger (eds.) *Crossing Media: Theater – Film – Fotografie – Neue Medien* (Munich: ePodium, 2004). An earlier version was presented at the interdisciplinary colloquium ‘The Theory and Analysis of Performance’ organized by the Department of Germanic Studies, Cinema & Media Studies, Theater & Performance Studies at the University of Chicago, 5-6 March 2004. My thanks to David J. Levin for the generous invitation and particularly to the discussants Loren Kruger and Tracy Davis. The paper also benefitted from contributions by other members of the colloquium, in particular David Wellbery and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht.

² Hammerthaler, Ralph: „Das Kino und sein Double: Warum das Theater tut, was es tun muß: Es klaut beim Film.“: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12.1.1998, n.p.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

well-known Danny Boyle film and Irving Walsh novel. Michael Laages in the *Deutsche Bühne* refers to Castorf's shameless borrowing from the cinema as "vampiristic parasitic pied piperism (vampirische(m) Schmarotzertum und Rattenfängerei)"⁵. Castorf has been called a lot worse things in the course of his colourful career in German theatre. (On the Richter scale of critical invective, this is about a 7). However, the choice of terms is revealing. Expressions such as 'parasitic' and 'pied-piperism' contextualize in a significant way the question of theatre in the media age. The terms are significant because they reveal a ground-swell attitude among the critical and scholarly community towards the theatre. The charge of being 'parasitic' implies that the stage should keep itself free of harmful media influences. More revealing however is the expression 'pied-piperism' - the German word is 'Rattenfängerei', literally rat-catching)- because the question immediately poses itself which group of spectators are the children or the rats? From the perspective of the critic the reference is clearly to Castorf's young spectators who otherwise would only be found in the cinema or in front of a television and, this is the unspoken implication, the theatre only compromises itself by trying to cater to them.

What we are dealing with is a clear separation and hierarchization of the media both in terms of their products and associated patterns of reception. The problem I shall discuss revolves around the assumption that there are many more 'rats' among theatre spectators than often thought. By rats I mean spectators whose horizon of expectation and receptive competence have been formed by a complex and heterogeneous media landscape. As well as cinema and television we have to include of course videos, comics, computer games and the internet as media influences which spectators bring with them to the theatre. While this is by no means a startling insight, the issue it raises certainly needs to be discussed within the academic discipline of theatre studies more seriously than it has been up until now. What methodological and theoretical implications are raised when we begin to situate our 'medium', the theatre, in the context of a pluralized mediascape? This broader question I shall focus with a narrower one. It can be briefly formulated in the following way: In order to meet the challenge posed by the multiplicity of media, theatre studies need to undergo a revision of one of their fundamental paradigms: In place of a perspective centred on the doctrine of media *specificity*, theatre studies must consider theories based on notions of *intermediality*. That this paradigmatic shift is underway in the theatre itself can easily be demonstrated (although by no means everywhere). Within theatre studies however, there is not much evidence that the same change is afoot. This is

⁵ *ibid.*

certainly due to the fact that a shift to an intermedial perspective implies farewelling the notion that the definition of theatre as an art form is somehow linked with its specific properties as a medium.

I shall illustrate my argument in the following steps. I shall begin by glossing the two terms ‘media specificity’ and ‘intermediality’. The main part of my paper will focus on exemplifying the term intermediality with reference to the work of Robert Lepage, in particular to his epic production *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. I shall conclude by discussing these results within a broader disciplinary context of theatre studies and intermediality.

From Media Specificity to Intermediality

The term ‘media specificity’ refers, in the words of the film theorist Noël Carroll, to a form of ‘medium-essentialism’: “It is the doctrine that each artform has its own distinctive medium, a medium that distinguishes it from other art forms [...] the medium qua essence dictates what is suitable to do with the medium.” (49) The central corollary of this theory implies or even states explicitly that definition of medium determines notions of aesthetic value. In the case of film, the aesthetically privileged films would be those that make the most extensive or innovative use of the particularities of the medium.⁶ Applied to the theatre, media specificity would imply a concentration on the basic theatrical situation, which would necessarily highlight the presence of a live audience and/or a performance style not reliant on modern technology. Carroll argues that the early film theory of Kracauer and Arnheim employs the doctrine of medium-specificity as a means of legitimizing the new medium of film as a artform. (I shall return to this point in a moment).

The concept of media specificity is, however, by no means an invention of film theory despite its close links to that discipline. It in fact goes back to a much older ‘common place’ of aesthetic theory that finds its first comprehensive formulation in Lessing’s *Laokoon* essay of 1766, where he makes a fundamental and famous distinction between temporal and spatial arts. By critiquing the old formula of *ut pictura poesis*, which enabled one artform to be the model for another, Lessing introduced a new precept

⁶ See Noël Carroll: *Theorizing the Moving Image*. (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), particularly chap.2, ‘The Specificity of Media in the Arts’.

in aesthetic theory that privileged arguments of difference and delimitation over concepts of analogy and exchange. The consequences of this perspective continue into the present and certainly provided one of the underpinnings of modernism. It was the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg who declared the question of medium to be the defining and distinguishing moment of art, thus effectively reversing the aesthetic doctrine of idealist aesthetic theory which considered the material aspect of art to be the least important. For Greenberg the search for medial purity was the ultimate goal for each and every modernist artform. In an essay, entitled the “new sculpture”, Greenberg writes:

A modernist work of art must try, in principle, to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium. This means, among other things, renouncing illusion and explicitness. The arts are to achieve concreteness, ‘purity’, by acting solely in terms of their separate and irreducible selves.⁷

Greenberg’s art criticism goes back to the 1930s. By the time his famous collection of essays, *Art and Culture*, was published in 1961, the doctrine he was espousing had solidified into something approaching critical orthodoxy. It was paralleled by the same arguments in film theory. Between 1930 and 1970 numerous film and art theorists such as Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin and Erwin Panofsky expounded the dogma that the artistic nature of film – in comparison mainly to theatre – could be identified in the way it used its “elementary material properties” (to quote Rudolf Arnheim).⁸ The medium-specific ‘property’ of film was determined to be the use of the camera and montage.

This position began to be questioned in 1960s. Among the earliest critics was Susan Sontag – who in her 1965 essay ‘Film and Theatre’ questioned the idea of an “unbridgeable division, even opposition between the two arts.”⁹ She continues: “[I]t is no more part of the putative ‘essence’ of movies that the camera must rove over a large physical area, than it is that movies ought to be silent.”¹⁰ While conceding that the two media demonstrate differences, Sontag questions that these differences have any kind of normative aesthetic value. Sontag’s essay is part of a debate which challenged Greenberg’s fundamentalist position. It was sparked off among other things by the rise of performance

⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, Boston 1961, 139; cited in Carroll 1996, 25.

⁸ Arnheim, Rudolf „Film als Kunst“ (1932). In: Albersmeier, Franz-Josef (Hg.): *Texte zur Theorie des Films*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995, 179.

⁹ Susan Sontag; Film and Theatre in: *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, (NY: OUP 1974), 249-267; here 249.

¹⁰ Sontag, 254

art. This debate forms also the background to Michael Fried's defence of art against theatre in his famous essay 'Art and Objecthood' published in 1967.

What Sontag doesn't see, mainly because the tendency had not become visible by 1965, is the way theatre itself reacted to the Greenbergian position, i.e. in Sontag's words "the maintaining and clarifying of barriers between the arts."¹¹ With hindsight it becomes clear that the mid to late sixties saw attempts to redefine theatre in Greenberg's terms. Whether it was Peter Brook's search for an immediate theatre in an empty space, or Grotowski's poor theatre for a few chosen spectators, both can be seen as attempts to formulate both in theory and practice the theatrical equivalent of medium-specificity. Both directors, in this period of their work at least, were working with a concept of theatre reduced to its basic essentials.

At almost exactly the same time, theatre studies (and I am speaking particularly of German *Theaterwissenschaft* here) was redefining itself within the same paradigm. One can observe significant tendencies to define the scope or even essence of the subject as the problem of intratheatrical communication, i.e. what happens between stage and spectators. Theatre was defined as a special form of face to face communication and therefore clearly distinct from other art forms or media. The theoretical basis of this discussion is sociological theory, in particular the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism. One of the major proponents of this movement in Germany, Arno Paul wrote in 1970: "It is necessary to ask precisely and systematically what the constitutive moment of theatre is and from there to determine the central object of the discipline."¹² The central object is the performance and more exactly the face to face communication between performers and spectators. This almost fundamentalist obsession with the live performance was motivated by three strategies of demarcation: Firstly to free the subject from its entirely positivist-historicist orientation; secondly to draw a clear line between itself and literary criticism and thirdly, and this is the point which is of concern here, the essentialization of face-to-face communication meant drawing a clear line of demarcation between theatre and the new, technical, audio-visual media. That this debate is by no means dead, or just a teutonic spleen, can be seen from the on-going discussion within performance theory over the status of liveness. The basic positions – for the sake of brevity we shall call them

¹¹ Sontag, 264.

¹² Arno Paul, 'Theaterwissenschaft als Lehre vom theatralischen Handeln.' In: Klier, Helmar (ed.): *Theaterwissenschaft im deutschsprachigen Raum*. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 222.

Auslander versus Phelan – restate the same debate twenty years after Paul, albeit with different examples and a wider frame of reference. ¹³

Intermediality

A counter-model to an aesthetics and a discipline based on a doctrine of medium-specificity has been formulated under the rubric of intermediality. This critical approach proceeds from the assumption that media specificity as it has been defined above is at best an historically contingent phenomenon, at worst a critical and ideological construct that consigns much of the most interesting theatre of the past two decades to the critical scrapheap. From the point of view of scholarship, the term intermediality has engendered a great deal of research and discussion within the humanities, particularly within the French and German-speaking worlds. ¹⁴ In English, the word is only slowly gaining currency. ¹⁵ Discussion began in the 1980s with studies into the interrelationship between text and images in surrealist and dadaist collages. This was followed by a growing number of studies into the adaptations of literature into film as a form of media transformation. Film studies have embraced the term, with the work of Peter Greenaway forming perhaps the most popular *objet de recherche*. Theatre studies have only just begun to discuss the term seriously. Because of the history of the term and its beginnings in literary and film criticism there is still no clear generally accepted definition. At best we can distinguish

¹³ See Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1999). Auslander develops his argument that there is no ontological difference between live and mediatized performance by critiquing Peggy Phelan's influential book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁴ The origins of the term and its critical discussion lie in 1960s performance art. The challenge posed by the happening and fluxus movements led to an interrogation of distinct artistic boundaries. It is generally acknowledged that Dick Higgins initiated discussion with his essay 'Intermedia' first published in 1965. See Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia', *foew&ombwhw* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969 [1965]). He revisited the subject in his: *Horizons, the poetics and theory of the intermedia*. (Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). There has been considerable discussion of the term in German scholarship: see Albersmeier, Franz-Josef: *Theater, Film, Literatur in Frankreich: Medienwechsel und Intermedialität*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992; Müller, Jürgen: *Intermedialität: Formen moderner kultureller Kommunikation*, Münster: Nodus, 1995; Zima, Peter (Hg.): *Intermedialität der Literatur*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996; Spielmann, Yvonne: *Intermedialität: Das System Peter Greenaway*. München: Fink Verlag, 1998; Helbig, Jörg (Hg.): *Intermedialität: Theorie und Praxis eines interdisziplinären Forschungsgebiets*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1998. Of these publications only Albersmeier deals with theatre in the context of the historical shift from theatre to cinema. The earliest application of the term to theatre was probably an essay by Petra Maria Meyer, 'Theaterwissenschaft als Medienwissenschaft', *Forum Modernes Theater* 12:2 (1997), 115-131.

¹⁵ In 1998 a working group in the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) was set up under this term. The first book length publication in English is a special number of the periodical *Degrés* edited by Johan Callens, 'Intermediality', *Degrés* 28:101 (2000).

three fields of application, all of which use the term: Intermediality can thus understood to be:

1. the transposition of diegetic content from one medium to another;
2. a particular form of intertextuality;
3. the attempt to realize in one medium the aesthetic conventions and habits of seeing and hearing in another medium.

The first definition – the transposition of content between media – refers of course to familiar questions of adaptation – *War and Peace*: the book and the film, *Henry V* the play and the film – of which there are any number of studies. This field of research tends however to base itself on a medium-specific paradigm, asking as it does how the different media require by definition certain changes and alteration.

The second definition - intermediality understood as an extension of the term *intertextuality* to the relation between media products – evolved in the field of comparative literature and was mainly applied to a specific category of text that integrated images such as William Blake’s illustrations of his own and other texts.¹⁶ The problem with this definition is that it is subject to the same conceptual inflation as its progenitor. Since literary theory sees intertextuality to be a basic condition of text production – there are no texts that are not intertextual, although some may be more intertextual than others, the same generalization may be applied to intermediality. If we narrow intertextuality to mean a specific strategy of explicit reference to particular pretexts, then the term becomes focussed on the level of content rather than on the formal dimension of perception determined by media conventions.

It is this latter aspect – the realization of media conventions in another medium – the third option, that defines intermediality in a narrower and more useful sense. It is this meaning that I shall be using in the remainder of this paper. The key term here is conventionality. This means that media are regarded as a set of historically contingent conventions, which may or may not be predicated on their technical devices. I would certainly argue that

¹⁶ See Peter Wagner ed., *Icons - texts - iconotexts: essays on ekphrasis and intermediality* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996) and Eichler, Thomas und Ulf Blechmann (ed.): *Intermedialität: Vom Bild zum Text*, (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 1994). Throughout the 1990s, one can observe in the humanities a widespread tendency, particularly in Germany, to reformulate traditional aesthetic questions as medial ones. This confirms Fredric Jameson’s definition of ‘mediatization’ as “the process whereby the traditional fine arts [...] come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system.” *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), p.162; cited in Philip Auslander, ‘Liveness, Mediatization, and Intermedial Performance’, *Degrés* 28: 101 (2000), p. e 8.

notions such as ‘cinematic’ or ‘televisual’ can be identified and probably intersubjectively agreed upon (at least for certain periods). This does not mean, however, that a notion of media specificity is thereby re-introduced “through the backdoor”, as Peter Boenisch for example has argued.¹⁷

That the exchange between media does not just proceed on the level of content but also on a deeper level of conventions and perceptions was already observed and commented on in the 1920s and 1930s. Both Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht concerned themselves with this question: Benjamin in his seminal essay on art and mechanical reproduction where he argues that perception is historically contingent on technical innovation and changes. In 1931 Brecht published a report on the trial surrounding the film adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*, *Über den Dreigroschenprozeß*. He noted aphoristically: “The film viewer reads stories differently. But he who writes stories is also a film viewer. The technification of literary production is irreversable.”¹⁸ In this pithy statement we already find key elements of the concept of intermediality. Most importantly it shows that the question affects both production and reception: The film viewer reads stories differently, and the producer of these stories is also subject to the same influences.

If we define intermediality as the simulation or realisation of conventions and patterns of perception of one medium in another then we must ask in a next step by what criteria we can recognize and study such strategies. In the case of theatre for example we would have to ask if any and all use of film, video or even slide projections is a defining factor of an intermedial approach: here we have the term multi- or mixed media theatre, problematic though it is, as semiotic theory tends to define theatre by definition as multimedial.¹⁹

The borders are of course fluid. Multi-media theatre in the common (not the semiotic) sense may of course pursue an intermedial strategy. Examples go back to the 1920s with Piscator’s use of film and slide projections which evidence not just a use of technical media to better contextualize ‘historical’ background but also to contrast their various functions on a formal and perceptual level. Contemporary examples of course abound. Various New York-based groups and artists such as The Wooster Group, John Jesurun and

¹⁷ See Peter Boenisch, ‘coMEDIA electrONica: Performing Intermediality in Contemporary Theatre’, *Theatre Research International* 28:1 (2003), 34-45. Boenisch argues that theatre is intrinsically ‘intermedial’ and thereby not reliant on the presence of film projections or computers on stage to justify the use of the term.

¹⁸ Brecht, Bertolt: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 18 Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967, 156.

¹⁹ It is necessary to distinguish between ‘multimedial’ in sense of mixed media utilizing technical devices such as film projection, and the semiotic definition, which regards theatre as per se ‘multimedial’. See Hess-Lüttich, Ernest W.B.: ‘Multimediale Kommunikation als Realität des Theaters in theoriegeschichtlicher und systematischer Perspektive’. In: Oehler, Klaus (ed.): *Zeichen und Realität*. (Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 1984), 915-927.

The Builder's Association are, from a European perspective at least, the best known exponents of such an approach.

In the rest of this paper I shall examine the work of Robert Lepage, in particular his production *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* in order to elaborate in more detail analytic categories for the examination of intermediality.²⁰

The Seven Streams of the River Ota evolved over the course of four to five years between 1994 and 1998. In its final versions it consisted of seven parts which occupy a fictional time span of fifty years, and a performance time of, depending on the length of the meal breaks, up to eight hours. I shall restrict myself to four scenes from the first part. Part One is titled 'Moving Pictures' and tells of the relationship between the Us-American army photographer (Luke O'Connor), who has the task of photographing the damage to buildings caused by the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and a survivor of the bomb, a Hibakusha (Nozomi), who has received 'facial damage'.

1. The Torii of Miyajima

An image of the Torii (arch) of Miyajima is projected on the screen. Gagaku music plays. An American soldier and a Japanese boatman appear in silhouette behind the screen. The boatman helps the soldier put his gear - a duffle bag and a camera on his tripod - onto his boat and pushes off. The background image turns into running video of the Bay of Miyajima. The soldier holds up a light gauge, sets up his camera and shoots pictures. When the boat reaches a small dock, the boatman helps the soldier to alight.

The image of the dock fades away as an elderly woman in a kimono enters the stage right and goes inside the house.

(...)

3. Cheesecake (Fig.1)

An American soldier, carrying a paintbrush, is silhouetted against the screen, which is tinted chartreuse. Music plays, a mixture of synthesized French horns and percussion. The soldier begins to 'paint' the screen with his brush. A photograph of

²⁰ Lepage's theatre work has only recently begun to attract scholarly commentary. The first collection of essays is: Donahue, Joseph and Jane M. Koustas (ed.) *Theater sans Frontiers: Essays on the Dramatic Universe of Robert Lepage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001. For a discussion of technological and intermedial aspects of some productions, see: Fouquet, Ludovic: *Du Théâtre d'ombres aux technologies contemporaines: Entretien avec Robert Lepage*. In: Picon-Vallin, Béatrice (ed.) *Les écrans sur la scène*. Lausanne: L'âge d'homme 1998, 325-332; and Hébert, Chantal and Irène Perelli-Contos: *L'écran de la pensée ou les écrans dans le théâtre de Robert Lepage*, In: Picon-Vallin, Béatrice (ed.) *Les écrans sur la scène*. Lausanne: L'âge d'homme 1998, 171-205.

an American military plane from 1940s emerges. The image turns into a running video of the plane flying. The soldier holds his hand up and the plane stops suddenly - the film freezes in one frame. The soldier 'paints' the plane some more; the film starts running again, and the plane flies off, nearly hitting him.

The soldier picks up a bucket and gestures at the plane, tossing paint at the screen, which turns chartreuse again. He paints again, revealing images of scantily clad women painted on the sides of planes. He throws more paint at the screen, the paints an airplane taxiing down a runway. He runs after it but can't catch up, and disappears stage right as the plane takes off. Blackout.

(...)

7. Wedding pictures

The Mother-in-law enters with a portofolio, puts it down on the porch, and kneels down to open it. Dreamlike Gong music plays throughout the scene. She takes out some photographs that have been half-destroyed by fire and looks at them sadly. She then slides open the three center doors to reveal the screen. One of the photographs she is looking at, of a Japanese wedding procession, appears on the screen.

The image turns into running video; as the wedding procession comes closer the Mother-in-law stands and touches the groom's face, but the image disappears. A new video of the wedding ceremony plays. The Mother-in-law kneels in front of the screen. The bride and groom on the screen clap their hands twice as part of the ceremony and hands clap offstage in synch with the video image, the Mother-in-law clapping with them. The scene freezes on the screen; the Mother-in-law stands up, cries out harshly, and slaps her hands against the screen several times; each time she slaps, the image grows smaller, until it's small enough for her to put her hands on it and 'drag' it into the portofolio, which she closes up and takes offstage.

(...)

9. The doll

(Fig.2)

An image of a train goes across the screen; the train music from scene 5 plays. Three soldiers including Luke appear behind the screen, making giant silhouettes. Luke sits down with his head bowed. The wedding doll is on his lap, covered by a cloth. He slips off the cloth and the doll, facing away from Luke, slowly turns around and lifts its hands. Luke lifts his head. The doll moves toward Luke's face and runs her hands down his profile. She goes to kiss Luke's lips but keeps moving; her image disappears into Luke's.

Luke stands up and turns towards the audience. A light comes on that illuminates him for a moment. Blackout. ²¹

These short excerpts make clear that *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* integrates into theatrical performance techniques and ways of seeing associated with different media - among them film, television, photography and video. At least three discrete levels of

²¹ Robert Lepage and Ex machina, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, (London: Methuen, 1997), 2-12.

interaction need to be differentiated. We are aware of media (1) as a framing medium (*Rahmenmedium*), (2) on an internal level, as media-within-media (*Binnenmedien*) and (3) on a thematic level. The framing medium is theatre which is never seriously destabilized as live actors continually interact with various technical devices. These form the various internal media, the second category, which include film, video and photography. The main thematic medium, as we shall see, is photography, which is signalled from the outset by the presence of the camera and in fact continues to play a role throughout the whole production. It becomes a central motif, connecting the various strands of action as they shift back and forward over fifty years and three continents. Photography as the medium of memory in the 20th century.

Internal media: stasis and movement

The use of different internal media is a characteristic of all forms of multi-media theatre. However, even this term is tricky, as it presumes a theatre that is not multi-medial, which brings us back to the semiotic definition of theatre. We can therefore only say that for specific historical reasons we still perceive the use of different internal media in *Seven Streams* as being in some way foreign to the nature of theatre. It is therefore more useful to think of such technical devices only in terms of their conventionality: that is, what we normally associate with them in terms of function and content. The scenes shown utilize different media and at the same time draw attention to their conventionality. The still images suggest or emulate photography without actually being it (in the media ontological sense). In the opening scene the still picture of the Torii of Miyajima is transformed into the moving images of the boat trip across the bay towards Hiroshima. In the Scene 'Wedding Pictures' the contrast is reversed. The home movie of a traditional Japanese wedding ceremony congeals into a photograph of the dead bridegroom, which is slipped back into a singed photo album. Roland Barthes' famous remark that every photo of a person from the past contains a premonition of their death is demonstrated by the medial shift from film to photography and emotionally charged through the interaction with the stage figure.²²

²² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (London: Vintage, 1993), chap..39.

Among the many examples of cinematic conventions used, the most obvious is the fading in of the title 'Moving Pictures' over the moving images in concert with the music swelling to a crescendo. In such moments the stage is almost transformed into cinema, but remains of course theatre thanks to the presence of live actors. The fact that they are only visible as shadows draws attention both to the convention of shadow plays with its roots in Asia as well as to contemporary possibilities of cross-media experimentation. The ancient works hand in hand with 'advanced' technology and creates thereby unusual media historical associations. We see that the projection of light is the basis of old and new technologies of illusion.

If the first and third scenes evoke associations with the medium 'film' (even if the images actually issue from a video projector), the second scene, entitled 'Cheesecake', makes explicit use of and alludes to video art. (FIG.1) In this scene the same combination of live actors and moving images, is employed as in the other two, with the significant distinction that a different aesthetic mode is alluded to. Here there is hardly any attempt to make explicit a diegetic and/or emotional relationship characteristic of cinema. Instead Lepage evokes with the help of the associative aesthetics of video art and computer animation a complex of images sedimented in our collective memory: the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the pin-up girls. The title itself, 'Cheesecake', which only appears in the published text, makes the association with pin-up girls explicit. In these objects of desire, with which American pilots decorated their engines of destruction, is reflected one of the overriding principle of the whole production, namely the coexistence of eros and thanatos.

Thematic Medium: Photography and Memory

The first entrance of the army photographer Luke O'Connor, equipped with camera and tripod, establishes both an image and motif, which, more than the characters themselves, hold together the seven parts of the *Seven Streams*. Contemporary history, particularly the history of the second half of the twentieth century is constituted to a large degree by photographic images, distributed by various mass media. Such images are an essential ingredient of our private, public and historical memory. The link between the private and historical dimension of image making is represented in the story of the army photographer O'Connor and his relationship to the Japanese woman Nozomi, a survivor

of the bomb. The photos he takes which are part of his official mission lead in a later part of the production to a meeting between his two sons, one American, one Japanese.

The character of the Czech Jewish photographer and concentration camp survivor Jana Capek represents the public-official dimension of our collective photographic memory. Originally the central figure of the work (in the first versions she appeared in all scenes), her role changed as the production evolved, until she finally assumed less a dramatic than a symbolic function. In the later versions of the work, she does not appear until Part Five, 'Mirrors', in which her memory forms a bridge between the two holocausts: Hiroshima and the Shoah.

Jana takes off her shirt, hangs it up, and puts on a silk robe. She opens the centre doors and does a slight take when she sees that there are mirrors behind them. She opens the three centre doors and sits down in front of the mirrors. Looking at herself, she lies on her side with her back to the audience. The tinkle of chimes is heard, and the lights fade downstage and come up upstage. The mirrors turn transparent so we can see behind them. A young girl with red hair in a pink dress is lying behind the mirrors in an identical position to Jana; a yellow star is sewn on her dress. It is Jana when she was a girl. All the action involving young Jana in this section takes place behind the wall of mirrors.²³

What Foucault says about the mirror as a kind of heterotopia, can be applied to the photographer, Jana Capek, as she lies on the floor of the house in Hiroshima with her back to the audience while before her sleeping eyes, her childhood memories of the concentration camp Theresienstadt are reflected behind and between mirrors. Foucault notes: „from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.“²⁴ Lepage represents the heterotopia concentration camp in the theatre (it too a heterotopia according to Foucault) by means of the old illusionistic media technology of mirrors. Hidden in a small magic box Jana Capek is smuggled out of the concentration camp. The single-lens reflex camera with which she later becomes an acclaimed photographer is based on the same technology.

Although the medium of photography with its numerous private, public and historical memory functions is a central theme of the production, Lepage does not use a single photograph in a documentary function. There are no slide projections of the destruction of Hiroshima, or of the concentration camp Theresienstadt. These and all other diegetic

²³ Lepage, *The Seven Streams*, 45.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces', in: *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, London: Routledge, 240. The use of mirror stage which produces an illusion of infinity can be read as a homage to the Czech stage designer Josef Svoboda.

spaces are represented by the many means offered by the framing medium theatre. Thus photography remains a theme and is never actually materialized for the spectators.

Playing with the Frame

In *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* the medium of theatre forms more than a self-evident frame for the action. Due to the fact that Lepage employs a large number of theatrical devices of different cultural and historical provenance, the medial function of the theatrical frame becomes self-reflexive. The theatrical forms and conventions used or alluded to include: Nô, Bunraku, Shadow plays, Butoh, strict naturalism, and a Feydeau farce viewed from backstage. The pros and cons of *création collective* are debated (which is something of an in-joke since the whole production is based on this principle) and, as we have seen, various techniques of multi-media staging are implemented throughout. That *Seven Streams* attempts to blend so-called theatre-specific and multi-media devices is not the question here. The question, however, still remains, where the particular intermedial strategies of this theatre can be found?

Lepages theatre is intermedial, because, although the framing medium theatre is at no point seriously destabilized, at certain points our 'ways of seeing' seem to be more televisual or cinematic. Narrative cinema with its now relatively conservative conventionality provides the most frequent point of reference for this strategy of intermedial reframing. Techniques such as fades, the use of sub- or surtitles when foreign languages are spoken, a discontinuous narrative structure all point to an attempt to simulate filmic conventions with the means of the theatre. This experimentation with medial simulation is by no means specific to *Seven Streams* but is a characteristic of Lepage's work since the mid 1980s. A particularly clear example of the use of filmic devices without actually using the medium of film can be seen in the 1987 production, *Polygraph*, which Lepage has since made into a film. This psychological detective story consists of short scenes which are reminiscent of cinema not just because of their brevity but because they are explicitly staged as film scenes. In one striking example Lepage creates a perspective for the spectators that is otherwise only familiar in film or television: (Fig.3)

Lucie uncoils from the floor to take the same position against the wall; simultaneously, the two men each put one foot on the wall, turning their bodies

horizontal so as they appear to be in the classic cinematic ‘top shot’ of a corpse.

François and David shake hands ‘over’ her body.²⁵

Important here is not just the perceptual perspective – we see in theatre in a way we normally only see in the cinema –, but also the fact that Lepage is consciously citing and contrasting the perceptual conventions: The stage direction of the published version reads: “they appear to be in the classic cinematic ‘top shot’ of a corpse.” Significant here is the expression: “classic cinematic top-shot.” He is staging film without film. By using very simple theatrical devices – the whole effect is achieved with a simple shift in body positions and a lighting change – we seem to be looking through a camera. In the context of the debate media specificity or intermediality this scene should be read not as a clear points win for the theatre but rather as a demonstration of the conventionality and historicity of all so-called media specific forms of expression.

The field of experimentation outlined here, which I have termed intermedial theatre can encounter virulent opposition, particularly among the German theatre critical establishment. This brings us back to the ‘rat’ problem discussed earlier. Lepage’s *Seven Streams of the River Ota* was not met everywhere with critical jubilation. I quote Franz Wille, a major critic of *Theater heute*, Germany’s leading theatre magazine: “What is one supposed to make of Lepage’s ‘Seven Streams of the River Ota’, now that the meandering American-Japanese-Canadian family saga has been presented in its final version at the ‘Theater der Welt’-Festival in Dresden?” Not a lot according to Wille. He compares this ‘family saga’ to a “third generation American TV series. Its genealogical resolution is about as logical as the family tree of a homosexual wire-haired dachshund.” Or worse, and now Wille resorts to the most lethal weapon in the arsenal of German critical invective; he gives the production the final coup de grâce: “the dialogue could almost attain the level of soap opera, if it weren’t so clumsy.”²⁶

Theatre as soap opera. This devastating judgement could be compared with remarks by Lepage who has said on many occasions that he is concerned with exploring the relationship between theatre and other media: I quote from an interview given to a German newspaper:

²⁵ Lepage, Robert und Marie Brassard: *Polygraph*, trans. Gyllian Raby. (London: Methuen, 1997), 29.

²⁶ Wille, Franz: ‘Mit der Gießkanne im Regen stehen’, *Theater Heute* 8, 1996, 22.

I am simply interested in finding out what the theatre of the future is going to look like. And one cannot ignore the vocabulary of the cinema – how one can tell stories using the means of cinema. The audience has this knowledge after all, has through music videos become accustomed to stories being told in jumps. This staccato-rhythm will also reach the theatre.²⁷

A large discrepancy manifests itself here: On the one hand the French-Canadian ‘theatre magician’ who is concerned with the future of theatre in the media age. On the other hand, the damnation of this goal and its aesthetic means by a leading German critic. Although Lepage has often remarked that German critics are hard on him the gap between the two positions is not just a question of an incompatibility between an individual artist and a particularly unkind critic. It is symptomatic of a deeper-seated problem transcending individuals and even theatre cultures.

The work of Lepage represents on an artistic level the basic precepts of the theoretical discussion underpinning the concept of intermediality. Wille, I would argue, and other critics of his ilk, are still firmly situated in the paradigm of media specificity. Not only does Lepage work in different media – theatre and film –, which in itself is nothing unusual, but the major focus of his activities and the production company *Ex machina* he has set up, is devoted to the question of exploring how the different media can interact and influence one another.²⁸ These projects include the question of situating theatre in the emerging digital technologies and the internet. The incompatibility lies in the fundamental rejection of this kind of endeavour for theatre.

Perspectives

In conclusion I would like to discuss some possible perspectives and areas of research for theatre studies based on / proceeding from an intermedial paradigm.

1) The theatre spectator is a spectator with competence and knowledge in a variety of media. Taking cognizance of this circumstance does not mean becoming the pied piper of theatre studies, playing seductive tunes taken from MTV video clips. Nor does it mean that

²⁷ Diez, Georg: „Graben nach der großen Form“. Interview with Robert Lepage. In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 21. August 1998, 12.

²⁸²⁸ Lepage’s first and much acclaimed film *Le Confessionnal* (1994) develops motifs from his first internationally successful production, *Trilogie des Dragons*, and makes use of actors from *The Seven Streams*. Lepage made his play *Polygraph* into a film in 1996. His film *Nô* (1998) is an adaptation of part three of *Seven Streams*, ‘Words’.

the theatre must subscribe to the same aesthetic of quick cuts. On the contrary: the seven to eight hours of the *Seven Streams* require an exceptionally patient spectator, willing to adapt to quite heterogeneous ways of seeing and hearing. From the point of view of research, it is necessary to examine more closely different media aesthetics as a question of conventionality, i.e. as historically emergent practices of seeing, hearing and behaving rather than as essentialized properties determined by material factors.

2) If intermediality is to be taken as an historical paradigm then theatre must be understood in the first instance as a hypermedium that was always capable of incorporating, representing and on occasion even thematizing other media. This ability is not a just a recent discovery of Erwin Piscator, the Wooster Group or Robert Lepage. An intermedial perspective could be productive for theatre historical research, if for example, the question of technical apparatus were examined more closely, not as a separate question but in relationship to other aspects of the theatre. Well before the so-called new media were invented, theatre was a technological medium in dialogue with other media. The exchange is clearly evident in the question of writing and more importantly the invention of printing. McLuhan's Gutenberg Galaxy fundamentally altered the medium of theatre in the early modern period with wide-ranging implications for interrelationship between language, performance and reception. The interaction between media is however more obvious in the area of illusionistic technologies such as the *laterna magica*, panoramas, dioramas and of course photography. Although the development of these media has been intensively researched in isolation, our knowledge of their interrelation with the theatre remains fragmentary.

(3) On a theoretical level a shift towards intermediality would require that theatre studies engage with the complex and often contradictory discussion of media theory. If there are two points of gravitation in the labyrinthine field of media discourse: textoriented and technologically oriented media theories, then it is difficult to fit the theatre into either. Therefore one must ask if there is not a third path to explore, which would necessitate examining particular features of theatrical mediality. If we define theatre as a hypermedium, then one of these features is the potential of theatre to realize and represent all other media. A live television broadcast incorporated into a performance is live television but, thanks to the theatre's ability to recode anything it enframes, also theatre as semioticians and phenomenologists never tire of telling us.

Conclusion

If theatre today is exploring the interstices of intermedial relations, then theatre studies cannot afford not to follow in the wake. This means that the subject cannot define itself in counter-distinction to other media by assuming a defensive posture. On the contrary the discipline must define theater as a medium whose basic disposition is intermedial, that is open to exchange. All theatre spectators today, or almost all, have at their command plural media competence. Theatre such as that explored by Lepage opens a new perspective for the relationship of theatre towards the technical media, which have since the beginning of the last century posed its greatest challenge. If Theatre is to gain access to a new generation of spectators and not become the string quartet of the 21st century, then it must define its relationship to the other media in terms of openness and productive exchange. As critics and scholars of theatre, we must do the same. Then finally it will not be possible to defame intermedial theatre as a form of rat-catching, for by then we will all be rats.

Illustrations

Fig 1. Seven Steams of the River Ota. Scene 3, Cheesecake. Photo: Ex Machina.

Fig 2: Seven Steams of the River Ota. Scene 9, The Doll. Photo: Ex Machina

Fig 3: Polygraph. 'Top Shot' of Lucie. Photo: Screen shot of video recording, courtesy Ex Machina.