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FOREWORD: MEDIATIONS OF METHOD

As the subtitle of the two volumes of *Beyond Media Borders: Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media* makes clear, these reflections on media have the mission to begin where medium-specificity or, what I call slightly irreverently, medium-essentialism ends. The media under discussion here, considered from a great variety of perspectives, are all ‘multi-modal’, set in more than one semiotic mode. The most readily understandable example we have rehearsed for so long would be, of course, cinema or television, the study of which in monodisciplinary departments seems to take for granted that they *are* media, whereas the inevitable combination of words and images, colour, sound, narrativity and technological effects clearly demonstrates that no single disciplinary framework will do. As I am also a maker of films and video, I feel I am in a good place to say this. But as the essays in these volumes make clear, practically all media deploy more than one modality.

The point is not so much, however, that ‘multi-’ aspect, although that, too, is important, since it advocates an anti-purist view of the media products—Lars Elleström’s term for ‘texts’ and ‘images’, ‘sounds’ and ‘words’, and what have you, that it is the Humanities’ mission to study. What catches my eye is primarily that word ‘relations’, in combination with the preposition ‘inter-’, which is particularly dear to me, as I have explained more times than I care to remember. Briefly, ‘inter-’ stands for, or *is*, relation, rather than accumulation. It is to be distinguished in crucial ways from that currently over-used preposition ‘trans-’, which denotes a passage through, without impact from, another domain. With his consistent interest in media *as* intermedial and his prolific publication record,

many edited volumes, and as director of the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS), Elleström has become a primary authority in that domain that is best characterized as one that doesn't fit any of the traditional disciplinary concepts, yet is probably the largest, most frequently practised mode of communication among humans, indispensable for human life. Elleström's ongoing focus on—his intellectual loyalty to—the idea of the *semiotic*, a concept and field that on its own already indicates the need for the 'beyond' in the books' main title, demonstrates a resistance to ephemeral academic fashion and a consistency of thought without dogmatism which I consider characteristic of the semiotic perspective. Briefly again, a semiotic perspective asks how we make meaning. The interest of these volumes lies in the importance of communication in general, without which no human society is possible.

Media, as the editor explains, are always-already 'inter-', as the century-old debates about inter-arts clearly demonstrates. The preposition is a bridge, and the articles brought together here explore what the bridge bridges. This requires reflection on the concept of media itself. One cannot understand intermediality without a sense of what a medium is; even if, as such, in its purity, it doesn't exist. With exemplary clarity, Elleström begins his substantial opening and synthesizing article with five tendencies he finds damaging for intellectual achievement in (inter)media studies. Anyone interested in this field of study will recognize these tendencies and agree with the editor's critique of them. But then, the challenge is how to remedy these problems. This is where Elleström earns his authority: he proceeds to announce how these tendencies will be countered, or overcome, in the present volumes. If only all academics would take the time and bother to lay out what they are up against and then redress it: academic bliss would ensue. In other words, this is real progress in the collective thinking of cultural analysis. Felicitously refraining from short definitions, he embeds the relevant concepts in what he calls a 'model', but what those of us with a mild case of 'model-phobia'—the fear of a certain scientific demand of rigour before all else—may also see as a theoretical frame. Felicitously, he calls his activity 'circumscribing' rather than defining. His approach alone, then, already demonstrates in the first pages of his long introductory text an academic position that integrates instead of separating creativity and rigour and thus not only helps us understand the general principles of communication but, through detailed analysis, makes us 'communicationally intelligent', if I may follow discursively the example of psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas who, in his 1992 book *Being*

a Character, sensitizes us to the complexities and *thereby*, clarity, of how people are able, and by the media products, enabled, to communicate effectively, with nuance.

There is not a term or concept here that is not both circumscribed and relativized and put to convincing use. The length of the introductory essay is, in this sense, simply a demonstration of generosity. For example, the central concept of ‘transfer’ that we can hardly do without when talking about communication is neither defined in a simplistic way, as a postal service that goes in one direction only, nor theorized into incomprehensibility. The idea of transferring means that a message goes from a sender to a receiver; we were told in the early days of semiotic theory. Of course, in order to discuss communication, we must consider the idea that a message is indeed transferred from a sender to a receiver; without it, we are floundering. In this, Elleström is realistic; he doesn’t reinvent the wheel. Yet, the implicit (but not explicit) notion that the content of a message, as well as its form, go wholesale from sender to receiver, as endorsed in traditional semiotic theory, is clearly untenable. For, the sender’s message, with the sender always already ‘in’ communication, will always be influenced, or coloured, by what the sender expects, and has reasons to expect, the receiver will wish, grasp, appreciate.

What do we do, then? Instead of casually rejecting the idea, concept or notion, Elleström and his colleagues in these volumes recalibrate and nuance what we consider a message to be, with the help of the relationality that the preposition ‘inter-’ implies. This makes the sender-message-receiver process an interaction, mutually responsive, hence, communicative in the true sense. The change from ‘sender’ to ‘producer’ intimates that the former sender has *made* something. The former ‘receiver’ has shed her passivity by becoming a ‘perceiver’, a term that adds the activity performed at the other end of the process. And when the term ‘meaning’ is hurt by a long history of rigid semantics, as is the case of many of the concepts we use as if they were just ordinary words, they come up with alternatives, but not without bringing these in ‘discussion’ with the simpler but problematic predecessors. The need for a concept that cannot be reduced to dictionary definitions compels the authors, guided by the experienced and ingenious editor, to come up with richer terms that are able to encompass all those nuances that were always a bit bothersome and that we liked to discard or ignore. Thus, ‘cognitive import’ cannot be reduced to ‘meaning’, and neither can it be confined to language. That would make the substitution of a well-known term by a new one pointless.

Instead, the new term necessarily includes the embodied aspect of communication. This eliminates the mind-body dichotomy to which we are so tenaciously attached; not because we believe in it, but because, until these volumes, we had no alternative vision.

The word ‘dichotomy’, here, is perhaps the most central opponent in these volumes’ discourse. And as with ‘inter-’ as implying relationality, I feel very close and committed to an approach that does not take binary opposition as its ‘normal’, standard mode of thinking. And once we are willing to give up on dichotomies such as mind/body, it becomes possible to complicate all those dichotomies that structure what we have taken for granted and should let go in order to recognize the richness of mental life—mental in a way that does not discard the body but endorses it, along with materiality, as integrally participating in the thinking that communication stimulates, helps along and substantiates. Both the partners in communication, who can be singular and, at the same time, plural, and the site of communication, are necessarily material or bound to materiality. Moreover, the sense-based nature of communication makes the abstract ideas surrounding communication theory, not only untenable, but futile, meaningless. Getting rid of, or at the very least, bracketing, binary opposition as a way of thinking is for me the primary merit of the approach presented here.

So, the first thing these books achieve is to complicate things, in order to get rid of cliché simplicity, and then, right after that, to clarify those complicated ideas, concepts and the models that encompass them. This is perhaps the most important merit of these volumes. They complicate what we thought we knew and clarify what we thought is difficult. With that move as their starting point, the enormous variety of topics of the chapters become, thanks to the many cross-references from one article to another, a polyphony. Rather than a cacophony of loud divergent voices, this polyphony constitutes a symphony that, as a whole, maps the enormously large field of the indispensable communication that is human culture, without pedantically demanding that every reader be an expert in all those fields. I don’t think anyone can master all the areas presented and examined in the contributions, but the taste of it we get makes us at the very least genuinely interested. This is not a dictionary or an encyclopaedia but a beautifully crafted patchwork of thoughts.

The conceptual travels are stimulating, never off-putting, because they are completely without the plodding idiosyncrasies one so often encounters when new concepts are proposed. And devoid of the polemical

discussions with other terminologies, well explained and labelled meaningfully, the conceptual network towards which these books move fills itself as we read along and thus ends up offering a ground for cultural analysis that I am eager to put my feet on. Solid, reliable and, still, exciting. What more would we wish from in-depth academic work? This collective, collaborative work is based on a deep understanding of what scholarly work should be: an act of communication between producers and perceivers, as the view presented here would have it, one that makes its readers feel involved. This is the only way they can learn something new.

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