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Passages across Thresholds: Into the Borderlands of Mediation

Abstract

Concepts of multimodality, intermediality and intertextuality are here put in a wider cultural context of boundaries and transgressions. Earlier concepts of passages and thresholds may enrich today's understanding of recent mixtures and flows across borders within contemporary digital media culture. A trace from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is followed through the borderlands of a contemporary shopping centre in order to approach late modern thinking of flows across borders in media culture and cultural studies, where with contextualising, dialogic and critical interpretation are crucial. The combination of 'multi' and 'inter' stresses plurality and interrelations rather than monolithic and essentialist reductions. A first section presents sociological, anthropological and philosophical ideas of passages and borderlands. The second section outlines main kinds of media passages through real and virtual spaces. The third section discusses the interrelations between multi- and inter-concepts that are today crucial for cultural theory, suggesting some ways to understand their mutual connections.

Passages across Thresholds: Into the Borderlands of Mediation

Introduction

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin was a flâneur in early and high modern culture, most particularly in his tour through the combined media- and cityscape of nineteenth century Paris, the unfinished *Arcades Project*. In that work, he both *discussed* and *made* important passages over boundaries and thresholds. One of his many traces passes through borderland ideas that continue to inspire late modern thinking of flows across borders in media culture and cultural studies. They are of relevance also to the discussion of multimodality and intermediality. Instead of viewing different symbolic modes as clearly distinct and homogeneous essences, the multimodality perspective suggests us to conceive of them as complex, constructed, impure hybrids, with crucial overlaps. And instead of studying each kind of medium in separation from others, the intermediality perspective investigates their intersections within differentiated networks of communication. The combination of ‘multi’ and ‘inter’ stresses plurality and interrelations rather than monolithic and essentialist reductions. I will approach these themes by following the Benjamin trace up to a contemporary shopping centre, where a mapping of the interplay of people and media turns out to shed useful light on today’s borderlands of multi- and inter-mediation. My perspective is a Nordic variant of cultural studies with contextualising, dialogic and critical interpretation at its base. This text will itself have the form of a passage, surging over a series of thresholds in order to look through half-open doors at a number of interconnected themes.¹

Traces of transgressions

The word ‘arcade’ refers to the vaults and lined arcs that formed the narrow shopping galleries hidden within, under and between city houses. However, the German title of Benjamin’s manuscript was the *Passagen-Werk* – the passages-work. The Latin ‘passus’ means step, and a ‘pass’ is a narrow path or corridor between walls. ‘To pass’ is to move through or along something else, in a temporal-spatial sequence of first approaching a subject, object or structure, then being very close but not colliding, and finally withdrawing and leaving the other behind. A ‘passage’ is either a movement through, across or past some kind of structure (like a walk through a corridor), or that very structure itself which such a movement goes through (the corridor itself). The structure may be static and fixed, or it may be itself in a flux, though then moving differently than the passing subject – like a swimmer passing through a stream of water. Passages are movements in both time and space with some intensified contrast between the moving subject and the surrounding contextual structures.

The concept has not been much elaborated in cultural theory, compared to concepts like field or flow. One exception is in studies of ‘liminal’ experiences of so-called ‘rites de passage’ by Arnold van Gennep in 1909, whose ideas seem to have been known by Benjamin and were later further developed by Victor Turner in 1969.² The Latin word ‘limen’ signifies a threshold, and liminal phenomena precisely stand on some social or experiential threshold. ‘Passage rites’ demarcate age-related shifts between life phases, by rituals where the subject has to make physical movements into a different, liminal experiential space, thereby symbolising a definite

step between one phase and the next, like passing through a door opening. Benjamin was well aware of the importance of these passages, and believed them to have become increasingly scarce in modernity:

Rites de passage – this is the designation in folklore for the ceremonies that attach to death and birth, to marriage, puberty, and so forth. In modern life, these transitions are becoming ever more unrecognizable and impossible to experience. We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us. (But together with this, there is also waking up.) And, finally, there is the ebb and flow of conversation and the sexual permutations of love – experience that surges over thresholds like the changing figures of the dream.³

Falling asleep lets us into the transitory dream worlds of our unconscious inner life, while his addition of waking up opens a door to enlightenment and critical demystification, which is a key theme in his work. By proposing conversation and love as additional examples, human interaction and communication are acknowledged as sources of threshold experiences. Benjamin then makes a conceptual distinction: ‘The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action’.⁴ Whereas a boundary is a line that separates, a threshold is ‘a zone of transition’.⁵ Thresholds are interesting since they allow passages over them, transitions between spheres or states: while boundaries tend to halt movements, thresholds invite innovative change.

Gaston Bachelard, in his *The Poetics of Space*, refers to the little gods that in East Asian countries mark the sacred properties attributed to the threshold. I was recently in Singapore, Hong-Kong and Taiwan, and was much impressed by these door or threshold gods that even today indicate a culture that pays homage to transitions. Bachelard analyses the poetical metaphoric of the door, which can be closed, wide-open, or half-open. ‘And language bears within itself the dialectics of open and closed. Through *meaning* it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up.’⁶ Therefore, as a language-using animal, ‘man is half-open being’.⁷ His idea that ‘poetry puts language in a state of emergence’ indicates the fruitfulness of a use of the threshold metaphor in the analysis of the basic functions of language, communication and culture in general.⁸

The threshold passages of liminal rituals are not limited to adolescence or sublime poetics alone. Practices of entertainment and popular culture as well as the various uses of communication media also induce several kinds of threshold states – between self and others, past and future, understanding and the unspeakable. Media play key roles in ritual processes that structure everyday life.⁹ The self-forgetful letting go in front of a novel, a sound system or a computer, opens experiential spaces where otherwise unconscious impulses may find expression through unexpected impressions. Such transitory experiences are better described in terms of thresholds for passages than as collisions with fixed borders.

A world where conversation, entertainment and love seem to have such a central position in public and private lives casts some doubt on Benjamin’s pessimistic diagnosis that such threshold experiences would be rare today. Late modern

practices of media use also host such zones of transition between people and between experiential forms, as thresholds between mental and social spaces are marked and crossed by the use of various media texts. Modern communications let people and their works overflow an increasing number of borders, dynamising space and time by accelerating passages through physical, experiential, social and cultural spaces or spheres. No wonder that late modern social and cultural research is flooded by references to nomadic movements and transitional border-crossings. The globalisation debate is but one example.

Borders and transgressions are mutually dependent on each other. Only by crossing a border, at least in thought, can it be experienced as such. Ethic norms or group identities are regularly reinforced by discourses on that which is beyond the limit, discourses on the Other(s). Conversely, crossings are only possible if there are borders to cross. In an essay called 'Bridge and Door', Georg Simmel emphasised this close interdependence of separation and connection, whereby human separations of things 'have already related them to one another in our consciousness'.¹⁰ Conversely 'things must first be separated from one another in order to be together', since 'it would be meaningless to connect that which was not separated', so that human beings always 'separate the connected or connect the separate'.¹¹ For Simmel, 'the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating' – 'the bordering creature who has no border'.¹² Here again, half a century before Bachelard, this state of half-openness opens a door toward a poetics of creative freedom. For transgressions and hybrids to have meaning and value, they must contradict established boundaries and bridge that

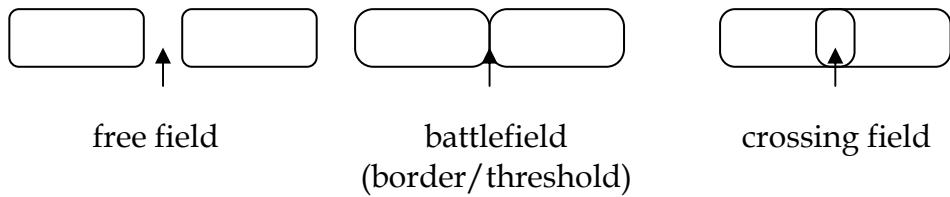
which is otherwise separated. Aesthetic practices combining art and popular culture for example offer a bonus kick precisely when their rule-breaking mixtures of high and low in new combinations are experienced as such. For those who may not have internalised that borderline, its crossing may pass unnoticed. Likewise multidisciplinarity becomes pointless without disciplines, multiculture without cultural spheres to hybridise, and multimedia without some kind of 'pure' media to combine.¹³

What may appear as absolute limits or frontiers toward the external unknown can mostly better be understood as borders between existing fields, where innovation means reshuffling through bricolage and montage rather than invention from scratch. Outside most boundaries are borderlands between fields rather than empty voids. The borderland idea has old roots within the traditions of cultural studies, from German critical theory to French cultural sociology and British cultural studies. Dialectics of differentiation and demarcation on one hand and crossings and impure mixtures on the other are central to the interplay of 'high' and 'low' genres as well as of news and entertainment or between cultural spheres dichotomised along dimensions of class, ethnicity, gender or generation. Gloria Anzaldúa introduced the term 1987 in her studies of culture at national and ethnic frontiers.¹⁴ Ten years later, James Clifford generalised these ideas in relation to both cultural and academic borderlands.¹⁵

In a recent internet research project called 'Digital Borderlands', similar themes were elaborated in the field of cyberspace.¹⁶ Internet culture is full of transitional passages through the virtual arcades of its digital borderlands. Portals and sites mix

and redefine previously seemingly well defined areas of media and communication, through what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin call ‘remediation’ processes, whereby new media always lean on older ones, borrowing contents, forms and functions but reshuffling them in renewing ways. These processes are fuelled by a paradoxical double urge both toward ‘immediacy’ (making the mediating machinery transparent) and ‘hypermediacy’ (reflexively focusing and playing with that same machinery).¹⁷ New communication technologies have induced convergences between industrial branches, practices and symbolic modes, but also between previously separated academic traditions. Remediation implies dense passages between a series of old and new media over thresholds that have been widened into ambiguous borderlands.

Fig. 1: Borderlands.



Interrelations between fields may be conceived in three interconnected senses. First, as *free fields*, intellectual free-zones, third spaces of refuge in-between established closures. Second, as *battlefields*, fields of fighting contradiction on the very borderline where struggles take place. In this sense, borderlands are compressed to thresholds or even to distinct borders. Third, as *crossing fields*, fields of hybridising bricolage construction in the overlap between what is elsewhere separated. These three aspects are intrinsically and dialectically interlaced. Release from disciplining restriction and the free play of critical contradiction are both necessary conditions of creative cultiva-

tion. These models apply both to culture and to cultural studies, which is both an intellectual free zone between regulated disciplines, a battle zone where traditions collide, and a crossing zone where paradigms overlap and make new hybrids grow. And in both cases, it is the practices of passages across thresholds that give the borderlands their shape.

To provisionally sum this up, passages are movements over borders or thresholds. They may be narrow or wide, long or short and of varying permeability. This corresponds to thresholds being high or low, wide or thin and hard or soft. Borders are extreme cases: infinitely thin and often rather high and hard to get through. With or without doors above them, thresholds stand half way between borders and borderlands. They are permeable borders with some extension, making it possible to place oneself for a moment on the border itself, in an intermediary state of half-open ambiguity. Thresholds may sometimes grow and widen to create borderlands as third areas between separate but interconnected spheres and with their own inner dynamics. They may in turn eventually become fixed and established as regulated fields of their own, gradually losing their particular border character altogether.

It is time to move back over the threshold and reconnect to the trace of Benjamin. Passages leave traces. Benjamin depicts how the tracing of such tracks of movements stands in a tension toward the magic aura that surrounds both traditional works of art and holy sacraments like the mystifying commodity world of capitalism:

Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however

close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us.¹⁸

This magic aura has to do with commodity fetishism, which through image and logos make dead things appear alive and living labour to crystallise into sellable commodities. Benjamin gives this Marxist idea a communicative twist. On one hand, he distinguishes trace and aura in terms of nearness and distance, which raises issues of communication. The trace moves us near the thing, lets us approach it and pass closely enough to see it clearly, while the aura distances it from us and leaves it out of our touch, preserving its sacral magic. On the other hand, Benjamin introduces the question of the power over interpretations. The aura is the power of the thing, text or medium over human subjects or users, and it creates a distance to what is symbolised, so that it appears as sacred and untouchable. Critical hermeneutics in the spirit of Paul Ricoeur resists this dichotomy by following the traces, approaching the remnants of human acts and expressions, using distancing detours in order to uncover symbolic meanings and demystify that which first may appear incomprehensible, thus uniting nearness and distance in one large hermeneutic arc.

It is in this spirit I want to follow Benjamin's own trace, and rather open up his work in order to get hold of some of his ideas and use them for present purposes than submit to the aura of his work as a closed holy book. Benjamin's failure ever to finish his Arcades project might have been inevitable. The complex passages of modern life could and should probably not be conceived as a closed totality. We have to be content pointing out tendencies, following traces and combining fragments. Benjamin's method of studying various encounters between people and

commodities suggests us to reintroduce people (human agency) and society (contextual frames) into our models of textual intermediality. Let me try to explain this by yet another detour, this time through an ongoing Swedish ethnographic media research project.

Media passages through real and virtual spaces

The research project 'Popular Passages: Media in the Modern Consumption Space' borrows its name from Benjamin's work. It is an effort to depict the social space of urban late modernity by looking at the interlacing passages of people and media in a contemporary Swedish shopping centre, Solna Centre just above Stockholm. It is one of the largest in the region, with more than 100 shops, 25 restaurants and 9 million annual visitors. Some fifteen researchers from various disciplines are involved in this five years' project based on close ethnographic studies.¹⁹

The project runs in a series of steps. First, theories of consumption (shopping studies) and media use (reception studies) were developed, fusing two fields that have hitherto grown remarkably separate from each other.²⁰ This combination made it possible to treat the whole process of consumption with all its phases, including choice and purchase as well as use and disposal. Then, the whole centre was investigated as a communicative space, including marketing, architecture, internal communications, surveillance, visual and aural design as well as people's actual movements through this space.²¹ In a third step, the project analyses how certain media groups are used. Some main media shops are investigated, to see how they structure and sell their goods and how customers make choices and use whatever they buy there, in order to understand how certain boundaries are reorganised in

these processes. There is to be one study each of postcards and posters, photography, videos, CDs, books, newspapers and magazines, telephones and audio-visual hardware.²²

Most media studies focus on one medium or genre or even text at a time, like studies of romance novels, soap operas, ads or news clips. Others choose one social category or specific group of people, like families, teenagers or diasporic communities, in order to uncover their total media use. By starting instead with one specific space or place to analyse how a great variety of media and people flow through and interplay in this space, a series of connections can more easily be discerned, between media genres as well as between media users. This makes possible to put some petrified categories in motion, for instance of media genres or social groups, and see how they dynamically interrelate in communicative practice. And it enables us to extend our media concept to include all technically organised vehicles for communication; not remaining enclosed in the television/radio/press confines that too often hampers media research – also within cultural studies.

Urban spaces are passages, through which material things, bodies and symbols move. Some of them have more of a threshold character than others do, some even grow into extensive borderlands. Consumption spaces are particularly full of thresholds. Their external limits are often somewhat diffuse, in order to make the entrance more easy for potential customers. ‘These gateways – the entrances to the arcades – are thresholds’, says Benjamin.²³ A shopping centre can be outlined on a map and treated like a fairly well-defined building, but is as such more permeable than many other kind of structures. There is also a certain lack of overview, control

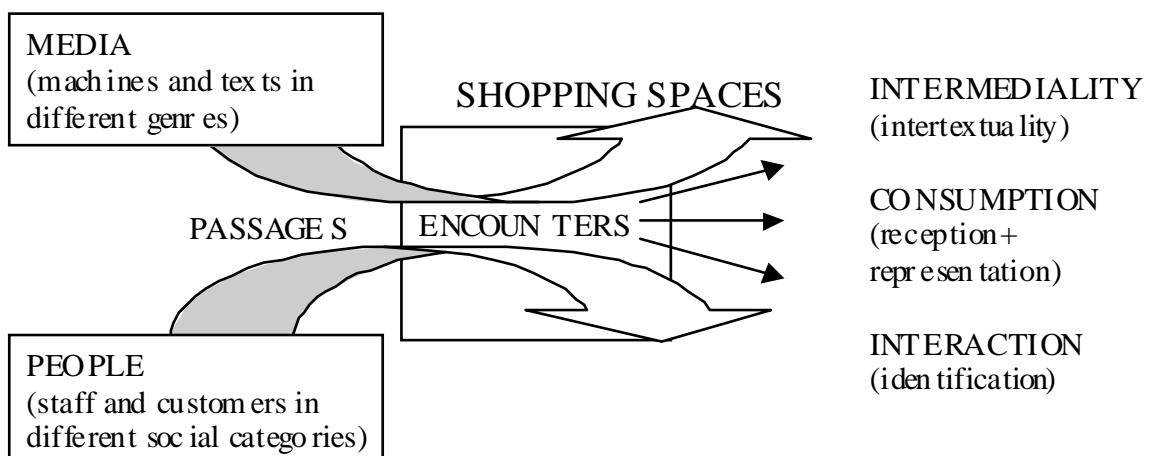
and structure in its interior, so that it is often easy to get lost there. Benjamin often states that arcades are ambivalent places: both buildings and streets, houses and passages. 'Arcades are houses or passages having no outside – like the dream'.²⁴ While this stimulates sales, it also nourishes unconscious impulses that are not so easily channelled into commodity consumption.

Solna Centre indoor square is just like Benjamin's arcades 'house no less than street'.²⁵ It is an open square between built structures at the same time as it is a half-enclosed and protected room. Its space is like the Paris arcades in many ways ambiguous. In fact, it has an additional threshold trait, since unlike them, it is the town's ordinary central square that was in 1989 covered with a glass roof, so that it now doubles as both a public city centre and a commercial shopping centre. This gives rise to even more ambiguous tensions between public and private, communal and commercial. The city council and the company that runs the centre co-operate closely, but sometimes their interests collide, when they try to control the street spaces for conflicting purposes. It is a borderland space where the civil society's needs for communication arenas often collide with both the commodity and money flows of the market and the administrative regulations of the state system. Within this ambivalent centre, consumption acts are mixed with fast crossing and strolling around. Some visitors really buy things or have a cup of coffee, others just look at people or visit the public library. For some, this is a pure purchase space, while others use it as a public, social or aesthetic space.

Above all, the late modern shopping centre is really a space for *passages*. The inner passages over experiential thresholds have a social and material basis in

specific passages of media and people through spaces of consumption, which give rise to a series of encounters where boundaries are transgressed or drawn. The shopping centre is an arena for two interlaced passages: flows of people through spaces and media, and flows of media through spaces and people. Together they give rise to several principal kinds of meetings, which are only separable as analytic aspects of a complex totality.

Fig. 2: Passages of media and people through consumption spaces.



(1) First, people meet media in the phases of *consumption* where they encounter and accompany each other for certain periods and functions. Consumption passes through four main phases: choice, purchase, use and disposal. Such encounters may sometimes lead to some kind of interpenetration of the two. (1a) Either media flow through people through processes of *reception*, where people make meanings by interpretations of the media texts they use. Media invade people's lives, minds and bodies. (1b) Or people flow through media as they offer *representations* of people. Media texts are populated by symbolic representations of human subjects. (2) A second general kind of meeting is that between people in forms of social *interaction*.

People meet each other in front of media (talking in front of a poster) or through them (by using mobile phones). (2a) These interactions may lead to mutual interpenetration in the shape of (self or other) *identification*. (3) A third main kind of encounter is the *intermediality* between different technologies and texts in encounters on bookshelves or in the streets. (3a) Here again, texts may not only stand beside but also penetrate each other, in phenomena of *intertextuality*, where mediated texts are criss-crossed by other texts, through open or candid references. All these passages may lead either to transgressing contacts and hybrid fusions or to confrontations and separations. It is due to these encounters that the passages of consumption are a particular kind of communicative practices, since they entail a meaning-making interplay between subjects and texts in contexts, when consumption develops into reception and representation.

Between multi- and inter-

These passages across boundaries, thresholds and borderlands, where multiplicity and interlinking appear as central, lead back to the themes of multimodality and intermediality. They may be studied both through their traces in texts and in the actual productive uses of texts that produce such traces. The shopping centre bookstore not only sells printed books but also spoken ones on tape and disc: are they books or phonograms? The photo shop also sells web images: are they just extensions of photography or transitions to new computer media? The poster shop has images full of designed letters that stand half way on the threshold between pictures and writing. And the encounters I have described are examples of transgressions of boundaries around single media genres.

The concept of *multimodality*, proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, seems to imply that each symbolic mode is a complex mix of various sense modalities.²⁶ In particular, verability cannot stand alone, but always presupposes elements of the pictorial mode, since writing relies on graphics and speech on gesture, but also on the musical mode, since speech is composed of sounds. This latter aspect is important: it is too common to only include images, writing and speech in the discussion, so that the aural is reduced to the verbal-oral only, which hides away music and reduces non-verbal sounds to only elements of speech.

The ‘modality’ term evokes the concept of sense modalities, in that certain media activate sight, others hearing. But symbolic modes cut across that distinction, when visuality is divided into images and writing, and aurality into music and speech. This distinction makes multimodality slightly less confusing, since the pictorial aspects of writing, while showing that pictures and written words share the visual sense modality, do not dissolve all written texts into mere images. Both sense modalities and symbolic modes are abstractions. They are no absolute givens, but neither are they subjective and arbitrary illusions. They are *real* abstractions, to use Karl Marx' expression, i.e. they are not only artificially produced, external or formal abstractions made up by theoretical analysis. Neither are they only mental habits of individual minds. They are socially and materially produced by institutional practices, for instance of cultural professions in arts, media and academy. Like other sociocultural concepts they are intersubjectively valid but abstract constructions that strive to cover cultural phenomena that are always in practice much more impure. The

concepts of multimodality, multimedia and hypertext underline this necessary hybridity in all human communication.

I thus propose a constructionist, processual and pragmatic notion on modes, not only seeing how they are used in communication, but also how they are themselves made in historically situated social interaction. Rather than consisting of originally discrete and objectively pre-given modes with inherent essences, human communication and culture also continually differentiate and develop reflexively its very own basic dimensions, constituents and tools.

Generally speaking, the combinatory multi- may be interpreted as a special kind or aspect of the relational inter-. Multimodality is then a combinatory form of what could be called *intermodality*. Intermodality is when modes are in some way related to each other, multimodality the special case when they are combined in one unit. Similar distinctions may be applied also to texts, media, arts and other levels and types of cultural organisation. In my opinion, it is the inter- that presents a more far-reaching challenge. The general pluralism of the multi- has its very important points, but the relational inter- opens up wider doors toward new kinds of processual cultural studies, by allowing for a great range of different kinds of connection, beside the mere addition of elements. This stress of the inter- is a way to navigate away from the traps of structuralism and systems theory, where dynamic relations tend to become petrified into relatively closed totalities. In the spirit of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, I pledge for sticking with the half-open, the thresholds and the passages, and will therefore try my best to avoid the temptation of reducing and reifying them into well-mapped frozen sets.

A hypertext is a kind of *multitextual* montage, with links between its constituents. It is an example of combinatory *intertextuality*. Like intermodality, intertextuality comes in many forms, as comparisons, translations, co-operations, dialogues and hybrids between texts or textual genres.²⁷

Multimediality may similarly be seen as a special case of *intermediality*. Multimedia are combined sets of separable media types, which is one of many possible ways to relate media to each other. Intermediality concerns passages between media that demand thresholds (if not borders) between media, i.e. relative differences between media, i.e. a plurality of media.²⁸ When narratives such as *Beauty and the Beast* moves from told to printed tale to television series and film, when *Batman* is transferred between comic books and films, or when *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* travels from book to radio play and computer game, these are all examples of intermedial passages that need to be further studied.²⁹ Such studies tend to show that few – if any – narrative capabilities are intrinsically bound to a particular medium.

Differences between media and codes are better understood as cultural constructions than as physically based facts. The meaning and function of physical differences between books and films or sounds and images etc. are always produced in the uses of these media by historically and socially dynamic interpretive communities. By complex sets of reasons, these communities of media users choose to separate them and allocate different functions to them within a larger cultural context. The borders between singular ‘pure’ modalities or media are not fixed or impermeable. Take for instance the distinction between music and lyrics in songs, where the criteria for

which sounds are heard as words and which as nonsensical sound effects are notoriously fuzzy.³⁰

In the discussion of the shopping passages above, intertextuality was described as a special case of intermediality, in that media can also relate to each other in other ways than through the texts they process, for instance by the mere way they are physically placed in a room. On the other hand, only some intertextual links also cross boundaries between different media.³¹ There are thus relations that are intermedial but not intertextual (non-textual relations between media), those that are intertextual but not intermedial (textual encounters within the same medium), as well as those that are simultaneously intertextual and intermedial.

In practice, these phenomena are often mixed so that the differentiation between these concepts is notoriously blurred. My own dissertation was for example on a music theatre show, itself a kind of multimedia work. This work was analysed in kind of an inter- and hypertextual manner through a parallel presentation of its audial and visual levels, the participants' comments on each scene, and my own analysis of the whole.³² Comparative intermedial analyses were also made of the theatre show in relation to a record and a film that were based on it.

This is obviously a complex conceptual field, where intermodality, intertextuality and intermediality only partly overlap each other. Adding multi- and interarts to the series, thereby introducing social aspects of institutional sectors for aesthetic production, further complicates things, since for instance the thresholds around the art of music, music media and music as a symbolic mode cut across each other in highly complex ways. The multi- and inter-combinations of modalities, texts, media

and arts indicate passages whereby on different levels symbolic formations are connected, with respect to material codes, organised channel, meaningful content or institutional setting.

Meetings between texts and between media demand human agency and are always contextually situated. An emphasis on practice and work warns us not to isolate media and texts from their institutional and processual contexts, as Kirsten Drotner underlines in her discussion of intertextuality.³³ Texts and media only enter interrelations by the mediation of human subjects placed in social contexts. Intermediality and intertextuality therefore first need to be supplemented with *intersubjectivity* and *interaction*.

The concept of passage has an advantage of not being confined to textual meaning-structures. It can also comprise non-discursive or extra-textual aspects of movements of media and people. Intermedial encounters between media do not only exist in the form of textual cross currents but also in each physical juxtaposition of, say a telephone and a radio. Texts as things and as commodities undermine the textual autonomy postulated in conventional aesthetic studies. That autonomy is always contested and reconstructed through intersubjective practices, i.e. through passages between subjects. Meaning is made where texts and subjects meet in contexts. Therefore intertextuality and intermediality are incomplete concepts if they disregard subjects and contexts. Texts and media get their relations through contextualised human interaction. Intermediality and intertextuality is when media or texts are connected by specific people (interpretive communities) in specific settings (physical, virtual and social spaces). In the other direction, interactivity and

interaction should also be thought in a way that includes the mediation of texts: intersubjectivity between two human agents is only possible through the mediation of some textual form in a symbolic mode. People necessarily mediate between media and media between people.

Not only would models of intertextuality and intermediality gain by being supplemented by the concepts of intersubjectivity and interactivity. As a third component, we need sooner or later also discuss *intercontextuality*, which is still an under-theorised dimension. These ideas can be summed up in a basic cultural model, where culture is seen as founded on triangular encounters between subjects, texts and contexts – all of them in plural. This model derives from ideas from Charles S. Peirce and Paul Ricoeur.³⁴ Culture may be seen as the process whereby, in such multiple triangular relations, texts are given meanings, subjects afforded identities and contexts transformed into social worlds. This extension and embedding of the intertextuality and intermediality concepts therefore reintroduces people (human agency) and society (contextual frames), thereby reducing the risk of formalism or reifying ‘essentialism’.

It was mentioned above in relation to the shopping centre passages of media and people that they sometimes penetrate each other. In that project, the spatial context was held relatively constant. Adding now this third dimension on full scale makes it possible to integrate a series of further aspects and processes.

‘Penetration’ is here to be understood as passages that leave imprints. If for instance media ‘penetrate’ people in acts of reception and interpretation of texts, this does not mean that the medium or text as such is actually fused with a specific

subject, but rather that it passes so closely that it leaves some kind of mark. It is possible to reconstruct specific forms of interrelation and interpenetration both within each corner and along each side of the multiple subject-text-context triangle, and to discern their results in the form of meanings, identities or social worlds.

Before, I mentioned that the consumption encounters between media and people could include penetration of media texts in subjects, in the form of reception that shapes meanings, and/or of subjects in texts through representation that shapes identities. I also mentioned the internal passages between units in the multiple textual corner, where intermediality may go deep enough to become intertextuality, while intersubjective interaction in the likewise plural subjects corner can let subjects invade each other in processes of identification. Adding multiple contexts increases the complexity considerably, by demanding theorisation of intercontextual relations, passages of subjects and texts through contexts, and variants of these where ‘penetration’ in one or the other direction takes place, leaving imprints or marks that transform both sides.

A more detailed elaboration of this model has to wait until another occasion. The multi- relates to the plurality of all three corners (subjects, texts and contexts), whereas the inter- points toward the passages of subjects and texts past and sometimes through each other and those spatial, social and cultural contexts that may function as thresholds by creating friction for these passages. Actually all these separate relations are only aspects of more complex transformations of whole constellations of plural subjects, texts and contexts, whereby all are developing both

internally and in their external relations. The movement of only one unit is an analytical special case.

The inter-theme opens up immense fields of research and theoretical development. How exactly are senses, modes, media, texts and arts interrelated? How to conceive of the many types of passages between subjects, texts and contexts? Which main kinds of intermedial passages may be distinguished? How do they relate to the four basic symbolic levels of materiality, form-relations, meaning and pragmatics? What is gained by switching to an inter-perspective when it comes to specific empirical cultural studies? All this has to be further discussed.

This whole series of inter-concepts points at a basic mediality in cultural studies. In contrast to ideas by Larry Grossberg and other poststructuralist theorists who strive to erase all traces of mediation and return to facts as they are, I instead propose a critical hermeneutics where passages of mediation are the very focus of cultural theory.³⁵ First, the core of cultural studies is culture – those meaning-producing practices of subjects on texts in contexts. Second, cultural studies demand communicative inter-theorising through interdisciplinary dialogues, to understand the multiple interrelations of late modern media culture. Third, cultural studies proceed by critical and reflexive bricolage and combinatory reworking of crossing traditions rather than by stepping totally out of inherited concepts and transgressing into some completely new void. Old boundaries are rarely erased, but they can and should be renegotiated, dynamised and made reflexively accessible.

The multi-perspective declares that no single monocentric entity – not even the concepts of multimodality or intermediality – can grapple the plurality of

phenomena and perspectives of media culture. The inter-perspective departs from all self-sufficient essences, instead to focus on relations and the between, i.e. on mediations. Our communication society is based on mediations between texts and people, in that people pass and meet each other through texts, and texts pass and encounter each other through people. I consider this as a further development of the critical hermeneutic perspective on culture and cultural studies, reinforcing the 'cultural turn' by a supplementary 'intermedial turn'.³⁶ Cultural studies does right to honour those little profane threshold gods who mark the transgressive passages that constitute the productively mediating flows of culture.

References and notes

¹ My own intellectual trajectory also consists of a series of passages, from mathematics and philosophy through musicology and youth culture studies to media and cultural studies.

² Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909/1960); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge MA / London UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982/1999), p. 494. The word 'Unterhaltung' of the German original can in fact not only mean 'conversation' but also 'entertainment', which invites certain of my following reflections.

⁴ Benjamin, p. 494.

⁵ Benjamin, p. 836.

⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958/1994), p. 223.

⁷ Bachelard, p. 222.

⁸ Bachelard, p. xxvii. Bachelard's ideas are kin to much other poetic theory as well; see for instance Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975/1986).

⁹ Karin Becker, 'Media and the Ritual Process', *Media, Culture & Society*, 17, no. 4 (1995).

¹⁰ Georg Simmel, 'Bridge and Door', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11, no. 1 (1909/1994), p. 5.

¹¹ Simmel, p. 5.

¹² Simmel, p. 10.

¹³ The interdependence of separation and fusion was stressed by Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia', *Leonardo*, 34, no. 1 (1966/2001).

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinster / Aunt Lute, 1987).

¹⁵ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA / London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Johan Fornäs, Kajsa Klein, Martina Ladendorf, Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson, *Digital Borderlands: Cultural Studies of Identity and Interactivity on the Internet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002). See also Johan Fornäs, 'Digital Borderlands: Identity and Interactivity in Culture, Media and Communications', *Nordicom Review*, 19, no. 1 (1998).

¹⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA / London, UK: MIT Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Benjamin, p. 447.

¹⁹ The project is funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, 1998-2002.

²⁰ Erling Bjurström, Johan Fornäs and Hillevi Ganetz, *Det kommunikativa handlandet: Kulturella perspektiv på medier och konsumtion [Communicative Action/Shopping: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Consumption]* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2000).

²¹ Karin Becker, Erling Bjurström, Johan Fornäs and Hillevi Ganetz eds., *Passager: Medier och kultur i ett köpcentrum [Passages: Media and Culture in a Shopping Centre]* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2001).

²² The project will then end by making methodological reflections on collective media ethnography.

The main findings will also be summed up in a forthcoming English volume.

²³ Benjamin, p. 89.

²⁴ Benjamin, p. 406, see also p. 839.

²⁵ Benjamin, p. 10.

²⁶ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London / New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 39.

²⁷ For an overview of theories and types of intertextuality, see Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature. From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985/1992).

²⁸ To Higgins (1966/2001), intermedia fuse art forms that are elsewhere separated, thereby producing works that seem to 'fall between' the traditional, 'pure' media. Later discussions have widened the concept considerably, transcending the sphere of avantgarde art movements into the larger field of media and popular culture at large. See for instance Yvonne Spielmann, 'Intermedia in Electronic Images', *Leonardo*, 34, no. 1 (2001).

²⁹ A doctoral course I organised on media differences in 1992 forced me to consider the effects of transpositions of precisely such narratives.

³⁰ Johan Fornäs, 'Text and Music Revisited', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 14, no. 3 (1997); Johan Fornäs, 'The Words of Music', *Popular Music and Society*, (2001). See also Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 1995).

³¹ Mikko Lehtonen, 'On No Man's Land: Theses on Intermediality', *Nordicom-Information*, 22, no. 3-4 (2000).

³² Johan Fornäs, *Tältprojektet: Musikteater som manifestation [The Tent Project: Music Theatre as a Manifestation]* (Stockholm / Göteborg: Symposion, 1985).

³³ Kirsten Drotner, 'Cross-over Culture and Cultural Identities', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 4, no. 1 (1996).

³⁴ Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 180ff; Johan Fornäs, 'The Crucial In Between: The Centrality of Mediation in Cultural Studies', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3, no. 1 (2000), pp. 58ff; Bjurström et al., p. 126.

³⁵ Johan Fornäs, 'The Crucial In Between: The Centrality of Mediation in Cultural Studies', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3, no. 1 (2000).

³⁶ This has also been suggested by Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam / Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999).

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