

## **Handbook of Intermediality**

# **Handbooks of English and American Studies**



Edited by  
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## **Volume 1**

# Handbook of Intermediality



Literature – Image – Sound – Music

Edited by  
Gabriele Rippl

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## Editors' Preface

This De Gruyter handbook series has been designed to offer students and researchers a compact means of orientation in their study of Anglophone literary texts. Each volume – involving a particular historical or theoretical focus – introduces readers to current concepts and methodologies, as well as academic debates by combining theory with text analysis and contextual anchoring. It is this bridging between abstract survey and concrete analysis which is the central aim and defining feature of this series, bringing together general literary history and concrete interpretation, theory and text. At a time when students of English and American literary studies have to deal with an overwhelming amount of highly specialized research literature, as well as cope with the demands of the new BA and MA programs, such a handbook series is indispensable. Nevertheless, this series is not exclusively targeted to the needs of BA and MA students, but also caters to the requirements of scholars who wish to keep up with the current state of various fields within their discipline.

Individual volumes in the De Gruyter Handbook series will typically provide:

- knowledge of relevant literary periods, genres, and historical developments;
- knowledge of representative authors and works of those periods;
- knowledge of cultural and historical contexts;
- knowledge about the adaptation of literary texts through other media;
- knowledge of relevant literary and cultural theories;
- examples of how historical and theoretical information weaves fruitfully into interpretations of literary texts.

Internationally renowned colleagues have agreed to collaborate on this series and take on the editorship of individual volumes. Thanks to the expertise of the volume editors responsible for the concept and structure of their volumes, as well as for the selection of suitable authors, HEAS not only summarizes the current state of knowledge in the field of Anglophone literary and cultural studies, but also offers new insights and recent research results on the most current topics, thus launching new academic debates.

We would like to thank all colleagues collaborating in this project as well as Dr. Ulrike Krauss at De Gruyter without whose unflinching support this series would not have taken off.

**The first volumes include:**

Gabriele Rippl (ed.): *Handbook of Intermediality*

Hubert Zapf (ed.): *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*

Julia Straub (ed.): *Handbook of Transatlantic North American Studies*

Ralf Haekel (ed.): *Handbook of British Romanticism*

Martin Middeke and Monika Pietrzak-Franger (eds.): *Handbook of the English Novel,  
1830–1900*

Christoph Reinfandt (ed.): *Handbook of the English Novel, 1900–2015*

Timo Müller (ed.): *Handbook of the American Novel, 1900–2015*

Martin Middeke

Gabriele Rippl

Hubert Zapf

May 2015

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Gabriele Rippl

## 0 Introduction

### 1 Why Intermediality?

This *Handbook of Intermediality* introduces the vast field of intermediality research which has been ever-expanding since the 1980s. Paying tribute to the fact that media do not exist disconnected from each other, the handbook aims at familiarizing its readers with the diverse – affirmative as well as critical – approaches to theoretical concepts such as intermediality, multi- and plurimediality, intermedial reference, transmediality, intermedial methodology and related concepts such as visual culture, literary visuality, the musicalization of fiction and poetry, literary acoustics, remediation, adaptation, and multimodality etc. Generally speaking, the term ‘intermediality’ refers to the relationships between media and is hence used to describe a huge range of cultural phenomena which involve more than one medium. One of the reasons why it is impossible to develop *one* definition of intermediality is that it has become a central theoretical concept in many disciplines such as literary, cultural and theater studies as well as art history, musicology, philosophy, sociology, film, media and comics studies – and these disciplines all deal with different intermedial constellations which ask for specific approaches and definitions.

The popularity and increasing importance of intermediality studies and other related fields can be attributed to the fact that in our digital age many works of art, cultural artifacts, literary texts and other cultural configurations either combine and juxtapose different media, genres and styles or refer to other media in a plethora of ways. The focal nodes of this handbook are intermedial relationships and networks between Anglo-American as well as Anglophone postcolonial literary texts and other media. Intermedial literary texts transgress their own medial boundary – writing – in many creative ways by including pictures and illustrations or by referring to absent (static and moving, analog and digital) pictures, by imitating filmic modes or by mimicking musical structures and themes. In the face of the sheer number of Anglophone literary texts which participate in intermedial interfaces – a few recent examples are Charles Simic’s *Dime-Store Alchemy* (1992), David Dabydeen’s *Turner* (1994), Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), John Updike’s *Seek My Face* (2002) or Siri Hustvedt’s *What I Loved* (2003) – literary scholars today have come to accept that media and art forms cannot be analyzed in isolation and instead have to be discussed against the backdrop of their medial networks, what Bernd Herzogenrath calls their “arch-intermediality” (2012, 4). Literature’s role and function must hence be appraised in a cultural field characterized not only by the competition and collaboration of different media, but also by medial interfaces. Our digital age also has an impact on how we

think of ‘literature’ today: The term has undergone a considerable change in meaning and has come to include not only relatively stable literary texts which exist in oral or printed form, but also hypertextually encoded fictions such as Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon: A Story* (1990), Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* (1991), Simon Biggs’s *The Great Wall of China* (1996) and Caitlin Fisher’s hypermedia novella *These Waves of Girls* (2001), all of which exist only in an electronic medial form. Hyperfiction’s interactive and multimedial form reminds us that any concept of a purely verbal art does not work and invites us to investigate intermedial configurations.

As a central notion in the analysis of the arts, the media and their border-crossing, the concept of intermediality allows for a reading of literary texts against the backdrop of their cultural and medial contexts from systematic and historical perspectives. Taking into account the network of medial connections and the collaboration of media throughout history (even if today with digital media these collaborations and fusions have dramatically increased), scholars of intermediality investigate how meaning is generated in/by inter-, multi- and transmedial constellations and cross-medial references. This task asks for interdisciplinary engagement, which is why any study of literary texts or other cultural phenomena should be – as Mieke Bal puts it –

interdisciplinary, at least in its framework of interpretation. [...] We live in a world in which we are surrounded by images but, more crucially, in which images and language jointly participate in a much wider and more ‘mixed’ cultural life. [...] The question of words and images is not, therefore, a matter of definitions of essences and separation of practices, but of how people communicate: with one another, with the past, with others. (Bal 1999, 169)

The fact that over the last twenty years, literary departments have fostered teaching in the field of intermediality, and that even centers for intermediality research have been established to great success – for instance at the Austrian University of Graz (cf. *CIMIG*, the *Centre for Intermediality Studies in Graz*, which also publishes the successful book series *Word and Music Studies*), at the Swedish Linnaeus University (*Forum for Intermediality Studies*) and at the Canadian Universities of Montreal and Quebec (*Centre de recherche sur l’intermédialité, CRI*) – proves, together with the steadily growing *International Society for Intermedial Studies (ISIS)*, that intermediality has indeed become “one of the most vital and invigorating developments within the humanities today” (Herzogenrath 2012, 2).

## 2 Historical Perspectives: *Sister Arts* to Intermediality

Literary texts have always had close ties with music and images: While poetry, due to its rhythmic qualities, has a natural link to music and, due to the arrangement of

its lines, can show iconic qualities, narrative literary texts, too, may foster close relationships with other media and art forms, e.g. through formal and stylistic imitation of musical genres and styles (cf. e.g. Wolf 1999; Balestrini 2005; Redling forthcoming; ↗26 The Musicalization of Poetry). Steven Paul Scher has presented a triadic distinction between ‘literature in music,’ ‘music and literature’ and ‘music in literature’ (Scher 1968; ↗24 Literature and Music: Theory), long before intermediality studies emerged. The investigation of text-music relationships is a vibrant one; however, to date more research has been undertaken on text-image relationships, which is probably due to the fact that for a long time visibility has been taken as modernity’s signature, while more recently the field of literary acoustics has proven that this is not necessarily the case (↗25 Literary Acoustics; Schweighauser 2006).

In intermedial studies, relationships between words and images in particular have become a central field of investigation, which is reflected in the space dedicated to the topic in this handbook. There is a plethora of text-image interactions to be found in Anglophone literary texts which fall into at least three major categories (cf. Pfister 1993): (a) the inclusion of images such as cover pictures and frontispieces, miniature paintings in medieval texts or illustrations such as the woodcuts in Virginia Woolf’s short story “Kew Gardens” (1919); there are also genres based on text-picture combination such as the popular early modern emblem or postmodern graphic narratives like Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli’s adaptation of Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (2004); (b) typographical experiments, where text and image are simultaneously present and actually form a unit; this is the case in so-called figure poems or technopaignia, a genre which dates back to antiquity but has been successful throughout literary history (one famous seventeenth-century example is George Herbert’s metaphysical poem “Easter-Wings,” and a later example of typographical experimentation is Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* published in 2005); and (c) ekphrasis, i.e. the description of paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures in texts (cf. Rippl 2005, 2012, 2014).

In accordance with W. J. T. Mitchell, who claims that there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ medium – “all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media” (1995, 94–95) – this handbook’s premise is the insight that all media and art forms are interconnected and that intermedial qualities always inhere in cultural phenomena. Referring back to Gilles Deleuze, Bernd Herzogenrath states that “rhizomatic intermedia[lity] is the quasi-ontological plane underlying all media, out of which the specific media that we know percolate [...] there is one intermedia[lity] that comes first, which is the quicksand out of which specific media emerge, and a second intermedia[lity] that focuses on the various interconnections possible, from the very perspective of these specific media forms.” (Herzogenrath 2012, 3) To speak of specific media forms does not imply that ‘medium’ is understood in an essentializing way, but rather underlines the fact that when we speak of individual media we refer to conventional conceptualizations, material restrictions, and affordances of individual media. Already in 1999, Wolf underscored that delimitations of media and the idea of

medial distinctness are nothing but a convention: “Intermediality can [...] be defined as a particular relation (a relation that is ‘intermedial’ in the narrow sense [cf. 3.2]) between conventionally distinct media of [...] communication” (Wolf 1999, 37). Not only questions concerning the specific material qualities of words, images, sound and music, but also investigations into their interfaces, the ways different media interact with one another and the role they have in the communication processes of postmodern societies have transformed literary studies into a more interdisciplinary field.

It is important to note, however, that questions of intermediality and the relationship between art forms are not wedded to modernity. In fact, they reach back to the time of ancient Greece and Rome (cf. Webb 2009) when structural similarities between text and image as well as functional analogies were foregrounded. In his *Ars poetica*, Horace (65–8 BCE) referred to an influential formula ascribed to Simonides of Ceos (late 6th century BCE), *ut pictura poesis*, which has been translated: ‘as in painting so in poetry.’ This formula was still influential in the Renaissance, when painting and poetry were first referred to as *sister arts* (cf. Hagstrum 1958). However, the term *sister arts* hides the fact that the different art forms were increasingly understood as competitive ones: Clearly, the story of medial purification and the idea of separating the arts arose in the Renaissance, when Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and others engaged in the *paragone*, the competition between the arts, by lifting the visual arts from their status as crafts to independent art forms which surpass poetry (cf. Rippl 2005b; Klarer 2001). In the eighteenth century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing compared the artistic media painting and poetry, examining their strengths and limitations. In his essay *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1984 [1766]) Lessing attempted to differentiate between words and pictures on a semiotic and medial basis. He separated the two sign systems as two radically different and independent modes of representation. Whereas language follows the rules of arbitrariness, successivity and time, images adhere to the laws of simultaneity and space. While Lessing’s essay was widely read and accepted at the time, the succeeding generation of Romantics began to blur Lessing’s neat line of demarcation between the two arts. The late Romantic writer Walter Pater, for instance, stated in his essay on “The School of Giorgione” (1877) that

although each art has thus its own specific order of impressions, and an untranslatable charm, while a just apprehension of the ultimate differences of the arts is the beginning of aesthetic criticism; yet it is noticeable that, in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term as *Anders-streben* – a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place to each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces. (Pater 1986, 85)

While Pater is positive about the arts’ *Anders-streben*, in his *New Laocoon* (1910) Irving Babbitt accused Romantic writers of ‘*eleutheromania*,’ i.e. of not respecting medial borderlines between the arts, and thereby distorting and perverting them; consequently, he asked for a new art, a modern art, which would develop a new

generic and medial purity and accept the uniqueness of the different arts. In the same vein, in his 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” leading American art critic Clement Greenberg insists on the specificities and unique nature of individual media and rejects hybrid forms. According to him, discussions about the purity and boundaries of media help to stop the confusion of the arts: “Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art.” (Greenberg 1993, 32) When we turn to see how modernist writers addressed the question of mediality, Ezra Pound is an interesting figure. In his essay “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” (1911–1912), Pound elaborates on the medial differences between the arts:

The reasons why good description makes bad poetry, and why painters who insist on painting ideas instead of pictures offend so many, are not far to seek.

I am in sympathy equally with those who insist that there is *one* art and many media, and with those who cry out against the describing of work in any particular art by a terminology borrowed from all the others. This manner of description is objectionable, because it is, in most cases, a make-shift, a laziness. We talk of the odour of music and the timbre of a painting because we think we suggest what we mean and are too lazy to understand the analysis necessary to find out exactly what we do mean. There is, perhaps, *one* art, but any given subject belongs to the artist, who must know that subject most intimately before he can express it through his particular medium.

Thus, it is bad poetry to talk much of the colours of the sunrise [...] in the matter of the actual colour he [the poet, GR] is a bungler. The painter sees, or should see, half a hundred hues and varieties, where we see ten; or, granting we are ourselves skilled with the brush, how many hundred colours are there, where language has but a dozen crude names? Even if the poet understands the subtleties of gradation and juxtaposition, his medium refuses to convey them. [...]

I express myself clumsily, but this much remains with me as certain: that any given work of art is bad when its content could have found more explicit and precise expression through some other medium, which the artist was, perhaps, too slothful to master. (Pound 1973, 36–37)

Although Pound’s poems are saturated with spatial and iconic strategies, he seems to accept medial boundaries and to have a clear understanding of the problems a metaphoric use of ‘painterly’ language in connection with poetry and music can trigger:

We go to a particular art for something which we cannot get in any other art. If we want form and colour we go to a painting, or we make a painting. If we want form without colour and in two dimensions, we want drawing or etching. If we want form in three dimensions, we want sculpture. If we want an image or a procession of images, we want poetry. If we want pure sound, we want music. [...] A painting is an arrangement of colour patches on a canvas, or on some other substance. (Pound 1980, 6)

Lessing, Pater, Babbitt, Greenberg and Pound all present examples of the different ways of defining the relationship between art forms and media. But no matter how such a relationship is conceived, words have always been measured against images and music and vice versa. This attests to the flexible and ever-changing positions and borders of art forms and media within the medial networks. To be informed of these very different eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century voices helps us

to understand the new insights intermediality studies has to offer. While the *sister arts* paradigm, together with the so-called *Interart Studies* or *Comparative Arts*, dealt with a range of contacts between literature and the ‘high arts’ such as music and painting throughout the twentieth century (Wolf 2005, 252), basically contending that the different arts are alike and function according to the same rules, intermediality studies are more ‘democratic’ since they not only deal with art forms and high brow cultural products exclusively, but with all kinds of cultural configurations, be they performances, products of popular culture or the new media. What has also become clear is that intermedial configurations and medial border blurring are not at all novelties, but of course “new aspects and problems have emerged especially with respect to electronic and digital media” which have boosted “different views on medial border-crossings and hybridization” and have led to “a heightened awareness of the materiality and mediality of artistic practices and of cultural practices in general” (Rajewsky 2005, 44). The diverging views on medial border-crossings and hybridization are reflected in the many different terms and concepts that describe intermedial phenomena such as multi- and plurimediality, medial border-crossing, transmediality, remediation, media-fusion, hybridization and multimodality. In what follows, a range of theories and concepts will be discussed.

## 3 Theories and Concepts

### 3.1 Medium

Intermediality is a semantically contested, inconsistent term whose various definitions refer to a general problem centered around the term ‘medium,’ which itself has accumulated a wide range of competing definitions (cf. Rippl 2012 for a more detailed discussion of different concepts of ‘medium’ and ‘mediality’; cf. also Jäger, Linz, and Schneider 2010). Clearly, media allow for the production, distribution and reception of signs, hence they enable communication, but in spite of the many definitions on offer, there is not one definition of ‘medium’ which scholars working in the field of literary, cultural and media studies would agree on. Etymologically, the term ‘medius’ in Latin means ‘middle’ and ‘intermediate,’ ‘Vermittler’ in German. It entered the English language around 1930 to designate channels of communication; however, since then, it has become a highly ambiguous term. In the plural form, “media,” it is often equated with mass and popular culture:

Ask a sociologist or cultural critic to enumerate media, and he will answer: TV, radio, cinema, the Internet. An art critic may list: music, painting, sculpture, literature, drama, the opera, photography, architecture. A philosopher of the phenomenological school would divide media into visual, auditory, verbal, and perhaps gustatory and olfactory (are cuisine and perfume media?).



An artist's list would begin with clay, bronze, oil, watercolor, fabrics, and it may end with exotic items used in so-called mixed-media works, such as grasses, feathers, and beer can tabs. An information theorist or historian of writing will think of sound waves, papyrus scrolls, codex books, and silicon chips. 'New media' theorists will argue that computerization has created new media out of old ones: film-based versus digital photography; celluloid cinema versus movies made with video cameras; or films created through classical image-capture techniques versus movies produced through computer manipulations. The computer may also be responsible for the entirely new medium of virtual reality. (Ryan 2004, 15–16)

This quote demonstrates the wide range of the term 'mediality' and its different uses in various contexts. One influential definition of the term was given by Marshall McLuhan: Media are in a very general way a sort of prosthesis, "any extension [...] of man" (1964, 3) be it of the body or the consciousness. Aleida Assmann (1993, 1996) and Horst Wenzel (1995) also understand 'medium' in an encompassing way, including not only technical media but also non-technical ones such as spoken language, writing, painting, the human body etc., while Friedrich A. Kittler, a literary scholar who has worked on the history of material media and developed a hermeneutics of media technologies, uses the term 'medium' exclusively when talking about technical channels, and acoustic and optic media for transmitting and storing information such as the typewriter, film, television etc. (cf. Kittler 1985, 1986). In German-speaking literary departments discussions of the 'materiality of the sign,' the 'media of communication' and the interrelationship between meaning and materiality in literary texts have been topical since the 1980s (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1988). In this tradition, 'medium' refers in a very general sense to the material side of the sign, i.e. its carrier (Rippl 2005) – it is that which mediates – and the focus is on the question of how this material side of the sign / semiotic system is involved in the production of narrative meaning. To talk about mediality means to question the applicability of verbal models to all cultural manifestations. Whereas semiotics and a post-Saussurean logocentrism believe in language as the master discourse of all media, scholars working with concepts like mediality and intermediality use interdisciplinary approaches and consider problems encountered when attempting to apply the rules of language to pictures and music. In her influential book *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), Susanne Langer summarizes the differences between words and images by referring to the differences of their medial or material basis in the following way:

[a]ll language has a form which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other; as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the clothesline. This property of verbal symbolism is known as *discursiveness*; by reason of it, only thoughts which can be arranged in this peculiar order can be spoken at all [...].

Visual forms – lines, colors, proportions, etc. – are just as capable of *articulation*, i.e. of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that *visual forms are not discursive*. They do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously,

so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision. Their complexity, consequently, is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it.

Photography, therefore, *has no vocabulary*. The same is obviously true of painting, drawing, etc. There is, of course, a technique of picturing objects, but the law governing this technique cannot properly be called a 'syntax,' since there are no items that might be called, metaphorically, the 'words' of portraiture.

Since we have no words, there can be no dictionary of meanings of lines, shadings, or other elements of pictorial technique. We may well pick out some line, say a certain curve, in a picture, which serves to represent one nameable item; but in another place the same curve would have an entirely different meaning. It has no fixed meaning apart from its context. (Langer 1942, 81, 93, 95)

Whereas language consists of a certain vocabulary and follows more or less fixed semantic and syntactical rules, according to Langer this is not the case with pictures. What would be the equivalents of the phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic elements of language when it comes to pictures? If one talks about the 'pictorial text' or the 'imagetext' and the 'sculptural text' or 'sculpture text' as semioticians do, what then would be the 'grammar' of these 'texts'? Structural and cognitive semioticians such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev have often focused almost exclusively on the content, the *signifié* or cognitive side while neglecting the material *signifiant*-side. This is why the linguist Ludwig Jäger speaks of a displacement or repression of the problem of mediality, i.e. the sensuous side of a sign, in semiotics (1999, 13).

According to Marie-Laure Ryan, different media such as oil painting, music, digital photography, and film "are not hollow conduits for the transmission of messages but material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, 'matters' for the type of meanings that can be encoded" (Ryan 2004, 1–2). Instead, "a medium is a category that truly makes a difference about what stories can be evoked or told, how they are presented, why they are communicated, and how they are experienced" (2004, 18). Ryan distinguishes between at least three different approaches to media: (1) semiotic approaches such as that of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1984 [1766]) and Werner Wolf (1999, 2002), who have looked into codes and sensory channels that support various (verbal, visual, and musical) media; (2) material and technological approaches that focus on how the semiotic types are supported by media (Ryan 2005, 15); and (3) cultural approaches that are interested in social and cultural aspects of the media as well as in the network of relations among media. While many scholars in media theory today disregard semiotic categories when discussing media and prefer to call them 'modes' and a combination of modes 'multimodal' (cf. 3.4), Ryan points out that semiotically based media such as music and two-dimensional images cannot be ignored and that 'modes of signification' play a major role in distinguishing media from each other. There is no way to build a media system without taking semiotic criteria into consideration and, moreover, "'mode' is as difficult to define as medium is" (2014, 28). Like Ryan, Werner Wolf (2011) has argued for a flexible concept of medium.

He accounts for the material effects of a medium and “thus mediates between the positions of media determinism and media relativism” (Fludernik and Olson 2011, 16).

To solve some of the terminological dilemmas of the term ‘medium,’ Harry Pross also argues for a more systematic approach to media by subdividing three different types of media according to their degree of technological saturation: (1) ‘primary media’ such as the human voice, body language etc., with no technology involved; (2) ‘secondary media’ such as a flute (here technology is needed for the production of sound, but not for its reception, cf. Pross 1996, 36); and (3) ‘tertiary media’ such as analog television, radio, cinema and television (technology is needed for production and reception, cf. Pross 1972). A fourth category, “quaternary media” (i.e. media which require digital technology such as computer, multi-media, e-mail, WWW), has been added by Werner Faulstich (2002, 25). Siegfried J. Schmidt, too, developed a typology which helps to chart a diffuse field. He has argued that media systems consist of four components: (1) a semiotic instrument of communication, the prototype being natural oral language; (2) a media technology (since the development of writing examples of media technologies have included print, film, both kinds of “notebooks”); (3) a social system, that is, institutions on which technologies are based, such as schools or TV stations; and (4) media products or offerings such as literature or music that provide the opportunity to study aspects like production, distribution, reception, and processing (Schmidt 2008). In addition, the entry for “medium” in *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* (1991) is enlightening. It includes two definitions of ‘medium,’ a ‘transmissive’ and a ‘communicative’ one: (1) a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment [transmissive definition], and (2) material or technical means of artistic expression [communicative definition; communicative media are not simply conduits and hollow pipes, but also carry out configuring action. Obviously, each medium has certain constraints and possibilities, i.e. built-in properties, which shape the message they encode]. Of the two definitions of the term “medium” given by *Webster’s Dictionary* listed above, the first one, medium as channel of communication, has been far more influential in Anglo-American media studies, where scholars commonly concern themselves with technologies of mass communication and cultural institutions developed in the twentieth century. The second definition of the term medium, material means of expression, has become more relevant for German media studies from the 1980s onwards as discussed above (cf. Voigts-Virchow 2005).

This short overview of terminology has demonstrated that the meaning of the term ‘medium’ is notoriously shifting and ambiguous; what constitutes a medium depends very much on the scholarly background and purpose of the investigator. However, it seems that the narrow use of the term medium, which focuses solely on technological and sociological aspects and highlights media differences and specificities, is now passé. It has been replaced by a broad understanding of the term which triggers an investigation of how meaning is generated by cross-medial references and allows for a systematic analysis of inter-, multi- and transmedial constellations. While

for a long time, media scholars investigated individual media, they now agree that the specific characteristics of media can only be reconstructed through a comparative analysis of media that takes into account the history and collaborations of all media, their network of connections. Likewise, literary scholars also concur that literature's role in a cultural field characterized by networks of media and of artistic constellations has to be investigated and questions concerning literature's 'mediality,' i.e. its status as verbal or written text, as printed (cf. Eisenstein 1979; Giesecke 1991) or digitally encoded document (cf. Landow 1992; Segeberg and Winko 2005), are crucial to the understanding of how meaning is produced.

### 3.2 Intermediality – Plurimediality – Transmediality

After the preceding discussion of the wide range of meaning of the term 'medium' which has accumulated a whole plethora of competing definitions, it comes as no surprise that intermediality, too, is a semantically contested, inconsistent term (cf. Mahler 2010) and that intermediality studies covers an extremely diverse field: praxis-wise and discourse-wise. Since 'medium' etymologically means 'middle,' 'intermediate' and 'between,' and since 'inter' means 'between,' intermediality "can very literally be described as *between the between*" (Herzogenrath 2012, 2). In spite of the fact that the term intermediality is charged with all kinds of problems inherited from the debates around the term 'medium,' some widely accepted definitions of intermediality as well as typologies of intermedial configurations have been developed. Since the 1980s the term intermediality has become strikingly successful in German-speaking academic debates and, subsequently, gained recognition in various disciplines (cf. Caduff et al. 2006; Todorow 2011). Dick Higgins published a pioneering article called "Intermedia" in 1966, where he describes the rich interdisciplinary and intermedial activities that occur between genres that became prevalent in networks of artists such as *Fluxus* in the 1960s. Higgins stated that 'intermedium' is the "uncharted land that lies between" (Higgins 1984, 22) different media and that he had come across the term 'intermedium' in Samuel Taylor Coleridge who used it in a lecture on Edmund Spenser in 1812 to explain functions of allegory (cf. Friedman 2005, 51; Müller 2009, 31). It was Aage Hansen-Löve, a scholar of Russian literature, who introduced the German term "Intermedialität" in a 1983 article. Whereas he applied it to text-picture relations such as modern Russian pattern poems, where both media, i.e. writing and pictures, are co-present, today intermediality is considered an umbrella term which also includes ekphrastic phenomena, where only one medium, writing, is present. Although intermediality as a field of research requires interdisciplinary approaches and collaboration between literary scholars, art historians, musicologists, film and media scholars, etc., literary scholars initially tended to understand intermediality as a neglected extension of intertextuality, which was a central field of research in the 1970s and 1980s. In German-speaking literary and cultural studies, some of the

early influential scholarly publications on intermediality were Eicher and Bleckmann 1994, Wagner 1996, Wolf 1996, Helbig 1998, and Griem 1998; in film and media studies Paech 1994, Müller 1996, Spielmann 1998; and in communication theory Luhmann 1995. Today intermediality research is also increasingly recognized internationally.

Major theoreticians of intermediality like Werner Wolf and Irina O. Rajewsky have presented definitions and typologies which help to differentiate a wide range of intermedial phenomena. As Rajewsky points out, “researchers have begun to formally specify their particular conception of intermediality through such epithets as transformational [Spielmann 1998], discursive, synthetic, formal, transmedial, ontological [Schröter 1998], or genealogical intermediality [Gaudreault and Marion 2002], primary and secondary intermediality [Leschke 2003], or so-called intermedial figuration [Paech 2002]” (Rajewsky 2005, 44–45 fn. 4). For Rajewsky, intermediality is an umbrella-term and hypernym for all kinds of phenomena that take place between media:

- “intermedial” designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media;
- “intramedial” phenomena do not involve a transgression of medial boundaries;
- “transmedial” phenomena are, for instance, the appearance of a certain motif or style across a variety of different media.

Intermedial phenomena can be studied from a synchronic research perspective, which allows scholars to develop typologies of specific forms of intermediality, and a diachronic perspective, which investigates the history of the media and their intersections and collaborations. According to Rajewsky, the current debate reveals two basic understandings of intermediality: “a broader and a narrower one, which are not in themselves homogeneous. The first concentrates on *intermediality as a fundamental condition or category* while the second approaches *intermediality as a critical category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products or configurations*” (Rajewsky 2005, 47). Rajewsky’s literary conception of intermediality in the latter and more narrow sense encompasses three subcategories, but single medial configurations will also match more than just one of the three subcategories:

- Firstly, media combination (also called multi-media, pluri-media as well as mixed media); the examples she gives are opera, film, theater, performances, illuminated manuscripts, comics, computer installations etc. In this subcategory, intermediality is “a communicative-semiotic concept, based on the combination of at least two medial forms of articulation” (Rajewsky 2005, 52).
- Secondly, medial transposition, including, for example, film adaptations, novelizations etc. This category is production-oriented, the intermedial quality “has to do with the way in which a media product comes into being, i.e., with the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium” (Rajewsky 2005, 51).

- Thirdly, intermedial references (Rajewsky 2005, 52), for instance references in a literary text to a piece of music (the so-called ‘musicalization of fiction’), the imitation and evocation of filmic techniques such as dissolves, zoom shots, montage editing etc.; descriptive modes in literature which evoke visual effects or refer to specific visual works of art (‘ekphrasis’). Intermedial references contribute to the overall signification, like the first category, they are of a communicative-semiotic nature, but they involve “*by definition just one medium*” (Rajewsky 2005, 53). It is important to note that the mere mention of another medium or medium-product does not justify the label intermedial, but only such media-products which evoke or imitate formal and structural features of another medium through the use of their own media-specific means (the “as if” character and illusion-forming quality of intermedial references; they create the illusion of another medium’s specific practices; Rajewsky 2005, 54–55).

In addition to Rajewsky, Wolf is a literary scholar and narratologist who has published widely on intermediality. Intermediality applies in its broadest sense to any transgression of boundaries between *conventionally* and culturally distinct media and thus is concerned with ‘heteromedial’ relations between different semiotic complexes and how they communicate cultural content. Media in this sense are specified principally by the nature of their underlying semiotic systems, i.e. verbal language, pictorial signs, music, etc., or in cases of ‘composite media’ such as film, a combination of several semiotic systems; their technical or institutional channels are merely secondary. There are four main intermedial phenomena (Wolf 2005, 253–255):

- “transmediality” (an extracompositional variant), which describes such transmedial phenomena that are non-specific to individual media (motifs, thematic variation, narrativity) and which appear across a variety of different media;
- “intermedial transposition” (an extracompositional variant), the ‘transfer’ of the content or of formal features from one medium to another, e.g. a film adaptation of a novel;
- “intermedial relations / references” (an intracompositional variant), where the involvement with the other medium may take place explicitly, “whenever two or more media are overtly present in a given semiotic entity” (Wolf 2005, 254), or covertly, i.e. indirectly (e.g. musicalization of fiction, or ekphrasis, i.e. visualization of fiction/poetry). Mere thematization of another medium is not enough, the term should be reserved for an evocation of certain formal features of another medium;
- “multi- or plurimediality” (an intracompositional variant), or combination of media (ballet, opera, film, comic strips, radio plays) (Wolf 2005, 253–255).

Obviously, the typologies developed by Rajewsky and Wolf (↗24 Literature and Music: Theory) are similar attempts at charting the vast field of intermedial relations. Discussions of examples for each of their categories can be found in the three parts

of this handbook. As in all classifications there are borderline cases hard to classify, and multiple labeling of one and the same phenomenon is sometimes necessary. This is why Rajewsky as well as Wolf point out the heuristic value of their typologies and underline the importance of analyzing individual intermedial constellations.

Jens Schröter (2012), a media scholar, also suggests a typology, but his typology is one of (at least) four types of *discourse* on intermediality. He does not intend to define what intermediality “‘really is,’ but to describe what ways of talking about intermediality, in a most general sense, there are” (Schröter 2012, 16; he explains that his last two models are different sides of the same phenomenon rather than two completely different categories):

- Synthetic intermediality: In this discursive field “intermediality is discussed as the process of a (sexually connoted) fusion of several media into a new medium – the intermedium – that supposedly is more than the sum of its parts” (Schröter 2012, 16); synthetic intermediality is associated with some artistic movements of the 1960s such as Happening and Fluxus and is rooted in Wagner’s nineteenth-century artistic synthesis of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*; ‘monomedia’ are condemned and more holistic intermedial approaches and art forms favored, for instance by Dick Higgins (a Fluxus artist), which break up habitualized forms of perception and support utopian impulses for the reunification of individuals in a classless society (here the mix of multimedial and utopian-holistic ideas is problematic since intermediality becomes ubiquitous); one inescapable problem of this model is, however, the differentiation of intermedia/intermedial forms such as ‘visual poetry’ (where a conceptual fusion occurs) and mixed media (regarded by the viewer as separate).
- Formal or transmedial intermediality: This discursive field is built on the concept that there are transmedial structures (such as fictionality, rhythmicity, compositional strategies, seriality) that are not specific to one medium but can be found in different media. Models utilizing transmedial intermediality have the problem that ‘media specificity’ is hard to conceptualize.
- Transformational intermediality: This discursive field deals with the representation of one medium through another medium (what Bolter and Grusin 1999 term ‘remediation’); here the question arises whether transmedial intermediality is an intermedial category at all, since a representation of a medium is no longer a medium but a representation; nevertheless, “one would obstruct an interesting perspective if, with this argument, one would skip representation. [...] if photography can point or relate to a *written* text then we are already dealing with a relation between two media. One medium *refers* to another – thereby it can comment on the represented medium, which would allow one to make interesting inferences to the ‘self-conception’ of the representing medium.” (Schröter 2012, 27) Schröter suggests the term “intermedial representation” for “a representation that explicitly refers to the represented medium” (Schröter 2012, 27). Since a transformation cannot be observed without knowledge “of what the represented medium (alleg-

edly) is [...] as well as what the representing medium (allegedly) is,” the descriptions of transformations always have “ontological implications” (Schröter 2012, 27–28). Transformational intermediality is therefore the reverse side of Schröter’s fourth category.

- Ontological intermediality or ontomediality, which highlights the fact that media always already exist in a medial network and never in splendid isolation. The question that has to be asked is this: “Do the clearly defined unities that we call media and that are characterized by some kind of media-specific materialities precede the intermedial relation, or does a sort of primeval intermediality exist that conversely functions as a prerequisite for the possibility of such unities?” (Schröter 2012, 28) Ontological intermediality does not follow the specificities of given and defined media, but rather precedes them; the concept of ontological intermediality or ontomediality undermines the idea of clearly separated media, and “we have to recognize that it is not individual media that are primal and *then* move toward each other intermedially, but that it is intermediality that is primal and that the clearly separated ‘monomedial’ are the result of purposeful and institutionally caused blockades, incisions, and mechanisms of exclusion” (Schröter 2012, 30).

It is notable that for Schröter media always already exist in relation to other media, never in isolation: “Intermediality is rather the ontological *conditio sine qua non*, which is always before ‘pure’ and specific media, which have to be extracted from the arch-intermediality.” (Herzogenrath 2012, 4)

### 3.3 Future Fields of Intermediality Research

Some very interesting intermedial constellations in the field of literature are to be found in postcolonial, transcultural and cosmopolitan Anglophone literatures. Unfortunately, these postcolonial intermedial texts have been largely neglected so far, even if aspects like work-image intersections, ekphrasis and visual culture have raised some academic interest (Kortenaar 1997; Döring 2002; Emery 2007; Meyer 2009; Mendes 2012). In her pioneering article in this handbook, Birgit Neumann not only explores the multifaceted role of intermedial configurations in postcolonial literatures, she also debates the applicability of the concept of intermediality to postcolonial literatures. Since intermediality as a concept touches upon notions of hierarchy, superiority and legitimacy in the field of cultural representation, it is predestined to discuss the politics of symbolic forms in postcolonial literatures. As Neumann states, the field of “intermediality is one of the most promising and invigorating research areas within postcolonial studies today. And yet, despite the prominence of intermedial constellations in postcolonial literatures, to date there have been only few attempts to systematically introduce the concept into the field.” (↗27 *Intermedial Negotiations: Postcolonial Literatures*) She opens up numerous fruitful intermedial perspectives for the



interpretation of postcolonial literatures and discusses the constitutive and dynamic role of media in construing forms of sociality and perpetuating cultural knowledge, including concepts of identification, alterity and power in postcolonial contexts. Since postcolonial literatures are often concerned with renegotiating imperial legacies and the ensuing predominance of Eurocentric epistemologies, the concept of intermediality, by opening up a space of semiotic and material in-between-ness, may intervene in the social fabric of existing medial configurations, reworking them in a way that allows readers to experience, see and imagine the world differently. By unsettling colonial epistemologies, which typically promote notions of cultural purity, the intermedial strategies of postcolonial literatures may bring to the fore “the heterogeneity and plurality of meaning-making and, in a wider sense, reflect the essential impurity and – to use a central concept of postcolonial studies – hybridity of all cultural formations.” (↗27 *Intermedial Negotiations: Postcolonial Literatures*, 514) Postcolonial writers are often preoccupied with countering the colonial gaze, intervening in the existing relationship of visibility and power by, for instance, delivering subversive ekphrases of colonial painting, thus using ekphrasis’ transformational potential to discuss colonial legacies. Chapter 7 on postcolonial ekphrasis also contributes to the field of postcolonial intermedial studies. It expounds on the fact that Anglophone postcolonial literatures testify to visibility as a battleground on which colonial legacies are negotiated at a time when increasing globalization is accountable for today’s conspicuous transnational and transcultural dimensions of the lives and works of so many Anglophone writers. This handbook hopes to augment efforts at bringing together postcolonial studies and intermediality studies more closely.

Among the areas of intermediality research which are of special interest in our times of media hybridization, and hence likely to be further developed in the future, are also transmediality research and inter-/transmedial narration. As a theoretical framework, transmediality research seems to be a central category for understanding our media-saturated world characterized by media transposition, adaptation and ‘remediation’ (cf. 3.4; also ↗13 *Adaptation – Remediation – Transmediality*). In intermediality research, transmediality is a category that refers to phenomena that crop up across a variety of media, for instance fictionality, rhythmicity, seriality, motifs, thematic variations and narrativity. One of the most productive fields of transmediality research is inter- or transmedial storytelling (cf. Grishakova and Ryan 2010; Schwanecke 2012; Thon 2014, 2016 forthcoming). As comparatively recent concepts, inter- and transmedial storytelling made their first prominent appearance in the early 2000s (cf. Rippl and Etter 2013 for a more detailed discussion). Werner Wolf triggered the debate with a groundbreaking article in 2002 that systematically investigated the narrative potential of music, paintings, and picture series by bringing together the findings of intermediality studies and literary narratology, thus developing a new intermedial narratology. On the basis of formal (chronology, repetition, teleology, causality/cohesion) and thematic indicators (tellability and singularity; cf. Wolf 2002, 47–51), Wolf has discriminated *genuinely narrative* genres such as novels that are based on pre-

dominantly verbal media (written and oral text) from works that indicate narration, such as picture series and mono- or polyphase pictures. The narrative potential is low whenever a considerable input to the production of narrativity is required from the recipient (cf. Wolf 2002, 96). In other words, prototypical narration in a novel requires a minimal narrativizing activity on the part of the recipient, whereas instrumental music demands a maximum (cf. Wolf 2002, 95); comic strips hold a middle position on Wolf's scale (cf. Hoppeler, Etter, and Rippl 2009, 96). Thus, intermedial narration is based on the insight that narrativity is a transmedial cognitive frame. While most classical narratology has "disregarded the interrelation between narrativity and media, [...] [p]ostclassical narratology has started to dismantle th[e] hegemony of narrator-transmitted narratives and has emphasized the transmedial nature of narrativity as a cognitive frame applicable to ever 'remoter' media and genres" (Wolf 2011, 145). In 2011, Wolf defined transmedial narratology as the study of narrativity in works of art outside the literary text, such as painting, sculpture, instrumental music (cf. Wolf 2011, 158). If narratology leaves behind concepts such as that of the narrator and the preoccupation with the verbal medium and focuses instead on prototypical and cognitive aspects of narrativity, a transmedial reconceptualization of narrative becomes possible. While narrative, like all cognitive macro-frames, can be realized in more than one medium, it is to a large extent (but never completely) medium-independent and hence a transmedial phenomenon. But this does not imply that transmedial narration does not take into account the material specificities of the respective medium in which an idea or story is expressed (cf. Wolf 2002; Ryan 2004; Walsh 2006). Generally speaking, transmedial narratology contends that the tellability of any given narrative depends intimately on the resources and the constraints of a given medium, just as each medium has particular affinities for certain themes and certain types of plot: "You cannot tell the same type of story on the stage and in writing, during conversation and in a thousand-page novel, in a two-hour movie and in a TV serial that runs for many years" (Ryan 2004, 356).

### 3.4 Critical Voices and Alternative Conceptualizations

Media-fusion, media transposition and a general tendency towards the dissolution of medial boundaries are central features of contemporary digital culture, which explains why more recently the question whether it makes sense at all to investigate individual media on their own and to contend that categorial media borders exist has become a crucial one. As a consequence, the concept of intermediality itself has come under scrutiny since it presupposes media borders that are then transgressed (cf. Weingart 2010). Researchers such as Wilhelm Voßkamp and Brigitte Weingart warn against essentializing media borders and media purism; they claim the constructedness and historicity of any conception of medium. Referring to W. J. T. Mitchell and Jacques Derrida, text, picture and music are not conceived as different media with

clear-cut borders, and instead a principal permeability between media is stated (cf. Weingart 2001; cf. also Voßkamp and Weingart 2005). Precisely because intermedial artifacts and phenomena aim at dissolving and transcending media borders, rigid and essentializing conceptions of media borders as well as media purism have to be challenged in favor of an understanding of media as relational constellations and situational incidences. Theories and typologies of intermediality can hence never be anything but heuristic instruments.

In spite of this criticism, researchers such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2005), Irina O. Rajewsky (2010) und Werner Wolf (2011) find it problematic to give up the concepts of media borders, “border zones” (Rajewsky 2010, 65) and media specificities altogether. They instead refer to the heuristic potential of these terms in analyses of various intermedial conceptions and specific intermedial manifestations:

Currently, efforts are being made to strengthen common and crossover features [...] in intermediality studies [...]. Contrary to this tendency, I have advanced the thesis that medial differences and the notion of media borders play a crucial and extremely productive role in the context of intermedial practices. [...] thus starting from the objects of investigation as such, it is precisely the concept of the border which can be strengthened. In my view, the concept of the border is the precondition for techniques of crossing or challenging, dissolving or emphasizing medial boundaries, which can consequently be experienced and reflected on *as* constructs and conventions. [...] My thesis thus encompasses the idea of fostering a process of rethinking the notion of boundaries: it should be shifted from taxonomies to the dynamic and creative potential of the border itself. (Rajewsky 2010, 63–65)

Rajewsky talks about individual media without, however, conceiving of them as ‘pure’ media: Referring to Wolf (1999, 37), she underscores that media are only “conventionally perceived as distinct from other media” (Rajewsky 2010, 66 fn. 7). For the analysis of concrete intermedial configurations and intermedial practices in the arts, “media borders and medial specificities are indeed of crucial importance,” as are their basic material and operative conditions (Rajewsky 2010, 53).

In addition to the controversial debates about the concept of media borders versus that of ‘arch-intermediality’ and the unsolved problem of a clear differentiation between media and art forms, there exists another striking problem within intermediality studies, that of the diverging terminologies used in different disciplines and fields. An example is Henry Jenkins’s concept of “transmedia storytelling,” which he defined in his book-length study *Convergence Cultures* (2006, esp. 95–134) as “[s]tories that unfold across multiple media platforms” and “a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products” (Jenkins 2006, 334). Transmedia storytelling is interested in the circulation of media content across different media systems, favoring an integrated approach to franchise products which ignores older models based on categories like ‘the original’ or the ‘source text/urtext’ and later (supposedly aesthetically less valid) derivative texts. While according to Jenkins, during the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth

*media differentiation* took place, today we encounter the *convergence of media* in the form of digital code and computer processing which renders investigations into individual media anachronistic. Although Jenkins implicitly agrees with Ryan's stance that every medium has its idiosyncratic ways of shaping a narrative, he has more in mind for the term "transmedia" than the switching from one medium to another while telling one and the same story: He is interested in how a certain narrative is spread simultaneously over a field of several media. The *new media* product – the one that, according to him, merits the term "transmedia" – can be observed in those cases where the 'travels' across media are planned and laid out right from the start (cf. also Mittell 2012). Jenkins's main focus is on the franchising strategies of cultural products in our highly mediatized, digital world characterized by a convergence culture with its "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins 2006, 2).

Digitality and the computer as a new hyper-medium play pivotal roles in all attempts at defining intermediality. As a result, media scholars have asked whether the concept should be restricted to the analog arts and media, because only there is the materiality of a medium actually present (Paech and Schröter 2008). Intermediality's role as sole player in today's theoretical landscape in the discussed field is challenged by scholars who consider Jenkins's term 'convergence culture' and related concepts such as 'culture of remediation,' 'postmodern culture of recycling' and 'adaptation' to open up better approaches to and explanations of today's cultural products.

While Jenkins has introduced the term 'convergence' to describe the series of intersections between different media systems in our digitalized world, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin also discuss inter- and transmedial relationships in connection with digital media; however, they use a different term, namely 'remediation,' a metaphor from media ecology which has replaced McLuhan's vision of media as network. Bolter and Grusin claim that in current (digital) media, "*all* mediation is remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 55), understanding the concept of 'remediation' as a particular kind of intermedial relationship undergoing processes of medial refashioning. They define remediation as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 273), as "*the mediation of mediation*: Each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other to function as media at all" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 55):

[New] visual technologies, such as computer graphics and the World Wide Web [...] are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media. Digital media can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces.

What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media. (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 14–15)

Remediation can easily be aligned with concepts like adaptation, especially when the adaptation is to a different medium, which is the case with filmic adaptations of texts, and here remediation may serve as a synonym for adaptation (Hutcheon 2006, 3; ↗13 Adaptation – Remediation – Transmediality). Rajewsky comments on Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation as “a defining characteristic of the new digital media” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 45) and a basic trait of all medial practices. While their concept of remediation is a subcategory of intermediality in the broad sense, it is nevertheless “hardly reconcilable with conceptions of intermedial subcategories like medial transformation, media combination, or medial references” for the very reason that remediation “necessarily implies a tendency to level out significant differences both between the individual phenomena in question and between different media with their respective materiality; differences that come to the fore as soon as detailed analyses of specific medial configurations, their respective meaning-constitutional strategies, and their overall signification are at stake” (Rajewsky 2005, 64).

Another important related field of intermediality research investigating visual phenomena and networks is ‘visual culture studies’ (cf. Mirzoeff 1999; Rimmele and Stiegler 2012). Visual culture plays an important role in different disciplines such as American Studies (cf. Böger and Decker 2007; Decker 2010; Hebel and Wagner 2011), English Studies (cf. Brosch 2004, 2011) and Germanic Studies (Benthien and Weingart 2014; cf. also Stiegeler 2014). In addition, the relatively new field, literary visuality, investigates the role of literature(s) in visual culture(s): The approach is the result of a “fast-developing dialogue of textual studies with visual culture studies” (Harrow 2013, 1) and “constitutes an alternative or complementary paradigm to intermediality studies in that it posits the larger framework of visual rather than media culture as the context in which to analyse the visualities of literature.” (cf. Isekenmeier ↗17 Literary Visuality, 325) Intermediality studies, and ekphrasis research in particular, have been criticized by scholars working in the fields of visual culture and literary visuality for being mainly concerned with pictures and their media. Because of their understanding of cultures as semiotic systems, which combine social practices, material artifacts and conventional codes, literary visuality’s range – according to Guido Isekenmeier – extends beyond (the) media and questions their centrality in or for visual culture(s) by putting visuality, i.e. vision, sight and seeing, center stage. A literary studies approach to visuality in particular “has to look or read beyond (the) media in order to elucidate literature’s participation in visual culture at large” (↗17 Literary Visuality, 326). While it seems logical to underline the embeddedness of pictures and visual media in visual practices, scholars of intermediality would reply that all practices of looking and scopic regimes presented in literature are exclusively accessible

through the medium in which the text is encoded, hence the question of medium cannot be foregone.

A last concept that needs introduction is ‘multimodality.’ Werner Wolf distinguished between ‘covert intermediality,’ which refers to the transformation of another medium into a literary verbal text, and what he terms ‘overt intermediality’ (cf. Wolf 1999, 37–44), which goes by the name of ‘multimodality’ in social semiotic approaches (↗34 Non-verbal Semiotic Modes and Media in the Multimodal Novel). Examples of overt intermediality are opera or film, which both combine language, music, sound etc.: “As a rule, such conventionalized forms of the co-presence of different media in one work of art constitute literary or aesthetic genres of their own with a very specific and conventionalized interrelation between the different media and have therefore also been termed ‘plurimediality’ (as in the case of the theater play [...]), or the ‘multimodality’ of film [...] or of novels” (cf. Hallet ↗32 Methodology of Intermediality in Literary Studies, 606). Multimodality as a theoretical framework in the humanities has been developed to account for the shortcomings of monomodal disciplinary approaches in linguistics as well as literary studies, where “language was (seen as) the central and only full means for representation and communication” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 45). Kress and van Leeuwen have first developed the notion of an intrinsic combination of ‘different codes’ and ‘modes’ in acts of signification and communication. They define mode as any semiotic resource that produces meaning in a social context (for a critical discussion of Kress and van Leeuwen cf. Elleström 2010b, 13–17; 40 fn 7 and 8). With the emergence of new multimedia technologies and electronic multimedial environments, linguistic theories of communication as well as literary theories of symbolic representation need to account for the combination of different media and symbolic forms. In its most basic sense, multimodality is a theory of communication and social semiotics, it describes communication practices in terms of the textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources – or modes – used to compose messages. In social semiotics, media are defined as merely physical and material resources “used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used (e.g. the musical instrument and the air; the chisel and the block of wood)” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 22). Wolfgang Hallet (2009) is a preeminent literary scholar who – in reaction to the fact that since the 1990s a new kind of Anglophone novel has emerged which integrates a wide range of non-linguistic symbolic forms and non-narrative modes such as visual images, diagrams, maps, screenshots, drawings, handwritten letters and e-mails into the narrative discourse – has adapted multimodality theories from social semiotics and discourse analysis in linguistics to discuss the sub-genre of the multimodal novel and to describe how the combination of various semiotic modes and forms of symbolization serves signifying and communicative purposes.

It is not easy to bring the two fields, intermediality studies and multimodality research, together, since the concepts of media are diverging ones. As Hallet succinctly summarizes, a semiotic mode is

always tied to a specific material or medial carrier, but media in themselves do not produce meaning. This is a substantial conceptual difference between intermediality theories and multimodality theories. Whereas in the former the verbal text and a visual image are regarded and described as different, interrelated media, text-image relations in the multimodal novel (as in multimodal texts in general) are not conceptualized as intermedial relations, but as an interplay of two distinct semiotic modes (textual entities) in the same ‘medium,’ i.e. the printed book, which jointly contribute to the production of one whole meaning in a single act of communication [...]. (↗34 Non-verbal Semiotic Modes and Media in the Multimodal Novel, 642)

An interesting and promising attempt at discussing multimodal and intermedial approaches and their conflicting terminologies together has recently been put forward by Lars Elleström who claims that “all kind of sign systems and also specific media productions and works of art must be seen as parts of a very wide field including not least the material, sensorial, spatiotemporal and semiotic aspects” which Elleström calls “the four ‘modalities’ of media,” and which allow him to pinpoint the commonalities and differences between art forms, media, etc. (Elleström 2010a, 4). He also distinguishes between “three aspects of the notion of medium. *Basic media* are simply defined by their modal properties whereas *qualified media* are also characterized by historical, cultural, social, aesthetic and communicative facets. *Technical media* are any objects, or bodies, that ‘realize’, ‘mediate’ or ‘display’ basic and qualified media.” (Elleström 2010a, 5; for a critique of Elleström’s model ↗31 Performing Games) These three types of media are not separate ones, but “complementary, theoretical aspects of what constitutes media and mediality” (Elleström 2010b, 12); the modalities of media build “a medial complex integrating materiality, perception and cognition” (Elleström 2010b, 15). The material modality is defined as “the latent corporeal interface of the medium”; the sensorial modality is “the physical and mental acts of perceiving the present interface of the medium through the sense faculties”; the spatiotemporal modality of media covers “the structuring of the sensorial perception of sense-data of the material interface into experiences and conceptions of space and time”; and finally, the semiotic modality is “the product of a perceiving and conceiving subject situated in social circumstances” (Elleström 2010b, 17–18, 21).

A few years before Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen published their influential book-length study *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* in 2001, W. J. T. Mitchell claimed in *Picture Theory* that “all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes” (Mitchell 1995, 94–95). In this vein, Elleström, too, explains that “[a]ll media are mixed in different ways. Every medium consists of a fusion of modes that are partly, and in different degrees of palpability, shared by other media. Every medium has the capacity of mediating only certain aspects of the total reality” (Elleström 2010b, 24). There is no doubt that in the future, the concepts of intermediality, transmediality, multimodality, etc. will be further discussed and refined as new inter- and transmedial manifestations are encountered in our digital and globalized culture.

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music* is the first volume in the new De Gruyter series *Handbooks of English and American Studies: Text and Theory*. This handbook has a theoretical focus; however, theory is brought together with concrete interpretation of literary texts against the backdrop of literary and cultural history – which is the programmatic idea behind the series. As an attempt to chart the rich field of intermediality research in literary studies and related fields, editor and contributors are aware that this cannot be a comprehensive undertaking: there are so many additional issues which ask for more in-depth discussion (cf. the Further Reading section of this Introduction). In the thirty-four chapters of this *Handbook of Intermediality* that follow, a range of crucial concepts of intermediality will be discussed in connection with literary examples from different centuries and Anglophone cultures. In its three parts – I Text and Image, II Music, Sound and Performance, and III Intermedial Methodology and Intersectionalities – the handbook reflects the different areas of intermediality research relevant to the study of Anglophone literatures. The three parts are of different length long and thus reflect the expertise of the editor in the field of text-picture intersections. The longest, Part I Text and Image, consists of five subsections: Ekphrasis; Literature and Photography; Literature and the Moving Image; Literary Visuality and Intermedial Framing; as well as Intermedial Narration: Text-Picture Combinations. Part II Music, Sound and Performance includes chapters on musico-literary relationships, literary acoustics, postcolonial intermedial negotiations, theatrical intermediality, literature-dance encounters, as well as intermediality and video games. Part III Intermedial Methodology and Intersectionalities offers a chapter on a methodology of intermediality in literary studies, a field which has so far been neglected, but is of course of great importance for students. Part III also offers two chapters on multimodality and how to operationalize the concept in analyses of ‘texts’ which include visual material such as pictures and maps: Chapter 33 is authored by a linguist and communication scholar, chapter 34 is provided by a specialist of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and literary scholar. In all contributions, the choice of approaches and literary examples inevitably reflects individual preferences, however not to the disadvantage of the project, but rather as an indication of the vibrant and diverse field of intermediality studies and its neighboring research fields. Paying tribute to the broad range of scholarly backgrounds and the wide spectrum covered, the chapters vary in their use of British and American English and spelling. At the end of the handbook, the reader finds two index lists covering subjects and names which will assist efficient use of the handbook.

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**Part I Text and Image**

Ekphrasis

Literature and Photography

Literature and the Moving Image

Literary Visuality and Intermedial Framing

Intermedial Narration: Text-Picture Combinations



James A. W. Heffernan

# 1 Ekphrasis: Theory

**Abstract:** As a literary genre, ekphrasis ranges from ancient rhetorical exercises in description through art criticism to poetry and fiction. Furthermore, since digital technology and cinema have animated visual art itself, the verbal representation of visual representation has become more fluid than ever before. While traditional ekphrasis generates a narrative from a work of art that is still in both senses, silent and motionless, cinematic ekphrasis exploits the metamorphic power of film to conjure a dream world that rivals and contests the order of realistic fiction. In all of these cases, the verbal version of a work of visual art remakes the original. The rhetoric of art criticism aspires to make the work of art “confess itself” in language that is always that of the critic; ekphrastic poetry turns the work of art into a story that expresses the mind of the speaker; and ekphrastic fiction turns the work of art – whether still or moving – into a story that mirrors the mind of a character. Finally and simply, then, ekphrasis is a kind of writing that turns pictures into storytelling words.

**Key Terms:** Art criticism, ekphrastic poetry, ekphrastic fiction, cinematic ekphrasis, pregnant moment

# 1 Ekphrasis: Definition and History

*Ekphrasis* is an ancient rhetorical term that has now been revived in academic studies of art and literature. After languishing in obscurity until 1967, when Murray Krieger published a notable essay on it, ekphrasis is commanding major attention. As of August 2013, the online *International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association* lists 859 studies of it, including 33 books. For more than twenty years, it has been a regular topic at the triennial meetings of the International Association of Word and Image Studies, and at various other meetings devoted to ploughing the inexhaustibly fertile ground where literature meets visual art.

Unfortunately, this new thicket of academic studies and sessions springs from no common ground of agreement on what the term *ekphrasis* means. From the ancient Greek rhetoricians who gave us the term we inherit a range of meanings. What is probably the earliest definition comes from Ailius Theon of Alexandria, generally assigned to the first century of our era, who defined ekphrasis simply as a way of describing just about anything visible:

*Ekphrasis est logos periegematikos, enargos hup' upsin agon to deloumenon.*  
(qtd. in Webb 1992, 35)

Ekphrasis is exhibitionistic (literally 'leading around') speech, vividly leading the subject before the eyes. (Translation mine)

By the fifth century, ekphrasis had come to denote the description of visual art, but both the general and the particular meanings remain very much alive in current critical discourse, which has at once preserved and amplified them. On the one hand, the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* defines ekphrasis as “the rhetorical description of a work of art” (Denniston 1970, 377), and Jean Hagstrum, who traces ekphrasis to its Greek roots *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce), uses it even more restrictively to denote poetry that makes the silent work of visual art “speak out” (1958, 18n). At the other extreme, a handbook of rhetorical terms that appeared in 1968 – just after Krieger’s essay – makes no reference to art in defining ekphrasis, calling it simply “a self-contained description, often on a commonplace subject, which can be inserted at a fitting place in a discourse” (Lanham 1968, 39).

In his book on ekphrasis, subtitled *The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, Krieger oscillates between these extremes. Though he approvingly cites Leo Spitzer’s definition of ekphrasis as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (Spitzer 1962, 72), Krieger’s book has very little to say about poetry that *represents* such works. Instead, he treats ekphrasis chiefly as the verbal *counterpart* of visual art. For Krieger, ekphrasis is “word-painting.” As “the sought-for equivalent in words of any visual image, in or out of art,” it “include[s] every attempt, within an art of words, to work toward the illusion that it is performing a task we usually associate with an art of natural signs” (Krieger 1967, 9). Ekphrasis thus gratifies our lust for natural signs – for the immediate presence of the object signified – by defying the “arbitrary character and [...] temporality” of language (Krieger 1967, 10). It offers us a verbal icon, “the verbal equivalent of an art object sensed in space” (Krieger 1967, 9).

In defining ekphrasis as a poetic genre modeled after what he calls “an art of natural signs,” Krieger presupposes that pictorial signs are natural, or at the very least *naturalized*: models of apparently immediate expression, transparent windows on the objects they represent. This assumption has been widely shared. Art historians as well as literary theorists have long believed that literature differs from visual art chiefly because words are conventional and pictures natural: because words are supposed to represent things by convention alone while pictures are supposed to represent them by natural resemblance. Even E. H. Gombrich, who has written at great length about the role that convention plays in art, declares that “images of Nature [...] are not conventional signs, like the words of human language, but show a real visual resemblance, not only to our eyes or our culture but also to birds or beasts” (Gombrich 1981, 12). Likewise, Jonathan Culler firmly locates pictures outside the domain of semiotics – the science of signification – because, he says, semiotics cannot account for “natural resemblance” (Culler 1975, 16).

On the other hand, the notion that painted images can be naturally recognized has been sharply attacked by critics such as Norman Bryson, who has not only assailed what he calls Gombrich's "doctrine of Perceptualism" – the idea that painting re-creates what the artist has actually seen – but has also firmly defined painting as "an art of signs, rather than percepts" (Bryson 1983, xii–xiv). In light of this claim, which we might regard as distinctively contemporary, we do well to remember that a similar claim was long ago made in the most famous of all essays on the difference between literature and visual art: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön*, first published in 1766.

Since Lessing's *Laocoön* is a landmark in the history of theorizing about the relations between literature and visual art, it is likewise central to the history of theorizing about ekphrasis, and must be closely examined. In his own time, Lessing took arms against what he saw as literary pictorialism, drawing or painting with words. To make pictures with words, Lessing thought, is to ignore the essential difference between poetry and painting. They differ not because arbitrary verbal signs differ from naturally recognizable images, for according to Lessing, "figures and colors in space" are "signs," just as words are. But, he argues,

if these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation [*bequemes Verhältnis*] to the thing signified, then signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive. (Lessing 1984 [1766], 78)

For Lessing, then, poetry and painting each work with signs, which we normally take to be arbitrary or conventional. Paradoxically, however, they differ because the signs of each are *naturally suited* to represent different things. Just as Lessing considers painted objects "natural signs" of real ones, he believed that poetry "must try to raise its arbitrary signs to natural signs; only that way does it differentiate itself from prose and become poetry" (Letter of 1769 to Friedrich Nicolai, qtd. in Krieger 1968, 48). Since poetry uses words – verbal signs – that come one after another, it "can express only" things that "follow one another," which is to say "actions" played out in time. Likewise, since painting uses forms and colors that coexist in space, it "can express only" bodies (Lessing 1984 [1766], 78).

Yet just as soon as Lessing makes this fundamental distinction, just as soon as he declares that painting and poetry can express "only" bodies *or* actions, he complicates the opposition. While the "true subjects of poetry" are "actions," poetry can nonetheless suggest the body that performs an action. Conversely, while the "true subjects of paintings" are "bodies," painting can represent the body *in action* by choosing the "single moment of an action" that is "most suggestive" or most pregnant (*prägnantesten*), the moment "from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible" (Lessing 1984 [1766], 78).

While Lessing never used the term ekphrasis, his concept of the "most suggestive" or most pregnant moment suggests what might be called an obstetrical theory

of ekphrasis: it delivers from the pregnant moment of arrested movement the narrative – the sequence of actions – which this moment recalls and anticipates. Using this point to help construct a theory of ekphrasis does not require that we accept Lessing’s deeply problematic concept of the “natural sign,” which is almost self-contradictory, for insofar as a natural sign is a *sign*, it must artificially differ from what it signifies. But an obstetrical theory of ekphrasis definitely swerves from Krieger’s claim that ekphrasis feeds our craving for “the spatial fix” which “asks for language – in spite of its arbitrary character and its temporality – to freeze itself into a spatial form” (1967, 10).

If works of art “are structures in space–time” rather than *either* spatial *or* temporal, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues (1986, 103), ekphrasis must allow for both elements in the works it represents. For this reason I have defined ekphrasis as “*the verbal representation of visual representation*” (Heffernan 1993, 3). This definition makes room for descriptions of paintings and sculptures that represent anything at all, whether someone or something in motion or a still object like Magritte’s famous pipe.

## 2 Ekphrasis and Art Criticism

Thus defined, ekphrastic writing invites comparison with art criticism, and specifically with its rhetoric. This move may seem a detour from the high road of literature – especially if art criticism entails art history, the compilation of facts about painters and paintings and schools of painting and the sequence of pictorial styles. But the line between literature and art criticism starts to blur as soon as we consider the kinship between Homer’s description of the shield sculpted for Achilles in the 18<sup>th</sup> book of *The Iliad* – the founding instance of ekphrasis in Western literature – and the *Eikones* of Philostratus, the father of art criticism. A Greek-born teacher of rhetoric who flourished in the third century BCE, Philostratus demonstrates for his students the rhetorical art of description by describing a number of paintings that he claims to have seen in a luxurious seaside villa outside Naples. But Philostratus’s descriptions of the paintings are actually interpretations of a distinctly literary kind: exfoliations of the stories they implicitly tell.

Typically, Philostratus interprets a painting by turning it into a narrative: not the story of its making, as in Homer’s account of Achilles’s shield, but the story suggested by its shapes, which are identified with the figures they represent. Though he never explains just *how* the episodes of a story are depicted or arranged in a painting, he aims to make the work “confess itself” – in Leo Steinberg’s phrase (Steinberg 1972, 6) – through the inferred speech of its characters. He sometimes tells us what painted figures are saying to each other and what sounds they signify, such as shouting and piping. As Leonard Barkan has recently observed, the *Eikones* “do everything that pictures cannot do by themselves. [...] They exploit picture to create words. All the non-



pictorial experiences that the ekphrases elicit from paintings are linguistic” (Barkan 2013, 22–24).

To see how Philostratus generates words from a picture, consider his commentary on a painting of Narcissus standing over a pool. Philostratus treats this painting as a metapicture, a painting about painting. In so doing, he anticipates Alberti, who later calls Narcissus “the inventor of painting,” and who asks, “What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water?” (Alberti 1966, 64) Philostratus likewise begins by reading the reflected image of the youth as a painting within a painting. “The pool paints Narcissus,” he writes, “and the painting represents both the pool and the whole story of Narcissus” (Philostratus 1931, 89). Unlike Alberti, however, Philostratus does not consider Narcissus himself a painter. On the contrary, he sharply distinguishes Narcissus from the painter and – just as importantly – from the viewer of the painting that represents him.

Philostratus first praises the verisimilitude of the painting in traditional terms: a bee shown settling on flowers looks so realistic that we cannot tell “whether a real bee has been deceived by the painted flowers or whether we are to be deceived into thinking that a painted bee is real” (Philostratus 1931, 89–91). Leaving this question open – perhaps only a risky fingering of the bee could decisively settle it – he continues:

As for you, [...] Narcissus, it is no painting that has deceived you, nor are you engrossed in a thing of pigments or wax; but you do not realize that the water represents you exactly as you are when you gaze upon it, nor do you see through the artifice of the pool, though to do so you have only to nod your head or change your expression or slightly move your hand, instead of standing in the same attitude; but acting as though you had met a companion, you wait for some move on his part. Do you then expect the pool to enter into conversation with you? Nay, this youth does not hear anything we say, but he is immersed, eyes and ears alike, in the water and we must interpret the painting for ourselves. (Philostratus 1931, 91)

Philostratus treats the painting as a study in illusion. For him Narcissus could hardly be the inventor of painting because he does not even know how to *look* at a painting, or in this case at a visible metaphor for painting: a reflected image. As the bee (if real) mistakes painted flowers for real ones, Narcissus mistakes the natural “artifice” of his reflected image for another person. And instead of moving his own head or body to view this picture-like image from various angles, he waits – transfixed – for the other to move.

Consider now the viewpoint of Philostratus himself. In viewing this painting of Narcissus, Philostratus does not simply receive its illusionistic effects. He assumes a position of dominance and judges those effects. He sees only too clearly how Narcissus is deceived. Almost contemptuously, he asks of the painted figure gazing on his reflection: “Do you then expect the pool to enter into conversation with you?” Yet this very question destabilizes Philostratus’s critical stance. The speaker’s question is “rhetorical” in presupposing its answer, and the speaker clearly sees that “this

youth does not hear anything we say.” Yet to interpret the painting, Philostratus must embrace the illusion that he *can* converse with it. If “we must interpret the painting for ourselves,” we must also, paradoxically, enlist the help of our painted companion.

This is what Philostratus does in the rest of his commentary – with a curious combination of confident inference and hesitant speculation. The spear held by the painted figure shows that he has “just returned from the hunt” and he is said to be “panting” (Philostratus 1931, 89, 91). But not everything about the figure speaks to the viewer clearly:

Whether the panting of his breast remains from his hunting or is already the panting of love I do not know. The eye, surely, is that of a man deeply in love, for its natural brightness and intensity are softened by a longing that settles upon it, and he perhaps thinks that he is loved in return, since the reflection gazes at him in just the way that he looks at it. [...] The youth stands over the youth who stands in the water, or rather who gazes intently at him and seems to be athirst for his beauty. (Philostratus 1931, 91–93)

Sliding from assertion to tentative inference, from “surely” to “perhaps” and “seems,” Philostratus hears and transmits as much as he can of the painting’s confession. He not only tells the story it implies (a youth just returned from the hunt stands entranced by his own reflection in a pool); he also articulates the feelings signified by the silent figure, and in so doing, he inevitably imputes to it a conscious, sentient life. So the Narcissus wrought by this commentary is considerably more than the deceived “Other” exposed as such by the knowing, sophisticated Self of the viewer (cf. Mitchell 1986, 333). Though not the inventor of painting, he is, if anything, a figure for the interpreter of it. Like Narcissus, art critics gaze on a still and silent image to which they impute an independent life and from which they seek to solicit a voice, to hear a confession. But no matter how attentively they listen, the voice is inevitably their own, a product of their own reflections.

It could be objected that art criticism – like art itself – has undergone major changes since the time of Philostratus. Until photographic reproductions became widely available in the twentieth century, art criticism had to reproduce paintings in words, as Denis Diderot did in the later eighteenth century for subscribers to his *Salons*, where he describes the paintings regularly exhibited at the Louvre and often generates elaborate stories from them. But now, we might say, art criticism no longer needs description, and storytelling is surely irrelevant to much of modern art – especially abstract art.

What sort of story, after all, can be told about an art that seems to turn its back on representation, on reference to any object or figure that we might recognize from our experience of the world outside the painting, and that might thus give us something to talk about? Modern art has been charged with declaring war on language itself. Yet if modern art ever aimed to silence the viewer, it has conspicuously failed. Its very renunciation of what we commonly take to be subject-matter intensifies our need to talk about it. What Harold Rosenberg says of Minimalism applies to all abstract art:

“The less there is to see, the more there is to say.” (Rosenberg 1968, 306) Viewers of abstract art thus recall in a way the condition of Diderot’s subscribers, who could see the Salon paintings only through the screen – or grid – of his words. Though reproductions and frequent exhibitions give us ready access to the works of abstract art, most of us need words in order to see what these works are, what they do, what they “announce,” what in any sense they represent. So far from silencing the critic, then, abstract art provokes and demands at least as much commentary as any of its precursors.

Consider what a late renowned art historian had to say about a notable American painting of the last century: one of the works with which Jasper Johns launched Postmodernism in the late nineteen fifties, *Shade* (1959). “I keep looking,” writes Leo Steinberg,

[...] at his black-and-white painting called *Shade*. But for a narrow margin all around, its entire surface is taken up by an actual window shade – the cheap kind; Johns had to fortify it to keep it flat. It’s been pulled down as if for the night, and obviously for the last time. Over all the visible surface, shade and ground canvas together, spreads the paint itself, paint unusually atmospheric and permissive of depth. It makes a nocturnal space with bursts of white lights that radiate from suspended points, like bursting and falling fireworks misted over.

An abstracted nightscape? You stare at and into a field whose darkness is Absolute, whose whites brighten nothing, but make darkness visible, as Milton said of infernal shade.

Or a scene of nightfall: far lights flaring and fading move into focus and out, like rainy nights passed on a road. Are we out inside the night or indoors? A window, with its cheap shade pulled down, is within reach, shutting me out, keeping me in? Look again. On a canvas shade lowered against the outside we are given to see outdoor darkness: like the hollow shade our closed eyes project upon lowered lids. Alberti compared the perspective diaphanes of the Renaissance to open windows. Johns’ *Shade* compares the adiaphane of his canvas to a window whose shade is down. (Steinberg 1972, 309)

Just as Jasper Johns’s Postmodernism returns us to the world of tangible objects that Modernism had renounced – to objects such as flags, targets, and shades – Steinberg returns us to the world of literature that Modernism had supposedly silenced. Steinberg uses both Milton and Joyce to help him say what he sees in this painted shade. “[D]arkness visible” describes Hell in the first book of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (2011 [1667], 7), and in the opening paragraph of chapter 3 of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus uses “adiaphane” to mean opacity, “the limit of the diaphane” (Joyce 1986 [1922], 31). Steinberg also reactivates most of the rhetorical strategies that have permeated art criticism from Philostratus onward. This passage is driven by a series of narratives. The Homeric story of how Johns made the painting grounds two other stories about what is represented or signified here. The quotidian tale of a day ending (the shade “has been pulled down as if for the night”) becomes the quasi-apocalyptic story of darkness immutable (“and obviously for the last time”) and then the art-historical narrative of what Johns does with Alberti’s master trope: the open window of

Renaissance art, with its sunlit three-dimensional vistas, becomes the impenetrably occluded window of modern or Postmodern art, with its resolutely flattened opacity.

But Steinberg's commentary deconstructs this opacity even while seeming to affirm it. With a series of rhetorical questions, he prompts us first to see the painted shade-on-canvas as an abstracted nightscape, then as the representation of nightfall with its own depth ("far lights flaring and fading") or of a window that cannot help signifying the two worlds it constitutes by separation – inside and outside.

Like Philostratus and Diderot, Steinberg uses rhetorical questions to make us share his experience of painting, his insistently interrogative mood, his acts of repeated looking. But unlike his precursors, Steinberg aims his questions at the reader rather than the painting, and from the painting he elicits not a single answer but a variety of them. The painting may represent a nightscape, a nightfall, a window or a screen on which we project outdoor darkness just as we may project shade on our lowered eyelids. Thus the story about lowering a shade becomes a story of closing one's eyes – just as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus tests the limits of the diaphane when he says to himself: "Shut your eyes and see" (Joyce 1986 [1922], 31).

Unapologetically literary, Steinberg's response to Johns's painting clearly shows how much we can learn about the art of ekphrasis by studying it in what might be called its purest form—as art criticism. Art criticism works so close to the border of ekphrastic poetry that it sometimes crosses that border. In one of the most remarkable ekphrastic poems of the twentieth century, John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery quotes not only from Giorgio Vasari's sixteenth-century *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* but also from Sydney Freedberg's *Parmigianino* (1950) – a modern scholarly monograph. Though Ashbery – who has written a great deal of art criticism himself – surely knows the difference between that and poetry, he also demonstrates how much the first can feed the second (for a detailed reading of this poem, cf. Heffernan 1993, 169–189).

### 3 Ekphrastic Poetry

Nevertheless, ekphrastic poetry differs from art criticism (almost but not quite equivalent to ekphrastic prose) in some important ways. Typically, I have argued, the art critic delivers from a painting or sculpture some kind of story about what it represents. At the same time, art criticism draws our attention to the medium of representation – oil, watercolor, stone, wood – and the technique of the artist, who is himself (or herself) a major part of the story told by the critic. In other words, art criticism typically operates on three major components: the work of art, the thing it represents, and the artist who represents it. In some cases, of course, one or more of these three components is suppressed. Philostratus makes no reference to any of the painters

who produced the works he describes, and in explaining the painting of Narcissus, he nearly elides the difference between the work and what it represents.

Ekphrastic poetry may likewise blur this difference, as when John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" addresses the sculpted figures on the urn as if they could think and feel and pant and move. On the other hand, in repeatedly reminding them that they are fixed and frozen, the poem highlights their difference from the figures they represent, thus reckoning with both the work and the world it signifies. At the same time, Keats elides any reference to the sculptor who stands behind the urn. In spite of all the art historical questions he raises about the figures on the urn – "what men or gods are these?" (Keats 1982 [1820], 282) – he never asks the first question typically posed by art history: who made it? This is largely because the work of sculpture described in the poem is imaginary or "notional," as John Hollander (1988) calls it, made up in words by the poet himself.

While many other ekphrastic poems likewise ignore the artist, this is hardly a defining feature of ekphrastic poetry, which – as in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" – may have plenty to say about the creator of the work it contemplates. What truly differentiates an ekphrastic poem from a piece of art criticism is that the poem demands to be read as a work of art in its own right. So while art criticism treats the painter, the painting, and the object represented, the critic of ekphrastic poetry must also reckon with the poet and the poem. Here too some elements may be suppressed. In his ode on the urn, Keats says nothing explicit about himself; just as he elides the sculptor, he seems to edit out the poet. But in the final stanza the poet – or rather speaker of the poem – creeps in as one of the observers of the urn, which teases "us out of thought," thus making explicit his presence as one who is both struggling to grasp what the urn represents and shaping his own work of art in the process (Keats 1982 [1820], 282).

Consider what W. H. Auden does with the five components of poetic ekphrasis in his "Musée des Beaux Arts," written in 1938. The museum of the title is the Brussels Musée des Beaux Arts, which houses most of the paintings that Auden refers to in the poem. His poem thus reveals not so much his knowledge of art criticism and art history as his experience of what typically frames our experience of art: the museum. To see paintings in a museum, which is where most of us typically find them, is to see them in relation to each other, which partly explains why it takes Auden more than half the length of his poem to get to the painting that chiefly concerns him: Peter Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (ca. 1558). This poem thus gives approximately equal weight to the painting and its maker—or rather to a whole group of makers:

About suffering they were never wrong,  
 The Old Masters: how well they understood  
 Its human position; how it takes place  
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking along[.]  
 (Auden 1976 [1938], 146)

The poem begins by defining the Old Masters in terms of what they understand about the world we live in: not the visible shapes of things (which is what painters are supposed to understand much better than the rest of us) but the incoherence of the human condition, which juxtaposes high drama and indifferent spectators, tragedy and trivia, a miraculous birth with children skating, or the massacre of the holy innocents with dogs leaping about in the snow. Curiously enough, this opening passage stresses *actions* so much that it might be read as applying to great storytellers; only the phrase “Old Masters,” along with the “Musée” of the title, tells us that Auden is writing about painters.

A further curiosity about the opening passage is that it makes a questionable generalization. If the Old Masters were “never wrong” about the juxtaposition of suffering with signs of indifference to it, what would Auden say of Breughel’s *Parable of the Blind* (1568), which depicts a row of blind men tumbling miserably into a ditch while not a single animate creature – neither man nor beast – is shown anywhere else in the picture, let alone shown displaying indifference to their plight? Viewed in light of the museum where this poem is nominally set, and more specifically of the paintings to which it alludes, Auden’s grand generalization about the Old Masters is at best idiosyncratic. We should read it not as a universal truth – which it certainly is not – but as a clue to the state of mind that Auden’s *speaker* brings to the viewing of Breughel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Here, the speaker tells us,

[...] everything turns away  
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on. (Auden 1976 [1938], 147)

The point of view implicitly imputed to the painting as a whole might be that of the sun, mirror of the viewer’s eye: the sun resting on the horizon at the vanishing point and gazing dispassionately – like an appreciative connoisseur – at the vivid flash of white legs against green water. Moreover, as Michael Riffaterre observes, the ship is “the most exemplary passerby in the indifference sequence” (1986, 8), for in abandoning the drowning man to his fate, it breaks one of the most fundamental laws of the sea. But how far does this indifference to Icarus’s plight extend? If the splash and forsaken cry that the ploughman may have heard did not signify “an important failure” for him, is this also the attitude implied by the painting as a whole, or by the poem? The question moves from one ekphrastic component to another, from the action imputed to the real world, to the painting of that action, and then to the poem about the painting. The poem thus leads us to see how the painting pretends to subordinate the disaster to other sights, or actually does subordinate it by making it far less

conspicuous than the ship and the ploughman. But above all, the poem makes us see how the moral meaning of the painting – the meaning it is said to illustrate – is largely constructed by the words of the title with which the museum has labeled it. The title is the verbal bridge between the painting and the poem, which reconstructs not only the painting but also its literary source – the story of Icarus in Book 8 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In Auden’s hands, the story of Daedalus’s anguish at the loss of his son becomes a story of the suffering of Icarus alone – a verbal narrative of suffering willfully ignored (Heffernan 1993, 146–152).

## 4 Ekphrasis in Prose Fiction and Cinematic Ekphrasis

Besides taking the form of poetry, ekphrasis can also be found in works of prose fiction. In a recent novel called *Underworld* (1997), Don DeLillo links the destructiveness of the atomic bomb to Peter Breughel’s *The Triumph of Death* (ca. 1562, Museo del Prado, Madrid). While J. Edgar Hoover, the longtime Director of the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, is attending a legendary baseball game in October 1951, right after the Soviet Union had just exploded a second atomic bomb, he is struck by pictorial fallout when the two halves of a reproduction of Breughel’s painting—torn from a magazine and thrown down from above him – descend on his head. Fitting together the two halves, Hoover thoroughly examines all the details of the painting – “a census-taking of awful ways to die” (DeLillo 1997, 50) – and is then prompted to think of the bomb just detonated by the Soviets. In this case, as is typical of ekphrasis in fiction, the painting is verbally represented in such a way as to reveal the mind of a central character in the novel.

Ekphrastic fiction can represent not only painting, still photography, and sculpture but also film. In Manuel Puig’s novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, one prisoner describes to another a series of films that are mostly imaginary or “notional” but often composed of elements drawn from actual films. Cinematic ekphrasis, which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Heffernan 2015 forthcoming), radically challenges the notion that ekphrasis deals only with pictures that are still in every sense, silent and motionless. In the world of art itself, quite apart from film, digital technology is already making pictures that move, as does Ori Gersht’s *Pomegranate* (2006); when examined for more than a few seconds, this would-be still life of a pomegranate, a cabbage, and a pumpkin turns out to be a High-Definition film of the pomegranate struck by a bullet and then exploding its seeds in slow motion. Whatever verbal story might be told about this picture, the stories told about the films described in Puig’s novel are much more elaborate, but they strongly suggest that cinematic ekphrasis exploits the inherently dreamlike character of film, its metamorphic fluidity. In the infancy of film, metamorphosis emerged as one of its most distinctive features. Its

transforming power was discovered by accident one day in 1898 by George Méliès, the great French pioneer of filmmaking, when his camera briefly jammed while he was filming traffic outside the Paris Opera. The camera stopped, but the vehicles and the pedestrians kept moving, so when he started cranking the camera again, he got a new sequence of images that was discontinuous with the previous sequence. When he projected the film, therefore, he saw “a bus changed into a hearse, and men changed into women” (qtd. in Heffernan 1977, 140). Here is metamorphosis: precisely what we experience in the irrepressibly fluid world of dreams.

Hence the metamorphic character of film evokes a particular kind of embedded narrative to be found in literature well before the advent of cinema: the story of a dream, which can all too easily become a nightmare. In Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (first published 1818), which has inspired more than two hundred films, Victor describes the dream that he had right after animating the monster. In telling his own story to a character named Walton, Victor says that at the moment of animation, his dreams of glory at creating life dissolved in the face of the monster’s ugliness. “[T]he beauty of the dream vanished,” he says, “and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley 1999 [1818], 85). Soon afterwards, when Victor falls asleep, he dreams that he sees Elizabeth – his fiancée – walking down a city street. But as soon as he embraces and kisses her, she turns into the worm-ridden corpse of his long-dead mother. In turn, this ghastly nightmare prefigures a later, real-world event. By the time Victor gets around to actually embracing Elizabeth on their wedding night, she has just been killed by the monster.

In his dream of kissing a young woman who turns into a corpse, Victor anticipates what happens to the psychiatrist in the first of the films that Molina describes in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. As a descendant of the cat people of medieval Europe, Irena will turn into a panther if any man kisses her. So when Dr. Judd kisses her, she turns into a panther and kills him. Desire is once again frustrated by death.

The story of this cinematic episode is recalled and reconstructed in the final pages of the novel, where the cinematic and the oneiric – the world of film and the world of dreams – converge with the world of politics, which has up to now been cast as the antithesis to both film and dreams. To this point, the sole source of the stories told about films in this novel has been Molina, the gay window dresser serving eight years for seducing a minor. His cellmate, Valentin, is a Marxist firmly committed to his radical comrades in their fight against the government of Argentina. So, the authorities try to use Molina to seduce Valentin psychologically, and with deliveries of tasty food and the promise of an early release, they set Molina to spy on Valentin and to extract from him information about the whereabouts and plans of his comrades.

All of the stories that Molina tells about films, therefore, could be seen as a means to the end of steering Valentin away from politics and into the world of dream, fantasy, and erotic arousal – as in the Nazi propaganda film about the singer who falls in love with the German officer, who is recruited by the resistance to spy on him, and who is finally shot down by a member of the resistance. Obviously this film prefigures



the fate of Molina, who is likewise shot down by the Argentine radicals whom he was trying to serve. But in general, the medium of film in this novel is represented as something feminine, seductive, and erotic as well as metamorphic, always threatening to soften and melt the links binding Valentin to the masculine world of politics. For the most part, Valentin disdains the aesthetic value of film. Though he keeps wanting to hear Molina tell him the stories of films, the one about the singer and the German officer strikes him as a piece of “Nazi junk” (Puig 1991, 56). But for Molina it’s a purely apolitical love story, “a work of art” (Puig 1991, 56) that makes him think of his boyfriend Gabriele, the married waiter who obsesses him. Molina loves a straight man because he feels himself to be a woman, and he plays a woman to the hyper-masculine Valentin so as to seduce him psychologically: at one point he tells the authorities that he thinks he can soften up Valentin because he’s a bit “attached to me” (Puig 1991, 198). Valentin himself knows the dangers of this. Near the end of the novel, when Molina asks Valentin to kiss him just before the two men part for good, Valentin says he’s afraid to do so lest Molina turn into a panther “like with the first movie you told me,” he says. Then, when Molina denies he’s the panther woman, Valentin says, “no, you’re the spider woman, who traps men in her web” (Puig 1991, 260). Of course the spider woman will re-appear in Valentin’s dream, but it’s important to realize that by the time he leaves Valentin, Molina is wholly committed to the radical cause. “I’ll do whatever you tell me,” are his very last words to Valentin (Puig 1991, 263). Before he is shot by the radicals, he does everything he can to reach them with Valentin’s message while *eluding* the government agents sent to follow him – to use him one last time in tracking down the radicals.

On the other hand, even as Molina is politically radicalized through the influence of Valentin, Valentin is softened and feminized through the influence of Molina and all his stories of films. Right after calling Molina “the spider woman,” a phrase Molina loves, Valentin says, “I learned a lot from you Molina” (Puig 1991, 261), and on their last night together, the two men make love and then kiss. After that, and after we learn that Molina has been killed and Valentin tortured almost to death by the prison authorities, Valentin is caught up in a final dream that is not only called a “silvery [...] film [...] in black and white” (Puig 1991, 280) but is also steeped in scenes and images drawn from the movies that Molina has narrated for him. Molina thus embodies for Valentin the enchanting power of film and dreams, which is then refigured by the masked, silver-dressed woman “trapped in a spider’s web” (Puig 1991, 280), the woman who has been virtually metamorphosed into a spider. Like Molina in their cell, the spider woman offers Valentin sex and luscious food. But since Valentin has already linked Molina to the panther woman of the film, has already called him “the spider woman,” and has kissed him before they parted for the last time, this is a dream or nightmare of Molina’s end. As the spider woman, Molina weeps for both himself and Valentin, caught behind the mask of his spying and within the web of his conflicting services to both sides in the government’s persecution of radicals.

## 5 Conclusion

As a literary genre, therefore, ekphrasis ranges from ancient rhetorical exercises in description through art criticism to poetry and fiction. Furthermore, since digital technology and cinema have animated visual art itself, the verbal representation of visual representation has become more fluid than ever before. While traditional ekphrasis generates a narrative from a work of art that is still in both senses, silent and motionless, cinematic ekphrasis exploits the metamorphic power of film to conjure a dream world that rivals and contests the order of realistic fiction. In all of these cases, the verbal version of a work of visual art remakes the original. The rhetoric of art criticism aspires to make the work of art “confess itself” in language that is always that of the critic; ekphrastic poetry turns the work of art into a story that expresses the mind of the speaker; and ekphrastic fiction turns the work of art – whether still or moving – into a story that mirrors the mind of a character. Finally and simply, then, ekphrasis is a kind of writing that turns pictures into storytelling words.

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Andrew James Johnston

## 2 Medieval Ekphrasis: Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*

**Abstract:** This article offers a sketch of medieval approaches to vision, to the relations between text and image and to ekphrasis, before moving on to a reading of the way Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* critiques attempts to essentialise and keep separate different media and genres, especially the verbal and the visual.

**Key Terms:** Middle Ages, Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, ekphrasis, power

### 1 The Problem of the Middle Ages

A variety of reasons render a discussion of medieval intermediality in a handbook like this problematic. After all, the European Middle Ages lasted a thousand years, comprising an astonishing number of different ethnic, linguistic and political communities all displaying a vast degree of cultural diversity and change. Moreover, the very concept of the 'Middle Ages' has become increasingly questionable. Medievalists have long been criticising the principles of periodisation that have led to the consistent marginalisation of the medieval and a concomitant simplistic celebration of the early modern as the birth of all that (post)modernity has desired to praise itself for. The rise of postcolonial and queer paradigms in medieval studies has helped to intensify this critique. Then there is the issue of what and whom to include in the category of the 'medieval': traditional notions of a uniformly Christian Middle Ages, for instance, look increasingly unconvincing before the backdrop of the many Muslim and Jewish communities to be found on the European continent, a continent whose boundaries would have looked very different from a medieval point of view, if, indeed, the notion of 'Europe' had existed. The mere idea of a *uniformly* Christian Middle Ages looks odd in the light not only of the breadth and inclusiveness of Western medieval Christianity but also of its internal variety, its constant development and its tendency towards internecine conflict. Even if, for purely heuristic reasons, we stick to the concept of the 'Middle Ages' the problems only multiply. If we are intent on periodising, then what criteria should determine the beginning of the Middle Ages? The rise of Christianity? That was well in place in the Roman Empire before the Middle Ages started. The decline and fall of the Roman Empire? The rise of Islam? The birth of the first precursors of the European nation states? And what events mark the end of the Middle Ages? The era of discoveries? The invention of the printing press? The Reformation? The beginning of the Counter-Reformation? The Battle of Bosworth? Or, perhaps, the supersession of an episteme of resemblance by the taxonomic discourses of what

Michel Foucault calls the 'Classical Age'? None of these criteria are particularly satisfying (the least satisfying being the well-worn cliché of the rediscovery of Antiquity in the Renaissance).

At first glance, this by no means exhaustive list of typical criteria has little to do with intermediality, except perhaps for the printing press, and to a certain extent the Reformation. As far as media are concerned, the differences between the Middle Ages and Antiquity, on the one hand, and the Middle Ages and the Renaissance or Early Modern Period, on the other, are not nearly as great as the tiredly teleological histories of the rupture-ridden progress of Western modernity tend to assume: Even after the invention of the printing press, important texts were still circulated in manuscript form, and for a long time texts were still very much experienced in aural form, while early modern intellectual exchange was still strongly informed by the academic genres, both written and performative, that had developed at the medieval universities.

Things become still more messy when we narrow down the problem of intermediality to questions of text and image or turn our attention to the even more specific problem of ekphrasis, which serves as an important focal point in the second part of this article, where it will primarily be understood in terms of James A. W. Heffernan's definition as "*the verbal representation of visual representation*" (Heffernan 1993, 3).

With regard to ekphrasis – whichever of its many definitions one might prefer – the Middle Ages is not vastly different from the previous, nor from the following, period. Yet again, it probably depends on which Middle Ages one actually has in mind. In this article, special attention will be paid to Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400), an author who, in the English-speaking world and especially in the eyes of non-medievalists, epitomises the medieval, even though from a continental European perspective this sounds odd, given that his principal works were written at a time when both Petrarch and Boccaccio were already dead.

I have chosen Chaucer, and his *Knight's Tale* in particular, for various reasons: First, because his works betray a consistent fascination not only with the relations of the verbal and the visual but also with media in general. I have chosen Chaucer also because his literary activity was situated at a cultural crossroads where a number of different discourses intersected; I shall mention only the ones relevant to the topic of this article: the classical traditions of literary ekphrasis as they survived in the poetry of Virgil and Ovid, for instance; early humanist discussions of visual art; the intensely visual culture and aesthetic exuberance of King Richard II's splendidly flamboyant court; specifically medieval literary traditions as exemplified in the dream vision and other poetic allegories; contemporary state-of-the-art scientific discourses on vision, optics and the workings of the human mind; and, last but not least, contemporary heretical iconoclasm as championed by the Lollards.

## 2 The Visual and the Verbal in the Middle Ages: Some General Remarks

Before zooming in on Chaucer, I will make a few general observations on medieval relations between the visual and the verbal, observations which do not claim to be exhaustive by any means. Because of its illuminated manuscripts, its stained glass windows, its embroidered tapestries, its pageants both religious and secular and its culture of conspicuous ritual and display – e.g. the elevation of the host during mass, reliquaries, the triumphal entries and public processions – medieval culture is often described as a particularly visual one. At the same time, the Middle Ages are just as frequently portrayed as possessing a strong affinity to textuality: This is because of its fascination with complex hermeneutics, manifest, for instance, in the fourfold sense of scripture, but also because of its general obsession with a type of philosophy and learning that was language-centred; moreover, because the Middle Ages venerated the privileged authority of canonical corpora, e.g. the Bible, the works of Aristotle, as well as established commentary traditions such as the *Glossa ordinaria*; and because of the medieval tendency to read the world as a book, as a space that was not merely material but semiotic. Hence, if we see the verbal and the visual in some kind of fundamental binary and seek to chart the Middle Ages' position somewhere between these two poles we reach an impasse: Despite the fact that even medieval theorists could be prone to conceiving of the relation between the verbal and the visual in starkly oppositional terms, textuality and visuality were both deeply rooted in medieval intellectual and aesthetic practices and tended to engage in complex forms of interaction. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the verbal/textual experience of the Middle Ages is often described in terms of a binary of the oral vs. the literate, so that, from a medieval perspective, the 'verbal' would not necessarily cover the same type of phenomena as nowadays. Over about the last three decades, this particular medieval media problem has been conceptualised in increasingly sophisticated ways, giving rise, for example, to the notion of 'aurality', a concept that shifts attention from the production of texts to the way an audience would have received them. But again, this is only part of the story: medieval poets were not the innocent or passive victims of their media contexts, be they oral or aural. They developed sophisticated means of creatively integrating conceptions of their media into their meaning-making activity. For instance, feigned orality, the artful imitation of poetic forms associated with supposedly 'oral' literature, was frequently used for the purpose of highlighting the literariness of the literary discourse or of exploring notions of fictionality.

Writing and literacy, too, meant something very different in the Middle Ages from what they mean today. We witness, by way of an example, an intense medieval concern with the materiality of the linguistic sign, a concern which seems to have vanished from (post)modern experience. This interest in the material aspects of linguistic signification is evinced, amongst other things, in the playful and self-consciously

enigmatic composition of the dual-language inscriptions on the *Franks Casket*, an early eighth-century Anglo-Saxon whale's bone box adorned both with images and writing, just as much as it is evidenced in the Anglo-Saxon riddle of the bookworm, a species presented as actually 'eating' words. This interest in the materiality of linguistic signification can be traced in Chaucer's allegory of the House of Fame (*House of Fame*) standing, as it does, on a block of ice from which the great names of history are constantly erased due to the block's melting surface.

The question of what constitutes media may thus take very different forms in the Middle Ages from what it does today. If, for instance, a Gothic cathedral displays beautifully coloured stained glass windows that illustrate biblical narratives, then surely those windows constitute a visual medium like a picture or a series of pictures. Yet again, this type of imagery easily introduces sequential narrative into the equation; and the changing of light during the course of the day inevitably affects the visual experience, an experience that does not remain confined to the window itself but also has to do with the blurs of brilliant colour dancing on the walls, pillars and floors of a building itself covered in polychrome murals and frescoes. And how, in terms of media theory, to conceive of the church windows' symbolic status as embodied in the light streaming through the glass without damaging it, just as, according to Christian belief, Jesus was conceived without impairing Mary's virginity? In what way do these windows bear a message; what kind of media-situation do they imply when it is not the image *on the glass* but the materiality *of the glass itself* that provides the visual symbolism that matters?

The very issue of what constitutes an image in the Middle Ages is not as straightforward as one might think. The Latin term *imago*, rather like the Modern High German word *Bild*, refers both to pictures and statues, as well as to images in a wider cultural and especially mental and conceptual sense. Images were discussed in a broad variety of cultural contexts. For instance, according to the ventricular model of the brain, a model still very much in use in the Renaissance, images played a fundamental role in fixing and processing the products of sense perception so that they could be turned into rational ideas and thoughts. Without images, thinking was considered to be impossible. Moreover, in the form of visions, images featured prominently in medieval mystical discourse which provided access to religious truth in ways different from the more rational theology. Then there was the problem of religious imagery: Pope Gregory the Great (590–604) endorsed images in churches as a way to educate the illiterate and to acquaint them with Christian doctrine. But soon the problem of the image's cultic status reared its head, and in the eighth and ninth centuries the Byzantine empire was repeatedly riven by conflict over iconoclasm. Indeed, when believers prayed before the image of Christ or the Virgin Mary, were they, in fact, venerating the image, thereby committing an act of idolatry, or were they merely using the image as a commemorative prop so as to better focus their attention on the religious truths represented in the picture? And what if there actually were miracles associated with particular images, such as statues that bled or icons that wept? The problem of

images within the cultic context of a monotheistic religion is part of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and considerably affected medieval Islam, too. In Chaucer's England, the Lollards, a heretical movement initiated by John Wycliffe (1320–1384), launched an energetic attack on religious images, as on the Eucharist and pilgrimages. Iconoclasm later became a hallmark of the English Reformation, whereas post-Reformation nostalgia for medieval England often included a hankering for the beautiful frescoes, statues and altarpieces that had adorned churches before a violent iconoclasm swept them away (cf. Simpson 2002).

Textual interpretation, too, involved particular attention to the visual. During the Western Middle Ages, the dominant exegetical method was that of the fourfold sense of scripture which distinguished between the literal sense and the three allegorical senses of the Bible. This hierarchical model has often been seen as evidence of the way medieval minds tended to prefer the symbolic and abstract over the material and concrete, but even within this system of biblical interpretation, it was possible to stress the importance of the *sensus literalis* (the literal/historical sense) as opposed to the other three allegorical or mystical senses. The twelfth-century Victorine school of monastic mystical theology was especially fascinated by the aesthetic qualities of biblical texts but also by the physical beauty of and in the world: To Hugh of St. Victor, visible beauty was an image of God's invisible beauty (cf. Eco 1986, 58). Moreover, biblical exegesis is important for discussions of medieval intermediality not least because the relation between the biblical text and religious truth was itself conceptualised in terms of visual metaphor. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, St. Paul states that the divine could not be beheld directly but merely indirectly: *per speculum in enigmate* – “through a glass in a dark manner”. Religious truth was always hidden behind a semi-transparent veil (cf. Akbari 2004).

Besides, medieval notions of the visual as a scientific phenomenon differed from their modern counterparts. From the twelfth century onwards, sophisticated Arab optics entered the horizon of Western knowledge, and hence the question of what actually constituted sight was hotly debated. Western interest in optics was partly fuelled by what was considered the spiritual nature of light, but that did not preclude an interest of a kind we would consider scientific from a modern point of view: On the contrary, the two went hand-in-hand. By the mid-fourteenth century, both Oxford and Cambridge had adopted *perspectiva*, the study of optics, into their arts courses; in other words, a basic amount of scientific knowledge on optics had become part of every educated person's standard intellectual toolkit. Within the narrow space of this handbook article an overview of the different theories and their development cannot be provided, so I shall offer merely the briefest and most superficial sketch of what, in Chaucer's day, was considered established knowledge, i.e. what was to be found in the familiar authorities on optics, especially the Arab Alhacen (Ibn al Haytham, c. 965–c. 1039) whose *Kitab-al-Manazir* was translated into Latin as *De aspectibus* ('On visual appearances'), and the Silesian Witelo, whose book *Perspectiva* (c. 1274) became the prime agent of disseminating Alhacen's views in Europe. In the *Squire's Tale*, Chaucer



actually mentions both authorities as 'Alhazen' and 'Vitulon'. According to Alhacen, every point on the surface of a physical object emitted rays of light that streamed into the eye. The eye in turn admitted rays only if they hit its surface at a right angle, with the rays converging at the centre of the eye. This is important amongst other things because Alhacen's intromission theory of vision superseded the Euclidian model which, in the Platonic tradition, posited that in the process of human vision the eye itself emitted rays. Although, by the mid-fourteenth century, Alhacen and Vitulon's ideas had very much become the standard account of optical theory, they were by no means uncontested; or rather, there were alternative accounts, such as Roger Bacon's (c. 1220–c. 1292). Despite Bacon's by and large following in Alhacen's footsteps, there were some crucial differences to his model. Bacon assumed the existence of so-called *species*, likenesses or images of the object seen, that emanated from the object itself and were transported to the eye by the object's adjacent medium, air. But in order to successfully complete the operation of sight the eye, too, had to emit *species* and, consequently, Bacon's theory managed to merge aspects of intromission with aspects of extramission. In order to make sight possible, the eye and the *species* of an object had to enter into a process of communication. To put it very crudely, vision in Bacon's world required the air to be full of little images moving towards the eye and being actively met rather than merely passively received by it (cf. Brown 2007, 47–68).

Furthermore, the material forms of medieval written textuality differed from modern ones in as much as books were aesthetic objects which frequently stressed various aspects of the visual to a degree that has become uncommon in modern books. The codex, i.e. the bound volume with turnable pages present-day Western human beings automatically identify as the material referent of the word 'book', was an invention of late antiquity and, in the West, superseded the scrolls that, in classical antiquity, had been the dominant physical bearers of texts. A codex had obvious advantages over a scroll, not least for the ease with which it made possible, through turning the pages, to move backwards and forwards through the text. In the Middle Ages, this potential was exploited enthusiastically through the development of complex systems of referencing and cross-referencing, of schemata and tables which could guide a reader through a text and its complicated arrangements. (Coloured) rubrics and capitalisation, marginal glosses, and marginal commentaries often set in blocks around an authoritative work turned the writing into a kind of visual map that made it easier to understand the structure and meaning of the text as a whole.

There is an interesting moment in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385) when, as a go-between for Troilus, Pandarus for the first time comes to visit his niece Criseyde. He enters a room of considerable public status, a paved parlour, and sees Criseyde and her ladies engaged in a communal reading of a book on the history of Thebes. Not knowing what it is that Criseyde and her company are reading, he asks, as an opening gambit, whether their reading matter dealt with love. Criseyde points to the book's "lettres rede" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, II, l. 103), thus referring to the coloured markers that help to visualise the work's structural make-up and explaining where

exactly in their reading of the narrative the ladies have been interrupted. Here, textuality is considered to be a highly visual form of experience.

Rubrics and coloured initials constitute only one aspect of the visual potential inherent in the medieval manuscript. Illumination is another aesthetic practice associated with the medieval codex. And here again we encounter forms of aesthetic experience that defy modern conventions. If, as W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, the “impulse to purify media” is “one of the central utopian gestures of Western modernity” (Mitchell 1994, 5), then the medieval manuscript is, indeed, ideally suited to provide a radical contrast to this specifically modern drive. In the illuminated manuscript, writing/text and visual imagery ineluctably merge, as letters, especially initials, turn into foliage or become part of a larger decorative design, frequently containing small images set into the letter itself. Or, in other cases, letters become entirely hidden in a whole page covered by an image, as to be witnessed, for instance, in the *Book of Kells* (c. 800), a famous Irish manuscript, where the lettering of the first two words of the Gospel of St. John (“*In principio*”) is so completely and seamlessly integrated into an elaborate decorative design that it is only from “-pio” onwards that the inexperienced viewer realises that she is actually dealing with script. From there, it is only a short step to the ‘carpet pages’ found in early medieval Christian, Jewish and Islamic manuscripts – pages containing no script at all, but covered entirely in highly elaborate geometrical designs. In a Christian context, the intricacy of these designs could be seen as an aid to meditation or to the rumination on scriptural texts that was typical of monastic theology and spirituality. Instances such as these show the image shedding all mimetic qualities and turning into an instrument of a particular spiritual epistemology that has little in common with modern notions either of the visual or the textual.

A final comment on the term ‘ekphrasis’ seems in order. In the ancient and medieval rhetorical tradition ‘ekphrasis’ referred to any detailed and, especially, to any vivid description, with *enargeia* as the key term to describe the quality of lifelikeness that was associated with a successful ekphrasis (cf. Webb 2009). But whereas in antiquity, lifelikeness referred to the illusionistic quality of the representation in both verbal descriptions and in images – the verbal representation’s ability to conjure images in the mind, the visual representation’s ability to appear as though it were real – in many medieval texts, the lifelikeness of a statue or a painting was about giving the impression of the image’s either being alive or coming to life. This lifelikeness applies less to the question of mimetic representation than to an artifact’s ability to magically or miraculously overcome its own nature as a mere material object. In the Middle Ages, an apparently representational problem thus turns into an epistemological or even a metaphysical one. Such a lifelikeness does not depend on the illusionistic quality of the work of art, it might just as well occur in an artifact marked by stark hieratic stylisation (cf. Camille 1991, 44–47).

### 3 The Politics of the Visual in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*

Whereas the previous remarks primarily stressed the degree to which medieval media-experience could considerably differ from its modern counterpart, the following discussion focuses on the way in which Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* negotiates the degree to which the visual and the verbal are separable or not. In other words, it is my aim to show how modernity's supposed desire to keep different media apart, a desire so perceptively dissected by W. J. T. Mitchell, already was a medieval concern, though not necessarily one that was dealt with in the same fashion as in the modern period. Hence, it is important that we understand the *Knight's Tale* not merely as a story about chivalric love and violence or about Boethian ethics and monarchical statecraft, but also as one about the way the visual and the verbal interact, intersect and, in so doing, become politically relevant. As I have already hinted at, the *Knight's Tale* seems deliberately to be mixing, on a verbal level, various medieval approaches to the visual. At the same time, the tale is also interested in the poetic competition between the visual and the verbal. Yet despite its evident fascination with the verbal representation of visual representation, the *Knight's Tale* should not simply be seen as a conventional exercise in the time-honoured game of the *paragone*, but rather as a shrewd meditation on the ideological impulses involved in the *paragone* itself.

The *Knight's Tale* is a chivalric romance with conspicuously epic features, though one could just as well call it a shortish epic with romance-like characteristics. In any case, it is an epic-cum-romance with a twist, since its ultimate solution is arrived at by narrative means more closely resembling those of the *fabliau*, i.e. the medieval comic tale, than those of the two genres the tale ostensibly appears to be combining (Vaszily 1997). In purely generic terms, the tale betrays a marked interest in mixing and merging aesthetic phenomena otherwise considered to be distinct in medieval literary culture. An original and highly self-conscious adaptation of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida* – which draws on Statius' epic *Thebaid* – the *Knight's Tale* relates the story of Palamon and Arcite, two Theban princes captive in Athens, who, after spotting from their dungeon window the Amazon princess Emilye, sister-in-law to their captor, Duke Theseus of Athens, fall in love with her. They each manage to escape in a different way, return to Athens and begin fighting a mortal duel for an Emilye entirely oblivious of their desires. After happening upon them by coincidence, Theseus arranges a grand tournament at which, aided by a hundred volunteers each, the princes once more, but this time publicly, struggle for Emilye in a Theatre specially built for that purpose. Before the battle, the princes and Emilye all pray to their respective tutelary deities, with Emilye unsuccessfully imploring the goddess Diana to let her remain unmarried. Arcite, who asked Mars to grant him victory, wins. As he approaches to claim his prize, his horse is startled by a fury sent from hell and throws him off. He breaks his neck, so that eventually his cousin Palamon, to whom Venus had promised

the hand of Emilye, is free to marry the princess a year after Arcite's death. This turn of events is the result of a squabble between Mars and Venus, who each promised to fulfil the wishes of their respective champions. In a typically fabliau-like manner, Saturn solves the conflict by strictly adhering to the exact wording of the prayers, rather than their implicit meaning. Since Arcite asked only for victory in battle, this is exactly what he gets, while Palamon begged for the woman and, consequently, wins her hand despite having been defeated.

The tale contains a number of important scenes which problematise the visual in one form or another, ekphrasis in Heffernan's sense being only one of them. I shall briefly discuss these scenes in the order they occur in the narrative, first the traditional variety of ekphrasis found in the *Knight's Tale*, i.e. Chaucer's description of the frescoes in the temples, then the voyeuristic scene in the temple of Diana, and finally the exotic pageant staged in the vast Theatre where the tournament is held before an audience that comprises the entire population of Athens.

Chaucer's adaptation of the *Teseida* is marked by a number of significant changes vis-à-vis his source, many of which matter with respect to visual issues. First, whereas Boccaccio's Theatre – a circular building resembling a Roman amphitheatre like the Coliseum – was already standing, Chaucer has Theseus specially erect it for the event. Second, while Boccaccio's temples are not related to the Theatre, in the *Knight's Tale* the temples to the three deities are built into the theatre. Marijane Osborn (2002) has shown that the Theatre's design has marked affinities to a medieval astrolabe, thus providing the tale with a visual context both astrological and astronomical. So, even as it purports to be an archaeologically consistent imitation of classical architecture, Chaucer's fictional building constitutes a grandiose scientific fantasy. At the same time, the Theatre is a complex space where different forms both of visual art – most importantly the ekphrases in the temples – and of the visual in general are represented. For instance, by vastly expanding the Theatre's size, Chaucer creates a sense of total vision: As all the world becomes a stage in Athens – after all the building's dimensions make it capable of holding some 200,000 spectators – the narrator stresses that all of the viewers are granted perfect vision since, due to the seats rising in concentric circles, no-one's view can be impeded. Everybody sees – but, just as important, everybody can be seen (cf. Johnston 2008, 100).

The temples themselves offer typical instances of *paragone*-like ekphrastic description. The temple of Mars, for instance, contains a fresco depicting a temple of Mars from the outside, but then the narrator takes the readers right into that temple, i.e. into an edifice described as a mere two-dimensional representation, logically possible to be viewed only from the outside. There, the narrator embarks on an elaborately detailed description of the frescoes *inside* that building. As the reader's gaze is thus impossibly directed inside the temple, the narrator himself, the Knight, seems to lose control of his narratorial power, referring to the images as though he had seen them himself – “there saugh I” (*Canterbury Tales*, Fragment I, l. 2011). On the one hand, this rhetorical tour-de-force invokes the traditions of ‘notional ekphrasis’ (cf.

Hollander 1995), the detailed poetic description of purely fictional works of art, a literary tradition beginning with the shield of Achilles in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*. In so doing, Chaucer appears to be participating in the aesthetic competition of the *paragone*, in this case the rivalry between visual and verbal art. And, as is to be expected of a poet, he seems to claim victory for verbal art in as much as he verbally depicts imagery which, in purely physical terms, no human eye would ever be capable of seeing: such as frescoes supposedly inside a building existing only as a two-dimensional painting.

In the temple of Diana, Chaucer takes his ekphrastic fantasies one step further by showing us an image of a woman in childbirth. In her seminal study on the visual object of desire in late medieval England, Sarah Stanbury discusses this final ekphrastic scene within the context of lifelikeness. This is a context that takes us close to the original classical meaning of the rhetorical term 'ekphrasis', i.e. a detailed description and the particular ideal of lifelikeness, of pictorial vividness, associated with this concept:

The image might be said to illustrate the drama of life-likeness, but also – in the picture of the woman trapped in childbirth – a terrible stasis, the place of the undead, the inability to bring to life. This final ekphrasis bespeaks a number of very different responses, highly ambivalent, toward images as it resolves on an image, lodged between life and death, of death-dealing nascent life. (Stanbury 2008, 105)

Part of the ambivalence Stanbury perceptively identifies here derives, I argue, not from the problem of lifelikeness as discussed in ancient and medieval rhetorical handbooks. Rather, Chaucer is ironically commenting on the problem of visual art's supposed inability to depict narrative. He is giving poetic expression to a binary the eighteenth-century German writer and literary theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would famously conceive of as the opposition of *Raumkunst*, the supposedly spatial and entirely non-narrative visual art, vs. *Zeitkunst*, i.e. verbal art defined as purely temporal. By trapping the pregnant woman and her scream in a never-ending static image, by forcing her to cry out forever, Chaucer seems not only to anticipate but already to question Lessing's concept of the 'pregnant moment'. The notion of the 'pregnant moment' was meant to conceptualise painting and sculpture's supposedly unsatisfying substitute for narrative temporality. According to Lessing, if visual art sought to achieve an effect similar to narrative, then, because of its fundamental limitations, it was forced to choose a particular point in the action so central to the narrative development that viewers could perfectly imagine what had gone before and what must follow after. In the labouring woman's ever-lasting pain one senses, I suggest, a sarcastic dismissal of the aesthetic essentialism inherent in paragonal discourse, an essentialism rendered all the more painful, but also more ridiculous by being associated with a victimised woman. Precisely because Chaucer's discussion of the relations between the verbal and the visual takes such an exaggerated and hauntingly cruel turn, because he so obviously seems not to be taking seriously the very

principles of the paragone, of which he appears to be producing a cynical caricature, do we realise that there is more to his exploration of the verbal and the visual than meets the eye. In the *Knight's Tale*, I argue, the aesthetic is always already embedded in questions of power, hence there is always a political angle to anything that may resemble an essentialising attempt to fix categorically what specific media are supposedly capable of and what not (cf. Johnston 2014, 188–192).

This becomes particularly clear in the *Knight's Tale's* second instance where Chaucer deals with the relations between word and image, between telling and seeing. This moment occurs when Emilye engages in the ritual ablutions she has to undergo before praying to Diana:

This Emelye, with herte debonaire  
 Hir body wessh with water of a welle.  
 But hou she dide hir ryte I dar nat telle,  
 But it be any thing in general;  
 And yet it were a game to heeren al.  
 To hym that meneth well it were no charge;  
 But it is good a man been at his large.  
 (*The Canterbury Tales*, Fragment I, ll. 2282–2288)

This is a highly complex situation, with the narrator deliberately turning the reader into a voyeur by making him conjure in his mind a pornographic fantasy which the narrator himself seemingly refrains from elaborating. An image is evoked in the mind's eye but not actually depicted. Supposedly for reasons of decorum, that image is relegated to the realm of that which had better not be described. Led on by a seemingly innocuous narrative voice, the audience is drawn step by step into a trap making them visualise a scene the Knight's paradoxically prurient modesty ostensibly denies them. In executing this narrative ploy, the narrator not only emphasises his privileged voyeuristic perspective, but also creates a stark contrast, first, to the sense of visual totality/total vision the amphitheatre seemed initially to be promising, and second, to the Knight's feigned narratorial ineptitude as noted by Lee Patterson (1991); an ineptitude which seemed to have reached its apogee in the temple ekphrases when the narrator appeared to be sucked into his own story. Far from being a bumbling amateur, when it comes to his strategies of visual entrapment, this narrator proves to be fully in control of the narrative (cf. Johnston 2008). And this has political consequences, since, as Lee Patterson famously demonstrated, the *Knight's Tale's* conspicuous narratorial naivety stands for the chivalric classes' ideologically-driven denial of subjectivity (cf. Patterson 1991).

There is one final scene in the *Knight's Tale* where Chaucer explores once more the relations of the verbal and the visual. This is shortly before the great tournament, when the two armies of volunteers arrive. They are led by Lygurge, King of Thrace, and Emetrius, King of India, respectively, and both monarchs are depicted in flamboyantly exotic costumes. This is the description of Lygurge:

Ther maistow seen, comynge with Palamoun,  
 Lygurge hymself, the grete kyng of Trace.  
 [...]

Ful hie upon a chaar of gold stood he,  
 With four white boles in the trays.  
 In-stede of cote-armure over his harnays,  
 With nayles yelewe and brighte as any gold,  
 He hadde a beres skyn, col-blak for old.  
 His longe heer was kembd bihynde his bak;  
 As any ravenes fethere it shoon for blak;  
 A wrethe of gold, arm-greet, of huge wighte,  
 Upon his hed, set ful of stones brighte,  
 Of fyne rubyes and of dyamauntz.  
 (*The Canterbury Tales*, Fragment I, ll. 2128–2129, ll. 2138–2144)

Emetrius is depicted in a very similar way:

With Arcita, in stories as men fynde,  
 The grete Emetreus, the kyng of Inde,  
 Upon a steede bay trapped in steel,  
 Covered in clooth of gold, dyapred weel,  
 Cam ridynge lyk the god of armes, Mars.  
 His cote-armure was clooth of Tars  
 Couched with perles white and rounde and grete;  
 His sadel was of brent gold newe ybete;  
 A mantelet upon his shulder hangynge,  
 Bret-ful of rubyes rede as fyr sparklynge;  
 His crise heer lyk rynges was yronne [...]

(*The Canterbury Tales*, Fragment I, ll. 2155–2165)

By introducing his description with the words “Ther maistow seen”, as though the readers themselves were actually present in the theatre, the narrator is repeating a performance we already witnessed in his ekphrastic depiction of the temple. While his description of the paintings ostentatiously collapses the distance between his own narratorial role and the tale he is telling, here we witness him taking a step further by seeking to erase the boundaries between the tale and the reader/listener. The reader/listener is addressed as though s/he, too, were a part of the fictional theatre’s audience, sitting on one of the circular tiers, excitedly looking forward to the battle. Once again, this can be seen as an effect of the description’s lifelikeness, of a visual impression represented through words so vivid that it erases the very boundaries between the narrative and the reader/listener. But here, as in the previous moments of heightened visuality and ekphrastic intensity, there is a political slant to what we are experiencing, and this political slant is reinforced through, amongst other things, a reference to an intermedial context not encountered before: that between words and sounds. For some fifteen lines at the beginning of the battle proper, Chaucer draws heavily on alliteration, thus producing not only an intensely evocative soundscape of