

*The Liminal Space of Intermediality*

One of the first thesis the reader encounters in the book *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* is that: “Intermediality leads into an arena and mental space that may be best described as *in-between realities*.”<sup>1</sup> On the next page we then read further: „intermedial researchers inhabit the *space of the in-between*. (...) Our thesis is that the intermedial is a space where the boundaries soften – and we are in-between and within a mixing of spaces, media and realities.”<sup>2</sup> What becomes clear from these two quotations is that if one would like to grasp *intermediality*, it is necessary to locate the intersection, the point where two or more media meet, exchange, converge, and transform each other. Since the process of intermedial dialogue involves a shift in perception, what has to be conceptualized at the same time is a theory of reception that is able to make connections across disciplines, artistic practices and different concepts. This can be done by emphasizing the relationship between the body and screens and interfaces that seem to menace its materiality and liveness. Within the live/mediated debate that has occupied (and is still occupying) much space of contemporary performance studies, the *volatile body* has become the ultimate battlefield. Can there be a performance event without the live, physical body in front of the audience? How does technology effect and affect the flesh? And, finally, is there, and where should we draw a line between the human and nonhuman?

As a methodology concerned with the actual experience of the perceiving subject, phenomenology takes the body and its relations with the external world as the starting point. According to Merleau-Ponty: “Our body is not in space like other things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like hand to an instrument, and when we

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<sup>1</sup> Freda Chapple/Chiel Kattenbelt, *Key issues in intermediality in theatre and performance*, in: Freda Chapple/Chiel Kattenbelt (Ed.), *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2006, pp. 11.

<sup>2</sup> F. Chapple/C. Kattenbelt, *ibid*, pp. 12.

wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the body is the condition of the access and conception of space. Only through the *corporeal schema* it is possible for a human subject to locate him/her self in space. A fundamental feature of a large number of intermedial art works is that exactly this corporeal schema has been subverted and turned upside down. One illustration that could demonstrate this subversion is Bruce Nauman’s 1970 work entitled *Live-Taped Video Corridor*. In her book on installation art, Claire Bishop describes the work: “Two video monitors are installed at the far end of a long corridor; the top is linked to a camera positioned high on the wall at the corridor’s entrance; the lower monitor plays a pre-recorded tape of an empty corridor. (...) The closer you get to the monitor, the smaller your image appears on screen, while the more you try to center your image on the screen, the further away from the monitor you are required to stand. At no point you are allowed to feel ‘centered’ and in control.”<sup>4</sup> What seems to be the decisive moment in Nauman’s work is exactly the point where the subject becomes spatially confused and disoriented. The gap between the experiencing body and its screened double, situates the viewer in an in-between space which requires a performativ decision. In her book on television, new media and cyber culture, Margaret Morse argued that this type of work opens: “liminal spaces, sacred places of social and personal transformation”.<sup>5</sup>

In the discussion on intermediality, Christopher B. Balme structures his argument around the notion of transformation and writes that theater’s most fundamental property is: “its ability to effect a *transformation of perception*.”<sup>6</sup> The process of transformation that is at heart of intermedial strategies affirms something that could be best described as difference and alterity. Establishing a dialogue across various artistic practices and media, intermedial projects operate with differences and create a field where they become obvious. It surely is not a coincidence that much of phenomenological theory has been written by female writers like: Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray, Susan Kozel, Bernadette Wegenstein and others. What they all share, some sort of a common denominator is a

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963, pp. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art*, London: Tate Publishing, 2003, pp. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998, pp. 157.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher B. Balme, *Audio theatre: the meditzation of theatrical space*, in: Chapple/Chiel Kattenbelt, *Ibid*, pp. 117.

need to somehow bridge the gap between the binary oppositions that had dominated western philosophy and theory: soul/body, male/female, time/space, inside/outside, private/public etc. For the subject we are interested in, we shall now focus on a book by Susan Kozel entitled *Closer*, where she offers a phenomenological analysis of a few intermedial projects. What is at the core of her interest is an encounter between different new media devices and the human body. She writes: “This dimension of lived experience is brought into sharp relief when the body of the performer is split, transformed, multiplied by motion capture systems and visualization techniques. When I encounter my digital self I discover that it is not simply me. (...) The figure with which I perform is always at the same time both of my body and another body; it manages to be this because of the way I perceive the world dynamically while I am enmeshed within the world.”<sup>7</sup> Understood as a dynamic exchange and transposition between live and digital bodies, intercorporeality can be seen as a fundamental quality of intermedial aesthetics.

Due to the fact that intercorporeality, as the transformative power of intermedial performance, can reconfigure the relation between the audience and the performers, we might perceive it in a light of – what Victor Turner has called – the condition of the *betwixt and between*. Such a condition implies that the persons involved in a performance event are: “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”<sup>8</sup> As an example of the anti-structure that occasionally occurs in performance events, we perhaps could think of *The Living Theatre* and their 1968 performance *Paradise Now*, which caused a huge controversy and even lead to the imprisonment of the troupe members in Brazil. The significance of this performance was in the fact that it radically altered the relationship between the audience and performers, creating an almost sacred atmosphere where borders between art, religion and politics were ultimately dissolved. Establishing a new approach within the discourse of theatre studies, an approach devoted to the understanding of the transformative possibility of performance, Erika Fischer-Lichte focuses on the notion of the liminal: “As our cursory examination revealed, theatre performances are not only always staged but are also principally capable of triggering liminal experiences, even if

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Kozel, *Closer*, Cambridge-Massachusetts-London: The MIT Press, 2007, pp. 239

<sup>8</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-structure*. New York-London: Routledge, 1969, pp. 95.

the experiences afforded and methods used differ. In the same way that the *mise en scène* aims at reenchanting the world, aesthetic experience as liminal experience strives to transform the performance's participants. Transformation thus constitutes a fundamental category of the aesthetics of the performative."<sup>9</sup>

In both examples (Bruce Nauman's installation and The Living Theatre performance event) discussed above, the role of the body is a primary one. What is of crucial importance is that the audience is invited to leave aside their (in classical theatre and visual arts usually) passive role and establish an active relation/conversation with the art work. Claire Bishop describes this spectatorship as the *activated spectatorship*, which has important political implications: "It is conspicuous that the drive towards activating the viewer (so that we are surrounded and given a role within the work, as opposed to 'just looking at' painting or sculpture) becomes over time increasingly equated with the desire for political action. Recent critics and artist writing about installation art have suggested that the viewer's active presence within the work is more political an ethical in implication than when viewing more traditional types of art."<sup>10</sup> Within such a shift where the viewer becomes an active agent and the art work is turned into an arena where relevant political, ethical, social and ideological questions can be discussed, what seems to be of great importance is the issue of reciprocity and alterity, because ethics and politics can, in fact, be seen as embodied in the relation between the "I" and the "Other". On another level, the relation between the "I" and the "Other" is always a question of the border. For Mieke Wagner it is precisely this *phenomenological interplay*, border and media crossing, that is at the origins of intermediality: "Intermediality dwells on the margins between the look and the gaze and becomes perceivable *through the challenging of the other*. The tension between the look and the gaze sets the body as a medial figure in motion and so negates any fixing of an essential corporeality. (...) Crucially, the phenomenological perspective includes also *the spectator as seeing and being seen body*."

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<sup>9</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (trans.Saskya Iris Jain), London-New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 195.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Bishop, *Ibid.*, pp. 102.

This is the point where intermediality and phenomenology meet and generate new understandings.”<sup>11</sup>

Caught in a dynamic interaction of images and living bodies, the postmodern viewer doesn't any longer resemble the immobilized cave dweller described by Plato in his famous myth. Instead of being fixed on a seat, as it was the case in the tradition of classical theatre with the convention of the “fourth wall” or in the cinema, the audience can now witness the artistic event on their own skin. According to Jacques Rancière the vital political moment in theatre is the play between distance and proximity. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* he writes: “Politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigm as the relationship between the stage and the audience, as meaning produced by the actor's body, as games of proximity and distance.”<sup>12</sup> As we have shown, one of the significant features of intermedial art works is that they not only transform established artistic norms and genres, but also the relation between the viewer and the performer or the art object (video, internet or installation piece). What emerges in such projects is a specific kind of potentiality where bodies, images, the viewer and the performer are in a dynamic state of reciprocity and exchange. Illustrating his thesis of – what he calls the *metamorphic image* – with the practice of installation art, Rancière argues that: “Installation art thus brings into play the metamorphic, unstable nature of images. (...) They are interrupted, fragmented, reconstituted by a poetics of witticism that seeks to establish new differences of potentiality between these unstable elements.”<sup>13</sup> Within a decentred structure, where borders are blurring and media are blending, the idea of the liminal seems to offer a frame where it is possible to situate the nomadic movements immanent to intermediality. At the same time, liminality can be seen as the point where phenomenology can introduce new understanding of the ambiguity between the flesh and technology, between the self and the other. Finally, such a progress would be able to move future examinations beyond the dualistic impasse and into the potential space of the *in-between*.

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<sup>11</sup> Meike Wagner, *Of other bodies: the intermedial gaze in theatre*, in: Chapple/Chiel Kattenbelt, *Ibid*, pp. 131.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London-New York: Continuum, 2004, pp. 17.

<sup>13</sup> J. Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (Trans. Gregory Elliott), London-New York: Verso, 2007, pp. 26.