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Intermediality, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy

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Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 11
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Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,
Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>

Abstract: In their article "Intermediality, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy," Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetaert discuss how the notion of intermediality challenges the institutions that traditionally "mediate" culture and they discuss implications for pedagogy. First, they focus on how the museum as an institution is questioned and problematized by describing it as a "medium" that is increasingly influenced by cultural and technological developments. Second, they focus on the implications of new material culture and intermedial practice and how this requires new perspectives on pedagogy. Rutten and Soetaert elaborate on previous work on the curriculum as a "contact zone" (Pratt) by focusing on the rhetorical nature of curricula and by introducing (new) rhetoric as a theoretical and conceptual framework for discussing the relationship between intermediality, culture, and pedagogy.

Kris RUTTEN and Ronald SOETAERT

Intermediality, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy

The objective of the thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice* of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* as stated in the call for papers of the issue is to publish new work about how "intermediality influences the negotiation of culture and education (in theory and application), and how, in turn, cultural and educational practices shape the use of media and their social significance." In this article, we discuss how the notion of intermediality challenges institutions that traditionally "mediate" culture and we introduce the field of rhetoric as a frame of reference for exploring the social and educational significance of new media.

During the second half of the twentieth century we have been confronted with different but related "turns" in the human and social sciences: linguistic, cultural, anthropological/ethnographic, visual, interpretive, semiotic, narrative, rhetorical, etc. All these turns emphasize that "there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture" (Geertz 49) and that there is no such thing as culture independent of language. The importance of signs and symbols in our interpretations of reality is emphasized and, more specifically, the cultural construction of meaning both through language and narratives. From this perspective, the focus shifts to the understanding of humans as "symbol-using" (Burke, *Language* 16), "story telling" (MacIntyre 201) animals, and "living in a world of signs" (Smith i). For Clifford Geertz this implies: "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (5). These webs of significance are increasingly part of a digital and globalized network and this has important consequences for our interpretive analyses of meaning-making processes. Thus we postulate that the above-mentioned "turns" need to be reconsidered in relation to current developments in new media. Mikko Lehtonen comments that in the study of language and culture there has been relatively little attention to the fact that "the past and present of contemporary culture and media are indeed part and parcel of multimodal and intermedial culture and media" (71). Not only has the (digital) processing of information become an important "communicative vehicle" of culture today, "technological applications and intermediality play an important role in developing educational and cultural policies and practices; expanding the stock of shared heritage while maintaining cultural diversity and the multiplicities of identity formation" (Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela 40). We postulate further that there is a need to study and assess critically how these developments change traditional institutions such as schools, libraries, and museums. There is a strong connection between the advent of postmodernism and larger social and cultural developments: postmodernism moved away from master narratives (i.e., Lyotard) and this has important implications for traditional institutions where these master narratives are/were conserved. It is no coincidence that these developments are also related to the emergence of a discipline such as cultural studies that deflects the attention away from a focus on high culture to a focus on different and contextualized cultures (on the relevance of the comparative and contextual for "comparative cultural studies" and intermediality, see Tötösy de Zepetnek, "From Comparative," "The New Humanities," *Comparative Literature*). One of the most important changes is that traditional institutions are confronted with new forms of institutionalization that need to be more fit to a society that is increasingly confronted with intermediality and the crossing of different cultural boundaries.

In what follows, we discuss how the museum as an institution is perceived and problematized today and what these developments imply for culture and pedagogy in general. To understand how the museum is transformed, we describe it as a "medium" that is inevitably influenced by cultural and technological developments (see Soetaert). Kieran Egan describes revolutions in education as consequences of the development of a specific technology. Indeed, the educational system for an oral culture is different from an educational system in a writing culture and, similarly, new media and intermediality influence literacy, culture, and education. New media developments influence inevitably what and how we learn and also influence the institutions that organize "education" in the broadest sense of the word.

Changes in media have always caused debate about how culture in general and participation in culture in particular is "threatened" according to some or "liberated" according to others. In debates about the added value of technology we often find a tension: by introducing a new medium a culture changes and at the same time also the values of that culture change. From an educational perspective, new material culture and intermedial practice influence how we think about literacy in general and cultural literacy in particular. What "counts" as cultural literacy has always been related to developments in technology and media. For example, the invention of the technology of the printing press (and the book as a medium) created a specific literary culture with its institutions focusing on the printed word (see, e.g., Dubois). Moreover, by focusing on the use of "standard" language and the creation of a literary canon, this literary culture has been important in the construction and "imagination" of nineteenth-century nation-states (see, e.g., Anderson; Rutten, Mottart, Soetaert). It is clear that the current shift from a culture of books to a digital culture influences our institutions which function as intermediaries of culture.

The traditional museum emerged in the nineteenth century in a specific timeframe reflected in its architecture: museums were conceived as stately buildings with a design that represent a structured and stately collection. Similar to how the printing of books created the need for anthologies and a literary canon, museums also created collections for the "imagination" of national histories and identities. However, their role in the construction of "imagined communities" (Anderson) is confronted today with a crisis of legitimization. Traditionally, museums present and represent a specific culture, they frame a national identity and related values, and they present what is "worth" of being exhibited (see, e.g., Blau; Garoian; *Museum Research*; Young and Trapani). However, museums are confronted with an identity crisis today because the traditional role as "memory" of the nation has been challenged by the question of "whose" memory needs to be conserved (see Young and Trapani). Moreover, there has been an increased recognition that museums are artificial institutions and that exhibiting objects of art is not "natural" but is part of a specific historical construction (see Soetaert). The concept of having a painting in a frame on a wall was part and parcel of a historically constructed art practice and thus museums have become loci of ways of seeing and specific ways of looking at art. The twentieth-century avant-garde already questioned this institutional perspective: for example, Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades urged us to recognize that once an object is placed in the "scene" of a museum, its significance inevitably changes. Similarly, the norms for distinguishing art from other material culture have been challenged: "the paradigms of value, quality and historicity can no longer be charted thus it is hard to predict what will remain and what will be representative in art" (Holtappels 133). The search for the value of art is replaced by a search for social functions within specific networks and specific frames. Thus, the different functions of museums are questioned, oscillating between conservation and study on the one hand and explanation and dialogue on the other hand. Owing to the critical turn in (comparative) cultural studies, the mere "exhibiting" and "musealization" of artifacts in a museum has been critiqued (see Pinxten). The museum can no longer be seen as a permanent archive where visitors find a place for "sharing a collective model of their own private minds" (De Kerckhove 126); instead, it needs to be reconfigured as a temporary node in a digitized and globalized network. The traditional concept of a museum is changing because of new technologies and new modes of the production and distribution of knowledge and information: the introduction of databases, (active) archives, the introduction of hypertext, hypermedia, virtual reality, and other technologies as subjects of and material for artistic creation.

In *The Electronic Word* Richard Lanham points to the relation between contemporary culture and its different developments and suggests that the postmodern condition is marked by digital culture. What happens if a text appears on the digital screen? "First, the digital text becomes unfixed and interactive. The reader can change it and become a writer at the same time. The center of Western culture since the Renaissance … the fixed, authoritative text, simply explodes in the ether" (Lanham, *Electronic Word* 31). The renaissance ideal of one perspective is exploded both in art and in theory as in our conceptions of reality. From a pedagogical perspective, it is important to take these developments into account, because they problematize the foundational status of knowledge: "if we accept that the world is essentially the world-as-interpreted, it is a small step to the realization that there are usually many and various interpretations" (Smith i). Stepping away from foundational claims about

reality caused the advent of many "plural" terms: we are confronted with a variety of languages, vocabularies, discourses, literacies, cultures, rhetorics, etc. And these different terms are seen as ever more interconnected: "intermediality, intertextuality, and related cultural terms such as hybridization, border-crossing, interculturalism and collaborative learning pervade contemporary critical media and culture theory and practice" (Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela 40). This raises the question "as to whether there is anything that can be agreed upon in this arguably postfoundational age" (Stables 2). This theoretical and philosophical question has important practical implications: "What should we be teaching — when there is no 'we'?" (Graff 149). In consequence, the agenda of education can be formulated this way: "the we, the what, the how and certainly the why" (Soetaert and Mottart 53).

Intermedial pedagogy challenges us to question the traditional institutions and domains of knowledge and such a "pedagogy needs to address how the issue of authority can be linked to democratic processes in the classroom that do not promote pedagogical terrorism and yet still offer representations, histories, and experiences that allow students to critically address the construction of their own subjectivities as they simultaneously engage in an ongoing process negotiation between the self and the other" (Giroux 112). Everyone who is involved in education, is confronted with the conditions under which learning, information transfer, communication, and interaction occur and what this means for a generation "that is experiencing life in a way that is vastly different from the representations offered in modernist versions of schooling" (Giroux 70). Young people today create new "affinity spaces" (Gee 294) and "borderland discourses" and create new social networks: "Children are at the epicenter of the information revolution, ground zero of the digital world" (Jon Katz qtd. in Sefton-Green 1). They are living in a world without certainties, in a plurality of worlds, and languages and cultures that ask for many different roles. A so-called "border youth" (Giroux 93) is manifesting itself online where different forms of narrative, interaction, and communication are happening and that are moving away from traditional institutions and practices. A new culture is created with new frames of reference and the cultural center has shifted to a myriad of different centers. Anyone who is involved in culture and education today cannot avoid this new situation, "a narrative space that is pluralized and fluid" (Giroux 94). One of the most important consequences of a new material culture and intermedial practice for education is that it has caused a shift in the relation between youth and adults, between students and teachers. In education we are confronted with a generation of digital natives, children who are born and raised in a digital world for whom new media are as "natural" as books, films, and television were for their parents. And teachers are confronted with the consequences of digitization in their daily practice. These developments change the roles of the "mediators" of knowledge and information. The role of the teacher as "sage on the stage" needs to be changed by the "guide on the side" or the role of the coach. This latter perspective implies that the role of the teacher as intellectual can be compared to the teacher as ethnographer or anthropologist: "The educator as anthropologist must work to understand which cultural materials are relevant to intellectual development. Then he or she needs to understand which trends are taking place in our culture. Meaningful intervention must take the form of working with these trends" (Papert 32).

This changing relation between teacher and learner confronts us with the emergence of new loci and environments for collaborative learning and confronts us with the design of these new spaces. Design-based teaching will become a central concept in education in the same way that education has become a central concept in the world of design (see Soetaert). The New London Group has introduced the teacher as a designer of multimodal environments and thus the "teacher as anthropologist" should also become the "teacher as designer": "indeterminacy rather than order should become the guiding principle of a pedagogy in which multiple views, possibilities, and differences are opened up as part of an attempt to read the future contingently rather than from the perspective of a master narrative that assumes rather than problematizes specific notions of work, progress and agency" (Giroux 102).

We now turn to rhetoric as a general frame of reference for such a pedagogy that takes indeterminacy as its guiding principle. From a rhetorical perspective, "intermediality can be defined as the ability to read and write critically across varied symbol systems and across various disciplines and scholarly as well as general discursive practices" (Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela 38). These developments orient education "to developing increased meta-awareness of dominant cultural practic-

es within our societies and of the cultural practices of others" (Stables 245). But, how do we create such a meta-awareness of language, new media, and culture and what should a postmodern and intermedial curriculum look like? Patricia Bizell argues for a reconsideration of the humanities in general and language- and literature education in particular by crossing traditional boundaries: "not on their essential nature, whatever that may be, but rather on how they might, not fit together exactly, but come into productive dialogue with one another" (165). Bizell focuses on Mary-Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone": "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34).

In our previous work we discuss what the idea of the contact zone can imply for education (see Soetaert; Soetaert and Mottart; Soetaert, Mottart, Verdoodt). Here, we elaborate on the rhetorical nature of the curriculum as a contact zone. The curriculum as a contact zone implies a shift from theory to narratives, from a master narrative to multiple narratives. Pratt describes this relocation as "exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms; the redemption of the oral; ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories); ways to move into and through rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all-important concept of cultural mediation" (33). In a contact zone students "examine texts which foreground and critique different cultural groups' attitudes toward a common issue" (Van Slyck 155). In other words, the contact zone serves as a forum for dialogue between different discourses. The concept of the contact zone is similar to Homi Bhaba's "Third Space": a space for the "enunciation of cultural difference" and that is not based on the "exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (38). In turn, Bizzell's concept of the contact zone in the teaching of literature challenges the traditional focus on chronology and linearity: "studying texts as they respond to contact zone conditions is studying them rhetorically, studying them as efforts of rhetoric" (168). This re-conceptualization "involves bringing texts and perspectives together to organize productive dialogue so that students learn from understanding another person's point of view and come to 'see' their culture not only from their own perspectives but also from the perspective of outsiders" (Soetaert, Mottart, Verdoodt 161).

This educational perspective can be related to the classical rhetorical *paideia* which taught how to revise not only speeches and texts but also "attitudes and human relationships … [*paideia* as an educational system] taught a way to hold knowledge: tentatively, aware of your arguments and of the arguments that opposed your own. Aware, above all, that under different circumstances you might be arguing the opposite case" (Lanham, *Economics* 26). It needs to be emphasized, however, that this "revisionist thinking is not relativist thinking … it provides an opposite method, a way to hold absolute truths in your mind without compromising them or imposing them in other people" (Lanham, *Economics* 264). The plea for a revival of the rhetorical *paideia* can be related to the expectations of a new economy and to the related expectations of a new material culture and intermedial practice. In *The Economics of Attention*, Lanham describes the new economy that defies standard economic analysis not only as an information-based economy but as an "attention economy" (8). If we describe economics as the study of the allocation of scarce resources, we should become aware that the concept "information economy" is problematic because the growing availability of information on a variety of media platforms creates new scarcity. The argument is that we live in an age in which attention is the commodity in short supply. In all sectors of society — from commercial enterprises to public institutions — we compete for attention: "in an information economy, the real scarce commodity will always be human attention and … attracting that attention will be the necessary precondition of social change. And the real source of wealth" (Lanham, *Economics* 46). Furthermore, it is a central contention that specifically the (new) social media change the texture and flow of attention. Therefore, we have to focus on how a generation of digital natives changes patterns of attention in more multifocal and multimodal ways: in the new economy of attention the manipulation of attention is a basic skill. This, of course, also implies a critical engagement with, as well as on behalf of, these "attention structures":

"in a world where stuff, and what we think about stuff are often at odds" (Lanham, *Economics* 26), education should make you comfortable with a bi-stable grasp of the world. And this world is indeed confronted with different political, religious, and economical differences.

One way to achieve such a bi-stable perspective is by introducing art in education as a way for studying the symbols, language, and media with which we create meaning. From the perspective of an economics of attention, artists have always instructed us how to pay attention to the world: "artists are supposed to be, as our epigraph from Kenneth Burke reminds us, prophets of things to come" (Lanham, *Economics* 63). Hence our proposition that we should focus on artists who instruct us how to problematize and thematize information society. Art, inevitably, is becoming intermedial and can therefore be seen as a new space for communication. To understand what is happening in our digitized culture Derrick De Kerkchove urges to focus on artistic developments: "What is happening at the edge of technology through the study of the arts" (xxvii). Of course, the relationship between art and technology was emphasized much earlier by Marshall McLuhan: "if men were able to be convinced that art is precise advance knowledge of how to cope with the psychic and social consequences of the next technology, would they all become artists? Or would they begin a careful translation of new art forms into social navigation charts? I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the new blow from our own extended faculties" (McLuhan qtd. in De Kerckhove xxvii). Indeed, "the mind of the artist is always the point of maximal sensitivity and resourcefulness in exposing altered realities in the common culture" (McLuhan qtd. in De Kerckhove xxvii). The concept of intermediality helps us to reconsider the relationship between art, culture, and pedagogy and this can be related to what new material culture and intermedial practice imply for education. We are witnessing the emergence of new spaces: "a writing space" or a "society of text" which become a "border zone" or a "contact zone." A culture of intermediality creates new frameworks for thinking about space and time and this changes the relationship between the different institutions that are intermediaries for knowledge and culture such as schools and museums. Intermediality should not be seen as a panacea for achieving all of the above-mentioned challenges and changes, but the cultural changes we are faced with are linked unavoidably to a new material culture.

These issues raise questions for the future of the museum. The way we see it, the museum needs to reconsider its role as the "gatekeeper" to material culture. The role of the museum as a collective memory changes because memory is no longer static and closed but dynamic and bi-stable. New technologies have become important for the conservation of cultural memory in the digital realm. The museum can no longer deal only with the past but ought also focus on what we can learn for the present: the culture of the museum needs to be extended as "distributor of simulations and the purveyor of information" (De Kerckhove 133). The traditional architecture of museums does not invite visitors to question the presented objects or "interact" with them. Therefore, a new material culture and intermedial practice also have important consequences for the "design" of museums. Interactivity should be taken into account when we conceptualize new museums for artists who create "a social space within the artwork where spectators meet and have social interactions which are embedded in the artwork and modify it, the artwork becoming a conceptually structural scenography for social exchanges" (Shaw 148). Indeed, "all museums … ought to be cultural amplifiers which give a spin to the visiting present" (De Kerckhove 130). Moreover, museums need to become "cultural amplifiers" in a postmodern, intercultural and "intermedial" society in which developments in culture and education are high on the agenda. The digital realm creates a new environment for both public and specialized debates and thus for organizing debates (and perception), we need to take into account that the traditional frames of reference are mutating.

By relating these developments to questions in education we claim that new rhetoric is an important frame of reference for exploring the social and educational significance of new media for traditional institutions such as schools and museums. The type of rhetorical training that has survived in our time "usually justifies itself by arguing that you need to learn methods of argument to defend yourself against your opponents" (Lanham, *Economics* 26). However, the kind of revisionist thinking that can be arrived at through a broad perspective on rhetoric "allows you to defend yourself against yourself, to cultivate an interior countercheck" (Lanham, *Economics* 26) because "the more odious you

might find that opposing position, the more you should seek to know what would make someone hold such an opinion. And the more you should examine the grounds on which you hold your own. This self-examination is, and ought to be, a humbling experience" (Lanham, *Economics* 26). Richard Rorty stated that taking such a plural perspective is more than "mere" relativism. Rorty describes a shift "against theory and toward narrative" (xvi) and narratives are broadly seen as film, documentary, comics, etc. At the same time, we should also question the role of, and borders between different institutions: schools, libraries, and museums. This is an important question that should challenge modern institutions and museums can be laboratories for this debate. Indeed, the museum should also become a "contact zone".

From a related perspective, comparative cultural studies urge us to contextualize our own culture, to engage in meaningful debates with other cultures and this can be related to the notion of intermediality. From an educational perspective, we argue that we should make our students aware of the fact that culture, education, and new media are cultural constructions and that they are neither natural nor neutral. In turn, this implies that we stimulate students and teachers to take a critical stance. Through reflection, they "denaturalize" the obvious. In New Literacy Studies it is suggested that teachers should learn to "denaturalize and make strange what they have learned and mastered" (New London Group 86). We can link this argument with our suggestion to introduce art as research , as well as practice in education because the rhetorical turn also stresses that if the world and our identity are not constant, we are obliged to "rediscribe" or "restory" it constantly (Rorty). Of course, this justification for the utility of art is not original as such. Indeed, as Lanham states, "to take only one example, a body of critical thinking in the twentieth century argued that art's job was to defamiliarize experience, to make it new by making us see it in a new way" (*Economics* 165). Rhetoric offers us the tools for such defamiliarization and new ways of seeing. It is important to learn to live with these many perspectives, or from an educational perspective, to become "symbol-wise" (see Burke, "Linguistic Approaches"; Enoch; Rutten). And this can be the added value of introducing rhetoric as a general perspective for educational theory, research, and practice.

In conclusion, in the digital age the perception, understanding, practice, as well as the study of culture are changing. The concomitant impact of intermediality requires new perspectives and practices for pedagogy. By introducing the curriculum as a contact zone and by focusing on the rhetorical nature of such a curriculum, we propose rhetoric as a theoretical and conceptual framework for research, as well as practice. Our example of cultural practice, i.e., the museum —a locus of material culture as memory and that has along cultural, social, and pedagogical functions — must follow suit.

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