

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 21 (2008)

Artikel: Introduction
Autor: Heusser, Martin
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-130647>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Introduction

Does the medium influence the message and, if so, to what extent? What is the exact nature of the relationship between form and content? What happens in medial boundary-crossing? Is a picture indeed worth a thousand words? Although these and similar questions only recently began to be explored systematically in the name of “mediality” and “intermediality,” they have been attracting critical attention for literally more than two millennia.

Horace’s famous dictum “ut pictura poesis” (“as is painting so is poetry”), for instance, with its apparent emphasis on the similarities between painting and poetry, has fuelled discussion from classical antiquity to the present day. Closely related to it is the notion of the *paragone* – the Renaissance comparison between the visual arts and literature, famously treated by Leonardo – which eventually developed into an investigation of the possibilities and limitations of the various arts and their media. It is a discussion that is taken up again in the eighteenth century by Lessing, who forays into the topic of intermedial relations in his *Laocoon* and concludes confidently that poetry and painting are two different domains that should not be mixed: “It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter.” Barely a generation later, however, Blake brilliantly belies Lessing’s claim – not in theory but in practice – in his illuminated manuscripts.

With the advent of photography and film in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this discussion of intermedial relationships takes on a new and much broader dimension, leading Paul Valéry to point out prophetically that “[w]e must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.” Gradually, with the increasing importance of the press, motion pictures and radio, the mass-media establish themselves and the relationship between the medium and the message is explored once more against a different background. That the medium not only interacts with the message it conveys but actually very powerfully influences the pro-

duction and the interpretation of its content is discussed in depth in the early fifties by the Canadian communication theorist Harold Innis. More than a decade before the publication of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, in which McLuhan elaborates on his famous slogan "the medium is the message," Innis wonders whether new media will, in the long run, determine the quality of knowledge and ultimately bring about the birth of a "new civilization." Today, after the arrival of new channels of communication, notably the Internet, it appears that Innis was right on track with his pioneering study.

Reflecting the temporal and thematic variety of these discussions, the essays gathered in this volume explore a wide diversity of aspects of mediality ranging from Shakespeare to contemporary literature, and from the motif of the Arthurian Round Table to the treatment of a metafictional novel in cartoon form.

The opening essay, Werner Wolf's investigation of the role of mediality/intermediality in the field of literary studies, addresses a number of fundamental theoretical and methodological issues. Mediality and intermediality have become, as Wolf demonstrates, highly relevant concerns for both teaching and research in literature. Rather than being a threat to literary studies, mediality is a useful tool for the study of literary texts because it is ultimately an essential aspect of literature itself.

An assessment of the practical value of mediality and its relevance for the field of Shakespeare studies is offered by Lukas Erne. He shows, based on a close examination of the character of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, that one of the essential differences between the first and second quartos is medial in nature. Given that this is not at all an isolated case and that similar differences between the multiple versions of some of Shakespeare's plays can be found, Erne argues that Shakespeare knowingly wrote with two media in mind.

Performance and performativity are also a cardinal concern in Barbara Straumann's analysis of the literary treatment of the singer's voice and its medial aspects in Willa Cather's "The Song of the Lark." She pays particular attention to the means by which this voice is represented in the text – ultimately to the extent, as she argues, that it becomes a cipher for the American Dream.

Two contributions are concerned with the medial relationship between the written text and instances of visual representation. In the first, Michael Rösli uses Julio Cortázar's short story "Blow-Up" to document the way in which photography and literature meet and overlap in

the undercutting of their own signifying authority. Cortázar's complex narrative, Rösli claims, declares the death of the author almost a decade before it is declared by Roland Barthes.

The second of the two contributions is Matt Kimmich's study of the comic book version of Paul Auster's metafictional novel *City of Glass*, by David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik. As comics are inherently intermedial and naturally call attention to their own sign-character, they are, according to Kimmich, particularly suited to an adaptation of a text such as *City of Glass* that problematizes the relationship between signifier and signified.

Treating different literary genres (diaries and poetry) as different media, Florence Widmer-Schnyder reads Dorothy Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* against contemporary travel writing on Scotland, including poems by her own brother, William. She traces the effects of the influence of the text types on each other and shows how the resulting interferences serve to both appropriate and undermine the aesthetic agenda of the picturesque tradition.

Intermediality is used as a model to describe the basic structure and strategy of a typical New Historicist analysis in Ladina Bezzola's essay. Based on Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, with its anamorphic rendering of a skull, she argues that the often considerable shifts in position required from the reader of a New Historicist article are modeled on the very changes of perspective the viewer of the Holbein must adopt in order to "read" the picture correctly.

Finally, following the image of the Arthurian Round Table through different media, Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman trace the gradual domination of the visual over the discursive in twentieth-century political representation. Moreover, they investigate the way in which each of the media in question – literary text, painting, and motion picture – determines how the act of gazing orchestrates notions of nationalism and masculinity.

Martin Heusser, Zurich

