

# Introduction

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All through the 20th century, there have been rich and complex interchanges between aesthetic practices and media technologies. Along with the arrival of mass media, new technological forms of culture were gradually added to the old typologies of the arts. Photography, film, television, and video increasingly appeared in the curricula of art schools and were given separate departments in art museums. With the introduction of digital media technologies in the 1980s and 1990s, the means of production, storage, and distribution of mass media changed, and eventually, so did its uses. As artists adopted the technologies of mass media, the economy of fine art (like the economy of limited editions) was confronted with the logics of mass production and mass distribution. Thus, when visiting a contemporary art museum one might find, for example, such conceptually contradictory displays as “DVD, edition of 3” (see for instance Lev Manovich 2000). The increasing centrality of digital tools and technologies in all sorts of social practices has changed the media as we have known it. These social, cultural and technological changes in everyday life have also influenced artistic forms, as well as modes of imagination, expression, and critique.

In these complex interchanges between aesthetic practices and media technologies, *media aesthetics* has emerged as an interdisciplinary field of research between media studies and the aesthetic disciplines. This field grew out of earlier attempts at theorizing about the relations between aesthetics, technology and media, such as media philosophy (Friedrich Kittler), medium theory (Joshua Meyrowitz), mediology (Régis Debray) and critical theory (most notably Walter Benjamin), and is influenced by current, aesthetic theories of what has been termed “new media” (Mark Hansen) and “visual culture” (W.J.T. Mitchell). During the last decade, the word “media aesthetics” has been used as a label for advanced art or media productions (often with the notion “applied media aesthetics”),<sup>1</sup> and as an alternative marker for textual analysis and more generally for humanistic media studies. However, early examples of a more specific use of the term “media aesthetics” that are more in line with the current project can be found in the media philosophy of

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1 One of the most influential being Herb Zettl, *SIGHT SOUND MOTION: APPLIED MEDIA AESTHETICS*, Sixth Edition, 2010, describing major visual and auditive elements of television and film and presenting in-depth coverage on how they are creatively used.

Wolfgang Schirmacher (1991)<sup>2</sup>, and in attempts at preparing the ground for what was called “A New Media Aesthetics” (Tim Jackson 1998) or a “Post-Media Aesthetics” (Manovich 2000).<sup>3</sup> It is also interesting to note how the term has been used retrospectively for a collection of texts by Walter Benjamin published in 2002 with the title *Medienästhetische Schriften* (Media Aesthetic Writings).<sup>4</sup> This indicates the field of research on media aesthetics that we hope to identify and further develop with the contributions in this volume.

The *aesthetics* of media aesthetics is not viewed as a philosophy of art. Rather, aesthetics is understood as a theory of culturally and historically embedded sensation and perception, conceptually developed from the original Greek sense of the term, as *aisthesis* or sense perception. The human perceiver is considered as embedded in the sociocultural environment and interacts with it continuously in an engaged and multisensory fashion (see Berleant 2005). This general model of aesthetic engagement is equally applicable to works of art and popular culture, and to the built and natural environment. Hence, aesthetics is not confined here to a particular kind of object, like art. Neither is it characterized by the specific properties of the object of inquiry. Rather, the perspective by which the objects are approached defines it. The perspective incorporates the perceptual engagement described by Arnold Berleant as well as the influence of conceptual information and the ways in which conceptual knowledge may direct our perceptual scale and framing of the objects (see Carlson 2005). Aesthetics is seen as a critical reflection on cultural expressions, on technologies of the senses and on the experiences of everyday life. The studies of perception in this volume share an interest in the reciprocity between the senses and an ideal of a non-hierarchical view of sense perception. In contrast both to the separation of the senses in neuroscience and cognitive psychology – treating each sense as individually linked to one single physiological organ and one particular part of the brain<sup>5</sup> – and also to the ranking of the senses so common in philosophies of art, the media aesthetic perspectives

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2 In a paper called “Media Aesthetics in Europe”, given in Paris as early as in 1991, the German philosopher Wolfgang Schirmacher discusses what he considers to be the differences between European and American media aesthetics.

3 Note that these writings must be read more as attempts at an aesthetic for “new” media or for “post-media”, rather than a media aesthetics as such.

4 The Benjamin collection contains 51 of his essays, including “The Storyteller”, “The Telephone”, “On the Minute”, “Short History of Photography”, as well as “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”.

5 Research on brain plasticity and the recent development of the idea of neural reuse as a fundamental organizational principle of the brain (see the target article on the subject by Michael L. Anderson 2010) may be considered a parallel conceptual development in neuroscience.

presented here attempt to understand the complexity of sense perception and its embeddedness in the cultures and histories of technologies of mediation.

*Thinking Media Aesthetics* brings together contributions from different disciplines from both sides of the Atlantic and from several generations. It stages a conversation that introduces important questions, and ways of thinking about those questions, around basic concepts in the field, preeminently what we mean by the “medium” and “media” in the present, and how we might best go about studying these terms.

The media aesthetic program presented here will not reduce all the different media concepts to their least common denominators. Rather, we intend to clarify important conceptual tensions and present a collection of suggestions regarding the direction the discussions about the conception of medium and media should go. What is shared – initially and in a very basic fashion – is the wish to move beyond the idea of a medium as something rather fixed, like an object or apparatus, toward a concept of mediation as a process, as the performance of a task. The media aesthetic program presented here refocuses the study of medium from object-oriented questions like “what is film?” and “what is photography?” common in both communication studies and historical studies of the arts, to questions regarding social practices and experiences of media technologies. This implies a refocusing from ‘medium’ to ‘mediality’ or ‘mediation’.

The move from medium to mediation also represents a shift from medium and media as predefined objects of study: Taking a particular medium as a point of departure often involves a tendency to naturalize media. The idea, for example, that the distinction between art and documentary has vanished, is often based on such a naturalized conception of medium. However, using the same media technologies or expressive resources in different contexts does not make the aesthetic practices the same. Different contexts, discourses, spheres or cultural systems situate the practices differently.<sup>6</sup> Like any practice, aesthetic practices cannot be reduced to, or deduced from, the techniques used and the technologies in which they take part. The shift from medium to mediation does not only represent a shift in focus; it also represents a shift in perspective from medium as an object of study and media as collections of artifacts and technologies, to medium and media as concepts, ideas, models for understanding practices, articulations and experiences. Hence, a medium may be something other than what we – caught within the currents of the current examination of media – take it to be.

The shift from medium to mediation represents a shift from medium as a predefined object, to mediation as a complex perspective for understanding. Most basically, and in accordance with the fundamental insight from the linguistic turn

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6 See for example Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (1995 [1984]).

in the humanities during the 20th century, perception is understood as symbolically mediated by signs, rules, and norms (see Ricoeur 1990 p. 57). Language in the broad sense of the term, or symbolic systems and forms, constitute reality insofar as we would not even be able to recognize a particular object, situation or phenomenon as something particular without simultaneously recognizing that it is not everything else. In other words, a particular object, situation or phenomenon is defined as being a specific collection of characteristics that are themselves defined in certain ways, all of this within the symbolic systems of culture and history.

Secondly, following as a consequence of perception being symbolically mediated, there is an internal relation between a social practice and the changing circumstances under which it is performed and experienced. Translated into the language of mediation, there is an internal relation between a medium and what it mediates: Each is what it is by means of the other. They mutually refer to each other and make a unity without being identical (Østerberg 1988). Just as there is no single ‘sociality’ out there that can simply be mediated by artistic activity (see Blom in this volume), there is no ‘content’ that can be passed on, understood or experienced without a complex set of cultural and historical competences. The media aesthetic program presented here underscores the importance of studying the fundamental relationality of the irreducible role of mediation in the history of human being (see also Mitchell and Hansen 2010, p. xii).

In the media aesthetic field, mediation represents not just one perspective on understanding, but a set of perspectives, which I will return to below. What they share – in addition to the very basic principles of mediation stressed above – is a move beyond the paradigm of communication and the idea that a medium first and foremost should be seen as a vehicle of communication. This does not imply that communication cannot be studied from a media aesthetic perspective. Rather, it suggests that the conceptions of medium and mediation should not be seen as dependent upon a theory of communication. This reflects a more general wish to open up the conceptions of meaning and sensation so often subordinated to a perspective of communication between senders and receivers in studies of media.

The shift from media as a collection of artifacts to mediation as a perspective for understanding indicates the importance of the theoretical dimension of the media aesthetic field. All the essays in this collection contribute to this thinking of and about media aesthetics, some very explicitly, some more inherently in their analysis. They bring forth questions from an encounter with concrete phenomena or empirical situations, yet the answers to these questions have theoretical relevance beyond the concrete analysis.

In other words, the objects encountered in this book are studied both in their own right and as objects of theoretical reflection. Some of them may be characterized as theoretical objects, be they concepts, like that of theory (Rodowick), of medium of

reflection (Weber), of sociality (Blom) or photography (my contribution), or specific conceptual relations (like for instance sound-image relations in Daniels' and Naumann's chapter). Some of the objects encountered may be considered art or perceived as media aesthetic practices (inside or outside the art discourses as such), while others again may normally be thought of first and foremost as commercial objects, like for instance the movie trailer (discussed in Doane's contribution). In this volume, they are considered as technological arrangements, as objects of experience and as opportunities to think through and rethink basic ideas in the field.

Further, while the questions posed in the different essays come from problems and sticking points in the contemporary moment, the answers to these questions emerge within an historical framework. Hence, the volume is opposed to recent tendencies – on the part of critics and also of a culture oriented to the present and very near future – to segregate contemporary media experience from the history of media.

A proper understanding of and appreciation for media aesthetics would thus introduce a shift from the static concept of medium/media to the dynamic process of mediation; it would move beyond the paradigm of communication to mediation as a perspective of understanding, and it would combine theoretical argument with analysis of individual artworks or media phenomena. Finally, it would insist on the continuity, rooted in the long history of aesthetics in its more general sense, between so-called old and new media.

Rather than present a unified theoretical front or create an inevitable historical trajectory, this book will affirm that media aesthetics represents an interdisciplinary *arena* more than a unified field of research on media and aesthetics. It does not belong to any one discipline, but is rather a set of perspectives that may inscribe themselves into a very great number of disciplines and has done so most notably in art history, media studies, film studies, and to a certain extent, comparative literature and humanistic informatics, as well.

As inscribed (rather than inserted) into different disciplines, these media aesthetics perspectives are influenced by the acknowledged discourses in and about these disciplines. The media aesthetics perspectives therefore vary partly by the disciplinary discourses from which they arise. The term 'medium' may illustrate the historical difference between two disciplinary discourses of importance in the field of media aesthetics.

Being one of the key concepts in modern art, "the traditional media" referred to "painting, sculpture, drawing, architecture" (see Krauss 1999, p. 296). As an even more basic term in media and communication studies, "the traditional media" refers to television, radio, and newspapers, and sometimes also film.<sup>7</sup> The

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7 We also find the concept of medium sketched here with reference to the discourse of mass communication in everyday language.

difference between these two basic terms is not just a question of culturally separate objects of reference. It is a conceptual discrepancy between what we may call a modernist art discourse and a discourse of mass communication: In the art discourse in question, “a medium” was seen as a set of conventions derived from “the material conditions” of a given “technical support”, conventions out of which to develop a form of “expressiveness” (Krauss 1999, p. 296). In the tradition of mass communication research, on the other hand, “medium” was treated as a channel of communication, a technical apparatus for the mass distribution of “content” or “messages” (Fiske 1982, ch.1; O’Sullivan 1983, p. 134).

This conceptual distinction between the two discourses contains differences in importance and in function. As a key concept in modern art, distinctive media laid the foundations on which the typology of artistic practices was based. This media-based typology of art structured (and to a certain extent still structures) the organization of museums, art schools, funding agencies and other cultural institutions. In the discourse of mass communication on the other hand, the medium was just one concept among many subordinated to a model of mass communication. The differentiation of media was based on several dimensions, such as forms of distribution, structures of ownership, economic terms, sociologies of readers, and public concerns about unwanted moral effects on children (see for instance McQuail 1987). The medium was less in focus as an expressive resource. This stands in stark contrast to the discourse of modern art.

This discursive discrepancy has some very basic consequences that can be illustrated with the different concepts of *medium specificity*. Without going into detail on this highly sophisticated issue, let me just roughly indicate that in the discourse of mass communication, medium specificity is a *descriptive* term referring to the technical and communicative capacities of one medium compared to the technical and communicative resources that can be shared by most media. In the discourse of modernist art, on the other hand, medium specificity often worked as a *normative term* referring to an ideal of artistic purification and specialization that harks back to the theories of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and that found its most radical expression in modernist painting and sculpture. Conceptual divergences like these must be discovered and clarified if we want to understand what is at stake in interdisciplinary discussions, especially if we have the ambition to theoretically develop the field further.

Conceptually unrecognized assumptions continue to influence the discourses even after the historical circumstances that produced them may seem to have changed. The ideas of a *post-medium situation* may briefly illustrate this, as these ideas directly follow the conceptual disparity outlined above. In response to the growing integration of information, of communication networks, of media platforms and of different markets, the simple model of communication between

senders and receivers based on an idea of separate media must give in. In media studies, this is often referred to as “the culture of convergence” and is characterized as “a post-medium situation”. While this “post-medium situation” challenges the basic conceptions in the models of mass communication and therefore the very premises for a mass communication discourse as such, “a post-medium situation” has a different meaning and impact in the discourse of fine art.

The modernist ideal of artistic purification and specialization belongs to an historical past along with the idea that art forms are dependent on specific, physical materials. With site-specific happenings, installations, conceptual art and other artistic forms, the typology of arts based on the materials used challenged the concept of medium in the arts long before digital technologies became available in the 1980s and 1990s. In the discourse of fine art, therefore, “the post-medium situation” has several layers of meaning, referring to the critique of normative aesthetics of artistic purification and specialization, to the death of art objects as defining art forms, as well as to technical convergence as part of “the culture of convergence” discussed above.

These conceptual disparities (medium, medium specificity, post-medium situation) are parts of different historically important discourses that, in various ways, influence the disciplines that media aesthetic perspectives inscribe themselves into, that is, the participants in the media aesthetic arena. The *discourse of mass communication* has been of major importance in media studies, particularly in the United States, Britain and Scandinavia, as well as most countries on the European continent. The medium theories from what has been called the Toronto School in Canada and the interest in medium theory in Germany as well may be seen as exceptions to this dominance of mass communication in media studies (see Wintrop-Young 2010, pp. 187-188). The discourse of mass communication has also influenced a range of other disciplines, such as sociology and pedagogy, and a variety of fields of research have submitted to the paradigm of communication. The *discourse of fine art* has been of major importance in art criticism and art history and all disciplines concerning the arts. However, the conceptions of medium and medium specificity discussed above did not quite find their way into the modern discourses of literary scholars (see Mitchell 2005, p. 205; Hayles 2004). Despite being a discipline primarily occupied with the study of works of art, the technical and material *medium* of this verbal art of literature (print, paper, book) has hardly (and until recently) been in focus since Gutenberg’s mechanical printing press. The critical discussions of the concept of the *work* of art in comparative literature during the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by Roland Barthes’ essay “From Work to Text” (1971), had more to do with “The Death of the Author” (see Barthes’ 1977 essay) than with the death of the art object as such. Roland Barthes’ *écriture*, Jacques Derrida’s *grammatology* and other conceptions of

writing may seem to complicate this rather simplified sketch. But even if this interest in writing represents an interest in the mediality of literature, it seems fair to say that studies in comparative literature until recently – and generally speaking – have been less occupied with the medium of the art works of study (see also Mitchell 2005, p. 205). Hence, comparative literature has been less influenced by the critique of the concept of the art medium and therefore has also been less absorbed with the idea of a post-medium situation.

In film studies, however, the conceptions of medium have been influenced by the discourses of both modern art and mass communication discussed above. Throughout its history, film has struggled to become accepted as art and as a field of academic research, and scholars have defined film both as a specific art form (in accordance with the discourse of art) and a medium of communication, the institutional result being that film has been included in art schools, departments of literature and rhetoric, and departments of media in addition to having departments of its own. Conceptually, the result has sometimes been rather confusing, as can be exemplified by the influential film philosopher Noël Carroll's criticism of medium specificity in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (1996). In Carroll's presentation, we may recognize the normative, modernist aesthetics from the discourse of art mentioned above, which here is termed "the doctrine of medium specificity" (p. xv). However, the object of critique is primarily what he (synonymously) calls "medium essentialism" which dominates classical film theory, according to Carroll (see p. xv and pp. 49-50). This medium essentialism is explained as a striving toward defining one, single essence of a particular "medium, and a keystone, and, with them, the promise of a unified theory" (p. xv). Hence, without taking a stand for or against Carroll's critique of this "medium essentialism," his argument seems to confuse attempts to define the essence of a medium with a normative aesthetics of modernist art. This may illustrate how the discourse of film studies, for better and for worse, has historically been influenced by the medium conceptions from both the discourse of art and that of mass communication.

The field of film studies is also strongly influenced by a third discourse, which I will introduce here because it has had an important influence on several of the disciplines in the media aesthetic field: *the textual discourse*. In contrast to the two other discourses mentioned above, this discourse of textuality historically did not include a concept of medium, at least not in the sense that we find in the discourses of modernist art and of mass communication discussed above. The discourse of textuality must be seen as a part of the "linguistic turn" in the humanities. The most important characteristic of the "linguistic turn" during the 20th century is the focusing of the relationship between philosophy and language. Although several of the very different intellectual movements associated with the "linguistic turn" have discussed language as a medium of thought, the con-

cept of medium has been quite different from the ideas of “technical support” in the discourse of art and the “channel of communication” in the discourse of mass communication. The models of the text were developed according to an ideal of semantic autonomy independent not only of author and reader, but also of medium (see for example Barthes 1966). This reflects the earlier attitude of Russian formalism (and its attempt to describe poetry in mechanistic and then organic terms) and of New Criticism, a formalist current of literary theory that dominated Anglo-American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century and emphasized close reading (particularly of poetry) to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. However, with the development of French structuralism of the 1960s and the ensuing movement of poststructuralism in the 1970s, we may speak of a textual paradigm for understanding across disciplines (social anthropology, psychoanalysis, the history of ideas, literary theory), media (visual, auditive), different semiotic systems (like images, language, fashion), and from top to bottom in the hierarchy of cultural expressions.

The structuralist impact on the humanities and social sciences during the 1960s, followed by the theoretical shift “from work to text” as well as the “death of the author” made it easier to transfer theories from literary theory and linguistics into film studies and eventually also into humanistic media studies, disciplines in which both the concepts of “work” and of “author” made little or no sense (except for the so-called art film and the auteur theory of the 1950s and 1960s). Equally important for this theoretical inheritance – although less recognized – is the ideal of media-neutral theories, that is, models of texts, of narratives, of sense making, considered neutral to expressive resources, semiotic differences and materialities of mediation.

For film studies, the textual paradigm offered useful models of texts and narrative discourses that could be adopted, adapted, and adjusted to the ideas of an artistic medium as well as of a technical apparatus for the communication of narratives and the maintenance of ideology. The interest in film adaptations of literary works among literary scholars also contributed to the discussions of film as a distinct medium with a complex set of expressive resources and genre conventions. Even the influence from literary theories of the modernist novel on film studies seems to have stimulated a high level of reflection about basic distinctions between different media (here, the entertainment film and the novel). This appears most clearly in theories of film narratives in the U.S. (like for instance Chatman 1978). Here, we may recognize a model of communication which is less a result of theoretical inheritance from American media studies (and its theories of mass communication) than a result of the institutional and theoretical influences from the field of comparative literature in the U.S., where film studies

are often placed in English or Rhetoric departments. In some of these departments, narrative theory has been strongly influenced by what we may call the rhetorical tradition from Wayne C. Booth (1961), which important theoreticians like Seymour Chatman developed into a theory of narrative communication (1978). Chatman's model may illustrate how the field of film studies has been developed between disciplines and between discourses from different disciplines. While introducing French theories of narrative to American readers and incorporating these theories (i.e. Barthes' structuralist model from 1966 and the notion of 'the implied reader' (*Der Implizite Leser*) coined by the German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser in 1972) into his own theories (influenced by Booth, among others), Chatman also discusses differences between film and (the paper-based) novel in order to develop a model of narrative that is sensitive to the medium in question. This may represent a basic trend in the history of film studies. In sum, the influence from both the discourse of art and the discourse of mass communication, as well as from the discourse of textuality and its ideals of medium neutrality, seem to have contributed to the development of film studies as an aesthetically, technically and rhetorically rich and theoretically complex discipline. To a certain extent, one may be tempted to say that the field of film studies has been a media aesthetic discipline from the start.

The influence of the discourse of textuality on humanistic media studies is quite a different story. Compared to film studies, it is a young discipline (some may even argue it isn't really a discipline). Like film studies, it adopted the concepts of text and narrative, reading and interpretation, as well as theories of meaning (semiotics, hermeneutics, rhetoric) from comparative literature. Due to a rather abstract and easily expandable concept of text, theories have been adopted and applied to the study of televised news, advertising, movie posters and record covers. In contrast to film studies, however, this theoretical inheritance did not involve the same amount of conceptual work. Historically, the discourse of mass communication employs a rather verbally-oriented, almost abstract conception of meaning. To the extent that Shannon and Weaver's theory of information has influenced the concept of communication, the question of abstraction (and immateriality) in communication may be even more radical, because this model was not about communicating significance, but simply about optimizing the ratio of signal-to-noise in message transmission. Conceived in this way, information was independent of context, a probability function with no dimensions, no materiality, and no necessary connection with meaning (see Hayles 1999, p. 52). The introduction of theories from a discipline historically devoted to verbal texts, reading and writing (i.e. comparative literature), was not met with much conceptual resistance. The level of abstraction associated with concepts like "content" and "message" (central to the discourse of mass communication) easily fit the methods of

hermeneutics or close reading, as did the tendency to assimilate technical and material phenomena into linguistic models of literary theory (important features in the discourse of textuality). Either combined with, or dominated by, a model of mass communication, the textual model contributed to the development of media studies as a discipline belonging not only to the social sciences, but also to the humanities.<sup>8</sup> However, the influence of the discourse of textuality on media studies did not bring along with it a proper theory of aesthetics. Just like the development of cultural studies (in media studies as well as in sociology, ethnography, etc.), the unfolding of a humanistic dimension to media studies extended the scope of legitimate objects of study to include so-called low culture and popular aesthetics. But these objects were studied as *textual* expressions in social and cultural contexts, and considered important as objects of study due to the way people used them (producing identity) or were abused by them (ideologically). Only to a very limited extent did it involve aesthetic concepts like sensing and perceptual experience.

The fourth and final discourse of key importance to the outline of media aesthetics can be referred to as *the historical discourse*. This is a discourse of basic importance for all the disciplines involved as far as they are humanistic disciplines. They all have an acute awareness of the historical dimension of their subject of study. They all present the histories of their academic disciplines as part of their curricula and consider their conception of theory as historically constituted (as Rodowick demonstrates in an exemplary way in this volume). It may nevertheless be wise to be aware of the important difference between historiographic disciplines like art history and departments devoted to the history of literature on the one hand, and on the other, a sociologically-influenced discipline mainly occupied with modern mass communication like media studies. In media studies, all media are digital media in the sense that digital technology is involved in one or more stages in the process of production and distribution. New media are no more than 20 years old and no medium is more than 200 years old. In art history, there still exists artistic media with little or no binary code involved. The media of media art goes back at least one hundred years and old media goes back more than 2000 years. In art history, it is hard to neglect the historicity of the world of art and media. Admittedly, the field of media studies does count in historiography, especially the histories of media institutions and of media technologies. It seems nevertheless reasonable to suggest that the tendency to overestimate the sociocultural and theoretical importance of *new* technologies, followed by a rather simplistic treatment of the “old” or “traditional” that we

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8 Historically, the other major contribution to the development of media studies as a humanistic discipline is historiography, which I will come back to below.

witnessed in this field particularly during the 1990s, can at least partly be explained by the relatively low degree of historical awareness in the field. In comparison, the introduction of digital technologies in the production, distribution and reception of *film* seems to have stirred up previous discussions (among film scholars) of the relations between the technical apparatus, matters of style (like for instance realism) and spectatorship, as well as revitalizing an interest in early cinema. The rather strong historical dimension of film studies (concerning the history of the cinematic institution, of film technologies, of film genres and styles, as well as the interest in filmography) seems to imply a certain attentiveness towards historicizing and relativizing the specificity of digital media technology. Briefly put, the influence from the discourse of historicity varies considerably among the disciplines involved in the field of media aesthetics.

Although these four discourses – the discourse of modern art, of mass communication, of textuality, and of historicity – do not form an exhaustive list, their various degrees and forms of influence on the disciplines involved in the media aesthetic arena must be taken into account if we are to understand and develop the field further. The media aesthetic arena may be seen as a meeting place for different conceptual cultures. It represents a plurality of contexts for the questions posed. If we are to understand the general questions to which media aesthetics seems to be an answer, the specific questions must be identified as embedded in different disciplines influenced by diverse ways of thinking. Based on the short outline of important discourses briefly indicated above that have influenced the disciplines in various ways, let me suggest – as a rule of thumb – that a media aesthetic that arises from a history strongly influenced by the discourse of modern art may endeavor to produce a critical thinking about the politics of the society of modern media. A media aesthetic critically employing a textual paradigm, on the other hand, may advocate concepts like medium and experience. Moreover, a culture that has put aesthetics in the shade and has focused on mass communication may stimulate a media aesthetic interest in a conception of perception and materiality. Of course, neither disciplines nor discourses in and about them determine the questions posed and the interests involved in the development of media aesthetics. The differences in questions between the disciplines involved may nevertheless cast light on some of the challenging and thought-provoking distinctions in the field.

The different questions, interests and approaches in the media aesthetic field explore the complexity of the concept of ‘the media’, referring both to the plural of *medium* and to a collective singular noun, a class considered as one unit: the media. As W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen suggest in their introduction to *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, media in this latter sense “also names a technical form or formal technics, indeed a general mediality that is constitutive for the human as a ‘biotechnical’ form of life” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, p. ix).

This conception of the media is somehow tied to the advent of mass media in general and inexpensive newspapers and magazines in particular (see Chun and Keenan 2006, p. 3), forms through which “information itself is mediated”, as Mitchell and Hansen put it (p. xi). Media in this sense of the term is regarded as “an environment for the living” and “an ontological condition of humanization – the constitutive operation of exteriorization and invention” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, p. xiii). We may call this the *environmental* or *ecological* (in a non-normative sense) interest in media aesthetics.

In the media aesthetic program presented here, the media are social practices or assemblages of materials and perspectives. They are also very specific technological arrangements that can be identified as such through the way they activate experiences with different media technologies. In this second conception of media, particular objects, situations or phenomena are studied as complex expressions of mediation and are considered as tools for the investigation of cultural preconditions and theoretical assumptions. The plurality of media is of interest not so much as a collection of narrowly technical entities or systems (cf Mitchell and Hansen, p. xiii), but rather as a reservoir of different technical premises, semiotic systems, modes, genres, and stylistic conventions, as well as of scholarly interests, academic discourses and kinds of knowledge. As N. Katherine Hayles and others have demonstrated, comparing media can make us recognize theoretical premises that are otherwise hard to see. Hayles refers to the field of comparative literature as she argues that “Literary criticism and theory are shot through with unrecognized assumptions specific to print” (Hayles 2004, p. 68). Years of interest in film adaptation among literary scholars has stimulated theoretical work on the distinctions between verbal language versus film language, but they have shown only a very modest concern for the conception of the material differences between the printed page and the projected image in the experience and interpretation of the work. As also noted by Hayles, “Only now, as the new medium of electronic textuality vibrantly asserts its presence, are these [unrecognized] assumptions [specific to print] clearly coming into view” (Hayles 2004, p. 68).<sup>9</sup> The media aesthetic interest in the plurality of media critically discusses how some sensuous experiences seem neglected while others are seen as pertinent in certain social and cultural situations. We may call this the *rhetorical* or *phenomenological* interest in media aesthetics.

These two interests in the media should not be considered schools or traditions. The media aesthetic field is too young and too heterogeneous, both in and across disciplines, to identify specific long-standing practices. It is nevertheless

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9 One important result of this is the growing interest in studies in book history. See for instance Finkelstein and McCleery (2005).

important to note that the two interests indicated above, although not mutually exclusive, represent slightly different sets of questions, refer to diverse lines of thought and seem to develop their vocabularies in somewhat disparate directions.

The *environmental* or *ecological* interest in media aesthetics envisions media as an encompassing system and environment as combined with a local system that points to the specificities of particular “ecosystems” inside and outside of it, in order to understand what goes on between and in the meeting of these different systems (see Mitchell 2005, p. 213; Heise 2002, p. 165). We may identify this interest in Susanne Østby Sæther’s contributions to this volume, as well as in the chapters by Samuel Weber and Ina Blom. The two latter contributions represent what may be considered a particular interest in the politics of the senses in media aesthetics as they address situations where human perception is the object of political and economic exploitation. Historically, Walter Benjamin’s work as well as that of the Frankfurt school are particularly important predecessors for this interest in media aesthetics. These perspectives have been further developed by Michel Foucault (biopolitics), Gilles Deleuze (on film) and Deleuze and Felix Guattari (social machines) and Friedrich Kittler (*Aufschreibesysteme*, a notion that tentatively can be translated as ‘notation systems’).<sup>10</sup> Important names for this line of thought are Jonathan Crary, W.J.T. Mitchell, Miriam Hansen, Samuel Weber, Rosalind Krauss, and Alexander Galloway, as well as Mary Ann Doane and D.N. Rodowick.

The *rhetorical* or *phenomenological* interest in media aesthetics should historically be seen in relation to a reorientation toward rhetoric in humanistic disciplines (particularly since the 1960s)<sup>11</sup> and the renewed interest in the materiality of mediation in the 1990s (most notably from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer). Historically, Walter Benjamin’s work has been of major importance here, as well. Perspectives from what is often referred to as the Toronto School of Communication (originating in the works of Eric A. Havelock and Harold Innis in the 1930s, and growing into prominence with the contributions of Edmund Snow Carpenter, Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan) have also been significant.<sup>12</sup> Equally important is the revitalization of philosophical hermeneutics

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10 Kittler seems to have borrowed this notion, *Aufschreibesysteme*, from Daniel Paul Schreiber’s *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* (1903). The notation system, writing board, or “writing down system,” as Schreiber called it, became the title of Kittler’s book, translated into English as *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (see Van Der Haven 2009, p. 93).

11 Arguably, there is a complex relation between rhetoric and aesthetics through history. See for instance, John Poulakos’ (2007) evocative discussion of the impact of rhetoric on the aesthetics of the eighteenth century.

12 The importance of McLuhan is also pertinent in current media ecology. See for instance The Media Ecology Association, or the worldwide celebrations of McLuhan (commemorating “100 years of McLuhan”) in 2011.

(Gadamer, Ricoeur) and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard), particularly in studies of film and photography during the 1990s and the growing interest in the philosophy of science and technology (N. Katherine Hayles, Don Ihde) in literature, media studies and humanistic informatics. Mary Ann Doane and D.N. Rodowick are important names here as well, along with Mark B.N. Hansen, Noël Carroll and Mieke Bal. The phenomenology of Roland Barthes, as well as his desire to give voice to “the third meaning” (1987 [1970]) or “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” as he puts it in “The Grain of the Voice” (1987 [1972], p. 188) are also of relevance here. In Arild Fetveit’s contribution to this volume, this grain of the voice is studied as an aesthetic ideal. The rhetorical and phenomenological interest in media aesthetics is also of basic significance in my essay (referring to Ricoeur, Ihde, Barthes) as well as the contribution from Eivind Røssaak (inspired by Hansen).

These two interests in media aesthetics are equally important, both historically and theoretically. They should both be considered humanistic in a very basic sense. They are – to coin a phrase from Mitchell and Hansen – occupied with the “existential stakes” of how the “operations of mediation tie in with the form of life that is the human” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, p. xiv). They both represent a basic interest in human experience. This interest is explored through concrete studies of cultural expressions or situations. In several of the contributions to this volume, the cultural expressions or situations analyzed can be considered works of art. The main reason for this is methodological. Artworks often seem to alert us to the functioning of social practices or assemblages of materials and perspectives, even as they isolate and fixate on highly specific or peculiar media functions. This is not only because (as Kittler once claimed) the artistic media of any given society are less formal than its systems of knowledge, and therefore present their regulatory operations in a crude shape, so to speak. It may also be because (as Tom Gunning has suggested) modern artworks tend to actively defamiliarize technology, reintroducing sensual awareness toward aesthetic relations that are neutralized by everyday familiarity. Aesthetic practices like these – be they so-called high or low culture, inside or outside the discourses of art as such — may be considered media aesthetic practices. However, because media aesthetics concerns the character of experience itself and is not confined to a particular kind of aesthetic object, it is not restricted to art objects or media aesthetic practices, but can involve any object or practice whatsoever. The collection of investigations into the character of experience in the field of media aesthetics springs out of a diversity of disciplines influenced by a complex set of historically important discourses. This intricate interdisciplinarity can be observed, not only between the contributions to this volume, but also within the different essays. It seems therefore fair to say that this is not a collection of essays from different

disciplines, but is rather a range of interdisciplinary approaches toward questions of interest in several disciplines and in the field of media aesthetics in general. Several of the scholars come from interdisciplinary schools of research or have an academic history from different disciplines. Some of these scholars approach objects normally associated with disciplines other than their own. The result is a dense network of concepts and ideas ranging across the volume. With the interdisciplinarity of the media aesthetic program presented here, this volume intends to provide the research with a productive distance to the disciplines involved and a reservoir of different attitudes and kinds of knowledge relevant for the research issues in question.

In the first chapter of this volume *Samuel Weber* turns to Walter Benjamin and his way of thinking and rethinking the conditions of human perception and sensation in the realm of media technologies and information machineries. Weber demonstrates how one of the things that makes the writings of Benjamin so intriguing is the way his thoughts on what was then considered the new media emerge from a very distinctive interpretation of the old. According to Weber, the most elaborately articulated instance of this emergence can be found in an early text, namely, Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." Although Benjamin has become one of the most cited critics in recent decades, his dissertation has not attracted the same attention, even in literary-critical circles. And where his dissertation has been discussed, one aspect of it has been almost entirely ignored. In this dissertation, Benjamin introduces a term that is not to be found in any of the writers he is discussing: 'medium of reflection.' This term, Weber argues, anticipates Benjamin's later interest in the new media, by retracing a movement that leads from Romantic 'reflection' in Schlegel and others, to an awareness of 'repetition' as exemplified in the poet Hölderlin's practice and in his notion of 'sobriety.'

In the second chapter, *Ina Blom* presents a critique of the idea that the proliferation of so-called social, relational or participatory practices in contemporary art attests to a 'postmedial' condition in art production. She argues that the widely-used distinction between artistic medium specificity (modernist formalism) and post-medium art productions has severe limitations when it comes to understanding the social thinking generated through artistic productions. These terms and distinctions all essentially depart from a preoccupation with the definition of the work of art, its ontological and phenomenological aspects, and terms of interpretation. This preoccupation tends, explicitly or implicitly, to frame all discussions of artists said to work in and with the social, whether they are lauded for activist or interventionist acuity or accused of bad immediacy or a return to naïve realism. The medium status of the artwork is the key frame of reference, while the question of social contents, strategies or operations emerges as a secondary frame,

arrived at as if by special effort: art and sociality are, in other words, pitted against one another as incompatible entities. In order to present a counter-model, Blom engages in an analysis of Liam Gillick's *Literally No Place: Communes, Bars and Greenrooms* – a multifarious art project that includes sculptural and architectural constructions, fictional personae, theoretical and political literature, audiences and institutions. This work challenges us to think differently, not only about the notion of artistic media or mediation, but – just as significantly – about the concept of 'the social' itself. In Gillick's work, 'the social' – defined as instances where the sense of collective being is up for questioning or negotiation – is something that emerges with the mediation of a connection between previously separate objects.

Mary Ann Doane presents us with yet another challenge. Through careful discussions of several works and aesthetic phenomena, she develops a theoretical argument concerning the spatialization of time. Theorists and philosophers from Henri Bergson to Fredric Jameson have argued that the process of spatializing time is characteristic of modernity and/or postmodernity, producing a loss in which the experience of time as duration, flow, and historicity is replaced by the quantification or mathematization of time and hence, its transformation into a static, spatial, divisible entity. Doane asks what this can mean in relation to a time-based medium such as the cinema? By concentrating on the figure of the filmic ellipsis (and its exaggeration in the movie trailer) and an analysis of work in or about cinema by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Tsai Ming-Liang, and Jim Campbell, this third chapter explores a crisis in and around the commodification of time in a culture characterized by intensive and extensive mediation.

From spatialization of time, we move on to what Eivind Røssaak calls 'slow space'. Through discussions of works by Bill Viola, Douglas Gordon, Tobias Rehberger and Olafur Eliasson, Røssaak argues that the moving image has turned the museum space into an experimental 'slow space' conditioned by techniques of delay or barely moving light particles where the human confronts mediated time or 'technical moments' through a specific choreography of experience. "Technology *appears* as an 'invisible' force (movement, spacings, 'real-time') co-determining the aesthetic experience," he writes. The concept of editing in architectural space emerges as a key metaphor, and the 'slow space' presents a particularly good starting point for a renewed analysis of the interaction between the spectator and the image in the museum. The author demonstrates how the slow spaces produced by these art installations render the interaction between the human and the non-human, or what Bernard Stiegler has called 'technogenesis', *visible* and tangible in new ways. Røssaak's approach in this fourth chapter describes a widespread tendency present in the museum, as well as a new tendency in a certain theoretical development within phenomenology and media philosophy.

The time-space dimension and the spectatorial position are also a subject in the fifth chapter. Discussing the spectatorial position established in artist Douglas Gordon's video work *through a looking glass*, based on the so-called mirror scene from Martin Scorsese's neo-noir film *Taxi Driver*, *Susanne Østby Sæther* proposes that Gordon's work stages key conditions of contemporary media spectatorship. The work articulates a fundamental tension between image, vision and narrative, on the one hand, and embodiment, activation and spatial extension, on the other. This tension is seen to negotiate current spectatorial experiences of handling and controlling media technology on an everyday basis, while simultaneously being fully enveloped by the mediascape these different media comprise. In order to acknowledge the complexity of the spectatorships, offered in recent video and post-cinematic work, the author argues that we have to look both at the precise ways in which its various medial elements are internally organized, yet also acknowledge that each and every one of them points out of the gallery space and into the mediascape from which they are culled and of which they continue to be constituent parts. As the discussion of *through a looking glass* suggests, this allows us to perceive more precisely the complex ways in which the media apparatus and subjective experience of it are connected, as explored in recent video and post-cinematic art.

In this sixth chapter of this book, I look into Alice Miceli's video installation *88 from 14.000* (2004), a 56-minute video presenting 88 b&w portrait photographs of victims from one of Pol Pot's most infamous death camps – the S-21 at Tuol Sleng – on a screen of falling sand. What has this video installation to say about photography? Inspired by contemporary phenomenology, I discuss how the technical arrangement of Miceli's work, especially the way it reuses and remediates existing photographic material, changes its purpose and context, and may activate rather specific media technological experiences. Through critical analysis, I explore multiple dimensions of photography that are normally not considered in the same theoretical discourses. In this chapter, I attempt to contribute to a reflection on conceptions of medium and mediality, as well as to further develop a phenomenologically-inspired media aesthetic tool for the investigation of cultural preconditions and theoretical assumptions.

Arguably, a screen of falling sand is an unusual medium for presenting photographs. Being uncommon and both visually and auditively rather noisy, a screen of falling sand is hard to ignore. The *noise* of the medium is the subject of *Arild Fetveit's* chapter. In this seventh chapter, Fetveit investigates the contemporary aesthetics of noise – prevalent in the auditive as well as in the visual realm. The author asks what this aesthetics of noise has to offer as a means for expression in the auditive as compared to the visual realm, and how can its present surge be explained. He argues that the advent of digital media is a key factor both in

grounding the expressive potential opened up by this aesthetics of noise as well as in its evolution in the first place. The chapter ends by considering why it is that the current aesthetics of noise affects the visual as much as the auditive field. By re-actualizing Walter Benjamin's essay on art in the age of its technological reproducibility, Fetveit attempts to localize the structural kinship between the visual and auditive which contributes to making the aesthetics of noise so pervasive. This move aims to clarify that medial noise is grounded in mechanical recording and the parallel, but different, complications to which it is heir in the auditive as well as in the visual realm.

In the eighth chapter, *Dieter Daniels* and *Sandra Naumann* attempt to trace 150 years of image-sound relations in the interaction between art, technology, and perception. Today, the connection between the visual and acoustic worlds is so close and diverse that it is difficult to imagine how separate these areas were before the arrival of the media age. It was not until the nineteenth century that audiovisual media enabled the time stream of sounds to become storable and that images 'learned to walk,' so that today, we perceive their synthesis almost as a matter of course. Thus from the outset, Daniels and Naumann argue, the question arises in all media forms of art as to the relation between image and sound, namely in terms of both technology as well as aesthetics. However, the interfacing of image and sound made possible by media technology not only corresponds with a logic of machines but also with the fundamental need for synesthesia embedded in human culture. Tracing the development of image-sound relations through the long series of historic predecessors to today's everyday audiovisual world, Daniels and Naumann attempt to examine the close relationship between the innovation of technical processes and new forms of artistic expression.

In the final chapter of this volume, *D. N. Rodowick* critically examines the history of the concept of theory in general, and the history of film theory in particular, to argue that theory has no stable or invariable sense in the present, nor can its meanings for us now be anchored in a unique origin in the near or distant past. If the currency of theory is to be revalued conceptually for the present, we need a history that attends critically to the competing sites and contexts of its provenance in the past, and which can evaluate the forces that shape its diverse and often contradictory conditions of emergence and its distributions as genres of discourse. Hence, Rodowick strongly underlines the theoretical ambition of the current volume, to think and rethink the intersection between aesthetics and mediality as a question of thinking and perception, history and technology.

This program for thinking of and about media aesthetics investigates the field between media studies and the aesthetic disciplines that have witnessed very creative and fruitful growth and interaction during the last decade. In this volume, we attempt to consolidate these diverse developments into a focused interdisciplinary

program that combines theoretical argumentation with exemplification and analysis of individual artworks and media phenomena. A key strategy has been to think the fields of film and media theory and art history together, not by harmonizing the disciplinary differences but by sharpening the conflicts in and across the heterogeneous field of media aesthetics. In this way, we will be able to see more clearly what is at stake and take some steps further toward developing a critical media aesthetics.

We hope that the questions raised here will push the field forward.

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