From in- between to node: shifiting perceptions of intermediality

My contribution to this panel started from a personal observation with regard to the two books our working group has published. Whereas in the first book the notion of the “in-between” appeared to be both central to the book and our thinking about intermediality in performance, this concept was somewhat pushed to the background in our second book in which we approached intermediality in performance through the prism of contemporary digital culture.

Although nowhere explicit it seemed to me that with our shift in focus and our attempt to investigate media relationships in theatre through concepts such as networks and nodes and by locating intermediality firmly at the heart of culture that today is characterized by flux and fluidity, the notion of the in-between got out of sight, or at least not as relevant or to the point anymore

In her article ‘Border Talks: The problematic status of media borders in the current debate about intermediality’ Rajewsky points out that the concept of intermediality as a crossing of media borders that produces an in-between has come under scrutiny.

Ralf Remshardt suggests in his abstract for this panel that this shift in intermedial theory from the in-between to the networked and nodal might be conceived of as a reflection of a cultural shift towards the meta-medial.

Or as Henrietty Kasay-Schuster, one of our working group members, puts it in her paper: there is an intermedial disposition to be found in the contemporary imagination.

A similar line of thinking is unfolded in a call for papers for the new ISIS conference (International Society for Intermedial Studies)

quote

“Facing the challenge of the daily experiences of the digital age, discussions of media differences or ‘dialogues' highlighting the ‘inter,' the ‘gap,' the ‘in-between,' the ‘incommensurability' between media are currently being replaced by discourses of the ‘enter' or ‘immersion,' and the ‘network logic' of a ‘convergence culture' in which we have a "free flow of content over different media platforms" (Henry Jenkins). At the same time the turn towards the corporeality of perception in all aspects of communication has also shifted the attention from the ‘interaction of media' towards the ‘interaction with media,' from the idea of ‘media borders' towards the analysis of the blurring of perception between media and reality, of humans and machines - media being perceived more and more not as a form of representation but as an environment and as a means to ‘augment' reality.  Nowadays media continuously mutate, relocate and expand, while connections between ‘old' and ‘new' media are being established with incredible fluidity. Accordingly, we may ask: what are the new perspectives for intermedial research in the digital age?”

My answer to this question would be that we need to mind the gap. I would like to argue today that the critical potential of the in-between needs to be re-adressed in intermedial discourses. In a way I argue to re-mind the gap.

I am not alone in this.

In the before mentioned article “Border Talks” of Irina Rajewski she claims that any kind of theoretical dismantling of the term ‘intermediality’ is confronted with concrete intermedial practices in which media borders and media specificity still proof to be very important. Moreover she argues that no matter how hybrid contemporary intermedial practices have become, the effect potential of intermediality is always in a way based on medial differences and borders. Rajewsky points to the creative potential of the border itself, understanding border zones as “enabling structures, as spaces in which we can test and experiment with a plethora of different strategies”

In the same call for papers of ISIS that I referred to earlier on, after having demonstrated how discourse on intermediality has moved away from the idea of the in-between, the organizers of the conference ask the following question:

While media are continuously changing and expanding, how can we relocate the "in-between"? And if we believe that the "ecosystem" of contemporary media can be understood not as a unified digital environment that nullifies differences, but as a thriving and highly diversified, "multisensory milieu" (Jacques Rancière) that poses new challenges both for the consumer/producer and the theorist, how can we address these challenges? How do media differences persist and how do these differences still matter despite voices advocating the so called "post-medium condition"?

So, differences still matter.

We should mind the gap.

Re-mind the gap.

Why?

In our first book we made a first attempt to answer this question

First book:

“new”

We approach intermediality as the presence of other media in theatre productions, suggesting that this creates “new modes of representations, new dramaturgical strategies, new ways of positioning bodies in time and space, new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations.

Despite the apparent “newness of contemporary intermediality it is important to recognize the decisive role played by the historical avant-garde in establishing the necessary conditions for intermediality

* although we did acknowledge the importance of the history of intermediality and of early pre-conceptions of intermediality, there was a shared understanding that contemporary intermedial performances were innovative and reshaping theatre and performance
* in our debates at that time this reshaping was often discussed in terms of rupture, clash and disturbance

Intermediality is a powerful and potential radical force which operates in-between performer and audience, in-between theatre, performance and other media, and in-between realities – with theatre providing a stage for the performance of intermediality

* as you can tell from this quote we located this radical and critical potential of intermedial performance in the being in-between
* many of us conceived of this in-between as a promising border zone, limininal, indetermined, full of potential
* not only an artistic zone for the maker in which one could experiment with different media either in a critical, self-reflexive or playful way or a perceptual zone for the spectator in which new modes of perception and thinking could manifest themselves
* but also a zone for the researcher herself, a conceptual space that helped and stimulated us to think anew of media and media relationships and performance
* as the quote also indicates we believed the performance to be the stage par excellence where media reflexivity could be played out [ theatre as a hypermedium, capable of staging other media in their own media specificity ]

I stil very much believe in the significance of theatre and performance in our mediatized culture.

I strongly believe in the stage as a place where media and the workings of media can be displayed, being played with or even maybe displaced.

Theatre, because of its staging capacity, has the power to bring together separate elements, to force them in a relationship. Theatre because of its transformative potential also is able to constantly destabilize relations. Any constellation of elements is only ever temporary. Theatre is a place of actualisation and production.

Within the context of a culture where it is suggested that everything is connected, networked, fluid, and without borders, intermedial theatre as I would say, is able to perform the act of connecting. And in doing so reminds us of the fact that things can only be connected, if they can be disconnected as well and therefore connected differently. Intermedial theatre is able to direct the attention towards the points where people, media, objects do actually meet and/or part, no matter if this happens in a very smooth, merging kind of way or in a very disruptive and disturbing matter. This is where I locate the in-between, a space that is the result of the process of both connecting and disconnecting.

Intermedial performance asks the important question of how media are related, how we relate to media and how we relate to a mediatized world.

It is the in-between as described before that I believe to be the productive thinking space for the intermedial researcher as well. It is also in this respect that I use the phrase re-mind the gap. In order to reflect on how media are connected, be it in intermedial performances on a micro-level or in our digital culture at large, in order to create a thinking space for ourselves from which we can think of these matters, we need to engage in this movement of disconnecting and connecting. I would like to argue that the act of theoretically separating media is a precondition for researchers in order to be able to reflect on how these media might come together, and more importantly to create the space for thinking how they could be related differently.

Mind the gap

Re-mind the gap