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## Mapping moving media: film and video

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## Summary

*Mapping Moving Media* is an inquiry into the specificity of film and video. In this study, I argue that mapping the specificity of these two media is indispensable in analyzing and understanding contemporary intermedial objects in which film and video are mixed or combined. Today, many moving image objects are, on the one hand, ruled by elements which derive from the field of film, and, on the other hand, by features which are more typical of the video medium. This mixture of the cinematic and the “videomatic” is most prevalent in installation art, yet it is also common in contemporary narrative fiction films. In addition, the combination of film and video forms functions in the ubiquitous moving images which surround us outside of the museum, art gallery, or film theater today. It infuses home movies, videos on the Internet, commercials on TV, and clips on cellphones.

The co-presence of the two media in moving image objects is often overlooked or ignored. In this study, I argue that our understanding of the meanings and effects of moving images in contemporary society will increase when combinations of film and video elements within moving image objects are taken into account.

In order to study the combinations of film and video within cultural objects, an analysis of their intermedial relationship may seem an obvious starting point. Contemporary (new) media theory offers a wide range of terms by which interrelations between media can be defined and conceptualized. However, although I take the wide variety of notions such as remediation and hypermediacy as helpful tools in analyzing the relationships between media, I argue that the starting point of an investigation into intermedial interactions should be the concept of medium specificity instead of the many notions which define forms of intermediality.

This does not mean that we should return to some of the essentialist ideas on medium specificity which have been attached to the concept. Although the essentialist heritage of the concept of medium specificity cannot easily be sidestepped, I hold that it is nevertheless imperative to ask what mediality means when we discuss intermediality.

For, an investigation into relationships between, or convergence of, different media still starts out with the presupposition of different, distinguishable media. In order to analyze what happens between media, it first needs to be clear how these media are (to be) understood. The rightful conclusion that essentialist ideas on medium specificity are rendered untenable by today's mixed, multi-, and intermedia, too often overshadows the question of *what* is being mixed, expanded, remediated, refashioned, converged or combined. When faced, for example, with a definition of multimedia that incorporates video, text and graphics, it is simply a useful question to ask: "what do you mean by video?"

In this study I ask the questions "what is meant by video?" and "what is meant by film?" How are these two media (to be) understood? How can film and video be defined as distinct, specific media? I hold that in this era of mixed moving media, it is vital to ask these questions precisely and especially on the media of video and film.

From a technological point of view, however, it no longer makes sense to differentiate between film and video today. Upon its arrival in the 1960s, video started out as an analogue electronic medium which clearly differed from film. In its initial phase, it was only able to produce grainy black-and-white footage. Its magnetic tape, moreover, could not easily be edited and was prone to electronic distortion. In addition, video footage could only be watched on a TV monitor. Hence, the early low-quality video images did not look like film, and could, moreover, not be looked at in the same viewing set-up as back-lit film projections. However, as the technological properties and formal abilities of the video medium evolved rapidly, the differences between film and video became less distinct over the past decades.

Yet, in spite of the fact that technological differences between the two media have largely been bridged, distinctions between film and video are still ubiquitously perceptible. This demonstrates that the difference between video and film is made rather than given; it is repeatedly shown, (re-)produced and applied by visual objects and artworks. In addition, the distinction is made by spectators, who (sometimes only subconsciously) recognize and thereby respond to the difference between film and video features in the process of viewing and reading moving images. Defining video and film as two distinct media, then, first of all begs for a definition of medium specificity which does not solely rely on the given technological, material components of a medium. How can the constantly mixing, merging and rapidly evolving media of film and video be defined as distinct media when the technological differences between them have become almost superfluous? What is more, how can film and video be defined as distinct, specific media without reverting to essentialist notions of medium specificity?

My search for a non-essentialist definition of medium specificity starts with *A Voyage on the North Sea* (1999). In this pamphlet-sized book, art historian Rosalind Krauss replaces modernist essentialist ideas on medium specificity with another definition: "the specificity of mediums, even modernist ones, must be understood as differential, self-differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the

physicality of their support” (53). According to Krauss, a medium is to be seen as a layered structure that is constantly being repeated. This structure is not given; it is made and composed out of the physical support plus a set of rules and conventions. These conventions determine how the expressive possibilities offered by the technical support of a medium are delimited or applied.

I take the differentiability in Krauss’ definition of medium specificity as a term which suggests or refers to the comparison of different media, rather than a notion which solely focuses on differences. Hence, I argue that media are specified by mutual differences from, as well as specific similarities with, other media. Following this train of thought, the act of defining a medium’s specificity can in part be understood as a process of mapping the differences and similarities between media, rather than the disclosure of a medium’s single, unique essence. The idea of differential specificity indicates the direction of my investigation into the media of film and video. By way of comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities between the two media, I map out the layers of their related and similar, yet specific structures; that is, parts and sections of their specific structure.

My investigation into the media of film and video relies heavily on the idea that conventional opinions shape medium specification. Although I focus on some of the (ever-changing) technological differences between film and video, and moreover map out the most distinct conventions which shape the specific dominant applications of each medium’s technology, my study also comprises comparisons and analyses of the most dominant reflections on film and video. I argue that the distinct specific features of film and video can only be defined by also studying definitions of the media in question. Theoretical as well as artistic reflections on the two media do not only describe, but also (co- and re)produce the specificity of film and video. Hence, the notion of differential specificity which forms the basis of this study goes hand in hand with differential specification - the latter involving both theoretical texts and self-reflexive visual objects.

When it comes to the media of film and video, there has been much cross-over between medial practices and theoretical specifications. In this study I demonstrate that the medium of video has not only influenced the specificity of film through video practices which, for instance, have taken over some of film’s dominant applications, but also via the medium specifications which film theory forms. The arrival of video made film theorists sensitive to some of the abilities of cinema. Abilities, that is, which had not yet been widely noted before video images brought them fully into sight. In this way, video managed to shed a new light on film, which was consequently viewed differently. On the other hand, film theory can provide insight into the specificity of video. Film-theoretical concepts prove to be either elucidating or useless in the analysis of video works. Either way, in the absence of a coherent field of video studies, film-theoretical ideas guide the specification of video as a medium.

Although Krauss’ definition of medium specificity forms the starting point of my research, I discuss the problems and shortcomings of her thesis throughout this study.

In each of the four chapters of this book, I propose a supplement to her definition which can obviate the “pull” of essentialism which inconspicuously recurs in Krauss’ as well as other outwardly anti-essentialist media theories. The first supplement can already be found in the common denominator of the chapters, each of which is structured around an effect of the two media on their users. Krauss diverts attention from the essentialist question of what a medium *is* by focusing on the question of how a medium is produced. To Krauss’ question of how a medium is made and specified, I add the question of what a medium *does*. What are the (distinct and/or similar) performative effects of film and video? How do the two media affect their viewers? How do they relate their users? Which positions do they enable, create, or preclude to the subject? The four chapters of this book are organized around four effects which surface most pervasively in specifications of film and video. Those four effects, moreover, form a suitable ground for comparison, as the most notable differences and similarities between film and video are tied to them.

In **Chapter One**, I compare the way in which film and video each produce reality effects, yet in different ways. Some of the most famous discussions of film’s specificity circle around the medium’s inherent realism. Video has, however, altered the way in which the relation between film and reality can be understood, as the technology of the video medium relates video images differently to referents in reality than film does. What is more, although film and video both produce a reality effect, their impression on the viewer is slightly different. In addition, the conventional devices by which film and video produce their respective reality effects are disparate. Intermedial video artworks and films often combine the reality effect producing devices of both film and video. What is the effect of such double yet different reality effects in one visual object? In two close readings of *Benny’s Video* (Haneke 1992) and *Family Viewing* (Egoyan 1987), I analyze how the videomatic reality effect enhances the cinematic one, while the two films in turn constantly specify the video images they show as “real.” In addition, the specific (yet conventional) relation between video images and reality turns out to offer new narrative possibilities to fiction films.

The comparison of the reality effects of film and video leads to some questions on the concept of medium specificity. Krauss’ definition proves to have its shortcoming, as it cannot account for the fact that film and video each have many, sometimes even opposing abilities and characteristics at the same time. In chapter one, I therefore suggest to expand Krauss’ definition with a term which spatializes Krauss’ predominantly temporal term, namely, George Baker’s notion of the medium as “field.”

In **Chapter Two**, I study the ways in which film and video each affect the viewer’s sense of being a physical body in time and space. Why is the medium of film usually theorized as a medium which produces a disembodied viewer; a viewer who forgets her own temporal and spatial bodily presence? Why has video, on the other hand, been defined as a haptic, embodying medium? In order to answer these questions, I turn to Jean-Louis Baudry’s influential film-theoretical concept of the *dispositif*. Not only has this concept formed the basis of the discourses of so-called apparatus theorists, who

more than anyone have produced the dominant view that the film spectator is a disembodied one, it is also a very useful concept in explaining why video often functions as an embodying rather than a disembodiment medium. What is more, the intermedial cinematic video installations by David Claerbout and Douglas Gordon which I discuss in this chapter combine some of the most typical disembodiment and embodying qualities of film and video, most of which concern features of the media's *dispositifs*; features such as the spatial viewing set-up of their technologies, the spatial and architectural features of the viewing room, (institutional) viewing conventions, as well as the position of the spectator.

In **Chapter Three**, I frame film and video within society. In addition to the fact that the concept of the medium in general necessitates attention to the social field, this field is especially important to an investigation of film and video. First of all, video came into being in the same decade in which medium theory (as formulated by, most prominently, Marshall McLuhan) centers on the idea that media produce social structures. Many early video practices relate to this dominant, influential idea. The technological determinism which is expressed by these theoretical texts and objects gives rise to new questions on Krauss' definition of medium specificity. The concept is redefined in this chapter by way of Raymond Williams' ideas on so-called soft determination.

Out of all the domains within which the two media operate (culture, politics, art, etc.) the social field can be said to point out the internal differentiation of the two media the most. When film and video are framed by their operation within the social field, the specificity of the two media turns out to be fraught with contradictions. In addition to these internal contradictions, film and video overlap, differ, and oppose each other in the social field. Besides theoretical texts which specify the social effects of film and video, I analyze how the different social meanings, functions and effects of the two media are (further) exposed as well as applied in intermedial artworks by video artists Lynn Hershman and Sadie Benning.

The positive and sometimes even utopian specifications of film and video which are discussed in Chapter Three have dominant negative counterparts. In addition to texts and objects which emphasize the specific ability of film and video to produce stable subject positions within (democratic, emancipated, utopian) social structures, many practical and theoretical works specify the two lens-based media as cold, objectifying media which hurt and obstruct, rather than aid or create the subject. Although some of the dystopian views of film and video are discussed in Chapter Three, I zoom in on these other sides of film's and video's respective "Janus heads" in **Chapter Four**, which deals with the violent features of the two media. As the violent impact of film and video can hardly be considered separately from harmful social discourses, I investigate whether the concept of the medium can be related to, or embedded in, Foucault's notion of *discours*.

What is more, the violent features of film and video cannot be understood without taking the common ancestor of the lens-based media into account, that is, photography.

A triangulation with photography provides insight into the specific ways in which film and video are each able to hurt their users, most notably the subjects in front of the lens. Such triangulation with another medium is not unique to Chapter Four; mapping the differential specificity of the two media vis-à-vis each other necessarily involves comparing the ways in which the two media relate similarly or differently to other, closely related media. In the first chapter, literature and literary theory brings out some of the specific qualities of film and video. In Chapter Two, art-historical ideas on painting, theater, and sculpture are brought to bear on film and video. The medium of television mostly plays an important part in Chapter Three. The influence of the computer, finally, runs through all four chapters. The question of how digitalization has (or hasn't) altered the applications and possibilities that are specific to analogue film and video is addressed throughout this study.

Near the end of Chapter Four, the Janus heads of film and video are turned again – by films and videos themselves. In the final section of Chapter Four, I compare the different ways in which feminist films and videos work to oppose the misogynist traits of traditional narrative cinema. Whereas feminist films radically disengage themselves from classical film conventions, intermedial video works such as *Phoenix Tapes* (1999) by artist duo Christoph Müller and Matthias Girardet, and *Approximations* (2000-2001) by Johanna Householder and b.h.Yael form critical reflections on misogynist film conventions by mimicking or sampling scenes from classical narrative films. These videomatic strategies of mimicking and sampling bring me to Isaac Julien's video installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) in the conclusion, where I demonstrate how my differential mapping of film and video can form a guide through intermedial film/video works.