Nodal points that need each other
On the specific kind of intermediality of a poet’s paintings and a painter’s poems

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Can we define the paintings of a poet and the poems of a painter as ‘intermediality’? Since the nineties of the former century, intermediality has been defined in quite different, but inspiring ways. For Peter Zima in Literatur intermedial (1995:7), intermediality focuses on convergence and complementarity. Intermediality aims at a ‘symbiosis’ of words, images and sounds. Jürgen Müllers keywords are conceptualization, cooperation and communication when defining intermediality in Intermedialität. Formen moderner kultureller Kommunikation (1996:33): ‘a medial product becomes intermedial, when it transfers the multi-medial Nebeneinander of medial citations and elements to a conceptional cooperation (Miteinander)’

Peter Wagner defines intermediality in Icons-Texts-Iconotexts (1996:17) as a ‘sadly neglected but vastly important subdivision of intertextuality’. Analysing the interactions between images and texts in what he calls ‘iconotexts’, he stresses more than the other authors quoted above, the differences that persist within one medium and between different media. In any case, these authors preserve the term intermediality for all cases where texts and images converge to a more or less extent.

My statement is that we could consider the work of a double talent, a poet who is also painting, as a kind of intermediality as well, even when the two media do not converge. The way of painting influences the way of writing, and vice versa, not only on the technical level of the construction of the poems and the paintings, but also on the level of the imagery and of the themes. Of course, we need to redefine the ‘inter’ of intermediality in the case of the work of a double talent.

In order to suggest a new definition of the ‘inter’, I’ll base myself on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. And in order to demonstrate the theoretical framework, I’ll present a small case study of the work of the Belgian (Flemish) poet and painter Paul Snoek (1933-1981). Snoek’s poems have been translated in English. The importance of his poetry isn’t merely local. His poems, though sufficiently personal and original, show influences of Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, André Breton and the German Surrealists. His prophetic trilogy, including the volumes Hercules, Richelieu and Nostradamus, draws heavily on the archetypal imagery of nature. In this sense, there are correlations between his work and the Deep Image poets in the United States. Also his paintings can be situated in an international context: they show influences of Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy, and later on of the Naïve Painters and of Friedensreich Hundertwasser.

In Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffes discourse theory, the term ‘hegemony’ is essential. They define hegemony as ‘an articulatory praxis instituting nodal points that partially fix the meaning of the social in an organized system of differences.’ (Torfing 1999:109). Hegemony is a question of articulation: ‘Hegemony and discourse are mutually conditioned in the sense that hegemonic practice shapes and reshapes discourse, which in turn provides the conditions of possibility for hegemonic articulation.’ (Torfing 1999:43).

In a literary-historical sense, Paul Snoek was trying to gain hegemony, especially during the Fifties and the Sixties of the Twentieth century. For instance, in an interview in 1959, he claimed that there were three great post-war Flemish poets, Hugues C.Pernath, Hugo Claus...
and himself, and that of these three he was the greatest. This elicited angry responses in Flanders that continued for weeks.

Snoek wanted to manifest himself as double talent, no less important than his great example from the Netherlands, the poet and painter Lucebert, who presented himself as the ‘Emperor of the Dutch Experimentalists (the Vijftigers)’ and even more important than – already at the end of the Fifties– the famous Flemish poet, painter, novelist, theatre playwright and film director Hugo Claus.

In order to become hegemonic, a hegemonic ‘agent’ should try to speak in the name of a whole and to incarnate the universal in a provisionary way. According to Laclau, this is only possible by emptying the signifiers. The themes of the poems and the paintings of Paul Snoek were that much influenced by the themes in the work of the artists he was admiring, that his themes became empty signifiers. We should not interpret this in a negative way. As Laclau and Mouffe state, there is an intrinsic emptiness in all discourses. This is what constitutes them as unstable, inessential and contingent formations. No discourse can be a complete entity – i.e. a social construction that would be independent from all other constructions – because that would mean that the construction would be essentially given and resistant to change. This is exactly the problem with the structural linguistic theory of Saussure, the base for the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. Because of this theoretical problem, Laclau and Mouffe introduced several notions, among them their concept of the ‘field of discursivity’ (1985/2001: 111), a field in which every discursive formation partakes in and which they cannot fully master. The field of discursivity is characterized by infinitude, i.e. by the multitude of meaning that every object, sign or element can take. This field conditions every object as discursively constituted, while at the same time it prevents every attempt to fix their meaning, since they can always be put in new relational constellations, which would assign them new meanings. Every discourse thus becomes a semi-stable fixation of the field of discursivity and there is always something outside every discursive formation-structure in Saussure’s terminology. This ‘outside’ makes every discourse into a non-complete entity, which allows us to theorise about structural change.

The field of discursivity allows us to understand the non-complete character of meaning, but it doesn’t allow us to understand how a semi-stable meaning actually is constructed. As Laclau and Mouffe say: “Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning.” (1985/2001: 112). How is this meaning constructed? How do certain elements in the field of discursivity actually become connected to one another and thus turn themselves into a chain of relational positions (which is Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of discourse)? This is where the empty signifier comes into play. The empty signifier is the discursive centre, what Laclau and Mouffe call a nodal point, i.e. a privileged element that gathers up a range of differential elements, and binds them together into a discursive formation. But it is only by emptying a certain signifier of its content that this process can be achieved. Its emptiness makes it possible for it to signify the discourse as a whole. The power of a certain signifier is therefore coterminous with its emptiness. It is only through this emptiness that it can articulate different elements around it, and thus produce a discursive formation. With this emptiness the nodal point becomes universal in its scope, but it cannot be completely universal, since it is only given meaning by the particular elements, which it stands in relation to. Rather it is becomes a signifier of an absent universality – of a lack within the discourse’s core. It becomes: “... present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence” (Laclau, 1996: 44)
The centre’s emptiness is what makes discourses possible, but at the same time they condition every discourse as empty – as a non-complete formation. The discursive centre, far from being an identifiable centre with a given - positive - content thus becomes a function of negativity, i.e. a function of something that the discourse lacks, to use Lacanian terms.

In this way, I would like to define the ‘inter’ of intermediality in the case of the poems of a painter and paintings of a poet, certainly when applied to the double-talented artist Paul Snoek, as the link between nodal points that cannot do without each other in the chain of relational positions.

References


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