

Is There a Transmedial Dispositif?

Aesthetic Epistemes and the Question of Disciplinarity

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ABSTRACT In this article, I argue that one has yet to acknowledge the extent to which the notion of the aesthetic and its content is institutionally negotiated. A central question that we ought to bear in mind is: does the organization of “aesthetic knowledge” that the traditional disciplines facilitate promote or prevent insight into meta-aesthetic and transaesthetic concerns?

KEY WORDS aesthetic knowledge, transmediality, transaesthetic, question of disciplinarity, film studies

Disciplinary boundaries, like differences between artistic mediums, are a subject of investigation, not denial.¹

1. Introduction: aesthetic knowledge and its disciplinary limitations

The present examination starts with the observation, or intuition that aesthetic theory is lagging behind developments in the aesthetic field, a consequence of which is that the rift between theory and practice extending back to Kant is becoming increasingly precarious. Thus, a pivotal question that needs to be posed is this: does the organization of aesthetic knowledge that the traditional disciplines facilitate promote insight into meta-aesthetic concerns? Or does it rather obstruct it? The chief premise here is that the aesthetic is always something more than its particular instantiation within the frames of a given discipline. The name given to this “something more” is the transaesthetic, a term in need of much elaboration but which for now may be construed in the abstract as a nomadic, rhizomatic effusion or transmission that flows through individual aesthetic media, in the process transforming them. When Raymond Bellour talks about “grasping all the arts as part of one single ensemble and analyzing each work in terms of its mix of different art forms, particularly in terms of media,”² he is pursuing a line of thought that appears to be in the vicinity of what I above refer to as the transmedial dispositif.³ Below I would like to begin to develop the notion of such a transaesthetic force, at once diffusive and integrative, as it connects to larger institutional issues of disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity and epistemology. What needs to be particularly scrutinized are the places where disciplines overlap as well as those interstices where there are no disciplines at all. While disciplines construct objects, institutions in turn construct disciplines.

2. Background: current upheavals in theory and aesthetics

Before I delve into a discussion of these concepts, I would like to briefly note a series of ruptures, the implications of which I think might help to contextualize the topic in question. These are very exciting times in which to be preoccupied with the notion of the transaesthetic, as it seems we are about halfway through a number of transitions, or upheavals even: from the linguistic turn via the iconic turn and now the synaesthetic turn; from poststructuralism to a new love affair with empiricism in various guises; from post-theory and back again to more theory, new theory; from epistemology to what has sometimes been called post-epistemology; from representation to presentation; from the object to the concept; from meaning to phenomenological experience; from a sturdy notion of interpretation to the more enigmatic notion of encounter; and, finally, from traditional academic scholarship to aesthetic, or aesthetized, forms of research. This is a whole lot to take in, but what these transitions all highlight is the extent to which the hermeneutic firmament is always changing, always in a state of flux. On the one hand, new theoretical perspectives transform our objects of study, on the other hand changes in the objects themselves in turn transform our approaches and theories. Such reciprocity should indicate clearly enough the extent to which the triangulated concepts in the title of this article – the epistemic, the disciplinary and the transmedial – must be relationally considered.

2.1. THE EPISTEMIC

In contemporary theory, the first of these concepts has obviously been closely associated with the work of Foucault, and in particular his *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970, originally published in 1966). The epistemic in this modern sense denotes not so much – and is not really interchangeable with – knowledge itself, but rather the often quite intangible apparatus or network of structures that make possible and give shape to any given body of knowledge within a historically and culturally circumscribed context. Thus, an epistemic configuration functions at once as a condition, generator and frame for discrete sets of discursive content. Foucault's own account of the epistemic in a later work reads:

I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme

is the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific.⁴

Like Thomas Kuhn, Foucault was inspired by Gaston Bachelard’s idea of an “epistemological rupture,”⁵ but his use of the word episteme is not restricted to the realm of science. All kinds of cultural discourses may be fundamentally constituted by the largely indiscernible work of epistemic mechanisms, which in a sense provide, or represent, the necessary limits of whatever might be sayable or otherwise thinkable within a given domain of discourse (to invoke a term associated with Judith Butler, another theorist who has been concerned with the epistemic).⁶

2.2. THE DISCIPLINARY

This brings us to the second concept, that of the disciplinary. It should now be clear that academic disciplines operate pretty much according to the protocols of the episteme, both in their organization and their behavior. As a particular discursive formation, a discipline is not only a way of systematizing knowledge; it also provides the means by which to produce it. In those fields committed to the examination of artistic inventions – art, literature, drama, music, dance, photography, film, television and so on – knowledge of aesthetic matters as well as aesthetic experience are to a large extent configured by, and mediated through the discipline in question. While we evidently also talk about art as an inclusive, para-disciplinary entity, individual discussions of aesthetic experience usually presume a medium-specific notion of the aesthetic. Interdisciplinarity often disrupts this particularization of the aesthetic to establish new kinds of relations between the various art forms, in the process producing what may be seen as transmedial epistemes: that is, configurations of aesthetic knowledge that are the result of processes of convergence and interdisciplinary conceptualization, and that in turn might be able to capture aspects of the aesthetic that escape the experiential frameworks of individual disciplines.

2.3. THE TRANSMEDIAL

The prefix “trans” designates the prepositional “across,” “beyond,” or “through,” which all suggest a sense of movement or change, as in translation or transformation. Transmediality as a concept hints, then, not necessarily at that which all media has in common, but rather at something which flows or surges through individual aesthetic media, in the process altering them. This “surge” might not be too different

from Gilles Deleuze's notion of *figure* as he puts it to use in *Cinema 1*, where it comes to designate the processes of "deformations, transformations or transmutations" that engender stylistic variability.⁷ The transmedial is a force that creates disunity within the single medium but a kind of unity among the different species of media. This is merely to allude, in passing, to a more abstract notion of transmediality. For more practical purposes, we could say that the transmedial embodies the promise of a shift in methodology as far as the organization of the aesthetic disciplines is concerned. Such a shift would involve (a) a restructuring of curricula and courses in which concepts and themes rather than art forms or genres constitute the topical framework, (b) a heightened awareness of W. J. T. Mitchell's by now well-known dictum that "all media is mixed media,"⁸ (c) a stronger emphasis on the continuity of different aesthetic expressions and on the extent to which any given medium may fruitfully interact with, or even retain traces of, a different medium within its own ontological boundaries, (d) an acknowledgment of the epistemologically creative role theoretical concepts from one aesthetic medium may have when they are being transferred and called upon to explain facets of another art form, and finally, e) a rejuvenation of the field of philosophical aesthetics as it is put into closer contact with the transmedial object.

3. Taking stock: a time for disciplinary self-interrogation

The perceptual transformation crucial to achieving these objectives, however, is probably predicated on some form of awareness of the lives and times of the discipline. Serendipitously, the current moment is rife with reflections and reassessments about the state of the discipline. The summer 2009 copy of what is perhaps the leading humanities journal in the field of theory, *Critical Inquiry*, was a themed issue about "the fate of the disciplines."⁹ Earlier that same year, the epochal British film theory journal *Screen* celebrated its 50th anniversary by focusing on "Screen Theorizing Today," a wide-ranging stock-taking of its discipline divided into four main sections: "Spectatorship and Looking," "The Screen Experience," "After Cinema," and "Screen Cultures." In the domain of cinema studies, there is also the quite comprehensive survey of the historical institutionalization of the discipline, *Inventing Film Studies*, edited by Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson.¹⁰ The new and still emerging field of visual culture studies, moreover, has cultivated a sense of meta-disciplinary self-reflection as part of its identity since its inception about two decades ago. Late last year, Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith

edited *What is Research in the Visual Arts: Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, an anthology of essays derived from a conference on the methodology and orientation of the discipline of visual culture studies.¹¹ These are just a few of the titles that suggest that disciplinarity is a vital tendency in recent scholarship and also very much at the forefront of present debates. In fact, as I was writing this essay, the latest *New Review of Film and Television Studies* landed in my inbox, a themed issue on the “synaesthetic turn.”¹²

Back in 1980, Clifford Geertz noted that the protocols and methods of interpretation had started to become more indistinct, in the sense that they increasingly came to constitute what he referred to as a “vast, almost continuous field” of hermeneutic practice.¹³ The theoretical cross-fertilization of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – when new and so-called shadow disciplines began to develop,¹⁴ when avatars of poststructuralist thinking seeped into a number of disciplines, and when concepts originating in brand new disciplines such as film studies soon migrated to other fields – spelled the beginning of the end for the dream of a self-sufficient and uncontaminated form of disciplinarity. But, with the age of theory (with a capital T) receding and with the large-scale return to what David Bordwell once named middle-level research,¹⁵ there might be reason to believe that the discipline, so long convalescent, is in the process of regaining its power as an epistemological regime.

Although theory has not exactly disappeared from the scene, it seems to have abandoned the logocentrism of its poststructuralist incarnation, transmuting into a kind of neo-phenomenology defined – as previously noted – by notions of encounter, experience, or presentation.¹⁶ This terminology, it could be argued, captures the transmedial sensibility more felicitously than the Grand Theories of the preceding decades. To experience an aesthetic object, to encounter it – not in any naively unmediated fashion, but nevertheless in a more open and less predetermined mode – means that we are equally sensitive to its totality and its multiplicity, as our perceptual energies are not usurped by the forces of disciplinary protectionism or the doctrines of aesthetic singularity. Thus, a post-theoretical experience of a text, image, performance, etc. could make us more alert and responsive to the fundamental impurity that marks the aesthetic object or event.

In order to discern the underlying principle that has animated much of the philosophical history of the arts, the notion of purity may in fact be a key term. Hegel’s idealist history of aesthetics, for instance, is the story of a process of gradual dematerialization, from ancient architecture

to poetry and painting. In the tradition inherited from Kant, poetry is the most privileged aesthetic medium because it is the one closest to the immateriality of thought. One could go much further back. In Greek antiquity, there were no muses for the spatial and visual arts. The nine muses brought into being by Zeus and Mnemosyne were all patronesses of the temporal and verbal arts (that is, music, dance, history, astronomy, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, epic poetry, and choral poetry). Painting was promoted to the level of fine art only during the Renaissance, and it was not until the 19th century that the academic or scientific study of art congealed into a disciplinary formation. As for some of the other arts, comparative literature – always interdisciplinary in nature – surfaced as an academic field of inquiry in the early 20th century with distinct French, German and American schools (literary studies had obviously been pursued as part of the philological enterprise prior to this), and cinema studies materialized as an institutional entity in France and in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. This is an overly familiar story by now, and I only reiterate it here to underscore the significance of the historical relations that pertain to the aesthetic disciplines. That is, while the arts themselves have comprised discrete disciplines¹⁷ – in the traditional sense – since antiquity, it is only much later and basically over the last 150 years, that these artistic disciplines also have become the locus for and the subject of ever more specialized academic disciplines. Until the 1960s, that is, when the disciplinary fabric began to unravel.

4. The Moment of indisciplinaryity

Unlike Aristotle, who found disciplines to be necessary but undesirable,¹⁸ I don't want to suggest that this flourishing is a bad thing. What I want is merely to call attention to a couple of blind spots in our transactions with academic disciplines. First of all, they must be continuously re-historicized. Any current disciplinary landscape is the product of particular institutional developments, and is always transmutable. Long established fields such as psychology, sociology and even mathematics, materialized at different points in time from the mother discipline of philosophy, for instance. New technology spawns new media, which in their turn grow into new disciplines. Second, just because any given discipline reveals itself to be a useful, robust and enduring method for organizing and producing knowledge, does not mean that it is the *only* possible way of doing so. Whatever research project preoccupies you, it will almost always consist of a multiplicitous array of material that goes in many different directions and that point up more than just one discipline. Aesthetic

media such as film or literature could, in principle, be about anything, and from there it follows that the process of accumulating knowledge about specific objects that fall within the purview of these media should likewise be prepared to go anywhere.

What I want to illustrate here, to recap, is how easily the peculiar entity that is the academic discipline lends itself to processes of de-naturalization and deconstruction. By historicizing disciplinarity and exposing the permeability of its boundaries, we come to see both how a given body of knowledge is also the product of its own method of organization, so to speak, and how existing disciplinary constitutions may function as subtle indices of the colossal, unwritten history of ideas that lays buried among the intricate system of relations that both regulate and produce an epistemic assemblage. When James Chandler in the introduction to the aforementioned special issue of *Critical Inquiry* states that disciplines “seek to be complete worlds unto themselves” and that they “aspire to explain everything, albeit in their own way,”¹⁹ he is invoking an ideal conception of disciplinarity in which its central mechanism is a centripetal force, a force that tirelessly turns otherness into sameness without a loss of disciplinary identity. But a discipline also harbors alien elements that always threaten its unity and pull it into closer contact with other disciplines or shadow disciplines. When the internal pressure reaches a certain point, a moment of rupture or crisis may ensue. This is what W.J.T. Mitchell refers to with his notion of the *indiscipline*.²⁰ “Isn’t the truly interesting moment,” he writes, “when one has a chance to see or participate in the explosion or implosion of a disciplinary regime, even if that event is (as it usually is) rather quiet, unobtrusive, and scarcely registered even by the discipline in which it is taking place?”²¹ The concept of an indiscipline might sound like it is something akin to a paradigm shift, but it might more productively be considered a liminal or transitional phase in which disciplinary stability is challenged by emergent (to speak in Williamsian terms) forces that could be temporary and swiftly assimilated but that could also either eventually engender a new field (in the form of a shadow discipline, a recent example of which would be visual culture studies) or lead to a complete makeover of the old one.

5. Film studies – a discipline without an object?

This could actually be what is going on in the discipline of film studies at the moment. In our digital era, the discipline has quite literally lost its object,²² and, as Gertrud Koch reminds us, when disciplines lose their objects they “come to a natural end.”²³ This might not bode well for the

future of cinema studies. As Koch and others have asserted, however, a medium or discipline is not necessarily defined by materiality alone. A discipline's objects, she writes, are

interdependent on the discourse running the discipline because the discourse also constitutes the objects – as one can learn from the debates about film and the new media. As long as there is still a discourse around the cinematic dispositif there can be cinema studies in a literal sense even if there are no more classical films (which, by the way, is not entirely the case). Cinema studies has the competence to theorize and analyze moving images, moving images of many kinds, regardless of their technological origins.²⁴

On a similar note, D.N. Rodowick has argued that the theoretical and analytical concepts that the discipline of film studies has invented, will survive the material demise of film and continue to have a purchase on developments within the larger area of visual culture.²⁵ Dudley Andrew, likewise, states that “our seasoned ability to understand how the movies have functioned and to question how they came to function this way can guide the study of whatever audio-visions attract our attention.”²⁶ And as I pointed out elsewhere, the term that gave the medium its name in the late 19th century – the “writing of movement” – was not technological so much as conceptual.²⁷ The cinematic cannot be reduced to a question of materiality, since what it primarily represents is a form of experience, a particular sensibility.

A key term for Koch in the above passage is the Foucauldian *dispositif*, which the French thinker used somewhat interchangeably, or in concert with, terms such as “apparatus” and “deployment.” Koch claims that the cinematic dispositif “arranges our ways and modes of speaking and thinking about film” and that it “constitutes the subject of the discipline” through its “institutional codes of production and reception, its architectural settings, its administration of time through screening schedules and norms of film duration, and its modulations of affect as bio-power (that make us scream, cry, and laugh).”²⁸ I dwell on this because I want to accentuate the ontological gap between any given aesthetic medium's material/cultural existence and its disciplinary/discursive existence, again with a view toward de-naturalizing disciplinarity. Film is an instructive case because the institutional life of that medium has been, and remains, so nomadic. Its subject matter, Dudley Andrew writes, “overrun[s] all names and borders.”²⁹ At the University of California-Berkeley, for example, film studies is housed inside the Rhetoric Department. At Harvard it is part of Visual and Environmental Studies, and at the University of

Wisconsin-Madison its home is Communication Arts. At Concordia University the name is Cinema and Moving Image Study, at the University of Iowa Cinema and Comparative Literature, at Brown University Modern Culture and Media, and at Clark University Screen Studies. At my own home university, the University of Bergen, cinema studies are taught at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies (but there is now also a course at the Philosophy department, and in the past there have been courses at some of the language departments).

In the late 1940s, Gilbert Cohen-Séat lobbied Sorbonne to establish an interdisciplinary research environment for film studies, the filmologie group, which, in the words of Edward Lowry, espoused “a pluralist orientation of various disciplines toward the object of film, unified by a positivist belief in science and a certain sociological rhetoric,” which in retrospect could be seen as “the first coherent statement of a problematic for the comprehensive study of film and as something of a model for subsequent film study in the Western university.”³⁰ The movement created the journal *Revue internationale de filmologie* in 1948 (which changed its name to *Ikon* in 1962 and moved to Milan), and in 1950 an institute was in place. Cohen-Séat, whose book *Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma* became important in rousing support for the academic study of cinema in France, aspired to set up nothing less than a superdiscipline of aesthetics and sociology. He regarded film as the embodiment of that prospect, in that the then half-century old medium represented both the totality of the arts (that would be the aesthetic dimension) and possessed an unprecedented global reach (the sociological dimension). I bring this up because I want to suggest that Cohen-Séat's model for a new discipline construes film studies itself as a kind of transmedial structure, in that the *gesamtkunstwerk* could be considered as a manifestation of such an aesthetics.

In the rapid institutionalization of film studies in the following decades, theoretical work from other fields (semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis) was copiously imported to harness the emerging discipline, again an example of disciplinarity being as much a product of perspectives and methods as of the object that names the discipline. While film studies has entered into multifarious constellations over the years, it has also become increasingly specialized, something to which the massive recent growth of journals attests. Intellect, for instance, a single publishing house, currently issues no less than 18 film studies journals, among which are titles such as *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, *Journal of Screenwriting* and *Transnational Cinemas*. Such a proliferation obvi-

ously affirms the habitat film studies has secured within the academic ecology, so to speak, as do all the other mechanisms – a name, a method, a corpus, a department, majors, graduate programs, professional associations and conferences – which over time transform research initiatives into disciplines.

6. Epistemic reorganization

A full-fledged discipline is a serious matter. As Chandler notes, it “operate[s] on the level where our academic identities and attachments are at stake in a peculiarly important way.”³¹ No doubt this is true. Disciplines produce and maintain scholarly identities and provide a home. But the problem is just that they are also quite malleable things masquerading as completely natural phenomena. Imagine, for a moment, if someone made the following proclamation: “There can be no sense to a teaching of literature which is not a branch of media studies.”³² The statement is not fictitious but was made by Colin MacCabe in his book *The Eloquence of the Vulgar* (1999). MacCabe, a Joyce and Godard expert among other things, certainly did not propose to replace literature with media studies, but his remark is indicative, I think, of a recognition – too rare, perhaps – of the need to modify the disciplinary structures in accordance with historical changes in the objects of study.

Identity attachments aside, a common reservation with regard to interdisciplinarity is that it might eventually lead to deskilling.³³ Knowledge specific to a discipline of artistic medium might deteriorate, the argument goes, if students and scholars are too recklessly exposed to an extensive range of artifacts and the various methodological tools that come with them. Is this a genuine problem, or is it mostly the rhetoric of conservatively inclined scholars who see it as their job to discipline their peers and punish renegade colleagues? First of all, there is not necessarily any need to implement interdisciplinarity from day one. A solid grounding in a “traditional” discipline could still precede transaesthetic pursuits on a graduate or post-graduate level. Second, I do not want to imply that everybody should become interdisciplinary and be it all the time. My position is much more modest than that. With the increasing convergence of aesthetic forms and media, it seems pertinent however, that more research projects proceed transaesthetically a little more often than has been the case in the past. Both in literary studies, art history and film studies, it would appear, the organization of syllabi and courses according to historical period, author/artist/auteur, nationality, and genre – to name a few of the most obvious vectors – still pretty much

holds sway, whereas it would be perfectly feasible – and in all likelihood epistemologically enriching – to organize knowledge clusters around entities such as concepts, topics, philosophical problems, etc. This is exactly what Mieke Bal advocates in her influential, even prescient, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), where she proposes that in the era of “humanities without borders” the notion of the concept should replace the idea of coverage.³⁴ Some examples of transdisciplinary concepts that Bal discusses in the book would be *image*, *mise-en-scène*, *framing*, *performance*, *tradition* and *intention*. Many more could be added to that list, for instance fairly familiar and broad concepts such as war, violence, globalization, sexuality, technology; more abstract ones like experience and mediation, figurality; and more specialized, neologist ones like Linda Williams’s concept of on/scenity or Clyde Taylor’s concept of entelechy.³⁵

By now it should be evident that the concept scrutinized here has been that of the discipline, particularly in its salient relations to the notions of the episteme and transmediality. Much is at stake in this area, as Judith Butler has shown in a recent article. In the ongoing and fervent debate about academic freedom in the U.S.,³⁶ Robert Post anchors the right to institutional self-governance in the norms of the profession and the discipline.³⁷ Butler feels uneasy about this and claims that

when and if academic norms, understood as professional and disciplinary norms, become the legitimating condition of academic freedom, then we are left with the situation in which the critical inquiry into the legitimacy of those norms not only appears to threaten academic freedom but also falls outside the stipulated compass of its protection. So too do disciplinary and interdisciplinary innovations that might unsettle the boundaries of the discipline. Professional norms, construed in part as disciplinary norms, legitimate academic freedom, but what, if anything, legitimates such norms?³⁸

There is obviously no easy way out of such a conundrum, but the problem does prompt us to consider the institutional value of a sustained engagement with and critique of disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses. Exploring what could perhaps be termed the *transmedial dispositif* is one possible direction that such an engagement could go in.

7. Transaesthetic currents and the case of ekphrasis

In our current mediasphere, aesthetic experience (and our ways of thinking about it) is not what it used to be. Maybe we could say that we have entered the era of the post-aesthetic, but I’m not sure if that is a very apt term, as it tends too readily to evoke the trajectory from Duchamp, to

abstract art, conceptualism, relational art – in short, all that. The present shift is different. It is about a turn toward transaesthetics, transmediality. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno says that “Hegel and Kant were the last who ... were able to write major aesthetics without understanding anything about art.”³⁹ Let us hope we will be the last generation to make heady pronouncements on aesthetic matters with a poorly developed understanding of the continuity of all the art forms. This is not to say that there haven’t been attempts to problematize obsolescent aesthetics and to formulate new ones. I could go on and on about the list of publications that have appeared this last decade that grapple with these issues. There is Mark Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media* (2004), for example, and the thoroughly interaesthetic work of Angela Dalle Vacche. There is, furthermore, the synaesthetic orientation of film scholars such as Laura Marks and David MacDougall, and David Rodowick’s epochal *Reading the Figural* (2001). There have also been more regional attempts to dive into this area, in the form of anthologies like *Interart Poetics* (1997) and *Interaktioner* (2009).⁴⁰ And then there is of course the contributions of two major French thinkers, Jean-Luc Nancy – who in *The Muses* (1996) asks why there are several arts and not just one – and Jacques Rancière.⁴¹ Some of this scholarship touches on transaesthetics/transmediality – and my own ruminations on the phenomenon is in part inspired by it – but these concepts, for me, are in need of much more additional elaboration. What I would like to pursue further is this sense that all aesthetic media share something in common that is not reducible to the forms and particularities of each discrete medium, nor to any traditional sense of “aesthetics.”

One could be lead to think that I am simply talking about the good old notion of intertextuality, or maybe instances of remediation, one of the favorite terms of media studies this last decade.⁴² But that is not what I’m talking about. Transmediality, or transaesthetics, goes beyond those two terms. Intertextuality as a term comes to us with a pungent connotation of language and the verbal and is, strictly speaking, about repetition and recontextualization of fragments. Remediation as a term is closely associated with the realm of the digital and concerns, moreover, technologies of transmission more than it does the content of what is being remediated. Besides, intertextuality does not need to involve more than one medium, and remediation tends to entail a dynamic of emulation and reconstitution that is not quite what transmedial aesthetics is about. Rather, it is a particular sensibility, it is that which courses through the aesthetic work, an energy which strives to incorporate medial difference, a desire for formal multiplicity and aesthetic impurity.

Currents of this sensibility seem to be discernible in especially these three aesthetic or discursive formations: synaesthetics and the growing literature on vision in relation to other senses; the theoretical perspectives offered by visual culture studies; and the expansion of ekphrastic aesthetics in what I have elsewhere referred to as *oculariture*.⁴³ What particularly interests me here is this enactment of effusive visuality in a medium frequently considered adverse to the culture of the ubiquitous image. Siri Hustvedt's 2003 novel *What I Loved*, for example, contains many passages in which a variety of visual media – paintings, installations, video – are rendered in much detail. This is also the case with much prose fiction from the last two decades: *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (Richard Powers 1985), *Underworld* (Don DeLillo 1997), *Larry's Party* (Carol Shields 1997), *Austerlitz* (W.G. Sebald 2001), *The Book of Illusions* (Paul Auster 2002), *Seek My Face* (John Updike 2002), and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Jonathan Safran Foer 2005) – texts such as these herald the appearance of what may be named a nascent *ocular literature*, or *oculariture*.⁴⁴ By this slightly incongruous phrase I do not only have in mind the kind of “visual poetics” – the life of the visual in the literary – about which Mieke Bal has written so eloquently,⁴⁵ but something which transcends mere pictorialism to encompass a sense of writing both as a way of seeing and, more importantly, as a way of *showing seeing*.⁴⁶ An ocular literature is one that engages acutely and powerfully with the domain of visual culture, that blends into it and thereby reveals the extent to which the novel also can be considered a visual medium. This undoubtedly represents a shamelessly heretical stance to the proponents of that firmly entrenched logocentric tradition which regards literature as an especially delicate and intangible mode of expression, wholly uncontaminated by the physical. The art of literature, John Guillory notes, has been “less conspicuously marked by medial identity than other media, such as film, and that fact has tacitly supported the disciplinary division between literary and media studies.”⁴⁷ And as David Rodowick has pointed out, literature as a signifying practice has often been ontologized in contradistinction to more corporeal and tactile arts like painting and sculpture: “[t]hrough Kant, Hegel, and beyond, the most temporal and immaterial arts, such as lyric poetry, ranked highest, since they were presumed to be the most spiritual; that is, they corresponded most closely to the immateriality and temporality of thought.”⁴⁸ Novelistic discourse, however, cannot be reduced to the kind of media purism espoused by this logocentrist orthodoxy. With respect to books that feature images as a component integral to the work (e.g. the aforementioned *Austerlitz*, Duane Michals's *The*

House I Once Called Home (2003), or William Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003)) this seems patently self-evident. But how does the claim that the novel may also be a visual medium of sorts apply to the vast majority of texts which, after all, do not contain literal images? One suggestion would be that, since visibility is not a homogeneous phenomenon but can imply a multitude of forms and instantiations, it should not be approached exclusively as a cause, or means, but also as an effect, or result. In other words, visibility may very well derive from sources that are not themselves visual in a strictly material sense (besides literature, dreams and imagination would be two other obvious catalysts). Yet, one might still object that thinking about literature as something visual is predicated upon a deliberate conflation of medium and effect. Be that as it may. The main point is that there appears to be enough evidence to suggest that the distinction between the verbal and the visual vis-à-vis the novel is an increasingly tenuous one. To denote the alternative experience of the visual that can be had from literary texts, then, I propose to use the term *nominal* or *conceptual visibility*, a notion whose coordinate is that ekphrastic hermeneutics which animates the novels mentioned above.⁴⁹ As a generative aesthetic process, ekphrasis may be conceptualized as one instance of the work of a transmedial dispositif.

Notes

1. Svetlana Alpers, "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (1996): 26.
2. Raymond Bellour, "Battle of the Images," in *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, eds. Jeffery Shaw and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003), 58.
3. Since this analysis approaches the subject of medium from primarily an aesthetic vantage point, it tends to use the notions of the transmedial and the transaesthetic somewhat interchangeably. Evidently these are distinct concepts that should not be conflated; however, space and emphasis don't permit their scrupulous disentangling in this essay. Suffice it here to say the concept of transmediality operates more on a theoretical level where that of the transaesthetic is tied more to the level of material expression.
4. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 197.
5. Gaston Bachelard, *Le nouvel esprit scientifique* [1934] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).
6. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

7. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* [1983], trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 178.

8. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

9. The issue is based on the proceedings from the conference of the same name held at the University of Chicago in May 2006. It also forms part of a series co-edited by James Chandler (of the Franke Institute for the Humanities at the University of Chicago), the first two installment of which were "Questions of Evidence" (published by *Critical Inquiry* 18, Winter 1992, with Arnold I. Davidson and Harry Harootunian) and "Acts of Transmission" (*Critical Inquiry* 31, Autumn 2004, with Davidson and Adrian Johns). Now a trilogy of sorts, the projects were not originally conceived together.

10. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

11. Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith, eds., *What is Research in the Visual Arts: Obsession, Archive, Encounter* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and Yale UP, 2008).

12. Tarja Laine and Wanda Strauven, "Introduction: The synaesthetic turn," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7.3 (2009): 249–255.

13. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar* 49 (1980): 166.

14. Shadow disciplines are institutional formations that develop from the emergence of new objects of study, new material, new topics or new approaches. Examples would be cultural studies, gender studies, film studies, media studies, ethnic studies, performance studies, race studies, and science studies.

15. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 1.

16. It may be noted that the concept of experience recently has become increasingly prevalent in the film studies literature. See for instance Patricia White and Timothy Corrigan, *The Film Experience: An Introduction* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2004), Jane Stadler, Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), Murray Pomerance, *The Horse Who Drank the Sky: Film Experience Beyond Narrative and Theory* (New Brunswick, N. J.; Rutgers University Press, 2008), Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), and Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

17. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Art, Fate, and the Disciplines: Some Indicators," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 1022.

18. See Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.
19. James Chandler, "Introduction: Doctrines, Disciplines, Discourses, Departments," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 739.
20. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Art, Fate, and the Disciplines: Some Indicators," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 1027.
21. *Ibid.*, 1028.
22. There is now a bulging literature about the past and future of cinema studies. See for instance Dudley Andrew, "The 'Three Ages' of Cinema Studies and the Age to Come," *PMLA*, 115.3 (2000): 341–351; Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI, 2001); Jon Lewis, ed., *The End of Cinema as We Know It* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Lisa Cartwright, "Film and the digital in visual studies: film studies in the era of convergence," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1.1 (2002): 7–23; Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, eds, *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of world Cinephilia* (London: BFI, 2003); Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Peter Matthews, "The End of an Era: A Cinephile's Lament," *Sight and Sound* 17.10 (2007): 16–19; D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds, *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Asbjørn Grønstad, "'No one goes to the Movies anymore.' Cinema and Visual Studies in the Digital Era," *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* 30 (2008): 5–16; Gertrud Koch, "Carnivore or Chameleon: The Fate of Cinema Studies," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 918–928; and Dudley Andrew, "The Core and Flow of Film Studies," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 879–915.
23. Koch, "Carnivore or Chameleon," 928.
24. *Ibid.*
25. D.N. Rodowick, "Dr. Strange Media, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Film Theory," in *Inventing Film Studies*, eds. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 340.
26. Andrew, "The Core and Flow of Film Studies," 912.
27. Grønstad, "'No one goes to the Movies anymore'", 12.
28. Koch, "Carnivore or Chameleon," 928.
29. Andrew, "The Core and Flow of Film Studies," 880.
30. Edward Lowry, *The Filmology Movement and Film Study in France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 170.

31. James Chandler, "Introduction: Doctrines, Disciplines, Discourses, Departments," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 733.
32. Colin MacCabe, *The Eloquence of the Vulgar: Language, Cinema and the Politics of Culture* (BFI Publishing: London, 1999), 159.
33. See for instance Rosalind Krauss, "Der Tod der Fachkenntnisse und Kunstfertigkeiten," *Texte zur Kunst* 5 (1995): 61–67.
34. Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 7, 8.
35. Linda Williams, "Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene. An Introduction," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–23; and Clyde R. Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract – Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 59.
36. See for instance Beshara Doumani, ed., *Academic Freedom After September 11* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), and Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
37. Robert Post, "The Structure of Academic Freedom," in *Academic Freedom After September 11*, ed. Beshara Doumani (New York: Zone Books, 2006), 61–106.
38. Judith Butler, "Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 774.
39. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 334.
40. Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), Angela Dalle Vacche, *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film* (London: Athlone, 1996), Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund and Erik Hedling, eds., *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), Peter Stein Larsen, Peder Kaj Pedersen, Ernst-Ullrich Pinkert and Bent Sørensen, eds., *Interaktioner: Om kunstarternes produktive mellemværender* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2009).
41. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) and *Multiple Arts: The Muses II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), and Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).
42. See J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

43. Asbjørn Grønstad, "Stories of the Eye: Showing Seeing in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*," forthcoming in *Art Objects and Women's Words: Women's Ekphrastic Writing 1750 to the Present*, ed. Jill Ehnen (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011).

44. Contemporary poetry also boasts important ekphrastic voices such as those of Jorie Graham and Arielle Greenberg. See for instance Jorie Graham's *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974–1994* (Hopewell, N. J.: Ecco Press, 1995), and Arielle Greenberg's "Seven Poems," *Conjunctions* 42 (2004): 19–25.

45. Mieke Bal, "Toward a Harshavian Poetics," *Poetics Today* 21.3 (2000): 492.

46. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1.2 (2002): 165.

47. John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 322.

48. D. N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 34. For another important critique of the notion of aesthetic experience in Kant, see Jay M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

49. What W. J. T. Mitchell refers to as a projection of virtual spaces would be another way of talking about this notion of conceptual visuality. See Margaret Dikovitskya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005), 56.