

## MEDIUM SPECIFICITY

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(First published May 31, 2025)

It. *Specificità mediale*; Fr. *Spécificité des médias*; Germ. *Medienspezifität*; Span. *Especificidad Medial*.

Medium specificity can be defined as a concept, belonging originally to the theory of art and image and later to the theory of media, which indicates that every form of expression has peculiarities that are not only its own, but also inherent to it. In its most radical formulations, such specificities are even connoted as 'essential' or 'ontological'. Any aesthetic theorization approaching medium specificity postulates that inescapable features in the creation and reception of each expressive typology are implied and compelling. It regards the medium as of primary importance for the qualities of expression. The notion was developed during 'High Modernism', in parallel with the revolution of the Avant-gardes, and was vindicated in the second modernist phase of the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, it has roots in reflections developed in the Enlightenment era.

### THE TROPE OF LAOKOON

The concept of medium specificity is anchored in the categories of modernism and modernity; only starting from the latter is it conceivable to speak of 'mediality' proper, and to sketch a genealogy of it. The concept of media comparison matured in 1766, when Gotthold Ephraim Lessing circumscribed the rhetorical trope philosophically in *Laokoon*: a veritable intermedial scrutiny. He sensed both practical and theoretical confusion among the arts, and felt the need to theorize the impact of the characteristics specific to each medium on the perception of the works. He started with a precise example (the representation of physical pain in poetry and sculpture), but his purpose was broader. It was not to establish media distinctions so that poetry and imitative arts would not be confused with each other, but to emphasize the differences between word and image: even when they would like to express the same they arrive at different results, because of the properties of each medium. In all instances, the principle of the immanence of art is valid: "We should discriminate and call only those works of art which are the handiwork of the artist, purely as artistic" (Lessing 1887: 63). Positing the self-determination of the linguistic medium and the iconic medium, the book stands as one of the seminal media theorizations of the Modern age.

### TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF MODERNITY

From a philosophical point of view, the reflection on media experienced an upheaval at the beginning of the 19th century with *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in which Georg W.F. Hegel framed the main arts as modes of the absolute in a "system of the individual arts" (Hegel 1975). While relating them to the 'Spirit', he methodized them by incorporating the materials of representation into their concept (Szondi 1978), and anticipated – with his idea of the "death of art" and aesthetic *Aufhebung* – the future of artistic theorizing: from Romanticism onwards, in fact, aesthetics would become more and more a philosophy of art, also practised by critics and by artists themselves. A case in point is Madame de Staël. In an 1818 pamphlet, the French writer appropriated media-comparative instruments, transfiguring and renewing the Renaissance *Paragone* between the arts in the light of modernity. A few years earlier, she had refined her principles through the characters of her major novel, *Corinne and Oswald*; in discussions on art and beauty, the former advocates medium specificity, and therefore modernity: "Elle était convaincue que l'empiètement d'un art sur l'autre leur nuisait mutuellement. [...] Les arts sont bornés dans leurs moyens, quoique sans bornes dans leurs effets" (de Staël 1985: 225).

Again in *Corinne*, the way by which the two lovers are transformed into modern critics was disclosed: every difference of opinion "tenait à la diversité des nations, des climats et des religions" (de Staël 1985: 221). This 'climatic' paradigm, which included geographical influences in the grids to differentiate artistic productions, would be decisive for the link between modernity and modernism: Charles Baudelaire. The point of *Salon de 1846* was to construct an aesthetics of modernity, associated in essence with Romanticism and colour. The poet asserted that "le romantisme est fils du Nord, et le Nord est colouriste" (Baudelaire 2020: 145), sharpening the contrast, already acute in Hegel, between North and South as artistic worlds: the dualisms of art criticism became tools of medium specificity, and they were even prone to exhibit the ambiguities of the modern.

By the end of the century, the comparison of artistic media was increasingly freed from taxonomic rigidities and turned to a keener understanding of the structures of the work, now investigated by the creators themselves. A 'creative' focus allowed a look from the inside leading to formalism, instigated by the innovations of the artists of the time. Consider Émile Zola's endorsement of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* of 1867, according to which that painting was at first a collection "de belles taches, de belles oppositions", and then the display of the magic of painterliness through the mere exhibition of "un peu de chair" (Zola 2015: 152, 161). And think of the edgy statement of the *Nabis* painter Maurice Denis who, in 1890, declared that "a picture – before being a war horse, a nude woman, or telling some other story – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a particular pattern"; then, he specified that his intention was to admonish the viewer against the "elusive 'nature'" artistically depicted, always illusionistic, and against the feelings, always "literary" (Denis 1890: 863, 867), aroused by paintings. If previous comparatistics were *analogical*, its later development led to *tautological* mediality.

## THE MODERNIST PEAK AND THE POSTMODERNIST REJECTION

It was in the mid-20th century that medium specificity achieved its refinement, due to the American art critic Clement Greenberg. In addition to fostering its validity in the judgement of works of art, he even enclosed it in

a historical teleology whereby, starting with the revolution of modern painting of the mid-19th century, artists stopped stressing both imitation and illusion: "They sought for the decisive structure of things" (Greenberg 1988b: 272). The avant-garde artists pursued and found "the structure of the picture"; they reduced style to "its [...] purity and unity" (Greenberg 1988b: 272, 271). The modernist work of art was thus determined according to an ontological and essentialist criterion; Greenberg reworked the Lessingian trope "towards a newer Laocoon", to adapt it to abstraction, that would return the most self-evident medium display: "to restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized" (Greenberg 1988a: 32).

Despite the self-critical efforts of Kantian descent, his vision had limitations. Greenberg based his system on the sole medium of painting and "eyesight alone", operating a "bureaucratization of the senses" (Jones 2008), not observing the specificities of every medium. Moreover, he was aware of "the crisis of the easel picture", which he denounced as "an uninterrupted process of attrition" (Greenberg 1988b: 222) that could exhaust the medium itself. In this, Greenberg was anticipated by Nikolai Tarabukin who, in 1923, facing the 'total' Constructivism of Aleksandr M. Rodčenko, pronounced "the 'last' painting" as "the last word, after which painting must become silent" (Tarabukin 1923: 139). As repercussions of "the concentration on painterly content" there would be two consequences: "a steady destruction of the integrity of the painterly organism into its constituent elements", and "a gradual degeneration of painting as the typical art form" (Tarabukin 1923: 135).

These remarks had a tenor strikingly analogous to that of the anti-medium contestations of the postmodernist season and the massive rejection of Greenbergian positions. Tarabukin (1923: 142) predicted that not art itself but individual media would die, and that artisticity would be channelled into "production skills". This was, more or less, what happened from the end of the 1950s onwards: artistic production developed by transcending the prescriptions of media specificity and surpassed criticism and theory, becoming intrinsically philosophical. There had been, therefore, a decisive dismissal of the medium from the field of art, which broadened its spectrum of expression to extremes ranging from intangibility to literalness.

The anti-medium wave was raised first by the artists themselves (e.g. Robert Morris, for his anti-formal extremism, who only allowed "disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things" in his work, 1968: 188); by art critics (Lucy R. Lippard's "dematerialization of art", which "transformed into energy and time", 1971: 255, Harold Rosenberg's "de-definition", which became a "de-aestheticization" of art, 1972); and by philosophers (cf. Arthur C. Danto's almost 'nominalist' attitude to the "transfiguration of the commonplace", 1983). Postmodernism's crusade subsided when, as time went on, it seemed clear that a non-media artistic expressivity was impossible, and that both immaterial and objectual art had solidified into codified forms, and converted themselves into specific media.

#### NOTES FROM THE POST-MEDIUM CONDITION AND PROLEGOMENA FOR MEDIA STUDIES

Since the 1980s there has been, for various reasons, a return of the medium in aesthetic reflection: the evolution of postmodernist art, the influence of mass media in society, the proliferation of new technologies in artists' practices, and a disciplinary broadening from the theory of art to the theory of image, which even

includes "images that are not art" (often technological, Elkins 1995). Rosalind Krauss proclaimed that "we now inhabit a post-medium age", and that art is immersed in a "post-medium condition" which "simultaneously implodes the idea of an aesthetic medium" (Krauss 1999: 20): media specificities exist, but are constantly merged. The medium is now reactivated as an instrument capable of articulating the point of view from which the spectator can interpret the meanings of the works, suggesting that self-determination can allow a movement of openness that connects the work to the viewer in the same trajectory, as a 'phenomenological vector' linking the living body and the world.

It also reappears in Visual Culture Studies and in *Bildwissenschaft*: in those fields of study intended to overcome the rigidities of the label 'art' by shifting focus to images: to everything that is both 'image' and 'picture'. The research on images and desire of W.J. Thomas Mitchell, for example, considers pictures as "complex assemblages of virtual, material, and symbolic elements", and the medium as "the set of material practices that brings an image together with an object to produce a picture" (Mitchell 2005: XIII). Hans Belting, however, inscribes it in a triangulation together with the image and the body, whereby every visible manifestation is inherently 'physically embodied': "No visible images reach us unmediated. Their visibility rests on their particular mediality. [...] Physical images are physical because of the media they use" (Belting 2005: 304).

A further testimony to the vitality of the contemporary debate on mediality is Lars Elleström's theory of intermediality, which demands a perpetual "clarification" of what a medium is (Elleström 2010: 11). To study the "*combination and integration*" or "*mediation and transformation*" between different media, one must first dwell on the "medium borders", and then realize that they possess "modalities" ("categories in the area of the medium") subject to "modes" (qualitative "variants", Elleström 2010: 28, 16). Even such an inclusive and loose overview does not renounce media specificity, to better understand the poignancy of any formal hybridization; yet, however much it may be aimed at blurring all boundaries, even in multimodality "each basic medium has its own modal characteristics" (Elleström 2010: 28), which do not dissolve so easily.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

M. Sessa, *Medium Specificity*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2025 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2025/spring/MediumSpecificity.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630160.

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M. Sessa, *Medium Specificity*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 8, Milano, Mimesis, 2026.