

## Total Intermediality?

Jeff Thoss

**Abstract:**

Christine Schwanecke's *Intermedial Storytelling* combines intermediality studies and cognitive narrative theory to develop a typology for the analysis of prose narratives which thematise, imitate or incorporate the medium of photography. The book constitutes a valuable and rigorous study regarding text-image relations including numerous meticulous close readings. However, the discussions of specific texts occasionally apply the concepts rather liberally, leading to the question whether all that is mentioned can justifiably be subsumed under the heading of intermediality.

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## Total Intermediality?

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Christine Schwanecke. *Intermedial Storytelling: Thematisation, Imitation and Incorporation of Photography in English and American Fiction at the Turn of the 21st Century*. Trier: WVT, 2012. 220 pages, paperback, € 25,00. ISBN: 978-3-86821-395-9

"What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" In this pictorial age, Alice's famous question has increasingly occupied novelists who have seen it as their task not only to include (as they have always done) conversations in their narratives, but, above all, images. Christine Schwanecke's *Intermedial Storytelling* wishes to account for the recent spate of English-language novels that deal with one type of picture, the photograph, by – as the book's subtitle indicates – thematising, imitating or incorporating the visual medium. Drawing upon intermediality studies and cognitive narratology, Schwanecke develops a flexible typology for the analysis of prose narratives relating to photography and offers meticulous readings of twelve texts. However, while her book manages to give a detailed presentation and description of text-image relationships, it also raises questions about the practice of intermediality research as such.

*Intermedial Storytelling* starts off with an extended theoretical part that provides a largely straightforward overview and synthesis of intermediality studies, cognitive and inter- or trans-medial narrative theory as well as photography theory. Schwanecke's main intervention into the current state of research comes at two points: For one, she coins the term 'photoreme' (mental photographic universals) in analogy to 'narrateme' (mental narrative universals); it refers to speaking about instances in a text where some tangible reference to the medium of photography is made and "the system of 'photography' is [...] actually realised in the reader's mind" (p. 45). While this may solve the issue of how to identify intermedial references on a cognitive level, it does not, however, necessarily account for the specific features of a text apt to elicit these 'photoremes', features which only become evident in the discussion of actual examples later on.

Christine Schwanecke's second major proposal concerns typologies: taking issue with Irina Rajewsky's fine-grained differentiation of categories such as 'evozierende', 'simulierende' and '(teil)reproduzierende Systemerwähnung', she argues that when it comes to intermedial references a distinction between "explicit thematisation and implicit imitation" suffices (p. 50). Still, Schwanecke does come up with a fully-fledged typology: For one, she distinguishes between cases of 'thematization' that are primarily content-related and cases that are "increasingly structural" (p. 48). In addition, she differentiates cases of 'iconic imitation' that are sporadic and unobtrusive from cases where photography is continually imitated in a marked

fashion. For the category of 'media combination' or 'incorporation' of photography, she likewise singles out two subtypes, hybridisation based on semiotic heterogeneity and hybridisation based on semiotic homogeneity. These six types are then placed on a scale that indicates increasing modification of a typical prose narrative's semiotic and material structure. This model evidently constitutes the study's cornerstone. Admittedly, it does not lack complexity in comparison to the type of classification the author rejects. However, its success can only be determined on the basis of its application.

This is where Intermedial Storytelling's second, analytical part comes in. Its structure is straightforward: a chapter is devoted to each of the three main categories and a subchapter to each of the six types. The author discusses two mostly well-known novels per type, from Don DeLillo's *Mao II* to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. It might be surprising that Schwanecke spends as much time dealing with the thematisation as with the imitation of photography in prose narratives, as the 'mere' thematisation of other media has often been sidelined in intermediality studies. However, the analyses convincingly show that there is merit in treating medially inconspicuous texts such as DeLillo's *Mao II* or Paul Auster's *Leviathan* from an intermedial perspective as these do contain extended reflections on text-image relationships. In contrast, Schwanecke overemphasizes the unique narrative potential of plurimedial works such as Foer's *Extremely Loud* or Leanne Shapton's *Important Artifacts* [...] in a chapter that also omits mention of the French tradition of the roman-photo or the genre of the artist's book.

Of particular interest is the middle chapter, though, which deals with the imitation of photography. Traditionally, intermediality research has been plagued by the question of how implicit intermedial references – which do not 'name' the medium they are referring to – can be recognised with certainty. This issue is handled well by Schwanecke, who proceeds with care and attention to textual detail when identifying where a particular novel alludes to a 'photoreme'. Yet, frequently, once it has been established that a particular text does in one part or another imitate photography, the analysis moves on to assimilate more and more textual elements whose 'photoremic' quality is not really obvious or of a more metaphorical nature to an intermedial reading. The problem, then, is not where intermediality begins, but where it ends.

For example, in her discussion of Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Schwanecke calls the novel's storyworld "distorted" – e.g., Kennedy survives the Dallas assassination – and links this to the protagonist's (a photographer) experience with "scale distortion" using mirrors (p. 105). This connection seems tenuous and one could debate whether giving the storyworld a timeline different from our own actually qualifies as "distortion" in any vaguely photographic or even visual sense. Likewise, in the section dealing with Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie*, the author writes that "similar to the converging lines in a photo, threads of action merge in a decisive point of each chapter" (p. 120). One has to wonder whether this is not too impressionistic and largely based on a metaphorical application of the concept of vanishing point to literary texts.

Generally, it appears that whenever there is talk of perspective, darkness, illumination or even fragmentation, of words that are in one way or another related to photography, Schwanecke is quick to subsume them under the novels' intermedial dimension. Thus, one is often left with the impression of 'total intermediality' operating in these texts, a term that the author actually reserves for her last example, Shapton's Important Artifacts. This does not really affect the typology presented in *Intermedial Storytelling*, which stands the test of practice and arguably proves to be more intuitive than Rajewsky's. It is rather a question of to which textual elements or phenomena one applies these types, and where one overextends the concept of intermediality to the point where it loses any distinctiveness. Despite this caveat, *Intermedial Storytelling* is a valuable study for those interested in narratology, intermediality studies and their intersection.