

Jeff Thoss

The Metareferential Turn

- **The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media: Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation. An International Symposium organized at the Centre for Intermediality Studies in Graz (CIMIG), Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz/Austria, 1–3 October 2009.**

It is certainly not a new suspicion or observation that in recent times media have tended to talk more and more about themselves and less about the ›world out there‹. However, while many individual manifestations of this increase in ›metareference‹ – the move from a first cognitive and communicative level to a higher one on which thoughts, expressions and elements from the first level become objects of reflection and communication in their own right – have been identified and studied, e.g., 1960s and 70s ›metafiction‹, a large-scale interdisciplinary and transmedial investigation of the phenomenon has so far been lacking. The symposium »The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media: Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation« ventured to remedy this research lacuna. Jointly organized by the Centre for Intermediality Studies in Graz and the research project »Metareference – A Transmedial Phenomenon«, the event was a follow-up to last year's conference on »Metareference in the Arts and Media«, whose goal it had been to synergize efforts from various disciplines and develop a framework for the study of metareference across media. (The proceedings have been published as *Metareference across Media*, ed. Werner Wolf, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.) This time around, twenty-five scholars were invited to apply these theoretical findings in their inquiries into the questions of whether and why contemporary Western culture has experienced a ›metareferential turn‹. The speakers came from a wide variety of fields and discussed an even wider variety of media and genres, including literary fiction, fantasy fiction, television series, music videos, classical as well as popular music, mixed-media installations, graffiti and murals, sculpture, photography, arthouse cinema, porn as well as horror films, animation, graphic novels, webcomics, net art, clothing, and cell phone ringtones.

Over the course of the three days, the conference hypothesis that metareference has significantly increased was strongly substantiated, yet opinions differed as to when this increase began (and perhaps also ended). The issue was said to depend upon the medium under scrutiny: while, as already hinted at, ›metafiction‹ made an indelible mark on literature in the 1960s and 70s, similar developments could be observed only about two decades later in television – as was demonstrated by **Henry Keazor** (Saarbrücken) among others. Some participants, as for example **Irina Rajewsky** (Berlin), felt that metareference has already passed its zenith and seen a decline in popularity over the last decade. In contrast to this, **Katharina Bantleon** (Graz), speaking from the perspective of the visual arts, pointed to a large number of recent metareferential works that appropriate older metareferential works, a trend she dubbed ›meta²‹. Another topic that was hotly debated in this context was the notion of ›turn‹ itself. For many, the term implied a certain suddenness of change, which was deemed incongruent with a phenomenon that ostensibly arose in a more gradual way. Yet, conference initiator **Werner Wolf** (Graz) defended his choice of the term by remarking that none of the alternative labels proposed (e.g., metareferential ›boost‹) had quite the pithiness and explanatory power of ›turn‹.

If the question of whether there has been a metareferential turn was almost uniformly answered in the affirmative, attempts to explain this development were made from vastly different angles. However, the models put forward did not so much contradict as complement one

another. A topic that came up again and again was that of media competition or rivalry. As, for instance, **Alexander Starre** (Göttingen) argued, in a culture which proliferates medial forms of expression, media cannot but turn upon themselves to show what they can do that other media cannot. A corollary to such a media saturation is media savvy, whose relevance **Nicholas de Villiers** (Jacksonville, FL) revealed in the context of horror audiences, audiences that know the conventions of their genre well and enjoy being made aware of them. The emergence of new media or medial hybrids as well as changes within established media were generally seen to be accompanied by a need for self-inspection in order to define (and perhaps also legitimate) one's place in the media landscape. Such matters were discussed by, for example, **Christine Schwanecke** (Heidelberg) with regard to the photo-novel. Likewise, media could also frequently be found looking back upon their own history – a possible symptom of the often diagnosed postmodern nostalgia. While animation scholar **Erwin Feyersinger** (Innsbruck) viewed this phenomenon in a relatively positive light, **Roy Sommer** (Wuppertal) was somewhat more dismissive of what he considered to be a bland retro-fashion. Sommer was among the few present who offered a more skeptical perspective on the metareferential turn. Similarly critical points were raised by **Andreas Mahler** (Graz), who contemplated whether in some cases metareference could not be seen as a mere sleight of hand to disguise a lack of originality.

With a series of high-level presentations and lively discussions, the symposium certainly raised the expectations for the conference proceedings, which are expected to be published in the winter of 2010/2011 (*The Metareferential Turn: Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation*, ed. Werner Wolf, Amsterdam: Rodopi).

Jeff Thoss

Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz
Institut für Anglistik

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