Colloquium “Self-Reference in the Media”
Abstracts

Fernando Andacht: *On the uses of self-mockery and self-disclosure as modes of audiovisual self-reflexivity in the age of the reality show*

The paper accounts for the specific semiotic process of a popular phenomenon of contemporary television. A comparison is posited between self-reflexivity in the reality show *Big Brother Brasil (BBB)*, and in a documentary by E. Coutinho, Brazil’s leading documentarist. His *Edifício Master* (2002) points to its own rhetoric to disclose its constructed nature, and undo the illusion of the real created by the genre. *BBB* mockingly highlights its own structural components, to persuade its audience about its reality status and enhance its entertainment value. Since their prevalent esthetic effect relies on signs with an existential link to their objects, both belong to the indexical genre. However, the former seeks transparency, and the latter to cover up its meaning strategies by showing a backstage of its own choice. The playful exhibition of discarded videos of rejected candidates is a case of self-mocking “communicative self-reference” (Nöth), self-reflexivity on its production format. In successive editions, *BBB*’s prevalent semiosis changed from its initial “index appeal” (Andacht), reliance on factual signs issuing from the interaction order, to an iconic/symbolic hegemony. This semiotic change is due to the short lived impact of indexicality as a form of popular entertainment, and to the long lasting effect of sit-com conventions and visual strategies. Thus self-reference is used by two varieties of indexical genre for different purposes: consciousness raising (documentary), and new ways of turning everyday life interaction into humorous sketches (*BBB*).

**Topic:** A comparative semiotic analysis of self-reference in a glocal reality show, Big Brother Brazil, and in contemporary documentary film, *Edifício Master*. Different purposes are accomplished by a similar self-referential strategy.

Nina Bishara: “Absolut Anonymous”. *Self-Reference and Opaque Advertising*

Advertising is essentially a means to an end but never an end in itself. It refers to a product, which is the object of a sign. This kind of reference is highly indexical in the sense of Peirce. Occasionally, advertising appears on its surface to be self-referential, that is, it seems to point to itself and not to the product. This does not only constitute a paradox, it also seems counterproductive to the primary aims of the text genre. One of the forms of self-reference in advertising is the topic of this paper: opaque advertising. It consists of seemingly empty indices and invisible referents. These enigmatic advertising texts remain self-referential as long as the recipients do not succeed in determining a referential object or interpretant with the help of clues provided by the advertisers. Therefore, opaque advertising is ultimately only seemingly self-referential as the invisible referent is actually transparent in the advertising message. The function of enigmatic advertising is to increase the readers’ time dedicated to the text and thus increase the memo value of the advertising message.


The visualization of history is one of the strength of television in its ongoing competition with the existing media ensemble. During the historic development of television documentaries established themselves as dominating formats of the visualization of history. But since a few years diverse showformats of historytainment like “The Castle” (Pro Sieben) play an important role in german television programs. Fragments of Archive material are used to deliver nostalgic experiences to the audiences like in shows about the history of the GDR. This lecture is analyzing the special usage of archive Material in the visual presentation of television history in television. On this basis it is possible to reflect about the self presentation of television as well as about the role of television in the collective memory of society.

Andreas Böhn: *Nostalgia of the Media / in the Media*

As media are part of the world of our everyday life they are also object of personal memories. Changing and developing in the flux of time, they are no more what they used to be in a former stage of our life. Therefore they form part of an expanding culture of memory, with aspects of
musealization and nostalgia, which can be regarded as a counterpart to the process of modernization. This nostalgia of the media does not only extend to the material remains (media archives, personal collections etc.) but also to their specific way of appearance and representation, the way they let us see the world generated by them. Media do increasingly devote themselves to this nostalgia of the media, which means that they rely to different historic versions of themselves resp. of other media. Therefore nostalgia of the media in the media is a way of self-reference of the media, because media refer to themselves as subject to historic development, remembrance, oblivion, destruction etc. The paper will focus on examples that show nostalgia of film and tv in film.

Vincent Colapietro: Distortion, Fabrication, and Disclosure in a Self-Referential Culture: The Irrepressible Force of Reality

The news being broadcast via such media as television, radio, and the world wide web constitutes unquestionably intricate and arguably insular networks of self-citation and self-commentary. The news reports on the news as much as anything else. Popular entertainment constructs a world of complex allusions to the fabrications of the entertainment industry itself. Nowhere is intertextuality more evident than, for example, in the narrative, characteriological, imagistic, and musical structures of cinema. We seemingly inhabit a world of our own making, one in which claims about reality are viewed with deep suspicion, if not outright dismissal. The crisis of representation, insofar as it is generated by the inherent dynamic of, and theoretical reflections on, mass media, is inseparably connected to the forms of reflexivity so pervasive in a culture so radically structured by such media: the possibilities of reference and representation seem to be limited to those of self-reference and self-representation.

The mediated (or semiotic) realism of C. S. Peirce is however able to do fuller justice to the complex actualities of contemporary culture than more influential theories of radical constructivism. For theoretical and practical purposes, the language of disclosure must not be completely jettisoned in favor of the language of distortion or that of fabrication (or construction). The purpose of this paper is to make this argument as briefly and yet pointedly as possible.

Britta Neitzel: Metacommunication in (Computer) Games and Play

According to Gregory Bateson, play is always metacommunicative. Those who play are permanently emitting signals, which refer to the situation and denote it as play. Such signals change the meaning of all actions within the situation. For example, what seems to be pursuit, attack, or business, changes to „only play” or „just for fun.” This change of meaning involves a paradox. Playful actions mimic actions, but at the same time, deny the meaning of the mimicked actions. The self-referential message „This is play”, included by all playful actions, is constitutive for the play-situation: if play is not signified as play it is not play.

Proceeding from an elaboration of Bateson’s theory, the paper will consider the possibility of its application on games, focusing on forms that are used by single player computer games to include metacommunication in the gaming process. These games, due to the lack of communication and communication partners, either fictionalize the act of metacommunication or establish a situation of parasocial interaction (a concept derived from TV-theory to describe programs that simulate direct address of the spectators). Analyses of exemplary computer games will illustrate the theoretical premises.

Winfried Nöth: The Death of Photography in Self-Reference

The „death of photography” has been declared since the advent of digital photography. The metaphor refers to the end of a medium whose messages were indexical signs causally related to the objects they refer to, a medium about which R. Barthes has said that „it never lies.” The death of photography is hence the advent of pictures which have lost their referent. However, if the loss of the referent is the distinctive feature of traditional photography, the “death of photography” is as old as the “crisis of representation,” and the history of photography has seen many forms and modalities of this death, e.g., falsification by retouch, double exposure, or abstraction from the gestalt of the objects in the “abstract photography” of the 1920s. Many deaths of photography are due to self-reference, since photographic self-reference is a form of the loss of the referent in photography. The camera in the picture, the photo in the photo (mise en abyme), or the deliberately distorted photo
are forms of pictorial representation which result in hiding the photographic referent. The paper examines various forms of such losses of the photographic referent from the 19th to the 21st century and concludes with reference to Peirce’s theory of indexicality and iconicity that whereas the now-defunct classical photography used to produce indexical signs, the postphotographic art of Concrete Photography has arrived at photos which can be described as genuinely self-referential icons.

Karin Pühringer / Gabriele Siegert: There’s no business without show-business: Self-Reference as Self-Promotion

Media have become increasingly self-referential. However not all various types increase similarly. While we find more and more meta-media, e.g. program guides and media parodies, critical media journalism such as critical reporting about political and economical dimensions of current media developments, is regressing. The most common phenomenon of self-reference is self-promotion. The rise of self-promotion can be explained with the economical intentions of media companies: Enforced competition constrains the use of self-promotion for announcement, image-building, creating audience-flow and - in the long run - for being successful in the media industry. Therefore self-promotion has become a crucial instrument of media marketing and has been evolving various forms. In the theoretical part of our presentation we focus on self-reference in traditional mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and TV, arguing from a media economics point of view. We analyze the intentions of media companies to facilitate self-promotion and present empirical results of program analysis of German-speaking TV-programs.

Bernhard Rapp: Forms of Self-Reference in Computer Games and Analyses of Selected Examples

Playing computer games has always meant to be confronted with self-reference on various levels such as rules and interaction. With the aid of examples this presentation tries to give a survey of the variety of self-reference from a specific point of view: To match with the complexity of the phenomenon I will focus on the category of ‘(self-)reflexivity’ which - according to a definition of Kay Kirchmann - shall be understood as a collective term for all kinds of explicit self-thematisation. The examples are to show that this specific form of self-reference is a continued, a-historic tendency in the computer gaming-scene which occurs in all kinds of game-genres and displays a vast variety of elements in terms of content, extension, aesthetics and function. It is for instance prominent in adventure games such as Day of the Tentacle (LucasArts 1993) (where a game is included within the game), or action games like XIII (Ubisoft 2003) (where advertising refers to the developing company). By discussing these and other examples I will suggest some guiding questions that may help to open up a more analytic approach to the object of research.

Lucia Santaella: Paroxysms of Self-Reference in Games

Self-reference and self-reflexivity are features of digital culture. In computer games, self-reference is taken to paroxism by the various forms of simulated realities without any reference to the “real” world. Several types of self-reference in games will be distinguished: quotation, intertextuality, intermediality, repetition, break of fictional illusions, and the focus on the materiality of the sign instead of its referent. This paper will discuss the way these types of self-reference create specific types of games and how the rules of computer game are self-referential.

Jan Siebert: Self-Reference in Animated Cartoons

In many regards, the history of animated cartoons is also a history of self-referential effects. From the beginning, filmmakers have found many ways of proudly implementing their signature in the course of their film. As a result, animation films can very often be described as a genre that displays its artificiality to a much higher degree than live-action films, the authenticity of which the animated films have never been able (and mostly have never been eager) to copy. While the live-action film is based on the recording of photographic images and is thus generally aimed at mimicking reality, the animated film is created frame-by-frame, leaving the creator many possibilities to stress the underlying process. Even with the domination of computer-generated images since the 1980s, the tradition of self-reference has been carried on with the juxtaposition of live-action and animation sequences (e.g. WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT, USA 1988, SPACE JAM, USA 1996) and the production of “Making of”-
features that mock the perfectionism of Pixar films like TOY STORY (USA 1995, 1999) or MONSTERS INC. (USA 2001).

This paper intends to give an insight into the high variety of moments of self-reference in animated films. For further reading, the book Flexible Figuren: Medienreflexive Komik im Zeichentrickfilm (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005) by the same author is recommended. It also analyses sequences of intermediality in animated films that can be described as variants of self-references that will not be discussed in this paper.

Gloria Withalm: The Self-Reflexive Screen: Outlines of a Comprehensive Model

The long list of examples shows that the filmic reference to itself as medium is as old as the medium itself, and can be found in every genre. In order to deal with the topic in a comprehensive way, a model has to be developed which is able to cover the entire range of observable textual strategies and practices and relate them to the double nature of film as a sign system and as a socio-cultural system. Based on the socio-semiotics of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, a possible model looks at the medium film as a whole along the main phases of the fundamental cycle production - exchange (or distribution) - consumption (or reception), as well as at the product film. Apart from the well-documented self-referential procedures of film-within-film (or rather filming-within-film), film citation and allusion, or people watching movies, there is a particular group of movies which transcends these forms of self-referentiality: self-reflexive movies that at certain moments of the discourse focus on themselves. Over the decades, a variety of types and functions were created; among them are:

- lines of dialog in which characters talk about the movie or even about themselves as film characters;
- showing the film studio or drawing attention to the shooting camera;
- temporary dissolve of the barrier of the movie screen within the movie;
- diegetization (or even materialization) of film aesthetic devices or elements of the film;
- “self-presentation” of the movie as a movie;
- movie characters changing the course of events of their movie;
- a film enters recursive narrative loops, returning at the end to its very beginning...

The examples are taken from feature films throughout film history, television series, commercials and animated cartoons.

Werner Wolf: Instrumental Metamusic as an Analogy to Literary Metafiction? An Exploration of the Limits of the Transmedial Field “Metareferentiality”

Among the many variants of self-reference, meta-reference is no doubt one of the most interesting ones. This is not only true with an eye to contemporary media, where meta-phenomena have become almost ubiquitous, but also from a systematic point of view. For meta-reference can be found in so many media that one may ask whether this obviously transmedial phenomenon actually extends to all media. This is the question I will try to answer with reference to a medium that at first sight seems marginal, if not downright inappropriate, in this context, namely (Western) instrumental (art) music. Indeed, in an exploration of the limits of the transmedial ‘meta-field’ instrumental music appears to be a medium that among all media is arguably the most self-referential one - as long as self-reference remains within the domain of repetition, variation and other forms of similarities and contrasts -, but seems especially problematic when it comes to meta-reference.

Starting from a definition of meta-reference as opposed to other forms of self-reference, I will present some typological tools for a comparative analysis of meta-reference, tools that are modelled on metafiction as one of the core-media in this field. On this basis I will then discuss to what extent the concept and important typological forms of meta-reference are applicable to instrumental music. My thesis is that under certain conditions (Western) instrumental music of the past few centuries can indeed approach the condition of meta-reference and thus be located within the ‘meta-field’, albeit at its margins only, since this medium has more difficulties than others in fulfilling essential ‘meta-conditions’ and can do so only to a limited and often debatable extent (which does not cover all the ‘meta-forms’ that are possible in metafiction). Examples of potential ‘meta-music’ discussed in my contribution will include compositions by Friedrich Gulda, Johannes Brahms and - as a particularly intriguing case study - J. S. Bach’s “Kleines Harmonisches Labyrinth” (BWV 591).