Metareference in Marianne Wiggins’s Literary Photo-Text *The Shadow Catcher* and Other Novels Referring to the Photographic Medium

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This article examines two types of novels capable of eliciting ‘intermedial metareference’: literary photo-texts and novels featuring intermedial references to photography. The first part analyses how metareferential potential is established by intermedial means and reflects upon possible functions and effects of this device. A scaling model for the respective metareferential potential’s ‘markedness’ is proposed in order to assess the salience of intermedial devices as secondary references to the sphere of media and related issues. The second part of this analysis deals with the question of the extent to which the novels under discussion – *The Shadow Catcher, The Photograph, The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, and *Mao II* – might help to explain the ‘metareferential turn’ assumed in this volume. In this context issues such as the recent changes in the Western media landscape or the increase in medial hybridisation over the last few decades are taken into account.

1. Introduction

As in distinct individual media, there has likewise been an increase and a heightened interest in metareference in intermedial forms of representation (see also Pier in this vol.). This article focuses on English and American novels which transcend their conventional medial boundaries by relating to and drawing on other, predominately visual, art forms. Marianne Wiggins’s *The Shadow Catcher* (2007), which will be at the core of this discussion, as well as Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991), Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), and Penelope Lively’s *The Photograph* (2003) – all of which were first published in the last two decades – have, above all, two things in common: they all relate to the photographic medium and display metareferential features. Therefore, I will discuss two major questions: 1) to what extent and in what respect is the metareferentiality of these novels related to intermediality; and 2) are there specific reasons for the growing popularity of metareference in novels that feature intermedial qualities?
I will start by examining the forms and functions of ‘intermedial metareference’\(^1\) in the works of fiction under discussion in order to assess narrative structures which are likely to direct the reader’s attention to the novels’ metareferential properties. Furthermore, I will consider the extent to which the four narratives might help to explain the ‘metareferential turn’ assumed in this volume. However, before addressing these issues, I will explore the relationship between intermediality and metareference.

2. ‘Intermedial metareference’ in selected contemporary English and American novels

It is true, indeed, that the four novels under discussion, which are all – in one respect or another – intermedial, at the same time show metareferential features\(^2\). We will see later that, in some cases, metaization is even caused by a particular intermedial structure. Yet, as Werner Wolf points out, one has to be careful not to assume that intermediality automatically corresponds to metareference. Quite on the contrary, “a number of factors and criteria must be active or applicable to allow the actualization of the metareferential potential which […] forms [of intermedial relations] no doubt possess” (Wolf 2009: 61; cf. also Wolf 1999a: 49). Whether, or to what extent, intermedial modes and devices may (at least in part) constitute and/or activate a given artefact’s metareferential potential depends on various parameters: firstly, the frequency with which such devices occur; secondly, the combination of implicit devices, such as ‘intermedial references’ (“intermediale Bezüge”, cf. Rajewsky 2002: 16–18, 25–27), with explicit forms of

\(^1\) By ‘intermedial metareference’ I mean metareference which is exclusively or at least in part caused by intermedial properties of the works in which it occurs.

\(^2\) In accordance with Werner Wolf, this analysis considers a ‘medium’ “not in the restricted sense of a technical or institutional channel of communication but as a conventionally distinct means of communication or expression characterized not only by particular channels (or one channel) for the sending and receiving of messages but also by the use of one or more semiotic systems” (1999b: 40; cf. also Rajewsky 2002: 7). This enables us to define literary photo-texts, which make use of two semiotic systems – photography and (literary) language, both of which can be related to single media – as a plurimedial genre. Intermediality is likewise used in its broad sense, “denoting […] any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media” (Wolf 2009: 61; cf. also Rajewsky 2002: 12).