

**Between / Beyond / Hybrid**

**New Essays  
on Transdisciplinarity**

**Edited by  
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**DIAPHANES**



# Table of Contents

## **Preface 9**

**Hartmut von Sass**

Transdisciplinarity—a Drug on the Market?  
An Introductory Question **11**

**Jürgen Mittelstrass**

From Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity  
to Transdisciplinarity and Back Again **25**

**Harald Atmanspacher**

Transdisciplinary:  
from a Philosophical Stance to its Implementation  
A Response to Jürgen Mittelstrass **45**

**Florian Dombois**

Art with Some T?  
A 35-Minute Essay **53**

**Amrei Wittwer**

Artists and the Transdisciplinary Workplace  
A Commentary **71**

**Andrea B. Braidt**

Transgressing Disciplines  
The Transdisciplinary Settings of Media Studies,  
Gender Studies, and Artistic Research **77**

**Marco Meier**

Response to Andrea B. Braidt **95**

**Sabine Maasen**

Collaborating In and Beyond Science  
Obstacles and (Somewhat Surprising) Opportunities **101**

**Christoph Schenker**

Transdisciplinarity and Condensed Knowledge  
Response to Sabine Maasen **125**

**Elisabeth Bronfen**

Crossmapping  
A Hermeneutic Practice **133**

**Christian Ritter**

Transdisciplinarity—a Double-Agent Operation?  
A Commentary on Elisabeth Bronfen's  
Crossmapping Concept **147**

**Hans-Jörg Rheinberger**

Away from the Disciplines **153**

**Hartmut von Sass**

The Way of Science, or Away from Science  
A Reply to Hans-Jörg Rheinberger **167**

**Contributors 173**

Elisabeth Bronfen

# Crossmapping

## A Hermeneutic Practice

When I first introduced my notion of crossmapping, in a collection of essays published under the title, *Liebestod und Femme Fatale*, in 2004, I was following an intuition.<sup>1</sup> Having noticed the thematic connection between a plot structure common to classic film-noir narratives and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*—a young man intervenes in the unhappy marriage between an older, powerful man and his dangerously alluring wife—I became curious to see if mapping a set of films from the 1940s (Jacques Tourneur's *OUT OF THE PAST*, Robert Siodmak's *CRISS CROSS* and Billy Wilder's *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*) onto the opera libretto would help me understand more about both the Wagnerian charting of the world and that of his cinematic successors and inheritors. In this endeavor I was guided by the conversation Stanley Cavell proposes between classic Hollywood films and a different dramatic oeuvre, namely the Shakespearean romance. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, treating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an antecedent of George Cukor's *PHILADELPHIA STORY*, Cavell explains that he is not interested in providing solid evidence for a relation between these two texts. His interest, instead, "is one of discovering, given the thought of this relation, what the consequences of it might be." He goes

- 1 See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Liebestod und Femme fatale. Der Austausch sozialer Energien zwischen Oper, Literatur und Film*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2004.

on to explain: "This is a matter not so much of assigning significance to certain events of the drama as it is of isolating and relating the events for which significance needs to be assigned." In other words: rather than reducing the problems of the latter film to the earlier drama, his curiosity is drawn by the question of why the concerns of Shakespeare's romantic comedy have worked themselves out in their particular shape in the subsequent film, and this includes understanding "what these 'concerns' are and how to think about those 'shapes.'"<sup>2</sup>

For my own project of crossmapping, the alignment of texts belonging to different media (early modern drama or 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera and modern cinema respectively) is as much about the detected similarity, which calls forth the comparative reading in the first place, as an insistence on the differences to which mapping one text onto another draws our attention. In this sense I would reformulate (or augment) Cavell so as to underscore the notion of reversibility in the proposed conversation between drama, libretto, literature, and film. To understand what the concerns are that work themselves out in analogous shapings—thus my claim—also entails asking what is different about these shapings? When a subsequent text refigures an earlier one, at a different historical moment and in a different medium, at issue is not only what is retained but also what is left out, what is re-encoded, re-figured, and as such aesthetically transformed in the process of the remediation. My critical term "crossmapping" is thus also meant to draw attention to precisely those shapings that exceed or fall outside the aesthetic formulas that the texts to be brought into conversation share, and in doing so compel us to interrogate the consequences of these transformations. At the same time,

- 2 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 145. See also Elisabeth Bronfen, *Stanley Cavell zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2009.

by charting an association between two texts (or sets of texts), predicated on the similarity of shared concerns, the analysis underscores the fact that both are mediations, even if both the medium chosen (be it drama, opera, literature, or film) is different, as is the historical context from which these texts emerge and which they reflect. If, furthermore, in the process of crossmapping an earlier text comes to be revisited in relation to one that succeeds it, this brings into focus the fact that the proposed analytic mapping is both transmedial and transhistorical. The juxtaposition follows what Mieke Bal calls preposterous history. The re-vision produced by mapping one text onto another neither collapses past and present, nor does it reify the past as an object that we can grasp in an unmediated manner. Rather, what she calls preposterous history entails a hermeneutic reversal, “which puts what came chronologically first (‘pre’) as an aftereffect behind (‘post’) its later recycling.”<sup>3</sup>

Given that I understand crossmapping first and foremost as a hermeneutic practice, it is useful to bring into play an example of such hermeneutic juxtapositions. Early on in the third episode of David Simon’s *THE WIRE*, a chess game takes place, which prompts me to read this early 21st-century TV novel in relation to Shakespeare’s first tetralogy of English history plays, *Henry VI 1–3* and *Richard III*.<sup>4</sup> In this scene, D’Angelo, the nephew of one of the drug lords of the West Baltimore projects, explains to his fellow foot soldiers the rules of the chess game. They, in turn, immediately pick up on the way these are analogous to the rules of the drug war taking place between them, their competitors, and the police, and thus are as applicable to their everyday life as to the game. To illustrate the rigid hierarchy at issue in chess, D’Angelo explains that

3 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 7.

4 See David Simon, *THE WIRE*, HBO 2002–08, season 1, episode 3.

everyone stays who he is except the pawns. If one of them actually makes it all the way to the side of the other player, he gets to become any piece he wants to be, including the all-powerful queen.

So the first crossmapping at issue in this scene is an intra-textual one. The characters, along with the viewers, are meant to recognize in the rules of chess a description of the feudal system of the drug world that *THE WIRE* seeks to make visible. The chess game serves as the template for the codes regulating the network of power which this TV novel wants to draw our attention to by formulating and formalizing the rules that organize all possible moves in relation to situations. The dramaturgically implied juxtaposition underscores that in both games (chess and the drug wars), each figure has a clearly defined place and role within a strictly hierarchical order in which power is incessantly renegotiated by virtue of political acts. The moves individual players can make are highly codified and ritually predetermined.

D'Angelo's scene of instruction, however, also draws our attention to the one hope that those who start out as pawns can harbor. With a combination of luck and audacity, the pawn can bypass all the other ranks and immediately become royalty. The pawn may be the most endangered position, but it is also the figure that most visibly points to the fragility of royal legitimacy, and it is precisely this rule in chess that opens up, as my crossmapping proposes, a suggestive line of connection between Simon's TV novel and the Shakespearean history plays. In chess the pawn is the piece that stands in for the particular circumstance within the rules of the game that allows for a self-declared right to absolute power. Having arrived at the other end of the chess board, this figure can proclaim itself royal. This is indeed what happens when, in the course of the third season, the newcomer Marlo can step into the power vacuum produced when D'Angelo's uncle is once again sent to prison. While in Shakespeare's history plays such claims remain the prerogative



## Crossmapping





of members of the ruling class, in Richard III's usurpation of the throne we find a similarly audacious act of self-legitimation. So the hermeneutic wager at issue in this second, intermedial crossmapping, now of two sets of texts (a series of history plays and five seasons of a quality TV series), is the way both shape a civil war along the lines of a game in which the situation individual players find themselves in determines the moves open to them. In this case two mappings are being juxtaposed: Shakespeare's first tetralogy (*Henry VI 1–3* and *Richard III*) re-imagines the thirty-year battle between two branches of the royal house of Plantagenet as a visceral aristocratic war game, transforming England into the territory on which this battle is fought. David Simon's teleplay in turn recalls a "thirty years' war on drugs," with Baltimore the playing field for urban centers in early 21st-

century capitalism.<sup>5</sup> As such, both the TV series (2002–08) and the series of history plays (premiered 1591–93) shape concerns regarding actual historical domestic strife—the English Wars of Roses, the American War on Drugs—as a theatricalized game, in which the shifts in political power are embodied by individual characters/actors playing through the schemes open to them.

Without going into a detailed discussion of these multiply tiered cognitive mappings, what I would like to underscore is that this juxtaposition of distinct shapings draws into focus the way a particular domestic strife is theatricalized so as to reflect on cultural anxieties and national identities. While Shakespeare's first tetralogy discusses the succession of the first Tudor monarch, who takes over the throne from the tyrant Richard III, in the context of an early modern political culture in which the killing of kings was nothing unusual, it is above all a reflection of the dominant ideology of his own time and the cultural anxieties surrounding the reign of Elizabeth I. If, in turn, Shakespeare's reshaping of the early English chronicles foregrounds the way power is seen "to depend not on legitimacy but on legitimation, on the capacity of the contender to seize and appropriate the signs of authority," this is precisely also what dramaturgically shapes Simon's concern with urban domestic warfare as a way of understanding the destructive aspects of both late capitalism and the war on drugs.<sup>6</sup> So my point is the following: the proposed crossmapping isolates a similar mode of re-imagining a particular political strife, albeit at different historical moments—early modern struggle over sovereignty, early 21st-century struggles over global capitalism—and in different media. My wager is that by looking at the Shakespearean dramas through the lens of their subsequent reshaping in

5 See David Simon, "Prologue", in Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire. The Truth be Told*, New York: Grove Press, 2009, p. 11.

6 See Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare's History Plays. Richard II to Henry V*, New Casebooks, London: Macmillan Palgrave, 1992, p. 12.

Simon's TV novel we see both in new light: we explore and explain one set of mappings (a chess game onto zones of the violence perpetrated by drug wars) with another (the war preceding Tudor ascendancy onto the reign of its last representative, Elizabeth I).

The investigation into intermedial correspondences and connections proposed by crossmapping transcends the issue of acknowledged influence and explicit citation, even as it is underwritten by a double move. On the one hand I would claim that a later text (*THE WIRE*) maps certain constellations or concerns found in an earlier text (Shakespeare's first tetralogy) onto contemporary cultural and philosophical concerns. On the other, given the discernible analogies between both series of texts, it is equally fruitful to map onto Shakespeare's plays the way in which Simon's TV series responds to its own contemporary cultural crisis. Crossmapping, in other words, entails using historically later texts as the point of departure for a speculation on their cultural origin and, in so doing, looking—to stay with my example—at Shakespeare through the lens of his subsequent, albeit implicit, recyclings. Which is to say that the refiguration is performatively constructed by the proposed reading. Rather than simply proposing a relation of influence, crossmapping sheds light on neuralgic points that connect both cultural moments. The lines of connection opened allow us, for example, to read Shakespeare's plays as anticipating something that will come to be significant again at a different historical moment, albeit in a different guise. At the same time this hermeneutic strategy can also help us to discuss what Shakespeare can teach us about modernity. However, uncovering significant relationships between an earlier and a later text not only allows us to discover those passages for which our readings may offer fresh meaning. Equally productive is the way in which, having found and then charted certain correspondences, the one text shines through the other precisely because the mapping in fact produces no perfect fit.

As such, as a critical strategy, crossmapping is explicitly indebted to the cultural practice of cross-dressing, in which the gender assumed in masquerade never fully screens out the other gender. Asking about the manner in which Shakespeare anticipates thematic and rhetorical formalizations that will bear fruit *again* at a later date also means noticing seminal differences in the shapings offered by the early modern poet. I speak of crossmapping because my concern is a dialectically conceived intersection between two lines of thinking, understanding, and shaping of concerns. If, as my example suggests, a given oeuvre (Shakespeare's plays) has had a resilient afterlife, the question is also what shifts have occurred in the course of such cultural survival. In other words, crossmapping draws attention to the way difference nevertheless comes into play within the very survival of cultural energies that Shakespeare's texts have engendered over the ages. Indeed, the cross I am interested in involves a constant oscillation between past and present, between the prior text and its subsequent refiguration along the lines of what Roland Barthes has called the duplicity of the signifier. In his essay "Myth Today," Barthes includes a description of sitting in a car and looking at the scenery through the window. His point is that one can focus at will on the scenery or on the window, so as to grasp either the presence of the glass while the landscape is unfocussed and at a distance, or focus the gaze on the depth of the landscape and screen out the transparency of the glass. What one cannot do however, according to Barthes, is see both glass and landscape at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

Applied to the juxtaposition of texts at issue in crossmapping this means that, even as we focus on either the prior or the subsequent text we sense the presence of the other. Through our shifting focus, each is performatively enhanced by the

7 See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" (1957), in *Mythologies*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 123.

meanings discovered. While the lines of connection are given by the concerns and shapings shared by the texts brought into the conversation, the heuristic consequences are (as in cross-dressing) performative. The point of what I am calling a hermeneutic strategy is that it allows one to grasp a set of texts simultaneously, precisely because one is analytically compelled to move constantly backwards and forwards between them, without privileging the one over the other.

For this reason I have found myself compelled to rethink Walter Benjamin's notion of translatability. If, for him, translation is a form that circles an unfathomable, mysterious kernel, translatability must be inherent to the text, albeit not as its essence. It means, rather, "that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability. [...] a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Benjamin goes on to note, it is in the process of being translated that the life of the original attains "its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding" (p. 255). Afterlife implies transformation and renewal, implies that the original undergoes a change: there is "a maturing process" (p. 256). In its "preposterous" stance, crossmapping explores precisely this notion of survival (*Überleben*), afterlife (*Fortleben*), and maturation (*Nachreife*), not only in terms of the question of translatability from one language to another but also extending this to the kinship between different media (be these literary, dramatic or visual). Benjamin's argument is predicated on an idiosyncratic notion of aesthetic genealogy. The original that comes to be translated contains an intention (or what Cavell calls "concern") that can never be grasped directly but only *in* and *as* a translation. In addition to what can be refigured and reme-

8 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 254ff.

diated, there remains something that cannot be communicated (*ein Nicht-Mittelbares*). Thus the articulation of difference (qua transformation) emerges as key in the visual analogy Benjamin offers: “Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.” (p. 260)

If Benjamin’s emphasis on the translatability of ways of meaning (*Art des Meinens*) recalls what Cavell calls shapes, at issue for both is the cultural survival of something hidden and fragmentary that nevertheless resonates in subsequent re-articulations of earlier texts. To return to the notion of crossing as the articulation of an intersection, each subsequent formalization or shaping “touches the original”, as Benjamin puts it, “lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense,” so as to pursue its own course (p. 261). In that crossmapping retraces, indeed discovers, both this point of intersection and the diverging lines that emerge from it, the notion of cultural legacy it is engaged with also corresponds to the mappings of visual formulas (*Bildformeln*) and pathos formula (*Pathosformeln*) at the heart of Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Concerned with the duplicitous movement contained in the aesthetic formalization of transient but overwhelming emotions, Warburg notes, punning on the German word for griffin (*Vogelgreif*): “Under the darkly whizzing beating of the griffin’s wings, suspended between apprehension (*Ergreifung*) and profound emotion (*Ergriffenheit*), we dream the concept of consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> The

9 Quoted in Dorothee Bauerle, *Gespensstergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene. Ein Kommentar zu Aby Warburgs Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Münster: Lit Verlag, 1988, p. 13.



set of panels in his library, onto which he charted the cultural survival of the pathos formulas of antiquity, even while incessantly changing the arrangement of his mappings, had a particular goal. He wanted to offer a visual, embodied articulation of the way any experience of art involves a productive tension between a state of being overpowered by an aesthetic experience and the ability to intellectually grasp it (*Begreifen*). The initial intensity requires a form to become comprehensible; understanding occurs on the level of formalization.

But what that also means, to return to my earlier point about multiple intra- and intertextual mappings, is that any work whose pathos overtakes the viewer/reader even while containing this intensity (intention, concern) is itself an aesthetic formalization of an earlier experience of overpowering emotion. This formula has already captured pathos by transferring intensity into a formalized image. The concept, the pathos formula, strikes a balance between apprehending an ungraspable intensity and disclosing this to be the shaping of an intense emotion. Or put another way: the first emergence of a pathos formula (which in Benjamin's discussion of translatability functions as the original) is always an aesthetic formalization. What is reiterated in subsequent periods and different styles is the formula. Only because the emotional intensity has been given shape can it re-emerge at a later date, in a different historical context and a different medium. What is thus tracked on Warburg's panels, which assemble a panoply of different figurations into a mapped series, is not only the cultural survival and indeed maturing of this pathos, but also the fact that we can discern this afterlife by virtue of its serial re-articulation.

As Georges Didi-Huberman has insisted, the survival of pathos formula can be understood as a poignant example for cultural haunting. To map the emotional intensity embodied in the movement of an expressive gesture, he suggests, entails "a knowledge in extensions, in associative relationships, in ever renewed montages, and no longer knowledge in straight



lines, in a confined corpus, in stabilized typologies.”<sup>10</sup> To claim that, with any subsequent resuscitation, an image formula gives expression to the very emotional intensity that had initially come to be contained in it, presupposes an unconscious memory that keeps erupting. In that crossmapping tracks and charts the image formulas that re-emerge, these can be taken as evidence of the way we continue to be haunted by the past. My claim is that such survival of traces from the past through the incessant revival of past pathos formulas is best charted by articulating unconventional and unexpected correspondences, rather than the explicit citations and acknowledged influences at issue in the more conventional understanding of intertextuality. Indeed, what is at stake is a more transversal knowledge of the inexhaustible complexity of a history we feel compelled to revisit because it insists on being taken note of, over and over again. What I thus take from Didi-Huberman is the way a hermeneutic gesture of montage articulates a “desire to reconfigure memory by refusing to fix memories—images of the past—in an ordered, or worse, a definitive narrative.”<sup>11</sup> At issue for me is the serial collection of connected image formula in a configuration that incessantly changes.

While my own work is limited to aesthetic crossmappings, my hope is that the strategy I am proposing might be useful for other types of comparative readings: looking at current political events and concerns in relation to the past they reiterate and respond to; thinking about the past—as a plural site when we bring different cultures into conversation with each other—in relation to the consequences events have had for the way we think about them and about our own situations. Reading the

10 See Georges Didi-Huberman, “Foreword”, in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, p. 10.

11 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back*, Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2011, p. 20.

present, in the sense of a panel containing series of different, conflicting, and even contradictory mappings of current concerns, in terms of and in conjunction with a past that in its own differentiated complexity we can grasp by virtue of what it continues to mean for us. Ultimately, crossmapping is concerned with the way we inherit and pass on these mediations of the world, with how we can return to this legacy and resignify it in the double sense of revision—seeing again and refiguring, revising, reconceiving it.