



WINFRIED NÖTH
NINA BISHARA
(Editors)

Self-Reference in the Media

MOUTON

DE GRUYTER

Self-Reference in the Media

edited by
Winfried Nöth
Nina Bishara

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin.

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines
of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Self-reference in the media / edited by Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara.

p. cm. — (Approaches to applied semiotics ; 6)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-3-11-019464-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Mass media — Semiotics. 2. Reference (Linguistics) 3. Meta-
language. I. Nöth, Winfried. II. Bishara, Nina, 1977—

P96.S43S45 2007

302.2301'4—dc22

2007033759

ISBN 978-3-11-019464-7

ISSN 1612-6769

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© Copyright 2007 by Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, D-10785 Berlin

All rights reserved, including those of translation into foreign languages. No part of this book
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without per-
mission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design: Christopher Schneider, Berlin.

Printed in Germany.

Introduction

Winfried Nöth and Nina Bishara

Communication, the conveyance of messages, is the purpose of the media according to the self-professed ethics of the mass communicators. Messages and their communication imply *otherness*: they are about something *other* than messages and communication, something in some *other* place and time, addressed *to others* by a self. Nevertheless, despite their dimensions of otherness, messages, communication, and the media have always been about themselves, too – self-referential messages about messages, communication about communication, media about the media. Street criers who once called out their public announcements did not only attract the audience's attention to their messages but also captured their imagination by means of their voices, rhetoric, gestures, and appearance. The newspaper in its competition with other media does not only inform its readers about the world of otherness, it also informs how and why it informs so well. The movies do not only bring ever new stories about heroes and heroines, they also raise an enormous interest and curiosity in the private lives of those who convey the messages about these heroes and heroines, i.e., the movie actors and actresses.

The topics of the present volume are the ways in which the media have become self-referential or self-reflexive (as some researchers prefer to call it) and the degree to which they have ceased to mediate between the real or fictional worlds about which their messages pretend to be and their audience which they pretend to inform, to counsel, or to entertain. The self-referential networks in which the media and their audiences are caught up – indeed, by which we are all so significantly shaped – will be investigated in the following chapters.

The papers are presented in seven sections. Part I on *Theoretical Frameworks* introduces two theoretical approaches to reference and self-reference inspired by the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce. In his keynote paper on “Self-reference in the media: The semiotic framework”, Winfried Nöth contextualizes the general topic in its cultural background in postmodernity, gives a survey of its transdisciplinary implications, and draws the outlines of a systematic framework for the study of self-reference in the media as a matter of levels and degrees. Vincent Colapietro, dealing with “Distortion, fabrication, and disclosure in a self-referential

culture: The irresistible force of reality”, investigates the concepts of reality, reference, and self-reference against the background of Peirce’s realism and shows how media such as television, radio, and the world wide web constitute intricate and arguably insular networks of self-citation and self-commentary.

Part II, *Self-Referential Print Advertising*, studies self-reference in the pictorial and verbal messages of advertisements of the print media. Siegfried J. Schmidt introduces a systems theoretical perspective in his analysis of reflexive loops in advertisements in their relations to other social systems, and he proposes a typology of “Modes of self-reference in advertising”. On the basis of a distinction between “Metapictures and self-referential pictures”, Winfried Nöth shows how pictures in advertisements have become pictures about pictures, and Nina Bishara, in “‘Absolut Anonymous’: Self-reference in opaque advertising”, argues how and why opaque elements in advertisements, which make their comprehension more difficult, evince a mode of self-reference in the media.

Part III, on *Self-Referential Photography*, begins with Winfried Nöth’s paper with the metaphorical title “The death of photography in self-reference”, in which the author examines the so-called loss of the referent in digital photography, especially in art photography. Kay Kirchmann follows with the essay “Marilyn: A paragone of the camera gaze”, which studies Marilyn Monroe’s modes of self-observation and self-presentation in photos for the media as presented in the 1999 ARTE series *Les cent photos du siècle / One Hundred Photographs of the Century*.

Part IV on *Self-Referential Films* is about the movies in the movies, filmic allusions to other films, quotations from films in films, and nostalgia created by filmic self-reference. Gloria Withalm presents reflections on “The self-reflexive screen” and draws the “Outlines of a comprehensive model” for the study of many forms of self-reflexivity and self-reference in the movies on the basis of Rossi-Landi’s socio-semiotics. Andreas Böhn’s paper, “Nostalgia of the media / in the media”, discusses nostalgia, memory, remembrance, and oblivion as forms of filmic self-reference, and Jan Siebert, in his article on “Self-reference in animated films”, presents examples from the cartoons offering insights into self-referential scenes and devices that testify to the close connection between humor, paradox, and self-reference.

Self-Referential Television is the topic area of Part V. In “On the use of self-disclosure as a mode of audiovisual reflexivity”, Fernando Andacht presents two studies, one of the television show *Big Brother Brasil* and the other of a documentary film by E. Coutinho, demonstrating the illusionary paradox that self-reflexivity is a means of the media to give additional evidence of the “real” reality in the presentations of these programs. In “The old in the new: Forms and

functions of archive material in the presentation of television history on television”, Joan Bleicher shows how the visual language of television has become self-referential in its more and more frequent presentations of archive material recalling the history of television itself thus creating a collective memory of the medium. From the point of view of media economics, Karin Pühringer and Gabriele Siegert, in “There’s no business without show-business: Self-reference as self-promotion”, give statistical evidence of how self-promotion has become one of the most important forms of self-reference in the mass media.

Computer games are the topic of Part VI, entitled *Self-Referential Games*. “Computer games [are] the epitome of self-reference” is Lucia Santaella’s argument in her paper putting forward a typology of seven types of self-reference in games. Bo Kampmann Walther proposes “A formalistic approach” to the study of self-reference in computer games, defining rules, strategies, and interaction patterns as their core elements and examining how and to what extent computer games can be defined as complex dynamic systems. Britta Neitzel, in her paper on “Metacommunication in play and in (computer) games”, shows that Gregory Bateson’s theory of play is fundamental to the study of games, and Bernhard Rapp, in “Self-reflexivity in computer games: Analyses of selected examples” concludes the section with exemplary analyses and proposals for future research on the topic.

Part VII presents three papers on *Other Self-Referential Arts* in such diverse fields as web art, body art, and music. Marie-Laure Ryan contextualizes self-reflexivity in the history of literature since *Don Quixote* and gives evidence of the predominance of self-reflexivity in digital art on the Internet in her paper “Looking through the computer screen: Self-reflexivity in net.art”. Christina Ljungberg, in “The artist and her bodily self: Self-reference in digital art/media”, constructs a typology of degrees and forms of self-reference in digital art exemplified by multi-media works of visual artist and performer Laurie Anderson, video/digital artist Selina Trepp, and media artist Char Davies. Werner Wolf concludes the volume with his paper entitled “Metafiction and metamusic: Exploring the limits of meta-reference”. Based on a definition of meta-reference in contrast to self-reference and self-reflexivity in the narrower sense, Wolf presents new typological tools for the comparative study of meta-music and offers original proposals for a comprehensive program of future research on the topic.

The volume is one of the main results of a research project on self-reference in the media with special focus on advertising, the movies, and computer games, carried out at the Interdisciplinary Center for Cultural Studies of the University of Kassel from 2003 to 2006. Supported by a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the project was directed by Winfried Nöth,

whose collaborators were Nina Bishara (Kassel), Britta Neitzel (now Siegen), and Karin Wenz (now Maastricht). With few exceptions, the papers presented here were contributions to the international conference *Self-Reference in the Media* organized in the framework of the aforementioned DFG project by Winfried Nöth, Britta Neitzel, and Nina Bishara at the University of Kassel in July 2005.

Thanks are due to the DFG for their substantial support and encouragement of this volume as well as to the University of Kassel for unbureaucratically providing the necessary infrastructure. Especially worth mentioning is the DFG supported collaboration of the research project *Self-Reference in the Media* with the Postgraduate Program in Semiotics and Communication Studies of the Catholic University of São Paulo, whose immediate results presented in this volume are the contributions by Lucia Santaella, Vincent Colapietro, and Fernando Andacht.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Renira Gambarato for improving several diagrams and to Diena Janakat for editorial assistance.

Contents

Introduction	v
<i>Winfried Nöth and Nina Bishara</i>	
 Part I: Self-referential media: Theoretical frameworks	
Self-reference in the media: The semiotic framework	3
<i>Winfried Nöth</i>	
Distortion, fabrication, and disclosure in a self-referential culture: The irresistible force of reality	31
<i>Vincent Colapietro</i>	
 Part II: Self-referential print advertising	
Modes of self-reference in advertising	47
<i>Siegfried J. Schmidt</i>	
Metapictures and self-referential pictures	61
<i>Winfried Nöth</i>	
“Absolut Anonymous”: Self-reference in opaque advertising	79
<i>Nina Bishara</i>	
 Part III: Self-referential photography	
The death of photography in self-reference	95
<i>Winfried Nöth</i>	
Marilyn: A paragone of the camera gaze	107
<i>Kay Kirchmann</i>	

Part IV: Self-referential film

- The self-reflexive screen: Outlines of a comprehensive model 125
Gloria Withalm
- Nostalgia of the media / in the media 143
Andreas Böhn
- Self-reference in animated films 155
Jan Siebert

Part V: Self-referential television

- On the use of self-disclosure as a mode of audiovisual reflexivity 165
Fernando Andacht
- The old in the new: Forms and functions of archive material
in the presentation of television history on television 183
Joan K. Bleicher
- There's no business without show-business:
Self-reference as self-promotion 195
Karin Pühringer and Gabriele Siegert

Part VI: Self-referential games

- Computer games: The epitome of self-reference 207
Lucia Santaella
- Self-reference in computer games: A formalistic approach 219
Bo Kampmann Walther
- Metacommunication in play and in (computer) games 237
Britta Neitzel
- Self-reflexivity in computer games: Analyses of selected examples 253
Bernhard Rapp

Part VII: Other self-referential arts

- Looking through the computer screen: Self-reflexivity in net.art 269
Marie-Laure Ryan

The artist and her bodily self: Self-reference in digital art/media	291
<i>Christina Ljungberg</i>	
Metafiction and metamusic: Exploring the limits of metareference	303
<i>Werner Wolf</i>	
Index of names	325
Index of subjects	331

Part I. Self-referential media: Theoretical frameworks

Self-reference in the media: The semiotic framework

Winfried Nöth

1. Self-reference in postmodernity and in the media

Self-reference is a much discussed characteristic of postmodernity (Lawson 1985; Nöth 2001; Petersen 2003). In an era in which everything seems to have been said, the “grand narratives” have lost their credibility, and representations can no longer represent (Lyotard 1979: 27). To escape from this dilemma, literature, the visual and the audiovisual arts and media have become increasingly self-referential, self-reflexive, autotelic.

Instead of representing something heard about, seen, lived, or otherwise experienced in social life, culture, and nature, journalists, commercial artists, designers, and film directors report increasingly what has been seen, heard, or reported before in the media. The mediators have turned to representing representations. Instead of narrating, they narrate how and why they narrate, instead of filming, they film that they film the filming. The news are more and more about what has been reported in the news, television shows are increasingly concerned with television shows, and even advertising is no longer about products and services but about advertising. The messages of the media are about messages of the media, whose origin has become difficult to trace. In *literature*, fiction has become metafiction, novels have become metanovels, and texts are being discovered as intertexts whose reference is not to life but to other texts. Last but not least, art is now about art, and even architecture is about architecture.

The digitalization of pictures and films, which has liberated the media from the bonds of factual reference to a world which they used to depict, has contributed to the increase of self-reference. No longer originating in a world which leaves its documentary traces on the negatives of a film, the pictures of the new media have become the result of digital imaging and art work, whose origin is in the software of the semiotic machines (cf. Nöth 2002) by means of which they are produced.

One of the most striking symptoms of the current concern with self-reference in culture and in the media is probably the recent phenomenon of *culture jamming* (Klein 2000, chapt. 12), the critical transformation of media messages by

activists who display their protest against the age of consumerism, globalization, and social surveillance in public places and urban spaces in subversive forms such as adbusting, graffiti, flash mobs, hacktivism, cybersquatting, or sousveillance (cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org>, 16.05.06), not without creating the self-referential paradox that they depend on the media in their subversive attacks against the media.

2. Self-reference as a multidisciplinary topic of research

The study of self-reference and related phenomena, such as self-similarity, self-organization, autopoiesis, replication, or recursion is a topic of interest to various fields of research. Bartlett (1987: 10–24) gives a comprehensive survey of relevant topics and studies in no less than twenty-one fields of research, from mythology to neurophysiology, among them the following ones not dealt with in detail below: *linguistics* (reflexivity), *space and time* (loops, circles, Möbius strip), *law* (self-referring and self-limiting laws, mutuality of contracts), *economics* (business cycles), *game theory* (rules permitting self-modification), *anthropology* (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: culture determining language and hence culture), *mythology* (cosmic cycles), *psychiatry* (narcissism), *psychotherapy* (Bateson's theories of play and double bind), *neurophysiology* (neuronal circuits), and *general systems theory* (see Nöth 1977). The following survey of more recent research in self-reference excludes *systems theoretical* approaches to self-reference which have been reviewed elsewhere with particular reference to *semiotics* (Nöth 2000b; Jahraus and Ort 2003).

In the *natural sciences*, the theory of complex systems in *physics* and *mathematics* (chaos and fractals: Peitgen, Jürgens, and Saupe 1992), *chemistry* (dissipative structures: Prigogine and Stengers 1984), *biology* (self-reference, self-description, autopoiesis: Hoffmeyer 1996: 39–51), and even *meteorology* (butterfly effect) are bringing more and more evidence of the omnipresence of self-reference and related phenomena in nature: self-observation, self-description, self-organization, self-replication, self-similarity, autopoiesis, feedback loops, iteration, replication, recursion, or downward causation (Andersen et al. 2000) are the key concepts in this context.

In *computer science*, the recursivity of Turing machines (Winkler 2004: 170–182) and the theory of autonomous agents (Pattee 1995; Nöth 2002) are relevant to the study of self-reference. The close affinity between recursion and self-reference, for example, is evident when we consider the mathematical definition of recursivity as a group “using the own group or function that it calls to the own function” (<http://www.mind-graph.net/foundations/mathematical/recursivity.htm>, 16.05.06).

Logic and the *philosophy* of language have given special attention to self-reference with respect to tautology, the *petitio principii* (taking for granted what should first be proved), other semantic circularities (Myers 1966), or self-referential propositions that lead to antinomies and paradoxes. Much attention has been paid to forms of self-reference implied in metalanguage (Hofstadter 1979, 1985) and paradoxes (Whitehead and Russell 1910; Bartlett and Suber 1987; Fitch 1987; Bartlett 1992b; Scheutz 1995; Schöppe 1995). Other *philosophical* aspects of self-reference are philosophical reflexivity (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida: Lawson 1985), the phenomenology of the self and its identity (Büttner and Esser 2001), the problem of self-consciousness (Potthast 1971; Colapietro 1989; Kienzle and Pape 1991), also a topic of *cognitive science* (self-awareness: Brook and DeVidi 2001), and the topics of self-reflection, self-representation, autosymbolism, or the autotelic function in *aesthetics* (Shir 1978; Luhmann 1984; Menninghaus 1987; Nöth 2000a: 425, 432; Metscher 2003).

Literary studies are one of the fields of research (besides aesthetics) in which the theory of self-reference has its longest tradition since the essence of literature has often been described in terms which imply self-reference. Key concepts in this context are aesthetic autosymbolism (Shir 1978), self-representation (Hempfer 1976: 70, 129; Jay 1984; Johansen 2002: 174–288), literary autonomy, autonymy, or the autotelic function of literature (cf. Nöth 2000a: 458). While most of these theories have been developed against the background of poetry, often with reference to Jakobson's definition of the poetic language as a self-referential language (Jay 1984; Whiteside 1987; Block 1999; Nöth 2000a: 453; Johansen 2002: 174–182), self-reference in prose and drama is a more recent topic. It has first been approached in the 1970s under the heading of metalanguage (Smuda 1970), later as metatext, especially metafiction (Waugh 1984; Siedenbiedel 2005), or metanovel (Zavala 2000). In the study of *narratives*, the topic has also been subsumed under the general heading of *reflexivity* (Stam 1992), *self-reflexivity* (Hempfer 1982; Scheffel 1997; Huber, Middecke, and Zapf 2005), or *self-reference* proper (Wolf 2001; Krah 2005a, 2005b). Comprehensive surveys on the topic can be found in Scheffel (1997) and Wolf (2001).

Language about language, fiction about fiction, or the novel about the novel, these are evidently topics which deal with self-reference at a very general semiotic level. The theory of intertextuality (Broich and Pfister 1985) implies a similarly general mode of self-reference since it deals with the way a text refers to a text instead of to the adventures of its protagonists. Metafiction containing reflections about the text in which these reflections are narrated may be described as evincing a higher degree of self-reference than intertextuality. Intertextual references also evince references to texts, but these references are to *other* texts.

Like literature, *music* and the traditional *visual arts* have had self-reference inscribed in their canonical definitions since the classics of philosophical aesthetics. *L'art-pour-l'art*, autonomy and autoreflexivity have been key concepts in this tradition (cf. Nöth 2000a: 434, 426–427). The new trend since post-modernity has been that artists have begun to reflect programmatically about art in their art works, so that art has become art about art (Lipman and Marshall 1978) and even architecture has become architecture about architecture (Wittig 1979). A conspicuous symptom of the increasing concern with self-reference in the visual arts is the current interest in representing and exhibiting the artist's own bodily self in works of visual art (cf. Santaella 2004; Nöth and Hertling 2005; Nöth ed. 2006; Ljungberg, this vol.).

Media studies have discussed the argument that self-reference is at the root of every medium. Each individual medium has a historical precursor to which it refers back in media history. The more the media interact today and turn *intermedial*, the more they refer to the media in self-referential loops. These were some of the reasons why McLuhan (1964) declared that the *medium is the message*. The famous tenet expresses among other things the view that each message in the media refers both to its own medium and to other media, and thus characterizes messages as partially self-referential. McLuhan (1964: 8) develops this argument on the basis of his very broad concept of medium as an extension of man, according to which even light is a medium:

The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the “content” of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, “What is the content of speech?”, it is necessary to say, “It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal”.

Notice that in this description of how the messages in the media circulate in a process of infinite semiosis which even includes thought as a content of a medium, the medium described as the most self-referential of all is light. A medium without a message which nevertheless conveys “pure information” can only be a medium that refers to nothing but to itself. All other media evince self-reference to the degree that they refer to other media, which implies a divided reference. To the degree that the media refers to the media, they are self-referential, to the degree that they refer to other media, it is (allo)referential (see below).

Intermediality (Müller 1996; Paech 1998; Spielmann 1998; Helbig 2001; Rajewsky 2002), the media in the media (Liebrand and Schneider 2002), media change (Ort 2003), as well as remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999), i.e., the

refashioning of the traditional media in the digital media, are the topics of research in self-reference in the media related to McLuhan's dictum in one or the other way. From various other perspectives, self-reference in the media has been approached in the contexts of *film* (Karpf, Kiesel, and Visarius 1996; Kirchmann 1996; Paech 1998; Buckland 2000: 53–76), *television* (Withalm 1995; Frieske 1998; Bleicher 1999), *journalism* (Marcus 1997; Blöbaum 1999; Kohring 1999; Weber 1999), and *advertising* (Schmidt and Spieß 1996). For further references, see the papers of this volume.

Various aspects of self-reference concerning other domains of *culture* are discussed by Hofstadter (1979, 1985), who has shown that self-reference is at the root of cultural creativity (see also Schöppe 1995), in particular of humor and paradox. Self-reference in *popular culture* from the comics to rock music and video-clips is the topic of the book on metapop by Dunne (1992). Among the topics of cultural semiotics with particular relevance to self-reference are the semiotics of mirrors (Eco 1984; Ort 2003) and the semiotics of fashion. It was Barthes (1967: 287) who described fashion as a “tautological system” which defines itself reflexively only through itself, a system of signs “deprived of content but not of sense, a kind of machine to operate sense without ever fixing it” with the only goal of making the “insignificant significant”, or, as Goebel (1986: 476) put it, a system that keeps conveying the same message for ever: fashion is hence “a language that consists of nothing but synonyms”.

In the interpretation of the phenomenon of ever increasing self-reference in postmodern culture, we find the “apocalyptic” critics opposing the “integrated” ones. The former, among them Baudrillard (1976, 1981, 1991), deplore the loss of referents in a more and more self-referential world in which reality has degenerated to constructed, simulated or virtual reality. The latter interpret self-reference as a symptom of increasing critical consciousness in a world that has lost its confidence in ultimate truths (Lawson 1985). However, while the integrated ones may lack critical distance in face of the aporias of postmodern self-reference, the apocalyptic ones run the risk of finding themselves involved in paradoxes as long as they are unable to explain the nature of those referents whose loss they deplore (Nöth 2001; Nöth and Ljungberg 2003).

3. Self-reference and reference: Semiotic premises

In the framework of the present research project on self-reference in the media (cf. Nöth 2005b), the concept of self-reference has been adopted in the very broad sense similar to the outline proposed by Bartlett (1987: 6), whose point of departure is the following reflection on self-reference in human thought: