



The intermedial reinvention of cinema

*A reinvenção
intermediática
do cinema*



Cecília Mello¹

¹ Professor no Department of Film, Radio and Television of the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). Author of *The cinema of Jia Zhangke: realism and memory in Chinese film* (Londres: Bloomsbury 2019 – Honourable Mention – Best Monograph 2020 – British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies). E-mail: cecilia.mello@usp.br

Abstract: Ágnes Pethő's book *Cinema and intermediality: the passion for the in-between* faces the question of intermediality in the cinema with astonishing depth and erudition, and as such it enlightens and opens new paths in film and media theory.

Keywords: film theory; intermediality; remediation; metalepsis.

Resumo: O livro de Ágnes Pethő *Cinema and intermediality: the passion for the in-between* encara a questão da intermedialidade no cinema com surpreendente profundidade e erudição e, como tal, ilumina e abre novos caminhos na teoria do cinema e da mídia.

Palavras-chave: teoria do cinema; intermedialidade; remediação; metalepse.

Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between is more than a labour of love, it is a labour of passion. It faces the question of intermediality in the cinema with astonishing depth and erudition, and as such it enlightens and opens new paths in film and media theory. The book is beautifully presented in a black and shiny hardback, with a collage of images and texts partially adorning the front cover and enticing the reader with a paradoxical combination of surfaces in mise-en-abyme. This is Ágnes Pethő's immeasurable contribution to the field, a culmination of years of research emerging from Cluj-Napoca in Romania that quietly but convincingly opened up the cinema world – and the world of film studies – with the prism of intermediality. As Serge Daney puts it in the book's carefully chosen epigraph, "passion is excessive, it wants cinema but it also wants cinema to become something else". And it is Pethő's passion for the in-between, which also means a rare combination of theorizing and analysis, that effectively enfolds individual films and sometimes whole oeuvres to this "something else", over and over again.

This is the book's second iteration. It first appeared in 2011 with Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and its ground-breaking force is now rechannelled in an enlarged edition that includes revisions, rewrites, three new chapters and an index. Pethő is Professor of Film Studies at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, and the executive editor of the English-language, peer-reviewed open-access journal *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film and Media Studies*. From 2011 to 2020, the ideas put forward in the book's first edition were fine-tuned and reassessed, with the help of a series of events both in Romania and abroad dedicated to intermediality and the cinema. I had the pleasure to attend a conference at Cluj in 2016 entitled "The Real and the Intermedial", where first-class research was presented and debated following a highly original call for papers, one that I often wished I could quote from! Such events ensued an engaging dialogue with international scholars around the world, amongst which Lúcia Nagib at the University of Reading in the UK, who signs the second edition's preface and whose admiration for Pethő's work filters through her own thinking about intermediality. Moreover, the conferences, journal special numbers and other publications put forward in a relatively short period revealed Pethő's intellectual strength and her generous disposition, and it is no wonder she has built a community of researchers that gravitate towards her, turning Romania and Cluj into a centre in the current map of intermediality scholarship.

The book's central theoretical concern is to raise and test several different hypotheses concerning the pairing of the two terms, cinema and intermediality. Despite the author's modest account of her intentions and achievements, the book

offers not only an encompassing account of the theory of intermediality thus far, but also proposes new methodologies and original analyses that, as Nagib points out in her preface, “rewrites the entire history of cinema by reconceiving the classical, modern, pre- and post-cinematic paradigms in the light of intermediality”. I believe that the book’s major strength lies in its ability to offer a decisive contribution both to media and film theory and to the history of cinema, always moved by the author’s passion for films and visual arts and by her reinstated commitment to the works of art themselves, opened up by new readings that create and recreate new and mutable constellations.

Intermediality is a highly malleable concept that has been used more and more in the past two decades, largely due to the introduction and dissemination of digital technology and the consequent multiplication of media interactions. Pethő takes it to mean the interconnections and interferences that happen between different media, focusing on their relationships rather than on their structures. There is a *parti pris* that could seem too prescriptive when faced with the enormity of possibilities afforded by intermedial studies, and that is Pethő’s deliberate choice to speak about cinema, understood as a type of film intended to be shown in a film theatre. This circumscription of her research scope, however, is precisely what provides the depth of her theoretical and historical probing. This anchorage is needed: cinema becomes the launching pad from which these expeditions into the world of the in-between will set forward, and to which they will return, for the interest lies in the intermedial figurations *within a film*.

The book is divided into four parts and embraces the malleability of intermedial studies by eschewing a teleological approach. The first part, entitled “Cinema In-Between Media”, is comprised of four chapters that offer an overview of intermediality as a theory, a concept and a method. The first chapter is composed as a historiography of methodologies that can, at first, seem a bit daunting in its many bifurcations and trifurcations. But pair it with the newly added chapter 2 on emerging paradigms in theorizing cinematic intermediality and the reader has in her hands an extraordinary road map to intermedial methodologies, one to which she will return to, time and again. The main possibilities opened up by the intermedial approach are laid out in a movement that goes from a focus on the boundaries between different media and different art forms to transmedia approaches where those boundaries become increasingly blurred. The only caveat here is that the author missed revising this chapter’s reference to David Rodowick’s *Elegy for Theory*, originally a public lecture delivered in 2006, but which came out in book form in 2014. But the core

of Rodowick's propositions is addressed, and his mourning for the loss of film theory that could seem at odds with Bordwell and Carroll's call for "piecemeal theorizing" is actually placed alongside current cognitive, ecological and philosophical approaches to film theory, and in opposition to the debate about media and the cinema, including questions of intermediality. This "rift" located by Pethő, which could very well have to do with "the languages of discourse" (English versus German and French), becomes more complex with the addition of Chapter 2, where she puts forward three new paradigms in the field that move from a semiotics-based approach to the realm of film philosophy – including the work of Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière and Raymond Bellour, and finally to the equation "the real and the intermedial". One of the strengths of the book, therefore, is that it provides the reader with a general survey of complex definitions, approaches and taxonomies. It also maps intermediality and makes it approachable, accessible as a concept, as a method, as a mode.

If only for these two first chapters, the book already deserves pride of place in the most accessible shelf in one's library, always at hand to help navigate a complicated maze of methodologies. But chapters 3 and 4, which complement the first part entitled "Cinema In-Between Media", face the book's challenge head-on by interrogating what intermediality actually entails in different films. The question impels a phenomenological redefinition of intermediality that shifts it from an analogy with intertextuality towards an awareness of an embodied spectator, sensually engaged with the film, and flows into the proposition of two different modes capable of generating a sense of intermediality in film, the sensual and the structural. This is Pethő at her best, navigating through mirrors and mise-en-abyme transfigurations, architectural monuments and city streets through original comparative readings of films by Bergman, Kiarostami, Greenaway, Wong Kar Wai, Antonioni (who rightly deserves a mini-chapter within a chapter), Coppola, Godard, Scorsese, Jarmusch, Snow and Tsai Ming-liang. Especially compelling are her readings of *Shirin* (2008) and *Persona* (1966), films that veer toward the myth of a "total" cinema that is constantly redefined by a heightened awareness of cinema's own sensorial and embodied nature. And in Chapter 4 the world itself becomes a media maze, where "sensual and structural gateways of intermediality" are found in the cinematic image. Despite a lingering adherence to the notion of transparency and illusionism that runs through this chapter, intermediality breathes new life into scholarship on the cinematic city, a space that comes alive in the book as a liquid, haptic environment where the *flâneur* seems to float rather than walk, a palimpsest of images composed as a poetics of framing, and a fragmented or juxtaposed world where intermediality

performs metaleptic leaps between the immediate and the mediated, between the figural and the corporeal, between abstract thinking and sensorial matter. As Quintilian observed, metalepsis is by nature an intermediate step, an in-between that affords a passage to that which is metaphorically expressed. In films by Tsai Ming-liang, Jim Jarmusch and Abbas Kiarostami, Pethő sees metalepsis not as a call for decoding but as an invitation to a contemplative approach.

The book then moves on to a historical poetics of cinema by facing two giants, Hitchcock and Godard, from the point of view of their intermedial figurations. That Hitchcock is located at the juncture of classical and modern cinema, and Godard at the juncture of modernism and post-modernism, as Pethő points out in her introduction to the second edition, soon becomes less relevant when understood in relation to intermediality. In Hitchcock, painting is the intermedial element that complicates the neat paradigms of classical narrative and that pulls his films away towards an ever-present mystery, not located in the narrative realm, ready to be solved, but of the order of the unexplainable, haunting the image as an unattainable dimension. As Pethő's sophisticated prose articulates, "it seems that for Hitchcock painting acts like an 'intermedial demon of the cinematic image', a medial doppelgänger that is ready to take charge at any time, threatening to disrupt the reasonable (and discursive) order of the world".

If painting conjures up a demon and throws us into the heart of the abyss with Hitchcock, Godard's cinema is seen as "possessed" by the other arts, and thus occupies centre stage as one of the (or the) most important artistic paradigms in cinematic intermediality. Pethő recurs to Bolter and Grusin watershed definition of remediation as the process that informs the genealogy of media through history and couples it with Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" to locate what she calls an "anxiety of remediation" in early Godard. Here, she sees his cinema as both paying homage to and rivalling literature, its older, more respected "relative" in the world of the arts. The book then delves deeper into Godard's exploration of the interconnections between words and images, and proclaims him to be ekphrastic filmmaker par excellence, with his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998) being the culmination of his ekphrastic impulse. Godard's ekphrastic intermediality becomes more than a rhetorical device and operates between different arts, illuminating their aspects and enhancing their original form. The esoteric impression of this haste description does very little justice to the complex proposition set forth by Pethő, who sees four different types of ekphrastic intermediality in Godard, operating to different effects.

The final part of the book enquires into the paradox of an intermedial cinema of immediacy by exploring photographic collages in the cinema of José Luís Guerín and Agnès Varda and, in the two closing chapters, two notable examples of Romanian cinema, Mircea Daneliuc's *Glissando* from 1984 and Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada* from 2016. It would be difficult to elect this book's most important contribution or even its more accomplished section, but Part 4's daring evocation of the real into intermedial studies certainly makes it a strong contender. This approach has been highly inspirational and liberating for me, informing my reading of Jia Zhangke's cinema (Mello, 2019), whose poetics I understood from the point of view of the combination of realism and intermediality.

In her vast reinvention, Pethő is here able to weave intermediality into film's indexicality and into each film's cultural and ideological specificities. This she does by embracing the sensual dimension of intermediality, which effectively does away with the paradox haunting the pairing of hypermediacy and immediacy, pointing the needle towards contemporary reality in all its complexity. In the first chapter in Part 4, Agnès Varda's highly reflexive and essayistic *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000) invites a fruitful comparison with the work of José Luis Guerín, especially his interconnected films *In the City of Sylvia* (*En la ciudad de Sylvia*, 2007) and *Some Photos Made in the City of Sylvia* (*Unas fotos en la ciudad de Sylvia*, 2007). But then Varda is given her own chapter, dedicated to a cinema "defined as an artifice between two layers of the real: the reality of herself, the personal world of the author-narrator and the reality captured by cinema vérité style cinematography". Changes between these different realities occur through metaleptic leaps, moving from film to film, between reality and fiction, and ultimately from the figural into the corporeal.

The book closes with two chapters addressing the politics of intermediality in Eastern European cinema, focusing on Daneliuc's *Glissando* (1984) and Puiu's *Sieranevada*. The first concerns the story of an inveterate gambler who sees his life unravelling and derailing towards psychosis and suicide. This mental state is conveyed through intermedial symbolisms that Pethő reads as a figuration of the mental life of Romanians during the final years of Nicolae Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime. Finally, New Romanian Cinema, one of the most exciting waves to emerge in the 21st century, is addressed through a parallel reading of Puiu's *Sieranevada* (2016) and the photography exhibition of the same name. Evoking Raymond Bellour's "double helix of the image", Pethő then proposes a third template capable of creating a sense of intermediality in the cinema, which she calls the "expansive

mode”, designating films that indeed expand beyond the limits of the screen towards other, interrelated artworks.

One of the extraordinary features of this book is how it weaves hands-on intermedial analysis akin to Bordwell and Carroll’s “piecemeal theorizing”, committed to the work of art in both its uniqueness and its plurality, with a Theorizing and methodological impetus, embedded in a vast array of scholarship and developed close to the films themselves. Textual analyses are supported and complemented throughout by carefully chosen film stills, generously distributed through the chapters. I found that, at times, excessive attention was paid to the image to the detriment of the sound, which the book somehow neglects. But the truth is that this book’s shortcomings are next to none. It shows how cinema is, and always will be, the art medium that cannot be contained by single categories and formulas. It is, as André Bazin put it, yet to be invented. Pethő’s fearless work shows us that this is precisely because cinema exists in a constant movement of intrinsic intermedial expansion. She makes us passionate for the in-between, a territory where our love affair with the cinema can always be reinstated.

References

PETHŐ, Á. *Cinema and intermediality: the passion for the in-between*. 2. ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

submitted in: May 26, 2021 | approved in: May 26, 2021