

New Approaches to Transcodification

Transcodification: Arts, Languages and Media



Edited by
Simone Gozzano

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New Approaches to Transcodification



Literature, Arts, and Media

Edited by

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Mattia Petricola

On Transcodification: A Proposal for a Code-Oriented Approach to Adaptation and Intermediality

Abstract: This essay proposes to look at intermedial processes as part of the larger set of transformations through which the ‘elements’ (memes, concepts, characters, narratives, etc.) that make up our culture migrate from one knowledge system to another. Therefore, I will try to define the notion of transcodification and its contribution to the field of adaptation/intermedial studies. I will start by suggesting that fiction-based religions (like those inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*) can be considered as falling within the scope of intermedial studies, provided that we look at adaptation less in terms of media than in terms of *codes*. To emphasize such a shift in focus, I will propose to define these exchanges between radically different semiotic realms as falling under the notion of transcodification – a category which both includes and transcends adaptation. I will then discuss some examples of transcodification, ranging from the relation between Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Tournier’s novel *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* to that between Freud’s psychosexual theory and the Oedipus myth, and from Erving Goffman’s application of the language of theatrical performance to sociology to Hilary Putnam’s study of the ‘brain in a vat’ scenario.

Keywords: Transcodification, adaptation, intermediality, cultural transfer, code

The introduction to a landmark 2013 volume entitled *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions* opens by discussing the intermedial journey of two major works of twentieth-century literature, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In tracing the adaptation processes that led “from Tolkien’s typewriter to the screenwriters’ solutions, to the cinematic screen, to the internet and to [...] an academic publication on adaptation studies,”¹ the essay demonstrates the vastness of the intermedial networks centered around Tolkien’s oeuvre by providing a wealth of examples, ranging from films to YouTube videos and internet memes. This already wide-ranging network could be further expanded by observing that

1 Bruhn/Gjelsvik/Hanssen 2013, 3.

Tolkien's novels have also become the basis for a spiritual belief system² – and that something similar has happened to the storyworlds of *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*.³ While fiction-based religions are primarily researched by religious scholars, it could be worth considering them from the perspective of intermedial studies, even just as an excuse to ask ourselves: are these adaptations? Do such phenomena fall within the scope of intermedial studies?

I would like to suggest that they do, provided that we look at adaptation less in terms of media than in terms of *codes*. To emphasize such a shift in focus, these exchanges between radically different semiotic realms could be defined as falling under the notion of *transcodification* – a category which both includes and transcends adaptation, and the keyword that the contributors to this collection have been asked to investigate. In order to keep the conceptual structure of this volume as open as possible, the essays that follow have been grouped into four sections; each section, in turn, is centered on one or two loosely defined keywords, so as to catalyze interdisciplinary exchanges and unpredictable connections.

In trying to define and interrogate the notion of transcodification as a potentially useful contribution to the field of adaptation/intermedial studies, I am well aware of Kamilla Elliott's observation that "claims to originality in a field that by and large rejects originals are incongruous".⁴ On the other hand, I am aware of the challenge, launched by Elliott herself, of developing "[a] truly interdisciplinary theory of adaptation" that "would go beyond the usual theoretical disciplinary suspects to include *every* discipline".⁵ In order to move in this direction, I believe that some new terms (or re-elaborations of preexisting terms) might be needed, at least for now, when trying to offer transversal or wider perspectives on the field.⁶ Furthermore, I recognize that the proliferation of terms and taxonomies, along with the frequent redefinition and reclassification of pre-existing concepts,⁷ is

2 Markus Altena Davidsen defines "Tolkien spirituality" as "a form of religion" that "does not constitute a religious movement in the conventional sense", embraced by "Tolkien fans with a religious background as Christians, Neo-Pagans, or religious seekers, who at one point began to fuse their religious engagement with their engagement in Tolkien fandom" (Davidsen 2019, 31–32).

3 See Davidsen 2017 and Cusack 2019, respectively.

4 Elliott 2013, 24.

5 Elliott 2013, 37. Emphasis in the original.

6 In this regard, see for example Hajo Backe's reflections on what he calls "hypercomplex objects," defined as "media objects which combine traits of so many qualified and multimodal media that they cannot be meaningfully identified with conventional media terms" (Backe 2020, 3). For an interdisciplinary approach to adaptation, see the essays in the section "Adaptation across Disciplines" of Leitch 2017 and those in the section "Intermedial Methodologies and Intersectionalities" of Rippl 2015.

7 An invaluable contribution in this respect is Zecca 2020.

an integral part of how adaptation/intermedial studies work. As Julie Sanders puts it: “I make no apologies [...] for the profusion rather than fixity of terms offered: the idiom in which adaptation and appropriation theory functions is rich and various and any study of the same should surely reflect this fact”.⁸

In the fields of adaptation and intermedial studies, the notion of transcodification (or transcoding) is, strictly speaking, nothing new. It appears, for example, in Hutcheon’s classic definition of ‘adaptation’:

seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This “*transcoding*” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation. Transposition can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama.⁹

As a creative and interpretive transposition of a recognizable other work or works, adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a *transcoding into a different set of conventions*. Sometimes but not always, this transcoding entails a change of medium.¹⁰

In a 2012 article that elaborates on Hutcheon’s theory, Donata Meneghelli affirms that adaptation “implies some sort of semiotic transaction, a technical and/or rhetorical *contrainte*, a re-mediation or a transcodification.”¹¹ She observes, however, that in order to define adaptation in terms of transcodification one must first put into question the very notion of “code”:

We can probably all agree that films like *Emma* [1996] and *Clueless* [1995] are adaptations of Jane Austen’s novel, or that Verdi’s *Falstaff* is an adaptation of certain works by Shakespeare. But can we say the same thing about *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, in which Tournier re-writes Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*? Here we have a transformation that adopts the same material support (the book), the same medium (verbal language), and the same genre (the novel). However, a number of “codes” – in at least one sense of the word – have certainly changed, since the 20th-century novel is not the same as the early 18th-century one. They are based on different sets of laws, conventions, and contracts.¹²

The case of *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* discussed by Meneghelli is somewhat analogous to the one pertaining to fiction-based religions and Tolkien spirituality. Both transformations clearly share some of the features that we associate

⁸ Sanders 2016, 5.

⁹ Hutcheon/O’Flynn 2013, 7–8. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Hutcheon/O’Flynn 2013, 33–34. Emphasis mine.

¹¹ Meneghelli 2012, 4. Translation mine.

¹² Meneghelli 2012, 3–4. Translation mine.

with the notion of adaptation: a source-text is transformed into something else. That “something else”, however, appears to fall, to a greater or lesser extent, beyond the scope of adaptation studies. The notion of transcodification could thus help us deal with a wide range of phenomena that challenge the scope and hermeneutic potential of adaptation/intermedial studies.

As Meneghelli rightly argues, one cannot explore the notion and practices of transcodification before defining (or at least delimiting) the meaning of “code”.¹³ Hutcheon defines it as a “set of conventions”;¹⁴ Meneghelli as a set “of laws, conventions, and contracts”.¹⁵ In order to provide a more solid foundation to this concept, I propose to draw on social semiotics.¹⁶ Starting from the classic, twofold definition of “code” as “(1) a set of shared rules of interpretation, and (2) a meaning-making potential”,¹⁷ researchers in social semiotics operate from the premise that

every community has its shared ways of making meanings with the patterns to which it attaches significance – language, visual codes, kinesic codes, gestural codes, music, and so on. To make meanings with a given semiotic code is to use a system of socially shared meanings. Code, in this view, is a semiotic resource – a meaning potential that enables certain kinds of meanings to be made (in language, in the ways we dress, in our eating rituals, in the visual media, and so on) while others are not, or at least not in that code.¹⁸

In light of this definition, Tolkien spirituality could be interpreted as the result of a transcodification that expands the meaning-making potential of Tolkien’s works by transferring it outside the domain of fiction and adapting it to the codes that regulate spiritual beliefs.

If one focuses on how codes work in specific disciplines and professional communities, it becomes possible to interpret Freud’s psychosexual theory as founded on transcodification – more specifically, on the adaptation of the Oedipus myth into the codes of the emerging field of psychoanalysis. Through such a transcodification, the story of Oedipus is transferred outside the traditional codes through which it used to generate meanings (such as literature, the arts, and the study of myth) to become an agent of meaning-making about the human psyche within a very specific professional community. Incidentally, this is by no means the first time that ancient Greek myths are transcoded in order to produce meanings on human behavior, since myths have functioned as models for identifying vices

¹³ For a critical history of this word and its uses along the 20th century, see Geoghegan 2023.

¹⁴ Hutcheon/O’Flynn 2013, 34.

¹⁵ Meneghelli 2012, 4.

¹⁶ For an overview of the field, see Hodge 2017.

¹⁷ Thibault 1998, 125.

¹⁸ Thibault 1998, 126.

and virtues at least since the European Renaissance. More recent trends in psychoanalysis have continued to draw on ancient myths as a powerful source of meaning-making potential to put at the service of the codes that regulate psychotherapy, like in the case of the so-called “Cassandra complex.”¹⁹

Another eminent example of how transcodification can shape a whole intellectual community can be found in the sociology of Erving Goffman, whose research was deeply influenced by the language of dramaturgy and theatrical performance. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in his conclusion to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*:

In this report the performed self was seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which *the individual on stage and in character* effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him. While this image is entertained concerning the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from *the whole scene of his action*, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is *a dramatic effect* arising diffusely *from a scene* that is presented.²⁰

If the use of theatrical codes in Goffman’s sociological research can be understood in terms of transcodification, then the opposite should also be true. It would be easy to imagine, for example, a theatrical or operatic piece in which the interactions among the characters are mediated through the hermeneutic codes used by sociologists – or maybe even a piece whose setting is an extremely realistic rendition of a sociology conference. It could be argued that, in Goffman’s case, theatre acts as a conceptual metaphor – in the sense that Lakoff and Johnson assign to the term.²¹ It is such a metaphorization, then, that allows the language of theatre to “jump” from the codes of dramaturgy to those of sociological research, thus assuming new meaning-making functions. An analogous process of metaphorization explains the emergence of the “book of Nature” as one of the most fundamental ideas in modern European thought, in which the interpretation of natural phenomena is transcoded as the interpretation of a specific media product (the book). Significantly, as a consequence of this metaphorical transcodification (which is often still ac-

¹⁹ I am grateful to Francesca Cichetti for bringing this to my attention. See Schapira 1988; Cichetti 2023.

²⁰ Goffman 1959, 252–253. Emphasis mine. On the influence of theater and dramaturgy on Goffman’s thought see Smith 2013 and the introduction to Edgley/Brissett 2017.

²¹ In Lakoff and Johnson’s classic formulation, “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff/Johnson 1980, 5).

tive today),²² the practices for the investigation of the so-called “natural world” have been thought of for centuries as practices of “reading”.

Moving to contemporary philosophy, the “brain in a vat” scenario – famously analyzed, among others, by Hilary Putnam²³ – is based on the transcodification of a classic science fiction trope, in which a person’s brain or head is kept alive, with the help of a technological apparatus, without the rest of the person’s body. Whereas in science fiction narratives the “brain in a vat” trope functions as a semiotic resource in the context of an aesthetic experience, this transcodification transforms it into a radically different type of resource, one whose meaning potential “enables certain kinds of meanings to be made”²⁴ through the codes that govern the philosophy of the mind as a disciplinary field. From a similar perspective, transcodification could also work as a hermeneutic tool for mapping the two-way exchange of information and memes (in Dawkins’ sense)²⁵ between techno-science and science fiction, thus helping us examine (and critique) semiotically ambiguous texts ranging from Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics* (1948) to Ray Kurzweil’s *The Singularity is Near* (2005) and more. How do these techno-visionary books, constructed as non-fictional accounts of the near future, position themselves in relation to the codes of actual techno-scientific research, on the one hand, and to those of science fiction, on the other? And what are the ethical and ideological implications of transcoding science fictional scenarios into the realm of plausible techno-scientific hypotheses?

On a completely different note, the notion of transcodification could potentially provide a new theoretical foundation to the study of popular culture practices like fan fiction and fan art.²⁶ Whereas fan works’ relation to the category of “adaptation” has been (and still is) contested,²⁷ it would perhaps be easier – and more productive – to see them as transcodifications, that is, as the result of the re-elaboration of certain stories or storyworlds (from Shakespeare’s plays to Marvel’s *Avengers*) through the highly formalized codes of fan fiction.

From a purely theoretical standpoint, a number of questions need to be addressed in order to pinpoint the specificity of transcodification in relation to similar concepts. For example, how can transcodification be put in relation with

²² See Blumenberg 2022.

²³ See Putnam 1981, 1–21.

²⁴ Thibault 1998, 126. See above.

²⁵ See Dawkins 2016.

²⁶ Essential contributions to this field can be found in Hellekson/Busse 2014.

²⁷ Hutcheon and O’Flynn affirm that “sequels and prequels are not really adaptations [...], nor is fan fiction” (2013, 9). This position has been strongly criticized by Pope 2020, 13.

Bal's "travelling concepts"²⁸ or with the notion of "intersemiotic translation"?²⁹ I could begin to answer by observing that travelling concepts – like "memory," 'gender,' 'visuality,' 'materiality,' 'performativity' or 'space,'"³⁰ among many others – tend to be, by definition, supremely general. Transcodification processes, on the other hand, usually involve the transfer of semiotic resources on a relatively smaller scale. If the transcodification of theatrical notions into Goffman's sociology may possibly be seen as an instance of the concept "theatre" travelling towards new lands, the other examples explored above have to do with travelling characters (Oedipus and Cassandra), tropes (the "brain in a vat"), and narratives (fan fictions), rather than concepts. As regards intersemiotic translation, it appears to be applied almost exclusively to the study of aesthetic media products, whereas transcodification favors the study of semiotic interrelations across the most diverse aspects of human culture, both within and outside the realm of aesthetics, as championed by Last Elleström.³¹

All these questions and examples clearly aim to propose hypotheses and sketch new conceptual patterns, rather than to provide solid answers regarding what transcodification is and does. Some of the contributions that follow will approach transcodification as a tool to map the transfer of semiotic and aesthetic resources across cultures, knowledge systems, and disciplines; others will use it as an umbrella term for defining intermedial processes that fall both within and outside the category of adaptation; others will take it in radically different directions. They all share, however, the desire to demonstrate that the notion of transcodification has the potential to actively contribute to the study of intermediality as a field that, in the words of Marina Grishakova, "has always been and still is an incentive for experimentation with new materials and cultural forms" and that is able to unveil "the yet unexplored and undiscovered resources of media."³² Hopefully, many transcodification processes await to be discovered and many theories of transcodification await to be developed.

²⁸ See Bal 2002 and Neumann/Nünning 2012.

²⁹ See Goriée 2015; Pârlog 2019. Dusi 2015, 183 proposes an opposite relation between intersemiotic translation and transcodification to the one I have developed here.

³⁰ Neumann/Nünning 2012, 3.

³¹ See Elleström 2021.

³² Grishakova 2023.

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Section 1: **Theories**

Raffaele Chiarulli

“Various Are the Incidents in One Man’s Life Which Cannot Be Reduced to Unity”. First Aristotelian Lesson on Transcodification

Abstract: For 2300 years, Aristotle’s *Poetics* has been telling us all we know about the art of structuring stories, together with our ability to know the world and the human being through them. Aristotle is one of the greatest philosophers of all Western thought. At first, his inquiry was oriented towards the scientific field. This let him include in his research disciplines that had seldom been explored by thinkers before his time, focused within a wide-ranging system. Throughout the 20th century, Aristotle’s revival was nearly unanimous. In the 21st century, the modernity of his thought has been proved by the vivacity of neo-Aristotelian schools in many different fields, where several researchers rediscovered important ethical, anthropological, and rhetorical topics thanks to the Greek intellectual. According to some recent in-depth analysis, the neo-Aristotelian philosophy is one of the most interesting new trends within the complex scenario of contemporary thought. The media landscape is not immune to this allure. Just think of the fortune of the neo-Aristotelian currents within the American screenwriting textbooks. What are the reasons why a text written more than two thousand years ago survives every media revolution and continues to inform our way of reading the world and telling it? Where does storytelling – the way Aristotle helped us identify it and organize it – place itself in the post-digital era? If today we can speak of transcodification, it is thanks to some key concepts of the Aristotelian narrative theory. In particular, the content of chapter 8 of *Poetics* (according to the modern subdivision) traces coordinates which are still very useful for media scholars and audiovisual storytellers, in order to prove that the storytelling which ruled the Western civilization for two thousand years is still alive and in good health.

Keywords: Screenwriting studies, storytelling, adaptation, biopic, Aristotle’s *Poetics*

A few years ago, Umberto Eco and Riccardo Fedriga argued that a major part of philosophy since the Renaissance has been led by the question about how to get rid of Aristotle. “Yet it is hard to be rid of a thinker who has left such an impressive

mark that posterity has never succeeded in getting round it”.¹ This essay starts from the conviction that Aristotle’s philosophical framework, which has shaped Western culture for centuries, is still a fundamental tool to understand and live in contemporary society and its media landscape. This conviction is reflected both in academic practice and in the communication and audiovisual professions, where cinema and TV series (the new dream factory) prove to be theoretical repositories and conceptual archives. Therefore, they appear as inventories of ways individuals think about themselves and build relationships.

Not only the whole 20th century marked a massive return to Aristotle in philosophy – since many thinkers rediscovered some of his ethical, anthropological, rhetorical themes, alongside an important return to metaphysics.² Also, the 21st century does not seem able to avoid an accurate and close comparison with a conceptual framework that owes its fortune and longevity precisely to its extraordinary vastness.³

In September 2018, an international study conference titled *Aristotle Metaphysics Yesterday and Today* was held in Palermo to take stock of the state of Aristotelian studies and their topicality. The conference reflected on some key issues about neo-Aristotelianism, one of the phenomena considered among the most innovative and most interesting in the complex landscape of contemporary thought.⁴ The attention paid to the conference by the major Italian newspapers (that is, by non-specialist media)⁵ favours the opportunity to consider Aristotelian thought crucial for today’s debate in more than one field – a fact confirmed by some very recent publications.

In the successful book *The Aristotle Method* (a bestseller in Italy, to the point of even being attached as a supplement to a newspaper), Edith Hall presents Aristotelian Ethics in contemporary language. She applies the teachings of the philosopher from Stagira to a variety of real-life challenges: making a decision, writing a job application, speaking in an interview, using the table of vices and virtues for the analysis of one’s character, resisting temptation, choosing friends and partners. According to Hall, each part of Aristotle’s prescriptions to be happy relates to a different phase of human life. Yet at the same time, they intersect them all, so

1 Eco/Fedriga 2014, 135. I thank Luca Bandirali for submitting this quote to my attention.

2 See Berti 1992; Fusillo 2001.

3 See Tahko 2011; Novotný/Novák 2014; Mari 2014; Simpson/Koons/The 2018; Magnoli Bocchi 2019; Jansen/ Sandstad 2021; Simpson/Koons/Orr 2022

4 See Ventimiglia 2018b, 10 – 11.

5 See Ventimiglia 2018a; Lo Verso 2018.

“whatever period of life you find yourself in, Aristotle’s ideas can make you happier.”⁶

On closer inspection, the question about the road to happiness and to a life that has fulfillment of meaning, is also one of the central questions of literature and fiction of all time. The media universe, even in the multiple variants of post-textuality, post-mediality and post-digitality, is called on to confront this question. The very motive of what we will call transcodification – travelling from one medium to another –, of re-mediating, of changing one’s skin, intersects with the possible outcomes of the above question.

Ten years before the cases we have mentioned, another important international conference was organized at the PUSC in Rome, in March 2007. It was titled *Mimesis, Truth, Fiction. Rethinking Art in the wake of Aristotle’s Poetics*. It was dedicated in particular to the *Poetics*, an occasion for reasoning on its legacy not only in the philosophical debate but also in the productive practices linked to the world of communication and entertainment. It was an event connecting the reviews on the influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the 20th century to a new branch of studies, particularly focused on the crucial screenwriting practices in the audiovisual world.⁷

In the last twenty years, thanks to the explosion of TV series and to their position at the centre of the media landscape, screenwriting practices have received increasing attention from the academic world. This implicitly admits that – in the cinematographic field and not only in the television one – if the 20th century was the century of directing, the 21st will be the century of screenwriting.⁸ It is precisely in the screenwriting theories and practices that Aristotle’s *Poetics* has enjoyed a gradual rediscovery in the Anglo-Saxon world. Even today, among those who deal with the fundamental elements of story structure, the *Poetics* is considered the essential archetype, the ABC that everyone must know and assimilate.

Maybe they don’t do so by referring directly to the Aristotelian text. Yet the screenwriting milestones over the past century are broadly and radically Aristotelian – from Lajos Egri’s *The Art of Dramatic Writing* in the 1940s to Robert McKee’s *Story* in the last twenty years, via John Howard Lawson’s *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting* in the 1950s and the controversial but seminal *Screenplay The Basics of Film Writing* by Syd Field in the 1980s. At the beginning of the new century, Michael Tierno attempted to domesticate the Aristotelian text, summarizing the links between the *Poetics* and the guidelines for screenwriting.

⁶ Hall 2018, 5.

⁷ About this topic see García-Noblejas 1982; Fedele 1999; Feyles 2003; Cataño/Yarza 2009; Brenes 2011; Brenes 2012; Gutiérrez 2013; Brenes 2014; Nardis 2015; Chiarulli 2020.

⁸ See Fumagalli/Albani/Braga 2021.

The result was a study – somewhere between theory and practice – that in Los Angeles bookstores devoted to film can be found on the same shelf as the manuals, as if to remind apprentices where all Hollywood dramaturgical wisdom originates from.⁹

During the same period, Finnish scholar Ari Hiltunen worked on emotional dimensions rather than on structure, interweaving them with narrative techniques such as dramatic irony and suspense, to explain how various genres *work* to involve and excite the viewer.¹⁰ The author starts from the premise that successful stories with common narrative characteristics produce similar experiences and pleasures and resorts to the Aristotelian concept of *oikèia edonè* (relevant pleasure). Hence, he investigates the mechanisms of audience involvement, ranging from very different media – from Shakespearean tragedy to John Grisham's best-sellers, from videogames to football games. Hiltunen especially insists on stories that *work*, pointing out that some great stories (including many Hollywood movies) never stop being enjoyable, even when watched for the hundredth time: "a good story retains its ability to create pleasure, even though the audience knows the events and turning points in advance. So, the strength of a good story rests on something beyond surprise and unpredictability."¹¹

Poetics, in this sense, gives many answers that cannot avoid being a necessary part of any storyteller's toolbox. Brian Price in *Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting* tells about his research to devise an innovative method to teach filmmaking, moving from the most elaborate systems. Eventually, he found out that in his journey to discover this brand new paradigm, something quite unexpected happened. He rediscovered an old one. Something downright, spanking ancient:

Of course, one might argue that Aristotle wasn't actually writing about screenwriting in his *Poetics*, simply about the tragic plays of his time. But then one would be very wrong. He was writing about "imaginative narrative fiction". And within that broader category, screenplays not only apply, but are arguably the current dominant form. His treatise is really an investigation into why we tell stories, and from that function, an analysis of what makes a good one and how to tell it the best way possible.¹²

Price has organized Aristotle's observations and concepts according to their order in the actual professional screenwriting process. So, each section of his book is

⁹ Tierno 2002.

¹⁰ See Hiltunen 2002.

¹¹ Hiltunen 2002, 10.

¹² Price 2017, 9.

structured in the following manner: Aristotelian concept, its contemporary significance to screenwriting, and finally, its practical application for the writer's own work.

Also, Philip Freeman in *How to Tell a Story*¹³ basically tries to answer the question "What Writers Want". That is, what writers need to make a good story, a story that works. And he finds all the answers are in Aristotle's *Poetics* already. Four years before, Italian publisher Dino Audino, specialized in screenwriting manuals translated from the North American market, released an annotated edition of *Poetics* expressly in a cinematographic key.¹⁴

So, how is it possible that in the engine room of the 21st century, in the midst of the debate on post-mediality, on the death of texts and the death of cinema, a book from 2300 years ago is being rediscovered with such insistence and conviction? Yet, it is precisely the media's new structure – from this point of view – that allows Aristotle's *Poetics* to remain a fundamental text for uniting different universes called to communicate with each other. A sort of centre of gravity within the media galaxy.

Even more recently, Italian scholar Luca Bandirali has shown how there is an indestructible framework in Aristotle's *Poetics* allowing it to survive in the age of digital fiction. In his article titled *New clothes for the old ceremony: Aristotle and digital fiction* he defines the narrative system of the digital era as 'a-modal' (stories are independent from the media conveying them); 'automatic' (stories follow pre-determined patterns and formulas); 'causal' (stories are chains of events connected by cause-effect relationships); and 'mechanistic' (stories have no end). He analyses TV series such as *Russian Doll* (2019) and the interactive film *Black Mirror: Bander-snatch* (2018), which can be considered among the most advanced attempts to subvert the canonical rules of mainstream storytelling. Nevertheless, Bandirali argues the description of the timeline in the aforementioned series, as well as the 'genetic relationship of facts' in the interactive film, obey causal links that still refer to the structures as Aristotle codified them.¹⁵

However, *Poetics* continues to be fundamental in the vast majority of cases of audiovisual text production. And, in these very last years, the interest in *Poetics* confirms it. Let us take an example, starting from what the philosopher says in Chapter 8 – according to modern division – of his text. The eighth chapter is the one where Aristotle clarifies his concept of unity of dramatic action. It is not by chance that terms related to uniqueness continuously recur in the first lines:

¹³ Freeman 2022.

¹⁴ Fumagalli/Chiarulli 2018.

¹⁵ See Bandirali 2021.

“Unity of plot does not, as some people think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man’s life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action” (Arist., *Poet.* 51a, 8–11). It is not the concentration on a single character; Aristotle explains, that gives unity to the action. Nor does it help, to define the sense of his story, collecting everything that such character accomplishes in his life, the pretension of being exhaustive. This is the problem, in our opinion, with those biopics that by desiring to provide the evolution of an entire life in as much detail as possible, lose contact with a stable narrative axis, with a clear theme and therefore with unity of action. The fundamental lesson of this chapter from the *Poetics* is that the construction of a story cannot start from the initial raw material, but inevitably from the prediction of the final result. It is the first lesson in history about transcodification.

In other words, the storyteller who wants to develop a theme and has an enormous amount of material useful to his cause will not have to ask himself, before he begins to write: ‘Where will I place all this?’. He will rather have to ask himself: ‘What do I need of all this?’.

This rule works for any kind of story – since every story performs a work of selection – but this passage from the *Poetics* has proved particularly effective for reflecting on adaptations of literary works and biographies. In his adaptation of Julian Barnes’s novel *The Sense of an Ending* (winner of the Booker Prize in 2011), Indian director Ritesh Batra recounts how he felt embarrassed towards the author of the book – worried as he was about any constraints he would impose on him. He was then reassured by the writer himself, who expected nothing but being betrayed. As Barnes declared, according to the film production notes, “for a filmmaker, the best way to be faithful to the text a film is based on is to betray it. I’ve always been convinced of this. The moment you entrust your work to talented filmmakers, you have to let them fly free.”¹⁶ The director’s and screenwriter Nick Payne’s goal was to remain faithful to the essence of the novel, while extrapolating its locations and characters, in order to craft a movie that works. As the director explained, with words that would be easily subscribed by many, “a film can act as a complement to a book, but when you adapt a novel you can’t help making it your own”.¹⁷

It is easy to understand how much this instance, applied to the audiovisual medium, is inherent to our discourse: Aristotle bases his reasoning on mimesis, which is on the relationship between reality and its representation. The histori-

¹⁶ *The Sense of an Ending*’s Italian press book by BiM distribuzione (2017), 6

¹⁷ *The Sense of an Ending*’s Italian press book, 6.

cal-biographical genre lives by vocation – to a greater extent than adaptations from literature – on the edge of the dialectic between what really happened and what deserves to be told. A commentator of the *Poetics* explains that:

Not all the particular events and actions [in one's life] are necessarily ordered in a meaningful and causally determined sequence, thus designing a single action such as Aristotle defines it: an action representing the character's passage from happiness to unhappiness (or vice versa). In other words, telling the overall meaning of one man's life.¹⁸

The commentator also provides the following example: “The fact that the American president J.F. Kennedy sometimes played football with his brother, according to Aristotle, would not necessarily belong to a tragedy ‘imitating’ his life or his brother Robert’s. Which is the passage of both brothers from power and glory to a dark death.”¹⁹ How interesting: in fact, in a movie about the Kennedy presidency, *Thirteen Days* (2000),²⁰ there are some scenes, including the final one, in which a football appears. JFK, Bobby, and Kenny O’Donnell (their assistant and friend, played by Kevin Costner) throw each other the ball in a friendly manner. To the screenwriters, a fact from everyday life – the leading characters’ passion for football – becomes the occasion to concretize through an object (an ‘objective correlative’) the theme of loyalty to the President. This is a corollary to the main definitions: not all the details of a man’s life are worth telling, but, in the hands of a capable writer, they can become useful to enrich a narrative, since they contribute to endow it with dramatic unity by supporting the theme.

It is clear why the historical-biographical genre constitutes an excellent testbed for this passage from the *Poetics*. Francesco Arlanch, the most important Italian screenwriter of TV biopics, analyses them starting from John Truby’s paradigm, which establishes a connection between single film genres and specific existential questions.²¹ If every narration attempts to provide a possible answer to the question about the happiness of a human being – argues Truby, also a neo-Aristotelian –, every film genre must focus on a possible declination of this general question. For example, crime stories focus on the dilemmas arising from the relationship between violence and justice; detective stories on the dilemmas generated by the relationship between truth and lies; action movies on the dialectic between killing and losing one’s life, etcetera. As Arlanch writes, “the biographical genre revolves around

¹⁸ Donini 1997, 27.

¹⁹ Donini 1997, 27.

²⁰ This movie reconstructs the thirteen days of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and therefore is not about the two brothers’ death.

²¹ See John Truby’s audio classes on www.truby.com (last accessed 07/12/2024)

the dilemmas arising from the fact that every life is destined for death". Therefore, "every life, as a whole, is liable to be judged good or not."²² It is as if the biographical genre could rely on real facts so it can look with greater clarity at the need for the existence of any story: "Aristotle, in fact, posed as a central question about existence not *What do I have to do?* but *What does 'good' life mean?*". Our desire for stories reflects this profound human longing to have a path, that is, to have a map to the meaning of existence."²³ Aristotelian unity of action does not exist only when the time of the story begins and ends within a day or an hour, but when the story has a unitary narrative axis, therefore is exhaustive in giving a judgement on an existential parable. This is the reason why modern theories of screenwriting tend to identify the unity of action with the theme of the film, which is the path that character and plot take towards a completeness of meaning. And this is why Aristotle survives the revolutions and migrations of stories from one medium to another. Transcodification is precisely what allows unity, confirming and consecrating it.

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²² Arlanch 2008, 59.

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Marina Grishakova

Transcodifications of the Real: ‘Presence,’ Nature, and Artifice in Historiography and Art

Abstract: This essay explores various conceptions of realism, from the artistic program to the verisimilitude perceived by viewers, and examines how different techniques, such as naturalistic effects and codified meanings, contribute to the creation of a realistic effect. The work of theorists such as Roland Barthes, Alva Noë, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is drawn upon to investigate the role of presence and imagination in conjuring a sense of reality. I argue that language, understood as *techne*, combines immanence and transcendence, bridging the nature-artifice divide. By activating material and iconic resources, languages and other symbolic systems trigger naturalistic effects and conjure a sense of presence. The effect of presence is instantiated by linguistic, narrative, or other symbolic techniques, which involve an imaginative leap back to the perceptual features needed to capture and understand the information encoded in language.

Keywords: Realism, *techne*, presence, imagination, cinema

The history of cinematic realism(s) illustrates an uneasy relation between the perceptually suggestive and photographically credible images of reality and the mechanisms of their production. The illusion of reality is produced jointly by the cinematic apparatus and psychological mechanisms: moving sequences of still images in film are seamlessly integrated in a continuous flow through the persistency of human vision and its propensity of seeing transition rather than substitution of images (the so-called “*phi* phenomenon”).

Early film criticism developed the opposing views of film as either a means of capturing and recording natural reality or an artifice, a technologically mediated artistic experiment. For Bazin and Kracauer, cinema was an art transcending traditional aesthetic forms and promising an entirely new synthesis, that of living reality. In Bazin’s view, cinema’s “integral realism” captures and retains an image of the actual world emancipated from technological-interpretive manipulations. In his “Myth of Total Cinema,” Bazin argued that enchantment with physical reality, a kind of mimetic spell was the moving force behind the development of film technologies (rather than vice versa). The cinema’s guiding myth is “a total and com-

plete representation of reality.”¹ Demonstrating a new, unprecedented degree of realism and capacity to capture images of reality, digital technologies, as it seemed, could have satisfied “once and for all, our obsession with realism,”² which manifests in the production of ever more sophisticated technologies and refined realistic illusions: “Each new technological development [...] points to the viewers just how “un-realistic” the previous image was and also reminds them that the present image, even though more realistic, will be superseded in the future.”³ However, as Stephen Prince demonstrated in his seminal article “True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory” (1996), photographically realistic but ontologically fictive computer-generated images (such as dinosaurs in Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*) disrupt a referential connection between the cinematic reality and the actual world. They are anchored in physical reality through an in-built system of correspondences in color, light, surface detail and texture, movement, and other perceptual cues and create an impression of being produced optically. However, unlike optically created images, they lack pre-existing referents in the actual world. Nevertheless, they are integrated in the film’s diegesis and photographic background and enhance the realistic effect by concealing traces of production and investing in perceptual impact enhanced by the spectator’s imagination. Due to this, they suture “the spectator into an imaginary relation to the image”⁴ more seamlessly than optical technology. Perceptual credibility forges a referential link between the digital image and an imaginary real object.

In this way, the techniques that made a new degree of realism possible revealed an ambiguity at the core of “realism” understood as a seemingly simple “mimesis” and disclosed the role of the artificial (technical) in conjuring the effects of reality and presence.⁵ While rendering a realist detail with great precision, they also brought to the fore the role of the artifice in fashioning “reality.”

Multiple facets of realism were depicted already by Roman Jakobson in his seminal article on realism in art (1922 in Czech). Jakobson notes that realism may be understood as 1) an artistic program (what is conceived or conceptualized as realistic by authors), 2) verisimilitude as perceived by readers, 3) a specific set of features characteristic of the 19th-century realism. Further, Jakobson distinguishes the verisimilitude based on imitation (an illusion of absolute faithfulness to reality) and verisimilitude based on convention (that is to say, a formula or code). Both following a code and deformation of the code may be perceived as a faithful

1 Bazin 1967, 21.

2 Bazin 1967, 12.

3 Manovich 1992, 2.

4 Elsaesser/Buckland 2002, 215.

5 See Grishakova 2020.

rendering of reality. The deformation of the code, the use of a fresh, striking expression or an accidental, *apparently insignificant* but perceptually prominent or stressed *detail*, but also “condensation of narrative by means of images based on contiguity”⁶ (that is *metonymy* or *synecdoche*) may be seen as more realistic against the background of a dead convention.

In cinema, naturalistic effects provoking immediate visceral, sensory, and affective response such as startle, dizziness, thrill, or anxiety⁷ function as striking, realism-enhancing details. Various perceptual extremes (extreme suddenness, loudness, vastness, rapidness, slowness, extreme heights or masses) elicit such response. Murray Smith discusses how the startle or fear reflex are operationalized, amplified or suppressed in film’s aesthetic and conceptual structures. However, the primary function of the naturalistic effect is to operate as a “shortcut” to external reality in filmic texture by prompting the viewer’s intensive somatic and affective engagement and heightened attention and involving the viewer in a sensorimotor-affective-interpretative feedback loop. An imaginative and interpretative effort is needed to integrate the naturalistic detail in a broader filmic context. In his article on fall scenes in cinema, Adriano D’Aloia observes that the fatal movement of falling to death provokes “sensory thrills”⁸ and elicits a strong motor and emotional stimulation in the viewer, mainly due to its incompleteness, insofar as the impact of the fall is not shown or is shown indirectly, for instance through witness’s reactions and response. The sensory stimulation is enhanced by imagination, that is, imaginative fleshing out of the interpretive gaps:

Because impact is *unrepresentable*, filmmakers employ alternative strategies to make impact *experienceable* [...] Neurophysiology experiments have validated the hypothesis that the observer tends to complete a ‘goal-directed’ movement at a neural level, even if the final stage of that movement is not displayed.⁹

The controversial issue of “realism” as either an effect of immediate sensory presence or as a result of mediation and codification, which make a representation believable or “true” for the observer, has been brought in a new focus by advanced digital technologies able to create increasingly realistic images.

⁶ Jakobson 1987: 25.

⁷ See Smith 2017, Plantinga 2009.

⁸ D’Aloia 2011, 81.

⁹ D’Aloia 2011, 84.

Roland Barthes and Alva Noë: the “third meaning” and the varieties of presence

Tension and interplay between the codified and naturalized realism of shared (cultural) meanings – and the realism of an accidental, non-systemic, random, disturbing detail remain central to Roland Barthes’ conceptualizations of the “reality effect,” “notation,” “obtuse meaning,” and “punctum.” In his early essay on the discourse of history, Barthes argues that the systems of meaning merge the referents and the signifieds (that is to say, the things themselves and the meanings of the words referring to these things), making them undistinguishable and thereby producing a referential illusion of the transparency of the “real” (“The Discourse of History”, 1967). Signification shields the material reality until, being confronted with the real, signs disintegrate and produce a “reality effect.” Further, in Barthes’ essay on the reality effect, the “notation” (an accidental and seemingly irrelevant detail that provokes the effect of the real) is contrasted with “prediction” (a predictive outline of the story). Against the backdrop of structured or codified meanings, the accidental detail looks disturbing:

If analysis seeks to be exhaustive..., if it seeks to encompass the absolute detail, the indivisible unit, the fugitive transition, in order to assign them a place in the structure, it inevitably encounters notations which no function (not even the most indirect) can justify: such notations are scandalous (from the point of view of structure), or, what is even more disturbing, they seem to correspond to a kind of narrative *luxury*.¹⁰

Notation appears as a linguistic “noise,” resistant to meaning and sometimes having a phantasmatic quality, for instance, in the rhetorical figure of *hypotyposis*, a vivid description that is expected “to put things before the hearer’s eyes.”¹¹ The real has always been on History’s side, observes Barthes, although it was contaminated with the notion of “verisimilitude” and referential illusion in earlier periods of history. Nevertheless, History aspired to convey “what really happened,” with the past revealing itself rather than waiting for representation, and the effect was achieved through connotation, fragmentation of meaning or “interstitial notation”¹² characteristic of aesthetics of modernity. In this way, for Barthes, a shared aspiration towards the “real” appears in modern aesthetics, technologies (photography, film), and historiography alike.

¹⁰ Barthes 1989, 141.

¹¹ Barthes 1989, 145.

¹² Barthes 1989, 147.

Further, the “codified versus non-codified” is recast as the “obvious” versus “obtuse” in “The Third Meaning” (*L’Obvie et l’Obtus*, 1970):¹³ the obvious meaning originates in a “common, general lexicon of symbols,” it is intentional and “presents itself quite naturally to the mind,”¹⁴ whereas the obtuse meaning is erratic, obstinate, unmotivated, “appears to extend beyond culture, knowledge, information” – and to persist like a *silent presence* of an uninvited guest (“disturbing like a guest who obstinately sits on saying nothing when one has no use for him”).¹⁵ The obtuse meaning is illustrated by the image of an old woman with a grotesque half-opened mouth and a headscarf pulled down too close to the eyebrows in a scene from Sergey Eisenstein’s classic movie *Battleship Potemkin*. Ultimately, the obtuse is seen “as the passage from language to significance and the founding act of the filmic itself.”¹⁶ Barthes’ argumentation moves through a series of differentiations, but the “founding act” introduces an ambiguity in his concept of “reality”: on the one hand, the “real” lies beyond language and symbolic systems, is anchored in materiality, carnival, the unconscious, etc. On the other, as a founding act, it seems to be inscribed in these symbolic systems, even if *per negatio*, by negation, as a *significant* absence within these systems. However, the fact that the obvious and the obtuse are *meaningful* excludes their polarization and establishes a relation of complementarity. Finally, the juxtaposition of the codified versus uncoded re-appears as “studium” and “punctum” in *Camera Lucida* (1980).¹⁷ The *punctum* is perceptible through its impact on the viewer (“it is this element that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me,” 26) and through its own materiality (a sensitive point, a wound), whereas the *studium* is identified as a culturally encoded and learned meaning.

The Barthesian juxtapositions resonate in American philosopher Alva Noë’s recent work *Varieties of Presence*¹⁸ where the presence effect features as “embarrassment that is routinely denied in a symbolic space.” Such is, for example, an experience of failure in theatre space, when something goes wrong, the stagecraft comes undone, and the theatre magic is disrupted. The failure triggers the effect of presence and, simultaneously, reveals its fragility.

¹³ Barthes 1977.

¹⁴ Barthes 1977, 54.

¹⁵ Barthes 1977, 57.

¹⁶ Barthes 1977, 65.

¹⁷ Barthes 1981.

¹⁸ Noë 2012.

Presence

Alva Noë also describes presence in a slightly different vein, as a two-way movement of showing up and bringing to focus, with the actual world showing up for us when teased out by our skillful engagement and focusing. The view of presence as an encounter of the world of phenomena as they appear to us and us attending to the objects in the world has a phenomenological, Heideggerian tinge and features also in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's book *The Production of Presence*.¹⁹ Gumbrecht portrays presence effects as produced, *brought forth*, and standing out against the background of absence: presence is a spatial relation, bringing forth an object in space, having a tangible impact on human bodies, appealing to the senses, and reconnecting experience and perception. Tangible, calling for our attention and pressing itself on the observer, Gumbrecht's "presence" is comparable to Barthes' "obvious meaning." At the same time, it extends beyond language, articulation, and interpretation and is sudden, fragile, ephemeral, and, therefore, similar to the "obtuse meaning." An ambiguity at the core of the Barthesian "effect of the real" which can be called a "border effect" due to its being simultaneously within and outside the symbolic systems of meanings (as the "filmic" of film or "novelicity" of the novel), is considerably weakened in Gumbrecht's conception of "presence" as situated beyond language, but shining through it and manifesting in sound, rhythm, magic, mystical experience, or epiphany.²⁰ Oscillation between the "presence effects" and "meaning effects," says Gumbrecht, is characteristic of art. At the same time, Gumbrecht proposes a general rough distinction between the "presence cultures" and "meaning cultures," keeping presence and meaning apart.

As an aesthetic effect, presence appeals to individual sensibilities and triggers a recipient's engagement with a work of art. This kind of presence can be seen as an analogy to foregrounding in verbal or visual arts, for instance, in Caravaggio's paintings, with human figures rising out of the contrasting background darkness as if levered forward, or in Francisco de Goya's *Fire at Night* (fig. 1). The bluish-white and rusty flame standing out against the background of darkness dominates the scene on Goya's painting: it is brought forth as inescapable presence, a major force that incites a feeling of awe and terror. The composition of the painting forms an imaginary diagonal descending from left to right, from the sinister blotch of flame towards a chaotic mass of people fleeing and removing causalities from

¹⁹ Gumbrecht 2004.

²⁰ See also Gumbrecht 2006.

the burning building. The color contrast, the vagueness of contours, and the image of helpless human mass heighten the sense of terror.



Fig. 1: Francisco de Goya, *El incendio de noche* [*Fire at Night*], 1793–74, Madrid, Abelló Collection. Source: <https://www.wga.hu/html/g/goya/3/308goya.html> (last accessed 10/02/2025).

However, the “presentification of the past” as the ontologization of the past and its blending with the present experiences may also serve as a manipulative tool and has been, indeed, used by national-totalitarian regimes for manipulative purposes, as Rik Peters warns in his article on fascist political mythology, published together with Gumbrecht’s, Ankersmit’s, Runia’s and other articles in the 2006 special issue of *History and Theory*.

Barthes’ and Gumbrecht’s works were recruited by the movement of “present-ism” in historiography.²¹ In his introduction to the 2013 interdisciplinary volume,

²¹ See Ankersmit 1994; Runia 2014; the 2006 special issue of *History and Theory*; Ghosh/Kleinberg 2013.

an editor refers to the emergent “theoretical paradigm” of presentism. Whereas the ambition of theory building can hardly be detected in these heterogeneous approaches, they share an aspiration towards the “real” and a *critical stance* towards the previously dominating linguistically oriented and constructivist theories. However, the latter, in their turn, also appeared as a critical response to the positivist presumption of transparency of historiographic descriptions as regards the “reality” and its hermeneutic naivety. In this way, the “presentists” find themselves between these two paradigms and are trying to avoid the extremes of constructivism and hermeneutic naivety alike.

Nevertheless, presence is considered by historians, such as Ankersmit and Runia, as gesturing *beyond* the limits of language, as a material presence of the past within the present, in tune with the Heideggerian claim to go “back to the things,”²² signaling a rapprochement of history and art on the new, post-constructivist grounds, but, still, provoking doubts as regards its hermeneutic naivety. The title of the chapter “From language to experience” in Ankersmit’s book on the sublime is, thus, programmatic and exemplary of the presentist movement. However, language still remains the indispensable tool of historical analysis and description and cannot be discarded entirely for the sake of “experience” – another broad and controversial concept, which, in fact, embraces the linguistic experience. In his article in the special issue of *History and Theory*, Gumbrecht proposes an opportunity of the (Heideggerian) reconciliation of language (the “House of Being”) with the “presence” of experience. Such reconciliation, if cast in Heidegger’s terminology, would be ontological, with the being-constituting function attributed to language. Gumbrecht’s focus, however, is on a non-metaphysical and non-ontological return to the “pre-conceptual thingness”²³ of the world, material, tangible, and sensory realities, and retains a split between language and presence.

In sum, the juxtaposition of presence and language in historiographic discussions re-instantiates the dichotomy of the natural and artificial (reality and construction), rather than overcoming it. In this framework, language can be associated either with the natural or the artificial (constructed). With a side glance to the history of technologies and the role of the artificial in fashioning the “real,” discussed in the introductory sections of this chapter, I propose the other way of reconciliation of language and “presence,” through approaching language as *techne*, combining immanence and transcendence and bridging the nature and artifice divide.²⁴

²² See Domanska’s article in the 2006 special issue of *History and Theory*.

²³ Gumbrecht 2004, 118.

²⁴ See Sterne 2006, Altamirano 2014.

Language as *techne*: presence and imagination

In Vladimir Nabokov's American version of his fictionalized autobiography *Speak, Memory*, "the hand of memory in a footman's white glove" meddles to help the memoirist to furnish the room of the past or "the property man" appears to fill out the imaginary settings conjured by memory.²⁵ Similarly, in Nabokov's novel *The Gift*, the St. Petersburg of memory is "restored here and there [...] according to the best pictures of our national painters" in the book authored by the main character.²⁶ Memory, a central motif in Nabokov's works, is pictured as a natural capacity generated by the necessity and urge for remembering (accompanied with a sharp sense of loss and nostalgia) – and, concurrently, as *techne* or artistic device supported by the mnemonic props or "prostheses." A combination of natural and artificial in memory can be also illustrated by melting clocks on Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory*. The power of memory supported by clocks and other measurement devices overrules those devices in Dalí's painting where melting clocks are deformed by dreams and the unconscious, but the image or their melting remains technically precise and realistic.

In Ancient Greek philosophy, *techne* meant "craft," "technique," or "skill," but the meaning was extended also to peculiar features (styles) of human behavior and abilities shaped by material and social practices. Leroi-Gourhan's and Stiegler's philosophical works portray bodily (anatomical) *technicity* relative to human perceptive and effective capacities. In his *Gesture and Speech*,²⁷ Leroi-Gourhan traces the development of speech, memory, and consciousness as prompted by upright posture and bipedalism, protrusion of the forehead, liberation of hands from locomotion, emergence of a specific human anterior field through the eyes and hands coordination – in sum, gradual bodily changes that liberated the resources necessary for the development of language and memory.²⁸ Indeed, language, as any kind of symbolic communication, emerges from the basic forms of human and animal interaction and the resulting practical skills, experiences, and the combined use of lingual elements and material tools (*techne*, in Aristotle).²⁹

Language, if understood as *techne*, is both natural and artificial or, rather, it precedes the nature-artifice divide and stems from an interplay of human bodily and symbolic resources with environments and tools anchored in the materiality

²⁵ Nabokov 1989, 100, 105.

²⁶ Nabokov 1963, 26.

²⁷ Leroi-Gourhan 1993.

²⁸ See Altamirano 2014, 26–27.

²⁹ See Sterne 2006.

of the world. The continuity between perceptual reality and language is brought forth by every linguistic (symbolic) act. Every linguistic act involves mapping of systems of perceived similarities and contiguities (iconic and indexical associations) onto symbolic representations.³⁰ The forms and functions of this continuity are tackled in various contemporary naturalistic frameworks, from cognitive biology and linguistics to biolinguistics, somaesthetics, and studies in embodied cognition. Drawing on Peircean semiotics and Deacon's conception of "symbolic species," Gennaro Auletta pictures the rise and functioning of consciousness and language through the interplay of symbolic and material resources. The brain as "the representational device" recruits external means ("physical structures such as gestures, phonemes, written symbols") to become a "symbolic machine": "symbols are structures that are not only realizable in the physical universe but even necessarily bound by a physical dimension."³¹

By activating their material and iconic resources, languages, and other symbolic systems, such as the languages of art, trigger naturalistic effects and conjure a sense of immanence and presence. The idea that language is grounded in the material, embodied, perceptual reality of human experience is prominent in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Greimas' structural semantics, anticipating Lakoff and Johnson's thesis that higher, abstract cognition stems from the basic embodied "image schemas" or forms of embodied orientation and navigation in the actual world. Sensorimotor and perceptual patterns are indexically triggered and instantiated by linguistic structures. Insofar as certain aspects of visual perception constitute a cognitive capacity, the "*observer*" is identified in cognitive linguistics as a function of speaker "whose 'observational' experience resides in apprehending the meaning of linguistic expression."³² The effect of presence is conjured by the speaker's function of observing or "showing", "a text-induced process of *epistemological transfer* such that the recipient will decode the perceptual information source as something he might have experienced."³³

Linguistic meanings are grounded in the experiential "backstage cognition." Meanings of many words, such as directional nouns and adverbs "north/ south", "left/ right" or movement verbs, such as "saunter" or "trudge," are grounded in perceptual properties and human embodied navigation and cannot be understood without reference to perceptual and embodied experiences.³⁴ The linguistically evoked perceptual "presence" manifests in 'on-stage' and 'off-stage framing,' eval-

³⁰ See Deacon 1997.

³¹ Auletta 2011, 19.

³² Langacker 2000, 204.

³³ Linhares-Dias 2006, 7.

³⁴ See Sanford and Emmott 2012, 132–160.

uative and perceptually encoded words, deictic patterns and signals of proximity or distance between the speaker (narrator) and the narrated world, “by means of which language becomes a concrete and embodied phenomenon, imbued with the subjectivity of the speakers and their coordinate system.”³⁵ Deictics or indexicals originate in the basic orientational-expressive patterns of gesturing and pointing aimed at calling someone’s attention to or expressing interest in some features of the environment, developed in early childhood. Further, the inferential capacity to distinguish between one’s own and another’s perspective becomes an important part of human cognitive “equipment” and development: “The ability to “displace” in time and space, including seeing things from another’s perspective, is thought to be a key factor in linguistic and cognitive development – indeed, arguably, “displacement” is one of the defining characteristics of human intelligence.”³⁶

The artistic practices build on the principle of collaboration between sensor-motor-perceptual patterns and specific artistic techniques. The filmic effect of “presence” is instantiated or heightened by compositional means, camera work, framing and suture, combined with the viewer’s imaginary navigation in the filmic space and time. Similarly, iconic strategies in verbal texts are able to activate the material features of language and to conjure the effect of presence. In my chapter on “intermedial metarepresentations,”³⁷ I explored how a sense of perceptible presence is created in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* through visual signals in verbal texture, such as syntactic and narrative mirror structures, recurrent use of the verbs of vision, gaps, and elliptic patterns, and how controversial or discrepant clues reveal the inability of a single medium, visual or verbal, to capture the complexity and multimodality of natural perception. In her book *The Style of Gestures*, Guillemette Bolens introduces the concept of the “kinesic style” and extends it from the perception of body movement to other kinds of personal expression, corporeal and mental, gestural and verbal, including the kinesic style of a literary work “experienced through narrative dynamics, which, in relation to the reader’s kinesic intelligence, elicits the understanding of bodily events, shaped in language.”³⁸

To summarize, I define the effect of “presence” as an integrated act of perception and imagination instantiated by linguistic, narrative or other symbolic techniques. The move from the information encoded in language back to the perceptual features, which are needed to capture and understand this information,

³⁵ Viola 2011, 399.

³⁶ Emmott 1997, ix.

³⁷ Grishakova 2010.

³⁸ Bolens 2012: 28.

involves an imaginative leap. The work of imagination is not limited to the arts, films, books, or music: we recruit imagination also in real life to fill out the missing parts of reality, when referring to the invisible, incomplete, hypothetical, non-existent and counterfactual entities, running our cognition in the discovery mode, and in the so-called attributive uses of language. We need imagination to integrate memories with the immediate perceptual information.³⁹ However, the effect of reality or presence guided by imagination is considerably enhanced and intensified in complex and technically sophisticated languages of art: it blends the real and the imaginary (fictive), nature and artifice.

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39 See Irish 2020.

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Ágnes Pethő

Cinema's Affective and Metaleptic Intermediality

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of intermediality and metalepsis in cinema, proposing an affective turn in intermediality studies. Metalepsis is examined in the context of cinema's capacity to blur the lines between reality and fiction. The author argues that intermediality, which involves the transfer of media forms, can facilitate metaleptic leaps, creating an affective experience for the viewer. The essay analyzes Pedro Almodóvar's short film, *The Human Voice* (2020), as a paradigmatic case of intermedial metalepsis, where the director employs a range of artistic references, including painting, photography, and performance art, to create a complex, self-reflexive narrative. The film's use of excess, artificiality, and melodrama is seen as a means to engage the viewer emotionally, while also highlighting the material constructedness of the cinematic medium.

Keywords: Metalepsis, intermediality, Pedro Almodóvar, affect, self-reflexivity

Metalepsis and an Affective Turn of Intermediality Studies

Intermediality and metalepsis are concepts that intersect in many ways. Essentially, the way we perceive intermediality is close to metalepsis considered in ancient rhetoric as a figure of speech. This rhetorical device entails – as the word's Latin equivalent, *transumptio*, suggests – a kind of transcription or transferal, the “assuming one thing for another” in “a chain of associations” (Hühn et al. 2009, 194). It is “a complex figure or trope [...] that involves a figure that either refers us to yet another figure or requires a further imaginative leap to establish its reference”.¹ As a rule, when we speak of moving images “becoming inter-medial,” we actually acknowledge the occurrence of such imaginative, metaleptic leaps. The form of one medium seems to be transferred onto another or assumed by another medium.² Thus, cinema may not only reference or absorb representations of the other arts and media as components of a diegetic world or as a juxta-

¹ Baldick 2001, 152.

² See the definition of intermediality provided by Paech (2002, 283), i.e. the repetition of one medium as the content of its form within another medium.

position of representations on the screen, but the cinematic image itself may be made to appear like a moving photograph, a canvas covered with paint, a space like a stage for actors and their carefully choreographed movements, or a room for exhibition filled with statuesque bodies and objects, a surface unfolding a collage of texts and images, and so on. In this process (i.e. through this “chain of associations”), it always becomes augmented by the affordances and connotations of other media.

On the other hand, looking at metalepsis as a narrative device (which is the current, more widespread interpretation of the term initiated by Gérard Genette, we can see that instances of intermediality in film can also function metaleptically in this way. However, while narrative metalepsis commonly occurs between different diegetic levels and creates an entangled form of storytelling, metalepsis that involves intermediality directs our attention primarily to multiplied layers of mediation as well as to the entangled forms of media and reality, of reality and fiction. Beyond a visible display of the (metaphorical) crossing of media borders (e.g. between painting and cinema) it marks a leap between ontologically separate worlds. Most often, it specifically signals a crossing over from diegetic reality into the world of imagination, emotion, or pure fiction, or it disrupts the transparency of the moving images and the seamless “fabric” of the diegetic world alluding to latent, metaphysical dimensions. In fact, any painterly distortion in a cinematic image or effect that makes the screen resemble a painting may give the impression of being “otherworldly” in its picturesque beauty, as a subjective dreamscape or it may look nightmarish, hallucinatory, uncanny, and surreal in a fiction film.

When we see an insert of a picturesque song and dance sequence in a classical Hollywood musical, for example, this can transport us into the realm of dreams, of subjective desires. Images of fantasy or intense emotion take the form of a theatrical spectacle staged to imitate moving paintings. Just remember the famous scene from Vincente Minnelli’s *An American in Paris* (1951), in which Henri (Georges Guétary) describes his affection for his new girlfriend to Adam (Oscar Levant) by literally conjuring up the image of Leslie Caron dancing within the space framed by the mirror on the wall, as a kaleidoscope of moving pictures within a small-scale imaginary ballet theatre. Or we can recall the stunning sequences of jazz ballet interpreting George Gershwin’s music at the end of the same film, that emerge as a daydream between the fade-out and the fade-in of Gene Kelley’s close-up, materializing his inner turmoil in the form of *tableaux vivants* (some based on the paintings of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec) after seeing the love of his life leave with another man. In a slightly different approach, Alfred Hitchcock uses extensively both paintings and painterly effects within his films to perform leaps into an ontologically divergent, abstract space (often conveyed through inserts of abstract paintings or expressionist patterns of shadows and light), as a way to

point out the irrational and inscrutable nature of moral sin. In many of his films a painting becoming prominent in a scene or the painterly effect in the cinematic image is decoded as an intrusion which produces more than “an effect of strangeness”,³ as something “threatening to disrupt the reasonable (and discursive) order of the world and to invade it with abstract shapes and colors, with images that resist to ‘tell’ and impress the viewer with what they ‘show:’ with their spellbinding visual presence”.⁴

Another area where we see similar metaleptic phenomena is the type of film considered under the umbrella term of the essay film, which – as an essentially subjective vision over the world – has also been defined by its ability to straddle fiction and reality. Although still undertheorized from the point of view of metalipsis, essay film practices “that undo and redo film form”⁵ resort to intermediality extensively, employing visibly different types of images and shifts between different levels of perception and cognition.⁶

Performativity is a key feature of intermediality, which can always be seen as something “that actively “does,” “performs” something, and not merely “is”⁷. Metalepsis is one of the possibilities how this performativity of intermediality eminently manifests itself. Furthermore, such metaleptic performativity of intermediality, as we see from these previous examples, relies on generating affects and emotions ensuing from sensuous perception and embodied cognition, and brings into play the tensions between the experience of reality and artificiality. Accordingly, it may challenge us to widen our perspective and consider an affective turn of intermediality studies by focusing not on the semiosis but on the affective affordances of mediation and by examining the ways in which intermediality contributes to weaving a complex emotional tapestry in movies. This affective turn could be conceived as an extension of an already highly influential theorization of intermedial relations that pivots from creating a conceptual framework of abstract categories towards unravelling unique aesthetic configurations and experiences of “sensuous excesses” and “impurities,” and towards an emphasis on “in-betweenness” that includes the intersections between life and art, between physical reality and media representations.⁸

3 Genette ([1972] 1980, 235.

4 Pethő 2020, 214.

5 Corrigan 2011, 4.

6 See e.g. Rascaroli, 2017; Monterrubio Ibáñez, 2022.

7 Pethő 2020, 27.

8 For a more detailed description of the three major paradigms of intermediality studies that have emerged so far see the meta-theoretical survey *Emerging Paradigms in Theorizing Cinematic Intermediality* (Pethő 2020, 39–51).

In my previous writings, I have described several variations⁹ in which we see intermediality effectively mediating transgressions between experience and memory and creating productive oppositions between what seems to be the unmediated, direct imprint of reality and various, conspicuous forms of mediation and intermedial references. In this respect, I have analyzed more closely the metaleptic collage practices of French New Wave cinema, and specifically those of Jean-Luc Godard and Agnès Varda (2020, 373–397), which, instead of opening up the images towards subjective realms (as seen in Hollywood genre films), provide insights into contemporary reality, offering highly critical reflections on an emerging consumer society, emphasizing the way in which hypermediacy that has become an integral and ubiquitous part of modern life is continually shaping (through images conveyed in advertisements, for example) how we perceive ourselves and how we live.¹⁰ Moreover, in the case of Varda's re-enactments, *tableaux vivants* and experiments with installation art assemblages, we have a metaleptic intermediality that facilitates yet again, not just a leap from the palpable to the imaginary, but also the other way round, a reconnection with physical reality and corporeality.

This present essay is an attempt to continue the research in this direction and to explore further figurations of intermedial metalepses in contemporary cinema. In what follows, I will present a paradigmatic case in which metalepsis achieved through intermediality is employed not only as a transgression of ontological levels but also as a gesture of overstepping epistemological boundaries, leading the viewer towards processes of discovery or re-discovery. Intermediality is intertwined with the real and the personal, and it engages alternating positions of spectatorship leading to an affective metalepsis through sensations oscillating between materiality and abstraction, as well as between immersion, empathy, and distancing effects of reflexivity.

Stepping in and out of the Picture

The case study presented below features the trope of characters being perceived in and outside the framework of “picture-ness.” This is actually a traditional trope of metalepsis in painting that emerges through the effect of *trompe-l'oeil*, which connects the real, physical space of the viewer with the illusory space created through artistic means in the painting. The viewer is invited (usually through the presence

⁹ Pethő 2020, 144–163.

¹⁰ See also Susan Felleman's (2021) analysis of the intermediality of Varda's *Happiness (Le Bonheur, 1965)* drawing on painterly references and the rhetoric of commercial and popular culture in order to observe and critique the contemporary reality of women's lives.

of painted thresholds doubling the real picture frame) to “step into” (i.e. behold and feel immersed into the world depicted by the painter, and contained within the frame) and to “step out of” the picture (i.e. literally to step back and to contemplate the picture as an art object from a distance).¹¹ Cinema has many possibilities to adopt this kind of metalepsis. What distinguishes the example below, Pedro Almodóvar’s short film, *The Human Voice* (2020), is the way in which it involves intermediality in this scheme and multiplies gestures of stepping into multiple spaces of art (cinematic, theatrical, painterly, literary, musical and photographic, etc.), as well as gestures of stepping beyond the realm of direct representation.

The film begins with a short prologue in which we see Tilda Swinton in a gorgeous red velvet crinoline gown, standing behind a transparent veil stretched across a frame (fig. 1). Her statuesque figure appears blurred, she looks like a pictorialist photograph. She is both in a picture within a picture, and, with her bell-shaped dress overflowing the frame, outside of it, inhabiting both the flat pictorial surface of the translucent canvas and the three-dimensional space of the room. After a moment of immobility, she turns and walks away from the screen, as if she were on a stage. What seemed to be photographic or painterly becomes theatricality and cinema: we see an actress walking around in a warehouse-like studio. This spectacular introduction can be seen as an image summing up the whole film in a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, as an emblematic scene for the emergence of intermediality within the film, exposing gestures of reframing, blurring and crossing over, and thus revealing cinema’s capacity for transgressing media borders or creating media ambivalences, and also its uncanny ability to erase all sense of mediation.

The film is an adaptation of Jean Cocteau’s monodrama with the same title, in which we see a woman having a long telephone conversation with her former lover, who has left her. While we only hear her side of the conversation, we witness how she goes through a rollercoaster of emotions. Performances of Cocteau’s play always showcase the compelling stage presence of an actress who embodies a woman who commands all our attention, paradoxically, in a situation in which

11 The typical occurrence of this type of metalepsis is the *trompe l'oeil* effect of insects or birds perched on the frame within the frame of a painting (e.g. Antonello da Messina: *St. Jerome in his Study*, 1474), or the painted fly (*musca depicta*) most common in 15th- and 16th-century European paintings (e.g. Carlo Crivelli: *Madonna and Child*, circa 1480; *Saint Katherine of Alexandria*, 1494; Petrus Christus: *Portrait of a Carthusian*, 1446), in which we see the fly proportionate to the viewer and not to the relatively small figures in the painting, so that it appears not *in* the picture but *on* the picture, as if it has just landed on the canvas. Beside the instances in which people portrayed in paintings, seem to look directly at us, or make other gestures towards the viewer, thus shattering the so-called fourth wall, these tiny figures have a similar metaleptic effect to mediate between reality and representation, between sensuous perception and abstract (symbolic) meaning.

she is utterly volatile and subordinated to an invisible presence. There have been numerous film adaptations in the past with Anna Magnani, Ingrid Bergman, Sophia Loren, Simone Signoret, Liv Ullmann, and Rosamund Pike among others, performing the monologue. Almodóvar himself made the play part of his 1987 film, *The Law of Desire* (*La ley del deseo*), only to return to it a year later, as a major influence for his *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988). Thus, in *The Human Voice* he is dealing with a well-known literary text that has multiple resonances both within film history and in his own work. Therefore, it is perfectly suitable for making it the vehicle for a complex self-reflection. The film can be interpreted as a companion piece to Almodóvar's previous, autofictional work, *Pain and Glory* (*Dolor y Gloria*, 2019), unfolding a series of allusions to his previous films and drawing on his own longtime fascination with Cocteau's play. The entire art design of the film is a compendium of his visual vocabulary. The characteristically gaudy, primary colors in costumes and furniture, the sculptures, the kitschy objects, the books, the DVDs, the artsy pottery, the paintings hanging on the walls are all building blocks of a typical Almodóvarian world that we recognize from his films.¹² The *mise-en-scène* places the film's narrative in a patchwork space reflecting elements of his cinematic universe, while the music accompanying the visual word, is similarly composed from themes borrowed and adapted from the soundtrack of four previous Almodóvar films, *Talk To Her* (*Hable con ella*, 2002), *Bad Education* (*La mala educación*, 2004), *Broken Embraces* (*Los abrazos rotos*, 2009), and *I'm So Excited* (*Los amantes pasajeros*, 2013) – with the exception of the last one, all of which feature prominently elements of self-reflexivity (some even films within the film) and/or autofiction.

Artificiality, excessive, melodramatic flamboyance and its paradoxical intertwining with a search for authenticity has always been Almodóvar's hallmark.¹³ In this short film, however, Almodóvar, reflects on this intertwining with a kind of distance (also by shooting the film in English, rather than Spanish and casting the androgynous Tilda Swinton in a traditionally submissive feminine role),

¹² Some of the props, pieces of furniture are literally carried over from previous films, and we even recognize objects from the previous film, *Pain and Glory*, parts of which were shot in Almodóvar's own apartment.

¹³ We can remember in this respect Almodóvar's stance on the relationship between artificiality and authenticity as it was articulated through the monologue of the transgender Agrado in *All about My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999). In this famous speech, she described herself as being "authentic" by detailing the costs of her implants and plastic surgery, declaring also that "you are more authentic the more you resemble what you've dreamed of being," while earlier in the film she also mentions that all she had left that was "real" were her feelings.

and most importantly, by reframing the famous monologue of the abandoned woman as a dialogue between the arts and reality, stylized pictoriality and intense emotion. Besides Almodóvar's characteristic attention to detail in creating visually striking images, *The Human Voice* betrays an explicitly photographic sensibility in devising linear arrangement of objects within the visual frame, in thinking of horizontal, almost flat compositions (see, for example, the "still life" of the cluster of perfume bottles and pillboxes lined up in front of the bathroom mirror), the expressive use of studio lighting and carefully chosen color scheme of each frame. The short film makes in this way his usual visual stylization an agent of self-reflexivity, presenting a visibly artificial picture space that appears familiar through the presence of personal objects and references to previous films. The visual artistry of the film also redirects Almodóvar's newfound artistic creativity in still life photography to converge with his cinematic language. In 2018 and 2019, Almodóvar had two major photography exhibitions at the Marlborough Gallery in Madrid and New York with the titles, *Life on Hold* (*Vida detenida*) and *Waiting for the Light*¹⁴. The pictures of various arrangements of wilting flowers and decorative vases photographed against colored flat backgrounds had some unmistakable touches of the aesthetic of his films, but their key inspiration came from the history of painting and partly from the photos of Robert Mapplethorpe, which were conceived similarly around the performative effects of light and shadow in his minimalist, pristine flower-and-vase compositions.¹⁵ Perhaps one of the most representative pieces of Almodóvar's photographic oeuvre, a kind of homage to Diego Velázquez's *Las meninas* (1656), featuring a vase resembling in shape the dress of the Infanta in Velázquez's painting, can be seen in the film hanging on the wall of one of the rooms. The playful self-reference is reinforced by Almodóvar's gesture of taking the same vase that he used for the photo and placing it in front of the picture, similarly holding a single yellow flower. The result is a *mise-en-abyme* and a metalepsis in which the real vase, taken from his home, mirrors its artistic depiction in the photo (fig. 2).¹⁶

It is also worth noting that in 2019 Almodóvar embarked on a joint artistic endeavor with the painter Jorge Galindo (the author of the painting featured in *Pain*

14 See the exhibition catalogue here: https://issuu.com/marlborough/docs/cata_logo_almodo_var_mny2019_final. Last accessed 27.05.2022.

15 Almodóvar, who met Mapplethorpe at the beginning of the 1980s, also curated a selection of his photographs for an artist's book, *Robert Mapplethorpe: Almodóvar's Gaze*, published in 2012.

16 The fact that this is a personal object belonging to Almodóvar in real life makes the small detail of the vase somewhat similar to the metaleptic depictions of flies in Renaissance paintings mentioned earlier (see footnote 4): we perceive it as a part of profilmic reality rather than of the filmic fiction.

and Glory), which resulted in an exhibition entitled *Flowers (Flores)* that was first mounted at the Andalusian Center of Photography, and later travelled to several art galleries around Spain and Portugal. In this project that fused photography with painting, they splashed and smeared paint with their hands over large prints of Almodóvar's photos in gestures of "energetic caress,"¹⁷ in a process similar to performance art, transforming his still life photos into hybrid, emotionally charged action photo-paintings. In *The Human Voice*, Almodóvar seems to fuse his photographic vision with cinema in a similar, affective intervention through the means of other arts. He does this, however, in an even more complex intermedial fashion. In the press release for the film, Almodóvar defines the short film as a "chamber piece" and "an experimental work."¹⁸ The physical space that he builds in the film, looks like an exhibition space dedicated to his own art, including a theatrical scenery constructed in the middle of an empty warehouse. It brings to life at the same time a doubly enclosed, claustrophobic world, i.e. a set within a set, in which the protagonist is running around as if it were a maze. In several shots, Almodóvar even shows us the set from above, making Tilda Swinton into a tiny figure moving around a dollhouse (fig. 3). Moreover, this is a double space that merges theatricality with cinema, as it is clearly indicated, for example, in the scene in which we behold Tilda Swinton gesticulating in front of a large green chroma-key screen used when shooting a film, hanging here like a spectacular curtain behind the actress, boosting the dramatic effect of the scene.

All of this excess of visuality in the *mise-en-scène* is in fact a kind of *mise-en-art* through which Almodóvar both exploits and subverts melodrama's tendencies to externalize emotional states in visual design. Hollywood melodrama, "especially in the 1930s, was structured, in part, around the presentation of women as glamorous objects to be emulated and consumed, and around the creation of a *mise-en-scène* that 'fetishizes' consumer objects and a consumerist lifestyle".¹⁹ In a similar way, Tilda Swinton is glamorously photographed here as a statuesque fashion model focusing all the attention of the camera, surrounded by consumer objects that flaunt gestures of product placement (the espresso machine, the hi-tech earbuds, the mobile phone, etc.). By parading the agonizing Tilda Swinton in a series of high-end designer clothes, which miraculously change from scene to scene and immediately impress the viewer, Almodóvar uses fashion as a medium on its own.

17 Quotation from Tove Langridge's review of the exhibition for TW Fineart, <https://www.twfineart.com/blogs/tw-fineart-1/jorge-galindo-pedro-almodovar-exhibition>. See a video showing the creative process here: <https://youtu.be/fwUImZFO-7U>. Last accessed 27.05.2022.

18 See the director's statement in the press release on this site: <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/index.php/filmink?id=9b917c6e-2e7d-eb11-a9d2-0edcbcd33718&type=cs>. Last accessed 27.05.2022.

19 LaPlace 1987, 141.

This time fashion is not integrated into the film (i. e. into the filmic diegesis making it integral part of the identities or fantasies of his characters), but interacting with the film in a truly intermedial way, creating an intersection between two art forms. The Balenciaga creations are more than theatrical props reminding us of the director's fashion sense evident in many previous films,²⁰ or emphasizing self-reflexively that Swinton plays in this adaptation not merely a woman, but a successful professional actress facing a situation of crisis, whose extravagant and eclectic taste in clothes could be motivated by her profession and social status. The use of fashion makes the film lean towards the recording of a piece of performance art featuring Tilda Swinton. It may evoke a series of other live art performances she participated in (many of them centered on fashion²¹), as well as her own entire body of work intersecting film, fashion, photography, and performance art. Many other directors beside Almodóvar have also tapped into Swinton's deep engagement with fashion (e.g. Luca Guadagnino in two films: *I am Love*, 2009; *A Bigger Splash*, 2015), and she has modelled for high-fashion designer labels in catwalk shows and photo editorials, a preoccupation that goes way beyond wearing haute couture at red carpet events that is habitual for any contemporary international movie star.²²

While usually Swinton appears in films as someone who embodies gender fluidity and performs identity through costume and style, here her ability to “cross over” is emphasized in a different direction, she is employed here as a performer who “shifts seamlessly between character, role, actor, model, and person across different art forms and genres”²³. What she embodies is not the mutability of gender identity, but the seamless flux in cinema between fiction and reality as well as in-between the arts, inviting a similar flexibility, in the viewer's position between reflective distance and emotional connection. For, despite a focus on physicality, on her fashion-model-like slim, tall figure and pale complexion that has almost always been a key to her screen presence, on her extremely stylish appearance and the

20 The previous intersections of Almodóvar's cinema and the fashion world served a dual purpose, according to Gerard Dapena: “for the Spanish public, they offered a schooling in how to be fashionable, serving up imaginary and pleasurable modes of identification with his performers made possible through the consumption of fashion brands and accessories; for audiences abroad, the fashion-conscious characters in Almodóvar's films were further proof of Spain's newly acquired cosmopolitanism and modern identity” (2013, 496).

21 Swinton has collaborated with the fashion historian and curator Olivier Saillard in several performance art projects (e.g. *The Impossible Wardrobe*, 2012; *Eternity Dress*, 2013; *Cloakroom – Vestiaire Obligatoire*, 2014; *Embodying Pasolini*, 2021).

22 See an analysis of the intersections of Tilda Swinton's film and fashion work written by Karen de Perthuis (2018).

23 de Perthuis 2018, 11.

visibly stylized décor, we do feel the pain of the character as she delivers the monologue. Although we do not see a typical, sanguine or hysterical Almodóvarian figure, but Tilda Swinton as herself (i.e. the public persona, the image of Tilda Swinton we know from public appearances, contemporary art, and cinema) stepping into an Almodóvarian universe, we do see a woman in anguish. We also fear for what will happen next as she stumbles around the house, buys an axe at the local hardware shop, then swallows a handful of pills, pours a can of gasoline all over the place and tells the man on the phone, “I’m what’s burning, my love.” In an affective metalepsis, the viewer is led not only to leap from actor/model to character (and back),²⁴ but from understanding and reflecting on the previously described processes of interartiality to becoming involved emotionally.

Stepping in and out of Reality

The protagonist herself goes through a process that is the reverse of what the viewer experiences. While we become more and more engulfed in the story, empathizing with the rejected woman, she manages to overcome her despair and shake off the shackles of emotional attachment to her lover who has scorned her. The film foreshadows her final move already from the beginning with the gesture of stepping out of the frame and by drawing on the capacity for metamorphosis associated with Tilda Swinton’s previous roles and with her image cultivated in different art forms. We see her confined in a doubly enclosed space, yet this artificially built environment can never actually contain her. Although it suggests that the character is literally isolated from the world in her obsession with the man who has discarded her, Swinton keeps walking in and out of the dollhouse-like set that we can see in this way for what it is, not as a real house, but as a set mounted inside a vacant industrial space. According to the director’s comments from the film’s press kit, we see “the wooden structure that holds up the walls of the realistic set, the material reality of what is fictional.” Almodóvar is reminding us here that pointing to its own material constructedness is always a gesture that grounds artifice in reality within an artwork. Accordingly, the short film is built not just as an interart experiment emphasizing the modulations of cinema between photogra-

²⁴ This is a frequent occurrence in metacinema that explicitly addresses the duality of the actor and role. Regarding more traditional fiction films, it was theorized in connection with Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), in which the image of the fictional character, a caricature of Hitler gradually morphs into Chaplin, the political agitator, highlighting “how the ‘real’ world can be metaleptically approached by certain narratives (or representations)” (Hanebeck 2017, 79). See also Schaeffer 2005, 327; Dahlberg 2010, 105.

phy, painting, performance art, and so on, but also as an experiment with enmeshing the worlds of fiction, of the imaginary with that of tangible reality, staging a dialogue between the visible and the invisible.

Tilda Swinton's fashion-model like presence and restraint in acting is counterbalanced by the connotations of passion, desire, frustration, violence attached to the well-known paintings hanging on the wall, the films or the books scattered on the table and brought into close-up in the film. The possibility of murderous revenge is hinted at by showing the DVD case of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Volume 1*, (2003), the melodramatic aspects are borne out by the pile of films by Douglas Sirk, the neurosis and infatuation in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *Tender is the Night*, suggests that something comparable is present in Almodóvar's film. The paintings that we see in the film, work in a similar manner. The uninhibited and campy eroticism of Alberto Vargas's picture, *Memories of Olive* (1920), the eerie embrace of the robot-like figures in Giorgio de Chirico's *Hector and Andromache* (1917), its visual forms carried over onto the reverberating patterns and colors of the interior design of the room, and finally, the sensuality and vulnerability of the reclining nude in the Artemisia Gentileschi's painting, *Venus and Cupid* (1626) hanging above the bed in which Swinton's character attempts suicide (fig. 4), all offer parallels to the emotional universe of *The Human Voice*, and resonate with the excessive feelings of Swinton's character. Nevertheless, their actual impact resides not in how closely they echo elements of the narrative, but in their potential to expand the imaginary realm of what we actually see in the film. They add to the multiple gestures of *mise-en-art* an intermedial gesture of *mise-en-esprit*.

Writing about so-called "one character films," Julian Hanich (2020) describes several modalities (of the use of sound, the content and intonation of verbal language) through which the film (in a process he terms *mise-en-esprit*) can prompt the viewer to imagine the character immersed in something that is elsewhere. This, of course, applies to this film as well. The human voice in the title belongs to the protagonist, we do not see the man that Tilda Swinton talks to on the phone, we can only imagine him from the woman's words, inflections of voice and body language that induce empathy, and we feel how the presence of his absence weighs on the forlorn lover. Additionally, the visible art references (just like Almodóvar's self-quotations) add not a literal but an imaginary dimension of "elsewhere" to the narration that can be located (in a metaleptic leap) outside the filmic diegesis in the previous experiences of the viewers or readers. Even if we do not recognize all the references and cannot conjure up previous impressions, interpretations to inform our experience of Almodóvar's film, the evoked artworks generate a certain mood and atmosphere, including a sense of medial otherness, e.g. a tension between the cinematic narrative and the essentially non-narrative expres-

sivity of painting. We perceive an excess oozing from the autonomous pieces of art that can never be completely absorbed by the diegetic world.²⁵

However, there is also another “outside” that we become sensuously aware of in the film. This is the actual, real, profilmic world that has been there all through the film, absent, yet acknowledged in the conspicuous artificiality of the theatrical-cinematic set-up, and one that is revealed in the last scene. The conclusion is the opposite of the film’s beginning, in which Swinton steps away from the flat screen defining a pictorial space and enters the diegetic space of the film, an imaginary reality inviting us to join her in her emotional journey. Here, at the end of the film, after burning down the set within the set, as a symbolic gesture of rising above her emotional turmoil, the final image of the film is Swinton going out of the warehouse-like studio into the street, into the world outside as the screen turns opaque and fades to white, erasing the image (thus even echoing the blurring effect of the opaque white screen within the screen in the introductory scene). The door here becomes a symbol of “the edge of fiction” as Jacques Rancière has suggested, marking “the very line of separation between the world in which nothing happens and that in which something takes place” (2020, 11), a threshold between the highly organized, structured world of fiction (which here materializes in a complex amalgam of the arts and media) and an ordinary reality where the storyworld literally ends, and “imageness” is erased by the uncontained flow of life itself. This “outside” corresponds to W.J.T. Mitchell’s claim that “we need to reverse the famous, misconstrued Derridean axiom, ‘there is nothing outside the text,’ to say just the opposite: ‘there is always something outside a medium,’ something that exceeds, escapes, defies mediation” (2017, 14). This “outside” is something that all art measures itself against, and that all art has attempted to “leap into” in one way or another.

In this short film, Almodóvar creates his own conceit to remind us of this aspiration of art that was epitomized by *trompe l’oeil* metalepsis in painting. Tilda Swinton’s gesture of stepping into an artificially constructed environment that immerses us in a familiar Almodóvarian space of art which is also more personal than before, and which communicates real feelings, as well as her stepping out into a (post-filmic) reality that lies beyond this hypermediated world, and where fiction stops short, are both emblematic for the dynamic relationship between art and reality that can emerge through cinema’s affective and metaleptic intermediality. The short film is remarkable for the way it reconfigures this trope of stepping in and out of a picture not as a narrative device of creating entangled internal levels of fictional/subjective worlds, and not even merely as a construction of met-

25 I have previously analyzed this effect of paintings in cinema as a kind of “vertigo” (Pethő 2013).

afiction (although it can be undoubtedly conceived as an allegory of the power of art to create illusions and to carry away its spectators), but as an intense experience of the two-way porosity between fiction and reality. As such, the film belongs in the same paradigm as *A Woman's Revenge* (*A Vingança de Uma Mulher*, 2012) by Rita Azevedo Gomes and *The Souvenir Part I* and *II* (2019, 2021) by Joanna Hogg, which also offer sensitive depictions of female traumas by weaving into the cinematic texture a rich panoply of art references and wrap up their (likewise metafictional) narratives in similar metaleptic images of revealing the material reality of the film set, concluding with their characters stepping out into the world that lies beyond the soundstage. Like these other films, Almodóvar's *The Human Voice* reaffirms the ontological position of the real beyond the "edges of fiction," and reclaims it in an epistemic process as something to be experienced through cinema's excesses of becoming intermedial.

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Fig. 1: Tilda Swinton appearing in-between photography, painting, cinema, and theatricality. Still frame from *The Human Voice*. © El Deseo 2020.



Fig. 2: Almodóvar's own photo paraphrasing *Las meninas* hanging on the wall with the vase used in the photograph placed in front of the picture. © Still frame from *The Human Voice*. © El Deseo 2020.



Fig. 3: In the set filmed from above Tilda Swinton appears as a tiny figure moving around a doll-house. Still frame from *The Human Voice*. © El Deseo 2020.



Fig. 4: Artemisia Gentileschi's painting, *Venus and Cupid* (1626): the sensuality and vulnerability of the reclining nude echoing the emotional state of the character. Still frame from *The Human Voice*. © El Deseo 2020.

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Marie-Laure Ryan

Telling Stories with Objects: Narrative and Materiality

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of narrative and materiality, examining how physical objects and their material properties shape our understanding of stories and their meaning. Through two case studies – Zachary Thomas Dodson’s novel “Bats of the Republic” and Orhan Pamuk’s “The Museum of Innocence” – I delve into the ways in which objects are used to tell stories, create meaning, and evoke emotions. I argue that materiality matters in narrative, influencing how readers engage with and interpret texts. I also investigate the blurred lines between fact and fiction, highlighting how narrative fiction can imitate factual discourse and vice versa. By analyzing the material properties of objects and their role in storytelling, I hope to shed light on the complex relationships between narrative, materiality, and meaning-making.

Keywords: Narratology, object-oriented, narrative, materiality, Orhan Pamuk, Zachary Thomas

As a phenomenon that transcends individual media, narrative can be embodied in different physical supports, or “materialities.” In language-based narrative, materiality has long been taken for granted: it does not seem to matter whether Jane Austen’s novels are realized as print, as audio books or as digital files, printed in large or small characters and in Courier or Garamond, because these factors do not affect the reader’s construction of the story and of its world. According to psychologist Rolf Zwaan (2005), the mental processing of narrative consists of building “situation models,” or mental simulations of the evolution of the story-world, that are independent of the medium and of its particular inscription. Yet with the surge of materiality and of the mode of existence of objects as topics worthy of philosophical investigation,¹ it is now widely accepted that “materiality matters,” though it is hard if not impossible to tell exactly how: it would take technological methods that go far beyond traditional literary scholarship (which is still largely based on the critics’ intuition) to identify the effect of material factors such as visual appearance or the sense of touch provided by the text on the experience of the reader.

1 See Harman 2011.

Another problem when dealing with materiality lies in its tangled relations with mediality. If we regard media as means of expression, they differ from each other through the material substance in which they encode information. Take digital media: their materiality lies in what singles them out as digital. But what exactly are they made of? Bits? Pixels? Electric current running through logic gates? Code that takes input and displays it on a screen, according to technologies that renew the display many times per second, so that the inscription is ephemeral and modifiable? The materiality of book-supported narratives is much easier to conceive, because it is solid and durable: books are made of pages of paper bound at the spine, and these pages bear permanent inscriptions. It does not really matter to the user how the inscription reached the page – whether by letter press, by photographic means, or by printing a digital file. The description of the materiality of digital texts must take into consideration how the system works, but the materiality of books can be intuitively grasped without reference to the production process.

The difficulty of distinguishing materiality from mediality is demonstrated by the pioneering work of Katherine Hayles. In *Writing Machines*, she forcefully states the importance of taking the materiality of texts into consideration:

My claim is that *the physical form of the literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean*. Literary works that strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate open a window on the larger connections that unite literature as a verbal form to its material forms.²

But when she turns to the task of demonstrating how materiality matters in specific texts, Hayles obscures the distinction between mediality and materiality by naming the project MSA – *medium-specific analysis*.

How would a MSA approach deal with a work such as Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*? Would it differ from a MSA analysis of other book-bound narratives, such as Jane Austen's novels, or the Sherlock Holmes stories? Not really. It could show how these texts take advantage of the affordances of their material support, but this type of analysis would not be very different from Walter Ong's demonstration of how writing and then print have transformed narrative. Insofar as many texts share the same medium, MSA would capture general features, but it would not tell much about what distinguishes Proust from Austen and from other book-supported narratives. To avoid this cookie-cutter approach, Hayles redefines

² Hayles 2002, 25, italics original.

materiality not as what entire media are made of, but as how individual texts deal with their physical substance, how they reflect on its affordances:

Materiality thus emerges from interactions between physical properties and a work's artistic strategies. For this reason, materiality cannot be specified in advance, as if it preexisted the specificity of the work. An emergent property, materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user's interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops – strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks.³

In this perspective, materiality becomes synonymous with how “literary works interrogate the inscription technology that produce them.”⁴ Hayles' conception of materiality as an emergent property is characteristic of self-reflexive and experimental texts, which she demonstrates through readings of Talan Memmott's digital *Lexia to Perplexia*, Mark Z. Danielewski's graphically complex print narrative *House of Leaves* and Tom Phillips' painted-over Victorian novel *A Humument* may appear excessively narrow, – do not conventional narratives also depend on a physical support? –, but the consciousness of materiality that emerges from experimental texts reflects back on all the texts that share the same physical support. In other words, it takes *House of Leaves* and its subversion of the reading conventions associated with the book to become aware of how these conventions have traditionally operated for Austen or for Proust.

Multimodality

A book can be experienced on the two-dimensional level of its individual pages through the eye that scans their surface, as well as on the three-dimensional level of the volume through the hand that holds the book and turns the pages. From the very beginning of the codex book, the flat surface of the page has been hospitable to both words and pictures. In illustrated storybooks, a form particularly popular with children, the images are not objects within the storyworld, but extradiegetic documents that the reader can see but the characters cannot.⁵ Image and text thus provide separate, though complementary modes of access to the storyworld. Starting around the nineties, a new form of multi-modal narra-

³ Hayles 2002, 33.

⁴ Hayles 2002, 25.

⁵ Even when the image depicts what the characters see, the characters don't see the image, because it does not exist within the storyworld.

tive developed in which images are no longer extradiegetic illustrations, but representations of intradiegetic objects that play a role within the plot.⁶ These objects can be material things connected to the characters, or the various kinds of ephemeral written documents that constitute the paper (and now digital) trail of human lives: handwritten or typed letters, emails, web sites, newspaper articles, maps, photos, sketches, diagrams, train tickets, hospital admission forms, birth and death certificates. The use of such documents suggests a return to the ‘pseudo-factuality’⁷ that dominated the novelistic production of the eighteenth century, a feature by which fiction hid its fictionality by imitating a genre of factual communication such as letters, diaries, and autobiographies. Now imitation extends beyond the purely verbal, to affect the appearance of documents. The contemporary forms of multi-modality in narrative fiction owe more to the use of genuine documents in nonfictional texts, such as memoirs, historiography, biography, and instruction manuals, than to the traditional case of illustrated children’s stories.

In what follows I will explore how narrative fiction deals with materiality in its most primordial manifestations: namely, materiality as solid, tangible object. Skipping over the ‘immaterial materiality’ of described objects, where matter becomes language and therefore one-dimensional (since language is primarily a temporal medium), I will discuss experiments with two and then three full dimensions.

Two-dimensional materiality

My example of multi-modal narrative that uses primarily two-dimensional reproductions of written documents is Zachary Thomas Dodson’s 2015 novel *Bats of the Republic*. Created by a book-designer doubling as literary author, *Bats* uses maps, genealogies, hand-drawn images of bats and other animals, and reproductions of written documents to complement the written text. In keeping with contemporary narrative trends, *Bats* interleaves two stories that take place at different times in the same world; the world-state of story 1 evolves into the world-state of story 2, and the main character of story 2, Zeke Thomas, is a descendent (by adoption) of the main character of story 1, Zachary Thomas. But things are not that simple. Each of the two stories consists of several branches, one of which is presented as a novel composed in the world of the other story, so that instead of a clean

⁶ See Gibbons 2012; Hallet 2014.

⁷ See Foley 1986.

hierarchical structure, we have what Douglas Hofstadter calls a “strange loop” or “tangled hierarchy.”

Story 1 is made in part of a Victorian novel titled *The Sisters Gray* set in 1848 about two sisters in Chicago in need of husbands, as well as of a series of letters to one of the sisters by her future husband, Zadock Thomas, who has been sent to the Republic of Texas to deliver a mysterious letter to a general. *The Sisters Gray* (which can be found in the library of story 2) is presented through a fac-simile picture of a book. Printed on paper browned by age, with many spots and blemishes, and using a typography and graphic presentation typical of the nineteenth century, the book within the book arouses a nostalgic awareness of its old-fashioned design. Story 2 is a collection of documents that includes narrations by different characters, as well as a novel titled *The City State*, which, as we are told in *The Sisters Gray*, was written by the mother of the sisters of story 1. It takes place in 2143, after a catastrophe has destroyed the United States and reduced its population to a handful of city-states governed by totalitarian regimes, and it deals with a mysterious letter inherited by Zeke Thomas from his grandfather. This letter, which is obviously the same one as the letter of story 1, is physically contained in an envelope marked “Do not open” at the end of the book. When we reach the envelope, we leave the realm of images and enter the domain of real objects. The envelope contains a long and thin piece of paper with the continuation of story 1 narrated by Zadock; it ends (spoiler alert) with Zadock escaping from captors and approaching a strange man. On the reverse side is the continuation of story 2 narrated by Zeke; it ends with Zeke escaping the city-state of the Republic of Texas and meeting Zadock, who hands him a letter.

But the materiality of *Bats* does not stop with the flatness of paper products. The reader is instructed to fasten together the beginning and end of the letter into a three-dimensional Moebius strip that makes story 1 flow into story 2 and story 2 into story 1 in an endless loop: an ending that may not bring the two stories to a satisfactory conclusion on the diegetic level, but that brings closure on the meta-diegetic level, by enacting materially the metaleptic entanglements of the two stories, each of which contains a novel composed in the world of the other (fig. 1).

Three-dimensional materiality

Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence* was inspired by the fascination of the author for objects that he found in antique and junk stores around Istanbul – mostly mass-produced objects that document daily life in Istanbul in the mid-twentieth century. As a writer who earlier in life aspired to be a visual artist, what could Pamuk do with his collection, gathered over more than a decade? One pos-

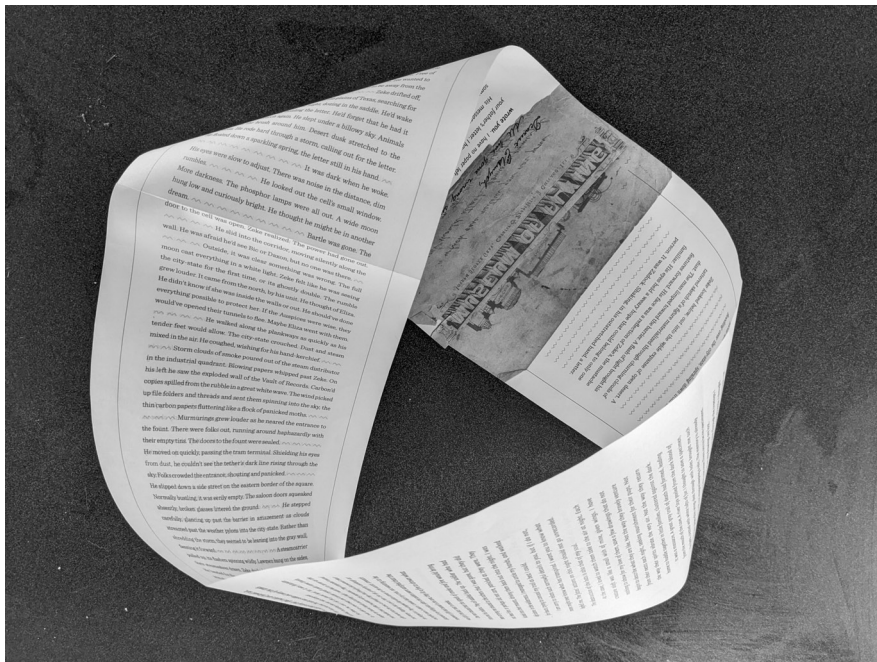


Fig. 1: The Moebius strip from *Bats of the Republic* by Zachary Thomas Dodson: a three-dimensional textual object. © Marie-Laure Ryan.

sibility was to exhibit the objects in a museum, commemorating the now vanished lifestyle that they embody, and bringing to the fore their “thingness,” their three-dimensional materiality;⁸ another possibility was to turn them into language by incorporating them into the plot of a novel. Pamuk choose to do both: he created a real museum that displays the objects, and he wrote a novel about the creation of the museum.

Set in Istanbul from 1975 to 1984, *The Museum of Innocence* tells the story of an unhappy love affair that turns into fetishist obsession. The narrator, Kemal, belongs to the upper crust of Istanbul society, a class that tries to emulate European culture at all costs. While engaged to Sibel, a heavily Westernized young woman, he falls in love with Füsun, a salesgirl of stunning beauty who is a poor distant relative of his. They engage for a short time in a passionate sexual relation, but

⁸ Examples of such exhibits are the Museum der Dinge in Berlin, which displays industrially produced objects from the 20th century, and the Cabinets of Wonders, or Wunderkammern, that displayed disparate collections of exotic objects in the 17th and 18th centuries. Both are mentioned by Pamuk as inspirations.

after Kemal's formal engagement to Sibel, Füsün disappears, and Kemal is heart-broken. His strange behavior leads Sibel to break the engagement. When Füsün renews contact with Kemal a few months later, she is married to a man she does not love. For eight years, Kemal visits Füsün four times a week for supper in her parents' house, where she still lives with her husband, and he spends his evenings watching television with the family. He also steals various objects from the house, because they bear the imprint of Füsün's presence. Finally, Füsün gets a divorce, she agrees to marry Kemal and they set out on a car trip to Paris. During the trip they renew their physical relation, but the next day Füsün drives Kemal's car into a plane tree, killing herself and seriously wounding Kemal. The text is ambiguous as to whether it is an accident or a suicide. After Füsün's death, Kemal creates a museum with all the objects he has stolen from her house, and he asks his friend Orhan Pamuk to write his life story. Pamuk accepts, but rather than writing a regular biography of Kemal, he will write a novel told in the first person by Kemal. This future novel is the one we have just read, so that the text of *Museum of Innocence* curls back upon itself, through the same kind of effect that we find in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

In addition to the fictional story of the fictional museum, Pamuk wrote a non-fictional catalog, titled *The Innocence of Objects*, in which he describes the contents of the actual museum and how it came into being. Pamuk's museum is in many senses the opposite of Kemal's. It is a real museum that tells a fictional story, while Kemal's museum is a fictional museum that tells what is from Kemal's point of view a true story. In Kemal's museum, objects are in a sense de-realized, since they stand for Füsün and the memories they evoke, while in Pamuk's museum they stand primarily for themselves, for their strangeness and opacity. But while the two museums exist in different worlds, they overlap in many ways, and there is a lot of interplay between the discourses that describe them. Many times in the novel Kemal mentions objects that play a role in the plot and then says: "I exhibit it here." This is literally true of the real-world museum, since one can see a similar object in one of the displays. The novel also contains a map to the actual museum and a ticket that will gain the reader free admission. Yet the novel's true-for-the-real-world elements do not function in the same way as the common phenomenon of imported facts, that is, of statements that happen to be true for both the fictional and the real world: the reference of "here" and the validity of the ticket for the real world truly transgress ontological boundaries. On the other hand, the catalog, which is as a whole a non-fictional account of how and why Pamuk created the museum, contains many passages from the novel, it refers to Kemal and Füsün as if they actually existed and it contains a literary map of Pamuk's Istanbul that shows the settings of events not just from *Museum of Innocence* but from several of his other novels. In other words, the fictional novel con-

tains true statements about the real-life museum, and the nonfictional catalog contains fictional statements about the characters in the novel. The fictionality of these statements is not marked typographically or paratextually, but it is obvious to any reader familiar with the novel.⁹

The novel consists of 83 short chapters, and each of them is represented in the real-world museum by a box that shows some of the objects mentioned in the chapter. There are three types of relations between the text of the novel and the objects of the museum: (1) Objects collected in the real world because they can stand for objects that are important to the plot. For instance, it was easy for Pamuk to gather 4213 cigarette butts to represent the ones that were smoked by Füsün and picked up by Kemal. (2) Objects that play no important role in the plot, but that Pamuk wanted to use both in the museum and the novel, because he fell in love with them for some mysterious reason. For instance, there is a display that contain only one object, a quince grater, that Pamuk found in an antique shop. To insert it in the novel he invents a rather convoluted episode in which the police stops Kemal on his way home, searches him, finds the grater and suspects it of being a weapon (this takes place during a military dictatorship). (3) Objects shown in the museum that could not be fitted in the novel, such as the belongings of Kemal's and Füsün's fathers, both of whom die during the story. The museum shows complete collections of all the objects that they used during their daily lives, as if these collections captured the essence of the living person.

But the most important object in the plot is not found in the museum. This object is Füsün herself. She is represented through her dress, panties, combs, earrings, etc., but the dress envelopes an absent body, and we see no picture of her face. I call Füsün an object because this is what Kemal turns her into. He never cares about what she thinks, about the long-term effect on her life of his obsession with her – he only cares about her appearance. He refers to her as “my beauty,” and that is what she is for him: a thing of beauty, an object of aesthetic pleasure. She is an allegory much more than an individuated character – an allegory of the artist's obsession with beauty, and also of the *genius loci* of Istanbul. After her death, “Istanbul [becomes] a very different city,”¹⁰ a city of paved streets and concrete buildings rather than the sensory feast of noises, sights, and smells that it was before.

⁹ An interesting – and probably inadvertent – combination of factuality and fictionality is also found on a street sign in Istanbul that points to the museum. It reads: “Pamuk, Kemal: this direction,” joining together the real author and the fictional character.

¹⁰ Pamuk 2010, 492.

Of the relationship between the novel and the museum, Pamuk writes in the catalog: “And yet just as the novel is entirely comprehensible without a visit to the museum, so the museum is a place that can be visited and experienced on its own. The museum is not an illustration of the novel, and the novel is not an explanation of the museum.”¹¹ For the visitors who have not read the novel, the museum brings two kinds of experiences: first, an experience of materiality, of thingness, that language cannot fully express, but that Pamuk tries to convey through the artistic arrangement of objects in every frame (an arrangement reminiscent of the boxes of the artist Joseph Cornell). Pamuk’s comments about a particular frame is valid for all of them: “As they gradually found their place in the museum, the objects began to talk among themselves, singing a different tune and moving beyond what was described in the novel”). And also: “I was trying to make a sort of painting with the objects, but they were telling me something different.”¹² What they tell Pamuk in their stubborn resistance to being turned into a painting is that their meaning resides in their pure presence, not in their relations to Kemal and Füsün. If objects are declared innocent, it is because of their insistence on being themselves and in telling their own story.

In addition to displaying the thingness of objects through the artistic arrangement of the frames, the museum is meant to capture the spirit of Istanbul through its geographic location, as well as through its spatial design and specific content. It is located in Çukurcuma, the ethnically diverse, occasionally run-down, but vibrant neighborhood where Füsün’s family lives. Visitors will have to walk through the same streets as the characters in the novel in order to reach the museum, and even if they have not read the text, they will imbibe the atmosphere that inspired it. The presence of Istanbul is also conveyed through the yellowing, mostly amateurish photos that are used as the background of the displays or grouped together as collages.

But what will the visitors who have read the book get from the museum? Playing the fictional game of make-believe, will they be moved by the thought that “this is Füsün’s dress, these are Füsün’s earrings” – as people may be moved by seeing relics from saints or the dresses once worn by Marilyn Monroe? (Fig. 2). I doubt that visitors will share Kemal’s fetishism: the visitor knows that Füsün does not exist, and the museum does not break the ontological divide between fiction and reality. Moreover, the aesthetic arrangement of objects in each window detracts the spectator’s attention from the novel they refer to, and they become self-referential. Pamuk himself has doubts about the visitor’s ability to connect

¹¹ Pamuk 2012, 18.

¹² Pamuk 2012, 83.



Fig. 2: A display at Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence, showing Füsün's dress and belongings. It shows the influence of Joseph Cornell's art boxes, as well as of cabinets of curiosities (Wunderkammer). © Marie-Laure Ryan.

the objects in the boxes to specific details of the novel, and this is why he does not want the museum to be an illustration of the novel: "From watching visitors to the museum who had also read the book, I realized that readers remember no more

than six pages of descriptive detail in the six-hundred pages of the novel. Readers who look at the displays were more likely to remember the emotions they'd felt while reading the novel than the objects in it."¹³ Judging by the comments on Amazon, the main emotions people feel while reading the novel are character-oriented, not object-oriented: contempt for Kemal, and pity for Füsün. If the artistic arrangements of objects inspire an emotion, this emotion is nostalgia. Both the novel and the museum remind us of a past perceived at the same time as very close and very remote: very remote, because technology steadily accelerates the rate of change of the world, but also very close, because some of us can actually remember using the kind of objects displayed in the boxes. Nostalgia involves a feeling of loss, and for Turkish readers of a certain age, or for foreign readers who rely on their imagination, this loss concerns the Istanbul of their youth.

If Pamuk is right about the limitations of memory, the best way to experience the relation between the novel and the museum is not during a visit to the physical museum, but by revisiting the museum through the catalog (which contains reproductions of most of the frames), and by re-reading the novel at the same time. As they look at the photos of the frames, and then read the corresponding chapters, readers will become aware of many details that they had not noticed during their first reading. The second reading will be like an Easter egg hunt for the objects that Pamuk inserted in the novel not because they are important to the plot but because he felt mysteriously attracted to them when he found them in a junk store.¹⁴

Conclusion

If the two works I have discussed have something in common, beside their display of materiality and their attempt to harness sources of meaning that go beyond the temporality of language and the spatiality of the page, it lies in their combination of the openly fictional with the pseudo-factual. The openly fictional resides on the level of plot: allegorical treatment of Füsün resulting in a lack of psychological verisimilitude for Pamuk; dystopic anticipation for Dodson, a theme typical of science fiction. The pseudo-factual lies in the imitation of real-world, truth-claiming documents or institutions: technical drawings, field-guide illustrations, and photographic reproduction of a nineteenth century book for Dodson; a museum for

¹³ Pamuk 2012, 121.

¹⁴ Çukurcuma, the neighborhood where the museum is located, is full of antique and junk stores. Walking through its streets makes it easy to imagine where the objects in the museum come from and why Pamuk became fascinated with them. Çukurcuma as a whole is a true Museum of Innocence.

Pamuk, a kind of institution normally devoted to the factual. In their combination of the conspicuously fictional with the pseudo-factual, these works demonstrate that from a narratological point of view fact and fiction do not exist in complete isolation from each other: fiction can imitate factual discourse, while factual discourse occasionally learns some techniques from fiction, for instance in New Journalism.¹⁵ But the relation is not entirely symmetrical, because fiction, not being committed to the truth, can imitate any form of factual representation by suspending its truth-claim, while factual discourse must worry about preserving its credibility. In other words, narrative fiction does not compromise its fictionality by mimicking real-world discourse or documents, but factual narrative can compromise its factuality by looking or reading too much like narrative fiction.

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15 See Wolfe 1973.

Dario Tomasello

The Impossible Transcodification. What if Performance Does Not Deal with the Mediascape?

Abstract: This paper critically examines the notion of performance in the context of transcodification, problematizing the gap between what remains and what is irretrievably lost in the performance's space and time. By engaging with the theories of Richard Schechner, Philip Auslander, and Peggy Phelan, it highlights the paradoxical relationship between the live and the mediatized, questioning the authority and ontology of performance. The paper also draws on Arjun Appadurai's concept of mediascape and the distinction between archive and repertoire, emphasizing the impossibility of transcodification. Furthermore, it explores the difference between performance and performativity, revealing the performative failure and the mystification of reality. The paper concludes that when we talk about media, the notion of performance as the immanence of an action is always "out of place," and that distinguishing between 'media performances' and 'live performances' becomes a gnoseological duty.

Keywords: Performance, live, mediascape, archive, repertoire

The aim of this paper is to critically debate the notion of Performance in terms of its plausible transcodification. On the one hand, there is no doubt that, starting from some assumptions of Richard Schechner himself, the theory of Performance has become viral, up to the point that many scholars, not just orthodox followers of Performance Studies, are working on what to some extent can be considered a privileged application of the so-called 'broad spectrum' of Performance (which is what Arjun Appadurai called "Mediascape").¹

It is the case for instance of Philip Auslander and his well-known paradox: "whereas mediatized performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or the real, the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized, which derives its authority from its reference to the live, etc. The paradigm that best describes the current relationship between the live and the mediatized is the Baudriallardian paradigm of simulation".²

1 Appadurai 1996, 296–300

2 Auslander 1999, 38–39.

On the other hand, Peggy Phelan's perspective provides with a much more drastic vision (maybe with an uncanny intellectual honesty?): "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance."³

Emphasizing, even in terms of Diana Taylor's distinction between *Archive* and *Repertoire*,⁴ the distance between what remains and what is irretrievably lost in the Performance's space and time, this paper tries to problematize such a seemingly unbridgeable gap in a way not too far from the idea of an impossible transcodification.

If performance is given exclusively as a process of representation, then the distinction between "is performance" and "as performance"⁵ also becomes misleading.

In fact, whether we are talking about performance within performing arts' field or as a method of reading actions in everyday life – for which anything can precisely be read as a performance –, the general theoretical framework does not change, since it is the result of the "original sin" that it does not distinguish the performance as a ritual of unrepresentable and the performance as an exhibitionist although effective representation.

It is easy, at this point, to notice that there is a difference, not only in nomenclature, between performance and performativity.

The performance, in its medial, performative dimension, deals with the effects of a continually mystified reality.

In this sense, the work undertaken by Arjun Appadurai in the context of derivative finance and the global crisis that has upset contemporary society to its foundations becomes fundamental, starting from what the American anthropologist has literally called a collapse of language:

Put another way, what collapsed in 2007–8 was a house of words made of contracts, each contract consisting of an agonistic pair of promises, together composing a performative chain as well as a performative mountain generated by the accrual of money value by the multiplication of wagers on uncertain future prices. When the markets froze, when the music stopped and no buyers could be found for any serious bundle of derivatives, what col-

³ Phelan 1993, 146.

⁴ See Taylor 2003.

⁵ See Schechner 2013, 38–41.

lapsed was the architecture of promises on which financial profits are composed, in the age of the derivative form.⁶

Even in advance of these brilliant intuitions, there is one of the most extraordinary episodes of recent Martin Scorsese's filmography. When the young Jordan Belfort/Leonardo Di Caprio, career broker in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), takes his initiation, he learns that the tools of the trade are not in any technical-economic *cursus honorum*, but in the storytelling and inventive art that Mark Hanna/Matthew McConaughey outlines as a weapon capable of muddying the waters and leading customers on a centrifugal carousel and perpetually out of the orbit of reality ("Keep the client on the Ferris Wheel, and it goes, the park is open twenty-four-seven, three-six-five. Every decade, every Goddamn century. That's it. Name of the game").

The very possibility that the game of the stock exchange can actually produce profits, beyond this delusional financial nonsense is feared by Hanna as the worst of nightmares, or as the landing in the real world that must be averted in every way:

So, if you got a client who brought stock at eight, and it now sits at sixteen, and he's all fucking happy, he wants to cash it and liquidate and take his fucking money and run home. You don't let him do that [...] because *that would make it real*.

Mark Hanna: Nobody knows if a stock is going to go up, down, sideways or in circles [...] You know what a fugazi is?

Jordan Belfort: *Fugayzi*, it's a fake.

Mark Hanna: *Fugayzi*, fugazi. It's a whazy. It's a woozie. It's fairy dust. It doesn't exist. It's never landed. It is no matter. It's not on the elemental chart. *It's not fucking real*.

A practice consisting of premises without consequences can also be performative, but it does not actually correspond to a performance, since it is a series of hypothetical postulates, not supported by facts, detached from a contact with lived reality, indeed sometimes exhibited to in spite of it. Thus, media performativity, between seduction and nostalgia, works on special effects, indeed on the special affects of a dream machine that can produce a failure. A failure only apparently less fatal.

The intuition that Appadurai articulated, framing the problem of derivatives in a linguistic failure, actually has a much broader scope than he imagined. In its substantial aspects, it concerns a much wider subsidence. In this sense, the financialization of the economy is the mediatization of actually experienced actions.

6 Appadurai 2016, 13–14.

The performative failure is maybe quite the same. There is a paradox in it.

Why does Appadurai continually speak of performativity as an effective attempt to ritualize the relationship between certainty and uncertainty, when this performativity is already a mediation with respect to the starting performance from which it radiates or precedes in an attempt to divine its outcome?

The “retroperformativity” that descends from Austin and Butler then inevitably becomes a parody of the performance in an attempt which tries to force a model, to “distort it” according to Butler. Or, at most, it represents the imagery of performance, understood as a presupposition that anticipates, in the Appadurian interval, the moment of truth:

Ritual practice is an effort to recalibrate the world (as it exists) so as to achieve a closer relationship to the cosmos (ideally a relationship of identity); financial practice is an effort to use the model to recalibrate the actually existing world so as to generate riskless return. This relationship of symmetry and inversion between the worlds of ritual and of trading comes into play because of the role of the interval (timing and duration between the present and any specific future date) and the peculiar nature of retro- performativity in the ritual and financial spheres.⁷

The process of technological extension has been amplified, as McLuhan noted, to the point of not assigning to the awareness of those who use the new devices (or are used by them?) a saving net against the thud of the worst nightmares. It cannot be said that McLuhan did not foresee this, from his ambiguous position as an oracle and at the same time exorcist of media:

Today, in the electronic age of instantaneous communication, I believe that our survival, and at the very least our comfort and happiness, is predicated on understanding the nature of our new environment, because unlike previous environmental changes, the electric media constitute a total and near-instantaneous transformation of culture, values and attitudes. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss, which can be ameliorated only through a conscious awareness of its dynamics. If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves.⁸

Today we know that, at least on this point, McLuhan, even with all the necessary precautions, had been excessively optimistic. An optimism relaunched by Pietro Montani in the name of the nomenclature of intermediality, destined to insist on the paradoxes of image saturation as an unexpected expedient for a rediscovery of an “elsewhere” that reality inevitably proposes:

⁷ Appadurai 2013, 94.

⁸ McLuhan 1969, 5.

[...] then in the concept of remediation (which is a particular form of hypermediation) it will be necessary to rely precisely on the opposite trend, that which consists in enhancing and intensifying the element of opacity. Adding that the counterpart of this movement, its referent, is not immediacy at all – the illusion of being certainly in the presence of things – but, on the contrary, the resistance of reality to be totally saturated by the audiovisual image. Its insuperable difference from the media forms that represent it. This specific declination of the phenomenon of remediation is what I define as intermediality.⁹

One may agree or not, especially when Montani refers to the Bolter-Grusin's category of "remediation" and overlaps the idea of "hypermediation", but what needs to be considered is how, according to a reflection on the media, the notion of *opacity* seems to play a privileged role.

Perhaps it would be appropriate, in this regard, to rediscover when Ernst Bloch wisely stresses: "The more opaque we are, the less we realize what is happening."¹⁰

So, it is a matter of fact that media and new media's atmosphere is inexorably accompanied by that self-induced subliminal trance, once feared by McLuhan: "The new media and new technologies with which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute a sort of enormous collective surgery performed on the social body with the total absence of antiseptic precautions."¹¹

Do the antiseptic precautions we need, more than ever, a sort of bias for a concrete reference with an authentic relational bodily fulcrum? Maybe it is the idea itself of "presence" that we can hardly evoke before the evanescent ghost circulating in the mediascape.

To distinguish between 'media performances' and 'live performances' perhaps becomes a duty in gnoseological terms, before and more than becoming passionate about transcodification's issues.

Can we deduce the most peremptory and uncompromising conclusion, namely that when we talk about media, the notion of performance, as the immanence of an action, is always "out of place"?

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Bartosz Lutostański

A Poetics of App Fiction

Abstract: This paper attempts to define and describe a relatively new subgenre of digital literature – app fiction. I differentiate between four key components of its poetics: triple reception model, three types of immersion, interface, and database. These components, which inform a specific set of media literacy competences necessary for receiving app fiction and conceptualize phenomenological, technological, and haptic dimensions of it, are used in a succinct discussion of three examples: *The Pickle Index* by Eli Horowitz, *Arcadia* by Iain Pears, and *Belgravia* by Julian Fellowes.

Keywords: App fiction, digital literature, media literacy, new technologies, immersion, database, interface

In the introductory chapter to *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (2013), Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad put forward a typology of digital fiction consisting in a chronologically arranged set of formally distinguishable phases: hypertext, multimodal and multimedia text, cybertext, and social media literature spanning more than two decades.¹ More recent research argues for emergence of new types of digital fiction. A good case in point is a special 2017 issue of *Paradoxa*. Its editors point to the storytelling practices “on the smaller screens of laptops, tablets, and even mobile phones.”² The so-called “small-screen fiction”³ conceptualizes a type of fiction whose narrative and storyworld construction heavily rely on the affordances of mobile devices. However, an extensive scope of the collection leads to multiple controversies with regards to the object of study. It remains unclear whether the small-screen digital fiction utilizes stand-alone apps or intermediary services (such as web browsers).⁴ Another shortcoming is a lack of clear distinction as to the exact technology in use since, arguably, a tablet and a smartphone generate dissimilar formal, aesthetic, and cultural implications. The term “small-screen fiction” also seems to include e-readers, which offer a different technolog-

1 See Aarseth 1997; Ensslin 2007; Hayles 2008; Bell 2010; Page/Thomas 2011; Gibbons 2011; Hallet 2014; Rettberg 2019; Lutostański 2022.

2 Ensslin/Frelik/Swanstrom 2017, 8.

3 Serge Bouchardon (2013) proposed the alternative term “touchscreen fiction;” “app-driven” or “app-based” fiction are also used.

4 See, for example, “Editions at Play,” <https://editionsatplay.withgoogle.com/> (last accessed 28/03/2022).

ical environment for literature and, more importantly, beg different ontological questions.

In a 2020 project, Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik and I⁵ tried to demonstrate a more sustained and nuanced exploration into fiction delivered via applications for mobile devices – smartphones and tablets.⁶ In the following paper, I seek to further specific conclusions from our research and offer a theoretical adumbration of a poetics of what we have called “app fiction”. In our view, app fiction is an autonomous phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention. In what follows, I systematically lay out fundamental formal features of app fiction (the titular poetics) and subsequently employ my theoretical observations in practical analyses of three selected examples: *The Pickle Index* by Eli Horowitz (2015), *Arcadia* by Iain Pears (2015), and *Belgravia* by Julian Fellowes (2016). These digital works have accompanying print editions, published concertedly with their electronic counterparts. Autonomous and stand-alone, the apps allow for a much more intricate and comprehensive organization of fictional components, encompassing non-literary, extra- and paratextual materials.

A poetics of app fiction

App fiction is a subgenre of digital fiction which exploits mobile media (technological) affordances in delivering a storyworld. These affordances necessitate, first and foremost, a specific set of media literacy competences. To conceptualize the competences, Rembowska-Pluciennik and I put forward a tripartite reception model.

The first reception role is that of a *reader*. The main narrative segments of app fiction are delivered in an exclusively word-based mode on the screen. Apart from few exceptions, they are completely devoid of lexias, images, videos, or other non-verbal resources. In addition, they reference traditional literary genres, styles and forms which should be recognized. The second role informs physical engagement with an app work: a *user* must maintain an embodied and situated contact with a device and its material dimension. By being literally “in touch”, we decode the digital work not only through sight but also touch.⁷ A specific aggregate of a mobile device’s material features (three-dimensional, slick, slim and relatively small, hand-held, “always-on-me” object), technological properties (a repertoire of hand movements as well as notifications and email alerts) and storyworld characteris-

5 Lutostański/Rembowska-Pluciennik 2020.

6 For a more up-to-date research see Ensslin 2022; Lutostański 2024.

7 See Ensslin 2011; Milligan 2017.

tics (the unfolding of the narrative in incremental installments or all chapters available for reading progression of our choosing) are accessible and operable exclusively through a variety of touchscreen gestures. The gestures, in turn, become distinct semiotic units: meaning-generating actions called “gestemes.”⁸ The final reception role is that of a *player*: An app novel can include ludic features and become, in effect, what Ensslin terms “ludoliterary hybrid.”⁹ Its primary ludic component is interactivity between user and device (Marie-Laure Ryan’s internal-external and ontological-exploratory interactivity),¹⁰ and user and user (collaborative interactivity).¹¹

Depending on an app novel, the reception roles might differ substantially. Generally speaking, the reader role is a matter of fundamental presence, the app novels are necessarily read if they are to be works of literature at all. The player role is a matter of possibility, the app novels can feature an array of game devices and genres, such as Role-Playing Game or Choose Your Own Adventure, but it is not indispensable. The user role, finally, is a matter of degree, always present due to material nature of the medium and reliant on a range of technological features requiring the recipient to engage with the machine in a physical, embodied and situated way. However, the user role, with its tactile implications, is the key feature distinguishing app fiction from previous digital fiction.

The tripartite reception model informs media literacy paradigms that generate a number of immersive phenomena on behalf of app-constituted storyworld. Immersion, adapted from computer games theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century,¹² is typically construed as “transportation”¹³ or “a shift of attention from the real environment to certain parts” of the storyworld and the mental construction of a “situation model” related to these parts.¹⁴ Corresponding to the triple reception model Rembowska-Pluciennik and I proposed to differentiate three types of immersion: haptic, phenomenological and technological. The *haptic* immersion highlights the experiential process of mobilizing multiple senses (touch, in particular) when engaging with the storyworld delivered in an app. It is generated via gestemes such as holding, scrolling, swiping, clicking, typing, moving fingers across the screen, increasing or decreasing the size of the displayed images. The haptics of app fiction is an indispensable and influential component for general experience

⁸ See Bouchardon 2013.

⁹ See Ensslin 2014.

¹⁰ See Ryan 2006.

¹¹ See Ciccoricco 2007.

¹² See Thon 2014, 269.

¹³ See Ryan 2001, 14–15, 103.

¹⁴ Thon 2014, 270–271.

of the narrative and forms a significant sensorial and affective dimension of the experience. To put it crudely, we “read” app fiction by means of sight and touch.

Rembowska-Pluciennik and I adapted the second type of immersion, *phenomenological*, from Anne Mangen’s research into hypertext fiction.¹⁵ She construes it as “the product of our own mental, cognitive, abilities to create [a] fictive, virtual (in the figurative sense of the word) world from the symbolic representations.”¹⁶ It is closely correlated with the reader competency: a reader immerses themselves in the storyworld by decoding verbal narrative and recognizing (meta)literary conventions. The third and final immersion type in app fiction is *technological*. It highlights the ways a mobile device app determines transportation into the storyworld, and centers on the degree to which the storyworld is “created and sustained by the technological features and material devices involved in its display.”¹⁷ The technological immersion is determined by the type of device, ludic components, visual and functional characteristics of the interface and algorithm-based software.

The last feature of the poetics of app fiction is the inter- and correlation of database and narrative. Contrary to Lev Manovich’s binary opposition of these two terms, I argue for their mutual co-existence in app fiction. Manovich’s main argument is as follows: “Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don’t have beginning or end; in fact, they don’t have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise which would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other.”¹⁸ App fiction tells stories with “cause-and-effect trajectory” *as well as* constitutes a “structured collection of data”. Database and narrative are not only not “natural enemies” but in fact allies in constructing and organizing the app interface, storyworld or end-user experience. A more effective theoretical problem, therefore, regards the nature and dynamics of their alliance at the cost of proving one’s primacy over another.

A comparative case study

In the above sections I have laid out the components of a poetics of app fiction. In the following section, I will discuss these components exploring three examples: *The Pickle Index*, *Arcadia* and *Belgravia*.

¹⁵ Mangen 2008.

¹⁶ Mangen 2008, 406.

¹⁷ Mangen 2008, 406.

¹⁸ Manovich 2002, 194.

As claimed above, the reception roles in an app novel might differ substantially. All three novels necessitate, first and foremost, a reader competence. *The Pickle Index*, *Arcadia* and *Belgravia* reference a group of well-known literary genres, styles, and forms: Horowitz's work heavily draws on dystopian fiction, satire, propaganda writing and autobiography; Pears' is clearly a fantasy piece boasting both utopian and dystopian traditions; while Fellowes's echoes historical fiction, and the 19th-century novel of manners and of sensibilities. In addition, *The Pickle Index* and *Belgravia* are serialized: the narrative's installments are delivered on a regular basis. In contrast, we can read *Arcadia* at our pace and even select which strand we want to follow. Accordingly, Pears' novel requires a significant amount of player input. We need to navigate the narrative around a garden-path, tree-structured story line divided into ten strands, for instance, "The Teacher's Tale" (pink strand), "The Student's Tale" (yellow), and "The Professor's Tale" (blue). In this way, *Arcadia* implements characteristics of "Choose Your Own Adventure" game genre (external-exploratory interactivity).

Even more player input is prescribed by *The Pickle Index*. Every new reader needs to register and becomes a citizen of the fictional state of Destina. As such, we are assigned roles, and our performance is monitored and quantified. Our actions within the storyworld do not affect the plot (internal-exploratory interactivity) despite co-creating the storyworld with each new recipe contribution (internal-ontological interactivity). However, the constrained agency entails two vital Role-Playing Game features; the players explore the storyworld coded in the word- and image-based interface (not unlike the "walking simulators" genre of games), and we can initiate or participate in a network of collaborators (collaborative interactivity).

In contrast, *Belgravia* requires no player input. Its reception entails reading serialized chapters and, optionally, delving into a plethora of factual resources accompanying each installment either by following the (very infrequent) in-text hyperlinks or exploring multimedia and multimodal materials in separate, non-fictional sections of the app. Fellowes's novel passes off as a compendium of contextual and factual knowledge, which curious recipients are at liberty to navigate through trivial and familiar touchscreen gestures. Herein lies its considerable user reception role: in order to explore (extra-fictional) materials, the recipient engages tactically with the app's architecture.

In *Arcadia*, on the other hand, a repertoire of body engagement comes down to a handful of gestures: clicking one node on a tree of the novel, selecting another fragment either staying on the same page or going back to the tree menu, and enlarging the view of the menu to reveal the chapters' titles. However, because of the Choose Your Own Adventure architecture and mechanics, these gestures are meaning-generating: they become gestemes. Still, *The Pickle Index*, because of its intri-

cate player role, exhibits even more user role. We maintain close, physical contact with the machine, and the use and experience of the storyworld require: tracing and enlarging the maps, browsing the Q&A, and, most importantly, typing and posting pickle recipes. These touchscreen gestures become *gestemes* too, insofar as they locate us within the storyworld and render us its participants.

Generally, the presence and degree of reception roles inform the complexity of media literacy in *The Pickle Index*, *Arcadia*, and *Belgravia*. The intricate reader-player-user aggregate in Horowitz's novel underlines its interactivity and intensity; we are actively exploring the storyworld, contributing to it with original material, and being rewarded for respectable citizenry. *Belgravia*, due to the absence of the player role, offers the story and its historical backdrop on a silver platter. Finally, *Arcadia* necessitates rather few hand gestures, but they serve ontological and narrative functions. Therefore, they bespeak substantial user role and emphasize the player role.

With the three indispensable types of media literacy, the recipients might get "transported" away from their immediate reality and immersed into the mental construction of a storyworld's "situation model". To begin with, the phenomenological immersion in *The Pickle Index*, *Arcadia*, and *Belgravia* operates on the basis of the display of the text in a simple and plain way: old-fashioned fonts in shades of black against white or beige background. Also, the texts lack interactive elements, and the reading process occurs through either swiping up (*The Pickle Index* and *Arcadia*) or left (*Belgravia*). The visual and tactile properties refer to the features of print book. Coupled with the traditional literary references, the novels seem to strive for maximum transparency of the verbal fictional substance: no multimedia or multimodal ingredients, no intricate user-text interactivity, no complex text operation.

The delivery strategies of the verbal component of the storyworlds go hand in hand with the technological immersion. This type of immersion helps differentiate between the apps' technological features and material devices employed; or, how the storyworld is communicated and what devices are used in the process. The "how" consists in three key elements: database, interface, and algorithm. Since I expound on database and interface below, I would like to address the specific utilizations of algorithm. The algorithm in Horowitz's novel performs various functions: it controls the reading process; circumscribes the remit of the recipients' participation; surveils them by verifying the degree of their in-world participation and quantifies it by means of points; allows for limited contribution through recipe disseminating and networking with other users. In contrast, the workings of *Belgravia*'s algorithm exclusively control the reading process and those of *Arcadia*'s observe and visualize it.

Finally, selecting the nodes and “choosing your own narrative” in *Arcadia* generates haptic immersion. To illustrate, we begin reading at the first node, “A Landscape”, which diverges into other nodes: “Arrival”, “The Vision”, “Lyttén in the Pub”, “Shopping”, “Allergies”, and “A Corridor Conversation”. These nodes, in turn, feed into other nodes, usually ranging between one to three, and infrequently overlapping. Making decisions as to where to move along the nodes are necessarily coupled with performing hand gestures, say, of enlarging the visual representation of the structure in order to read out a title of the chapter, tapping on it to access its content, or swiping sideways to move into another direction along the “branches”. The act of immersing in the narrative is therefore inextricably connected with tactile activities.

In *Belgravia*, the narrative is plain and easy to access: by tapping a chapter, we access it and read by swiping left. More intense tactile involvement is not only not mandatory, but also strictly divorced from the narrative content. Likewise, in *The Pickle Index* we are provided with the narrative component of the storyworld regularly and effortlessly. But only in part; the illegal posts by one of the characters need to be fetched from one section of the app before it can be accessed in another one. What contributes to the haptic immersion in Horowitz’s novel the most, however, is the requirement to participate in the storyworld by, amongst other activities, creating and posting pickle recipes. It is through touch that we play out the role of storyworld participants.

One more important feature of the haptic dimension in *The Pickle Index* and *Belgravia* is the fact that the reading process is controlled by the apps’ algorithms. We receive notifications and/or email alerts about the latest installment regardless of where we are or what we are doing. The apps beg for attention and reaction: to grab the device, unlock it and open the respective app. Horowitz’s app novel is particularly pressing in this matter, as it deduces points for delay and even issues warnings of legal actions against us. The haptic immersion can, consequently, be generated wherever and whenever we currently are, rendering the reading experience potentially a very situated and context-determined one, too.

Coming back to the technological immersion, I argued above that, next to the algorithm, its dynamics is determined by interface and database of app novels. On opening the *Pickle Index* app, we see the Home screen with a circle divided into three equal segments, the three main sections of the app: “The Index” is a platform for the exchange of the pickle recipes, “Today” a source of latest information, and “Cookbook” entails all downloaded and submitted recipes; in its center is a red cube constantly revolving and in the background is a blurry map of Destina and neighboring states. The interface is generally easy to navigate, the centrality of the three main sections invites their exploration. Importantly, the app and its interface are part of the fictional storyworld: every tap on the app lets us enter the

fiction, and all the interface sections (apart from three short black lines in the upper left corner) belong to the storyworld. In *Arcadia*, the interface upon opening the app presents the metafictional tree structure of the novel with all the color-coded strands and nodes. In the upper left corner, as in *The Pickle Index*, is the paratextual menu; in the upper right corner a list of all the color-coded strands: “The Teacher’s Tale”, “The Students’ Tale”, and so on. When we tap on one of them, we return to the home screen with the appropriate strand in more intense hue. By swiping up to the bottom of the screen, we see how all the stands merge and diverge, to finally come together into the final node. At the bottom of the screen are three towns: Willdon, Oxford and Mull; the strands are divided into the location of the action: the strands crossing the black lines between the towns visualize characters traveling in place and time. Clearly, the visual representation of the novel graphically depicts its narrative structure; color codes and menu help us grasp the complexity of interrelations between the distinct strands; and guides our progress of the novel.

Finally, the *Belgravia* interface demonstrates yet another approach to organizing the storyworld. When opened, the app’s interface on the home screen is paratextual, including for example, “Julian Fellowes’s BELGRAVIA” at the top and “Read the 1st episode free” in the lower half of the screen. When reading a chapter, we can tap at the top of the screen, and then tap on the three vertical lines to reach more detailed paratextual menu in ten blue rectangles, including “Episodes”, “Bonus Features”, and “Julian Fellowes & Team”. Such a complex and multi-layered arrangement of the interface indicates the incorporation of the novel proper amidst para- and extratextual paraphernalia. That is, we reach the novel within the interface, in a separate and well-delineated section. The clear-cut separation of the fictional from the extra-fictional bespeaks the primacy of the former and auxiliary character of the latter: it is not mandatory to delve into the “Bonus Features”. Also, the strong autonomy of the novel pertains to a high status of the fictional in the app as a whole, which echoes the absence of player role and medium user role. For this reason, it can be argued that *Belgravia* is the most traditional of the three examples of app novels despite its digital environment of delivery. In Fellowes’s own words from a promotional video on YouTube, *Belgravia* is the “marriage” of “up-to-the-minute technology” and “age-old art of storytelling.”¹⁹

The “marriage” of the latest technology and traditional storytelling pertains to the last feature of the app fiction poetics: the interplay of narrative and database. Clearly, the *Belgravia* app is a structured collection of data, on the one hand, with multiple sections containing a host of information (extra-, meta- and

19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iv5yZ7Ui560> (last accessed 28/03/2022).

paratextual), and the narrative, on the other. Without a doubt, *The Pickle Index* and *Arcadia* utilize the narrative and database features, too. The latter is far less complex in this matter: the collection of data consists of paratextual materials such as the tree structure of the narrative nodes and branches and a complete list of the ten color-coded “Tales”. The former, however, entails the various database elements which essentially correlate and coexist in creating the storyworld. For instance, we download accounts from the Index onto the Cookbook; when the download is in progress, we see the data transfer between multiple users on a map. Consequently, Horowitz’s novel does not divide database sections into fictional and non- or para-fictional; all the sections are fictional, and they establish an inextricable relation in delivering the narrative.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present key components of the poetics of app fiction and demonstrate their applicability in an analysis of three selected app novels. In my view, triple reception roles, triple immersion typology, interface and database features differentiate this subgenre of digital fiction from other genres, such as hypertexts, cybertexts or ludoliterary hybrids. Clearly, my analyses are far from exhaustive and definite, and their conclusion might seem incomplete or controversial. More sustained research will be necessary to fully acknowledge the emergence of a new type of literature. Also, time will tell whether app fiction can become something more than a fad or whether it will be supplanted by yet another innovation in the dynamically evolving and excitingly creative field of digital literature in the 21st century.²⁰

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Section 2: **Words and Images**

Márcia Arbex-Enrico

The Survival of Painting: Cinematic and Literary *Tableaux Vivants*

Abstract: This work aims to question the confluences between literature, cinema, and painting, specifically focusing on the intermedial survival of painting in *tableaux vivants*. Drawing on studies on the *tableau vivant* in Jean-Luc Godard, excerpts from filmographies of Alain Robbe-Grillet/Alain Resnais and Pascal Quignard/Alain Corneau, in which the medium of painting is explicitly featured, will be analyzed. This is not intended to be a study of the narrative aspects of widely explored genres of “films about painting”, or “films about painters” (biopics), but rather of how the relation between the two media may take place as “intermedial mirror” or “metacritical reflection”. The issue of the survival of painting by cinema – based on the premise that painting may be genealogically considered an ancestor of cinema, as its “medial foundation” – means also to take into account, in some of the examples, other foundations, literary and/or theatrical, that will complexify the nature of the relations among the media involved.¹

Keywords: Literature, cinema, painting, *tableau vivant*, theater, Jean-Luc Godard

Introduction

Recently we have seen many examples of *tableaux vivants* appearing on social networks. As TV5 Monde reports, a challenge was launched for people confined to their homes to reproduce works of art and share the results on the internet.² This challenge became a great success to the point of mobilizing major museums around the world that have taken up the idea. Many participants made parodies, and everyone was very creative with props and makeup. However, few were perhaps aware that they were contributing to the diffusion of a very intermedial phenomenon that is the *tableau vivant*.

Tableau vivant is defined by Patrick Pavis as the “staging of one or more actors who are immobile and fixed in an expressive pose suggestive of a statue or paint-

¹ This study was supported by CNPq, National Council for Scientific and Technological Development – Brazil (Bolsa de Produtividade em Pesquisa – BPP)

² See <https://information.tv5monde.com/video/art-et-confinement-des-tableaux-vivants-fleurissent-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux> (last accessed 10/02/2025).

ing.”³ Mostly popular in drama and melodrama during the 18th and 19th centuries, the main mark of this hybrid genre is the dramatization of a historical or literary episode.⁴ Liliane Louvel explains that “The characters, displayed in ‘talking’ poses reproducing a historically famous painting or scene, were set rigidly in, for instance, a rendering of *The Raft of the Medusa*, *Attila’s Death*, or *The Oath of the Horatii*, often more appreciated than the paintings themselves.”⁵

Starting from studies on the *tableau vivant* in *Passion*, film by Jean-Luc Godard, considered a paradigmatic example, we will compare it with the pictorial references in two other films: *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961), by Alain Resnais, from a script by Alain Robbe-Grillet; and *Tous les matins du monde* (*All the World’s Mornings*, 1991), by Alain Corneau, inspired by Pascal Quignard’s narrative, in which the medium of painting is explicitly and materially presented. This is not intended to be a study of the narrative aspects of the widely explored genres of “films about painting”, or “films about painters” (biopics), but rather of how the relation between the two arts may take place. Finally, the third and last topic will be the presence of *tableau vivant* in the literature, leaning on the example of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novel *C’est Gradiva qui vous appelle* (*It’s Gradiva Who is Calling You*, 2002).

***Passion*: a paradigmatic example of a complex intermedial relation**

Several critics are interested in elucidating the presence of painting in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Passion* (1982), considering its “complex intermedial relation [...] a site where painting and cinema can interact in different ways,” as Ágnes Pethő states in “Intermediality in Film”.⁶ In his summary of the film, Walter Moser already reveals the central role of the *tableau vivant*: “This is the fictional story of a Polish filmmaker (Jerzy) who is making a film in which famous examples of European paintings will be staged and reconstituted, live, in the film production studio.”⁷ This case study in cinema allows us to locate what Moser calls the “archaeological site of the problematic of intermediality”, departing from the premise that painting,

3 Pavis 1998, 377.

4 See the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam’s collection of old photographs of these representations: <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl> (last accessed 10/02/2025). See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqwMWvCHtlg> (last accessed 10/02/2025).

5 Louvel 2011, 94.

6 Pethő 2010, 61.

7 Moser 2006, 59.

as a visual art, may be considered an ancestor of cinema, its “medial foundation.”⁸ In addition, the interaction of painting and cinema would be explained by this “basic technical device,” considering that the film is made of a large number of fixed frames (pictures), whose sequence of 24 per second creates the illusion of movement (moving pictures).⁹ The transformation of painting into a “theatrical text” implies at least two primary processes of narrativization from cinema:

b) In order to show the painting within the medium of film, it is transposed into the story of its “fabrication”, as the film shows how the painting came to be, which may culminate in filming the act of painting. [...] This is akin to the process of the narrativization of Achilles’ shield as described by Lessing. [...]

d) In lieu of immobilizing the film, for descriptive purposes, as a tableau (that is, in lieu of presenting a filmic *ekphrasis*), the tableau is animated and brought to narrative life (as we shall see in Godard): the characters become characters of the film and take on a life of their own.¹⁰

The film *Passion* focuses on the “difficulty of making a film about painting.” The issue is not the pictorial production, but the cinematographic production, how the film is made; the film uses the relationship between the arts (painting and cinema) to “bring out the relationship between the media”. Therefore, Godard explores the following elements: “technicality” (technical filming equipment: cameras, lighting, studio equipment, etc.); “materiality” (costume, scenery, music); “sociability” (relationships between the film crew and society in general); “economy” (industrial and business aspect of cinema, accounting, financing); and the “film aesthetics” (discussions on how to make a movie, aesthetic choices, etc.).¹¹

Jacques Aumont also underlines the metadiscourse regarding the presence of painting in *Passion*, although the author does not mention the *tableaux vivants*. “What matters in *Passion* is that they are shown there, not pictures, but pictures being made, and falling apart.” He draws attention to the “great paintings” chosen by Godard, “the safe values of pictorial art, represented by some of its most famous canvases.”¹² Aumont believes that Godard is interested in the *historia*, that is, in the narrative aspect of the paintings. Evoking Rembrandt’s *The Night*

⁸ Moser 2006, 59.

⁹ Moser also considers *Passion* to be a case of remediation of painting by film, as defined by Bolter and Grusin, but extending the scope of their possible operations: “resume, reproduce, re-(a)present, reuse, recycle, revisit, transfer, transmit, transcode, transpose, etc.” (Moser 2006, 56).

¹⁰ Moser 2006, 56–57.

¹¹ Moser 2006, 60–62.

¹² Aumont 2004, 218.

Watch (1642), or Goya's *The Third of May* (1840), means putting the "passions" on stage, displaying them "via bodies where they incarnate (...)." ¹³

On the other hand, the critic also identifies in *Passion* the concern with "pictorializing cinema, injecting painter's issues and problems into it." ¹⁴ The operations of dismantling and assembling the frames in the film are like a "painting becoming cinema", which implies at least two aspects in common with theater: the *mise en scène* (staging) and the lighting, which is "a powerful dramatic and expressive medium" that reinforces the intensity of passions. ¹⁵

Also, Ágnes Pethő, relying on Joachim Paech, reinforces the metacritical function of the *tableaux vivants* in Godard. Their analysis revealed "the use of the cinematic reproductions of painting by Godard as devices that anchor certain thematic elements of the fragmented narrative, and as more complex vehicles for a cinematic meditation at the state of the art of cinema among the arts." ¹⁶ In this interaction, Paech highlights, above all, the role of memory and the relationship with theater and corporeality:

In a *tableau vivant* we only have the memory of a painting present and not the painting itself before the camera. The confrontation between cinema and painting unfolds on a third level: the level of the theatre. Such *tableaux vivants* are actually theatrical scenes, in which the penetration of the camera into the picture means an entrance into a stage-like setting. The space of the picture becomes theatrical space, the bodies that are represented in a picture become actual bodies further deconstructed into actor and part interpreted by the actor. ¹⁷

The transposition of Delacroix's painting *L'Entrée des croisés dans Constantinople* (Musée du Louvre, 1840), focusing on the women bodies, is an enlightening example of this theatrical scene.

***L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and *Tous les matins du monde*: pictorial references in cinema**

Let us now compare the example of *Passion* by Godard with two other films in which there are references to painting, although they cannot be considered *tableaux vivants*.

¹³ Aumont 2004, 233.

¹⁴ Aumont 2004, 220.

¹⁵ Aumont 2004, 159.

¹⁶ Paech 1989, 45, quoted in Pethő 2010, 61.

¹⁷ Paech 1989, 45, quoted in Pethő 2010, 61.

L'Année dernière à Marienbad, as we know, is a partnership between Alain Resnais and writer Robbe-Grillet, who wrote the screenplay. Seeking to distance themselves from the so-called narrative cinema, they were interested in “mental time”, with its strangeness, obsessions, passions, and the construction of “a purely mental space and time”, of dream or memory. In comparison to Godard’s film in which the frames are “animated”, this film has a “ceremonial solidity, a certain slowness, a sense of the ‘theatrical’, sometimes even this stillness of attitudes, gestures, words, and setting, which makes one think of a statue and an opera at the same time.”¹⁸

The scene is constantly immobilized, and the characters are “frozen” in fixed frames to the point where they resemble statues. In this case, one can speak of filmic *ekphrasis*.¹⁹ There is no reference to a specific painter or work of art, although there are plenty of substitutes for the pictorial such as mirror and framed images; but the importance given to staging and lighting can be observed, as in the emblematic scene of a theatrical performance. Here, it is not a “painting turning into film” but a “film turning into painting”, in which the illusion of movement is dismantled, once revealed “its technical device base” made of fixed frames (pictures).²⁰

On the other hand, in the film *Tous les matins du monde* by Alain Corneau, the painting references are still distinct from the others. The film is based on the eponymous novel by Pascal Quignard, in which the plot takes place in the 17th century and tells the story of the musician Sainte Colombe and his disciple Marin Marais. It is known that the director was inspired by paintings to recreate certain scenes and the film’s photography guarantees the pictorial aspect of the images, especially the lighting of the French painter Georges de La Tour.

There are other more explicit references to painting, including the still life’s genre and the historical painter Lubin Baugin, who is a character in the film. His canvases are literally quoted or described, as we can see in this frame that includes the canvas *Le dessert de gaufrettes* (Musée du Louvre, ca. 1631). The choice of the still life genre is interesting not only because of the theme of the transience of life, but also because it represents the five senses, with emblematic objects such as the musical instrument, wine, and flowers, as we see in *Nature morte à l’échiquier*

¹⁸ Original in French: “(...) solidité un peu cérémonieuse, une certaine lenteur, un sens du ‘théâtral’, même parfois cette fixité des attitudes, cette rigidité des gestes, des paroles, du décor, qui faisaient en même temps songer à une statue et à un opéra” (Robbe-Grillet 1961, 8).

¹⁹ Moser 2006, 56.

²⁰ Moser 2006, 55.

(Musée du Louvre, ca. 1630).²¹ These intermedial references reinforces the baroque aesthetic to the point of confluence of music, painting, and literature.

Literary *tableaux vivants*: *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*

As both painting and cinema are visual media, the close relationship between them in the composition of *tableaux vivants* involves dramatization, staging and corporeality, as shown above in Godard's film. In literature, one can indeed ask: how does the *tableau vivant* manifest itself in the literary text, with its own verbal and non-visual mediality?

The last topic of this essay aims to briefly focus on the literary *tableau vivant*, an interaction between different genres and semiotic codes. In literature, this performative representation is necessarily mediated by descriptions, in order to create a *tableau vivant* with words. According to Liliane Louvel, in literature, *tableau vivant* "is directly linked to painting and is a part of an aesthetic project given as such within the text"; they "provide narrative elements combining description and plot, and generating an action whose origin and consequences (...) have to be imagined," and "most of the time, it is voluntarily introduced by the narrator."²² To locate the *tableau vivant* in the narrative, we may identify the pictorial markers, including references to theater and staging, the frozen scenes, the codified gestures, the interruption of action followed by spatialization, and, of course, the reference to paintings. The clearest example, according to Louvel, is offered by the *tableau vivant* staged by Lily Briscoe in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*: "A brilliant Miss Smedden from Brooklyn showed to perfection the sumptuous curves of Titian's Daughter, lifting her gold salver laden with grapes above the harmonizing gold of rippled hair and rich brocade."²³

It is not surprising that certain narratives by Alain Robbe-Grillet also provide convincing examples of *tableau vivant ekphrases*, considering the aesthetics adopted in the film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. It appears in an explicit way in the cine-novel *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* (2002). Robbe-Grillet does not return to "the great painting", "of grandiose themes" as Godard did, but he is partic-

²¹ <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010065541> and <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010063168>. Last accessed 10/03/2022 (last accessed 10/02/2025).

²² Louvel 2011, 94–95.

²³ Louvel 2011, 138.

ularly interested in the enactment of passions and bodies, an even a stereotyped vision of Orientalism.²⁴

In *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*, the plot takes place in the old medina of Marrakech, where the art historian John Locke falls madly in love with the graceful ghost of a young odalisque once murdered in mysterious circumstances, according to the legend. This character is taken one night to the theater called Golden Triangle to watch a series of *tableaux vivants*, referring to orientalist painting, the object of his studies, but also of his hallucinations.

One of the *tableaux vivants* presented that night is announced as “*Le march-and d’esclaves, d’après Auguste Manneret*”, whose title refers to the various representations on the subject of the slave trade, in particular to those best known in Western art as *Le marché aux esclaves à Rome* (*Slave Market*, 1884) of Jean-Léon Gérôme (Hermitage Museum), considering the description of the pose and the gesture of the woman described in the text. But the name of the artist Auguste Manneret is entirely fictitious, probably referring to the photographer Man Ray and the painter Manet.

The last *tableau vivant* that John Locke attends that night at the theater – “*La favorite déchue, d’après Fernand Cormon*” – is particularly interesting for it takes up two pictorial themes simultaneously. At first, when the red curtains open, the scene presents, as the narrator notes, “an arrangement of characters similar, actually, to that of the painting” *The Deposed Favourite* (1870) by Fernand Cormon:

The sultan, who is watching the execution of his former favorite (Nina), is half lying on a *méridienne* armchair. (...) The new favorite, three-quarters naked (...), is lying backwards against him. (...) Slightly back, the tall black odalisque holds a whip in her right hand. At a sign from the Sultan, she drops Nina’s light clothing on the ground (...).²⁵

Soon after, the announced Cormon’s painting comes to life, and this time comes close to Gérôme’s famous canvas *Friné before the aeropagus* (1861), literally quoted in the text: “(...) This one [Nina], in a gesture of both shame and abandonment, raises her arms to her face to hide her eyes behind a bent elbow, reproducing

24 *C’est Gradiva qui vous appelle* is also a 2006 film directed by the author. However, our analysis focuses on the literary narrative rather than its cinematic adaptation.

25 Robbe-Grillet 2002, 99. Original in French: “Le sultan, qui assiste à l’exécution de son ancienne favorite (Nina), est à demi couché sur une méridienne d’apparat. (...) La nouvelle favorite, aux trois quarts nue (...), est allongée à la renverse contre lui. (...) Un peu en retrait sur le côté, la grande odalisque noire tient un fouet dans sa main droite. Sur un signe du Sultan, elle fait tomber à terre le vêtement léger de Nina.”

the pose of the famous *pompier* painting *Phryné devant l'aréopage*.²⁶ The picture depicted represents, in fact, a composite image, formed by Fernand Cormon's and Gérôme's canvases, which lend Friné's body and pose to the theatrical play of Nina's character.²⁷

In the literary narrative, the role of memory is even more significant than in filmic *tableau vivant*: the materially absent image is formed in the reader's memory, who resorts to his personal or imaginary museum. The *tableau* is gradually "fabricated" before the reader's eyes, who must imagine the work as "a painting put into motion, turned to life", to borrow Rajewsky's expression, which she uses in relation to a *tableau vivant* in a dance performance.²⁸ However, in the construction of these dramas, great doses of mystification and fantasy are observed, as if to mirror the character's mental process, which confuses reality with his ghosts and obsessions.

Conclusion

The confluences between literature, cinema, and painting, more specifically the case of the *tableau vivant*, reveal a complex intermedial relationship between the arts. In all these examples the medium of painting is explicitly referenced, but the materiality of the painting is transposed according to the specific codes of each art.

In Godard's film, the presence of the *tableau vivant* reveals not only its "medial foundation" – theater and painting – but also uses painting to speculate on how to make cinema, in a metacritical relationship. In *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and *Tous les matins du monde*, although the pictorial references, the relationship between painting and cinema is not used to "bring out the relationship between the media."²⁹ Unlike Godard, these films neither focus on the technical or socio-economic aspects of cinema, but they focus otherwise in the aesthetic aspects: painting's references seems to function more as "intermedial mirror"³⁰ than as a metacritical reflection. In *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Resnais and Robbe-Grillet uses freezing and spatialization strategies, breaking with the filmic sequence that prints move-

26 Robbe-Grillet 2002, 100. Original in French: "Celle-ci [Nina], dans un geste à la fois de honte et d'abandon, lève les bras vers son visage pour se cacher les yeux derrière un coude replié, reproduisant alors la pose du célèbre tableau pompier *Phryné devant l'aréopage*".

27 For further developments see Arbex, 2013.

28 Rajewsky 2005, 57.

29 Moser 2006, 60.

30 Moser 2006, 55.

ment to images, and thus approaching the pictorial. In *Tous les matins de monde*, the pictorial references inserted both in the narrative and in the film's photograph supplement the baroque aesthetic that dominates the film of Corneau and Quignard.

Finally, Robbe-Grillet's literary example shows the textual resources used to build a *tableau vivant* with words. The *ekphrasis* take up the theater scene as a stage for dramatizations, thus recognizing this medial foundation: the *tableaux vivants* are still a powerful dramatic and expressive medium that reinforces the intensity of passions on stage, as well as the passions and conflicts that torment the character. The role of memory is crucial in this case: the reader is invited to share the imaginary experience of the *tableau vivant* staging, as well as invited to imagine, in other words, to produce the absent image.

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Silvia Kurr

Ekphrastic Transformations of the Nude in Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *Nude*

Abstract: Since its first mention in the first century CE, the concept of *ekphrasis* has been through a long history of redefinition and expansion. I argue that *ekphrasis* may be understood as a dynamic multifaceted concept sensitive to changes in material-discursive practices. This essay aims to provide a new angle on the old concept by exploring contemporary literary and filmic *ekphrasis* in the light of new materialist theories. Through an analysis of *ekphrasis* in Pedro Almodóvar's film *The Skin I Live In* and Nuala Ní Chonchúir's short story collection *Nude*, this essay makes two points: firstly, the ekphrastic transformations of paintings bring out the dynamic nature of representational practices and posit representations as phenomena in the ongoing process of their materialization; secondly, the shift of perspective brought about by *ekphrasis* disrupts the familiar pattern of the visual consumption of the female form by foregrounding the embodied experience of objectification.

Keywords: Dynamic, ekphrasis, new materialism, the nude, transformation

The term *ekphrasis* has a long history dating back to antiquity. Since its first mention in the first century CE, the notion of *ekphrasis* has been changing, developing, and expanding increasingly.¹ First, I will provide an overview of the changing usage of the term from antiquity to the present and show that the development of the concept of *ekphrasis* is entangled with changes in material-discursive practices. Second, I will contribute to the present discussion on *ekphrasis* by addressing the following research questions: how does contemporary *ekphrasis* transform existing artworks, particularly those portraying the female body? What is the function of such ekphrastic transformations, and how do they address the entanglement of representational practices and material phenomena?

In my analysis, I apply new materialist thinking and the theoretical framework of “mattering,” which places the emphasis on “matter’s capacity to matter.”² As Karen Barad puts it, “Matter and meaning are not separate elements. [...] Mattering

1 Sager Eidt 2008, 16–17.

2 Jones 2018, 245.

is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance.”³ For Barad, meaning is not only entangled with matter but also “made possible through specific material practices.”⁴ Within new materialist theory, matter and meaning, nature and culture, the material and the discursive exist in entangled, co-constitutive, and dynamic relations.⁵ Following Barad’s “diffractive methodology,”⁶ I consider *ekphrasis* in the light of understanding of new materialism, while simultaneously exploring material phenomena in the light of understanding of representational practices. The diffractive reading of contemporary ekphrastic works – Pedro Almodóvar’s film *The Skin I Live In* (2011) and Nuala Ní Chonchúir’s short story collection *Nude* (2009) – aims to provide a deeper understanding of the entangled relations between ekphrastic practice, representational phenomena, and material processes.

Toward a dynamic concept of *ekphrasis*

If in antiquity the term *ekphrasis* was used in the framework of rhetoric to denote “a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes,”⁷ in the twentieth century, it was introduced into modern literary theory as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art.”⁸ Along with the growing popularity of the concept of *ekphrasis*, some scholars expressed the need to expand its definition beyond a description of an artwork. James Heffernan proposed to broaden the understanding of *ekphrasis* by suggesting a definition which is commonly used in modern literary theory: “the verbal representation of visual representation.”⁹ The medium-based approach to *ekphrasis*,¹⁰ in turn, extended the concept from the field of literary theory into the realm of intermedial practices. In short, from antiquity to today, our understanding of *ekphrasis* has gradually evolved from a rhetorical device to a wide array of intermedial phenomena, including not only descriptions of paintings and sculpture but also the integration of photography, film, and digital media in literary works.

3 Barad 2007, 3.

4 Barad 2007, 148.

5 Van der Tuin 2018, 277.

6 Barad 2007, 30. Barad uses the term *diffraction* to describe a method for rethinking and theorizing relationships between theories, phenomena, and practices whereby concepts and approaches are read “through one another” instead of being defined against one another.

7 Webb 2009, 1.

8 Spitzer 1955, 207.

9 Heffernan 1993, 3.

10 Grishakova 2010; Elleström 2014; Rippl 2018.

Johanna Hartmann suggests that the constant development of the concept of *ekphrasis* is due to the dynamic nature of the cultural environment.¹¹ Some of the recent changes in ekphrastic theory and practice may be explained by increased exposure to images and the subsequent shift toward the importance of images in modern culture that W.J.T. Mitchell theorized as “the pictorial turn.”¹² With the wide access to images through online sources and reproductions, lengthy vivid descriptions of artworks have become unnecessary,¹³ and *ekphrasis* today may be reduced to a short reference.¹⁴ As Renate Brosch observes, “*ekphrasis* responds to and participates in the culture of images,” whose development is fueled by technological progress.¹⁵ Technology spurs the proliferation of images, while *ekphrasis* engages with images that flow, multiply, and find various materializations across different media. The continuous development of ekphrastic theory and practice is, thus, entangled with the ongoing material processes of media and technological evolution. *Ekphrasis* may, then, be seen as a dynamic multifaceted concept sensitive to changes in material-discursive practices.

The invention of cinema was a significant technological innovation that prompted another conceptual change: the notion of *ekphrasis* was expanded to include the intermedial integration of paintings into film – *filmic ekphrasis*.¹⁶ Ágnes Pethő argues that *ekphrasis* in film “may be seen in parallel with the re-mediational logic of traditional literary *ekphrasis*.”¹⁷ In this essay, I adopt this broader view of *ekphrasis* as encompassing remediation of images across different media, including literature and film. My approach is informed by Lars Elleström’s notions of “transfer” and “transformation,” which imply the relocation of media traits among different media and the alterations that result from such media transfers.¹⁸ Media transfers and transformations involve the alterations of four media modalities: the material, the sensorial, the spatiotemporal, and the semiotic modalities.¹⁹ Taking Elleström’s approach as a point of departure, I regard ekphrastic transfers of paintings to literature and film as transformative processes. In what follows, I introduce two types of ekphrastic transformations: *unfamiliar double* and *art-work animation*. The case studies – *ekphrasis* in Almodóvar’s film *The Skin I*

11 Hartmann 2015, 114.

12 Mitchell 1994, 11.

13 Karastathi 2015, 97.

14 Rippl 2018, 267.

15 Brosch 2018, 229.

16 Sager Eidt 2008, 18.

17 Pethő 2011, 48.

18 Elleström 2014, 3.

19 Elleström 2014, 37.

Live In and Ní Chonchúir's short story collection *Nude* – engage with the portrayal of the female body in art, namely in nude paintings. I will show that the transformations of artworks question and reorient the tradition of nude painting in manifold ways, from bringing out the material and dynamic nature of representational practices to foregrounding the embodied experience of objectification.

From form to matter

"The nude remains the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into form," argues Kenneth Clark in his seminal work *The Nude*.²⁰ The "geometrical discipline" of art, he goes on, has the capacity to transform the "vulgar" and "unruly human body" into harmonious and orderly form.²¹ The idea that form is superior to and prevails over matter is prominent in the Western philosophical tradition, which is largely rooted in Platonic rationalism.²² For Plato, the material world is a mere shadow of the ideal realm of forms and ideas. The ideal female form has been reproduced and celebrated in painting for centuries. As a result of the ubiquity of the nude in Western visual culture, the transfer and transformation of nude paintings became prominent in contemporary ekphrastic works – both literature and film.

Pedro Almodóvar's film *The Skin I Live In* features the story of a plastic surgeon and bio-scientist Robert Ledgard, who cultivates transgenic skin and performs a skin replacement surgery on a character called Vera. Being given new skin, Vera remains under the constant surveillance of Robert and is kept in his estate as a captive. The image on Robert's screen, which he uses to watch Vera, strangely recalls Titian's painting *The Venus of Urbino*. I propose to call this type of *ekphrasis* an *unfamiliar double*. It includes literary descriptions or filmic images that strangely resemble existing artworks. The word "unfamiliar" conveys the effect of defamiliarization that such *ekphrasis* creates: the transformation of an existing artwork makes the familiar (e.g., a recognized painting) strange.

The transfer of the nude figure from the medium of painting into the medium of film transforms the painterly ideal into a moving image of a living material body. In terms of form and matter, the contrast between the two images deserves special attention. Let us take a closer look at the painted Venus. Lynda Nead argues that both the tradition of nude painting and the discourse on the nude often draws

²⁰ Clark 1984 [1956], 27.

²¹ Clark 1984 [1956], 71.

²² Nead 2001 [1992], 23.

on a dualistic paradigm that privileges the nude (the ideal) over the naked (the actual): “The transformation from the naked to the nude is thus the shift from the actual to the ideal – the move from a perception of unformed, corporeal matter to the recognition of unity and constraint, the regulated economy of art.”²³ The binary opposition of the naked and the nude, Nead notes, “is associated with a number of other oppositional pairings,” in which culture, ideas, reason, and art are related to masculinity, whereas nature, matter, passion, and obscenity are tied to femininity (14). Thus, the idealization of the nude body in art not only signals the departure from the actual world of the body but also reinforces the dualisms of male and female, culture and nature, mind and body, ideas and matter, subject and object.

In contrast to Titian’s painting, the transformed image of Venus in *The Skin I Live In* portrays an ideal form which is imposed on a material human body. By bringing bodily materiality into focus, *ekphrasis* challenges the dualistic perception of the world in a new materialist vein. In Almodóvar’s film, ideas and matter, culture and nature, human and non-human technology are not opposed but entangled. Vera’s transgenic skin is both a culturally significant element and a material substance. For Barad, matter is not fixed or passive but “refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization.”²⁴ In the film, the materialization of the ideal beauty is a process that involves the changing materiality of the body and is made possible through material-technological practices akin to biological arts. Biological arts is a recently developed artistic practice where artists use living biological organisms and systems that are altered through the means of technological biology; working with DNA as an “artistic medium,” artists manipulate life itself and thereby go beyond traditional procedures of artmaking.²⁵ Scientific practices, which involve dynamic engagement with the material world, are rather a “matter of intervening” than “representing.”²⁶ According to this line of thought, bio-artists intervene into and reconfigure the material world.

Like in biological arts, biotechnology in *The Skin I Live In* may be viewed as part of the artmaking process. Robert is a bio-scientist and an artist at once: he manipulates a corporeal organism to create an ideal female form. The centuries-long aspiration for the ideal form, which is manifested in and sustained by the persistent representation of the much-painted Venus, takes a “material turn,” where the corporeal body simultaneously becomes an object of art, sight, and scientific manipulation. The ekphrastic transformation of the familiar image brings out

²³ Nead 2001 [1992], 14.

²⁴ Barad 2007, 151.

²⁵ Catts 2018, 66–67.

²⁶ Barad 2007, 54.

the dynamic nature of representational practices and posits representations as phenomena in the ongoing process of their materialization. The changes in representational practices are, in turn, entangled with the development of new technologies. Technology also serves to turn the female objectification in art into embodied practice. Being under constant camera surveillance, Vera experiences objectification by the artist with her living body. The controlling discipline of technology is twofold: on the one hand, technology regulates bodily appearance by manipulating matter; on the other hand, filming technology is used to impose a controlling gaze on the body. Robert's biotechnological practices, thus, serve to enact the objectification of both the body and matter.

Matter is, however, not fixed or passive: the capacity of skin tissue to heal and repair itself is crucial to the processes of plastic and biotechnological surgeries that Vera undergoes. Drawing upon Butler's and Barad's theories of performativity, Nancy Harding et al. introduce "flesh as an agential actor," arguing that bodily matter "agentively participates" in processes of materialization.²⁷ Vera's skin is agential in that it actively partakes in the materialization of the Venus-like trans-human being. The passivity of the material body is furthermore challenged when the body reveals its capacity to react back: Vera resists objectification and escapes from Robert's estate at the end of the film. The body acts and is enacted within dynamic material processes. The transfer of the painting into the medium of film foregrounds the material, dynamic, and embodied nature of contemporary representational and biotechnological practices. Thus, *ekphrasis* here demonstrates the capacity to address the past and present at once: by evoking the existing painting of Venus, the unfamiliar double serves to challenge past representations of the nude; at the same time, the ekphrastic image addresses contemporary material procedures of artmaking as well as the changing role of the artist, who performs a multiple role of a scientist, a media creator, and an observer.

Nudity as process

The ekphrastic transformation of the image also brings the creator/onlooker into the picture and thereby turns the observer into the object of the gaze. Similarly, the shift of perspective in Nuala Ní Chonchúir's collection of short stories *Nude* serves to challenge the fixed observer-observed duality in the tradition of nude painting. The description of a portrait in the making in "Unmothered," for in-

27 Harding et al. 2021, 1–6.

stance, places the figure of a male artist under the scrutinizing eye of a female protagonist and pushes the observer into the position of the observed:

Your husband paints your portrait in the garden. You are naked, standing in the grass, and every breeze makes your skin prickle. You close your eyes against the sun and feel dizzy when you open them again. ... You look at your husband. His brushstrokes are meditative, small; you strain your ears to hear the slap of brush on canvas – nothing. Sniffing deep on the warm, grassy summer smells, you shut your eyes tight.²⁸

The description not only disrupts the familiar pattern of the visual consumption of the female form but also foregrounds the multi-sensory embodied experience of the model. The focus here is on the senses of the lived body: the touch of wind on skin, the feeling of dizziness, the smell.

The shift from representational to experiential²⁹ may also be traced in Ní Chonchúir's "Roy Lichtenstein's *Nudes in a Mirror*: We Are Not Fake!," a short story which is based on an actual incident that took place at an art exhibition in Australia: a woman stabbed Lichtenstein's *Nudes in Mirror* with a knife.³⁰ In Ní Chonchúir's story, the nude figures are brought to life: they observe the visitors of the gallery and holler to each other when it is empty. The story is narrated by the forefront figure, who, speaking for both portrayed women, describes the stabbing episode from her perspective:

We are so glad that Roy isn't alive to see what's happened to us because, oh my Lord, he would die. Yes, we're comic-strippy – not exactly *The Rokeby Venus* – but we are of-our-time, same as old Mrs. Rokeby. ... And, we are not pleased that some weirdos want to get at us because we are undressed. And that there are fancy-schmanzies who think we're dumb because we were modelled from models.³¹

I propose to call this type of *ekphrasis artwork animation*. It includes literary and filmic *ekphrasis* that bring existing and fictional artworks to life, as if by magic. As a result, the portrayed figures come to life and start moving or may even step out of the frame. In new materialist terms, the transformed painting in Ní Chonchúir's story exhibits what Jane Bennett calls *thing-power*: "the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of inde-

²⁸ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 14–15.

²⁹ By the shift from representational to experiential, I mean that the focus of the description is on the experience of objectification rather than on the peculiarities of representation (e.g., form and composition).

³⁰ *BBC News* 2005.

³¹ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 88.

pendence or aliveness.”³² The female figures in nude paintings are often “asleep, unconscious or unconcerned with mortal things”; such portrayal facilitates “undisturbed and voyeuristic enjoyment of the female form.”³³ The artwork animation transforms the passive figures into lively beings and gives voice to the female experience. By doing so, *ekphrasis* disturbs the pleasure of the visual consumption of the passive female form.

This type of *ekphrasis* involves the alteration of the spatiotemporal modality: unlike the medium of painting, the literary work mediates a temporal flow of experience. The transfer of the nude from nontemporal to temporal mode allows Ní Chonchúir to not only animate the unconscious figures but also convey the continuous embodied experience of objectification. For the nude figure, the constant objectification is an everyday routine experience. Temporality is crucial to understanding the entanglement of particular representational practices and the phenomenon of objectification at large. The repeated production and consumption of nude representations are temporal material processes whereby the phenomenon of body objectification becomes habitualized. Remarkably, the above passage also alludes to Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* and thereby addresses the whole tradition of the nude, which spans through centuries. In their essence, the nude figures in Lichtenstein’s painting are the “same as old Mrs. Rokeby.”³⁴ Numerous nude paintings, from Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* to Lichtenstein’s *Nudes in Mirror*, serve as the material means and records of the ongoing phenomenon of body objectification. The idea of sameness and repetition is, thus, conveyed through *ekphrasis* on many levels.

The ekphrastic transformation of the nude also serves to bring into focus the sense of disembodiment that the repeated practices of body objectification may induce in those objectified. The nude figure feels alienated from her stabbed body, which she observes from the outside: “I look down at my canvas; the wounds are long and threaded, I am cut from boob to belly. A flap of canvas falls forward like a lolling tongue.”³⁵ The sense of the otherness of the body is entangled with the ongoing representational practices which posit the nude body as the object of sight. Nudity is not a form but a process. The repeated production and consumption of nude representations are dynamic material phenomena which involve the continuous objectification of female bodies. The body is, however, not a passive surface but an agential force that can resist objectification. The nude in the story expresses strong discontent with the way the “undressed” figures are per-

³² Bennett 2010, xvi.

³³ Parker/Pollock 2013, 116.

³⁴ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 88.

³⁵ Ní Chonchúir 2009, 90.

ceived and treated by gallery visitors.³⁶ The nude figures also resist the imposed passivity and silence by using their voices. Hence, the artwork animation in Ní Chonchúir's story brings to the fore the dynamic relational entanglement of representational practices, the experience of objectification, and resistance to it.

Both in Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and in Ní Chonchúir's *Nude*, ekphrastic transformations of the nude expose and reconfigure the workings of representations. *Ekphrasis* not only serves to scrutinize fixed visual representations but also disrupt the familiar pattern of the visual consumption of the female form by foregrounding the embodied experience of objectification. Apart from addressing particular images, *ekphrasis* interrogates representational practices at large. Representations are not static objects but dynamic phenomena in the ongoing process of their materialization: the repeated production and consumption of images are temporal material processes. *Ekphrasis* has the capacity to foreground the material and dynamic nature of representational practices and challenge dualistic thinking, particularly the divides between body and mind, nature and culture, matter and meaning. Ekphrastic works may, therefore, serve as powerful tools for (re)shaping our understanding of art and the world, the world which is continuously in the making. As a concept, *ekphrasis* is dynamic in its adaptation to changes in material-discursive practices and environments, which are, in turn, closely entangled with the ongoing material processes of media and technological evolution. The continuous development of ekphrastic theory and practice is, thus, a relational dynamic process that is inextricably linked to material phenomena of the changing world.

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36 Ní Chonchúir 2009, 88.

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Yael Balaban and Naphtali Wagner

Musical Metaphors as Intermedial References

Abstract: Musical metaphors in literature are more than just ornamental language devices. They convey the aesthetic values, cultural associations, and emotional resonance of music, investing the narrative with new layers of meaning. This study explores the unique attributes of musical metaphors, demonstrating how they can challenge the linearity of text, infuse abstract notions with sensory qualities, create order or disorder, and evoke complex emotions. Through a close analysis of examples from literature, including Proust, Salinger, Kundera, and Morrison, among others, this research illustrates the multifaceted richness of musical metaphors and their role in shaping our understanding of literary works and intermediality. By examining how musical metaphors interact with the textual context, we can uncover the ways in which they influence the reader's experience, evoke emotions, and convey cultural significance. This study sheds new light on the significance of musical metaphors in literature, revealing their capacity to transform, subvert, and enrich the narrative.

Keywords: Music, metaphor, intermedial reference, musical ekphrasis, intertextuality

There are abundant references to music in literature, where they play various functions – plot detail, structural element, characterization, and cultural marker. References to music in fiction can be defined as musical *ekphrasis*, as intertext, or as intermedial reference;¹ each of these terms emphasizes different qualities of the musical reference. As musical *ekphrasis*, music brings its aesthetic values to the text – rhythm, (implied) sound, emotion, and beauty: “Attention is paid to the musical subject matter or point of the text or to the rhythm and tunefulness of its delivery.”² Intertext highlights the mutual influence of text and music. The reading experience is influenced by the ideas conveyed by the music and at the same time may change the way that music is understood. According to Rajewsky, intermedial reference combines the two, though she defines intertextuality in a relatively narrow manner: the text (what Rajewsky calls the “given media-product”) “*thematizes, evokes, or imitates* elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medi-

1 Goehr 2010, Kristeva 1986, and Rajewsky 2005, respectively.

2 Goehr 2010, 389.

um through the use of its own media-specific means.”³ Intermedial reference thus “opens up additional layers of meaning which are produced specifically by this referencing.”⁴

The inherent difficulty of representing music in words, including dependence on readers’ prior knowledge and the need to avoid professional vocabulary (think of Kretzschmar’s lectures in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*), often lead writers to employ metaphors to describe music. In this way even fictional music (such as Leverkühn’s *Lamentation*) can be brought to (some) life in the story.

But what if no music is “heard” in the fictional world and the music belongs exclusively to the textual stratum of the literary work, as a metaphor? In other words: if *ekphrasis* requires “one work to re-present another in some significant way,”⁵ then is it significant enough for music to serve as the source (vehicle) of a metaphor?

For example, here is Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*:

Every throb of this pulse seemed, as he walked away, to enclose her and her husband, and to give to each that solace which *two different notes, one high, one low, struck together*, seem to give each other as they combine.⁶

No music is played in the quote. Is there intermediality? We will return to this passage later.

The scholarship distinguishes diegetic music (music heard or played by a character, etc.) from non-diegetic music, as when a story is structured like a sonata, a rondo, or a fugue.⁷ In most of these studies, however, the critic drew attention to the music-like form because music was already present in the narrative diegetically.⁸ We have not found any previous treatment of music as the vehicle of a metaphor.

We argue that musical metaphors convey connotations and evoke ideas and aesthetic values derived from the music they refer to, even though no music is “heard” in the portrayed world. This observation is supported by Rajewsky’s notion that intermedial references stress the “as-if” character of literary texts, the

³ Rajewsky 2005, 53, emphasis ours.

⁴ Rajewsky 2005, 53.

⁵ Goehr 2010, 400.

⁶ Woolf 1989, 39, emphasis ours.

⁷ The concept came originally from film studies, where “non-diegetic” relates to musical accompaniment.

⁸ Examples are numerous. Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* is considered to have the structure of a sonata, and Hildesheimer’s *Tynset* of a rondo. See Bacilius 1981; Haas Stanley 1981.

“illusion-forming quality inherent in them.”⁹ The literary text “cannot *use* or genuinely *reproduce* elements or structures of a different medial system through its own media-specific means; it can only *evoke* or *imitate* them. Consequently, an intermedial reference can only generate an *illusion* of another medium’s specific practices.”¹⁰ It does not matter if the evocative word or phrase is a straightforward description [a violin *playing*], the tenor of a metaphor [a *weeping* violin]; or its vehicle [a baby crying *like an off-key violin*]. In all these phrases, only words are actually present; the violin is mute.

The writer’s lexical choices arouse certain schemes in readers and supplement and qualify the words according to the readers’ previous experiences and the textual context.¹¹ The choice of a specific metaphor influences how readers grasp the text; it constructs the portrayed world in a certain manner and generates meanings that derive from the mode of representation.¹² In every metaphor there is a complex interaction between vehicle and tenor. Readers isolate specific qualities that the vehicle and tenor share, while playing down other qualities that are irrelevant in the given context. This may require some prior knowledge on their part. When using a musical metaphor, the writer must count on readers’ acquaintance with certain works, composers, instruments, styles, and terminology. At the same time, if a specific work is mentioned the metaphor may also affect readers’ response to the music itself; as in any intertextual reference, the influence is mutual (and see below, the discussions of Proust and Wagner and of Kundera and Bach).

Cognitive research supports our contention that metaphors can stir up feelings and memories more strongly than literal language can, and even approach the force of actual sensory perception. Although we have not located any studies of musical metaphors, fMRI research of non-auditory metaphors supports our argument. Lacey, Randall, and Sathian (2012) showed that when people read textural metaphors (e.g., “a rough day”) the somatosensory cortex is activated; this proves that the comprehension of metaphors is grounded in perception. Citron and Goldberg (2014) compared taste metaphors (e.g., “look sweetly”) with literal language (“look kindly”) and found that “metaphorical sentences are more emotionally engaging than their literal counterparts” (the title of their paper). Pomp et al. (2018) showed similar results for olfactory metaphors.

⁹ Rajewsky 2005, 54.

¹⁰ Rajewsky 2005, 55 (emphasis in original). Rajewsky distinguishes intermedial reference from intertext.

¹¹ See Semino 1997, 124, 161.

¹² See Ingarden 1973, 255–275; Lakoff/Johnson 1980; Tzur, 1987; Semino, 1997.

Musical metaphors can change the meaning of what is heard in the story. When Proust's Saint-Loup describes air-raid sirens as the *Ride of the Valkyries*, he reveals his political and aesthetic views:

"And then the sirens, could they have been more Wagnerian, and what could be more appropriate as a salute to the arrival of the Germans? – it might have been the national anthem, with the Crown Prince and the Princesses in the imperial box, the *Wacht am Rhein*; one had to ask oneself whether they were indeed pilots and not Valkyries who were sailing upwards." He [Saint-Loup] seemed to be delighted with this comparison of the pilots to Valkyries and went on to explain it on purely musical grounds: "That's it, the music of the sirens was a 'Ride of the Valkyries'! There's no doubt about it, the Germans have to arrive before you can hear Wagner in Paris."¹³

A world war looms over Europe; those German airplanes are bombing Paris. But Saint-Loup welcomes them out of admiration for the Germans and for Wagner in particular. The musical metaphor invests the deliberately irritating sound of sirens with sublime artistic value and neutralizes its meaning. The pro-German Saint-Loup deletes the gap between the enemy's bombers and the sirens meant to protect him against them by turning the sirens into music – indeed, perhaps the "most German" music of all. The aestheticization of the sounds of war, which turns nationalism and fascism into "beauty," exemplifies Walter Benjamin's "introduction of aesthetics into political life."¹⁴

At the same time, the intermedial reference influences how we hear Wagner's music. The famous "Ride" evokes the idea of flight by means of the opening tremolo that ascends and descends registers, as well as through the rapid arpeggiations; the "gallop" rhythm suggests horses, while the trumpet calls give the scene a military atmosphere. The Valkyries return from the battlefield; Saint-Loup's metaphor underlines the splendor and glory of the music by comparing it to a "national anthem." But Proust's readers remember the horrors of World War I, maybe the least glorious of all wars. They feel the irony (and may already know that Saint-Loup himself will be killed in combat). Listening to the "Ride" after reading Proust, we may well think of the way heroism leads to death rather than glory. A similar violent association was employed by Francis Ford Coppola in the unforgettable scene of the deadly air raid – this time by helicopters – in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979). Note that Saint-Loup and Marcel do not hear any music, but only the raucous sirens.

Proust's metaphor turns noise into music and remains in the realm of sound. In the following passage from *The Catcher in the Rye*, the tenor of the metaphor is

¹³ Proust 2000, 84. Wagner, Act III Scene 1.

¹⁴ Benjamin 1969, 241.

strictly visual. Young Holden Caulfield is about to be with a prostitute for the first time in his life:

I read this book once. [...] He said, in this one part, that a women's body is like a violin and all, and that it takes a terrific musician to play it right. It was a very corny book – I realize that – but I couldn't get that violin stuff out of my mind anyway. In a way, that's why I sort of wanted to get some practice in, in case I ever get married. Caulfield and his Magic Violin, boy. It's corny, I realize, but it isn't *too* corny.¹⁵

The comparison of a female body to a violin is, indeed, banal. It is based on the shape of the instrument, not on its function.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Holden hopes to learn “to play it right,” concretizing the metaphor and bringing the instrument's function into the picture. Touching the female body is analogous to playing the instrument; but more than that, musical performance – especially on the violin – is an emblem of the virtuosity that the 16-year-old Holden dreams of achieving. The misogynistic objectification is also banal, but is appropriate to the character of the eager teenager.

What makes musical metaphors unique and worthy of interpretation?

Musical metaphors convey the qualities of music and its cultural associations. Music is, of course, sound. The comparison of sexual intercourse with a musical performance (as in *Catcher*) is a form of synesthesia, a blending of sensory modalities. But music is also an art form, and as such bears its own significance (as opposed to noise and natural occurring sounds). As we saw in the passage from Proust, the sound of sirens gained new meaning from the analogy to Wagner's music.

Unlike Proust, Salinger does not refer to a specific work. Musical metaphors may refer to different aspects of music, from specific pieces to general characteristics such as harmony or polyphony, and to basic qualities like pitch, rhythm, and volume.

Writers can call up polyphony to convey harmonic or disharmonic relation between sounds and other phenomena. “A symphony of cries” or “a choir of creaks” represents the experience of the listener surrounded by noises, but such images also bypass the linearity of language by representing the simultaneity of the event described: in other words, without turning the chord into an arpeggio... Paradoxically, the metaphor itself is part of a linear sentence. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a chord expresses harmony:

¹⁵ Salinger 1964, 93.

¹⁶ A similar metaphor – though visual, not verbal – is the basis for Man Ray's photograph “Le Violon d'Ingres,” 1924.

He drew forth a phrase from his treasure and spoke it softly to himself:
 – A day of dappled seaborne clouds.
 The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord.¹⁷

No music is heard here or even hinted at. The chord represents a perfect harmony, even though – as Joyce knew very well – musical chords may be dissonant. Nevertheless, they always combine multiple notes into a single experience.

Music is an organized phenomenon. It has rules, divisions, meter, etc. A musical metaphor may invest its tenor with new ways of organization, new relations between things. When Woolf compares a married couple to “two different notes, one high, one low, struck together” she applies the musical relation to husband and wife. The “solace” this idea brings to Mrs. Ramsey comes from the implied harmony between the two tones in a chord, their well-coordinated function.

In sharp contrast, in Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* music stands for strict dictatorship:

People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock, [...] where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect.¹⁸

This [1968] is the period commonly referred to as the Prague Spring: the men guarding the idyll had to go around removing microphones from private dwellings, the borders were opened, and notes began abandoning the score of Bach’s grand fugue and singing their own lines. The spirit was unbelievable. A real carnival!¹⁹

Kundera relates to a concrete work – Bach’s “grand fugue” – probably the fugue in G minor, BWV 542 (authors often choose well-known works that readers may recognize). This fugue may have various connotations, most of them positive, but here it represents imposed order and forced harmony. How can a fugue stand for contradictory ideas? The answer lies in the texture of a fugue. In a fugue, all the voices use the same thematic material consecutively; that is why fugue texture is called “imitative.” The different voices are considered to be independent and equal, in contrast to the homophonic hierarchy that privileges the upper voice over the lower accompaniment. Thus, a fugue can represent democracy. But imitation and repetition may also express uniformity. Kundera draws on the fact that all the voices in a fugue repeat each other in a strictly controlled sequence

¹⁷ Joyce 1996, 189.

¹⁸ Kundera 1980, 8.

¹⁹ Kundera 1980, 14.

to make the fugue represent dictatorship and forced order.²⁰ He chose “Bach’s grand fugue” to emphasize the power of the oppressive political regime. During the Prague Spring the forced harmony was ruptured and the many different tunes represented freedom. So, the same music can represent different and even contrasting ideas, but the textual context tells readers which aspects of the metaphor are dominant and how they should supplement the scheme “fugue.”

Music can arouse many contrasting emotions, restraint and enthusiasm, order and chaos. Another duality is the tension between abstraction and concreteness. Music is an abstract art form because it is intangible and usually lacks semantic content. On the other hand, music is a physical, sensory phenomenon, whereas words are abstract signifiers. Due to this duality music can sometimes concretize an abstract idea, as for Kundera; in other contexts, it can spiritualize a concrete subject, such as food. Here is an example from *Adam Resurrected* by Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk: “Pierre Lotti’s mousse is inspired poetry. Like [a] solemn mass, or Monteverdi.”²¹ Playing on the assonance of “mousse” and “mass,” Kaniuk grants the chef a sublime artistry.

Music usually lacks semantic content, but as an art form it can communicate. Karel Čapek may have stretched that capacity too far. A Czech orchestra conductor visiting Liverpool overhears a couple in conversation. He doesn’t know English, but he understands what he hears via a musical interpretation:

Believe me, this was not an amorous conversation, a musician can recognize that. A lover’s attempts at persuasion have quite a different cadence and don’t sound so tense – a conversation between lovers is a deep cello, but this was a high-pitched double bass, played in presto rubato, in a single key, as if the man were repeating the same phrase over and over again. I began to feel rather alarmed: whatever the man was proposing was something evil. [...] I must tell you that I don’t believe in hunches, but I do believe in music. When I listened to those two voices that night, I knew with absolute certainty that the bass was persuading the clarinet to take part in some appalling act. [...] I had heard it, and hearing words is better than understanding them. I knew that preparations had been made for a crime of some sort, and I knew what sort of crime it was. I could tell by the horror those two voices conveyed: it was in the timbre of those voices, in the cadence, the tempo, the intervals, the rests – you see, music is precise, more precise than speech.²²

The story ends with a newspaper headline that reads “murder.” But more than the precision of music as language, the story attests to a musical metaphor’s ability to convey two parallel layers of the scene: the sound of the speaking voices, stripped

²⁰ On the multiple meanings of the fugue form, see Greenberg 2018.

²¹ Kaniuk 1971, 94.

²² Čapek 1994, 277–78.

of the original semantic content, and the meaning attached to them by the listener. This duality is, of course, a basic quality of any metaphor, which is constructed of two components, vehicle and tenor.

The impact of the musical metaphor is influenced by both the vehicle and the tenor – by the music and what it represents. Musical metaphors may be used to map non-musical sounds, like Proust's sirens; non-auditory objects, like Kaniuk's mousse and Salinger's female body; or abstract notions such as dictatorship. Another example of non-musical sounds can be found in Tony Morrison's *Home*. A Korean War veteran suffering from post-trauma recalls the sounds of the battlefield:

The begging, the howling for help he could not hear clearly until an F-51 dropped its load on the enemies' nest. In the post-blast silence the pleas wafted like the sound of a cheap cello coming from a chute of cattle smelling their blood-soaked future.²³

Comparing the cries of injured soldiers to the lowing of cattle – equating the battlefield with a slaughterhouse – is a dead metaphor. Morrison revitalizes it by comparing the howls – human and animal – to “the sound of a cheap cello.” This second metaphoric layer is not necessary to illustrate the sound, but it conveys additional meanings. Music is manmade, and so is war and the suffering it causes; but the comparison is ironic, because there is no beauty or transcendent feelings in the sound of the injured soldiers' cries. And the cello is “cheap,” implying the worthlessness of human lives on the battlefield.

Morrison does not mention a specific work. In fact, authors do not always need a masterpiece: sometimes only an instrument or single chord is required. In Israeli writer Nathan Shaham's *The Rosendorf Quartet*, the German-Jewish violinist Kurt Rosendorf is on a ship that is bringing him from Germany to Palestine in 1936.²⁴

The sky is clear, golden blue. Only the sea is somber, in Prussian blue: dark, as if last night's storm is still seething in its depths. Foamless waves lap against the sides of the ship. The engine plays a chord in E-flat major. It goes well with the color blue, which is the color of yearning for the absolute. The Masonic key of friendship.²⁵

The sound of an engine is not music but noise. Even if Rosendorf the violinist filtered it in his musical mind and singled out three notes – E-flat, G, and B-flat – the sounds are accidental, a random by-product of the engine's operation. The

²³ Morrison 2012, 98.

²⁴ The Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra (then the Palestine Orchestra) was founded in 1936 and recruited Jewish musicians dismissed from German orchestras under Nazism.

²⁵ Shaham 1991.

metaphor turns that noise into music and endows it with meaning. Furthermore, the key – E-flat major – is not random. As the narrator (or maybe Rosendorf's inner monologue) tells us, it is "the Masonic key of friendship." E-flat major has three flats, which look like 3 *b*'s, and that makes it important for Freemasonry.²⁶ Remember that the ship is taking the Jewish Rosendorf away from Nazi Germany (where Freemasons were also persecuted). By means of the metaphor, a mechanical noise – a sensory quality – turns into meaningful music, which, thanks to the careful choice of vehicle, in turn carries abstract ideas.

The special attributes of music imbue musical metaphors with significance. They may be used to challenge the linearity of the text, through the polyphony inherent to many kinds of music; they can infuse abstract notions with sensory qualities; create order or disorder; and much more. This essay has illustrated the multi-dimensional richness of musical metaphors and has shown that their analysis can enhance our understanding of both literary works and intermediality.

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²⁶ The number 3 and the letter B are Masonic symbols. B represents the Hebrew letter *Beth* that stands for "house" [*baith*].

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Mattia Arioli

Framing a Shot: Intercode Adaptations and Ethical Remembrance of the Vietnam War

Abstract: This essay analyzes the remediation of Eddie Adams's photograph *Saigon Execution* (1968) through various (pop culture) media, focusing on how graphic narratives have adapted this iconic shot. These adaptations problematize the construction and perception of the narrative embedded in the photograph. Various comics have appropriated and subverted its embedded narrative by "framing this shot" within a broader (set of) image(s). Indeed, the framing of *Saigon Execution* within a sequential graphic narrative opens up new possibilities for interpretation, raising questions about the role of the "industry of memory," the framing gaze of the (American) photographer, the racial body of the Vietnamese subject, the ethics of memory, and the osmosis between private and public images.

Keywords: Adaptation, comics, photography, Vietnam war, ethics, memory

Vietnam: an iconic (tele)visual war

The Vietnam War launched a new way of narrating conflicts, being the first to be *fully* televised. The images that appeared on television were particularly shocking for American viewers because they showed explicit violence on a scale and with an immediacy that had been absent from the coverage of World War II and the Korean War. The (tele)visual elements were so pervasive that this conflict was defined as a "living-room war."¹ Between 1965 and 1975, footage of the U.S. military engagement in Vietnam dominated the news, and only the domestic crisis caused by the Watergate affair would deflect public attention from what was happening in Vietnam for a considerable amount of time.²

This brand-new way of broadcasting the news was a consequence of the technological developments in American society. In the 1950s, the television was a central piece of furniture for many American families, replacing the radio as the primary source of daily information. This saturation of media coverage helped turn the narration of the war into an "iconic event."³ However, it is interesting to

¹ Hallin 1989.

² See Patterson 1984a; 1984b.

³ Leavy 2007.

note that the visual archive of this war did not contain moving images but still photographs. The prominence of photography can be explained by the ease with which still images can circulate in other media (i.e., history books). Thousands of photographs were taken, but only a few became iconic, thanks to their use in documentaries and books. As Hagopian observed, “frequently reproduced photographs become part of a self-reinforcing circuit. Images that are published again and again are those that first come to mind when lay people, writers or documentary producers think about the historical events they depict.”⁴ Yet, each replica entails a new context of circulation and may produce a new interpretation. In fact, frames do not contain but break apart every time, and this perpetual break is “subject to a temporal logic by which it moves from places to places.”⁵

Even though early accounts of the war were still jingoistic, once the inability of the U.S. to win over the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Vietnamese became self-evident, war photography progressively became charged with anti-war rhetoric, gaining the ability to question U.S. imperialism. Hence, for photography to truly impact the viewer, it needs a (counter)narrative attached to it to produce change. As cultural trauma theorists have argued,⁶ cultural trauma always needs “carrier groups” capable of fostering a certain reading of the past, even when it is extremely polarizing. The anti-war movement used photography to shock the audience and challenge the official narrative of the war. From a rhetorical point of view, these photographs were used to achieve three main effects: to reveal what was going on, to confute the reasons for U.S. intervention, and to reinforce anti-war rhetoric. Yet, when analyzing these photographs and the sociocultural impact they had, we must also acknowledge the importance of *momentum*. For instance, according to Hamilton,⁷ Eddie Adams’s *Saigon’s Execution* (1968) was successful precisely because it resonated with the news of the escalation of the Tet Offensive. This was a pivotal moment in the Vietnam War, as it became clear that the conflict was far from over and that political leaders were lying about the real situation. Therefore, context helps us understand the success of a photograph. In fact, earlier photographs portraying a similar subject (a summary execution) were discarded by the press, suggesting that the time was not yet ripe for such a photograph.⁸

The anti-war movement (and media) selected certain photographs because of their evocative power. Images showing impending death are more likely to be reproduced multiple times, as their value lies not in the novelty or timeliness of the

4 Hagopian 2006, 203.

5 Butler 2016, 10.

6 See Alexander 2004; Alexander *et al.* 2012; Eyerman 2019.

7 Hamilton 1989.

8 See Zelizer 2010, 227.

image, but in the emotional response they can generate.⁹ Emotions trigger the attribution of meaning and possibly the urge to act; viewers have to decide where they stand in response to what they see. Images work on a neurological and cognitive level, eliciting emotional responses and being able to “address the spectators’ own bodily memory” and “touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion.”¹⁰ However, these emotional responses do not fully explain why certain images are selected to the detriment of others. Yet, looking at the broader context of circulation, it becomes clear that ideology determines what becomes iconic.

From media coverage to pop culture

The continued circulation of war photographs occurs not only through extensive media coverage and political appropriation, but also through their remediation in popular culture. Mass culture can disseminate images and narratives about the past, but the memories it creates are never natural or authentic.¹¹ Photographs become a common currency for memory because of their reproducibility, which increases the possibility of sharing an experience among different groups. As Sontag noted, “[a]ll memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating.”¹² Therefore, photographs are often subject to a permanent recirculation that wants to ensure a certain reading of the past. Because of this appropriation process, a traumatic event must be studied as a complex performance and not as a mere fact. Cultural trauma is thus constructed as a mediated event that we may not necessarily have experienced as individuals. It involves both the telling across generations, or “postmemory,”¹³ and projected “prosthetic memories,”¹⁴ including books, movies, documentaries, graphic novels, and artistic expositions. Hence, photographs function as “points of memory,” that is, “points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall.”¹⁵ This passage from the public sphere to the private and back to the public (thanks to media dissemination) is well captured by Dinh Q. Lê’s photo weaving, *From Viet-*

⁹ See Zelizer 2010.

¹⁰ Bennett 2005, 36.

¹¹ See Landsberg 2004.

¹² See Sontag 2004, 76–77.

¹³ See Hirsch 1997; 2012.

¹⁴ See Landsberg 2004.

¹⁵ Hirsch 2012, 61.

nam to Hollywood, in which public photographs, images from Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War (including *Born on the Fourth of July*), and pictures of everyday life during the war are visually interwoven and thematically linked to the artist's family history. Through this appropriation, what was once public enters the private sphere and is relocated into the present through an act of projection.

Moreover, the recurrence of these iconic photographs in various cultural artifacts involuntarily testifies to America's inability to come to terms with its failed military experience. For instance, Adams's photograph is remediated by movies dealing with the legacy of the Vietnam War (i.e., Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, 1978), but also by cultural products that do not comment on this historical event, but on war in abstract terms, such as Woody Allen's *Stardust Memory* (1980), Billy Joel's music video "We Didn't Start the Fire" (1989), and Mike Stimpson's *Classic photographs* series (for which the artist used Legos to restage Vietnam War pictures). As the original context of these photographs becomes tied to the past, their significance becomes blurred, and new viewers are tempted to interpret them according to the needs of the present. These photos partially lose their indexical nature to become symbols of war atrocities and U.S. imperialism, a connection well captured by Banksy's reinterpretation of the "Napalm Girl."

Adapting Adams's photograph to the graphic form

Adaptation reinforces *subjectivity*, since it involves transcoding, creativity, and intertextuality, with the source material serving as a palimpsest. As Linda Hutcheon and O'Flynn argued, "adapters must have their own personal reasons for deciding first to do an adaptation and then choosing which adapted work and what medium to do it in [...] An adaptation can obviously be used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique."¹⁶ In addition to reinforcing the subjectivity of adaptations, the change of medium also highlights their political agendas. This is particularly evident in the inter-code adaptation of photographs into comics; while photographs claim to tell the truth (standing as physical proof that something happened or existed) because of their indexical nature, drawings do not. Illustrations present a "narrowly selective interpretation" of the world.¹⁷ Comics materialize the visual framing present in all media, and they are aware of their own mediation.¹⁸ This

¹⁶ Hutcheon/O'Flynn 2013, 92–94.

¹⁷ Sontag 2008, 6.

¹⁸ See Chute 2016, 16–17.

intervention materializes not only through the use of a visible frame (the panel grid), but also through the use of drawings, which make the hand of the creator perceptible.

In the case of the Vietnam War, the decision to use drawings is not primarily dictated by the lack of images of the conflict or the inaccessibility of the camera eye to the event. Hence, the decision might be dictated by the perceptive dynamics that denote each medium, which are the cognitive and emotional responses they activate in the viewer. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, comics is a “cool” medium that demands a higher participation than photography, a “hot” medium.¹⁹ It processes information in “low definition” and forces its audience to activate all senses in the communication process; by contrast, photography simply ‘extends’ our vision, facilitating our understanding of the conveyed graphic information. Moreover, the fact that photography is contained within another medium (comics) is not at all problematic, because – as the scholar explains – “the content of any medium is always another medium,”²⁰ an idea that Bolter and Grusin implemented and referred to as “remediation.”²¹ In other words, media can be embedded within other media, generating hybrids. In particular, comics can interact with photographs in two ways: reproducing them as they are or adapting them to the comic form. The adaptation can either use the same style as the comics or develop a more realistic tone.

It follows that the hybrid nature of these adaptations aims to overcome/problematize the limits of photography. As John Szarkowski observed, the photographer’s “work, incapable of narrative, turned toward symbol.”²² Comics try to regain a narrative dimension by putting the frame in relation to other images, thus generating “closures”²³ and/or “inferences.”²⁴ The language of comics frames photographs into a sequential/tabular narrative. But unlike film or television, where each image cancels what came before it, in comics the stream of images does not produce an overlap, because the medium benefits from both the fixity of the panels (allowing the viewer to linger on the images) and the sequentiality, which can be used to complicate the preexisting narrative embedded in the image. Comics can therefore appropriate photographs and their entrenched narrative in order to subvert them, producing “counter-memories.”²⁵ The latter can re-

¹⁹ See McLuhan 2017.

²⁰ McLuhan 2017, 17.

²¹ See Bolter/Grusin 1999.

²² Szarkowski 2007, 42.

²³ See McCloud 1993.

²⁴ See Cohn 2019.

²⁵ See Lipsitz 1990.

construct what the image cannot tell, what preceded and followed the shot, thus exploiting the photograph's "inexhaustible invitation to deduction, speculation, and fantasy."²⁶ These adaptations also raise questions about the "ethics of memory"²⁷ and problematize the purpose behind each memory project.

Hence, the change of medium reveals that photographs are also interpretations, as their embedded meaning changes in response to the context of the photograph. Photographs only describe the present in which they are shot, and for this reason, they function as *memento mori*.²⁸ The link between death and photography is well captured in Adams's *Saigon Execution*, which depicts Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a South Vietnamese general, summarily executing Viet Cong suspect Nguyen Văn Lém in Saigon on February 1, 1968, during the Tet Offensive. This image was particularly shocking because it fixed the imminent death of the war prisoner by freezing the exact moment the trigger was pulled. Although the photograph was not the first to depict an act of violence emerging from the Vietnam War,²⁹ it captured the public's attention and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize a year after its first appearance. It was reproduced countless times, becoming an iconic example of the inhumanity of war. Despite representing an ordinary event during a conflict, the photograph was charged with anti-war rhetoric,³⁰ as it cast doubt on the worthiness of U.S. allies by providing evidence of a war crime.

This photograph became more than just a news story. It was widely recycled, and each reiteration capitalized on its "subjunctive value,"³¹ that is, its ability to evoke different interpretations. Indeed, about-to-die images give the viewer the responsibility to frame the image by "filling in the gaps," often with the help of captions. The unsaid is often used to trigger not only the viewer's curiosity but to draw them into the scene. This characteristic is amplified by the adaptation of photography to the comics form, which—according to Julia Watson—betray untold stories, offering occasions for introspection and asking the reader's complicity.³² By doing so, these adaptations also reveal how the past has ramifications in the present.

²⁶ Sontag 2008, 23.

²⁷ See Nguyen 2016.

²⁸ See Sontag 2008; Barthes 1981.

²⁹ See Chong 2012.

³⁰ See Hagopian 2006.

³¹ See Zelizer 2010.

³² See Watson 2008.

Doug Murray's *The 'Nam* #24

The 'Nam #24 describes the Tet Offensive and uses Adams's *Saigon Execution* as a point of memory, to use Hirsch's concept; the photograph is reproduced through "a double-frame image – two images presented one inside the other. The camera lens serves as an inner frame for the restaging of Adams's photograph reflected in vivid color."³³ This visual solution allows the reader to see the photographer shooting the scene. The agency of the American photographer is therefore called into question; his decision becomes subject to public scrutiny, as he is responsible for framing the scene.

Photographs are not just mere depictions of an event; on the contrary, they have an agenda of their own. Indeed, "photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe."³⁴ They do not depict the world as it is, but they construct it through the photographer's lens (and epistemology). They can only produce fragments of knowledge, capable of orienting the viewer. In many cases, the photograph is interpreted behind the camera lens. The reflection on the limited vision and understanding of the viewer is reinforced by the fact that the reproduction of Adams's photo is incomplete; the camera eye mainly focuses on the shooter, while the image of the victim is cropped.

This stylistic choice not only reflects the patronizing view of the photographer but also creates a parallelism between Adams and the general. They are both shooting, and their actions are synchronized. Adams's photo was awarded precisely for its composition and timing, as it captured the exact moment the persecutor pulled the trigger. The photographer's presence in the panel questions his agency, as he is not a mere spectator or a witness to a violent act; he participates in the scene. He even urges the shooting of the scene: "[H]olly –! Suu, Keep shooting! Just Keep shooting!" As Sontag observed, "photography is essentially an act of non-intervention [...] the photographer has the choice between photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene."³⁵

However, this rendition of the photograph reminds us that Adams is not shooting the victim but the general. The camera eye is aiming at the general in the same way that the latter is aiming at the prisoner. This visual solution seems to anticipate some of the key concepts of the eulogy published in *Time*, which Adams wrote for the general: "The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general

³³ Earle 2017, 140.

³⁴ Sontag 2008, 3.

³⁵ Sontag 2008, 3.

with my camera. [...] People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. [...] This picture really messed up his life.”³⁶ Adams regretted taking the picture and the impact it had on his and the general’s lives. In fact, it haunted them until they died. Hence, the political appropriation of a photograph may not always echo the author’s intentions.

Finally, *The ‘Nam #24* also reflects on the impact that this photo had on the war, influencing the morale of a nation. American people started to mistrust its government and wanted the war to end. The Pentagon papers accelerated the process. This relationship between cause and effect is reinforced in the scene following the double shooting, where a Vietcong hidden behind a wall predicts the demise of the foreign enemy. Yet, the myth of photography as a disruptive element should be debunked. Divisive stories about the war circulated through the media only when members of the government started to question their actions.³⁷ Indeed, those photographs were able to circulate thanks to the very war machine they supposedly denounced.³⁸ Photographers were able to go in and out of the war zones because the soldiers allowed them to do so and protected them.

Zimmerman and Vansant’s *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History*

Zimmerman and Vansant’s *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* (2009) frames Adams’s photograph within a television screen, reminding the reader both of the existence of film footage of the execution and of the media’s role in covering the event. This graphic narrative denounces the media coverage of the war and the presumed conflictual attitude of the press during the conflict, suggesting that their portrayal of the events placed disproportionate responsibility for the horrors of the war on the U.S. soldiers who fought in Vietnam. The authors create a new frame for Adams’s photograph and seek to control/correct the readers’ interpretations through captions and bold fonts, overwriting the anti-war rhetoric by making the narrator’s voice heard. In comics, the presence of a narrator is a marked feature,³⁹ and it is interesting to note that here, there is almost no dialogue between the characters, whereas the narrator’s voice establishes a narrative continuity.

³⁶ Adams 2001.

³⁷ See Hallin 1989.

³⁸ See Nguyen 2016.

³⁹ See Barbieri 2017.

The Vietnam War: A Graphic History focuses primarily on individual suffering,⁴⁰ while the enemy and the anguish of the South Vietnamese people are almost forgotten. The narration of the event is reduced to a discussion about the ethics of the conflict and the media's role in destabilizing the morale of the nation. The media are thus accused of having undermined America's success because of their "tendency toward sensationalism" and "antiwar bias."⁴¹ As in *The 'Nam* #24, Adams's photograph is used as an iconic representation of the conflict. Yet, both adaptations fail to reflect on the role of the people depicted in the photograph and the racial implications of the scene. They both enact the "oriental obscene,"⁴² as the Vietnamese are portrayed exclusively as either violators or violated bodies. The depiction of the violence of the war through the Asian body alone is a tactic to distance oneself from the violence of war and to avoid taking responsibility for military action. It also shows that, in the United States, violence on Asian bodies tends to be more tolerated than the wounds on the body of (Caucasian) U.S. soldiers, an aesthetic choice that has its roots in World War II photography and propaganda.⁴³

A diasporic South Vietnamese perspective

Diasporic South Vietnamese graphic artists remediate Adams's photograph in their works to criticize the oversimplification of the Western narratives of the conflict. To achieve their goal, they often try to unveil the context sealed in that photograph. They avoid universalistic and moral interpretations of the image by closely engaging with the indexicality of the photograph (which belongs to a specific time and place). Marcelino Truong's *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963–1975* (2015) uses arrows to name the characters involved in the scene, whereas Thi Bui connects General Nguyen's story to her father's. This appropriation of Nguyen's identity allows them to explore the reasons behind the general's actions: resentment and a desire for revenge. These graphic narratives question the prisoner's status as an innocent victim, reminding the observer that before being arrested he had murdered a family. These remediations complicate the moral narrative that usually frames war stories, where the good guys fight the bad guys, stressing that this narrative often fails to describe reality.

⁴⁰ See Nguyen 2016.

⁴¹ Zimmerman and Vansant 2009, 89.

⁴² See Chong 2012.

⁴³ See Moeller 1989.

Marcelino Truong contests the anti-war movement's appropriation of Adams's photograph and the depiction of the general as pure evil. He graphically illustrates this ideological appropriation by reproducing Adams's photograph three times; the first time, he adapts the photograph of the shooting to the graphic form, changing the point of view so that the reader can see Adams pointing his camera at the scene; the second reproduction shows the actual photograph; the third places the photograph on a protest placard. This last remediation shows the anti-war movement's appropriation of the photograph, as the protesters juxtapose the image of the general with a swastika. This choice reflects on the sedimentation of meaning, showing that there is an interrelation between 'new' and 'given' information, and that the pacifists transformed the photograph into an icon of the "dirty war."

Thi Bui also reproduces Adams's photograph three times, each time concentrating on one of the characters involved. In particular, she focuses on Adams's regret for taking the photograph, as he knew that there were many things that his photograph could not reveal, and he felt remorse for how his shot negatively influenced the general's life. Bui also uses this photograph to make the suffering of South Vietnamese people visible. It was not a two-sided conflict, and "for the Vietnamese the war continued whether America was involved or not."⁴⁴

However, it is important to note that even though Truong and Bui try to reconstruct the context of the shooting, their argument is never apologetic. They simply want to affirm an ethical form of remembering that takes into consideration the "inhumanities"⁴⁵ committed by all sides. Finally, they both frame Adams's photograph within their family histories in order to show how this shot affected their lives and the perception of their community worldwide. In other words, they deconstruct the "oriental obscene" by appropriating that image. The violence against the Asian body is no longer a universal and timeless symbol of the atrocity of war, but a reminder of a fratricidal conflict whose legacy endures in the memory of different generations. The photograph, then, becomes a central element in the reconstruction of the memory of a community that strives to reconcile with its past. This reconciliation is only possible through an ethical questioning of the (contrasting) memories generated by a photograph; these do not undermine the reliability of the narration, but they validate the historiographic research behind these works.

⁴⁴ See Bui 2017.

⁴⁵ See Nguyen 2016.

Conclusion

All adaptations discussed in this essay challenge some aspect of the ontology of photography in order to promote a counter-memory of the event they narrate. However, each adaptation raises ethical questions about the aims behind the projects and the perspectives adopted. An ethical remembrance can only be achieved through a narrative that recognizes the sufferings of all the parties involved in the conflict. Comics can participate in this process by reproducing iconic images and problematizing their content. These graphic narratives ask the reader not only to look at history from a different perspective, but also to bear witness to traumatic events. At the same time, they raise questions about the photographs that were never taken or simply neglected. As Truong observes in his graphic narrative, we have a huge visual archive of the atrocities committed by the U.S. and its allies, but not of those perpetrated by the communists.

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Laurence Riu-Comut

Recycling Film Genres: Transcodification of the *Film Noir* in the Contemporary Anglo-American and French Novel (Martin Amis, Robert Coover, Tanguy Viel)

Abstract: This essay examines the literary fortunes of the *film noir*, with the study of its transcodification in contemporary French and Anglo-American novels. The influence of film on the present-day novel is self-evident. We will focus on the popular and strongly codified genre of the *film noir*, which has had a great impact on cinephile writers. It provides a supply of character roles and action scenes that helps the novel to renew itself after the formalist experiences of previous decades. We shall firstly propose a conceptualization of this case of transcodification in which the intersemiotic transposition of cinematic into literary codes is complicated by the generic markers of the *film noir*. Semantic-syntactic criteria that bring out the obvious traits of a movie genre in the novel will be highlighted. The study of *London Fields* by Martin Amis (1989), *L’Absolue Perfection du Crime* by Tanguy Viel (2001) and *Noir* by Robert Coover (2010) will display the modalities of the *film noir* transcodification and its repercussions: the usual devices of the *noir* genre are redeployed in a critical way which further reworks traditional narrative structures.

Keywords: Cinema, contemporary novel, film noir, genericity, intersemioticity

The present-day novel is influenced by cinema, which through its fictional devices provides new structural patterns. It has attracted novelists who have rediscovered the pleasure of narration after the relative decline of narrative fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, under the influence of the formalist *avant-garde* critics. Aron Kibédi-Varga named this tendency “re-narrativisation”, that is to say “the effort of building again narratives”¹ – by playing with the codes of storytelling, and, as we will see, by recycling the codes of the cinema.

Certain film genres, such as the *film noir*, have had considerable impact on writers; its strongly codified structure, highlighted by vivid action scenes, has

¹ Kibédi-Varga 1990, 16. All the translations are ours, except for *L’Absolue Perfection du Crime* by Tanguy Viel: we will quote Linda Coverdale’s translation, *The Absolute Perfection of Crime* (see references).

given its style a kind of iconic stature. We will study three novels in which we can observe the renewal of narratives through transcoding the matter and the conventions of the *film noir*. This literary transcodification takes place in the context of an intersemiotic relationship: the cinematographic code is transposed into a literary code. This is a complex case of transcodification, especially since the *noir* genre itself is a hybrid one, at the cross-roads of literature and film.

L'Absolue Perfection du Crime by Tanguy Viel (2001) is a melancholic novel which evokes the failure of a casino robbery in a small Breton town by second-rate gangsters. The plot of *Noir* by Robert Coover (2010) recycles the *genre noir* conventions: a private detective, Philip M. Noir, is hired by a widow, who plays the part of the *femme fatale*, to investigate her husband's suspicious death. In *London Fields* by Martin Amis (1989), are shown the tribulations of a trio composed of a *femme fatale*, Nicola Six, and her pretenders, Keith Talent, the villain, and Guy Clinch, the innocent victim. The authors of these novels have reinvented narratives by reusing, in critical or parodic forms, the conventions of *film noir* genre: its stereotypical characters and action scenes are subverted by Tanguy Viel, the décor of the “noir” is recycled by Robert Coover, while the depiction of the stock character of the *femme fatale* is undermined by Martin Amis.

The study will display the repercussions of recycling the *noir* genre in the contemporary novel. Is transcodification a symptom of the decline of the novel, where writers lost confidence in their art faced with the omnipotence of the cinema today? Or, on the contrary, does transcodification lead to a renewal of the contemporary novel? Before examining these questions, we will present the theoretical basis of our study.

The “noir” from film to novel: a case of genre transcodification

The *genre noir* is a form which is well-known for its “plasticity” that, according to Natacha Levet, makes of it “a genre prone to hybridity.”² We can observe this phenomenon since its genesis, characterized by a “to-and-fro”³ between literary and filmic genres. The most famous example is *The Maltese Falcon*, written by Dashiell Hammett in 1930, then adapted for the screen by John Huston in 1941.

We shall propose the notion of “genre transcodification” to designate the linking between the literary code in the novel and the filmic code, which both belong

² Levet 2010, 81.

³ Levet 2010, 81.

to the same genre archetype, or “architext,”⁴ if we consider that genre identity is a form of architextuality. The “architext” must be understood in the broadest sense as transcending the categories of the mediums of film and text; genre features traverse these supports.

Some criteria will then help us to identify the presence of a movie genre in the novel. In *The American Film Musical*, Rick Altman proposes a “semantic-syntactic” definition of a film genre.⁵ The “semantic criteria” are the themes, motives, places, characters, and situations. Michel Cieutat, who has studied the *film noir* genre, highlights “fourteen fundamental themes:”⁶ crime, urban settings, night scenes, the *femme fatale*, the detective... These themes give birth to conventional situations such as car-chase, tailing suspects, robbery. Rick Altman also defined “syntactic criteria” to analyze how the message is encoded. The *film noir* is characterized by its aesthetics: according to Michel Cieutat, we find “eight stylistic characteristics which define the iconographic singularity of the *film noir*:”⁷ complex plots, the importance of the voice-over, oppressive confined spaces, the heritage of expressionism, filming in black and white. We will consider how this generic material is recycled, transcodified in the intersemiotic contemporary novel.

The *film noir* is a prolific matrix for the contemporary novel, in two paradoxical ways: the novel delegates to film transcodification the descriptive and narrative patterns, yet while using these devices still keeps a certain distance from them. We shall see this firstly in *L’Absolue perfection du crime* by Tanguy Viel.

L’Absolue Perfection du Crime: a melancholic transcodification of the film noir models

The title of the novel by Tanguy Viel, *L’Absolue perfection du crime*, recalls the French translation of Hitchcock’s movie, *Dial M for Murder: Le Crime était presque parfait*. From the outset, the reader is told this “absolute perfection” is an illusion. In this novel about failure, a disenchanted narrator relates a casino robbery by provincial Mafiosi, led by an old “uncle”, degraded avatar of Coppola’s “Godfather”.

References and allusions to *film noir* are omnipresent: to check out the casino surroundings the gangsters use a camera, as if filmic representation was now dis-

4 Genette 1992, 43.

5 See Altman 1987, 117–126.

6 See Cieutat 1993, 36–44.

7 Cieutat 1993, 36–44.

placing the immediate perception of the world. The robbery preparations also use a filmic knowledge about monitoring systems in casinos: “We’d watched films on that, about surveillance systems in casinos, in banks.”⁸ The description of the casino reminds the reader of some famous shots of *Casino* by Martin Scorsese and of *The Killing* by Stanley Kubrick. Tanguy Viel is offering the reader a kind of literary transposition of these movies.

But *L’Absolue Perfection du Crime* makes use of these very codes to undermine them, as we can observe in the transcodification of the classic scene of the robbery, which is a semantic criterion of genre definition, according to Rick Altman. The holdup is related *via* the judicial reconstitution in which the narrator is a participant. The present time of the narrative is replaced by a retrospective narration. The narrator is in jail now: the narrative device shows the reader why the robbery failed. Contrary to the usual hard-boiled fiction, there is no depiction of the crime scene.

Moreover, the literary representation is overlaid by an imaginary film scene. The holdup is considered as a film whose actors would be the literary characters, as the narrator explains: “I was going to play a golden boy who blows his wad on roulette, [...] that’s how it was, scripted like that.”⁹ The narrator is aware that he is playing a stereotyped role; besides, during the reconstitution, the other characters play their own parts. Stage directions are given, characters are dressed up as for their role. Playing parts however has its limits: the actor who plays the casino director is not convincing enough: “He wasn’t believable. I told the judge how the truth was eluding us, because of the actor, that he would try his best, of course, but you couldn’t believe in him.”¹⁰ This mediated representation can’t create illusion: in the narrator’s eyes, the fact that the scene is replayed prevents the discovery of a deeper truth.

Transcodification is done in a melancholic way, which makes representation of the real-world problematic. It has ontological implications, as Fabien Gris shows:

The novel is a pastiche of a robbery movie in which characters are replaying despite themselves a robbery movie. They are aware of the stereotyped universes in which they are trapped, of the representations that imprison them, turning them into “liquefied characters,”¹¹ condemned to repeat *déjà-vu* action scenes.

⁸ Viel 2001, 65.

⁹ Viel 2001, 56.

¹⁰ Viel 2001, 64.

¹¹ Gris 2012, 221.

This pastiche of a robbery movie has ontological implications: by playing parts, novelistic characters seem to lose their essence. Transcending the narrative structures and stereotypes of the film noir underlines the failure of the novel in relation to its cinematographic models. It also brings into question novelistic conventions, such as the description of the world, as we will see in *Noir* by Robert Coover.

Aesthetic transcodification of the *film noir*: the description of the world in Robert Coover's novel *Noir*

Noir: the title of the novel invites the reader to consider the text as an oblique tribute to the *noir* genre. Robert Coover constantly refers or alludes to the *film noir*, associating his diegetic world with a film. When he goes on a mission, the detective has the sensation he's playing a part in a movie: "The kind of movie showing nightly all across town. The movie you're in. Chasing shadows."¹²

Firstly, the detective, Philip M. Noir, is not only a traditional character in the novel but embodies the mythical figures of the *film noir*, as the onomastics suggest: the letter M evokes Philip Marlowe in Howard Hawk's *The Big Sleep*, and also *M* by Fritz Lang. The successive portraits of Noir show him with the perfect outfit of the detective: hat, trench-coat, and cigarette: "A thin cold rain is falling. You tug your hat brim down over your eyes, avoiding dark doorways, but keeping your eye on them, watching for any movement, cigarette hanging from your lip, the butt of your pocketed .22 gripped in one hand."¹³ Besides, the description recalls the images of the streets in the *film noir*, as this urban genre is characterized by shadows and contrasts of black and white inherited from German expressionism. In Coover's novel, this syntactic criterion of the genre is transposed in the descriptions of the dimly lit wet streets, such as the docks, setting of the crime scene:

Nightmarishly dark as it usually is down there, even in the middle of most days, lit only by dull swinging streetlamps, the reflective wet streets more luminous than the lamps themselves, though casting no light of their own. [...] Fishy smell in the air. Black water lapped the concrete landings and wooden piers somewhere down below.¹⁴

¹² Coover 2010, 152.

¹³ Coover 2010, 53.

¹⁴ Coover 2010, 9.

With the expressions “as it usually is down there” and “reflective streets”, the text underlines its metafictional dimension – Robert Coover is considered as a post-modernist novelist. The description reminds the reader of famous movie scenes: the East River’s quays in *The Naked City* by Jules Dassin (1948) or the harbor areas of New-Orleans in *Panic in the Streets* by Elia Kazan (1950).

Besides its traditional symbolic function, the night settings have an aesthetic purpose. The almost emblematic usage of dark scenery becomes a hackneyed convention. The setting of *Noir* is the city of the *film noir* genre: a representation instead of the real world. This recalls Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation in which the real world has been substituted by its simulacrum: “It is a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.”¹⁵ The omnipresence of the image signifies the loss of the original referent. Coover’s novel pays tribute to the greater power of cinema in the way it controls the reader’s imagination and representations of the world, as Jean-François Chassay explains: “It is in that sense that Coover’s work is an epistemologist’s work, as he questions the very meaning of the literary act in a world dominated by the arts of the spectacle.”¹⁶

This interplay reveals a contemporary world empty of meaning, as we can observe in *London Fields* by Martin Amis, with the transcodification of the figure of the *femme fatale*.

Transcodification of the *femme fatale* in Martin Amis’ *London Fields*: when the character is devoured by her roles

Amis’ novel is influenced by *film noir*: Nicola Six, “tall, dark, and thirty-four,”¹⁷ gathers all the *femme fatale*’s attributes: beauty, perfect body, irresistible seduction – she has the power “to occupy the erotic center.”¹⁸ She is lusted after by two men who play the part of the rival brothers, Guy Clinch et Keith Talent. Her murder is staged as a *film noir* scene set in tones of black and white.

Through the figure of the *femme fatale*, Martin Amis questions and renews the status of characters in the novel, who become actors playing parts. Nicola Six was an actress in her youth who trained with the Royal Shakespeare Company. As all

¹⁵ Baudrillard 1981, 11.

¹⁶ Chassay 1996, 10.

¹⁷ Amis 1989, 15.

¹⁸ Amis 1989, 20.

the good actresses, she is able to concentrate on herself all the light: “When Nicola walked the streets she was lit by her personal cinematographer, nothing too arty either, a single spotlight trained from the gods. She had a blue nimbus, the blue of sex or sadness.”¹⁹ The metaphor of the personal cinematographer shows the cinematographic consciousness of herself, as if she was a *film noir* character.

As a “a male fantasy figure,”²⁰ she embodies stereotyped roles for her masculine public. For Guy, she will play the romantic orphan, a virgin frightened of men; for Keith, she tries to resemble televisual models during sketches she plays for him: “She wore a black nightgown of candid vulgarity. With her hair freed and a third of each breast showing and no smile on her business face, she hoped to resemble a Monaco madame after a hard week in her first tax year of semiretirement, or something like that, as seen on TV.”²¹ The narrator defines – or undefines – Nicola Six as “a mixture of genres,”²² because of her excessive personality and her incessant metamorphosis: “You’re hard to categorize, even in the male fantasy area. Maybe you’re a mixture of genres. A mutant, I went on (I love these typologies). [...] In the end, though, I’m fingering you for a Femme Fatale. I like it. Nice play on words.”²³

Being such an actress, Nicola Six loses her essence. As she says, “But that’s art. Always the simulacrum, never the real thing. That’s art”²⁴ as if she was embodying the theory of simulation by Jean Baudrillard. The numerous parts she plays reminds us of the *Untitled Film Stills* by Cindy Sherman (1977), where feminine stereotypes are revealed with all their emptiness. As Nick Bentley says, “She is an empty signifier with nothing at the core; or perhaps more accurately she is a hyper-real character, because she presents constructed identities or masks to the characters she encounters (and the reader) behind which there is a vacuum.”²⁵

This emptiness goes hand in hand with her embodiment as a carnivalesque character. Mikhail Bakhtin has showed how the underlining of the “lower body stratum”²⁶ was characteristic of carnival scenes. In the *film noir*, the *femme fatale* is elegant, but rarely vulgar (or serves as an exception to the rule, like Gilda performing a striptease in Charles Vidor’s movie). Amis, on the other hand, subverts the stereotypical characteristics of the “femme fatale”: Nicola Six appears more

19 Amis 1989, 69.

20 Amis 1989, 202.

21 Amis 1989, 267.

22 Amis 1989, 260.

23 Amis 1989, 201–202.

24 Amis 1989, 130–131.

25 Bentley 2008, 43.

26 See Bakhtine 1965.

like a pornographic actress than the traditional high-class vamp. Firstly, Nicola Six is excessively sexualized. Her name is “pronounced ‘seeks’, but also misheard as ‘sex,’”²⁷ suggesting that she exists as a sexual object. Nicola’s portrait is significant: she resembles a “pornographic clowngirl” and her face evokes a carnival mask: “Her mouth was full, and unusually wide. Her mother had always said it was a whore’s mouth. It seemed to have an extra half-inch at either wing, like the mouth of the clowngirl in pornography.”²⁸ When she betrays Guy Clinch at the end, “Nicola was laughing with her mouth as long and wide as it would go.”²⁹ Her carnivalesque laugh (which recalls the monstrosity of *L’Homme qui rit* by Victor Hugo) makes fun of the mythical figure of the *femme fatale*.

The recycling of a stereotyped criterion of genre has a critical dimension. Amis, by his use of the now dated image of the *film noir femme fatale*, makes an ontological statement about the status of the contemporary woman, and, more generally, about the emptiness of *fin-de-siècle* humanity in a showman’s society.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study has shown certain issues of the processes of generic transcodification from *film noir* to novel, recycling filmic devices such as action scenes, decor, or characters in a critical dimension. That is the interplay of the contemporary novel, using and mocking well-worn devices. Tanguy’s Viel transcodification is a melancholic one, as if the disenchantment of his novels could not compete with the cinema: action and characters seem to lose their substance. By playing on our sense of *déjà-vu*, and by recycling the mythical decor of the *film noir*, Robert Coover shows the predominance of the filmic devices on our imagination. Martin Amis applies a carnivalesque treatment to the filmic codes, which underlines the contemporary loss of meaning and its inherent insubstantiality. This subversion is echoed in the novelistic conventions: the diegetic elements of character, scene and action are constantly undermined. Subverting *film noir* conventions goes hand in hand with its tribute to the *noir* genre, portraying new versions of its protagonists and revitalizing its myths – a tribute to the cinema in general.

These novels are representative of the relations between novel and cinema, in an era marked by a “pictorial turn” in the 1990’s – e.g. an increasing interest in pictures and images and a prevalence of these images in a society of the spec-

²⁷ Amis 1989, 37.

²⁸ Amis 1989, 18.

²⁹ Amis 1989, 460.

tacle, according to W.J.T. Mitchell.³⁰ Rather than trying to compete with cinema, which is now a prevailing medium, literary fiction composes with its themes and codes, and goes enriched and renewed by its struggles to compete with this visual medium. Great narratives for which today's writers seek their inspiration derive from the world of cinema – the new domain of our collective imagination.

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³⁰ See Mitchell 1994.

Miriam de Paiva Vieira and Joicy Silva Ferreira

***How to be Both* through Overlapping Ekphrastic Layers**

Abstract: The majority of models proposed for the study of media transformation, such as those suggested by Irina Rajewsky and Lars Elleström, include *ekphrasis* as a relevant (trans)medial procedure for research investigation within intermedial studies. There is a significant amount of consistent critical reflection on the relations between literature and painting promoted by this ancient device. Yet there has been ascending interest in other sources of inspiration for *ekphrasis*, such as sculpture, photography and architecture. Different effects are likely to be promoted by the modes of different source-media; for instance, while *ekphrasis* inspired by painting tend to be contemplative, those inspired by architecture tend to take advantage of the edifice's performative affordances. But what happens when painting is an intrinsic part of a construction system, such as fifteenth century frescoes? The plot of the novel *How to be Both* (2014), by Scottish author Ali Smith, is built on a series of ekphrastic passages inspired by Francesco del Cossa's frescoes, especially the ones about *Salone dei Mesi* in *Palazzo Schifanoia*, Ferrara, Italy. Thus, the aim of this paper is to present the role of *ekphrasis* inspired by Renaissance frescoes in *How to be Both*. To do so, we will rely on the notion of *ekphrasis* as a theoretical operator taking into account the proposal of an interpretative model of architectural *ekphrasis* (Vieira 2017, 2021) which was developed from the study of transfer of media characteristics among dissimilar media (Elleström 2010, 2014, 2021).

Keywords: Ali Smith, architectural ekphrasis, comparative literature, intermediality, frescoes

In most models proposed for the study of media transformation, *ekphrasis* is considered a relevant intermedial phenomenon, including those proposed by Irina Rajewsky and Lars Elleström.¹ Although painting remains in evidence in most of the reflections proposed by critics and researchers, there has been a growing concern

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1 See Rajewsky 2005; Elleström 2010, 2014, 2021.

in discussions of the issue aimed at embracing other types of artistic expression as a source of inspiration, such as architecture and photography. The potential of the source media results in different effects provoked by the ekphrastic passages. For instance, while painting provides a more contemplative character, *ekphrasis* inspired by architecture tends to take advantage of its performative potential. But what happens when painting becomes a constructive technique, as is the case of Renaissance buildings' frescoes? How could a painting technique used to paint walls in the 15th century be relevant to a British teenager in the 21st century? To answer these questions, this work investigates the novel *How to Be Both*, by Scottish author Ali Smith.

Man Booker Award nominee and winner of the 2014 Goldsmiths Prize and Costa Novel Award, and the 2015 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, *How to Be Both* is divided into two chapters, both named "One". One of them is preceded by the icon of a surveillance camera, designed by artist and filmmaker Sarah Wood, while the other features the representation of two eyes, inspired by *St. Lucy's* panel (1473–1474),² by Francesco del Cossa, a Renaissance painter specialized in frescoes. The chapter preceded by the icon of a camera narrates the story of George, an English teenager, while the other, preceded by the icon of the eyes, focuses on the life and work of Francesco del Cossa. Both chapters might be read separately, as independent short stories. It is worth mentioning that the novel was published by Penguin Books simultaneously in two versions: one starting with the chapter about George and the other with the chapter about the painter. That is, when purchasing the novel at a bookstore, readers are able to choose which predefined version they would like to read.

Set nowadays, the narrative takes place in a glimpse of George's life, who seeks for the memories of Carol, her mother, who died due to an allergic reaction to antibiotics. In this chapter, at least two narrative layers are explored: the first is George's life within the intradiegetic present; her early maturity in facing her father's alcoholism, leading to her taking care of her younger brother, as well as new findings about her own sexuality due to a growing closeness to her friend Helena. The second narrative layer takes place by means of *ekphrasis* and flashbacks and deals with the search for the memories of Carol, who is a great admirer of del Cossa's work. The chapter ends with George contemplating del Cossa's painting of *St. Vin-*

2 Tempera on poplar, 107,32 cm x 74,61 cm, with framing. Samuel H. Kress Collection. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., The United States. A reproduction of the painting is available at: www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.369.html.

cent Ferrer (1473–1475)³ at the National Gallery in London. The other chapter, about del Cossa, is framed by a typography that seems to materialize the literary resource of flashback, as it seems to open a crack in time, through which the character-narrator leaves the 14th century and enters the 21st century through the painting observed by George at the National Gallery. Throughout the first-person narrative, which does not follow punctuation rules and is marked by the excessive use of colons, italics, and upper case, del Cossa reveals his creative process in ekphrastic excerpts, and prompts speculation since there are practically no historical records about him as a historical figure. In this chapter, at least two other layers are explored: the first is the life of del Cossa and the execution of frescoes. The second, the relationship of Carol and her friend Lisa, triggered by one of George's visits to the museum, when she notices Lisa observing del Cossa's *St. Vincent Ferrer*. The girl, then, starts to stalk Lisa and decides to photograph her house, looking for clues of Carol's memories. In this chapter, despite not seeing or hearing him, George is always followed, practically haunted, by del Cossa, who, in turn, believes to be trapped in some sort of purgatory designed for artists. A third layer is then revealed, composed by the painter's remarks on the art of creating images in the contemporary world, in such a way that the medium of photography is integrated to the narrative and the constitution of the characters.

In an interview to *The New York Times*, Ali Smith reaffirms that both stories are independent and interchangeable, thus producing a different effect depending on which story the reader decides to read first.⁴ In another interview, to *The Guardian*,⁵ the author reveals that the inspiration to write the novel came from a photo of a detail of the frescoes from the Hall of the Months, at the *Palazzo Schifanoia*, in Italy, reproduced in *Frieze Magazine*.⁶ Smith reinforces that her fascination with the fresco is embedded both in the plot and in the narrative structure. She also explains that we look at a fresco on a wall and see what is in front of our eyes; however, the layer applied underneath may contain another story, which may or may not be in connection with that of the surface. Both are right in front of our eyes, but we only see one, or we see the one on the surface first, and only then pay attention to the one that is covered. Smith calls this “understo-

3 Tempera on poplar, 153,70 cm x 59,70 cm. The National Gallery, London, The United Kingdom. A reproduction of the painting is available at: www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/francesco-del-cossa-saint-vincent-ferrer.

4 See Lyall, 2014.

5 Clark, 2014.

6 *Frieze* is a company that diffuses culture and contemporary art in three types of publications: *Frieze* magazine, *Frieze Masters Magazine* and *Frieze Week*. See more at: www.frieze.com/article/picture-piece-frescoes-palazzo-schifanoia-ferrara (last accessed 07/12/2024).

ry". Therefore, the narrative could be understood via studies on visual hierarchy, in which an image, or part of an image, stands out from the rest for its color, position or size. We, nonetheless, chose to think of the narrative overlays departing from intermedial studies, more specifically, the notion of *ekphrasis* as a theoretical operator, based on the interpretive model for architectural *ekphrasis*,⁷ developed from the study of the transfer of media characteristics between dissimilar media proposed by Lars Elleström.⁸ To do so, before delving into the stories of George and del Cossa, it is relevant to understand the intrinsic features of the medium *fresco*, more specifically those of our object of study, the frescoes in the Hall of the Months, at the *Palazzo Schifanoia*, located in Ferrara, Italy.

When the palace was built, around 1385, Ferrara was ruled by a pacific patron of all forms of art, Niccolò III, from the d'Este dynasty. After his death, his heirs maintained the tradition of supporting the arts and the university. The youngest son, Borso d'Este, was responsible for the most significant expansion of the Palace by adding the ducal rooms and the great hall known as *Salone dei Mesi*, or Hall of the Months. The space is currently a museum named Civic Museum Schifanoia. Designed by court astrologer and librarian Pellegrino Prisciani, the hall was painted by the artists of the Ferrara school to illustrate a year in the duke's life on a monthly calendar. Each of the 12 months of the year is composed of panels subdivided into 3 sections spread over 525m². The lower panel displays representations of the duke's benevolent actions and daily scenes from the court. The central one, with a blue background, represents the 36 decades in which the astrological cycle is divided, while the upper panel brings allegories of the zodiac signs. According to Manuela Incerti (2009), the panels were carefully arranged so that the most important dates in the Duke's life were illuminated by the sunlight shining through the windows, with the help of opening and closing curtains. The incidence of sunlight inside the Hall was also carefully planned. For Incerti, the height difference between the windows was designed so that the frescoes were lit only in the first minutes of the morning in the west wing, dedicated to the hot months (from March to August), and only in the last moments of sunset in the east wing, dedicated to the cold months (from September to February).

The overlapping of layers is an intrinsic part of the fresco production process: the first layer is the building wall; the second, the mortar layer, is a sort of porous substratum likely to bind all layers together; the third is the drawing that will be filled by the color pigments produced from the combination of water and powders made from bones, plants, roots, stones and minerals; and finally, the painting is

⁷ See Vieira, 2017, 2021.

⁸ See Elleström 2010, 2014, 2021.

covered with a protective layer. In an interview with Ali Smith, Sarah Lyall compares the novel to an onion that needs to be peeled.⁹ In this line of reasoning, we could think of this overlapping of layers in the light of the notion of palimpsest, proposed by Gérard Genette,¹⁰ in which the traces left by this technique of writing on the skin of animals result from “erasing” the previous text in the same support. However, the technique of producing frescoes occurs in a different way. That is, understanding that this painting technique composes the structural layer of the building is essential to our investigation.

From the point of view of reception, once the fresco is finished, as in painting, the immediate sensory reaction is one of great visual appeal, not only due to spatial magnitude, but mainly to the number of details used to give life to the images. But, as in architecture, other senses are also triggered and affected. For instance, the temperature inside the room is usually different from the outside. Built more than 600 years ago, and now a museum, it remains closed for a part of the year, which may affect sensitive noses. The noise coming from guides and visitors may also affect hearing – after all, the hall is decorated only with frescoes, without any furniture, aside from some benches for observation. The physical space is delimited by the walls, floor, and ceiling, but the virtual space is expanded in the lower and upper parts of the panels using the perspective technique, greatly improved by Renaissance artists to allow the presence of elements in different plans. It is also necessary to consider the time taken to cover the entire length of the approximately 90 (12L x 30c x 6h) linear meters in order to appreciate all the sets of panels of the Hall in which the passage of time is punctuated by nuances in the color palette employed in each of the four seasons. That is, even though the literal representation of time in the Hall of Months highlights the presence of the space-time modality, it is still the material modality that distinguishes a fresco from a painting. Thus, for the exhibition of a year in the life of Ferrara’s regent in another geographical location on the planet, it would be necessary to remove all of the 525m² of solid walls – a Herculean task for those involved. The passage where del Cossa reproduces the echo reverberating in the great hall with the aid of capital letters is worth highlighting. In short, the ekphrastic passages of the novel appeal to all five senses, including the kinetic.

In the novel, George recognizes the role art plays in Carol’s depression preceding her death. According to the teenager, her mother was not at all happy with the disappearance of her friend Lisa. But, as with the author herself, after seeing the reproduction of an image of a man in ragged white robes using a rope as a belt in

⁹ Lyall 2014.

¹⁰ See Genette 1997.

an art magazine, Carol suddenly cheers up and decides to take the family to see the work “live” in the Palazzo, which is also known as *della Gioia*, or palace of joy. In a 10-page long ekphrastic excerpt, George reveals her experience in the Hall of the Months. Here, the potential of architecture is revealed in the emphasis given to the temperature of the room; the contrasts in luminosity, depending on the observer’s location; the amplitude of the empty space of the hall emphasized by prepositions and adverbs indicating the impossibility of visually grasping all at once, which leads the observer to walk around the entire hall. Throughout the novel, dichotomies are frequently presented by the narrator(s), but the characters constantly reaffirm that what actually matters is not choosing one or the other, but considering “both”:

The room is warm and dark. No, not dark, it’s light. *Both*. It’s like a huge dark dance hall with a lit-up picture that goes round some of its walls. There is nothing else in the room, except some low benches on which to sit and look at the walls, and over in the far corner a middle-aged lady (attendant?) on a folding seat. Apart from that, there is just the picture. *It is impossible to see it all at once*. Half the room is covered in it. The other half has faded picture, or no picture. What there is, though, is so full of life happening that it’s actually life like, at least those bits are at the far end. And the people in the broad blue stripe which goes all round the middle of the wall, all through the middle of the picture splitting it into an above and a below, look like they’re floating, or walking on air, especially in that brighter part.¹¹

After perceiving the architectural specificities of the hall, in accordance with the cultural knowledge pertinent to her age, George contemplates the fresco that motivated the family trip to Italy and concludes that “It resembles a giant comic strip. Except it’s also like art” (Smith 2015, 44). The following pages of the novel are dedicated to the girl’s perception of the many and varied descriptive details, such as human figures, animals, elements of nature, as in this excerpt:

Then there’s a monkey hugging the leg of a boy, who *regards* it with snobby disdain. Over there there’s a very small child in a cap, in yellow, *reading* or eating something. An old woman holding a piece of paper *is being attention* to the child. There are unicorns pulling a chariot here and lovers kissing there, and people with musical instruments here, people working up trees and in fields there. There are cherubs and garlands, crowds of people, women working at what looks like a loom up there, and down here there are eyes *looking* out of a black archway while people talk and do business and don’t notice the *looking*. There are dogs and horses, soldiers and townspeople, birds and flowers, rivers and river-

11 Smith 2015, 44, our emphasis.

banks, water bubbles in the rivers, swans that look like they're laughing. There's a crowd of babies. They look haughty. There are rabbits, or hares, no, *both*.¹²

The combination of verbs which appeal to sight – to regard, to read, to be attentive, to look (in italics) – with the use of the deictics “over there”, “here”, “there”, “up there” (underlined), guide the reader's eyes while the girl observes details from the lower and upper panels concomitantly. Although the fresco is the source medium of the excerpt, the protagonist seems to focalize on the details in the composition of the *ekphrasis* through resources such as focus and zoom, which refers to the affordances¹³ of analogical or digital cameras, the latter being the most familiar to the protagonist's generation.

Resuming the *ekphrasis* of the frescoes in the Hall of the Months:¹⁴ after enumerating the characters in the painting as if using photographic resources such as focus, zoom in and zoom out, George's gaze finally fixes on the middle panel, the one with the blue band that bears the figure of the man who caught her mother's attention:

It is impossible, though, not to keep looking then looking back again at the blue-coloured stripe which runs like a frieze round the room between the upper part and the lower parts of the picture and in which the people and the animals seem to float free. The blue calls your eyes every time. It gives you a breather from the things happening above and below it. In the blue there's a woman in a beautiful red dress just sitting in the air above a cheeky-looking goat or sheep. There's *the man in the white rags*. That's *the man who was in the picture her mother saw at home*. *He's why they're here*. Along from him, on the other side of the woman floating above the goat, there's a young man or a young woman, could be either, dressed in beautiful rich clothes and holding an arrow or a stick and a gold hoop thing, like everything's nothing but a charming game.¹⁵

George asks Carol whether the figure represents a man or a woman. The mother first answers that she does not know, but then adds that it could be one and the other: “both.”¹⁶

12 Smith 2015, 45, our emphasis.

13 An affordance might be understood as what each *mídia* “can afford”. In the case of architecture, it is the potential suggested by the form, previously planned by a designer, which will be presented by a certain object to be manipulated by an agent, according to its operation. For instance, a door handle is round in order to invite the agent to turn it. For further information, see Gibson. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.

14 To see images of the fresco “Allegory of March”, in the Hall of the Months, see: www.wga.hu/html_m/c/cossa/schifano/1march/index.html

15 Smith 2015, 45, our emphasis.

16 Smith 2015, 45.

The contemplation is intertwined with a brief performative action in which George recognizes that looking up to the upper panel may cause pain, due to its height. She, then, “turns on her heel to look at the other wall,”¹⁷ on the other side of the hall and concludes that “it’s just not as good, not as eye-catching or interesting – or maybe it hasn’t been as well restored.”¹⁸ The teenager notices that the differences in the shades and the intensity of the colors are intentional, so that the seasons of the year are represented. A sensitivity to the fresco technical affordances is revealed when she turns back to her favorite panel again and realizes that “it is like everything is in layers.”¹⁹ At this point of the contemplative *ekphrasis*, with certain aspects of performative instances, the descriptive quality of the images sheds light on the specificities of the medium fresco, that is, it is also a “technical” *ekphrasis*.²⁰ As explained by Smith, the modes of the fresco are intrinsically related to the structure of the narrative that is revealed through what she calls *understories*.

Meanwhile, in the chapter about del Cossa, the expression “both” is even more recurrent than in George’s chapter. The first sentence after the passage that seems to materialize the time crack is: “a boy in front of a painting,”²¹ referring to George. The painter tells his life story and reports *en passant* that he was born a girl, but after his mother’s early death, the father realizes his gift and dresses him up as a boy in order to secure him a lifelong job. In the second part of the chapter, the narrator recognizes that in fact “this boy is a girl,”²² and begins to weave his impressions of George’s world, which seems like a purgatory to him. This hybrid nature is an intrinsic part of who he is, but it is also part of George’s and Carol’s *understories*.

In a reading from the gender point of view, Maria Micaela Coppola argues that “Smith seems to employ the fresco technique, in which water, pigment and plaster merge together into an allegorical picture” since “she investigates the fluidity of gender identity by intermingling dimensions of space and time, literal and allegorical meanings, and genders.”²³ To Coppola, this multicolor allegory may be seen and interpreted from multiple points of view, since “both plots and subjects in these stories are composed of different layers of meaning, and give rise to multiple

17 Smith 2015, 46.

18 Smith 2015, 46.

19 Smith 2015, 47.

20 See Vieira 2017, 256–257.

21 Smith 2015, 163.

22 Smith 2015, 251.

23 Coppola 2015, 169.

combinatory possibilities of interpretation.”²⁴ We agree with Coppola that the fluctuation of voices from the Italian Renaissance to contemporary England, as well as the overlapping of invented cases, detective stories, along with the presence of ghosts, might collaborate to evoke a heterogeneous narrative. But we do not agree that the plot consists of two distinct cases: that of George and that of del Cossa. For us, just as the hybrid nature of del Cossa is inherent to the construction of his character, the modes of fresco are structuring elements of the narrative, so that we can read what is on the surface of one case – looking only at one of the Hall’s planes – or just notice the outer layer of the narrative. Nevertheless, the experience will only be complete if the correlations between the parts are established: after all, the fresco is part of the building, in which the layers of covering, painting, drawing, mortar, wall, will all together always be present. Therefore, to understand what is happening to the girl who seeks for her mother’s memories, one may also take into account the story and perceptions of del Cossa. Unlike peeling an onion, as suggested in an interview with the author, the fresco does not reveal layers through elimination, but through addition and accumulation. Yet, bound to a future where images are captured through digital devices, the painter believes to be imprisoned in a purgatory made for artists, where its inhabitants concentrate mostly on their “votive tablets,”²⁵ capable of creating images similar to the ones of the *camera obscura* used by Leon Battista Alberti. Photography operates as a “certificate of presence,”²⁶ as evidence that something existed in a determined space at some point, even if it no longer exists. Thus, the way the image instantly appears on George’s smartphone provokes contradictory emotions in del Cossa, whose narration, even in non-ekphrastic excerpts, combines references to traces of frescoes and allusions to traces of photography to differentiate the pictoriality inherent to a Renaissance painter’s subjectivity from George’s peculiar photographic gaze.

In short, the search for Carol’s memories is overlaid by George’s memories, who is being haunted by the memories of del Cossa, who, in turn, tries to comprehend the contemporary capacity of capturing an instant in space and time, that is, the materialization of making present something that is absent. The more the girl deepens her understanding of the painter’s story and, through photographs, comes closer to the reality her mother lived, the more her mother is present in her life and the more she accepts her own self. George’s search actually exceeds her longing for her dead mother’s presence: she also longs for self-acceptance. Meanwhile,

²⁴ Coppola 2015, 171.

²⁵ Coppola 2015, 195.

²⁶ Barthes, 1981, 87.

ekphrasis is the porous part that permeates all of the *understories*, in which nothing is understood from a single point of view in the interchangeable chapters. When exploring simultaneity with the aid of spatio-temporal overlays, the potentiality of the book is overcome in a narrative that reveals that everything seems to be as hybrid as its source of inspiration: the frescoes at *Salone dei Mesi* in *Palazzo Schifanoia*. In sum, through complex ekphrastic layers, Ali Smith demonstrates how to simply be both.

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Silvia Albertazzi

Nostalgia of the Present: Pauline Boty

From the Swinging Sixties to Post-Brexit UK

Abstract: This essay revives the legacy of Pauline Boty, a pioneering British pop artist of the 1960s, whose bright future was cut short after a tragically early death at the age of 28. Despite her innovative style and significant contributions to the pop art movement, Boty's work was marginalized and overlooked for decades. It wasn't until the 1990s, when art critics and curators began to rediscover her paintings, that her legacy started to receive the recognition it deserved. Through a detailed analysis of Boty's art, life, and times, this project sheds light on the artist's unique vision, her place within the pop art movement, and her struggle for recognition in a society that undervalued female artists. Through investigating Boty's work and its impact, this project seeks to reinsert her as a central figure in the development of British pop art, and to challenge and lead new generations of artists, curators, and art historians to look at her extraordinary legacy.

Keywords: Pauline Boty, British pop art, feminism, art history, gender politics

In 1962, Ken Russell, then a tv director, produced a documentary film about four young British painters called *'Pop Goes the Easel'* for the BBC series *'Monitor'*. Just from the title, making a pun on the refrain of a popular nursery rhyme, *'Pop Goes the Weasel'*, by substituting the word "weasel" (the animal that springs up in Jack-in the-box toys) and "easel", Russell seems to identify the novelty of pop art in its playfulness, and the young age of its representatives. The four painters portrayed in the film are all between 22 and 29; with their joy of life, enthusiasm, and lust for fun, they seem to confirm what the author of the first British pop painting, Richard Hamilton, affirmed in 1956: pop art is young, witty, sexy, gimmicky and glamorous.¹ Yet even though the same amount of time is devoted to the three male painters – Peter Blake, Derek Boshier and Peter Phillips – it is on the only woman of the group, Pauline Boty, that Russell's camera lingers. Besides being filmed working in her atelier and enjoying her free time, like her male colleagues, she is also the protagonist of the only narrative section of the documentary, a nightmare which forecasts Russell's most visionary feature films, and of a brief singing act where, in top hat and tails, she apes Shirley Temple, turning Hollywood's best-known *enfant prodige* into a sensual object of desire.

1 R. Hamilton, "Letter to A. and P. Smithson" (1957), quoted in Miles 2010, 65.

It is no surprise that Russell gives so much attention to Pauline, who was nicknamed “the Bardot of Wimbledon” by her fellow students at Wimbledon School of Art because of her beauty.² Yet, besides being a talented dancer and a promising young actress, Boty was first of all an accomplished painter, with a degree in stained glass design from the Royal College of Art. She had managed to obtain this recognition at a time when the School of Painting – attended by the likes of David Hockney and Ron Kitaji – was almost forbidden to women, because it was considered too competitive (in fact, even in her class of stained glass design she was one of only eight female students out of 36).³ Pauline was only 28 when she died, the victim of a very rare tumor.

After her death, her works fell into oblivion, many of them were lost. While in her lifetime she exhibited her works as early as 1961, in ‘*Blake Boty Porter Reeve*’, considered the first pop art exhibition in the world by Barry Miles,⁴ after her untimely departure, she was utterly forgotten: you must wait until 1993 to see again some of her works at The Barbican, where the curator of the exhibition *Art of 60s London*, David Alan Mellor, exhibited them. Stumbling upon Russell’s documentary almost by chance, Mellor was struck by Boty and started looking for her paintings: after a long and difficult search, he found several of them in Boty’s brother’s outhouse. At the Barbican exhibition, an art critic, Sue Tate, discovered Pauline as well, and started her own research of and into her work. The results of this would become a 1998 catalogue edited with Mellor and a critical biography published by the Tate in 2013, which is the main (but I might say the only) scientific source of Ali Smith’s novel, *Autumn*, published in 2016, the story of a young researcher who wants to write her PhD on Boty, notwithstanding the objections of her supervisor. Smith’s protagonist is aware that a rediscovery of Boty’s art would disrupt “the canonical narrative that British pop art was entirely defined by its three ‘main’ figures of Edoardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and Peter Blake”. Moreover, the obliteration of her work after her death would confirm how “the art historical canon systematically minimizes the contribution of female artists.”⁵

In almost all the books on pop art published before the year 2000, Boty is either not mentioned or just referred to as a starlet. A sexist prejudice prevented a proper evaluation of her works even when she was alive: critics and colleagues

2 On Russell’s penchant for beautiful actors/actresses and his concept of the body as “privileged filmic object”, see Mele 1975, 91.

3 Out of curiosity, it is worth noting that when in 1962 (four years after Boty’s enrolment at the Royal College of Art) the new building of RCA opened close to the Royal Albert Hall, there were no women’s toilets for the staff.

4 See Miles 2010.

5 MacNeill 2022.

considered her too beautiful to be clever, also because she liked to play with her looks, emphasizing her beauty with sexy clothes and heavy makeup, and even posing naked by her canvases. Moreover, her paintings, with their argumentative hints at gender politics, were rather annoying for the patriarchal society of the time. If anything, some essays published before Tate's biography, listed Boty among the activists of the 'Anti-Uglies', a group of teachers and students at the Royal College of Art rebelling against London post-war urbanism.⁶ The beautiful girl protesting against ugliness was – and has been almost until now – good subject matter for anecdotes.⁷ If this girl was able to answer back and, furthermore, she was also seen dancing on tv and having a good time with her peers, it is no surprise that, even after the rediscovery of her work, as late as 2016, while recognizing her as “the first pioneer of British pop art”, *The Guardian* still defined her “an incarnation of the swinging 60s.”⁸

Indeed, Pauline was the embodiment of ‘swinging London’, the “It girl of 1960s London counterculture.”⁹ she danced in the most popular tv show for young people; ‘*Ready Steady Go*’; she was a model for a photo shoot by David Bailey that appeared in *Vogue Magazine*; she played at the Royal Court Theatre and she appeared in a cult film of the period, ‘*Alfie*’, where, as Ali Smith writes, her cameo appearance, though being no longer than twenty seconds, “adds something essential and crucially female about pleasure to its critique of the contemporary new and liberated ethos, which was indeed what she was also doing with her aesthetic.”¹⁰ Rumor has it that she inspired the character of Liz, the protagonist of ‘*Billy Liar*’, epitome of the new liberated girl, by John Schlesinger; probably, she auditioned for the role of the protagonist of his next film, ‘*Darling*’, a role which went to Julie Christie, the very same actress who played Liz. It is said that she met Bob Dylan in London in 1962, and that he wrote a song for her, ‘*Liverpool Gal*’. Yet, first of all, “Boty was – is, and always will be – the first and only British Pop artist who happened to be a woman,”¹¹ to quote Ali Smith again. In fact, even though there are other female pop artists, Pauline is the only one who paints the pop erotic imaginary from a very female point of view, as if to celebrate her own sexuality and, at the same time, to take control over the male universe.

6 She is not mentioned in Sandbrook 2007, while Colaiacono/Caratozzolo 1996, notwithstanding her gendered work, mention her only as Anti-Ugly activist.

7 For a detailed account of the “Anti-Uglies” activities, see Baker 2013; Miles 2010.

8 See Smith 2016b.

9 See Jackson 2021.

10 Smith 2016, 224.

11 Smith 2016b.

Unlike some other female Pop Artists, Boty refused to create work that hid her vivacity or sense of fun. Her use of bright colours, humorous and/or glamorous imagery and foregrounding of her own desires and sexuality led to dismissals of her work as “girlish” or “slight”, despite the success of male artists who approached their work in the same way. Since her rediscovery, this work is now seen as an important reclamation of female agency.¹²

To see what this means, let us compare the image of Marilyn Monroe as you find her in Pauline and in her male colleagues. For Peter Blake, she was an American icon lusted after by a frustrated British male. Andy Warhol multiplies her image until, to quote Stoichita, “the pictorial narrative disappears, substituted by infinite diffraction and an infinite passage of appearances” (2008, 193). On the contrary, for Boty, Marilyn is the epitome of joy and sensuality; but firstly, she is unique: a sort of pagan saint whose figure is inserted in a secular altarpiece, in *‘The Only Blonde in the World’* (now at the Tate Gallery), “rather than a real person, [...] an abstract fantasy, the epitome of femininity and attractiveness;”¹³ as the title suggests, “the standard by which all other (blonde) women are judged [...] the way in which so many beautiful women are positioned as similar fantasies by the profoundly misogynist and heteronormative society of the early 1960s.”¹⁴ In *‘Colour Her Gone’*, painted after Marylin’s death, the actress is just a smiling face “copied [...] from a photograph that appeared on the cover of *Twin* magazine in November 1962.”¹⁵ Surrounded by red roses, Monroe is the image of that “nostalgia of the present” leading pop artists to create present-day mythologies. “Could you paint the female orgasm? It was Marilyn.”, Ali Smith comments.¹⁶ As for female desire, you can see a gorgeous manifestation of this in *‘With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo’*: here the French actor is portrayed in black and white, with an enormous red rose (a symbol of sensuality for Boty) covering his panama hat almost completely.

Pauline always shows an unusual empathy for her pop icons: see, for instance, Christine Keeler, the protagonist of the Profumo scandal, who, in *‘Scandal 63’*, an unfortunately lost painting taken from a famous photo by Lewis Gilbert, “still look[s] like the image everyone thought they knew, but at the same time [...] something not quite as you expect, as you remember, as it’s meant to be”, in Smith’s words.¹⁷ Or take a smiling Monica Vitti, inserted into an enormous green heart,

¹² MacNeill 2022.

¹³ MacNeill 2022.

¹⁴ MacNeill 2022.

¹⁵ Birne 2014.

¹⁶ Smith 2016, 245.

¹⁷ Smith 2016, 242–243.

on a red background. It is again Ali Smith, this time not in her novel but as an art critic, who points out that before Pauline Boty “there had been nobody critiquing gender, critiquing mass culture’s use of gender, no artist expressing or critiquing women’s pleasure in the new post-war mass culture, certainly no pop artist paying any attention to women’s sexual pleasure.”¹⁸ Not by chance, besides painting the presenter of *‘Ready, Steady, Go’* with an ecstatic gaze and a contented smile that might suggest erotic satisfaction, she adds a balloon with the caption “Ah, for a f.k”. “The energy that comes off it is pure Boty, which is to say utterly analytical, really good fun, and very sensual [...] When you are anywhere near her work in the flesh you feel the life, you feel the energy,”¹⁹ commented Ali Smith.

Talking about her art, Pauline Boty once said that “It’s almost like painting mythology, a present-day mythology – film stars, etc.... the 20th century gods and goddesses. People need them, and the myths that surround them, because their own lives are enriched by them. Pop art colours those myths.”²⁰ She called this need for contemporary mythology, “nostalgia of the present,”²¹ a present that is not represented only by pop stars but is also defined by the moment when a story becomes history. The Cuban Missiles Crisis, the beginning of the Vietnam war, Kennedy’s assassination all find a place in Boty’s artistic world. In the first painting of the diptych, called *‘It’s a Man’s World’*, she criticizes the patriarchal society through famous (or notorious) figures of virility, violence, and male success. On the contrary, in the second painting, a series of women in the nude in almost pornographic poses is superimposed onto a classic English landscape with Palladian architecture in the background. The center of this painted collage is occupied by a naked woman’s torso, without face, legs, or arms, “as far from pornographic as an image of nakedness can be”, in Ali Smith’s words.²² It represents the ultimate male idea of women. Nothing more than a sexual organ in a depersonalized torso. Not by chance, the images of the first painting, representing famous and successful men, are set on a contemporary background, while the anonymous nudes of the second one are linked to the natural world and a mere reproductive function. On the one hand, you have presidents, scientists, film stars and pop icons; on the other, objects of pleasure and desire. It is really a Man’s World, a world made by and for men, where a beautiful, clever woman appears like a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron.

¹⁸ Smith 2016b.

¹⁹ Smith 2018.

²⁰ See MacNeill 2021; Albertazzi 2020.

²¹ Boty in Smith 2016b.

²² Smith 2016b.

Pauline's last work is a painting that Kenneth Tynan, the producer of the musical *'Oh Calcutta'*, commissioned to her a few months before her death. It is titled *BUM* and it represents an enormous naked female bottom framed in a theatre proscenium. It is an auto-ironic work, suggesting Pauline's peculiar relationship with her body. In *'Autumn'*, Ali Smith imagines Pauline justifying her nude shots with these words: "I'm a person. I'm an intelligent nakedness. [...] Art's full of nudes and I'm a thinking, choosing nude. I'm a the artist as nude. I'm the nude as artist."²³

This "cul de theatre,"²⁴ as the same Smith defines it in her critical appreciation of Boty's work, is the first – and unfortunately – the only result of a commitment for the settings of a whole ballet. When she painted *BUM*, Pauline was already dying; she had been diagnosed with cancer during a routine pregnancy checkup. Refusing abortion, which was the *condicio sine qua non* to have treatment, she could not have radiotherapy, and died in July 1966, less than five months after the birth of her child. From this moment on, our story becomes more and more tragic: her husband, the literary agent Clive Goodwin, died of a brain hemorrhage in Los Angeles in the late 70s: he was in front of a hotel where he had met Warren Beatty to discuss the script for his film *Reds*, he staggered into the hotel to ask for help, the concierge called the police, who decided he was drunk, handcuffed him and locked him in a cell for the night. When they opened his cell in the morning, they discovered he was dead. As for her daughter, Boty Goodwin, she overdosed and died the night of her graduation, aged 29.

I do not want to end my essay on such a tragic note. So, to conclude, I will borrow the words of the novelist Margaret Drabble, who met Pauline on a very brief but intense Roman holiday in the late 50s: "She embodied the coming age. [...] Like a golden meteor she had flashed through life and escaped and soared onwards into space."²⁵ These words were written in 2014. Two years later, Ali Smith would turn Pauline into a charismatic presence in one of her best novels, giving her a new and everlasting life.

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Gianlugi Rossini

The Unlikeable Woman: *Olive Kitteridge* and the Invisibility of the Adapted Screenplay Text

Abstract: This essay examines the often-overlooked adapted screenplay text as a crucial element in the adaptation process, focusing on the HBO miniseries *Olive Kitteridge* (2014) as a case study. The screenplay text, written by Jane Anderson and based on Elizabeth Strout's novel, is analyzed as a hybrid text that negotiates the creative and industrial demands of transmediation. By exploring the screenplay's structure, language, and narrative strategies, this study reveals how the text navigates the challenges of adapting a quiet, introspective novel about ordinary life into a compelling television series. Specifically, it shows how the screenplay's gradual alignment with the unlikeable protagonist Olive Kitteridge, played by Frances McDormand, was achieved through a shift in point of view, language, and narrative structure. This study ultimately argues that the adapted screenplay text deserves critical attention and analysis as an autonomous and artistic form of its own, offering insights into the complex operations of adaptation and transmediation.

Keywords: Adaptation, screenplay, transmediation, alignment, point of view

At the intersection between contemporary adaptation studies and screenwriting studies there is the neglected screenplay text, neglected both in general and in the particular case of adaptation, be it a filmic transcodification or a televised one, or whatever else. Many studies¹ have retraced the complex history of screenwriting and of the historical development of the screenplay “as a particular kind of script, its emergence from other kinds of cinematic pre-texts, such as the scenario and the continuity”² and as a textual form which “acquired its shape during the silent period, with relatively straightforward alterations due to the introduction of sound”³ and which is always in dialogue with industrial changes. But the strand of research which focuses particularly on the screenplay text – rather than on the

1 I'm referring especially to the Screenwriting Research Network, the *Journal of Screenwriting* and the so-called “screenwriting turn” (Batty 2014, 1). See, among others: Sternberg 1997; Maras 2009; Nelmes 2011; Price 2013; Macdonald 2013.

2 Price 2013, 2.

3 Price 2013, 3.

screenwriting process – highlights the near absence of analysis centered on screenplays, as well as, in many critical studies about adaptation, the overlooking of the adapted screenplay text is, quite often, a common practice.

On the contrary, critics like Jack Boozer note and give relevance to the centrality of the screenplay text in the adaptation process: “It is the screenplay, not the source text, that is the most direct foundation and fulcrum for any adapted film.”⁴ The screenplay “guides the screen choices for story structure, characterization, motives, themes, and genre. It indicates what will or will not be used from the source, including what is to be altered or invented, and in what settings and tonal register [...] it remains the essential conceptual and creative bible for the film’s construction.”⁵

In this view, the study of the adapted screenplay may be of great help in better understanding the process of adaptation, the creative choices made during the transmedial transition and the complex industrial context of forces which surround and influence it. Considered as a particular hybrid text, a ghostly form, similar to plays written for theater performance⁶ but, unlike them, made to disappear,⁷ according to Boozer, the screenplay text may gain a visibility which illuminates the whole process of adaptation and which goes beyond the comparative analysis between the source text and the screenwork product, or the fidelity based approach or the hierarchical relations between texts.

The aim of this essay is to examine how the idea for the production of the adapted screenwork has been negotiated, imagined and communicated through the screenplay text form, seen as an integral element of the transmediation process, highlighting both the collaborative nature of screenwriting and the industrial context of production. This will be done via the example of the adaptation of Elizabeth Strout’s novel *Olive Kitteridge*, published in 2008, winner of a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and transcoded as a four-part miniseries broadcast by HBO in 2014, which in turn won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing For A Limited Series.

The screenplay text analyzed is readily available on the web, probably because in the Emmy website are published PDFs of the nominees for the best screenplay award. As written on the cover, it is a “White production draft” (dated May 7th, 2013), i.e. the shooting script, approved by the network executives. Changes made during the shooting are signaled by the customary color code:⁸ here there are blue, pink, and yellow revisions. Despite being a very advanced version, some-

4 Boozer 2008, 4.

5 Boozer 2008, 4.

6 See Stapele 2005; O’Thomas 2011.

7 Price 2013, ix.

8 See Butler 2012, 116; Price 2013, 235.

times it differs from the televised drama: there are omitted or modified scenes, changed lines in the dialogue, and so on. This highlights the status of the screenplay as a text that is not fixed, but subject to constant revisions, always in progress and barthesianly open to be rewritten.⁹

The creative team and the transcodification problems

Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* is a thirteen short stories cycle narrated in third person by an extradiegetic voice, who chronicles the small details of the lives of the inhabitants of the fictional Crosby, a little town in Maine. The short stories are linked by the presence – or the absence¹⁰ – of the main protagonist Olive Kitteridge, a retired math teacher who, casually or not, enters in relation with the other characters. Another unifying element is the small sea town of Crosby itself, and the ways of living of its inhabitants connected by recurrent themes as old age, depression, solitude, love, death.

The project of adaptation started from McDormand herself, who bought the rights for the novel, wrote a pitch to HBO and even contributed financially. McDormand acted (and was credited) as an executive producer: she chose both the director Lisa Cholodenko and the screenwriter Jane Anderson. Elizabeth Strout was involved in the process and given a role as “consultant”.

From the initial idea of the project to the numerous stages of development and final product, the discussions among the creative and production team have been described in the various interviews occasioned by the promotion of the series. In re-thinking adaptation as “something new,”¹¹ a different work in a different medium, Linda Hutcheon highlights how it involves both (re)interpretation and (re)creation through a series of transformations and choices relative to many components as setting, character, plot, themes. From this point of view, Snyder explains the screenwriters' experience in general and that of Jane Anderson as a particular example, with these words:

Writers adapting screenplays from source-text become readers of those texts and perform interpretations of them. [...] A reading of the source-text (or texts) must be carried out. An interpretation of that text must be developed before a screenwriter can begin. Jane Anderson, who wrote the screenplay for the 2014 miniseries *Olive Kitteridge* based on Elizabeth Strout's

⁹ See Price 2013.

¹⁰ See Cross 2016.

¹¹ Hutcheon 2012, 8.

novel, emphasizes how necessary her interpretation of the text became as she tangled with the producers.¹²

In this view, the shooting script is the result of the tension between Anderson's personal reading of the source novel during the process of adaptation and the external industrial demand of adhering to the transgressive and sharp standards of HBO brand.

As Anderson has told in numerous interviews,¹³ the transcodification of Strout's novel was challenged by at least two main problems: first, the story's uneventfulness, the novel's focus on ordinary life, which does not fit easily with the needs of a tv series in general and of HBO in particular. Anderson commented on this in multiple occasions:

HBO wants you to be hip and edgy [...] and the book *Olive Kitteridge* is very quiet [...] it's about a miserable woman in Maine [...] (Snyder 2014, 104).

It took a long time for me to solve this as an adaptation. Because HBO's works is known for its edginess, we talked about how we make this very brilliant novel older people in a small town in Maine sexy. What will make this different? What will give this edge?¹⁴

The solution was a reconfiguration of the narrative structure: Anderson talked openly about the genetic process of her first outline of the source novel plot, and of her continuously interrogating herself on how the adaptation of short stories about the slow, daily details and way of life of common old people could be made attractive for HBO audience.

I tried an outline where we started backwards and we back in time, and it didn't work. Then I tried it starting with the suicide scene. It's just three minutes of screen time that assure the audience that something really drastic is going to happen down the line.¹⁵

These words must not be confused with a declaration of authorship: the alternative use of 'me', 'I' and 'we' highlights the collaborative nature of the transposition process and of the writing work. Her understanding of the difficulties involved in bringing a 'brilliant novel' about old people in a small town on the screen made her decide to write a new opening sequence, a sort of frame which could immediately capture the spectator's attention and at the same time introduce them to the story, adding a "suicide scene" not present in the source text but connected with a

¹² Snyder 2017, 103–4.

¹³ See Brooks 2019.

¹⁴ Brooks 2019, 959.

¹⁵ Brooks 2019, 959.

recurrent theme in the short stories cycle.¹⁶ Hence, the story begins in *medias res*, or rather just near the end, when an old Olive, age 69, appears in the dramatic condition of preparing herself to commit suicide, in a present time (“2005”, as indicated in the scene heading) from which the abruptly suspended telling of the narration goes back to “25 years earlier”. The narration will return to that present towards the end of the last episode, as if everything was a sort of flashback. The going backwards and forwards has the effect of unifying the beginning and ending sections, and of opening a space inside which the story could unfold without no prescribed order, using different temporal indications as, for instance, “two months earlier”, “four years later”.

The second problem was Olive herself: “an unlikely protagonist, a character-type that would more regularly function as a secondary supporting character.”¹⁷ She has dark moods, she is often harsh both to her nice, loving husband and to her pre-teen son; she is not a ‘good mother’; she is often described as an intelligent but unpleasant person, both physically and in her manners. As pointed out by Brooks, even in a time when ‘difficult’ or ‘unlikable’ female protagonists could be found in many tv dramas, Olive can be considered an exception:

[Her] social awkwardness and detachment is not framed by an unnamed Aspergers or cushioned by her being highly accomplished at her job, nor is it housed in a body that represents and circulates as an “appropriate Western brand of female corporeality” as is the case for the socially awkward heroines in the recent wave of female detective transnational police procedurals.¹⁸

The solution to this second problem was a shift in point of view that brought the narrative (and the reader of the script, and the viewer on HBO) closer to Olive’s perception. Here we can see how the series authorship was negotiated between actor, director, and screenwriter: while the director Lisa Cholodenko was often presented as the *auteur* of the miniseries, the presence of a star like McDormand and the shift to a point of view nearer to the titular character, done in the script by Anderson, had a huge influence on the result:

Any impulse Lisa Cholodenko may have had to ‘demonize’ the mother figure as unforgivingly inappropriate [...] is undone by McDormand winning star persona and the script’s shift in point of view. In Strout’s stories, the point of view is dispersed among the townspeople; here it sits squarely with Olive and so reveals her more sympathetically than would an outsider’s perspective [...] McDormand’s Olive is a strong-willed [...] woman who defies social

¹⁶ See Letort 2015.

¹⁷ Brooks 2019, 947.

¹⁸ Brooks 2019, 948.

propriety and gendered dictates of decorum and deference, giving Olive's 'inappropriate' behaviour queer resonance.¹⁹

The shift in point of view, however, is performed gradually in the script during the course of the four episodes, initially portraying Olive as unlikable, and then bringing the reader closer to her point of view, changing their judgement. In the remainder of this essay, the analysis will describe with some examples how this shift was realized in the script.

Gradually approaching the unlikeable character

Conventionally, a screenplay is divided into scenes, each containing three components: the *scene heading* (indicating setting, interior/exterior location and time of day), the *scene text* (a prose description of characters and action, usually two or three lines long) and the *dialogue text* (the lines to be spoken by the actors, with the name of the character and, usually in parenthesis, the manner of speaking). As Claudia Sternberg suggests, the scene text consists of three modes: the *mode of description* (details about production design, slug-lines, the movements of the camera), the *report mode* (the temporal sequence of events) and the *comment mode* (a commentary that explains or interprets the events);²⁰ the dialogue text, conventionally placed at the center of the page, gives direct expression to the characters' voices. Here the analysis will be limited to the scene text and, in particular, I will focus on the comment mode, where the character's traits are mostly apparent.

According to Igelstrom, who studies the different narrating voices that guide the reading of the screenplay, in the scene text two kinds of information are given: one is *extrafictional* (i.e. external to the fiction world), the other is *fictional* (i.e. regarding the story world).²¹ This information is communicated by two distinct narrating voices: the *extrafictional* voice, that is the implied writer's voice, who gives technical information, screen directions, names of location and of characters, and is directed to the real world of the production team, and the *fictional* voice, who gives information about the story, the characters, the action, and is related to the fictional world. The fictional voice can be *impersonal*, "providing the reader with information about the fictional story world"²² or *personal* if "it has

¹⁹ San Filippo 2020, 287.

²⁰ See 1997, 71.

²¹ See Igelstrom 2013.

²² Igelstrom 2013, 50.

a specific and clear origin.”²³ Usually, the personal voice is in the dialogue text, while the impersonal voice is in the scene text. The interplay between these different voices and the use of a ‘high inflected’ language,²⁴ will uncover the ways in which the materials from the source novel have been transformed and recreated in the process of transcodification.

One more theoretical concept will be instrumental for the following analysis: Murray Smith’s influential theory of characters,²⁵ in which the common concept of identification is replaced by the three practices of *recognition*, *alignment*, and *allegiance*. Alignment, in particular, bears similarities with focalization and consists of an objective element, i.e. how much our experience of the storyworld coincide with that of the character, and a subjective one, i.e. how much we have access to their mental states (thoughts, emotions, etc.).

In scene 103,²⁶ just after the suicide scene that opened the first episode, Olive’s character is introduced in stark contrast with her husband:

CLOSE ON a Valentine’s Day Card being placed next to a box of chocolates, “For My Darling Wife”...

We see HENRY KITTERIDGE, 50, adjust the card just so. He’s a gently patrician, kind-faced man, neatly groomed and fit for his age.

Olive Kitteridge, now 44, comes in looking storm-tossed and cross from a night of wretched dreams.

Through the whole episode the reader follows either Henry or Olive, but the former is present in 19 scenes where the latter is absent, with the opposite occurring in only 8 scenes. There are, moreover, 20 scenes in which both are present, but while the impersonal fictional voice gives frequent access to Henry’s thoughts and emotions, rarely the same is done with Olive. Again, in scene 103, for example, “Olive goes to start the coffee” while “Henry waits for her to notice his offering”. Henry’s falling in love with his new young assistant Denise (and his fighting it) is profusely described:

Henry watches Denise arrange the chicks in the window with her small, girlish hands. She’s wearing a pale pink sweater and her big glasses look cute on her pert little nose... (scene 122)

Denise starts to cry. Henry gets out his hankie and gives it to Denise. She leans against him and starts to sob. Henry puts his arm around her. But no, this feels too good. He gives her shoulder a pat and disengages. (scene 132)

²³ Igelstrom 2013, 50.

²⁴ Connotative and evocative rather than denotative, Rush-Baughman 1997.

²⁵ See Smith 1995, 2022.

²⁶ Following the script, scenes numbers will be preceded by episode number. So scene 103 is the third scene of the first episode.

Henry is at his counter, filling a prescription. He gazes over at Denise who's standing at the card rack. The breeze from a fan is blowing wisps of her hair; the light is hitting her skin just so. Henry turns back to his work but has lost track of the pills he was counting. No, this is not acceptable. (scene 140)

In contrast, Olive's mental state is frequently described from an external point of view: "Olive looks spent" (scene 109), "She looks less than thrilled" (scene 123); or by actions: "Olive slams their plates back down then goes to the sink and starts furiously scrubbing a pot" (scene 109).

At the beginning of the second episode, the reader is now aligned with Kevin Coulson, introduced previously when he was one of the kids in Olive's school. Scenes from 201 to 231 carry on this alignment: Kevin is present in every scene, alone sometimes; flashbacks from his past are shown; he suffers from hallucinations, which are visualized by the impersonal fictional voice: "Kevin glances at her and briefly Olive has turned into a big, sad-eyed elephant, her trunk curled on her lap" (scene 205). By means of Kevin's character, the shift in point of view described earlier, is clearly performed: while aligned with him, the reader sees Olive through his eyes. Albeit ill-mannered, she is both the only person capable of understanding him, and the one who will convince him not to commit suicide.

In scene 218, during Christopher's rehearsal dinner, their connection is made explicit: "Kevin is watching her. Their eyes meet, and they both acknowledge each other's estrangement from this happy, happy group". The shift in alignment is completed in scene 235:

We've returned to the morning of the wedding. Olive is up with the birds, picking off snails from her garden and dropping them in a can. KERPLUNK, KERPLUNK.

We replay, from Olive's P.O.V., Kevin coming out of the house, trying to sneak away. Kevin stares at her, caught.

Olive just nods, giving him permission to go.

She watches Kevin get in his car and drive off. His departure makes her feel a little weepy. In fact the thought of this whole day is making her weepy. But she'll be damned if she's going to give in to it.

She sweeps any sad feeling out of her mind and returns to the task at hand.

As the extrafictional voice states, this scene repeats actions already seen in scene 231, but from Olive's point of view. From this point onwards, the reader will be aligned almost exclusively with her: Olive is present in every scene,²⁷ with more and more access to her thoughts and feelings, as is already evident here. Towards the end of

27 With the exception of three scenes in episode three (309, 310, 321), where the reader follows Henry.

episode three Henry has a stroke that reduces him to a vegetative state, leaving Olive as the only character to which the reader is aligned.

It is worth noticing that this gradual alignment with Olive can be found also in the novel, since her point of view is foregrounded in the fourth, sixth, eighth, ninth, and eleventh (and last) short story, with a progressive increase in frequency and importance. But while in the novel we move multiple times in and out of her subjectivity, the miniseries moves always in the same direction, thus greatly foregrounding the process of getting acquainted with this peculiar character.

This foregrounding of Olive's interiority is obtained also with other means: as, for instance, the involuntary belching which characterizes Olive in a handful of scenes, an expansion not present in the source novel,²⁸ first occurring in scene 241: during Christopher's wedding, while she is trying to be functional in a social situation, "Olive unintentionally lets out a soft, acidic belch". Recurring multiple times in episode two, and one time in both episode three and four, the belching

Is not a carnivalesque unruliness but rather something more like an expression of a general social and psychic discomfort and impatience with the business of living (Brooks 2019, 949).

It is a physical response to the intolerable discontent towards stereotypes about her roles as wife and mother, a gesture strong enough to arouse a reaction from the audience. The belching conveys Olive's uneasiness and anger, elements which, together with the thematic issues of depression, solitude, old age, recurrent in Strout's short stories cycle and in Anderson's screenplay text, as Brooks underlines, characterize Olive's personality, an Olive who swallows and is devoured by a pain, a lack, a desire that must be managed and contained and which in the television series, not in the source text, is made audible as air being involuntary expelled from the mouth.

Conclusion

The adapted screenplay has been – and still is – generally doubly marginalized and devalued due to its position of being situated, as a sort of channel or bridge, between the source text and the screen version, as an "interstitial text; a liminal entity which falls between two different modes of storytelling."²⁹ In this sense

²⁸ And which Elizabeth Strout approved and acclaimed as surprisingly amazing: "[McDormand] gave her Olive a recurring quirk that Ms Strout's version didn't have. [...] My Olive would never have belched, but her Olive is belching, and it's fabulous!" (Brooks 2019, 951).

²⁹ Sherry 2016, 14.

the adapted screenplay text functions as “a work oscillating between the source media and its destination form,”³⁰ as “a ‘border zone’ in the movement from text to screen.”³¹ To give visibility to that ‘border zone’, making it worth of critical attention and of analysis, has the effect of foregrounding not only the complex industrial and creative operations that take place during the adaptation process, but also of highlighting the nature of the adapted screenplay both as a functional document that contains the instructions and ideas for the transcodification on screen, and as a text having an autonomous and artistic form of its own.

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³⁰ Sherry 2016, 16.

³¹ Wells-Lasagne 2022, 7.

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Section 3: **Screens and stages**

Paolo Pizzimento

Liturgy and Theatre at the Gates of Dis. The *Divine Comedy* as a Transcodification of Medieval Performance

Abstract: This essay aims to apply Performance Studies to investigate some theatrical aspects of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Through this lens, the Sacred Poem emerges as a great work of transcodification that absorbs and recasts many elements of medieval theatre. This appears with evidence in Dante and Virgil's struggle against the devils at the gates of Dis (*Inferno* VIII–IX), a “sacred drama” in which the two pilgrims are no longer involved as spectators but as actors on stage within a representation that ties ritual and theatre. The analysis of this episode through the lens of performance can highlight the transcoding of theatre in literature and help reconstructing an aspect – the performative one – that appears far from secondary in Dante's poem.

Keywords: Divine Comedy, medieval theatre, liturgy, performance, transcodification

Performance Studies – whose main theorization is due to Richard Schechner¹ – intend to outline an interdisciplinary, open, and comprehensive paradigm. Starting with a specific focus on artistic and aesthetic performances, they developed an interdisciplinary approach that, through the methodological assumption of performance as a lens for studying the world, made them applicable even to what is not strictly defined as a performance: in this way cultural phenomena, the behaviors of everyday life, and even objects can be analyzed as performances.²

A performance happening in liveness can be recorded, filmed, or documented – in a word, can be *mediatized*. Still, a “mediated performance” is not a lifeless object. It can be investigated as a complex dynamic entity endowed with agency and as an event – in the sense of *Ereignis* – that intercepts the world view, the culture, and the practices of its time, influences them, and eventually offers them to the

¹ See Schechner 1976, 1985, 2004, 2013. See also Turner 1982, 1986a, 1986b; Goffman 1959.

² See Schechner 2013, 38. In the concepts of performance and performativity (terms that are “hard to pin down”, Schechner 2013, 123), Schechner outlines objects of study open to theoretical and methodological extensions and redefinitions.

ages to come.³ In fact, a performance is a creative act, but also a mean of transmission and preservation of cultural memory. Then, a performance transcoded into performativity continues to conduct a substantial part of its original sense or may even acquire new meanings through the passage into the new medium. Thus, the distinction between what *is a performance* and what *is as a performance* does not exclude the media – whether traditional or modern – but makes them a privileged point of reference.⁴

Under this lens, it is possible to analyze how a literary text such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* treasures the “broad spectrum of performing”⁵ of Middle Ages by transcoding and resemantizing it in the written page to become an ideal archive of the cultural memory of its time.⁶ Referring to a traditional distinction between *artes in effectu* (that generate a physical object) and *artes actuosae* (accomplished in the act itself without leaving any product),⁷ it can be acknowledged that Dante's Poem crystallizes many *artes actuosae* and translates them into literary forms. The *Comedy* mentions many performances of the late Middle Ages, such as knightly tournaments and jousts (*Inf.* XXII, 1–9), dances (*Par.* XIV, 19–21; XXIV, 13–18; XXV, 103; *Inf.* XIV, 40; *Purg.* X, 64–65), and religious sermons (*Par.* XXIX, 109–117). These become objects of a literary reinterpretation and provide material for the representation of the otherworldly kingdoms with images familiar to Dante's contemporary reader. Moreover, some episodes of the *Comedy* move towards the theatrical forms of the time,⁸ as if Dante were staging real dramas within his Poem. It is noteworthy that theatricality emerges in scenes marked by a clear ritual character.

From this point of view, the episode of Dante and Virgil's struggle against the devils at the gates of the infernal city of Dis (*Inf.* VIII and IX) appears worthy of analysis.

3 From this point of view, Hermeneutics and Cognitive Sciences have provided acquired notions such as precomprehension, hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, conflict of interpretations on the one hand (see at least Gadamer 1960; Ricœur 1969, 1977, 1986), and embodied cognition, literary mind and conceptual blending on the other (see Lakoff/Johnson 1980, 1999; Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1992; Turner 1996, 2014; Clark 1997; Fauconnier/Turner 2002).

4 Still, some of Schechner's most brilliant students affirm otherwise. E.g., see Phelan 1993, 146: “Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance”.

5 Schechner 2013, 170.

6 On archive and repertoire, see Taylor 2003.

7 See Tomasello/Vescovo 2021, 21; Vescovo 2015, 339.

8 On medieval theatre, see D'Ancona 1891; Faccioli 1975; Apollonio 1981; Toschi 1982; Allegri 1988; Drumbl 1989; Pietrini 2001.

I will summarize it. First, the demon Phlegyas ferries Dante and Virgil across the river Styx. The damned soul of Filippo Argenti emerges from the water, and Dante has an intense altercation with him. Then, the pilgrims arrive before the city of Dis, from whose walls thousands of devils watch them and ask:

[...] “Who is this, who is not dead,
yet passes through the kingdom of the dead?”⁹

The devils come out to bargain: Virgil will stay with them, and Dante will find his way back alone. Virgil objects that Dante’s journey is willed by God, but the devils close the doors of the city in his face. Although dismayed, Virgil still encourages Dante affirming that the devils yet tried to compete against Christ’s descent into Hell. Then, the three Furies suddenly appear and invoke Medusa, bringing the sense of horror to its peak. In this impasse, a being “sent from Heaven”¹⁰ comes in aid. He opens the gates of Dis with a small “wand”¹¹ and rebukes the devils for opposing the passage of the pilgrims. Finally, he comes back to where he came from without a word. Thus, Dante and Virgil can proceed “without further struggle.”¹²

This episode is striking for its marked narrative and dramatic autonomy. Furthermore, it brings together both ritual and theatrical aspects, so that Umberto Bosco has defined it as a sacred drama.¹³ A first consideration concerns its setting in a liminal place. In fact, the gates of Dis divide the upper Circles of Hell (Lust, Gluttony, Greed, and Wrath) and the lower ones (Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery). In the moral topography of Dante’s *Inferno*, the border is drawn here between the mere incontinence and the will of pursuing evil. Thus, the gates of Dis represent a *limen* that human reason allegorized by Virgil cannot cross without God’s help.

The ritual character of the episode is further clarified by the Heavenly Messenger, whose role seems to officiate a “liturgy of Christ’s Harrowing of Hell”, a rite that repeats the Savior’s descent into the kingdom of the damned (in the same way that, on earth, the Holy Mass repeats the Last Supper).¹⁴ Erich Auerbach

⁹ *Inf.* VIII, 85–86. The English translation of the poem is quoted from Hollander/Hollander 2000–2007.

¹⁰ *Inf.* IX, 86.

¹¹ *Inf.* IX, 90.

¹² *Inf.* IX, 107.

¹³ Bosco 1977, 136.

¹⁴ Christ’s Harrowing of Hell is a truth of faith that, besides indirect biblical references, finds its broadest narration in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, a text that inspired the medieval popular theatre (traces of it can be found, for example, in the dramatic cycles of York and Wakesfield). See Izydor-

has highlighted the Christological function of the Heavenly Messenger: his identity is not (and perhaps does not require to be) clarified but seems to coincide with his function *to perform the rite* as a figure of Christ.¹⁵

Thus, the entire episode makes up a fundamental rite of passage in the initiatory journey of Dante, who has to explore the lower states of Being (*Inferno*), recover the Edenic condition (*Purgatorio*) and finally reach the full metaphysical realization (*Paradiso*).¹⁶

Besides rituality, the episode also seems strongly marked by theatricality. The city of Dis has “mosques / [...] glowing red”, “moats / dug deep”, iron-like “walls”,¹⁷ a “high tower’s blazing peak” and the general aspect of a “fortress”.¹⁸ Dante frames and distributes characters and scenes like in a painting¹⁹ or a scenography. In fact, it should be noted that medieval liturgical dramas often represented hell as a fortified city. This scenography was effective precisely in the representations of Christ’s descent into hell, where the Savior broke down the infernal gates.²⁰ Within this setting, Dante and Virgil abandon their most usual role of spectators to become actors dramatically engaged in the scene. In doing so, it is as if the poet here reiterated the uncertainty of boundaries between performers and audience in medieval theatre.²¹

The VIII *canto* offers two crucial dialogues. The first one, between Phlegyas and Virgil, follows the pattern with which the Latin poet has already imposed his authority on Charon, Minos, and Pluto:

zyk 1997; Collura 2015. Dante could also have deepened the theological doctrine on Christ’s Harrowing of Hell in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* (IIIa, q. 52).

15 See Auerbach 1960, 210, n. 43.

16 See Guénon 1925. On Guénon’s interpretations of Dante, see Pizzimento 2018, 2020. The three stages exposed resemble the phases or hierarchical activities identified by Christian theology starting from Dionysius the Areopagite (*De coel. hier.* III, 3). These phases are recognized as constituting the action of the character Dante in the poem: *purgatio*, *illuminatio* and *unio*. See Mineo 1968, 222.

17 *Inf.* VIII, 71–72, 76–77, 79.

18 *Inf.* IX, 37, 109.

19 Vallone 1966, 247.

20 Brockett/Hildy 2014, 78. On the scenography of medieval theatre, see Guénon 1964, 189: “Le théâtre, en effet, n’est pas forcément borné à représenter le monde humain, c’est-à-dire un seul état de manifestation ; il peut aussi représenter en même temps les mondes supérieurs et inférieurs. Dans les ‘mystères’ du moyen âge, la scène était, pour cette raison, divisée en plusieurs étages correspondant aux différents mondes, généralement répartis suivant la division ternaire : ciel, terre, enfer ; et l’action se jouant simultanément dans ces différentes divisions représentait bien la simultanéité essentielle des états de l’être.”

21 See Allegri 1988, 229.

[...] "Now you are caught, damned spirit!"
 "Phlegyas, Phlegyas, this time you shout in vain,"
 replied my lord. "You will have us no longer
 than it takes to cross this bog."²²

The second dialogue occurs between Dante and Filippo Argenti. It displays in a rapid sequence the identification of the damned, the aversion of Dante, and the quarrel between the two. The comic-realistic register (typical of the *tenzone* but also of the jesters' performances) marks this dialogue, while the narration is reduced to a script indicating who is speaking:

While we crossed the stagnant swamp
 one cloaked in mud rose up to say:
 "Who are you that come before your time?"
 And I to him: "If I come, I do not stay.
 But you, who are you, now become so foul?"
 He answered: "As you can see, I am one who weeps."
 And I to him: "In weeping and in misery,
 accursed spirit, may you remain.
 I know you, for all your filth."
 When he stretched both his hands toward the boat,
 the wary master thrust him off, saying:
 "Away there with the other dogs!"²³

The lively altercation, the exaggeration of the feelings (Argenti's pain and Dante's aversion), and the actions reduced to mere captions elicit an interpretation of these verses as a dramatic *pièce* inside the *canto*.

From this point of view, the struggle of the two pilgrims against the devils of Dis is even more interesting. It should be noted that, as Dante's journey through Hell approaches its goal, the devils become increasingly reified, devoid of intelligence, autonomy, and dynamism: they suffer a sort of regression that reaches its lowest point in the mechanic stillness of Lucifer, described as a "windmill"²⁴ bereft of dramatic action. Yet the devils at the gates of Dis make a partial exception to this *anticlimax*. Of course, they do not reach the dramatic autonomy of the Malebranche²⁵ and remain an indistinct mass. Still, they have a certain depth in comparison with the other demons in the first canticle. They resemble the lively and frightening diabolical images widespread in medieval homiletic, fiction, theatre,

²² *Inf.* VIII, 18–21.

²³ *Inf.* VIII, 32–43.

²⁴ *Inf.* XXXIV, 7.

²⁵ *Inf.* XXI–XXIII.

and folklore. According to theology, their opposition to God is hopeless, but the narrative needs of the Poem require them to be a real danger for the pilgrims. Consistent with the martial aspect of the city of Dis, the language of the devils is based on the lexicon of war: even though their opposition is vain, their speech is an act of supreme energy and aware violence.²⁶ Virgil knows that it is necessary to win the “fight”²⁷ against them. Nor is it by chance that his hitherto undisputed authority wavers in front of them. So far, the Latin poet has faced demons of mythological origin (i.e., Charon, Cerberus, Pluto, Phlegyas) but now he must deal with those of biblical origin, against which natural reason (that he allegorizes) can do nothing without the help of God.

The impasse and the suspense are emphasized by the interruption of the VIII *canto* at the peak of the tragedy (a narrative technique so far never seen in the *Comedy*) and the beginning of the IX *canto* with the doubts of Virgil, whose authority diminished for reasons that seem more dramatic than allegorical or theological. His hesitant, broken up speech has the psychological relevance of a theatrical soliloquy.²⁸

“Yet we must win this fight,” he began,
 “or else... Such help was promised us.
 How long it seems to me till someone comes!”²⁹

This triplet expresses purpose, hesitation, reassurance, and uncertainty. This rapid sequence, together with the disruption of Virgil’s speech, is an invention of a purely theatrical nature.³⁰ So, the glimpses, the pauses, and the silence are all elements held up with a vivid sense of the unspoken and ineffable.³¹ All this instils in Dante – and in the reader – an agonizing doubt about Virgil’s authority. Even Dante’s question (“Does ever anyone from the first circle, / where the only penalty is hope cut off, / descend so deep into this dismal pit?”)³² and Virgil’s answer (“It seldom happens...”)³³ sounds like an expedient to make the drama more acute.³⁴

As for Dante-character, here for the first time he faces a (seemingly) real danger that threatens to end his journey before time and turn him back on his traces

²⁶ Vallone 1966, 241.

²⁷ *Inf.* IX, 7. See Pizzimento 2022.

²⁸ Vallone 1966, 243.

²⁹ *Inf.* IX, 8–10.

³⁰ See Mastandrea 2013, 287.

³¹ Vallone 1966, 243.

³² *Inf.* IX, 17–19.

³³ *Inf.* IX, 21–33.

³⁴ Vallone 1966, 244.

without the escort of Virgil (i. e., to get lost in the lower states of Being). In a scene made even more terrifying by the Furies and Medusa,³⁵ only the Heavenly Messenger, bursting onto the scene like a *deus ex machina*,³⁶ can dissolve the impasse. His contemptuous words to the devils (“O outcasts of Heaven, race despised...”)³⁷ do not aim to persuade the enemies, but but to affirm (in front of the reader/spectator) the uselessness of their opposition and the undeniable evidence of God’s will. Since there is no possible competition, any tragic possibility is excluded. This causes the devils to appear more and more pathetic, so that they end up looking like “poor devils”³⁸ and taking on the traits of the defeated holds typical of medieval theatre.

Thus, *cantos* VIII and IX is equally marked by the ritual character (inherent in the rite of passage and in the *pugna spiritualis*) and by the tendency towards scenic and theatrical invention. Ritual and drama establish the same relationship that existed between liturgy and sacred theatre in the Middle Ages. This relationship can be referred to Schechner’s efficacy/entertainment dyad, that outlines the *continuum* of performance from ritual (in which maximum of effectiveness is given) to representation (in which maximum of entertainment is given).³⁹

It should be noted that the “tragedy at the gates of Dis” presents many similarities with the “farce of the Malebranche” (*Inferno* XXI–XXXIII). Besides the conspicuous presence of devils, the two episodes are bound by the shifting of Dante and Virgil from spectators to actors, the defeat of Virgil in the face of the enemy, and the (seemingly) real risk that invests Dante. The difference in tone must be understood in terms of a parodic “intratextuality” pointed out against the characters onstage (Dante, Virgil, the devils).⁴⁰ It is as if the same story has to occur twice: the first as a tragedy and the second as a farce. In doing so, the *Comedy* almost covers the entire spectrum of the demonic manifestations – but, of course, also of the theatrical performance.

Thus, theatricality emerges as a “strong” structural element in the *Comedy*. Dante embraces in the *Comedy* the medieval broad spectrum of performing:

35 It is to be noted that the Furies move and act like mechanical puppets (see Mastandrea 2013, 293) while Medusa is a disquieting presence offstage.

36 In medieval theatre the angels acted in a similar way, descending from the celestial to the terrestrial *mansiones* through winches, pulleys, and machinery. See Brockett/Hildy 2014, 78.

37 *Inf.* IX, 92–100.

38 Vallone 1966, 254.

39 See Schechner 2013, 80: “If the performance’s purpose is to effect change, then [...] the performance is a ritual. But if the performance’s purpose is mostly to give pleasure, to show off, to be beautiful, or to pass the time, then the performance is an entertainment. The fact is that no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment.”

40 Barillari 2003, 64.

from the performances of everyday life to the “widespread theatricality” of his time. This volatile repertoire is transcoded in the literary medium: on the one hand, it is seized in its manifold manifestations and crystallized in – and adapted to – the writing; on the other, it is placed at the service of the “sacred poem– / [...] so shared by heaven and by earth.”⁴¹

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⁴¹ Par. XXV, 1–2.

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Sieghild Bogumil-Notz

Turandot – A Feminist Heroine Crossing Codes and Media

Abstract: This essay explores the Turandot theme across various media forms, including theatre, opera, and film, examining how the heroine's representation evolves over time and across different cultural contexts. From its origins in 12th-century Persian narrative to its adaptations in European theatre, opera, and Chinese film, the Turandot theme has undergone significant transformations. The essay delves into the media-theoretical implications of these transcodifications, questioning whether the medium or the subject matter takes precedence in shaping the narrative. Through a critical analysis of the Turandot theme in the works of Puccini, Brecht, and Xiaolong Zheng, this study reveals the dynamic interplay between media and subject matter, highlighting the ways in which each medium influences the narrative and its representation of the heroine. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates how the Turandot theme continues to captivate audiences, inspiring new adaptations and interpretations that reflect the changing tastes and values of different eras and cultures.

Keywords: Turandot, theme, adaptation, transcodification, heroine

The present contribution will deal with the Turandot theme as it is represented in theatre, opera, and a recent Chinese film performance. Delving into the earlier narrative forms has to be neglected and the analyses limited due to the required scope of this essay.

The title of this presentation implies three presumptions, two of which come from the field of media theory whereas the third one touches on gender issues. Actually, the title suggests that the heroine is outside of the media, facing, and – why not – shaping them. Yet, McLuhan's dictum is known: "the medium is the message". This essay, however, looks at the issue from a poetic perspective. This means that while the Manichaeian discourse of media theorists has to be rejected, the importance of the media themselves is still given. Going from book to theatre stage and finally to film, each utilized media inevitably affects the story's subject matter while the opposite is also true. The various stage productions of Turandot and the film show the interference between subject matter and media.

Note: My thanks to Sabine Schöll for proofreading the English version.

Another media-theoretical problem is the question whether the theatre can be considered a medium. The answer depends on how media are defined. Since there exist as many definitions as there are theories, it may happen that theatre is even excluded from the world of media, as it can be the case if media are mainly considered technical artefacts which allow communication between persons who are not present at the same time and/or place.¹ However, this does not apply to the theatre audience who, in theatre theories, is recognized as part of the performance. Yet in main media theories theatre is rarely mentioned. Marshall McLuhan, for example, does not refer to it even though he defines media as the “extensions of man,”² a characteristic that could easily be imagined suitable for the stage, too. In contrast, theatre theorists consider the theatrical performance part of the artificial realm of the media, defining media as a system of communication which enables messages and knowledge to be preserved and transferred and cultural and political practices to be re-actualized.³

The same general definition is valid for opera. Yet, an opera cannot be considered merely another theatre play. The “multiplicity and diversity of its signs” (Pavis) require a concentrated look on its kind of mediality. In the 1980s, Carl Dahlhaus, the late leading German musicologist, defends a theory, which was quite bold at that time: opera does not consist of the characters’ dramatic play but rather the dramatic dynamics of the play between voices and tunes, i.e. soprano, tenor, and others and the instrumental sound of the orchestra.⁴ Theodor W. Adorno adds costumes, including the very act of singing as another distinctive feature.⁵

Concerning the gender issue, the intention of the essay is to demonstrate that the medieval heroine has not lost her relevance over the centuries.

Indeed, emerging in 12th century Persia with Nezami’s narrative in verse form, the Turandot theme has always attracted attention and has continually been transcoded and adapted to different media. From Nezami’s story, which is characterized by its profound philosophical, mystical, and symbolic meaning, it changes to simplified prose adaptations and finally to the first European, more precisely, French translation by François Pétis de la Croix recorded in his anthology of fairy tales *Thousand and One Days* published from 1710 to 1712. In 1729, Alain-René Lesage adapts the tale to the stage – the first media change for the narrative. In 1762, the count Carlo Gozzi translates and adapts the tale to the Italian stage, from where it passes to Germany where Friedrich Schiller rewrites the

1 See Schoenmakers *et al.* 2008.

2 See McLuhan 1964.

3 See Pavis 2018.

4 See Gumbrecht 2001, 63–76.

5 See Adorno 1978, 24–39.

play. It is put on stage in 1802. Another transcodification is realized by Giacomo Puccini. He composes his famous opera *Turandot* from 1921 to 1924. Bertolt Brecht brings the theme back to the theatre stage between 1953 and 1954. Finally, in 2021, the Chinese director Xiaolong Zheng releases the film *The Curse of Turandot*. These references highlight merely the peaks in the Turandot tradition. All in all, there are about 13 opera settings, a ballet, about seven theatre plays, two films and a radio play. This enormous creative outcome most likely is due to the diversity of the most different and forceful features that the authors and producers attribute to the heroine over the centuries. Moreover, the figure is adaptable according to taste and media of any given epoch. In fact, the plot of Turandot is like a mass of clay, as it were, which the playwrights and directors shape to meet the taste of the audience and according to the requirements of the media predominant at that time or the media they want to utilize corresponding to their own vision.

The plot as it is recorded in European tradition is quite simple. Turandot, daughter of the emperor of China, is of outstanding beauty and intelligence. The latter is a guarantee for her freedom since she hates men and detests to get married. However, her beauty attracts suitors. They have to answer three riddles she asks them. If they fail to provide the correct answer they are beheaded, and of course, all the princes fail, except one. Turandot, who secretly falls in love with this prince on their very first encounter, finally agrees to get married.

Nezami's original Turandot narrative entitled *The Princess of Slavonia under the Red Pavilion* is part of what is considered the masterpiece of the Islamic medieval narrative literature, i.e. Nezami's *The Pavilion of the Seven Princesses*, the *Haft Peykar*. Here, the Russian princess stays nameless and lives on the highest summit of the Caucasus Mountains. In the first 13th century prose transcodification by Mohammad 'Aufi,⁶ the author relocates the story to the Roman Empire. In a much later adaptation based on 'Aufi's narrative, the setting is changed to China because, according to Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, "in Persian romantic tradition, including folklore, China is famous for handsome girls, and a Persian prince often goes in quest of finding his marriage partner in China."⁷

For different reasons, Europeans have a similar predilection for China in the 18th century. They are enthusiastic about every exotic trace, which is demonstrated by the tremendous European success of the *One Thousand and One Night* tales. They induce François Pétis de la Croix to translate and adapt an anthology of fairy tales which includes the Turandot story. He is the first to give this name to the princess.

⁶ See Mogtader/Schoeler 2017.

⁷ Seyed-Gohrab 2022.

Throughout the different adaptations and transcodifications the deep mysticism and morality of Nezami's *Princess of Slavonia Under the Red Pavilion* disappeared. Most likely, the mystical sense is not comprehended even in the early adaptations; without any doubt, European readers in the 18th century are neither interested in the mystical subtext nor do they understand it. They are mainly interested in the extrinsic signs of exotism which make them feel transported to other countries. Accordingly, the riddles become simple riddles – as complicated as they are at times – instead of Nezami's sophisticated mystic pearl play between the Princess and her suitor.

The difference between Nezami's mystical narrative and the Arabic adaptation resulting in the French fairy tale is so striking it inevitably leads to the question of what causes the changes. Nezami's complex verse narrative of the *Haft Peykar* finally reveals a kind of Mirror of Princes whose target-person is the young pre-Islamic Persian king Bahram Gur. Changing the work into a prose narrative suggests that it is intended for a broader public. Addressing readers at a large scale is finally achieved in 18th century France. Hence, this first great difference does not originate from a medial but rather a social change implying a shifting of the public's literary taste.

The first change of media takes place in 1729 when Alain-René Lesage adapts the French fairy tale to the stage in his comic opera *La Princesse de Chine*. The famous playwright and novelist is the first to recognize the dramatic value of the story. As the play is performed at the Théâtre de la Foire, i.e. in booths at fair times for an audience looking for amusement, he introduces figures of the *commedia dell'arte* in order to parody⁸ the story. The impact of this special medium is so great that the new formal shape of the play will remain unchanged for centuries.

The transcodification of the French play is *the* opportunity to seize for the Italian playwright count Carlo Gozzi. Indeed, in Italy, two different stage aesthetics violently clash at the heights of the Enlightenment. It is a kind of "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns" as it were. At the core of the debate stands the question whether the essential feature of the Italian medieval theatrical medium, the Commedia dell'arte, can be maintained onstage or not. The two outstanding opponents are the count Carlo Gozzi and Carlo Goldoni, both equally successful with their contrasting conception of the theatre. Goldoni defends a realistic stage and criticizes the static and unreasonable performance of the Commedia dell'arte. He wants the theatre to be adapted to modern times by staging Italian life and manners. His models are the comedies of Molière. In contrast, Carlo Gozzi wants the theatre to be a medium for poetry and imagination which he considers

8 See Avramovic 2018.

an essential feature of the traditional Italian theatre. Many of his plays are based on fairy tales integrating the Commedia dell'arte and prove to be a great success. He thus succeeds in re-establishing the traditional theatrical form onstage. The public is still mainly looking for amusement, for fairies, and ultimately for the kind of fantasy adventures displayed in the medieval fabulous novels of chivalry – but people want it in a modern exotic setting.

All this can be found in Gozzi's *Turandotte*. Characters coming straight from the Commedia dell'arte like Pantalone, Tartaglia, Brighella, and Truffaldino are holding high offices at the emperor's court. These comedic figures are mixed up with the serious personnel of the highly dramatic plot without any differentiation. This bizarre mixture ensures the comic part of the play which the subtitle promises: *Fiaba cinese teatrale tragicomica – Tragicomic Theatrical Chinese Fable*.

The Italian specificity of the theatrical medium in the 18th century finally achieves the complete separation between the Persian source and its European reception as it is already realized in the play of Lesage.

However, the comic element is not an unnecessary artificial supplement. To 18th century Europeans, China is a profoundly unknown country, and its inhabitants are generally ridiculed. The Commedia dell'arte figures fulfil the function of carrying farce and irony in a perfect manner. This perspective changes over the years when people are coming to know more about China, although names, even when they are changed, will continue to echo their origin. This already happens in Schiller's transcodification *Turandot. Prinzessin von China. Ein tragikomisches Märchen nach Gozzi* (*Turandot. Princess of China. A Tragicomic Fairy Tale Based on Gozzi's Play*).

The German poet does not simply translate Gozzi's play, but he rewrites it. It is the moment when the classical era is at its peak in Germany. Four years earlier, in 1797, he has exchanged views with Goethe regarding the rules of classical theatre and thus contributed to define its features. Like French classical drama, it follows a strong logic, abiding by the famous three unities including the coherence of characters. Additionally, the mixture of tragic and comic elements is banned from stage.

Why then Schiller delves into Gozzi's play? The question arises even more because the German playwright and theatre theorist considers both protagonists puppets. At the beginning, Schiller has nothing in mind but "the need of our theatre."⁹ His intention is to transcribe the existing German prose translation into a verse version, a kind of stylistic exercise without any aesthetic ambition.¹⁰ But

9 Schiller to Körner on 16th of November 1801 (1985), in Schiller 1985, 71, my translation.

10 See Guthke 2011, 89.

soon he becomes more involved in the play and wants to transform it into a “new and interesting piece of theatre”¹¹ giving it “a higher value”¹² in order to enrich the German stage¹³ while acquiring “some merit on his own.”¹⁴ The “higher value” consists in a new conception of the theatre aiming at educating and introducing the audience to a new aesthetics.

The rules of classical theatre create a major problem regarding the inner logic of the characters. Turandot is an ambiguous protagonist; on the one hand, she hates men because they do not respect her desire to live a self-determined life and acknowledge her beauty merely as a source for sexual attraction; on the other hand, she falls in love with the charming prince Calaf as soon as she first encounters him. In order to overcome the aporia, Schiller realizes that both characters have to be reconsidered. Hence, he stresses Turandot’s inner dramatic conflict which is just alluded to in Gozzi’s play. Right from the start when she sees Calaf, speaking aside, she confesses her love for him. Accordingly, her final confession of love does not appear like a *deus ex machina*. Schiller also reshapes the whole character of Calaf. The prince accepts Turandot’s desire for freedom and mainly freedom for beauty, “The first and highest of all possessions,”¹⁵ and he approves the high price she asks from her suitors for acquiring it. From the very start, the prince becomes her principal supporter. Thus, both protagonists are individuals acting on their own, – Turandot defending her beauty, the prince agreeing to its absolute priority –, but together, they form an aesthetic entity which entails a summary of Schiller’s philosophical and aesthetical ideas.¹⁶

This moral and aesthetical commitment gets lost in Puccini’s operatic transcodification. Needless to say, after more than one hundred years the composer’s vision of the princess is a different one and the public’s taste has changed. But it must primarily be taken into consideration that the operatic ‘language’ is a code of its own which is characterized by the fusion of a multitude of components. In fact, it implies all the elements a theatre relies on, but in addition, the actors are singing and are accompanied by an orchestra. Another very important distinctive

11 Schiller to Körner on 2nd of November 1801 (1985), in Schiller 1985, 69, my translation.

12 Schiller 1985, 71.

13 See Schiller 1985, 69.

14 Schiller 1985, 71.

15 Guthke 2011, 30.

16 The subtitle of Schiller’s play still refers to the imaginative origin: *A Tragicomic Fairytale*. But he transforms it. The tragicomic characteristic determines the protagonists whose confrontation takes place at the limit of a comic and tragic stubbornness which are mutually increasing. Goethe has recognized it as well as Thomas Mann who considers this intertwinement the “highest achievement of the modern spirit of art” (Guthke 2011, 90).

feature is the exaggeration of both the costumes and the character's passions, particularly that of the protagonists. Compared to a classical drama the inner drama is turned outside by intensively emphasizing the external signs of the character's emotions. Antonio Gramsci,¹⁷ analyzing the sociological aspects of 19th century Italian opera in his *Prison Notebooks* stresses the opulence of the decor and the use of extraordinary materials and techniques. Hence he defines the characters not as individuals but as archetypes and prototypes, as figures at the threshold of all probability, and caricatures of themselves. Pathos and irony as well as artificiality and nature coexist and make it possible for the audience to enter an elect sphere of profound emotions and noble passions while at the same time keeping an ironically distant perspective on the play. The opera seems a parody of itself. Theodor W. Adorno points out the same idea: "The nearer the opera comes to its own parody the nearer at the same time it is to its own element."¹⁸ He also approaches Gramsci's understanding of the operatic personnel as archetypes when he emphasizes that the opera "actually corresponds extensively to the museum also with regard to its positive function" which is "to help to endure what is threatened with fading away."¹⁹ Furthermore, Antonio Gramsci attributes the function of the popular novel to opera in general.²⁰

The cultivation and hence the continuing popularity of the opera are considerably due to Puccini's oeuvre. This is specifically true since the composer always closely follows the public's taste. Thus, *Turandot* becomes a bacchanal of passion, secret and unacknowledged love, and fierce violence. Directors, in general, still accentuate the passionate dimension by an exuberant Chinese setting. Thus, Puccini's *Turandot* shows in what way and to what extent the subject matter can affect the media through which it is conveyed. If it were not for the music, the opera would become a soap drama. Yet this is also the result of the impact romanticism had on Italy. Verdi's operas had imposed this new romantic sentimental taste on the musical stage while at the same time introducing a naturally fluid voice in accordance with the actual naturalistic movement in literature and art. Puccini follows the new style of singing, and, indeed, up to now, *Turandot* is appreciated for the beauty of its numerous arias.

But the composer also modernizes the plot. He takes up the feminist claim for emancipation expressed by the militant suffragette campaign which for decades had been spreading all over the Western countries. Accordingly, *Turandot* does not hate men because of herself but in order to avenge the rape and murder of

¹⁷ See Amodeo 2007, 185–197.

¹⁸ Adorno 1978, 24.

¹⁹ Adorno 1978, 37.

²⁰ Adorno 1978, 35 states a similar proximity of both media.

her ancestress of “thousands and thousands of years before.”²¹ Her hate is not easy to overcome insofar as she is an unconditional defender of her revenge plan and is ready to repress her love for Prince Calaf to succeed. In order to soften her flinty heart,²² the composer introduces the young slave and servant Liù who has fallen in unwavering love with Calaf and sacrifices herself for the prince. Puccini dies just after finishing the great aria of Liù. His manuscripts show that *Turandot* is supposed to finally change from a resistant and cruel character to a loving one.

Compared to Schiller’s drama, where the emperor’s ministers still have the names of the *Commedia dell’arte* characters, the ironic perspective allusively reappears in Puccini’s *Turandot*. In fact, the composer changes the names to Ping, Pang, and Pong, which are supposed to sound Chinese but still evoke the witty *Commedia dell’arte* figures. Obviously, the effect is one of double irony: on the one hand it is directed towards the Chinese language and people; on the other hand, Puccini uses it against the Italian theatrical tradition which becomes a mere shell to play with. However, even though the persons are somewhat witty, they primarily are simple everyday fellows who want to be at home with their wives.

Still, the Chinese setting is somewhat surprising considering that the romanticism had highlighted the Near and Middle East whereas the following movement of *verismo*, the equivalent of the French naturalism, is concerned with displaying social problems onstage. By that time, the desire for exotism is repressed but not forgotten and the First Opium War between China and Britain (1839–1842) as well as the Second one (1856 to 1860) during which France joins the British army. But the taste gradually starts to change. Even though people are still interested in fancy ideas and fantastic imagery, they want to become acquainted with the reality of China.²³

Again, Puccini meets his audience’s demand for *verismo*, but he does it on the musical level. The composer looks for original musical patterns and original instruments.²⁴ For instance, he uses a bass xylophone specially produced for *Turandot* and specific percussion instruments, such as the tam-tam or different kinds of gongs. A gong with a low pitch is placed onstage,²⁵ which results in a special exotic effect. Examples of old Chinese music are integrated in the orchestral score as well as two different forms of a temple march; furthermore, the part of Liù is exclusive-

²¹ Mehnert 2006, 51.

²² See Mehnert 2006, 103.

²³ See Lo 2015.

²⁴ See Mehnert 2006, 104.

²⁵ See Mehnert 2006, 106.

ly arranged in a pentatonic way,²⁶ the basic scale of Chinese and other south-east Asian musical traditions. Due to this musical transcodification, Puccini's *Turandot* is not regarded as an obsolete opera by his contemporaries nor is it counted among the group of works belonging to the artistic movement of *verismo*, but it is considered an experimental opera.

Around 1922, when Puccini is working on *Turandot*, Brecht writes the name of Turandot down in his notebook for the first time. But he realizes the play only in 1953/54, keeping the Chinese setting, yet in a modern style. The play is part of a voluminous literary complex that addresses the abuse of the intellect and criticizes the system conformity of the intellectuals, the Tuis. Their name is an acronym deduced from a word play on the notion of intellectual: tellect – ual – in. The literary project is recorded as the *Tui-Novel-Fragment* which comprises the play, notes, drafts, and the fragment of the Tui-novel.

The playwright feels caught in an aporia because he cannot decide between the novel and the theatre. In the thirties, he begins to work on the play, but soon abandons it in order to write a Tui-novel instead, which is supposed to show the conformist role of the Tuis during the decline of the Weimar Republic. Yet the compilation of the historical material becomes overwhelming, so, in the 1940s, he also gives up working on the novel. Immediately after the East-German uprising in 1953, he conceives a new play which he entitles *Turandot or the White-washers' Congress*. He abandons the narrative about the decline of the Weimar Republic in order to concentrate on the end of the fascist epoch. Accordingly, the theatre is the only media appropriate to his purpose, yet in the epic shape of the review theatre which he had already used in, for example, his *Threepenny Opera*.

Brecht's hesitation in choosing a medium for his *Turandot* again raises the media-theoretical question: does priority or interaction prevail between media and subject matter? The question particularly arises when comparing Brecht's play with Puccini's opera. As argued above, Puccini's *Turandot* shows that there is an interaction. Indeed, up to the 19th century, the Chinese subject matter entails opulence, and the operatic media not only allows but in fact provokes exaggeration. In contrast, Brecht's play shows to what extent the message can shape the media. New narrative characteristics are established onstage and prevail over the classical rules some of which still are there though, such as unity of action and characters. Hence, the final conclusion is that there is always interaction, but priorities can be distinguished most of the times.

Due to the required scope of the essay, only the character of Turandot will be considered briefly. It is no longer Turandot who decides about her marriage,

26 See Mehnert 2006, 104.

but she is at the mercy of the historical system in place. She is considered a trophy. In other words, Turandot has become the Prostitute of History.²⁷ Obviously, this is a hidden challenge to women – according to the Brechtian alienation effect – to look inwards, become strong, and defend themselves.

The cinematic version of Turandot by Xiaolong Zheng, which is based on Puccini's opera, brings the spectator back to the fantastic world which recalls the exaggerated stagings of the past. Here the media obviously shapes the subject matter, for the director creates a composition of his own using important cinematographic techniques. He highlights crowds and fierce battles, mainly inside large imperial rooms and wild horse rides across a wide green meadow landscape. He sets mysterious alchemist scenes in a rocky setting evoking the Caucasus Mountains of Nezami's tale, and introduces fantastic swordplay between Calaf and Turandot, who turn into comic heroes jumping like Spiderman from house wall to house wall and flying up and down, whereas the whole action is interspersed with the love story of the princess and the prince, which ends with Turandot's death. Indeed, she receives three cursed bracelets for her birthday which change her into a cruel and inhuman person unable to live her love with the prince because she has been promised to a mysterious power. In a way, one can say that, similarly to Brecht's Turandot, whose heart is broken by History, Turandot's heart in Xiaolong Zheng's film is broken by cinematic techniques.

Up to the present day, the various transcodifications and transmediations of the Turandot theme seem to confirm McLuhan's observation: "We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us."²⁸ Further adaptations will be a matter of imagination.

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²⁷ Surprisingly, Puccini utilizes the same term in a letter to his friend Antonio Bertolacci: "I am working on my prostitute of princess" (Mertens 2008, 215).

²⁸ Quoted in Manovich 2021.

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Massimo Fusillo

Sublime Voices, Tragic Identifications. On Two Opera Re-enactments in cinema

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of opera and film, focusing on the cinematic transcodification of opera and its emotional effects on the audience. Specifically, it examines the phenomenon of “tragic re-enactment,” where a character relives and performs an opera scene in an intensely personal and emotional way, often identifying with a female role and voice. Through a close analysis of two film examples, Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* (1993) and David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly* (1993), this essay reveals how opera re-enactments can disrupt predictable schemes and ideological constraints, creating a unique bond between characters and audiences. It also explores the cultural and political implications of these re-enactments, particularly in relation to gender stereotypes, colonialist domination, and sexual fantasies.

Keywords: Opera, re-enactment, cinema, transcodification, tragedy

Transcodifications of opera and cinema

Being a hybrid and mixed genre, opera is characterized by continuous and multifarious transcodifications, which involve its conception, realization, and reception. A first and more obvious level is the adaptation of a literary text to the musical score: a significant example of “intermedial combination,”¹ which gave birth to legendary artistic collaborations (Da Ponte/Mozart; Hofmannsthal/Strauss) and to equally legendary double talents (Richard Wagner). A second level, the ultimate realization of an opera in a performance, operates in the synergy of different arts and creative approaches involved (conduction, direction, acting, scenography). Finally, the operatic performance as a whole, this “total work of art”, can be rewritten and transcoded by several arts and media, such as literature, cinema, theatre, and video art.

Film and opera have an ambivalent relationship: they have a common multi-modal structure, they played a similar social and cultural role as popular genres (we cannot forget that cinema begun only twelve years after Wagner’s death), and they may often share an aesthetic based on strong emotionality and polarized

¹ Rajewski 2005, 51–53.

conflicts: the “melodramatic imagination,”² which was a crucial element in the birth of cinema. On the other hand, filmic adaptations of operas are often unsuccessful or unsatisfactory, because the two media have radically different narrative rhythms and the final product is likely to underplay the visual level (with several significant exceptions, of course). The most interesting intersection lies in what David Schroeder calls “the operatic impulse in film:”³ a series of stylistic and thematic strategies, which include a wide range of operatic modeling, images, borrowing and quotations.

We will deal with a very specific kind of cinematic transcodification of opera, which I call “tragic re-enactment”: a character re-lives and performs, in an extremely personal way, an opera scene which we hear in the soundtrack, in an excited emotional dimension dominated by death. In the two examples we will examine (Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* and David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*), a male character strongly identifies with a female role and voice, bringing together issues of gender, aesthetic response, and emotional involvement.

Since our two cases deal with operatic reception and identification, I would like to mention first a topical scene in literature and movies: the main character attending opera for the first time; a widespread motif which often highlights an aesthetic response of overwhelming empathy. We find a canonical and effective example in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*: in the second part of the novel, after the traumatic end of her first extra marital affair, Emma goes to Rouen to attend a performance of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Two dense pages depict her immersive and multi-sensory reception, focused on every detail of the intermedial performance:

She gave herself up to the lullaby of the melodies, and felt all her being vibrate as if the violin bows were drawn over her nerves. She had not eyes enough to look at the costumes, the scenery, the actors, the painted trees that shook when anyone walked, and the velvet caps, cloaks, swords – all those imaginary things that floated amid the harmony as in the atmosphere of another world.⁴

After the entrance of the tenor, Flaubert then highlights Emma’s total identification with love suffering: “She recognised all the intoxication and the anguish that had almost killed her.”⁵ This visceral and intense reaction abolishes any border between fiction and reality, bringing her to an even more regressive aesthetic expe-

² See Brooks 1995.

³ See Schroeder 2016.

⁴ Flaubert 1919, 230.

⁵ Flaubert 1919, 231.

rience of the opera, compared to her previous experience with sentimental novels. She “gave a sharp cry that mingled with the vibrations of the last chords”, and finally “the mad idea seized her that he [the tenor] was looking at her; it was certain. She longed to run to his arms, to take refuge in his strength, as in the incarnation of love itself, and to say to him, to cry out, “Take me away! carry me with you! let us go! Thine, thine! all my ardour and all my dreams!””⁶

Flaubert’s pattern of literary transcodification of opera and its emotional effects recurs in a very successful romantic comedy, the film *Pretty Woman* by Garry Marshal (USA 1990). In this case the identification is more direct and precise: the protagonist, Vivian Ward, a Hollywood sex worker (Julia Roberts), attends, together with the wealthy businessman who hired her (Richard Gere), the most iconic opera about a redeemed prostitute, Verdi’s *La Traviata*. This famous cinematic opera scene is, as a matter of fact, a summary: it alternates three moments of the three acts with shots and close-ups on Vivian’s face, first in a radiant smile, then deeply moved, and finally openly crying. After this operatic experience she will break her “no kissing” rule and will allow herself to fall in love.

Opera as catharsis: Callas’ voice

This passionate, intense, and empathetic reception of opera is the perfect background to understand our transcodifications, which radicalize this pattern, transforming it from a passive spectatorship to an active performance: a re-enactment (not by chance a term at the core of contemporary studies on empathy).⁷ Released in 1993, Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* was the first mainstream Hollywood movie to deal with the AIDS pandemic and with the related theme of homophobia. Its historical value for the visibility of the gay community is hard to deny; nevertheless, the movie appears somehow too didactic and edifying, especially since it describes in a quite Manichean way the legal struggle of the protagonist Andy Beckett (Tom Hanks) against the large corporate law firm which fired him; a struggle unanimously supported by his family, friends, and the family of his Latino partner (Antonio Banderas). With its sublime, emotional tragic force, the opera scene disrupts any predictable scheme and any ideological constraint, creating a unique bond between Andrew and his Afro-American lawyer, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington): an “operatic tutelage”, according to Charles I. Nero.⁸

⁶ Flaubert 1919, 234.

⁷ See Stueber 2006.

⁸ See Nero 2004.

At the beginning the scene shows Andrew and Joe discussing their strategy for a Q&A session at the court. After asking Joe about his familiarity with opera, and receiving a negative answer, Andrew begins to explain and comment a well-known aria from Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*, *La mamma morta* (act 3), sung by Maria Callas, walking and trembling around the room. Through most part of the scene, the camera is roosted on his shoulders, close to the drip: we do not follow his point of view (the so called "ocularization"), but the subjective effect is even stronger, because we are so close to his body, that we really feel his trembling, while we perceive his facial expression, his crying, his broken words, and his explosions. Andrew starts by roughly translating the words of the aria for Joe ("this is Madelaine who's saying now during the French Revolution the mob set fire to her house and the mother died..."), but soon deviates, highlighting more and more the emotional situation of the character and so involving his listener, ("Do you hear the heartache of her voice, do you feel it, Joe?"), describes a precious detail of the music ("Ah, this single cello.."), and exalts the passage of the text from personal suffering to transfiguration into oblivion and universal love, which is at the core of his identification ("It was during this sorrow that love came to me. It said live, still. I am life [...] I am oblivion, I am divine [...] I am love. I am love"). This thematic and expressive change is amplified by the visual style and by chromatic effects: at the beginning the scene is grey and realistic, but it changes gradually into a dark, dramatic red, that comes from the fire in the background. Andrew moves hence from "commentary to ventriloquism:"⁹ from a passionate explication to a full emotional re-enactment; in the vocal climax, "he becomes too physically engulfed in the aria, pacing, throwing his head back, gesturing and grimacing."¹⁰ The identification derives from a certain parallelism: in the opera Maddalena is a young aristocrat, who pleads for the life of the revolutionary poet Andrea Chenier, the title role, evoking her suffering during the revolution and celebrating the cathartic, regenerating force of love. Andrew is a wealthy and successful lawyer, devastated by AIDS, but convinced that this last legal struggle against homophobia can give an ultimate sense to his life.

In two dramatic moments the basic focalization on Andrew alternates with two shots on Joe's moved face, in a bluish tonality the first one, in a dark red the second one, as if he were at the end totally assimilated into Andrew's glowing passion. Joe's reception of Andrew's operatic re-enactment is a key point: it plays an important role in the semantic system of the movie. Joe stands in for the average spectator of this mainstream movie, who is not an opera fan: at the begin-

⁹ Schroeder 2016, 242.

¹⁰ Schroeder 2016, 246.

ning he is slightly homophobic, accepts the case after a long hesitation, and then changes gradually, becoming more and more involved in Andrew's suffering. To watch a dying person who acts and sings "I am life.... I am love" has inevitably a strong psychological impact. As in *Pretty Woman*, the opera scene reverberates on the following narration: Joe appears more emotional and empathetic with his family, and the bond with Andrew provoked by the opera re-enactment will increase, till the participation to the final mourning; a moving and beautiful closure, dominated by some home movies from Andrew's childhood.

Philadelphia exploits a widespread stereotype, which, as usually, was transformed into an identity symbol, profoundly interwoven with camp aesthetics: the gay opera lover, or opera queen. This complex connection was brilliantly studied by Wayne Koestenbaum in a book appeared for the first time in the same year as our movie, 1993: *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*.¹¹ Moreover, the movie uses as soundtrack an iconic singer, Maria Callas, whose life still fascinates various artists (suffice it to mention Marina Abramovich's recent performance *The Seven Deaths of Maria Callas*). Koestenbaum devotes a chapter to Callas as a gay icon:¹² a theme at the core of a 1985 drama by a Terrence McNally, *The Lisbon Traviata* (1992). In the case of *Philadelphia*'s peculiar operatic transcodification, Callas' vocal style perfectly embodies its extraordinary tragic potential: her sublime, expressive voice is full of contrasts and dissonances, and is able to exploit and transfigure even the technical imperfections (a typical feature of the sublime aesthetics).

A masquerade of femininity

The opera scene in *Philadelphia* is a splendid microcosm which enlightens the entire movie but remains isolated as an autonomous episode. On the contrary, David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* (USA 1993, again the same year) can be defined as a movie on opera transcodification, especially if we truly exploit the multilayered nature of this term, which involves expressive and communicational levels, as well as cultural and political ones. On the expressive level, it is a movie on operatic performance between East and West, which culminates in a tragic re-enactment of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*; on the cultural level, it is a movie on gender stereotypes, colonialist domination, and sexual phantasies: the transcodification of opera on stage and into film goes along then with complex cultural and political

¹¹ Koestenbaum 1994. See also Robinson 2002, 157–169; Emanuele 2006, 12–15.

¹² See Koestenbaum 1994: 134–153.

transcodifications. Based on a play by the Chinese American playwright David Hwang, also author of the screenplay, *M. Butterfly* retells a true story which took place in 1986: a treason trial of a French embassy attaché and his partner, a Beijing opera singer. Bernard Boursicot, the French diplomat (who in the movie bears a quintessentially French name, René Gallimard, if we think of the rationalist philosophy of Descartes and of the most canonical French publisher) declared that he wasn't aware that his partner was a man and explained the scarce likelihood of this situation with a classic orientalist stereotype: the shy and remissive nature of Chinese women. The ignorance about the sex of the Chinese singer (Song Liling in Hwang-Cronenberg) is maintained for a long part of the movie as well, although the Chinese theatrical praxis, which prescribes exclusively male actors, could be well-known. The stereotype of the oriental remissive woman has been the starting point for Hwang's play, which does not deal intensively with opera. On the contrary, Cronenberg's movie exploits Puccini's music throughout its soundtrack, and thematizes the psychological mechanism of operatic reception. One could say that the process performed by Andrew Beckett in the perfect microcosm of *Philadelphia*'s opera scene, from the role of listener and commentator to the full re-enactment, is the same that is performed by René Gallimard in the macrocosm of *M. Butterfly*.

At the beginning of the movie, set in Beijing in 1966, we watch Gallimard who attends an opera recital devoted to *Madama Butterfly*: his first contact with the uncanny Other who will disrupt his life, Song Liling. As Joe in *Philadelphia*, Gallimard admits his total ignorance of the opera; during the first lines of the dialogue with Frau Baden (Gallimard's friend who gives him the basic information about Puccini's plot), we begin to listen to *Butterfly*'s voice; as a matter of fact, it is a recorded version of a European soprano, Marcelle Couture: as Serena Guarracino points out, the seductive voice exceeds the gender binarism.¹³ During the filmic summary of the opera recital (a sampling of the three most famous arias, as in *Pretty Woman*), the camera fluctuates around the audience and pans left to right on the stage where Song Liling is singing; after three shots and reverse shots, it finally zooms from a medium distance on Gallimard's face: we see what the protagonist sees (song from a long distance). The culminating shot of this crucial scene shows Gallimard that moves his body forward to see better, immersed into a profilmic light, that creates a dramatic contrast. This body movement and Jeremy Irons' intensive glance condense and proleptically anticipate the metamorphosis (Cronenberg's obsessive theme, by the way) at the core of the movie. René Gallimard is not only transformed from a superficial spectator to a passionate listener and

13 See Guarracino 2011, 195.

viewer, like Emma and Vivian; the scene also depicts the awakening of a disruptive desire towards the image of an oriental woman; a desire which will become more and more obsessive, bringing him at the end to a re-enactment of Butterfly's destiny, which is also a reversal of ethnic and sexual roles. The final, true metamorphosis will transform Gallimard in Madama Butterfly. Teresa De Lauretis synthesizes this scene in a very effective way: "he is transfixed, for the light that shines in his eyes seems to come from inside him, as if he were suddenly lit up by an internal source – desire."¹⁴

There are two other key scene, in which Gallimard appears as opera spectator: the first one, still in Beijing at the Chinese opera, where he can finally discover a different theatrical tradition, characterized by a popular participation, emphasized by several shots and close ups; the filmic style is very simple and traditional: it alternates distant static shots of the stage, and reverse medium shots of Gallimard, whose face is a peculiar mixture of emotional involvement, curiosity, surprise, fascination. The second one takes place in one of the most famous Western opera houses, Palais Garnier in Paris in 1968: this time the camera is more mobile, pans slowly along the sumptuous architecture, the very different audience, and finally from Gallimard to the stage; this time his face is openly crying, because he is living the melancholy phase of the lost object. After the reunification of the couple and its arrest, a theatrical trial, and a violent confrontation with Song's male gay desire (Gallimard denies every other involvement: "I am a man who loved a woman created by a man. Anything else falls short"), the finale of the movie is the culminating point of a radical deconstruction of Gallimard's sexual fantasies. It is a very effective parallel editing, which alternates Gallimard's last performance in the prison and Song's flight back to China (the very last shot will be devoted to this elusive male Butterfly); an alternation in the visual track, while the soundtrack is characterized by the continuity of Madama Butterfly's most famous aria, *Un bel di vedremo*, the aria that expresses her monomaniac fantasy of eternal love and her infinite, tragic longing for an inadequate American husband.

Gallimard prepares very carefully his re-enactment in front of a mesmerized homosocial male audience: kimono, wig, and a complex make up (red, black, and white); at the end he will look very similar to the heavily rigged Western soprano in Palais Garnier, and to the canonical Italian soprano who sings in the recorded version we hear in the soundtrack, Mirella Freni. The make-up of the face is put in relief, in a long close up: Gallimard does it in front of a small mirror, an object with a strong meta-cinematographic and psychanalytic value. Using a shard from a mirror, which takes the place of the traditional *seppuku* used by Butterfly, Gallimard

14 De Lauretis 1999, 317.

will commit suicide in a particularly pathetic moment of the aria by Puccini, after a long monologue which shows his total identification with Butterfly as a colonialist fantasy. The reversal is now total: “The once mighty Western man is reduced to a pathetic figure in drag slumped on the prison floor in a heap of colored rags, without even the homage of a majestic panorama paid by Visconti to the protagonist of *Death in Venice*.”¹⁵

Gallimard's opera re-enactment shows the phantasmatic and fetishist nature of his erotic passion: a masquerade of femininity created by two men, deconstructed by the disruptive and seductive power of the female voice and by the empathic force of musical performance transcoded by the multiple gazes of cinema.

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15 De Lauretis 1999, 324.

Serena Guarracino

Transcodification as *Hantise*: Opera and Memory in Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien

Abstract: This essay explores the appropriation of opera and melodrama in two short films, Derek Jarman's *Depuis le jour* (1987) and Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1993), which counterpoint each other in their use of opera to voice the complex relationship between memory and desire, pain and pleasure, from a marginal subject positioning. Both films feature aging bodies as agents of desire, subverting linear time and normative narratives on desire and pleasure. Through their use of opera arias, the films interrogate the effect of remembrance and the power of memory to evoke pleasure and joy, even in the face of pain and trauma. By reclaiming opera as a means of expressing marginalized subjectivities, the films challenge hegemonic, Western forms of desire and offer a new poetics of transcodification. Ultimately, the essay reveals how these films use opera to cast the past as a source of joy and pleasure, rather than just melancholy and nostalgia, and to reclaim the place of marginalized bodies in a history of pleasure.

Keywords: Appropriation, opera, melodrama, body, marginality

An old white woman, in an elaborate, somewhat 18th-century dress and a long mane of white hair, is showered by petals, while George Charpentier's *Depuis le jour* (from the 1900 opera *Louise*) plays in the background. She bows and then throws her hands in the air with joy, holding a flower bouquet; the close-up on her face shows her smiling, blissfully.

A black, ageing man, wearing a white camellia on the lapel of his tuxedo, sings Henry Purcell's *When I am laid in earth* (from *Dido and Aeneas*, 1689) from a side box of an empty opera house. The singing is rather out of tune, but at the end of the aria the theatre nonetheless resonates with applause; the singer courteously bows.

These two scenes respectively open and close two short films, Derek Jarman's *Depuis le jour* (1987)¹ and Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1993),² works that counter-

¹ *Depuis le jour* is part of the feature film *Aria* (Miramax Films, 1987), produced by John Boyd, which includes ten shorts based on opera arias directed by, among others, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Altman and Ken Russell. Jarman's short runs 6' and it the last one in the film, with the exception of the framing performance of *Pagliacci* (directed by Boyd himself with Bill Bryden).

point each other in their appropriation of opera and melodrama – both the genre and the ‘mode’ – to voice the intricate relationship between memory and desire, pain and pleasure, experienced from a marginal subject positioning. Furthermore, both films invite the audience in through complex mechanisms of mirroring and focalization, to share multiple dislocations of a hegemonic timeline that identifies the aging subject as agent of desire only in the form of memory and melancholia. In both cases opera, a dead art form, gets transcodified in the flow of the present without losing its marked out-of-timeliness, thus giving voice to the incongruous, queer desires of the explicitly elderly bodies it haunts, and subverting both linear time and normative narratives on desire and pleasure.

It is generally held that opera as it was known in its heyday – the time of Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini – is “emphatically finished,”³ as Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar state in their brilliant study dedicated to the phenomenon of opera’s ambivalent status: always-already dead and yet stubbornly surviving its own demise. This seems to be a constant concern throughout the history of opera – after all, early opera was an effort by the Camerata de’ Bardi in Florence to resurrect ancient Greek theatre; however, as Fusillo and Petricola convincingly argue, the archaeological intent of this project actually resulted in a heightened experimentalism, producing “the most relevant intermedial art form of the baroque age.”⁴ However, after two centuries of widespread popularity especially in the form of nineteenth-century melodrama, the issue of opera’s out-of-time status resurfaces in the twentieth century, when the genre loses its role as a popular form of entertainment whose multifarious audiences cut across social classes, languages, and peoples. In a time when concerns about the representation of subaltern subjectivities – such as women and/or racialized Others – have become more and more pressing, opera’s entanglement with the most tainted aspects of Western ideology such as misogyny, orientalism, and even outright racism has become too self-evident not to raise issues about its legacy for the contemporary stage. Recent scholarship has exposed its relish in patriarchal violence⁵ as well as in the objectification of the Oriental ‘other’ put on display for Western eyes and ears:⁶ with its

2 The short, running 8’11”, is available among the special features included in the DVD of Julien’s film *Derek*, dedicated to Derek Jarman (BFI, 2008).

3 Dolar/Žižek 2002, 2.

4 Fusillo/Petricola 2023, 568.

5 See esp. Clément 1989; McClary 1991.

6 A groundbreaking effort in this respect is the analysis devoted to Verdi’s *Aida* by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993). I have discussed the impact of Said’s work and the debate it sparked in Guarracino 2010.

ideological grounds under close scrutiny, one would think that opera could easily “be assigned a neat place in cultural archaeology and thus properly buried.”⁷

And yet, in the face of its ever-announced death – whether hailed or mourned – the theatrical genre known as opera shows a stubborn vitality and a surprising ability to be subjected to transcodification, even in the form of unremitting interrogation or outright capsizing. This is certainly due to its belonging to the Western musical canon, which makes it part of a wider cultural legacy under constant revision and reappropriation; however, because of its overlapping with the mode of melodrama, opera has traditionally occupied a marginal, eccentric place in that very canon. Melodrama, Peter Brooks has notoriously argued, is a label that “has a very bad reputation”, whose connotations include “the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; [...] inflated and extravagant expressions.”⁸ Opera, differently from most instrumental classical music, appropriates – in different ways at different times – these ‘popular’ elements of melodrama; in particular, it foregrounds a powerful thematization of the body as the intersection between language, music, and gesture: “opera owes its undeniable affective power to the overdetermination of the verbal, the visual and the aural – not to the aural alone. And it is specifically the body – the gendered, sexualized body – that will not be denied in staged opera.”⁹

Hutcheon and Hutcheon’s specification of the centrality of the body in *staged* opera may easily be expanded to include other genres and art forms, especially cinema where, as Linda Williams has prominently argued, melodrama belongs to the category of “body genres”, those genres which both center on the performing body and excite bodily reactions from its audience (such as jump scares or tears).¹⁰ While Jarman’s and Julien’s films do not strictly fall in the category of either operatic or cinematic melodrama, they do tap into melodrama as an aesthetic category of bodily excess:¹¹ in particular, it is the ageing, fragile body as a destabilizing agent of desire that represents the narrative and symbolic center of both works, as a syncretic embodiment of melodramatic excess and of opera’s own radical refusal to disappear.¹²

7 Žižek/Dolar 2002, 3.

8 Brooks 1996, 11–12.

9 Hutcheon/Hutcheon 2000, 206.

10 Williams 1991, 3–4.

11 For melodrama as an aesthetic category, broader and more pliable than genre, see Fusillo 2022.

12 It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer an overview of the marginalization of aging bodies in contemporary economies of desire; a good introduction to the issue is Featherstone/Werwick 1995 and, as regards women in particular, Hurd Clarke 2011.

Both directors' choice of opera arias heightens the unexpected centrality of an ordinarily marginal subject position, as their sources are not exactly congruent even with the canonical opera repertoire: *Dido and Aeneas* predates the heyday of melodrama of at least one century,¹³ while Charpentier's opera may hardly be considered a major work. Yet the arias selected here are typical of operatic melodrama in the way they feature a strong emotional interpellation centered on a woman character, and a woman's singing voice. Dido's lament from Purcell's opera features a traditional subject of melodrama, the abandoned woman, who just before dying sings not to her departed lover but to her sister and handmaid Belinda, asking to remember her but without being burdened by the tragedy of her demise: "Remember me, but ah! forget my fate". Charpentier's *Depuis le jour*, instead, is addressed to no one in particular, as the main character Louise sings it to herself – and the audience – at the opening of the third act of the eponymous opera while happily reminiscing of the beginning of her love. The memory evoked here is, surprisingly for operatic melodrama, a happy one; and indeed, the love story lasts until the end, the opposition of Louise's family notwithstanding.

The two arias play with opposite emotional registers (joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain), but both harp on the same theme: the haunting power of memory, whether it be the tragic fate of the Carthaginian queen or the "souvenir charmant / Du premier jour / D'amour" of the young woman in twentieth-century Paris. Jarman and Julien both interrogate the effect of remembrance at a time – the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s – which saw the queer community on the verge of annihilation; and the issue of how to memorialize the lives and communities which were quickly disappearing under the pressure of the AIDS epidemics was central for artists and activists alike.¹⁴ Jarman himself had been diagnosed HIV-positive in 1986, the year before the release of *Depuis le jour*; in the same year Julien, then a young artist and activist, released *This is not an AIDS advertisement*, a short film reclaiming homosexual desire in the face of the puritanical approach of anti-AIDS campaigns.¹⁵ Both directors engage with opera as part of a broader poetics of hijacking hegemonic Western forms to find voice and expression for marginalized subjectivities, an approach which has been, in different ways, fundamental in the development of a specific LGBT politics and aesthetics.

¹³ Peter Brooks locates the inception of melodrama in the years around the French Revolution, a time when the secularization of public morals leaves a residue or void in the representation of the sacred which is taken on by this new theatrical genre; see Brooks 1996, 15.

¹⁴ On the issue of memory and mourning in relation to the AIDS epidemics, see Butler 2004, 19.

¹⁵ See the page of the short film on Isaac Julien's website: <https://www.isaacjulien.com/projects/this-is-not-an-aids-advertisement/> (last accessed 07/12/2024).

This project emerges quite clearly in *The Attendant*, where Purcell's aria is part of a wider set of rewritings and transcodifications. Julien pairs Purcell's aural suggestion with the visual re-coding of 19th-century painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa*, by French artist François-Auguste Biard, which comes to life under the scrutinizing eyes of the eponymous attendant, who is also the singer of Dido's lament. The painting, which is shown in full at the beginning of the film, is then fragmented in a series of close-ups on its main groups, which are transfigured as sadomasochistic tableaux. The representation of pain and violence endured by African slaves at the hands of European traders is transcodified into color-blind pleasurable play where, irrespective of race, black and white men play the role of tops (traders) and bottoms (slaves). The tableaux, in their turn, anticipate the old man's own relationship with a young white man called the Visitor, played out in the following scenes. The traumatic memory of slavery, which haunted the strained relations between black communities and the state in Britain at the time,¹⁶ is here re-framed through sadomasochism as a way of turning violence into care, pain into pleasure: as Elizabeth Freeman writes, "it is inescapably true that the body in sadomasochistic ritual becomes a means of invoking history – personal pasts, collective sufferings, and quotidian forms of injustice – in an idiom of pleasure."¹⁷

Julien rewrites the history of violence over the black body by reclaiming that same body's ability to pleasure itself and others while still haunted by the memory of its traumatic past, and Dido's lament plays a crucial role in this transformation of painful memory into present enjoyment. Purcell's aria does represent, in this sense, a sort of sadomasochistic experience in its own terms: as operatic melodrama often does, it turns the excruciating pain of one character into a deeply pleasurable experience for the audience. Dido's cry is part of a long list of suicidal or otherwise dying women who represent the height of operatic melodrama as an aesthetic experience: as Catherine Clément argues in her seminal *Opera; or, the Undoing of Women*, "on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing. The emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die."¹⁸ Forever ambivalent, opera audiences across centuries have both celebrated and shared this pain, at the same time suffering and enjoying the death of their favorite heroines.

¹⁶ In 1981 and 1985, so-called "race riots" broke out in major UK cities, including London, Birmingham, and Liverpool. While this unrest was caused by the discrimination of black communities founded by migrants from the former colonies after WWII, slavery remains a fraught legacy of colonial times (especially in a city such as Liverpool, historically a major slave trade hub).

¹⁷ Freeman 2010.

¹⁸ Clément 1989, 5.

Here, however, the pain for the opera lover is heightened by the fact that the film does not offer a technically impeccable rendition of the aria, but an off-key, travesty version in a lower register; a self-evident shift for those who are familiar with the original arrangement of the piece, further heightened by the movie's soundtrack, and in particular by the end titles immediately following the closing performance, where Jimmy Sommerville's impeccable falsetto offers a very different, virtuoso high-range male voice. In contrast, Thomas Baptiste, the actor playing the Attendant, offers an irregular, excessive vocality which highjacks the exceptionality of Dido's desire for Aeneas to make it his own. The Attendant's body thus powerfully occupies the incongruous position of subject of desire: incongruous because old in a culture that defines desire as a province of the young; because black in a history that casts black people as objects, not subjects; and as homosexual at the time of AIDS. This multiple displacement makes Baptiste's body the place where memory becomes, counterintuitively but joyfully, flesh; a flesh which bears the memory of pain but at the same time cries out its right and ability to pleasure. His performance is applauded by the third character in the film, a woman called the Conservator, who in other scenes is shown listening intently to the other, sexual performance between the Attendant and the Visitor. It is she, in both cases, that works as a place of focalization for the audience, who is invited into her emotional response to both performances, to share the mixture of surprise and empathy as historical pain is transfigured into aesthetic pleasure and erotic desire, embodied by the luxuriant black body bursting into color at the center of the tableau accompanying the Attendant's closing performance.

This unnamed young black actor¹⁹ features first at the center of one of the sadomasochistic tableaux from Biard's painting, laying down at the center of the picture while a white, leather-clad man holds (or caresses) him by the throat and another points him to the crowd around them; he also plays a jewel-decked, scantily clad, triumphant Dido in the initial and final tableaux accompanying the opera performance, surrounded by similarly attired black and white performers (the same featuring, in different roles, in the tableaux); his half-length shot, with his eyes looking straight into the camera, close the film. Another object of desire for the Attendant and the onlooker, but also the projection of a younger, glorious self who, however, never sings and never smiles, this character offers another, more opaque subject position, a remote manifestation of being in contrast with the Attendant's fragile but strongly vocal presence.

¹⁹ Although he is a recognizable presence, his name is not identifiable in the credits among the other "players": the only actors who are associated with character names are Baptiste (The Attendant), Cleo Sylvestre (The Conservator), and John Wilson (The Visitor).

The counterpoint between a young and an old body is also at the core in Jarman's film. Memory here is represented through the classic cinematic strategy of the old reel, which alternates between black-and-white and grainy color segments to show what appears to be the old woman's young, remembered self, played by Tilda Swinton.²⁰ She is shown with her lover, as they spend time together at what appear to be different times of the year; the reel is introduced by the old woman, who welcomes the audience with wide, enthusiastic gestures which respond to the aria's own sense of immanent elation: "Tout vibre, / tout se réjouit de mon triomphe! / Autour de moi tout est sourire, lumière et fête". While the two spaces of the film, the one occupied by the old woman and the one belonging to the young woman and her lover, are clearly demarcated, the formal division between them is constantly challenged: the montage of memorial fragments is constantly interrupted by close-ups of the old woman, the sequined linings of her dress and fan merging with the glittering waves among which the lovers play, as the camera pans over details of her clothes and of her lined, magnetically expressive face.

Especially if compared to the heightened tragicality of Purcell's aria (and of many other opera arias), Jarman's choice emerges as emphatically against the grain, eschewing the many voices who sing "their eternal undoing", as Clément puts it, and focusing instead on memory as a source of pleasure and joy, even of ecstasy. While Julien takes the pain embodied by Dido's lament and makes it a vehicle for the pleasure expressed by the Attendant, Jarman uses Charpentier's aria to cast the relationship between past and present as one not of mourning and loss, but celebrating a desire that goes both ways, from the present to the past but also vice versa. Considering that the film was produced at the same time as Jarman's own diagnosis, it is hard not to read it as an effort to overturn the tragic narrative of AIDS-related deaths – and the moral condemnation that came with it – to reclaim desire and joy for the prematurely ageing, quickly disappearing HIV-positive bodies.

At the end of the film, the old woman takes her leave with a bow; however, she does not bow at the audience but, as it were, *with* the audience, with her back to the camera, as if on the verge of joining us on the other side of the screen. The gaze of the audience, as in Julian, is guided by the aging towards the younger body; the woman's younger self, in her turn, recurrently looks at the camera throughout the whole film. Her look metafilmically addresses the audience and/as her older self, who finds itself at the receiving end of that blissful, desiring gaze. There is, in her mute look as in the silent black man at the end of *The Attendant*, a desire of the

20 Swinton had played for Jarman in *Caravaggio*, released the previous year.

past for its own future; a desire not only to be remembered, but to be a source of pleasure. These looks work as a reminder that bodies and lives that are considered expendable (because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, or age) have the right to be joyfully remembered and to reclaim their place in a history of pleasure. Through these operatic transcodifications, through the *hantise* of the operatic voice, the past embodied in the present is cast not only as the object of melancholy and nostalgia, but also as a very present source of joy, of *jouissance*.

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Anna Chiara Corradino

Corporal Transcodification(s): Mark Morris' Dance Adaption of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*

Abstract: My goal in this essay is to look at the Mark Morris Dance Group' adaptation of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. Mark Morris' ballet creates an alternative grammar, acting out a series of trans-codifications on various levels, through a heroine, Dido, who already embodies strong resistance to the normative construction of reality. All of these aspects will demonstrate how this multilayered adaptation is able to rebuild *Dido and Aeneas* through extensive trans-codification(s), resulting in the production of a corporal language that defies normative categories and rewrites both the opera and Dido's story. In order to explain this, I have divided this essay into three parts: a conceptual clarification on the transcoding of corporalities, contextualized in relation to Dance Studies and contemporary philosophical currents with respect to Morris' production; a brief introduction on Purcell-Tate's work and on the Mark Morris Dance Group, followed by an examination of the trans-codification(s) implemented in the ballet of the American choreographer; and finally, a problematization of the figure of Dido in relation to her cultural history and to Morris' representation.

Keywords: Mark Morris Dance Group, Dido and Aeneas, Henry Purcell, dance adaptation, bodies' transcodification(s)

The aim of this essay is to look at the Mark Morris Dance Group's (MMDG) adaptation of Henry Purcell's three-act opera *Dido and Aeneas*. On the one hand, by adapting Purcell's music and text of seventeenth century Irish poet and lyricist, Nahum Tate, Morris goes beyond a simple staging and instead performs a radical adaptation¹ and resemantization of the opera; on the other hand, he develops an alternative grammar with his body that allows for a widely disseminated disruption of the dancers' and his own identities, unhinging the traditional connotations associated with this opera. This latter operation is also a result of the historical,

Note: I would like to take this opportunity to thank the MMDG and archivist Stephanie Neel in particular, for the availability and material she provided me with, and the dancer Alessandra Petitti for the support throughout the writing process.

1 I am referring to the concept of adaptation proposed by Hutcheon 2006.

intellectual, and political events that occurred in Europe and America in the 1980s (both of which have been crucial to Morris's life and work).

Morris' various semiotic procedures resemantize and recode his own body and those of his *corps de ballet*, in addition to the performativity inherent in ballet staging as an ever-changing performance. The choreographer succeeds in writing a queer ballet (and a camp one too)² that brings out the force of generally regarded dangerous heroines, such as Dido, when it has the power to express itself, thanks to an innovative and fully personal adaptation.

Transcoding corporalities

Speaking of French contemporary dance, Sophie Walon writes that some choreographers stage heteroclite and non-standard bodies for “une *incorporation* à travers leurs pratiques chorégraphiques d’une volonté de résistance, de réaction face aux forces normatives, aux contrôles insidieux qui pèsent sur les corps.”³ This resulted in *nouvelles corporeités*⁴ which, both in France and, above all, in America, were gradually spreading from the 1980s onwards. It may be bumptious to point out that the distinctions between modern and contemporary dance are not only to be distinguished in terms of the specific episteme that had developed over time in America and Europe, but can also be analyzed as aesthetic-philosophical differences between the first and second halves of the twentieth century. Modern (American) dance, which arose as a reaction to classical ballet's rigidities, had as its primary goal the dogmatic isomorphism of dance and movement, as well as the expression of the dancer's emotional subjectivity.⁵ Conversely, contemporary dance opposes the naturalization and consequent ontologization of the body and the subject with the idea that these are instead constructs, that is, always the products of a constructive process – additional, historical, relational, gradual – in short, never given *a priori*.⁶

The postmodern body becomes a social construct, with a more radical meaning insofar as it is subjected to the pressure of cultural, political, and social forces that “shape its appearance through multiple symbolic representations that act

² Schwartz 2012, 82.

³ Walon 2011.

⁴ This is how Michel Bernard indicated, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the product of the work of certain choreographers who, through their practices, have produced an aesthetic subversion of the traditional category of the body see Bernard/Nioche/Perrin 2005: 46.

⁵ See Pontremoli 2018, 23.

⁶ See Rossetti 2021, 290.

forcefully from the outside on an identity that has become more malleable”⁷ (transl. mine). In this manner, the supposed *a priori* and universal categories are revealed as ideological constructs and deconstructed through dance itself. As Rossetti points out, this is the same foundation on which philosophy’s epistemological constructivism begins: with the de-objectification and de-substantialization of reality.⁸ Contemporary dance permeates forms, integrates styles and rejects all essentialist elements.

Mark Morris, despite being canonically targeted as a modern dancer, as he names his Dance Group as well, performs a series of aesthetic operations that apply extreme novelty and distinctiveness in comparison to his contemporaries. In particular, his style seems to be influenced by the queer theorizations that would only go on to be formalized in the 1990s, but followed years of struggles and gender claims – including the theories of Judith Butler – that boosted:

a macro-category of dance, in short, that has put into play the natural and biological presuppositions of a body morphology given *a priori*, proposing a plurality of “other” corporeities that have given *performative* substance to new organic materialities through innovative choreographic *statements*.⁹ (transl. mine)

The Mark Morris Dance Group is extremely peculiar both for the physical appearances of its dancers and their background. Let us remember that ballet in America had been greatly influenced by a construction of male gender that was centered on white, Christian, and Darwinian heroic masculinity, developed mainly by Ted Shawn as a response to the gender ideologies that were spreading in the 1940s and 1950s in the USA. In fact, American modern dance was born in strong opposition to Russian ballet (one can mention here, Nijinsky, who Morris himself decided to cite repeatedly for the purpose of his ballet), and it proposed a theatrical performance of masculinity summed up to describe Shawn’s dance troupe in what Kimmel (1987) would term as “Muscular Christianity.”¹⁰ It was Martha Graham who gave the first impetus to a general reconsideration of gender norms. Graham’s choice of heroines, conceived for a female audience, allowed a reappropriation of the representation of eroticized male bodies, albeit in a context in which masculinity was that proposed by Shawn (in which the eroticization of the male body is present but never explicit), i.e., heroic, white, muscular etc.¹¹ “Like Shawn’s

⁷ Rossetti 2021, 290.

⁸ See Rossetti 2021, 290.

⁹ Rossetti 2021, 301.

¹⁰ Kimmel 1987, 143.

¹¹ See Burt 2003, 112.

male dancers, Graham's Greek men's movement range is limited to represent only the more macho side of male behaviour."¹²

Morris started from there, but between Morris and Graham, there had been Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton and his contact improvisation, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer, who had greatly revolutionized the conception and connection between music and dance, as well as between stereotyped gestures, by providing an alternative way of staging. The movements staged by Graham – and expanded by Cunningham – who was certainly already moving towards a form of androgynization of the female body (less so of the male one), is reused by Morris in a totally new form. One can cite here, for example, the reprise of *Lamentation*, (figs. 1–2) or again the citation of Nijinsky's scandalous, at the time, masturbation, which Morris applies to Dido but with a changing of sign. The choreographer, however, resemantizes the movements of his predecessors, giving completely different meanings to his body and that of his dancers and destabilizing the boundaries of identity in an increasingly scattered direction. This is thanks to the ways in which Morris succeeds in making his own identity disappear and in allowing a very wide spectrum of possibilities, both in the performance and in the interpretation by the spectators, to blossom. In this way the adaptation of Purcell-Tate through the recoding of Morris's body in a "vortex of corporal trans-codifications", denounce, but above all contest, the ideological construct at the basis of binary concepts, such as those of masculine and feminine, chaos and order, evil and good.

Dido and Aeneas: Purcell-Tate vs MMDG

Dido and Aeneas (1689?) is an opera in three acts, probably written for young female students at the Josias Priest boarding school in London by Henry Purcell (1659–1695), on a libretto by Nahum Tate (1652–1715). It takes its cue from the 4th book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, blended with Ovid's Dido from *Heroides*,¹³ combined with suggestions from other compositions, including John Blow's masque *Venus and Adonis*, from which it takes its structure.

It tells the story of the love of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for Aeneas, the Trojan hero, and her despair when he abandons her. In Virgil, Aeneas has already been told that he should seek the site of a new Trojan Empire (which will be Rome), and Juno sends Mercury to remind him of his destiny when he appears ready to stay in Carthage with Dido. She urges him to stay but, when unsuccessful, she

¹² Burt 2003, 114.

¹³ See *Aen.* 4 and *Ov. Her.* 7.

builds a funeral pyre, upon which she stabs herself to death. Tate and Purcell make a significant alteration by focusing the attention even more on Dido and her inner struggle rather than Aeneas, who is the sole soloist without an aria. Rome and the imperial project are not but mentioned. However, there are some other distinctions. Dido dies of a broken heart, with no desire for vengeance or the need for a pyre. A Sorceress and a coven of witches, rather than divine providence, are to blame for persuading Aeneas to flee Carthage (the Sorceress enacts the spirit of Mercury).¹⁴ This priestess, according to Dido, has advised her on how to deal with Aeneas' impending departure, but she could well be a fiction of Dido's self-destructive mind – a ruse to hide the fact that she plans to murder herself.

Morris's *Dido* was created in Brussels for the Monnaie Dance Group/Mark Morris (during his three-year contract at the Theatre de la Monnaie) in 1989 and restaged several times with major differences until 2016. This analysis takes advantage of Barbara Willis Sweete's 1995 filming of the performance.

As stated in Morris' recent memoir (2019), he had the idea to stage *Dido* all by himself, interpreting all the characters in order to, "fuck myself to death,"¹⁵ since he was afraid this would have been his very last performance and that he would have gone on to die of AIDS.

Compared to other performances of the opera, Morris shows us a scanty scene: on the stage, a map etching the floor (a stylization of the Mediterranean), in the center a bench with Pompeian columns. Men and women of different physicalities walk in, all wearing black clothes, a Phoenician color but at the same time a lugubrious announcement of the opera's finale. It almost seems as if the entire ballet is a requiem for Dido's death ("Death is now a welcome guest" sings the heroine in the last act, III.3). The chorus and the soloists are voices-over from below the stage, while the scene is only for the dancers. The lights that we see are white, sometimes ghostly, and the only act that gives us a distinctly contrasting color is the second, in which a green light frames the scene of the witches while Morris goes from being Dido to the Sorceress: from a composed queen, he turns into a mad maenad with his curls blowing in the wind. In the very end, Dido in a sad dance with Belinda, both dignified and regal, dies surrounded by a blue light with the dancers framing her in a sculpture-like scene. In a final brushstroke, the destiny of a timeless heroine ends in the silence of a painting with ancient reminiscences (see fig. 4) but profoundly up to date (turning to Belinda she says, "no trouble in thy breast/Remember me/but ah! Forget my fate" III.3). Aeneas (Guiller-

¹⁴ Alastair Macaulay (2000, 816, quoted in Jordan 2015, 221) noted that a Sorceress lurks within Virgil's story, though is not explicitly mentioned.

¹⁵ Morris 2019.

mo Resto), the only one with a bare chest, always follows Dido in her dance; when he can no longer do so, he leaves the scene in silence, without ceremony.

Morris' version is most notable for his choice to dance in both Dido and the Sorceress parts, as well as the strong sensualization, at times parodic feel, of the entire score.

The ballet has been analyzed in depth from a great number of points of view.¹⁶ In particular, Gay Morris pointed out that the choreographer:

As Dido, he creates a sense of the feminine through the kind of movements he selects, which, in his second dance, are soft, rounded "feminine" shapes, as well as steps that in western theater dance fall within the domain of women, such as shoulder ripples. These are the "incessant and repeated actions" Butler contends create the illusion of gender stability. But at the same time, we see Morris as a "man." Not only does he dance in a "masculine" way during his first solo, with its many flat, angular movements, but we see and read his body as masculine – large, hairy, muscular. His body, one might argue, is not an activity; it is stubbornly material.¹⁷

However, in light of a broader theory of gender, body and performance that takes into account the modes of representation Morris chose to assume and blend with the languages he uses in his dancing, as well as the operations he performs to incorporate that in his body, it makes a new interpretation compelling. A synopsis of the dance styles used by Morris can be useful here (see figs. 2–3):

- Greek –'antiquey'– two-dimensional with torqued bodies and angular movement, in the manner of friezes and vase patterning.
- Ballet mime
- American Sign Language (ASL)
- Baroque rhetorical gesture
- Indian (Morris' refers to the style of 'mudras' – mime gestures with the hands)
- Indonesian, in the annual hip action in walking, an occasional tilt of the heads and the sarongs
- Irish step dance for the sailors
- A grotesque vocabulary particular to the Sorceress and witches, as they squat, upturn themselves or shudder in spasm, with gnarled arms and sickled feet¹⁸

¹⁶ By Stephanie Jordan in a recent contribution (2015), from a gender perspective by Gay Morris (1991, 141–58), Ramsay Burt (2007), Selby Wynn Schwartz (2012, 71–94), but specifically from a male-dancer point of view, and from its postmodern, multi-layered meanings by Sophia Preston (1998, 241–52), Carol Martin (1999) and Duerden/Rowell (2013, 143–71). See also the MMDG webpage for a collection of reviews on the opera: <https://markmorrisdancegroup.org/work/dido-and-aeneas/> (last accessed 07/12/2024).

¹⁷ Morris 2005, 145.

¹⁸ See Jordan 2015, 226–7.

Morris's adaptation of the Purcell/Tate opera, for his choreomusical, choreographic and direction choices, manifests a great "postmodern impulse."¹⁹ Purcell's music and Tate's libretto are reinterpreted in a way that no one has done before, thanks to the invention of a new dance typology that combines various genres. We might add here that both the "music visualization" and "mickey mousing" offered for Morris appear to be restricting categories to explain *Dido's* adaptation. We can best describe it as a "corporal trans-codification", of which the preceding aspects are only a part. This variety of styles and languages overlapping with the multimedia inherent in the ballet/opera already make it an intermedial and intertextual product. The grammar Morris *constructs* is therefore a constant dialogue with the past, which is, however, always a new construction, but above all, always a criticism and deconstruction of the *status quo* – an operation Morris carries out on various levels, especially in the choice of subject.

Dido, a queer heroine

Indeed, the choice of Purcell's work, particularly the character of Dido, is intriguing from the standpoint of cultural history. A component of the heroine's legacy has been crucial in Western culture. As shown by Maria Vittoria Tessitore and Paola Bono (1999) in a book about Dido's literary reception, she embodies on many levels a deviant femininity. Dido is characterized by both exterminating and generating and conserving power, as is typical of many mythical female figures with active willpower. At the same time, these are regarded as potentially dangerous. The representational ways of threatening femininity are divided into two in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, with Dido and the Sorceress, in both circumstances, standing for two possible destroyers. Morris flattens the dilemma that lies beneath the representation of dominant femininity by restoring Dido's agency and by not making her the victim of a male, but of her own volition.

It is no coincidence that the strong sexualization of Dido's body in the dance, which culminates in masturbation clearly not present in Purcell's score, in connection with death and love, allows a strong break with the stereotyping of Dido as an abandoned woman, also through the choreographer's choreomusical grammar and syntax. The centrality of Dido and her relationship with all the other characters in the opera (Roger Savage proposed seeing all the characters in Purcell's opera, with the exception of Aeneas, as facets of Dido's personality),²⁰ as well as Aeneas'

¹⁹ Duerden-Rowell 2013, 161.

²⁰ See Savage 1976, 397.

lack of mobility, who is the true outsider of the scene, allow for a “choral,” to use Kristevian terms, vision of femininity.

Morris’ operation goes even beyond chorality, which would have led us back to a realm where femininity is still associated with the abject. There is no longer a conspiratorial femininity, nor is there an annihilation of one femininity against another, as in Purcell’s text, but rather a very deliberate choice that brings Dido back to an anti-patriarchal and anti-normative horizon. Morris’ recoding and reinterpretation of Purcell’s text is part of a larger effort by the choreographer, who permits a comprehensive rethinking of both the music and the text, as well as the ways of writing and rewriting with and on the body, through his body. Ramsay Burt writes that “[t]he only political use [that] deconstructive strategies have is to create a space within which to make visible and representable what has remained invisible and unrepresentable within patriarchal culture.”²¹

Transcoding, therefore, has here the sense of writing with the body. Encoding and recoding through the use of the body creates a hybrid writing that is not only not strongly gendered but is also double and accepts the double in itself. Mark Morris’ corporeal writing, by combining codes from different media, creates a syntax that allows an emergence of Dido in all her possible aspects. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman (1988) argues that the female voice in cinema, as well as the soundtrack, contribute to the construction of gender difference, suggesting the passivity and the secondary role of women, always proposed through non-authoritative and non-narrative voices (verses, cries etc.), according to the double construct disembodied male voice vs. synchronized female voice. By eliminating the singers from the stage, and by presenting himself centrally as both the female protagonists of the ballet, Morris writes with the body what cannot be expressed within the common language, disrupting the division proposed by Silverman in a new hybrid system.

Morris’s operation is even more complex: on the one hand, he succeeds in going beyond the concept of the feminine abjection, staging a figure such as Dido who already represents a strong resistance to patriarchy; on the other hand, through his body, which is male, overtly homosexual, and harassed by the fear of death linked to sex, he succeeds in constructing a grammar that overlaps the word, but through the body “rewrites” all the characters of the opera, giving them a new agency. Mark Morris’ body, in other words, “corporealizes” the voices – especially Dido’s – making it gesture.

Morris brings about with his body a disruption of bodies, by consciously maintaining a perpetual ambiguity. This is possible only and exclusively in the construc-

²¹ See Burt 1995, 162.

tion of a hybrid language that borrows from different semioses. In fact, if dance is always presented as a hybrid form between word and image starting from the ancient “Greek schemata”, as Maria Luisa Catoni (2005) has well analysed in a brilliant book on the subject, Morris’ type of dance combines the already hybrid syntactic construction with the body and on the body, which does not intend to replace the word, but to show an alternative way of understanding it. What is called Morris’ “music visualization” or “mickey mousing” because of its excessively didactic significance – for which he was also strongly condemned by the critics – is in fact a new expressive mode, which will open the doors to a whole series of epochal changes that will lead to ballets that are probably much better known, such as Sasha Waltz’s *Dido and Aeneas*,²² but which certainly start from the reflections on the body of Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, Vaslav Nijinsky, but which Morris does not analyze through the lens of an androgynization of the female body, but of an expression that manifests performativity and the construction of movements and binarism in a continuous destructive and constructive dialectic, in short, in corporal transcodifications. And he does so by staging a heroine like Dido who presents in the history of her tradition a very strong form of female resistance to patriarchy.

22 See Alonso 2012 for a comparison of the two stagings.



Fig. 1: H. Moselsio, *Martha Graham in Lamentation, No. 3*. Photograph. © Library of Congress, Music Division. Source: www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200154214/ (last accessed 10/02/2025).



Fig. 2: Still frame from Barbara Willis Sweete (dir.), *Dido and Aeneas*, Mark Morris Dance Group, DVD, 19'18". © Mark Morris Dance Group 1995.



Fig. 3: Still frame from Barbara Willis Sweete (dir.), *Dido and Aeneas*, Mark Morris Dance Group, DVD, 4'23". © Mark Morris Dance Group 1995.



Fig. 4: Still frame from Barbara Willis Sweete (dir.), *Dido and Aeneas*, Mark Morris Dance Group, DVD, 50'16". © Mark Morris Dance Group 1995.

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Doriana Legge

A Performance Of Sound for an Immersive Theatre

Abstract: This essay delves into the liminal and unpredictable realm of sound and acoustic perception in contemporary works, with a focus on the theatrical sphere. Through the analysis of Ryoji Ikeda's works, including *Dataverse*, *Superposition*, and *Music for Percussion*, this study examines the role of sound composition as a directorial practice. By exploring the intersection of sound, technology, and the human experience, this research aims to uncover the ways in which sound can influence the stage setting, its processes of creation and reception, and the audience's perception of space and time. Drawing on philosophical debates on sound and perception, this essay argues that sound is a powerful tool that can immerse the listener, engage their sensory sphere, and create a "weather world" of dynamic and polymorphous experience. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the ontology of sound and its implications for theatrical practices, encouraging a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between sound, body, and space in 21st-century theatre.

Keywords: Sound, contemporary theatre, immersivity, acoustic perception, performance

In this essay I shall try to explore a liminal and partly unpredictable area. Here we are dealing with the question of sound and acoustic perception in some directorial works of the twenty-first century. Sound Studies consist in the study of sound, and research into sound and listening. When we extend some of the issues to the specific field of theatrical studies and performance the questions start to multiply.

In recent decades, those of the twenty-first century, the daily soundscape has undoubtedly changed. The manipulation of sound materials and technological-digital progress have allowed the creation of impressive sound formations in the stage setting. In this sense, technological progress in sound spatialization or the use of complex microphone systems has created unexpected experimental zones.

The nature of auditory perception, widely discussed in analytical philosophy, has undermined the centrality of vision and triggered questions about the interaction between subject and environment. By listening to sounds, our perception of space and time changes; in everyday life a lot of behavior is guided by sound cues so familiar that consciousness no longer perceives them, and if this happens in the theatre the issue ends up being amplified.

Clearly, the auditory process, the way our auditory system perceives sounds, always works in the same way, whether in an everyday situation or when attending a show or concert. However, it is legitimate to ask how, and how much, auditory perception can influence the stage setting, its processes of creation and reception. Thus, contemporary stage practices become the terrain in which many artists, sound designers and directors use sound as a tool to arouse the aesthetic sensitivity of the listener, with a joint reflection on the phenomenological nature of sound itself.

There is a heated debate around this issue in the field of the philosophy of perception, which I will try to explain briefly. We might refer to the studies by Roberto Casati and Jérôme Dokic (1994) on the auditory experience in relation to space, where three bodies of theory are highlighted: *distal* theories, whereby sound is the very vibration of the object that produced it (and therefore the object is said *to have* sound); *medial* theories, which localize sound as a sound wave and place it in the air (or in another medium of propagation, water for example), resonating with the fact that one often asks of a sound, not “where is it” but “where does it come from?”; *proximal* theories, whereby sound is in the auditory system of the listener, or rather is considered as an internal manifestation occurring in the auditory system and in our brain. In the latter case, the sound might be described as a *sensation*.

Thus, we might say that the most experimental artistic practices entail a conception of sound that oscillates between these different theories regarding the ontological nature of sound itself (distal, medial, proximal theories).

Over the last decade, especially in sound art, this aspect has become more and more evident, whereas, in the theatrical sphere, it seems that there is still a need for it to be traced out in detail, certainly by those who perform theatre, and even more so by those who study its practices.

Therefore, through some of these suggestions we might reflect on certain works that we will take as *case studies*. The works I have chosen are all by a Japanese composer and visual artist, Ryoji Ikeda: *Dataverse*, *Superposition*, *Music for Percussion*.

With these works we shall try to analyze the role of sound composition as a directorial practice.

However, it has to be assumed that sound is a type of mechanical (or kinematic) energy that, starting from a vibrating source, expands in the form of waves through the medium of propagation (water or air) until it reaches the listener. The human ear can hear sounds within a limited range of frequencies and sound pressure. Audible frequencies are generally between 20 Hz and 20000 Hz. Waves below 20 Hz are called infrasound, those above 20kHz, ultrasound. The

human ear is normally unable to hear ultrasound and infrasound, but the body is capable of perceiving vibrations below the common hearing threshold.

The human ear receives the waves and functions as a pressure sensor, but the acoustic pressure is audible according to the frequency of the sounds, that is, the number of oscillations per second: the greater the number of waves, the sharper the sound. A frequency (Hertz) corresponds to a complete oscillation in the time of one second. For example, a sound of 1,000 Hertz is audible at 0 dB (decibels), but if we go down to 30 Hertz the sound is audible at a sound pressure level of at least 60 dB.

While it is indeed true that the human ear is conventionally unable to hear ultrasound and infrasound, the sensory system is capable, despite itself, of perceiving vibrations below the common hearing threshold.

We know, for example, the effects of certain frequencies: infrasound produces a sense of nausea and confusional state, and infrasound of lightheadedness and dizziness. Sound, even when inaudible, is thus a physical phenomenon that acts on our bodies with sometimes unimagined possibilities. So it is evident what a powerful tool it might be in the hands of artists working with sound.

It would be more appropriate to clarify that by the term “sound” we want to refer to what Bregman calls “auditory stream”¹ – expression later replaced with auditory object. In fact, it certainly convinces more, with reference to the particular type of theatrical listening, to think of sound as a stream not related to the simple physical cause that produced it.

Ryoji Ikeda: geography of data, visual and aural

Ryoji Ikeda is one of the few international artists working convincingly on both visual and sound aspects. A recurring theme in his research is the universe of data. In the trilogy *data-verse*, the main electronic composer and visual artist of Japan, processes, transcribes, converts, transforms, and organizes massive scientific data sets to visualize and sonify the different dimensions that coexist in our world, from elementary particles to the universe. The trilogy will present three variations of this journey from the microscopic to the human and the macroscopic, inviting visitors to experience the massive flow of data in which we live. *data-verse* captures hidden facets of nature that have been processed, transcribed, converted and transformed through a massive set of open source scientific data obtained from various institutions such as CERN, NASA and the Human Genome Project,

1 See Bregman 1990.

thanks to which it is possible to visualize and sonify the different dimensions that coexist in our world, from the microscopic to the human, to the macroscopic. What Ikeda says is very interesting: “When I set out making this work, my approach was always, first and foremost, that of a composer. Rather than creating a traditional musical composition, I used data as my source material, applying a system and structure as you would with any score”.

The installation *data-verse* consists, in its first part, of a large-scale screen accompanied by a music created through the obtained data, which harmonizes the high-definition video projections. Generated by an extremely precise computer programming, the work comprises a minimalist electronic soundtrack and high-definition video projections of scientific data. Ikeda’s research allows us to see the world differently and to understand the many layers that make up the universe, particularly the intersections between arts and sciences. The idea is that technology allows us to see what is real and to dig inside things, to see the infinitely large and the infinitely small (just like a microscope or telescope). What Ikeda creates is a geography of data, visual and aural, which recurs in many of his works.

Let’s look at another of his works: *Superposition*.² The initial sequence begins by interrupting the silence with a very low frequency sound, not audible to the human ear, which gradually becomes more and more distinct. As I said before, therefore, many of these sounds are perceived by the spectators’ bodies rather than by the auditory system.

In this work there is an evident presence of two performers, a rare element in Ikeda’s work; in this case the two, Amelie Grould and Stephane Garin, in the role of data-coder and decoder, are there to show us the interaction between human and machine, generating words and messages through Morse code. However, the letters and text projected on the screen only appear intermittently, so it is difficult to grasp their meaning.

In *Superposition*, as in Ikeda’s other works, it is clear that the creation of sounds and video emerges via a process of editing, sampling, cut & loop and remix. These modes are not simply techniques, but a way of rethinking the aesthetics of multiplicity. The electronic musician creates a bricolage of music from distant universes, manipulates sounds, mixes fragments and stratifies them; thus, composition itself is linked to an operation of active and creative listening.

Another work from 2018, *Music for Percussion*,³ would seem to go in a different direction. On this occasion, Ikeda worked with pure acoustic sounds produced

² This is an extract from the work: <https://vimeo.com/49873167> (last accessed 07/12/2024).

³ This is an extract from the work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8az0JBOW_0g (last accessed 07/12/2024).

by a group of four percussionists. However, the interesting thing is that these instruments sound different from what we would actually expect. Let's look at the case of the last two compositions from this performance. They are compositions for triangles and cymbals and the sounds are produced by a simple triangle. So, it is clear that even the most conventional instruments can produce sound textures similar to those of electronic music. In this way, although this performance is a long way from Ikeda's previous works, it actually displays unexpected continuity. In another track, Ikeda uses cymbals and other percussive instruments, and he abandons the acoustic energy of his previous works and invites the listener to take part in a liturgy in which there is a shift from silence to an acoustic, and surprisingly fluid, magma.

The performance explores the liminal zones of darkness and silence which precede the beginning of the performance and announce its end. Therefore, the sound emerges gradually as if from a chrysalis.

Here is the idea of a world born from sound (and here we should mention all those creation myths that claim the world was born from sound – Marcus Schneider discusses all this in his very well-known book *Primitive Music*).

A few concluding remarks. Ikeda's work invites us to think that the actual perception of a performance does not take place at a distance but fully involves the sensory sphere and the "virtual body". In fact, sound has the capacity to immerse the listener without any supporting physical presence on stage. In the words of Merleau-Ponty: "Ce qui importe pour l'orientation du spectacle, c'est ne pas mon corps tel qu'il est en fait, comme chose dans l'espace objectif, mais mon corps comme système d'actions possibles, un corps virtuel dont le "lieu" phenomenal est défini par sa tâche et par sa situation."⁴

In the theater, imaginary worlds are inhabited by our bodies, "virtually" in action, but here I do not want to mean those performance practices that have to do with the active participation of the spectator and break the more classical separation between the actors' space and the public space, the distinction seems to me almost incidental in a discourse that wants to focus on the acoustic matter of the performance.

Indeed, sound has the power to immerse the viewer without the support of his or her physical presence on the scene.

Even when listening in the theater is mostly frontal, that is, the loudspeakers are placed in front of the audience and there is no specific surround design, the sound expands and envelops.

4 Merleau-Ponty 1945, 289

Thus, the most basic difference lies between interaction and immersion. Immersion is a complex phenomenon that requires different levels of neuro-psychological involvement, such as perception, attention, and emotion. George Home-Cook refers to sound immersion as a sum of acts of attention, and together something to do with the movement of sound itself: “sound *moves* and we move in sound. The experience of being immersed in sound is thus not only dynamic but *polymorphous*.”⁵

We can investigate this extra-quotidian experience – as Home-Cook suggests – both as a concept and as a phenomenon: “‘observation’ therefore, is not separate from the state of being immersed, but a necessary aspect of its dynamism: participation (or immersion) is not only a “condition” for “observation” but is itself characterized by dynamic acts of embodied attending.”⁶ Then he adds: “Whilst we may find ourselves seemingly “immersed” in sound, this immersion necessarily motivates us to participate in acts of *sounding*.”⁷

Tim Ingold refers, for example, to the “weather world”, an expression that seems to him preferable to the abused “sound landscape”, coined by Raymond Murray Schafer, or to the more recent “sound-as-scenography” coined by Ross Brown, who seems to forget that auditory attention does not have the same characteristics as visual attention, is multidirectional, and never has to do with detachment.

What I find successful about Ingold’s formula instead, and particularly valid for those theater studies that want to focus on the acoustic dimension of a certain work, lies in the absence of references to spatiality and objective reality, then: “As the visual is to light, and the aural to sound, so the landscape is to the weather-world.”⁸

It will be necessary to pay attention to the movements that lie at the origin of things and not to the objective form of the things themselves: this is the field in which many artists and sound designers move, using sound as a tool that activates the aesthetic sensibility of the spectator, but reflecting together on the phenomenological nature of sound itself. As we have seen, the acoustic texture, in the theater, while coming from elsewhere (the voice of the actors on stage or the speakers placed near the stage itself) is perceived more proximately than the things we see, and in fact it is often said that “the actor’s voice comes in” or that “the sound fills the room”.

⁵ Home-Cook 2015, 142.

⁶ Home-Cook 2015, 149–150.

⁷ Home-Cook 2015, 150.

⁸ Ingold 2011, 97.

For some philosophers of perception these expressions are not quite correct, so – as I have argued elsewhere⁹ – it seems to me preferable to use Bregman’s formula and consider sound as an “auditory stream”. According to the American philosopher Don Ihde “Sound comes in two primary spatial dimensions [...] Sound is directional and sound is encompassing”; he then adds “neither dimension is lacking in any given experience of sound.”¹⁰ George Home-Cook talks about sound immersion as something to do with the movement of sound itself: “sound *moves* and we move in sound. The experience of being immersed in sound is thus not only dynamic but *polymorphous*.”¹¹

Ikeda manipulates the sensory experience of listening and focuses the listener’s attention on the progression of the auditory flow; in this sense that one can create a directorial design with sound.

I would like to close with the words of anthropologist Tim Ingold:

In short, looking out to sea we saw a world in movement, in flux and becoming, a world of ocean and sky, a weather-world. We saw a *world without objects*. [...] The breaking waves were their sound, not objects that make a sound; the wind was its feel, not an object touched; the sky was light, not something seen in the light.¹²

Ikeda’s work for *Music for Percussion* can be traced back to this observation by Ingold, and, in general, to allusions of a creative energy, not linked to objects but closer to an atmospheric world, in which sound, light and air are mediums of an immersive and dynamic perception, far beyond the three known dimensions.

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⁹ See Legge 2019.

¹⁰ Ihde 1970, 17.

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Giovanna Santaera

***Black Mirror* – *Bandersnatch* and/as Intermedial Performativity through TV Series, Cinema and Digital Transcodification**

Abstract: This essay explores the intermedial and digital aspects of *Bandersnatch*, an interactive work part of the *Black Mirror* series, released on Netflix between 2018 and 2020. *Bandersnatch*, a choose-your-own-adventure style video game, blurred the lines between film, video, and interactive digital storytelling, raising questions about its categorisation and reception. This study examines the intermedial challenges of taxonomy, the role of digital codes in its transcodification, and the implications of its intermedial performativity. By analysing the structure, design, and user experience of *Bandersnatch*, this research reveals the complexities of its interactive storytelling, including the influence of media systems, technologies, and contexts on the user's choices and perception. Furthermore, it highlights the need for a transdisciplinary approach to understanding the hybridisation of media in *Bandersnatch*, recognising it as a macro-genre of transcodification that challenges traditional forms, processes, and practices of media cultures.

Keywords: Transcodification, interactivity, digital storytelling, performativity, intermediality

Introduction

Bandersnatch is an interactive work that is part of the *Black Mirror* series' narrative ecosystem, which could be experienced on the Netflix platform between 2018 and 2020. The digital producer conceived and financed the project realised by Charlie Brooker, the showrunner of the famous series, which has been dealing with technologies from a dystopian but also a realistic perspective since 2011.¹

At first glance, *Bandersnatch* tells about a young man who manages to get into a programming company in the 1980s to develop a video game, designed as a kind of *Imagine Software*. The imaginary ludic dispositif is a fictional re-adaptation based on an interactive novel by Jerome F. Davies, in which the reader can choose and shape the paths of the adventure themselves. Similarly, via *Bandersnatch*, Netflix users can take part in Stefan's journey (in which, like the book's author, he is in

¹ See McSweeney/Joy 2019.

danger of losing control) by making their choices between two options for just ten seconds at a time. The work could be realised in this way in trillions of possible variants with several different endings. The book cited in *Bandersnatch* has never existed, but a video game called *Bandersnatch* was developed in the 1980s, although it did not have the approach of *choose-your-own adventure*, as it is called.²

The experimental work *Bandersnatch* has been categorised as a form of interactive cinema. It has been also received as a kind of episode or event of the *Black Mirror* series, as an interactive digital video, as a film or series with a dominant video game modality and sometimes as a kind of *new medium* (namely, interactive digital storytelling).

This paper aims to discuss in the first section some questions of intermedial classification and critical reception of *Bandersnatch*, exploring issues and possibilities of its stratified performative intermediality. The second section will focus on the role and significance of the digital in order to analyse its intermedial transcodification and engage with its deeper references and experiences of our relationships through media. This meta-reflexive level leads us to discover how we can consider *intermedial performativity* as a kind of category in which collecting artistic projects that address a medial reflection.

Intermedial challenges of categorisation and reception

From a basic perspective, practices such as interactive cinema³ and digital narrative video⁴ combine film and video modalities with the adaptive and interactive capabilities of the digital. But they are not new. The interactivity of the *choose-your-own adventure* has already been used in novels and the first non-digital interactive films, characterised by the embodying of a kind of game system. As they are modeled on traditional cinema, the fundamental methods of filmmaking, image composition, and montage remain unchanged, even if they are challenged in terms of planning, production, and continuity. In this way, *Bandersnatch*, like cinema, developed and multiplied what it called *visual narrative branches* in a rhizomatic way: segments of stories were interconnected and could be assembled in variable conglomerates of pre-loaded contents at each point as a result of the different

² See Rowney 2018.

³ See Başcı/Tanakıncı 2019; Adler 2020.

⁴ See Roth/Koenitz 2019.

weight given to user choices assembling various routes, sequences, or variation of scenes. François Jost (2020) noted from a media archaeological and ecological perspective that *Bandersnatch* could be interpreted as a kind of cinema of *inter-action*. It was an example of what can be defined as *post-cinema*, but it is important to remember that similar works remediate historical paradigms, such as that of early films in this case. The cinema of *inter-action* reconfigures filmographic works as a performative, distributed sum of experiences of construction and fruition characterised by different notions of what film is, namely composed by different (artistic) codes and experienced in different spaces, of which the audience becomes quite intuitively aware. Based on this model, the transcodification of *Bandersnatch* must find out what *interactions* there were between the human and non-human elements, the environments, and the activated dynamics, as in the early cinema experience. Even though *Bandersnatch* has been considered a digital audiovisual video form, its language, close to the idea of *post-cinema*, has taken the historical features of cinematographic and audiovisual media and combined them with digital spaces, codes, and audience's interplays.⁵

Considering *Bandersnatch* as a video game, the user's activity was at the center of this kind of interpretation, which reduced the traditional notion of film experience to its opposite: bodily passivity. This distinction cannot be accepted from a phenomenological point of view, especially if we think about the immaterial cooperation that is necessary for any work, and also remember that in *Bandersnatch* users could make a choice without a physical gesture (in this case the system made an invisible selections based on the users' previous activities or an automatic advancement related to the branches' engineering). At the same time, the deterministic conception that users constructed the narrative experience only through their interactive, i.e. physical, choices on the technological platform can be reviewed if we consider that every artwork needs supports and apparatuses to be realised and that it has a medial function itself. Furthermore, in addition to the role of media, there were various elements such as cultures, beliefs, values and personal or social experiences that influence the design and choices of the users. Another current in the video game interpretation of *Bandersnatch* was the functional quality of the characters, but this could also be applied to other media. Additionally, Stefan, the young programmer, showed forms of resistance and dialectics with the outside world. So, users were also like a kind of *vector character* in themselves. It has been clarified⁶ that *Bandersnatch* could be recognised as a computer-based video game due to its main component, which is the *realisation of each view as a unique per-*

⁵ See Arcagni 2016.

⁶ See Rodrigues *et al* 2020.

formance, subject to early interruptions or unexpected rescues, non-logical shifts between one dimension and another, and varied repetitions of certain sequences. To address this question, *Bandersnatch* was inserted into a kind of *intermedial communication close to video games* that transcodes and re-signifies all the codes based on it, creating something new.⁷

On another level, *Bandersnatch* was also part of the *Black Mirror* series project. For this reason, it has sometimes been presented or explored as an episode or model for the entire *Black Mirror* series (which launched it as a *serial Black Mirror event*) and also as a tool for thinking about seriality in general.⁸ *Bandersnatch* basically combined the modular, segmented way and the ecological construction of seriality. The fact that it was part of the *Black Mirror* universe was initially hinted at in a very simple way through the Easter Eggs it contained.⁹ But self-references were highlighted by a meta-ending in which users could declare to Stefan that they controlled him by watching a series through Netflix. It also emerged in a branch where he discovered he was on the set of the *Black Mirror* movie for Netflix. For this metacritical point about the relationship between the audience and the platform, I would like to recall that the series first ran on Channel 4 and then moved to Netflix from the third season onwards, but the anthological series continues to remind us of our relationships with media and technologies, including its own and *Bandersnatch*. *Black Mirror*, like its interactive experiment, also consists of self-contained episodes that end in twisted ways and with open endings.¹⁰ Each of them is connected not only by the theme of human-technological narrative, but also by the way they advance stories built on real or possible media relations through the confusion of spaces and times between our past, present and future.¹¹ In this way, Netflix confirmed the deeper meta-reflexive intermedial idea of seriality as *complex storytelling* proposed by Mittell (2015), who also highlighted the development of an engineering model of digital writing for series in scripted/unscripted ways.

Finally, *Bandersnatch* has been analysed like an autonomous media form of *interactive digital storytelling*.¹² As mentioned earlier, users could also decide to not physically interact with the work, as made experimentally by Adriano D'Aloia (2020). This is an option that immediately problematises the idea of its digital-physical interactivity.

⁷ See Rodrigues et al 2020.

⁸ See Demaria/Piluso 2020; Ivars-Nicolas/Martinez-Cano 2019.

⁹ See Chapman 2018.

¹⁰ See Cirucci/Vacker 2018.

¹¹ See Maiello 2018.

¹² See Monteiro 2020.

In view of all this, the problems identified by a section of academic critics are related to the lack of recognition of the hybridisation of the media in *Bandersnatch* as a categorical challenge to experience the *complex transcodification* between audience, technologies, and artworks not exclusively in a rational or physical way, but both and through its digital immateriality. The second issue, in my view, concerns the analysis of interactive participation that have been limited to the enjoyable, immersive, or phenomenological realisation without considering contextual aspects.¹³ Moreover, the problems of *Bandersnatch*'s critics stem from external analysis. Even when the interface has been mentioned, it has been seen as a simple double choice or diagrammatic chart flow, considering the structural design of the story through a classic causal or dualistic view. For example, one of the most frequently cited and criticised choice has been the first between two brands of cereals because it has no narratively relevant scope. It served to familiarise the user, but someone has noticed that the cereal boxes reappeared in subsequent scenes recalling the cinematographic and video product placement. So, more profoundly, they connect sequences that reveal, through viewing, how, where, and when media contents might be partially influenced or shared as forms of complex relationships.

Digital codes and intermedial performativities

Now we can look at how *Bandersnatch* has been *transcoded*. First, Netflix engineers developed *Branch Manager*, a tool that allows to connect multiple script ideas from different branches of the ecosystem and prepared them so that they were not necessarily connected through a double-option choice.¹⁴ The same engineers have mocked up the common idea and different visual representations of *Bandersnatch*'s structure to decode it through a diagram or flow of the double-option system.¹⁵ Moreover, *Bandersnatch*'s visual continuity was guaranteed without interruptions by a JavaScript transcoding asset, based on what they define as *Seamless UI (User Interface)*. This was a media file composition that continuously uploaded different files to the pre-cache, segmented them, evaluated the external and internal *preconditions* related to the network (device, user, choices, and timing), and adjusted the outputs in each segment. Nevertheless, *Bandersnatch* could not be displayed on all devices due to the computational requirements. This shed light on one of the main problems associated with technologies as closed

¹³ See Roth/Koenitz 2019; Beugnett/Hibberd 2020; D'Aloia 2020.

¹⁴ See Roettgers 2018.

¹⁵ See Netflix Engineering 2019.

or incompatible systems. For this reason, Charles Brooker was not interested in creating an *interactive work* per se, but a story that could illuminate the interconnection between users and media. In addition, *Bandersnatch* analyses should take into account that the realisation was linked also to the so-called *Custom UX* (*User Experience*), which consists of *choice points* influenced by the weights, rules and measures of the underlying JavaScript infrastructure and conditions in each segment and in different branches.¹⁶ Indeed, the selection of the scenes and branches were influenced by the previous choices.¹⁷ The engineering team explained that they created in this way a kind of granular control, distributed in the transcoding workflow.¹⁸ The system of the choice points was also based on Netflix's experience of profiling, viewing habits and preferences.¹⁹ So, in the different branches, choices were related to moral decisions, psychological states, actions or narratological ideal choices that sometimes allowed alternatives with only violent options (Roth/Koenitz 2019, 249). If users did not choose to interact, the system managed the choices.

Thus, as Lay and Johnson (2020) argued, the selections in *Bandersnatch* presupposed (not only in technological terms) external conditions, different subjects and objects, and parallel virtual co-existence possibilities, suggesting at least a shared dialectic accountability. Even if *Bandersnatch* did not start from social and cultural perspectives, – but I think that every medium contains these aspects from the beginning – Anna Catarina Monteiro (2020) argued that the project moved through the following aspects: positive and negative polarities for the choices; the ambiguous real and fictional character of the story told, which gave it a kind of proximity to our lives; pleasurable and regretful, but always cathartic kinds of interactivity linked to the technological system, human thoughts and emotions; and the singular and general effects of reception, which became a motif of debate. These kinds of works, she argued, might require a *techno-cultural linguistic approach* to understand how they are created starting from the relationship with the body, personal desires, prejudices, cultural assumptions, and social beliefs.²⁰

But if, from the engineers' point of view, the buffer was the enemy,²¹ continuity was creatively disrupted by Charles Brooker's working with them to force users to loop, go back, repeat the process or adopt Netflix platform inputs such as fast-

¹⁶ See Schuler 2019.

¹⁷ See Roettgers 2018.

¹⁸ See Schuler 2019.

¹⁹ See Damiani 2019; Cirucci/Vacker 2018.

²⁰ See Monteiro 2020.

²¹ See Netflix Engineering 2019; Reynolds 2018.

forward.²² So, Buffering as a kind of meta-reflexive interruption, as theorised by Appadurai and Alexander in *Failure* (2019), was thus intentionally produced as the most important and deeply dramaturgical goal of its interactivity. Indeed, the symbol of the buffer can be seen in the promotional materials of *Bandersnatch* and *Black Mirror* in the past used like a *visual trope*.

The last level of analysis concerns their use of intermediality from a literary perspective, with the final focus on media perception. In *Bandersnatch* it is summarised by the symbol the *glyph*. It indicated three interconnected paths divided into different branches. The glyph has been considered as a visual representation of the digital transcodification, the concept of *Bandersnatch* and the complex relationships and entanglements between digital agencies, infrastructures and technocultures to show their mediated reciprocity.²³ It has also been used in other episodes of *Black Mirror*, confirming how this project gathers the thoughts of the entire series. In *Bandersnatch* it came from the original novel and it was recognisable several times, especially with the PAX villain, a kind of monster reproduced like a PAC death video game. But the word *Bandersnatch* recalled the mythological being of the same name created by Lewis Carroll through a visual *ekphrasis* in the sequel to *Alice of Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass* (1871).²⁴ The undetermined, unique (as neologism) and verbal description created, forming different mental images of this being, were used by Carroll to regenerate its linguistic ambiguity and uncategorisable quality as a challenge to any hierarchy.²⁵ In relation to Carroll's novel, *Bandersnatch* seemed to echo many aspects of *Alice in Wonderland*,²⁶ such as the madness and enquiries of a rabbit in the infancy by Stefan who also walked through a mirror. But the deeper reference was connected to this *intermedial ekphrasis* as an approach. This technique has been discussed by López-Varela, who has collected similar examples in other intermedial works. In these cases, she speaks of the development of an *intermedial ekphrasis*²⁷ as a process that connects the inter-artistic systems of representation and the medial discourses about them for the users.²⁸ Following this dispositif, in *Bandersnatch* the invisible but material dynamics were visualised by the users *experiencing* with their practice and imagination the interface that constructs the story with the complex interchanges between different forms of graphic, iconic, acoustic,

²² See Roettgers 2018.

²³ See Conley/Borroughs 2020.

²⁴ See López-Varela Azcárate 2015, 53.

²⁵ See Kérchy 2018.

²⁶ See Kérchy 2018; Pearce 2018.

²⁷ See López-Varela Azcárate 2015, 63.

²⁸ See López-Varela Azcárate 2015, 55.

computational and human transcodification in different spaces, temporalities, environments and conditions.²⁹ To simplify glyph and *Bandersnatch*'s intermedial ekphrastic approach, it resembles Wittgenstein's visual perception experiment, where the image creates a rabbit or a duck depending on how you see it but goes beyond that to imagine a third possibility at the end that grasps both, the conditions of viewing and the viewers.

A specific macro-genre of transcodification

To conclude, *Bandersnatch*, like *Black Mirror*, runs like a *media critic and theory tool*³⁰ or an *epistemological tool* to perceive the conflicts and different possibilities of media cultures through its experience.³¹ Because of this, *intermedial performativity* may be recognised as a macro-genre for similar works that challenge forms, processes (from production to the reception), and practices of our everyday life. This should help us to collect and analyse cases that use intermedial approaches and performative traits to produce an experience and a reflection on the media and their environments. If in the past intermediality has been explained as the passage or co-presence of recognisable codes,³² as a hybrid art form³³ and as a critical philosophical approach to the elaboration of representations, media and reality,³⁴ the next step is to recognise not only practices but the existence of works as *performative intermediality* in which these elements are co-present at all levels of content, material and experience, as already stated by some authors.³⁵ But this certainly requires further research to develop and share a methodology based on the necessary *transcodification* to the artistic, media archaeological, ecological and socio-cultural fields involved.

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²⁹ See Giomi 2020.

³⁰ See Cirucci/Vacker 2018; Conley/Borroughs 2020, 122.

³¹ See Tirino/Tramontana 2018.

³² See Rajewsky 2018.

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³⁵ Eilittä/Louvel/Kim 2012; King/Page 2017.

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Umberto Rossi

From V to V: The Problematic Adaptation of Alan Moore & David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*

Abstract: The academic discussion about adaptation seems to be mostly interested in criticizing the prejudice that deems the original superior to the adaptation, especially when literary works are adapted for the cinema. But what happens when comics, arguably a form of art which is less prestigious than cinema, are turned into films? The reaction of comics writer Alan Moore to James McTeigue adaptation of *V for Vendetta* presents us with an interesting case study, inasmuch as Moore criticized the screenwriters and the director for being *too* faithful to the original, thus inverting the usual complaints about adaptations' unfaithfulness. Moore's disapproval of the movie suggests that we need a political, not only aesthetic, analysis of the adaptation process.

Keywords: Dystopia, superhero, Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*, comics, cinema.

One of the main issues in adaptation studies seems to be the criticism of the original's purported superiority (by "original" I mean the adapted text, especially if it is a literary work) vis-à-vis the adaptation, that is, the product of the adaptation process (be it a film, an opera, a play, a TV series, etc.). Stam tersely states it thus: "A film adaptation as 'copy,' by analogy, is not necessarily inferior to the novel as 'original.'"¹ Such a stance is also expressed by Linda Hutcheon in her *Theory of Adaptation*, where she also strives to historicize this depreciation of adaptations:

It is the (post-)Romantic valuing of the original creation and of the originating creative genius that is clearly one source of the denigration of adapters and adaptations. Yet this negative view is actually a late addition to Western culture's long and happy history of borrowing and stealing or, more accurately, sharing stories. [...] An adaptation's double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis.²

The issue seems to be so relevant that Stam lists and analyses eight reasons why (cinematic) adaptations have often been considered inferior to (literary) originals, ranging from the valorization of anteriority and seniority to class prejudice, as cin-

1 Stam 2005, 5.

2 Hutcheon 2006, 1–2

ema has been seen as a form of entertainment “for the great unwashed mass audience.”³

One might then expect that such a denigration of adapters and adaptations should not occur when the original cultural artifact that is adapted belongs to a less prestigious form of art than cinema; thus the movie adaptation of a graphic novel (or comic mini-series)⁴ should hopefully avoid the quarrels about faithfulness/unfaithfulness, vulgarization, oversimplification, “embodiedness” etc. that have been denounced by Stam.

And yet there was a rather embittered reaction by the author of *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore, to the cinematic adaptation of his work, born as a series of short episodes published on the *Warrior* magazine from 1982 to 1985, left unfinished as the magazine was discontinued, then republished by DC Comics and completed from 1988 to 1989 – a graphic narrative which has subsequently been hailed as one of the masterpieces of the sequential art and repeatedly reprinted. Moore was so irked by the screenplay he read before the film was shot (written by the then Wachowski brothers, who also co-produced the film), that he demanded his name was taken off it and his share of the rights was given to the artists who had worked with him (David Lloyd first and foremost); Moore was later outraged when the filmmakers issued a press release saying that he was really excited about the film, so he resolved to burn bridges with DC Comics and Warner Bros., which he defined a “shark pool”.

The reasons of Moore’s disapproval are stated in two interviews from which I have taken two lengthy quotations, the first one also sketching some of the differences between the graphic novel/series and James McTeigue’s 2005 movie:

Those words, “fascism” and “anarchy,” occur nowhere in the film. It’s been turned into a Bush-era parable by people too timid to set a political satire in their own country. In my original story there had been a limited nuclear war, which had isolated Britain, caused a lot of chaos and a collapse of government, and a fascist totalitarian dictatorship had sprung up. Now, in the film, you’ve got a sinister group of right-wing figures – not fascists, but you know that they’re bad guys – and what they have done is manufactured a bio-terror weapon in secret, so that they can fake a massive terrorist incident to get everybody on their side, so

3 Stam 2005, 8.

4 These different definitions are respectively taken from the English-language and Italian-language *Wikipedia* entry on Moore and Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta*. One might argue that the definition in the Italian *Wikipedia* entry is more accurate from a philological point of view, while the one in the English-language entry seem to take into account only the current status of this graphic narrative, obliterating its origins. The introduction to the volume edition I have used, on the other hand, correctly reconstructs the complex *Entstehungsgeschichte* of *V for Vendetta*, placing it in its historical context, something that, as we shall see, has also been underscored by Alan Moore.

that they can pursue their right-wing agenda. It's a thwarted and frustrated and perhaps largely impotent American liberal fantasy of someone with American liberal values [standing up] against a state run by neo-conservatives – which is not what *V for Vendetta* was about. It was about fascism, it was about anarchy, it was about [England]. The intent of the film is nothing like the intent of the book as I wrote it. And if the Wachowski brothers had felt moved to protest the way things were going in America, then wouldn't it have been more direct to do what I'd done and set a risky political narrative sometime in the near future that was obviously talking about the things going on today?⁵

As we can see, it is not a matter of aesthetic/cultural dignity, but a political issue. The deletion of the two key words, “fascism” and “anarchy”, is indeed a remarkable choice of the adapters. In the graphic narrative the two terms are not only present, but explained and underscored in the same episode, meaningfully titled “Versions”. First we have Adam Susan, the leader of Norsefire, the fascist movement that has seized power in post-nuclear-war England, proudly declaring to be a fascist, and expounding the meaning of its emblem, the fasces: “The Romans invented fascism. A bundle of bound twigs was its symbol. One twig could be broken. A bundle would prevail. Fascism... strength in unity.”⁶ Then we are presented with V's dialogue with the statue of Justice, in which he theatrically declares his love for anarchy.⁷

What is remarkable, however, is that Moore does not complain because of the unfaithfulness of the screenplay, but because it was *too* faithful, a point he clearly makes in another interview:

[...] if they wanted to protest about George Bush and the way that American society is going since 9–11 – which would [be] completely understandable – then why don't they do what I did back in the 1980s when I didn't like the way that England was going under Margaret Thatcher, which is to do a story in my own country, that was clearly about events that were happening right then in my own country, and kind of make it obvious that that's what you're talking about. It struck me that for Hollywood to make *V for Vendetta*, it was a way for thwarted and impotent American liberals to feel that they were making some kind of statement about how pissed off they were with the current situation without really risking anything. It's all set in England, which I think that probably, in most American eyes, is kind of a fairytale kingdom where we still perhaps still have giants. It doesn't really exist; it might as well be in the Land of Oz for most Americans. So you can get set your political parable in this fantasy environment called England, and then you can vent your spleen against George Bush and the neo-conservatives.⁸

5 “Alan Moore – The Last Angry Man”

6 Moore/Lloyd 2005, 37.

7 See Moore/Lloyd 2005, 41.

8 “Mythmakers and Lawbreakers.”

This seems to stem from another passage in the first interview I have quoted, where Moore describes what *should be* the correct relation between adapted work and adaptation, that is, one of independence: “If the film is a masterpiece, that has nothing to do with my book. If the film is a disaster, that has nothing to do with my book. They’re two separate entities, and people will understand that.”⁹ Hutcheon and Stam might wholeheartedly agree with this statement, but after the release of the cinematic version of *V for Vendetta* Moore understood that there is a rub. In one of the interviews I have quoted, he immediately gives the lie to the overoptimistic idea of the original being independent from its adaptation: “This was very naive because most people are not bothered with whether it’s adapted from a book or not. And if they do know, they assume it was a faithful adaptation. There’s no need to read the book if you’ve seen the film, right?”¹⁰

Moore seems to be aware of something that neither Hutcheon nor Stam have taken into account, that is, the sheer mediatic power of cinema vis-à-vis a less prestigious art form with smaller audiences such as “auteur” comics. Many more people have seen *V for Vendetta* the movie than have read the original comic, so much so that the adaptation, regardless of its being faithful or unfaithful, can be said to replace, or hide, the original in the mediasphere. Of course, this is something that does not apply to the relation of literary works – whose cultural status is much higher than that of comics – to cinematic/televisual adaptations (moreover, literary works have had a longer history, and have been taught in schools and universities). All in all, what we should not forget is that adaptation does not take place in a vacuum, but is a complex process conditioned by a series of economic, political, cultural forces:¹¹ the making of any film based on a literary text, if we focus on the screenwriting process, is proof of this, and pure aesthetic concerns are not always the main cause of a film’s faithfulness/unfaithfulness.

I wish to underscore a key point: Moore’s argument against McTeigue’s adaptation of *V for Vendetta* is not primarily aesthetic/artistic. He even asks for less faithfulness to the original: he believes that not changing the setting, that is, leaving the story in England, weakens the political warning the film should deliver, as it does not help the viewers’ identification with its characters. Given the fact that both the comic and the film are basically dystopian narratives, one cannot help comparing the movie adaptation to a classic of the genre, Sinclair Lewis 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here*, in which Americans are presented with the threat

9 “Alan Moore – The Last Angry Man”

10 “Alan Moore – The Last Angry Man”

11 Quoted by Stam in his introduction, but he only takes them into account vis-à-vis the reception of adaptations when it is biased due to the overestimation of the original, but not when they condition the very adaptation process.

of fascism by telling the story of how a fascist regime might rise to power in the United States of America. Lewis was well aware that spatial proximity was a key factor; hence he did not set his narrative in another country; to be spatially close to an event is as important as being temporally close to it, an aspect that has been persuasively highlighted by Darko Suvin, who maintained that “[i]n this type of dystopian SF, the nearer the story date the greater the urgency.”¹² By being faithful to the setting of the comic, McTeague’s film may well be said to dampen the urgency of the warning.

Other choices of the screenwriters seem to aim at softening the impact of the cinematic adaptation. Once again, this is not a matter of faithfulness/unfaithfulness; the issue at stake is to understand what the differences from the original aim to. In the very first episode of the comic, “The Villain,” Evey Hammond is arrested by a vice detail because she is prostituting herself. Moore wanted to set out clearly who is the victim (while playing on the ambiguity of the term “villain”, which V attributes to himself), and who are the victimizers, so to say, as one of the fingermen (the policemen) boasts: “You’ll do anything we want and *then* we’ll kill you. That’s our prerogative.”¹³ Moreover, by having Evey introduced as a clumsy and naive prostitute (the first time she propositions a prospective customer she speaks to a plainclothes policeman), Moore immediately introduces the theme of sexual exploitation in a male-dominated society, which will also be developed by the subplot that have as protagonists two other female characters, Rosemary Almond and Helen Heyer. All this disappears in the film: Evey is arrested because she is in the streets during the curfew, while going to visit her boss, Gordon Deitrich.

The character of Gordon has undergone a remarkable transmogrification in the adaptation. In Moore’s graphic narrative he is a small-time hoodlum who only appears in Book Two, as the lover and protector of Evey once she has been abandoned by V outside his underground shelter. He is a sort of substitute for V, who in turn has replaced Evey’s father as a paternal figure. In the comic Gordon is subsequently killed by Alister Harper, the ruthless Scottish gangster whose gang is eventually used as auxiliary police force when the Norsefire regime begins to collapse. In the film Gordon becomes a gay talk show host, played by the iconic actor Stephen Fry, who is arrested because he has satirized the government in his TV program (but he is executed because a copy of the Quran is found in his flat). The transformation is definitely interesting as it makes it clear that male homosexuals are targeted by the regime as much as lesbians, like actress Valerie

¹² Suvin 2002, 379.

¹³ Moore/Lloyd 2005, 11.

Page, another key character of both comic and film. In the former Valerie is a much more important and visible character than the only male homosexual, Robert (whose surname is remarkably absent from the text); moreover, Robert seems to be tolerated by the regime,¹⁴ even protected by policeman Derek Almond, and is only killed when he gives vent to his rage and indignation for the brutal death of his mother,¹⁵ who has been eliminated like other elderly people.¹⁶ Valerie is still a key character in the cinematic adaptation, as it is by reading her memoir that Evey achieves her inner liberation (something which is already in the comic), but Gordon (in the movie) is surely a more complex character than Robert, and does not only play a passive role in the plot.

What is more puzzling is the total elimination of two important female characters, Rosemary Almond and Helen Heyer, who play crucial roles in the plot of the comic. Of course, turning a complex 265-page graphic narrative with plot and subplots¹⁷ into a 2-hour movie asks for a radical streamlining of the narrative line; but one may wonder why the screenwriters decided to elide the two female characters more clearly endowed with agency, even though Rosemary only becomes an active character in the end, when she shoots Adam Susan, the leader of the regime, and Helen is a definitely negative character, animated by ruthless ambition and unbridled lust for power. Rosemary, though married to a member of the Finger, the regime's police, is a victim; she is harassed by her husband Derek, who goes so far as to threaten her with his gun, though unloaded, and, after Derek is killed by V, is cheated by the insurance company and must work in a sleazy nightclub ominously called Kitty-Kat Keller, patronized by fingermen and criminals. On the other hand, Helen, the wife of a high-ranking member of the regime, Conrad Heyer, in charge of electronic surveillance, is a sort of dark lady,¹⁸ always scheming and striving to

¹⁴ Scattered throughout the graphic narrative there are veiled hints at Adam Susan's covert homosexuality; readers are however clearly shown that he is in love with Fate, the mega-computer that manages agricultural and industrial production on behalf of the regime.

¹⁵ Moore/Lloyd 2005, 129.

¹⁶ Moore/Lloyd 2005, 127.

¹⁷ Besides, Moore, talking about *Watchmen*, said that he and David Gibbons, the artist, "could place almost subliminal details in every panel, and we knew that the reader could take the time to spot everything" (Alan Moore – The Last Angry Man). *V for Vendetta* is almost as dense and multi-layered – but the moviegoer cannot take all that time. This also confirms that Moore is well aware of the specificity of both media.

¹⁸ Of course the phrase "dark lady" is used to acknowledge the visual influence of noir movies on the first, black and white version of *V for Vendetta*, an influence which is hidden by the coloring of later edition, an unwelcome addition that has spoiled the impressive graphic work of David Lloyd. But, given the Shakespearian origin of the phrase, it also seems highly appropriate inasmuch as

reach the top of the pyramid of power. Rosemary and Helen are visually opposed, the former being dark-haired, the latter an oxygenated blonde; the visual opposition seems to hint at their opposed characters, the passive victim, and the endlessly scheming villainess. But they both change: Rosemary plays an active role at the end, killing the dictator, thus bringing about the final collapse of the regime; Helen is shown as an impotent figure at the end of the story, when she tries to manipulate former inspector Finch like all the other men she has used in her climb to power, and is shunned by him.

Hence the cinematic version of *V for Vendetta* elided two important female characters endowed with agency, albeit episodic (Rosemary's) or negative (Helen's). Once this has happened, the power struggle that wrecks the totalitarian regime in the comic is reduced in the film to a vicious fight among men which however doesn't lead to a total collapse of society (which is shown instead at the end of the comic). Only two important female characters are left in the movie; one of them is Valerie Page, the woman in cell IV, which is not very different from the character in the graphic narrative (her story has not been radically changed, there are only somatic differences between the character as drawn by Lloyd and actress Natasha Wightman). But let us not forget that Valerie's agency is quite limited: she is already dead when the story begins, and hers is a story of discrimination, marginalization, victimization, with a brief parenthesis of happiness that only lasts three years.¹⁹ It might be argued that the memoir Valerie managed to smuggle into V's cell triggered a deep change in him, as it does in Evey during her simulated imprisonment; but what V manages to do, all his apocalyptic revenge, is mostly made possible by the experiments carried out in the Larkhill detention camp – and this is consistent with Moore's understated idea that a fascist regime contains in itself the forces that will ultimately lead to its destruction, V being a sort of catalyst.

Then there is Evey Hammond. She is surely much more than V's sidekick in the graphic narrative, because she ultimately *replaces* the masked revenger.²⁰ This is particularly relevant if we do not forget that *V for Vendetta* may be a dystopian narrative influenced by the Elizabethan revenge tragedy and noir movies, but it is a superhero story at heart, and must be also read in relation to the conventions of that graphic and cinematic genre. Having the superhero dying at the

Moore and Lloyd's graphic novel is a 20th-Century revenge tragedy, heir to *Hamlet* or *Titus Andronicus*, ending with a cathartic hecatomb.

¹⁹ See Moore/Lloyd 2005, 158.

²⁰ The importance of this moment is also made manifest by the fact that a whole episode, "The Vigil" is devoted to Evey's labored and torturous realization of "who V must be," that is, she (Moore/Lloyd 2005, 250).

end of the story, and being replaced by his protégé Evey (which is thus revealed as a pupil, not a conventional damsel-in-distress), is a subversive move: as if the Batman should die and Robin replace him.²¹ Yet this does not happen in the film; Evey just carries out V's order to give him a Viking funeral, that is to put him on the underground train loaded with gelignite which will blow up the Houses of Parliament (not 10 Downing Street as in the comic);²² she remains an occasional sidekick of V (not a very reliable one at the beginning), and the simulated imprisonment and torture, plus the threat of execution, is not, as it is in the comic, a sort of initiation to anarchic freedom aimed at enabling Evey to wear V's mask, to *become V*. The moment when Evey Hammond wears the Guy Fawkes mask is a remarkable act of empowerment of the female co-protagonist, which has been elided in the cinematic version of the comic.

Having said this, I am far from suggesting that the Wachowskis' screenplay is tainted by some purportedly misogynistic bias. Probably it is a matter of priority, which are always historically determined: 9–11 and War on Terror, plus homophobia, were more relevant in 2005, before #metoo and a renewed attention to masculine privileges. The screenwriters must be free to cut what they deem fit to adapt a novel, a comic, a play, to the cinematic format; the critic, however, may point out what is the result of such a streamlining process. What is more relevant for a discussion of the adaptation process is that Hutcheon may be right when she argues that the proximity or fidelity should not be the criterion of judgment of an adaptation, but the differences between adapted text and adaptation should always be taken into account, and may well be a legitimate and necessary focus of analysis, inasmuch as they may enable critics, by means of a comparative analysis, to better grasp what the artistic/political/moral value of the adaptation may be; what direction the adaptation process takes when it departs from the original. A direction, needless to say, that is never neutral, or innocent.

21 Not even Frank Miller, in his *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) went so far: he has Robin replaced by a girl, but she remains Bruce Wayne's sidekick.

22 In the comic the Houses of Parliament are blown up by V, but this takes place in the very first episode, "The Villain" (Moore/Lloyd 2005, 14). Since the building is deserted in the dystopian, post-atomic future devised by Moore, this bombing is purely symbolic, probably aimed at strengthening the connection to the historical figure of Guy Fawkes, whose plan was to blow up king James I and the House of Lords. V's mask famously reproduces the features of the 17th-century bomber. Moving the destruction of the Houses of Parliament (and Big Ben) to the end of the film is a choice motivated by the need of a spectacular conclusion with fireworks.

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Giorgio Busi Rizzi

Digital Comics as Participatory *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck*

Abstract: Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck* serves as a compelling case study in transcodification, demonstrating how a digital-native object can evolve into a transmedial, participatory ecosystem.

Homestuck has been, since the beginning, a peculiar webcomic, unfolding extensively over time and narrative breadth; it integrated static images and GIFs, re-mediated chat logs and video games, and featured Flash animations and interactive minigames. This hybrid mediality challenged conventional distinctions between comics, video games, and hypertext fiction. However, beyond its formal complexity, *Homestuck* expanded over the years into a rhizomatic network of interlinked medial objects, spanning video games, print comics, prose books, soundtracks, and an extensive body of fan-produced content, most often born within, or reintegrated into, the work's canonical storyworld. This morphed the franchise into a vast and complex narrative ecosystem, extremely indebted to the participatory practices of its community.

Consequently, this paper proposes examining *Homestuck* as a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, while aiming to untangle its intricate nature.

Keywords: Digital comics, videogames, participatory culture, narrative ecosystems, *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Digital comics have been eternally described as an emergent object, eternally on the verge of supplanting print. Surely, over time (print-born) *digitized* comics and skeuomorphic formats (replicating print formats) have successfully animated fan communities; digital comics hosted by social media platforms have adapted their formats and cultivated new audiences; and, in the last five years, Webtoons—vertically scrolling, serialized comics optimized for mobile reading—have

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soared in popularity.¹ Yet, despite a 30-year history, digital comics more conspicuously leveraging the affordances of their medium (e.g., integrating multimedia elements, or experimenting with the format) have failed consolidating their audience and cultural legitimacy, getting stuck in the limbo of unassimilated niche experiments.

Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck* stands as a striking exception to this. This multi-layered, gigantic, labyrinthine webcomic, deeply intertwined with video game and internet culture, evolved over the years into the central node of a sprawling network encompassing intermedial adaptations and transmedial expansions. Simultaneously, *Homestuck* fostered an extremely engaged fan community—one that not only interacted with the author, but also contributed to an extensive exegesis of their fan object and a vast body of fan content.

This contribution argues that, in light of this, *Homestuck* can be considered as a participatory *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the idea of a complex work of art making use of several media, as first elaborated by Richard Wagner. The paper will trace *Homestuck*'s creative trajectory, examine its distinctive medial features, and focus on the transmedial, participatory ecosystem that originated from it.

Before *Homestuck*

Hussie began publishing his comics on a small website called *Team Special Olympics*.² At the time, he was one of the animators of the *Gangbunch Fora*, a spinoff of the forum attached to *Something Awful*,³ a humor site founded in 1999 that hosted various columns and blogs. In 2006, Hussie created his own website, *MS Paint Adventures* (from now on, *MSPA*)—interestingly, hosting comics that, despite their name and lo-fi aesthetic, were drawn in Photoshop.⁴ There, he published *Jailbreak* (2006–2007, 2011), *Bard Quest* (2007), *Problem Sleuth* (2008–2009), and eventually *Homestuck* (2009–2016). Over time, the *Gangbunch Fora* community coalesced around Hussie, migrating to the *MSPA Forum*, which became their primary hub until its closure in 2016, after which the community moved to *OmegaUpdate*.⁵

1 For an overview and periodization of digital comics, see Busi Rizzi 2023.

2 The site, active from 2003 to 2008, has been closed and is unrecoverable. Much of the contributions can however still be found at <https://classichussiearchive.tumblr.com/>, last accessed 31/01/2025.

3 In the absence of the original material, I rely on the reconstruction from the “fandom” entry of the *Homestuck* Wiki (<https://mispaintadventures.fandom.com/wiki/Fandom>, accessed 31/01/2025).

4 Meeks 2010.

5 <https://omegaupdate.freeforums.net/>, accessed 31/01/2025.

Jailbreak, originally itself titled *MS Paint Adventure* and later *Escape from Jail Island*, follows two inmates attempting to escape from an unspecified prison. The series ran from September 2006 to February 2007, totaling 134 (web)pages,⁶ before going on hiatus. A single-page conclusion was added in September 2011. Hussie described his writing process as “always tak[ing] the first suggestion no matter what,”⁷ which resulted in a very haphazard narrative progression. He initially included experimenting with branching paths, but quickly abandoned the format due to the difficulty of maintaining a coherent reading experience.⁸

Bard Quest, published between June and July 2007, was the second *MSPA* and, being unfinished, remains the shortest, consisting of just 47 pages. Its fantasy-inspired plot follows a bard and his companions on a quest to slay a dragon. Hussie's intention was again to experiment with multiple paths, using hyperlinks to reproduce the Choose-Your-Own-Adventure format; however, the complexity of managing divergent storylines ultimately led to abandoning the project.

In 2008, Hussie introduced another story based on the room escape template, incorporating suggestions from forum members, and rehashing the CYOA format. *Problem Sleuth*, serialized from March 2008 to April 2009 (1673 pages), began as a parody of the noir genre, following three detectives trapped in their offices, but it soon spiraled into “an incredibly convoluted story, including time-traveling, the afterlife, a monster-infested alternate reality, a fantasy-adventure themed world of animal kingdoms, Lovecraftian horror and other strangeness”⁹—which gives a foretaste of the weird matter of which *Homestuck* was made.

***Homestuck*, indeed**

Homestuck debuted immediately after, eventually lasting from April 13, 2009 to April 13, 2016, spanning across seven acts, 8,000 pages, more than 800,000 words, and over four hours of video content.¹⁰ The publication pace was highly uneven: according to Bailey's detailed statistics, the most productive day saw the creation of 111 panels in 66 pages, but the comic was also punctuated by a dozen hiatuses, ranging in length from two weeks to a full year.

The story begins with 13-year-old John Egbert and his three friends playing a beta copy of a video game called *Sburb*, which inadvertently triggers a meteor

⁶ Bailey 2019.

⁷ Hussie 2017.

⁸ Hussie 2017.

⁹ Meeks 2010.

¹⁰ Bailey 2019; Busi Rizzi 2020.

storm that destroys Earth and transports them to another dimension. As they navigate the game's mechanics in an attempt to restore their universe, the boys are contacted by twelve internet trolls, who are later revealed to be an alien species that previously played their own version of the game, *Sgrub*, won, and, in doing so, created the human universe. As the story unfolds, humans and trolls unite and discover a game function called *scratching*, which resets game sessions. However, by executing it, they create yet another universe, where their roles are taken by their ancestors. Eventually, characters from both universes join forces to confront the story's three antagonists, until John acquires the power to operate a *retcon*,¹¹ reshaping past events for good.

Even in this condensed summary—about a hundred characters have enough narrative space, and cannot be addressed here—*Homestuck* reveals itself as a grotesque sci-fi *Bildungsroman* in which overlapping parallel universes and timelines unveil a self-referential structure that blurs the boundaries between the story and its parody, the text and its commentary. Hussie describes it as “an unusual media hybrid”¹² and “a story about kids on the internet, that is told in a way that is like, *made of pure internet*.”¹³

Formally, *Homestuck* incorporates few branched narratives, thousands of animated GIFs, long multimedia animations and approximately twenty interactive minigames, created in Flash. Moreover, it frames its entire narrative through the remediation of two digital devices: a chatlog that houses most of its dialogues (balloons are almost completely absent) and the reconfiguration of old adventure games. Hussie stated that the initial creative impulse for the webcomic was indeed to craft “a parody of text-based and point-and-click adventure games.”¹⁴ Accordingly, *Homestuck* primarily isolates one panel per page, with retro-styled static images or animations, and persistently remediates gaming POVs, aesthetics, and rule systems,¹⁵ including purported character levels, currencies, battle mechanics, and inventories—all of which ultimately prove meaningless to the narrative progression (fig. 1).¹⁶

11 A retcon, or retroactive continuity, is the process whereby creators and/or producers alter “the origin, backstory, and/or history of a character or storyworld” (Friedenthal 2017, 19). It involves revisiting previously established narrative segments—already familiar to the audience—and modifying them, sometimes “completely ignoring the old [story] as if it had never happened” (16).

12 Hussie 2012b.

13 Quoted in O'Malley 2012, emphasis in original.

14 Hussie 2012b.

15 See Glaser 2020.

16 See Busi Rizzi 2020.

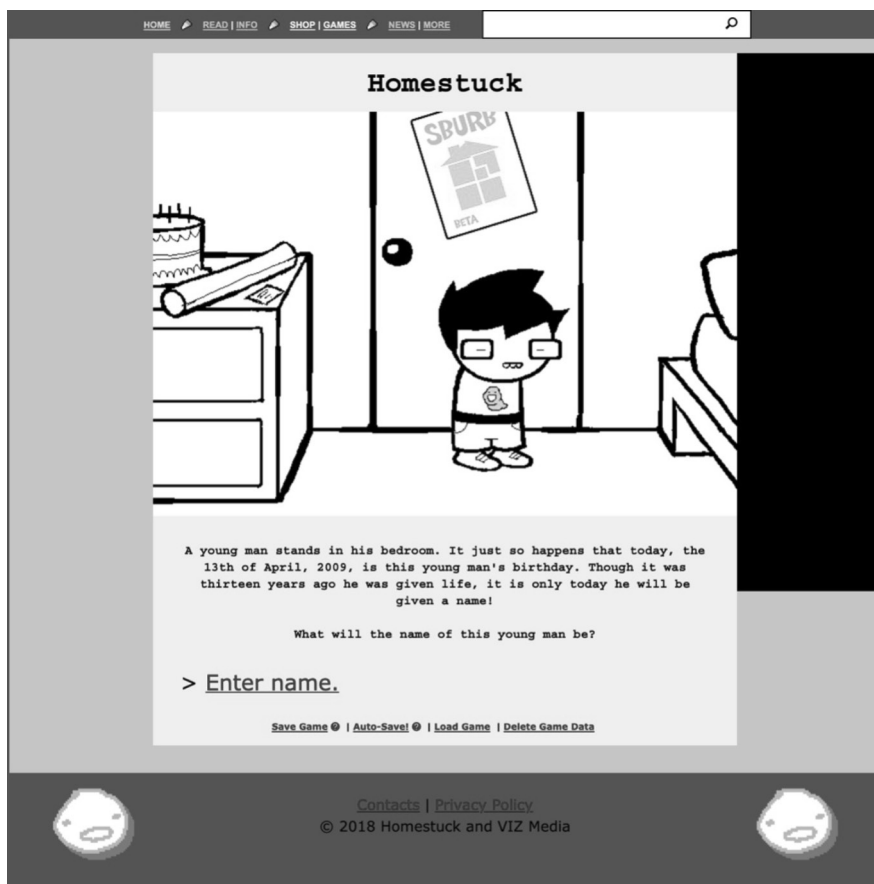


Fig. 1: The incipit of *Homestuck*. © Viz Media 2020.

Kevin Veale calls this rehash of digital elements and gaming tropes *metamedia storytelling*, defined as “a technique where the audience’s pre-existing and intuitive familiarity with modes of engagement from the wider landscape of mediated storytelling is used as a tool to shape and manipulate their experience of the text.”¹⁷

Yet, despite this array of inherently digital-born, web-based features, *Homestuck*’s articulation raises doubts about its overall affinity with the Internet, if not its outright resistance to digital culture. In a 2007 article, N. Katherine Hayles famously contrasted “deep attention” (focusing on a single object, ignoring exter-

17 Quoted in Glaser 2020, 106.

nal stimuli, preferring a single stream of information, and maintaining high concentration for a long time) with “hyperattention,” which involves rapid task-switching, engaging with multiple streams of information, a preference for a high level of stimulation, and a low threshold for boredom. The latter is associated to digital consumption. Yet, while *Homestuck* does hyper-stimulate its readers, it also demands sustained attention, patience, and memory from them. This led several commentators to attribute the fans’ enjoyment of the comic to effort justification—a cognitive dissonance due to which individuals assign higher value to achievements that required significant effort to attain. Hussie himself was aware—if not outright proud—of the issue, explaining that “the harder you have to work to figure something out, and the more concentration you have to apply, the more devoted you become once it all finally clicks and you get it.”¹⁸

Around *Homestuck*

By attributing *Homestuck*’s audience engagement to its hermeneutic complexity, however, Hussie overlooks other plausible factors. A different hypothesis can be advanced by examining its audience demographics, as reported in the 2019 survey carried out by the *Perfectly Generic Podcast*, a formerly weekly show dedicated to the franchise. The survey revealed that the average respondent age was 19.7 years, indicating a predominantly young adult audience. Regarding sexuality, 34% of the sample identified as bisexual, 19% as pansexual, 3% as allosexual, and 21% as homosexual; regarding gender, 21.5% identified as non-binary, agender or bigender, and 32% as transgender.¹⁹ The absolute majority claimed that seeing those themes represented in *Homestuck* was personally significant. *Homestuck*, indeed, is a story centered on romance and relationships, featuring numerous queer characters. This serves as a powerful draw for young audiences whose non-conforming identities play a crucial role in their self-perception, making them particularly willing to engage in participatory practices.

Another key factor in *Homestuck*’s engagement lies in Hussie’s active encouragement of audience participation, fostering a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. This engagement was continuously requested, facilitated, and rewarded, reinforcing the audience’s emotional and interpretive investment in the story. The exchange took place through the official forums, online polls, questions posted

¹⁸ O’Malley 2012. Even more than *effort justification*, Hussie’s phrase recalls Mittell’s concept of “forensic fandom,” in which audiences engage in deep analysis to fully grasp a story’s complexity (2015).

¹⁹ Mitchell 2019.

on Formspring, and on Hussie's Tumblr profile (now closed), but also in the constellation of fan-driven platforms devoted to complementing, expanding, and explaining the webcomic. In fact, *Homestuck*—especially in a post-object reading—would not be fully comprehensible without its Wiki, Subreddit, Discord,²⁰ and forums.

However, the practices of *Homestuck* users extended far beyond 'simple' fan activity, encompassing instead various types of *fanwork*²¹ and expanding the franchise to an extent equal to, if not larger than, the original object. Some of this production relied on existing content-sharing platforms: 52,000 themed works on Archive of Our Own (AO3), nearly 500,000 works on DeviantArt, several YouTube channels, and an extensive presence on Twitter, Tumblr, 4chan, LiveJournal, Fanfiction.net, and Dreamwidth.

Much, however, was hosted on dedicated websites, founded and managed by the fan themselves: the *MS Paint Fan Adventures* website²²—a hosting platform for fan-made webcomics set in the *Homestuck* universe—boasting almost 17000 stories and a total of about 700000 pages; *Paradox Space*,²³ an anthology website featuring non-canonical stories set in the *Homestuck* universe; fanart websites (*MSPA Booru*), themed roleplaying sites (*MSPARP*, then *MxRP*, *Cherubplay* and *Trollplay*), and even social media (*Gigapause*) and a real-life version of the *Pesterchum* app.²⁴ This intense fan labor is a hallmark of the *Homestuck* fanbase: for example, The Cool and New Music Team—a project born to create an unofficial soundtrack for the webcomic—ultimately produced more than 60 albums; and themed cosplaying and memes are so extensive to deserve a discussion of their own.

In this sense, Hussie's crucial move was to let fans use *Homestuck*'s story-world as a template to expand freely. As the original webcomic evolved into a larger transmedia project, various fan creators were invited to contribute to the canon itself. Among the first, were the creators of the official webcomic soundtrack (10 volumes and 30 digital albums, for sale on Bandcamp); then, an art team was assembled to create the longer animated sequences (*Cascade*, *Collide*, and *Act 7*). Eventually, when Hussie turned his one-person venture into a collective by founding the What Pumpkin Studios, many prominent community members were co-opted into its creative team.

²⁰ <https://www.reddit.com/r/homestuck/> and <https://discord.com/channels/152981670507577344> (last accessed 31/01/2025).

²¹ See Tralli 2018, 197–198.

²² <https://mspfa.com/>, (last accessed 31/01/2025).

²³ <http://hs.hiveswap.com/paradoxspace/> (last accessed 31/01/2025).

²⁴ Unfortunately, most of these websites are no longer online.

After *Homestuck*

The potential economic value of a fanbase with this level of engagement is undeniable: even before *Homestuck*, *Problem Sleuth* had already enabled Hussie to sustain himself financially, and the revenue deriving from ads on the website consolidated over time with soaring merchandise sales (pins, T-shirts, hoodies, and fan art prints). Hence, when in September 2012 the newly formed What Pumpkin Games launched the *Homestuck Adventure Game Kickstarter*—the funding campaign for a video game set in the *Homestuck* storyworld—the result was overwhelming: the designated goal of \$700,000 was reached in two days, and the campaign ended up raising almost \$2.5 million. Indeed, as Booth observes, crowdfunding is meant to monetize the fans' emotional connection to the original media entity.²⁵

Homestuck's crowdfunding resulted in several outcomes, though much later than scheduled: the first act of *Hiveswap*, released in September 2017; two spinoffs (the *Hiveswap Friendship Simulator* in 2018 and *Pesterquest* in 2019); and the second act of *Hiveswap*, in 2020.

Meanwhile, the *Homestuck* universe was being further expanded intermedially. Since October 2017, VIZ Media published the whole comic as a six-volume paperback collection. Aware that the process of adaptation to the paper format inevitably entailed the loss of animations and games allowed by the digital support, author and editors worked to simplify and compensate for lost elements from the original material, keeping in mind the specificity of the target medium. Key frames from Flash animations were isolated and distributed across multiple pages, while shorter or less salient multimedia elements were condensed into single images (fig. 2). Additionally, each page was supplemented with extensive author annotations, offering behind-the-scenes insights that ranged from rigorous analysis to humorous commentary. This paratextual apparatus transformed the book into a collectible for the passionate fan—whether seeking a tangible connection to the franchise or simply wishing to read Hussie's reflections on his own work—as well as a potential object of study.

In April 2019, the first three chapters of *Homestuck*'s text-only epilogue were published on the official website. A week later, an update introduced two alternative endings, to be chosen by selecting the *Meat* or *Candy* paths. The following year, the epilogues were compiled into a semi-canonical 640-page bifurcated prose work, co-created with several fans and published in paperback as *The Homestuck Epilogues*. Later that same year, an official post-canon, collective webcomic sequel ti-

25 See Booth 2018, 282.

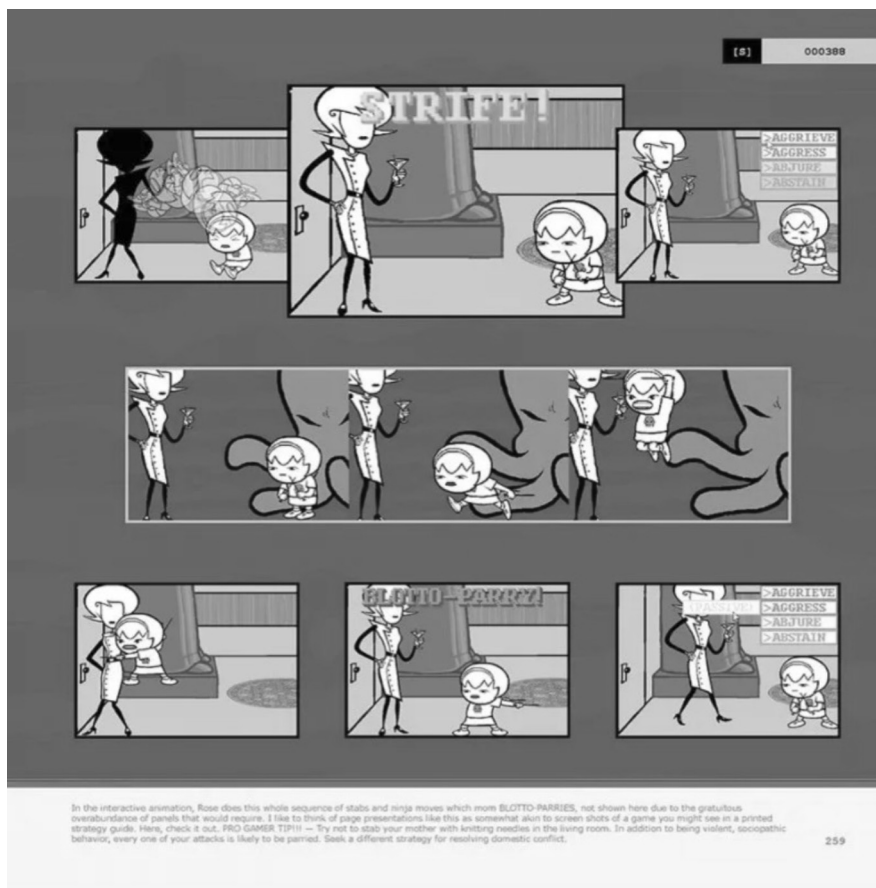


Fig. 2: Flash minigame adapted in the print version of *Homestuck* (Hussie 2018b). © Viz Media 2018. For a comparison to the original animation, see <https://www.homestuck.com/story/388> (last accessed 31/01/2025).

tled *Homestuck 2: Beyond Canon*²⁶ debuted. The project was a collaboration between What Pumpkin Studios and Snake Solutions Studio, the latter being an independent media partnership founded by *Hiveswap* author Aysha U. Farah and *Homestuck* fan creator Kate Mitchell, and was fundable through a *Patreon*.²⁷

²⁶ <https://beyondcanon.com/>, (last accessed 31/01/2025). The story progression is on hiatus since 2020.

²⁷ <https://www.patreon.com/homestuck> (last accessed 31/01/2025).

This intricate network of elements sharing the same storyworld thus results in a nexus of distributed textualities rather than a hierarchical world-building model—as in traditional transmedia structures, consisting of a core text and additional (paratextual) contents.²⁸ Here, instead, the fantext acted as the engine of a decentralization process, disrupting the hierarchizing idea of a core text, patrolled by an author establishing its boundaries and interpretations. Instead, *Homestuck* opened not only to a plurality of texts articulated across media, but to a distributed, participatory writing process. The best model to account for this rhizomatic evolution is that of *narrative ecosystems*—“narratives, pervasive and complex, extended in space and time, that may be generated by very different narrative instances,”²⁹ configuring expanding, emerging systems, only partially pre-designed “through an initial core set given by setting, characters, users and derived properties”, and thus “liable to change – even radically – over time.”³⁰

Conclusion

Homestuck evolved from a webcomic into the hub of a rhizomatic narrative ecosystem, both transmedial and collaborative. This transformation, and the franchise’s sustained success, can be attributed to several key factors that tightly interweaved its mediality and its audience engagement.

First, *Homestuck*’s formal composition, whose blend depended on the affordances of digital environment—integrating cartoony images and GIFs, chat logs and Flash games, animations, and video games—created an interactive, hyper-stimulating experience, albeit quite a convoluted one.

Second, *Homestuck*’s self-referential storytelling was deeply rooted in video game and internet culture—from a certain point of view, the story was also a cosmogonic metaphor for the Internet itself. Through themes of friendship, love, and adventure, perpetuated in an endless memetic cycle and a constant game of cross-references between author and fandom, the narrative mirrored and reflected both the participatory nature of online communities and the process of growing up after the digital turn.³¹

Third, the continuous interplay between Hussie and the fan community was pivotal in developing the franchise. Fans contributed not only through interpretation and engagement, but also through the production of an expansive, heteroge-

²⁸ See Hills 2018, 290.

²⁹ De Pascalis/Pescatore 2018, 20, my translation.

³⁰ De Pascalis/Pescatore 2018, 28–9, my translation.

³¹ See Glaser 2020, 96; Busi Rizzi 2020.

neous fantext. Over time, both practices merged, hybridizing canon and fanon through increasing collaboration between Hussie and several fan creators.

Thus, the original webcomic turned into the central junction—in geographical rather than hierarchical terms—of an ecosystem where each node not only offered an autonomous entry point, but did so by fully leveraging the medium-specific affordances of its support.

As such, *Homestuck* demonstrates that, in the absence of an established position in the publishing field, it is strategically advantageous to challenge conventional production models. Capitalizing on the affordances of digital media and harnessing creative contribution that engaged fans, once involved, are often extremely willing to offer, are effective tactics³² through which creators can gain (sub)cultural and social capital, and convert it into economic capital.³³

In light of this multifaceted complexity, I argue that *Homestuck* can fittingly be read as a collective, participatory, transmedial *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Far from finding its homeostasis, however, in the long run *Homestuck* engendered instead various controversies, largely due to tensions between authorial control and fan participation, which led to some disputes over credit, ownership, and compensation. These were further complicated by the transition to What Pumpkin Studios, as some fans-turned-official-contributors later expressed grievances about their treatment and lack of proper recognition. Moreover, Hussie's interactions with fans and his ethical stance at large were debated—while some appreciated his sarcastic, fourth-wall-breaking humor, others found his responses dismissive or antagonistic, especially when addressing criticism. Another major point of contention was Hussie's handling of fan expectations and communication, particularly regarding delays in *Hiveswap*, which frustrated backers: some felt that updates were vague and infrequent, accusing Hussie and his team of mismanaging funds. Additionally, *Homestuck*²: *Beyond Canon* faced backlash over its writing direction and indefinite hiatus since 2020. After Hussie and the Snake Solutions Studio distanced from it, the project was taken over by the Homestuck Independent Creative Union, with full financial and creative independence from the former.

Despite these controversies, *Homestuck*'s cultural impact remains crucial, continuing to fuel discussions on participatory ethics, creator accountability, and the evolving nature of transmedia storytelling. If there is any lesson to be taken from the post-object parable of the franchise, it is maybe that *Gesamtkunstwerke*'s constitutive complexity makes them fragile and ephemeral—more so, probably, than less ambitious enterprises.

32 See De Certeau 1984.

33 See Bourdieu 1986.

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Section 4: **Cultural transfers**

Sean Cubitt

Dissonance, Anachrony

Abstract: The term “transcodification” presumes the function of code, the dominant paradigm of communication since Shannon and Weaver’s Mathematical Theory of 1949. Central to the concept of code is its distinction from noise. Transcodification between media also raises a psychological understanding of the effect of transcoding on receivers, cognitive dissonance, an equally dominant paradigm. Analyzing Martin Scorsese’s film *The Departed* with the aid of a late Freud essay concerning disturbance of memory, this paper addresses the critical role of anachrony, disturbances in temporality, as mode of noise and dissonance.

Keywords: Scorsese, *The Departed*, Freud, memory, temporality, anachrony

Memory and recording

In 1936, a few months before his eightieth birthday and three years before his death, Sigmund Freud contributed a letter known as *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis* to a *Festschrift* for his friend the writer Romain Rolland. In this short account, Freud recalls a visit he made with his brother to Athens in 1904, twenty two years earlier, “a generation ago” as he writes. The anecdote involves an unexpected and inexplicable feeling of despondency that came over the brothers at the idea of travelling to Athens, and Freud finding himself thinking “So all this really does exist, just as we learned at school”¹ when finally he stands on the Acropolis. The explanation he offers – that both despondency and disbelief stemmed from a sense of guilt at surpassing his father’s poverty and limited horizons – is less interesting, in approaching our topic of transcoding, than his description of his sensations at the time of the event. He describes two: a sense of surprise at the real existence of Athens; and an even greater shock at discovering that as a schoolboy he had somehow doubted its existence. Motivating both, he argues, was disbelief that he would ever stand on the Acropolis: “this doubt of a piece of reality, was doubly displaced in its actual expression: first it was shifted back into the past, and secondly it was transposed from my relation to the Acropolis on to the very existence of the Acropolis.”²

1 Freud 1984, 449.

2 Freud 1984, 452.

Freud speaks of this sensation of incredulity as “derealization,”³ akin to déjà vu, only now not the memory of the present analyzed by Virno,⁴ but a projection of a disturbed present into a (false) memory of the past. Although, for Freud, ultimate explanations always lead back to infancy, this disturbance of memory suggests an opposite temporality: a retroactive generation, planting the cause of present derealization in a doubly remote past – a memory from 1936 of an event in 1904 that recalled a childhood in the 1860s – with the additional complication that he also mentioned the event briefly in *The Future of an Illusion* in 1926.⁵ Not so much an anachronism then as an anachrony, in this case affecting not narration (the technical meaning of the term, describing stories told with events in non-chronological order)⁶ but the biography that each of us constitutes for ourselves out of our memories and our present circumstances. In Freud’s case, he notes in concluding, in his present at time of writing “I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance and can travel no more.”⁷ We could of course use Freud’s own method to decipher this melancholic closing sentence (and link it to his mention of his daughter Anna’s work on child psychology). That would at least be in the spirit of his unswerving confrontation with his own Oedipal trauma; and his refusal of the kind of forgiveness that, in a phrase attributed to Oprah Winfrey, is defined as “giving up the hope that the past could have been any different”. The past may be unchanging, but memory works constantly to remake the conditions of its own existence.

Anachrony involves at the least the doubling of moments in a life – a memory of an event, a memory of remembering the event – and the possibility, perhaps just the suspicion, that the act of remembering not only reinforces but creates a memory. Memory, in other words, is retroactively performative: it brings about the situation it envisages, and in the process of remembering makes memory possible and memories actual. Freud’s experience on the Acropolis was not an aberration of memory but a moment when it revealed itself in action. Like one of Foucault’s archives, it doesn’t so much record a life as bring it about. I suspect there is something here to pursue as we try to understand what happens when stories are remediated, texts adapted, ideas translated, and memes recirculated. Recording and archiving only complicate the curious auto-generation of memory from the present.

3 Freud 1984, 453.

4 See Virno 2014.

5 See Sugarman 1998, 10.

6 See Lund 2019.

7 Freud 1984, 456

I jump ahead by suggesting that the way forward will lead through, if not to, the idea of non-identity that Freud experienced as a kind of double consciousness. Icons and mirrors have always been as suspicious as they have been magical, Technological media have not dispelled that respect for and distrust of the doubling of the world. Recording has obsessed practitioners of the moving image and their philosophers for a hundred and twenty years or more. Digital imaging has only made the issues more pressing. The succession of images in analog film already perplexed Bergson's generation, but at least in each flash of the frame on screen, a whole image, discrete, complete and in its presentation unmoving, was present to the viewer. But even analogue images are complicated in terms of "when" the image exists. The duration of exposure can be significant, as Benjamin noted in his *Little History of Photography*;⁸ and anomalies like lens flares occupy phenomenologically different temporalities to the scenes portrayed. Once the film frame has been exposed, other times intrude: a photographic image is latent on the raw stock after exposure but before fixing. Then it resurfaces, transformed, but as negative. A negative must be printed, an operation whose duration is critical to the visible image; and many prints may be struck from a negative in different ways at various points in its lifespan. Even under archive conditions, the afterlife of films and photos in albums and drawers involves change. Colors fade, chemicals in the filmstrip interact, environmental factors work on surfaces and substrates slowly or swiftly. We might call it decay: but this "archival afterlife" is immensely productive, as Bill Morrison's films so often reveal: exemplary collaborative works of human intentions, technical mediations, and natural processes. All these observations are also true of digital images, albeit in subtly or sometimes strikingly different ways. Digital images are never still: as scans, they are never entirely present, always coming into being and vanishing. TCP/IP protocols, and MPEG and other codecs underpinning transmission and display, actively process the visualization of files on screen in real-time (which itself is always a duration).

Freud's "disturbance of memory" and the multiple co-temporalities of moving image media often converge, the phenomenological and ontological aspects of a phenomenon that is already multiple, multiply in specific films and digital video. I'll start with one example, itself already multiple.

8 Benjamin 1999.

The Departed

Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) takes its cues from Andy Lau and Alan Mak's much-praised *Infernal Affairs* (1999) and its two sequels, but also from American film noir, particularly Anthony Mann's *T-Men* of 1947. As Scorsese makes clear in an interview with Michael Goldman (in Ribera 2017: 200), "The noir of today is different than the noir of ten years ago, twenty years ago, forty years ago. So, it reflects a different culture, it reflects a different time in the world. But, I still wanted visual references back to noir photography at its height", specifically the dramatic lighting and camerawork of John Alton, Mann's director of photography. The plot of both films involves an undercover cop planted in a gang, and a gang mole working in the police force, so already a doubling. In both films the character development of the protagonists plays on the fallibility of memory as they begin to lose their sense of identity. The Hong Kong movie comes in at a taut 97 minutes: Scorsese's at a generous 151. In both films the city is more than setting. The iconic rooftop encounters of Lau and Mak under ice blue skies and multiple shots of the city's mountainous surroundings contrast with the colder, darker palette and oppressive interiors of *The Departed*, largely shot in New York for tax reasons. Hong Kong plays itself, but New York doubles for Boston for much of *The Departed*'s running time.

Both films are contemporary-set: *Infernal* in 1999, two years after Hong Kong's return to China from British rule; *Departed* in 2006, although it owes some characterization and detail to notorious Boston crime boss Whitey Bulger who dominated the city in the 1970s and 80s (and was also an FBI informant). There might be a case to make that the ethical vertigo of *Infernal Affairs* belongs to those first steps into independence in the last years of the last century, while *The Departed* is weighed down by the legacy of the twentieth century as it curtails the spurious optimism of the early twenty-first. Both films were shot on thirty-five millimeter film, but Scorsese went for a digital intermediate, a digital double of the analogue negative. The opening sequence of *The Departed* – and I have to admit this is almost a chance discovery – not only has a surprisingly analogous structure to Freud's anachronous anecdote, but its sound design opens a door onto dissonance in contemporary film and, I hope to show, contemporary media more broadly.

The Warners logo rolls in silence at the start, with faint bird song and street noise gradually rising under the company credits and the black frames that follow, including the text "Boston, some years ago". The first image cuts in to shouts and scuffling: in grainy 16 millimeter, men are fighting in the street. In the montage that follows, it is hard at first to decipher whether this is library, or a shot restaged to look like library footage, but many of the shots are definitely news footage from

the notorious white riots directed at school buses and their police guards during Boston's desegregation busing policy, at their peak in 1974–6. Costello's voice over begins, including a vernacular history of race and gangs in the metropolitan area. At this stage, we can't know if he is speaking in the diegetic 1970s. Over shots of school buses, the first notes of the Rolling Stones' Gimme Shelter begin – a track Scorsese also used in *GoodFellas* and *Casino*. The track appeared on their 1969 album *Let It Bleed*, and features in the title and throughout the Maysles Brothers 1973 documentary film *Gimme Shelter* covering the Stones 1969 tour of the States that culminated in the murder of an audience member at the hands of a motorcycle gang during their set at the Altamont free festival. The song is dropped down the layers of sound when library footage of an African-American interviewee, one of the few Black faces we see in the movie, shows him saying the events “put hate in your heart”. Stock camerawork pans loosely over Boston's rooftops and the Charles River, zooming in on a neighborhood as the voiceover tells of an Italian gang taking over part of the city. Here we cut in to high resolution 35 mill: a tracking shot following Costello as he walks through a garage, silhouetted against doorways, in shadow between them. We are now in a different time to the library footage, but the voiceover still isn't synched with the actor, who takes a flamboyant drag on his cigarette in the middle of a line.

The dialogue here takes on a structure approaching Freud's disturbed memory: “Twenty years after an Irishman couldn't get a fuckin' job, we had the presidency, may he rest in peace”. This gives another set of dates: 1961, Kennedy's inauguration, and 1941, the year the US joined World War Two. We can presume that the action we are watching is no longer historical, but is indeed “Boston, some years ago”. In the dialogue scene that follows, Gimme Shelter continues, increasing and decreasing in volume around the speeches, clearly not a part of the diegesis of the store location. Dissonant because never anchored in synchrony with the image, the song's function changes constantly. Over the library footage from the seventies, it indicated the tenor of a moment in history (one Stones biographer says of the album it opens “No rock record, before or since, has ever so completely captured the sense of palpable dread that hung over its era”).⁹ Later it is more generic: bad-boy music, a continuum of danger and rock'n'roll over decades.

Costello talks to a child in the store, identified as “Johnny Sullivan's boy” and living with his grandmother, offering him a job. Cut to the Sullivan kid as altar boy, the piety interrupted by a return of the voiceover, criticizing the Church, over a cut that takes us back to the garage, this time with young Sullivan listening to Costello's speech, no longer voiceover but synch. The scene ends as Costello for

9 Davis 2001, 306.

the first time leans forward into the light and reveals his face, followed by a reverse shot of young Sullivan, followed by a jump cut to the same character, this time played by Matt Damon, ten or fifteen years later, in police uniform, beginning the narrative proper. The trope of the hidden face emerging into the light is one of Alton's techniques in *T-Men*, as is the dramatic X interrupting the camera's view of a character, specifically mentioned in Scorsese's interview about *The Departed*, here passing in front of the tracking shot of Costello. This evocation of the earlier cycle of American film noir overlays the Hong Kong source, layering the stylistic provenance of the look of the 2006 film in parallel with the complex of dates structuring the monologue.

This long analysis of the opening (the title of the film doesn't appear till the seventeenth minute) already gives up some clues. If the present of the film is 2006, as Scorsese says in interview, the dialogue scenes in the store and garage must be set in the early or mid-nineties, referencing three earlier times: the bus-ing riots (and white flight from the city center) of the mid-seventies, the Kennedy presidency, and the labor reforms of the nineteen-forties. Given Costello's apparent age, the gang wars of the seventies are probably in his own memories. His recall of the Kennedy years belongs to the construction of an imagined community, as Benedict Anderson¹⁰ would say: not a nation as such, but the Boston Irish. Here memory is no longer personal, carrying a freight of experience whose precepts could be handed on to a pre-juvenile recruit. Instead it is part of the construction of a collective distinguished from its neighbors and its government, for which the Romance languages have the incisive phrase "*noi altri*."¹¹ The reference to the 1940s is pure history, legitimated by the line of dialogue about being good in school: a surrogate memory conveyed institutionally.

These stacked incidents of incommensurable modes of naming and recounting the past, matched by the shift from sixteen to thirty-five millimeter, and by the drifting relation of Costello's soliloquy from non-diegetic commentary to diegetic dialogue, carry through to the fluctuating work of Gimme Shelter, at once the archetype of bad-boy rock, the prototype of bloated stadium anthems, an uncompromising rip-off of African American blues and soul, and a homage to it, especially at the moment when the edit privileges Merry Clayton's storming delivery in her part of the duet with Mick Jagger. The racist history of rock music is only amplified in the racism of Costello's monologue; but the verbal element of the soundtrack is presented as a sociological observation of collective identity formation and its processes of violent exclusion – demonstrated in the brief flashback to a long

¹⁰ See Anderson 1983.

¹¹ See Nancy 2005.

shot of the execution of an Italian American couple on the beach near Logan airport, which, after a medium-close shot canted steeply upwards to Costello's amused reaction, includes his accomplice's recommendation that "you should see somebody", implying that Costello's laughter is not just anti-social but schizophrenic, a personalized effect of communal differentiation.

Costello's dissonance is congruent with Freud's derealization. I am not sure that psychoanalyzing a fictional character is likely to produce usable knowledge. What we might gain from the analogy between this opening sequence and Freud's Acropolis story instead is that the formal properties of Scorsese's sequence mimic the temporal displacements of Freud's anecdote: the divergent recollections of past times, and especially the retrospective action of the present on the past. The dominance of the Irish mob in the nineties and two thousands produces a history, memorialized by and for the victors, of a half-century of conflict which in turn ratifies the brutality of the present as it rewrites the past in its own image. The symptom of this process, however, carried by the movement of the song from seventies to nineties to two-thousands, is a deracination of multiple presents acted out in the cracked symmetry of the two-moles narrative and their shared sense of estrangement that will dominate the rest of the film.

Autonomy and anachrony

The progress of a narrative always reformulates what we remember now of what went before. What we have already heard and seen takes on new meanings, but is also re-remembered in new ways. Freud seems to indicate that this is as true of biography as it is of fiction. I suspect that we can also make a statement, on this basis, about aesthetic objects. In the Kantian tradition, the artwork is autonomous. Silent cinema aspired to this degree of autonomy, as we can see in Charlie Chaplin's "Rejection of the Talkies"¹² where he wrote of the universality and medium-specificity of films without dialogue. Film was true to itself as a purely visual medium: synchronized dialogue could only falsify it. Like Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov's "Statement on Sound"¹³ a few years earlier, Chaplin rejected the idea that illustrated drama was the calling of cinema. He stopped short, however, of the next step that Eisenstein and his montagist comrades made, espousing a nonsynchronous, contrapuntal use of sound as a technique proper to cinema, distinguishing it from dramatic theatre. There is ample evidence of audio montage in

¹² See Chaplin 2014.

¹³ Eisenstein/Pudovkin/Alexandrov 1985.

Thelma Schoonmaker's cutting of the sequence from *The Departed* just analyzed, though she also uses the adherence of sound and image – lip sync – as one option among many: as a special effect, we might say, rather than an automatic choice.

This sequence indicates a significant dissonance in contemporary film, distinguishing it from the classical. *The Departed* is not an autonomous artwork. It does appeal to human interests, notably here when it demands we make a judgment of Costello's racism (and his sexist treatment of a pubescent girl, as well as the murder he commits and luring a child into the criminal underworld). More significantly, it makes it clear that the film does not "contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise", as Coleridge¹⁴ said of the well-made poem. Not only is *The Departed* dependent on technical equipment, engineering standards and the global bodies that oversee them, supply chains, raw materials and energy, investment markets and the English language: it makes its contingency on external matters clear through its direct recall of history. Like any movie, it re-processes history in the same way it reprocesses iron and sunlight; but unlike "any movie" it places that re-processing at the front of the film, ensuring we understand that the history it recalls took place only for the collective who believed, at a certain moment in the mid two-thousands, that they were victorious. The effect is vertiginous because the inference is that any historical memory, any historiography, is necessarily fictive, and so is any identity founded on believing it. Kant's aesthetics of the artwork and the history of its elaborations in practice and theory lead to this: that the work is not a self-defining whole. My hypothesis, which has been cooking all the way through this analysis of Freud's *Disturbance* and *The Departed* concerns the non-identity of cultural artefacts, including at least subjectivity and films, and by extension any artwork.

Communication and non-identity

If we take the opposite point of view, we might say that *The Departed* is a flawed film because it cannot support itself but requires materials, techniques and most of all histories that pre-exist it. The histories that have preoccupied us so far appear as intrusions into the formal unity of the work. An ideal film, in this view, would be the bearer of a structural perfection which it transports from source to spectator. This, you will instantly notice, is the formal diagram of Claude Shannon's 1948 paper on the Mathematical Theory of Communication,¹⁵ and its expan-

¹⁴ See Coleridge 1965.

¹⁵ See Shannon 1948.

sion in the book co-authored with Warren Weaver the following year. The Shannon theory was developed to guide engineers at Bell Labs constructing the vast new telecommunications networks of postwar suburbanization and economic booms in the USA. It aimed at maximum efficiency in delivering messages by excluding noise. In the twenty-first century this theory is hegemonic, the dominant ideology, not because everyone believes it or even knows it – a hegemony is all the stronger for being unnoticed – but because it is the structure that dominant forces use when they dominate. It underpins information as the commodity form of knowledge, the key commodity for contemporary capitalism from logistics to social media, population management to finance.

An information system is any network designed to carry messages from A to B. Messages are defined as “signal” and any extraneous material in the system as “noise”. Noise can arise from beyond the system, in the form of power outages, electrical interference and so on; or it can arise inside a system from technical problems like faulty clocks, clashing instruction sets, or friction and interference generated by the system’s own operation, notably from redundancy, especially repetition. As Parikka notes in an important chapter,¹⁶ noise may come from outside but is included in the diagram, and elsewhere in the definition of efficiency as the signal to noise ratio. A statistical theory, Shannon’s proposal described external noise as excess randomness, and internal noise as excess probability. Information lay in the sweet spot between too much difference and not enough: information needs to be “a difference that makes a difference”, in Bateson’s classic definition.¹⁷ In the original theory, engineers strove for ways to minimize both forms of entropy, Wiener’s cybernetics would further define the goal as homeostasis.¹⁸

Noise appears in systems as glitches: stutters, pixelations, break-up of pictures and interruptions in sound. Most systems are robust enough to correct for these problems so they are merely distracting. But they have attracted significant attention from engineers trying to control them and artists and scholars exploiting them as points of weakness where, depending on your viewpoint, systems reveal their materiality, functioning and vulnerability, or make possible interventions at the level of the medium with aesthetic or political potential. The grainy clips from old news footage and the distracting changes that alter the relation between Gimme Shelter and the disparate times shown in the vision track in our sequence would be an example of such a glitch, operating ambiguously from within and beyond the system we call *The Departed*. The film as a whole would normally strive to assim-

¹⁶ Parikka 2012, 90–112.

¹⁷ Bateson 1972, 428.

¹⁸ See Wiener 1948.

ilate these interruptions into its formal system, rather like the way an instigating special effect is explained in the course of a science fiction film. It is *how* it does that that is of interest, and that requires a critique of classical information theory.

Noise is extraneous to signal. Noise *manifests* as a glitch. A glitch is how noise *appears* in the system. Noise is an occurrence. A glitch is at root an *index* of a noise source within or beyond the system, but once it *appears*, it acts as a *symbol*. Like a sudden, involuntary cry in the middle of a sentence, a glitch operates both as an extra-linguistic index but also as a grammatically manageable phoneme: a punctuation mark, a phatic connection, a rhythmic marker, ultimately recyclable in a lexicon and grammar, a signal. The anomaly of glitches is formed by this double role: as interruption and evidence of interruption, both external to the system and integrated in it. A glitch retains its radical potential not because it risks breaking the totality of the system but precisely because it does not. Both within and without, events and symbols of events, glitches are non-identical. The ease of their assimilation thus points to a conclusion that Shannon had not expected: communicative systems, precisely at their most efficient, require what they define themselves by excluding. Information, the difference that makes a difference, is non-identical. To the extent that they act as if they were closed systems, artworks and telecommunication networks alike contain in themselves the reason why they are otherwise than so.

If – and it is a big “if” – memory is a system in the terms of the mathematical theory of communication, then it operates on information. Information is data processed and stored, or data during processing, which is how storage works in relational databases. Memory, like film, gathers data about the world. In analogue film, light reflects into the lens which gathers it onto the photochemical receptors on the film-strip, setting off chemical reactions oxidizing molecules of silver nitrate and dislodging electrons, storing the result on the film until it is fixed, when it becomes a negative that prints can be struck from. The period between exposure and fixing is called latency. In digital imaging, light reflected onto an optoelectronic chip triggers the release of electrons which are drained from the chip after exposure in lockstep order and stored in memory until they can be processed into image displays. The period between exposures, when the chip is being drained of charge, is called latency. I emphasize the parallels to make clear the time involved, and the indirect but active role of analogue and digital cameras in capturing data from the world. Data is not given but harvested. Data capture abstracts from the world by sampling light, instructing its storage mechanism when sufficient light has arrived at a given point of the frame or chip to trigger a reaction, and using electronics or filters to recognize wavelengths and thus colors. Abstraction occurs in both, chemical in one, numerical in the other. Abstraction seizes the useful parts of the world for the system and prepares them for the system’s processes and goals. The process is

akin to (and could easily be argued to be built on the model of) colonization: a territory is claimed, valued elements taken, and the remainder left behind. In economic terms – entirely appropriate to the information economy that includes image capture and processing today – the world is an externality that can be mined for wealth and used as a waste dump without cost. Whatever we might think of as the reality that is left out of image-processing, or data-processing more generally, from the point of view of an information system, it is waste. In Freud's account and in the way it is handled in *The Departed*'s opening sequence, the oddity of memory is that it does not eject its waste product. The glitches in Freud's recall and *The Departed*'s historiography are symbols (symptoms in Freud's terminology) of noise, that is of all that has been excluded from memory and film as systems. They mark the integration of waste into every system.

Economic aesthetics

Any information system capable of assimilating glitches as symbols processes them alongside more conventionally formed data. This has been true of montage since Méliès' camera jammed, turning a cart into a hearse. In our times, the industrial harvesting of human behaviors in the form of social media, governmental and financial data has reached such levels that vast swathes of our activities have become predictable. Consumer capital thrives on the data harvest, and even more so on derivatives created by placing old and new data in relational databases that ceaselessly process new configurations from stored information. This works as long as there is enough profit to be derived from consumption and debt, the two major engines of twenty-first century capital. The problem is the falling rate of profit and finite potential for growth in a wholly predictable system. Today, especially in the vanguard of finance capital, risk is no longer a danger to profit-making. The increasingly redundant behaviors of increasingly disciplined consumers, in what Marx might have called the real subsumption of consumption under capital (revolutionizing the means of consumption through electronic point-of-sale and online retailing leads to a revolution in the mode of consumption),¹⁹ is such that the system now requires pure randomness, wholly unexpected and unpredictable events, in order to leverage the differences into profit. Disaster capitalism is not an aberration: it is a symptom of the new system as it has emerged in the wake of the 2007 derivatives crash.

19 For a slightly different view of the same phenomenon see Panoyatakis 2021.

The gangster economics that so fascinate *The Departed* are integral to this new formation: in fact they may even have foretold it, as long ago as the nativist and immigrant *Gangs of New York* all the way to the Trump presidency. Criminality operates in the same way as climate disasters: as unpredictable changes, thus as massive inputs of data, that capital can turn to profit in the form of difference that makes a difference. As Jonathan Beller demonstrates,²⁰ this includes how social differences produce differences in wealth – profit as privation. Malaspina gives the example of the random buying and selling of “noise traders”, not only assimilated but used as sources of profit by investment funds.²¹ The efficiency of markets is measured by how successfully they transfer money from A to B without impediment. We know from simplest observation that this system is lumpy: wealth accumulates in vast sumps we know as corporations. The simple exchange of like for like results in noise because it is repetitious; the random exchange of unlike things is noise because it is chaotic. The “invisible hand of the market” ensures that private property produces privation as much as it produces properties. Nature must be excluded from the market because it is both equitable and random. A curious upshot is that some of the nature that has to be excluded, that becomes waste, is human nature.

In the first lines of the film, Costello says “I don’t want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me”. In the same talk that gave us his definition of information, Bateson gives an insight into the gangster theory of economics and the concept of environments as externality and waste when he says

the last hundred years have demonstrated empirically that if an organism or aggregate of organisms sets to work with a focus on its own survival and thinks that is the way to select its adaptive moves, its “progress” ends up with a destroyed environment. If the organism ends up destroying its environment, it has in fact destroyed itself.²²

Capital wants to destroy its environments. It has always believed that the creation of wealth is the sole good, and that the world is well lost in its pursuit. It has been less explicit that, as it advanced into the real subsumption of consumption, it abandoned the idea that wealth had a function beyond accumulation: that the purpose of wealth was to consume. Now that consumption has become a source of information and therefore of more wealth, it is no longer the teleological end of profit. The old capital sought to create wealthy individuals. Its art was the art

²⁰ See Beller 2021.

²¹ See Malaspina 2018, 120 ff.

²² Bateson 1972, 425–6.

of perspective, that made its spectator the center of their universe, the master entitled to enjoy every pleasure. Today capital seeks only profit, profits derived from profits, profit without end or purpose. It art is data visualization – spreadsheets, databases, geographic information systems – that places its spectator in the position of a manager. The move from magisterial to managerial is a move from personal enjoyment to impersonal accumulation. In the process, pleasures, however mutilated by biography, fly out the window. Capital no longer needs our satisfactions.²³ It needs our randomness, our novelty, our unpredictability. It needs us to be mad.

Montage, pioneered by Méliès in the surrealist tradition, was to be a gateway to unconscious desires and affective flows between humans, technologies, and ecologies. Eisenstein's montage was to shatter bourgeois norms and release revolutionary potentials. Randomness, pioneered in art by John Cage, Nam June Paik and their Fluxus co-conspirators, was to liberate the collective capabilities of humans and non-humans. It seems from the perspective of the twenty-first century that they did not demonstrate the relative autonomy of art but what Jacques Attali suspected of music:²⁴ that certain cultural forms – I would say, those that most actively exceed the margins of the human/technical/ecological divides – predict the forms of future economies. Today, when even nature appears, in economic accounts but also in some environmental politics as a self-regulating communicative system, we confront the possibility that madness is not the exception, and not only human. It is clear that nature is in crisis: fires, floods and very probably the pandemic are glitches in the smooth running we ascribed to a healthy planet. Our technologies are, as Marx wrote, “dead labor”, the black boxes where we keep the knowledge and skills of our ancestors and increasingly the knowledge and skills of the living, prematurely treated as if they too were dead. Inside their black boxes, the ancestors too may be mad. The stupid errors of artificial intelligences are harvested for their contingency, what remains, as waste, is their insanity.

Enlightenment rationalism is dissolving in a non-identity of its own making. Like Costello, it wanted its environment to be a product of “me” – but that “me” is now captured by its environment: by managerialism, where the promise of satisfaction for “me” is no longer just deferred but annihilated. Freud's disturbance

²³ Socialist analysis has always emphasised the cycle M-C-M' (money-commodities-more money); Greens emphasise another aspect of the same cycle (commodities-money-more commodities). It is increasingly clear that the two are, as they have always been, aspects of the same destructive process.

²⁴ See Attali 1985.

of memory was a quiet statement of his fundamental discovery that behind mental “illness”, the fragility of individual psychology, lurked a history of social repression. That individuality, now a residue of history, a waste product of the information economy, is irreducibly denatured, derealized and fractured; and mental illness reveals itself as the waste product of the integral subsumption of consumption under capital.²⁵ The artwork that once functioned as the model and aspiration of the self-identical self, its highest pleasure, is revealed as non-identical. Knowledge, once the highest goal of Enlightenment, has become a commodity whose purpose lies beyond knowledge-in-itself. This is the end of the European Enlightenment project. In the epoch of non-identity, we, *noi altri*, must begin to look elsewhere.

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Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih

The Egyptian Enigma in New Media Art. Haytham Nawar's AI Human-Machine Installations

Abstract: New media art is not subject to former aesthetic categorizations but is appraised by the extent of its playfulness that comprises an enigma (Perniola) involving the creator/user in an operative function (Deleuze). Such a proclamation predicates visual/verbal intermediation, as well as perception/creation in an event marked by experiential intensity, synchronizing a present past open to multiple future interpretations. With digital media intermediating different temporalities, recent scholarship has drawn connections linking Baroque and postmodern, Renaissance art and new media art whilst crossings interconnecting the hieroglyph, pictograms, calligraphy, and intermediated human machine creations need to be explored. In this context, this paper will focus on Haytham Nawar's AI human-machine installations that aimed at suturing differential temporalities and cultural divides. By reinstating eighty-four ancient visual scripts derived from diverse civilizations with the intent of generating a universal human machine language system, Nawar was responding to the prevalent fears of digitalization and its impact on creating cultural gaps. Among other issues addressed, the extent to which new media art can change looking practices to ancient script, the hieroglyph in particular, by creating an AI machine human communicative iconography. This would eventually propose alternative trajectories beyond differential temporalities towards an open orbit that of the enigma as an impetus for change.

Keywords: Hieroglyph, AI human machine intermediation, assemblage, pictographic language

Introduction

The Egyptian enigma, implying multivalent layers of meaning in art has long fascinated artists, critics, and thinkers, especially during times fraught with uncertainty. No wonder it intrigues us today during a period of rising global digital divide. Mario Perniola's *Enigmas* (1995) appeared in a period clouded by fears from a return to a remote barbaric past (repetition) while menaced by a technologically dominant future (difference) (VIII). The recurrence of such fears in the twenty-first century reiterates the issue of how to negotiate cultural gaps in an uneven

world. The prevalent anxiety in the third millennium is partly due to digitalization that has caused substantive cultural changes, concomitant with the explosion in diverse visual media practices. New media expanded with emerging technologies like computer simulated virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI) which have engendered new modes of visualization problematizing the real, thus calling for revisioning modes of communication in a multicultural global community.

Subsequently, new media art cannot be determined by aesthetic categorization or chronological evolvement as was the case in art aesthetics. Unlike classical art, which is determined by historical periodization, media art intermediates temporalities by creating past present continuities¹ unbounded by geopolitical borders. Folded temporalities² hold an enigma which Perniola designates as an “Egyptian effect”,³ a present past antithetical relationship setting ancient and new on one plane so as to arouse open ended future prospects, a continual folding and refolding in Deleuzian terms.⁴

New media art has been contingent upon its experiential intensity, “a condensed relation between temporal levels,”⁵ generating continual change. This process urged creators to deploy the clashing forces and insinuations in the folding refolding process to provide immersive user/performer experience, actively synchronizing perception and creation. The past present entanglement problematizes future anticipations inducing us to trace the extent by which new media art can change looking practices to ancient visual signs like the hieroglyph, and in turn help us determine the enigma in new media art. The *Egyptian* is of no geopolitical reference but understood in terms of Francis Bacon’s reassessment of the history of art: “I could never dissociate myself from the great European images of the past – and by ‘European’ I mean to include Egyptian, even if the geographers wouldn’t agree with me.”⁶

On that premise, I will explore the hieroglyph in conjunction with Haytham Nawar’s (b. 1978)⁷ AI human-machine installations. I will inquire into the nature of the creative processes in both, their modes of challenging exclusivity, revamping creative processes, and opening up spaces for interaction. I will proceed by showing how Nawar’s installations address growing concerns about differential tempo-

1 See Perniola 1995, viii; Frohne 2005, 16–17; Reading 2012, 144–145.

2 See Serres 2000.

3 Perniola 1995, 74.

4 See Perniola 1995, 11.

5 Frohne 2005, 21–22.

6 Russell 1979, 99.

7 <https://www.haythamnawar.com> (last accessed 07/12/2024).

ralities, digital divides, and AI human-machine media art. I will argue that Nawar's exhibited installations open up an intermediate space for interventions and/or dialogue that unfold multivalent interpretations in different locations and among different spectators/performers interacting with the generated visual communicative language developed by the AI human machine.

The hieroglyph

The hieroglyph stands out as the prototype of a present past multimodal composition, folding multivalent significations, referred to by the Greeks as the divine language for its timelessness. Synchronization of perception and creation in the hieroglyph was conceived in the process of articulating body and mind/spirit, knowledge and language which were understood as bodily phenomena. Jan Assmann explains that according to the ancient Egyptians, knowledge is formulated in the heart premised on the perceptions it receives, thus considered as bodily phenomena communicated by the tongue. Perception inspires the creative act which articulates the conceptual, the iconic and the phonetic.⁸ The hieroglyphic script is a human pictorial rendering of the concepts through forms; the tongue vocalizes those concepts which have been rendered visually. The hieroglyph configures the act of creation not as an "act of speech but of writing... and signs," drawn from the visible forms of nature. These visible forms are not merely ornamental but convey multivalent significations that comprise a political significance, as well.⁹ As an assemblage, the hieroglyph is a writing mode that consists of polyvalent levels of meaning that collapses past present temporalities and all binaries. As a sign it is determinative of several concepts, or what Assmann terms "crocodilicity."¹⁰ The derivation of this term is based on the example of the word 'crocodile' which as a sign can be used in the metaphoric or allegorical mode to refer to greed, violence, and considerably more qualities.¹¹

According to Assmann, the hieroglyph which is formed from life's components transforms "the world as text". Based on that, hieroglyphic writing and representational art are not separate since the hieroglyph refers to language and to things, albeit in a different mode.¹² As such, the enigma of the hieroglyph is not due to its strangeness but to its unfolding of what goes beyond the thing, or as Per-

⁸ Assmann 2007, 26–27.

⁹ Assmann 1994, 19.

¹⁰ Assman 1994, 28–29.

¹¹ Assman 1994, 28–29.

¹² Assman 1996, 68.

niola puts it, in its being in a state of transit.¹³ Unfolding does not imply clarification of a mystery but is related to Deleuze's concept of the fold; unfolding marks a fluidity, an ability to expand, to intensify.¹⁴ The hieroglyph's multiplicity of material and immaterial, visible and invisible, heart and mind, history and aesthetics, as well as reality and representation recall Deleuze's reference to the "Egyptian assemblage"¹⁵ as the starting point in European art, mentioned earlier in this research. Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage "acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously... There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)."¹⁶

Along similar lines, the hieroglyph's fluidity links writing and cosmos, or binds the iconic signs of the hieroglyph script and things in reality.¹⁷ The hieroglyph folds and unfolds all possible meanings unlimited by context and its iconicity attributes to it a cosmological character.¹⁸ Subsequently, the hieroglyph is more than a language system tied to a nation; it renders things of reality and abstract concepts through metaphoric and metonymic figures which makes it the language available to the world, since it depends on the "*materiality*" of the sign not its "*semanticity*", materiality referring to the sign's physical form and semantic to its meaning.¹⁹

The hieroglyph's "operative function"²⁰ is to unfurl the infinite folds enveloped the material and semantic to attain a cosmic communicative language that stems from real life, i.e., the local environment. It concurs with Egyptian representational art in folding and unfolding the enigmatic essence of the real world which bears a connective system amalgamating polarities.²¹ Likewise, the enigma is generated by a human-hieroglyph exchange, the hieroglyphic sign being an 'other' self while that self acquires characteristics of the 'other' sign. Such an exchange unbridles the hieroglyph from being merely an object or a representation of an object destined for conservation.

The enigma of the hieroglyph resides in its being part of history and beyond it, being conserved on papyrus and stone but dynamically active in funerary ritual

13 See Perniola 1995, 8.

14 Deleuze 1993, 8.

15 Deleuze 2003, 122.

16 Deleuze/Guattari 1987, 22–23.

17 See Assmann 2007, 29–30.

18 See Assmann 2007, 32–33.

19 See Assmann 1994, 15–17.

20 Deleuze 1993, 3.

21 See Perniola 1995, 76.

performances. Within an alternative time and space, the creator/viewer experiences the enigma, reconfigured in moments of past present intensity. Such moments of intensity are challenged in periods of transition and crisis in the process of migrating to digitalization, computation and/or access to new media devices that appear to be alien intruders. Lately, new media art has offered a new space for the experiencing of events, despite being in a complex reality-virtuality, human-machine relationship. In this respect, O'Sullivan opines that new media "coincide with art" by adapting an "aesthetic function" "a *detritorialising* function"²²

Everyday objects into a cosmic language

The *materiality and semanticity* of the hieroglyph, the assemblage of infinite folds was intended to create a timeless cosmic language of aesthetic, historical and political significance to the people of Kemet, the black earth, at present named Egypt. During times of upheaval, protestors worldwide transform everyday objects into a cosmic iconography that can galvanize the peoples of the earth. New media creators capture matter that folds past present experience to release the affect "*immanent* to experience."²³ Egyptian youth who have participated in the 25 January 2011 uprising underwent multiple levels of experience that were reconfigured by new media art creators. The torments of an uneasy life and the perseverance to *be* ignited the uprising whose major protest slogan was: "*Eish, Horreya, 'Adālah Igti-mā'eyah*" (Bread, Liberty, Social Justice). Protestors were chanting these words while displaying loaves of local flatbread during their marches. *Eish* in Egyptian dialect translates into English as homeland bread. It is a determinative of multiple concepts, meaning bread, livelihood, life span, the staff of life, and can undergo infinite inflections with irreducible significations related to being and livelihood.

Eish, the homeland bread descends from ancient Egyptian times. It was used for nourishment as well as a recurrent burial ritual sign on the funerary offering table depicted in ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. The utmost goal of the offering table which included bread the principal diet for rich and poor was to ensure bodily survival of the deceased.²⁴ The interpretation of food offerings and their development highlight their relationship to ancient Egyptian notions of 'Being' as analyzed by Barbara O'Neill who finds difficulty in interpreting the nuances of objects and food represented on the offering table.²⁵ The funerary scene is a ritual prac-

²² O'Sullivan 2001, 127.

²³ O'Sullivan 2001, 126.

²⁴ See Nawar 2020.

²⁵ See O'Neill 2015, 5.

ticed as a “multimedia experience” folding irreducible significations testifying for “the angst of loss and a resoluteness to exist.”²⁶ The hieroglyphic symbol of bread is “hetep” or “hoteb,” denoting satisfaction²⁷ a remnant denotation until this day in “Eisha” when pronounced in a rising intonation.

However, bread as a sign of livelihood and protest has never been exclusive to one nation or region. It has been shared along different temporalities and across geopolitical cartographies. Accordingly, bread does not only stand as an object of consumption but a universal icon bearing historical, political, and social significance, along with its variable aesthetic form. Although bread acts and is acted upon repeatedly, every-day, on every table worldwide, as it is being used for different purposes, it still retains its uniqueness. The daily bread has become an object of protest for different subjects worldwide, and has now been integrated by protestors creators in the language of protest.

Nawar’s *Collective Bread Diaries: A Taste for Protest*

Bread as a sign expressing “notions of Being”²⁸ prevalent since ancient times was captured by Haytham Nawar (b. 1978)²⁹ in his *Bread Diaries* which was a response to the 2011 youth uprising in Egypt. During this period, he interpreted the experience of bread as the source of life in a series of drawings, silk screen prints, and photography.³⁰ Bread which in ancient times meant sustenance in life and death, acquired a new significance for Nawar, protestor-creator who participated in the uprising. His first prints and photographs inspired the second version of his project titled *Collective Bread Diaries: A Taste of Protest* (2020), a new media art installation inspired by bread as a collective sign of protest developed in diverse cultures throughout changing periods of time. He traced bread as a principal factor in sparking off revolutions worldwide, being a major determinant in world economy and power structures. According to Nawar, bread has become “a universal language,”³¹ a sign that may activate protest. This ties up with Assmann’s explication

²⁶ See O’Neill 2015, 64.

²⁷ See Hill 2010; Nawar 2020, 410.

²⁸ See O’Neill 2015, 63.

²⁹ Nawar is an artist, designer, and scholar in the field. He is associate professor and Chair of the Department of the Arts at the American University in Cairo.

³⁰ See Nawar 2020, 412.

³¹ Nawar 2020, 411.

of hieroglyphs as being signs beyond the writing system, for within their “iconicity lay their cosmological character which corresponded to the ‘grammatological’ structure of the cosmos.”³² By drawing on Assmann with reference to the hieroglyph, the protestors in the Egyptian uprising and in other revolutions along history represented objects and concepts “via metaphoric and metonymic representations”³³ of a cosmological character, transgressing a writing system exclusive to a geopolitical location.

Nawar invited participants/users from diverse geopolitical locations to contribute their individual visual representations of bread as signs of protest in their respective locations. Nawar’s objective was to explore the cultural, socio-political, and religious discourse embedded in bread along history. In addition to his black vector drawings of bread, a hundred drawings were collected via mechanical MTurk. The drawings were recreated by the Roland: CAMM-ISERVO MACHINE with a fine black ink pen on 10 meters long and 60 cm wide sheets of paper. The drawings were organized as an installation exhibited at the UCLA Art/Sci Center Gallery (Opening, 5 April 2018) in a live human machine performance, enabling in-person participants to take part in visually assembling and reassembling the drawings while mediating historical eras and time zones.³⁴

Displaying bread in revolutions that took place worldwide was not a simple articulation of reality; the *semanticity* of bread and not its *materiality* is what counted. The materiality of bread, its fluidity generated a torrent of drawings created by worldwide performers. Drawing on Assmann’s terms, bread unfolded a “cosmic sign”, a “world reference,”³⁵ to which all humans contributed a part. In ancient Egypt, bread was part of the offering shared with the inhabitant of the other life. At present, sharing bread among the living is a “letting go,” and by giving away part of one’s possessions, O’Sullivan explains in another context, it is a “breaking of fetters.”³⁶ Bread, as an offering shared with the inhabitant in the after-life, or as a present-day sign of protest becomes a visual communicative language, mediating past present temporalities, while investing creators/viewers with aesthetic intensity.

The dynamics of *Collective Bread Diaries* lies in articulating a human-machine assemblage that invites translations of/among different bread drawings. As a human machine processed installation presented live, creators/viewers/ par-

³² Assman 2007, 33.

³³ Assman 2007, 33.

³⁴ The original sketches of the diaries were later printed in the exhibition catalog: <https://www.breaddiaries.net> (last accessed 07/12/2024).

³⁵ Assman 1994, 17.

³⁶ O’Sullivan 2001, 118.

ticipants become active performers in the event. Likewise, the writer reviewing the exhibition will be generating another event running parallel to the exhibition experience. Subsequently, attending the event becomes an “aesthetic zone”³⁷ that dissolves dividing lines between human machine creator/performer and/or writer, each experiencing moments of intensity separately while moving together beyond their subjectivities. Furthermore, the *Bread Diaries* enable the creator/performer to engage with past present human machine mediated intersections and interchanges of the different components of the assemblage that would anticipate future modes of visual communication.

In Nawar’s view, AI has become the artist’s “ideation partner rather than a tool utilized in the design process.”³⁸ In ancient times, the creation of the hieroglyph was intermediated by god human through an immersive experience, a creative process binding soul and body, knowledge and affect, translatable into a cosmic visual language. At present, new media art is generated through human machine intermediation (IHMC); humans program AI machines and machines are programming human brains by expanding cognitive technologies. It is a human machine assemblage to reshape human knowledge.

Ancient visual scripts and AI human-machine generative pictographic language

In the ancient past, the hieroglyph was conceived as cosmic language for its combinatory dynamics. At present, the bread assemblage in the *Collective Bread Diaries* has been turned into a cosmic language conveying diversity in uniqueness. Since 2010, Nawar has been exploring pictographic communication for possibilities of developing a system capable of transmitting information on a planetary scale.³⁹ Recently, Nawar chose to loop past present signs by unfurling visual protowriting systems used in the ancient past in order to generate infinite possibilities of trans-cultural communication with the help of human machine intermediation. His objective was to produce a “generative pictographic language” using machine learning, an AI application. Computer programs were developed in two ways: the first was to access scripts from eighty-four different civilizations in anticipation of producing similar scripts. The second was by synthesizing several characters from the same script as Cuneiform, Hieroglyphics, Coptic, Arabic, Mayan, and more. Inter-

³⁷ O’Sullivan 2001, 118.

³⁸ Nawar 2020, 409.

³⁹ Nawar 2010, 59.

mediating protowriting, an ancient human technology and present-day AI machine learning produced a unique generative script. The nonhuman outcome of this project was materially realized in the form of 3D objects, and the machine generated characters were engraved on tablets by a robot, simulating Egyptian hieroglyphic and Sumerian cuneiform tablets.⁴⁰

Nawar's project is in line with earlier attempts to form a universal iconography that can be shared by all cultures. The AI machine learning yielded a pictographic generative language that connects diverse writing systems despite their singularity (repetition in difference). Apart from connecting different scripts it has operated a human-machine activity that enabled the viewer/user to see the past from a novel perspective. Nawar concludes that human machine intermeditation bears a promising potential for future varied creative outputs and a favorable "hybrid creative environment."⁴¹

Conclusion

Nawar's installations have generated a promising open potential in human-machine generative pictographic language that blends past and present in one temporal dimension. This endorses Perniola's postulate of the "Egyptian effect," the "enigmatic synchronicity" that maintains a present temporality that unfolds multiple future openings. It also ties up with ancient Egyptian assemblage that conceived of the world as a combinatory system, connecting divisive binaries, in line with the conception of the hieroglyph's operative function as a cosmic sign. By bridging diverse cultural scripts, the generative pictographic language has unfolded crossovers linking major and minor languages without giving primacy to any. By blending past present temporalities these installations have addressed fears of obliterating pasts by being enveloped in a digitalized permanent present. The generative pictographic language generated by the human-machine installations re-introduced creators/viewers/performers to common iconographies like the hieroglyph, bread, visual script, protowriting and more, remnant from the past. Based on that, AI technology has not given solid scientific solutions to minor major or center periphery conflicts, but has teamed up with media art creators to insinuate the emotional intensity of mutual bonds.

⁴⁰ See Abdeljaouad 2021.

⁴¹ Nawar 2021, 5.

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Kathleen L. Komar

The House of Atreus in Cyberspace: Transmediality of Classical Materials

Abstract: One of the seminal battles in the establishment of gender hierarchies in the West takes place in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In the trilogy Klytemnestra defends Mother Right and blood relationships against Father Right and the privileging of legal relationships established in the founding of the Law Court of Athens. Klytemnestra kills her husband, Agamemnon, upon his return from the Trojan War in vengeance for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Klytemnestra is killed in turn by her son Orestes in revenge for her murder of Agamemnon. Orestes is finally acquitted of her murder by Athena's newly established court in Athens. This act creates a gender hierarchy that favors the male and legal rights over the female and blood rights. At the same time, Aeschylus has the female furies literally driven underground to become benevolent females in the service of the state. All of these characters from the House of Atreus resurface on the World Wide Web in the late 20th century. My paper examines what revisions take place in the reincarnation of the House of Atreus in cyberspace. I investigate shifts in values and changes in gender and other hierarchies created by moving the House of Atreus to the Internet.

Keywords: Classical tragedy, internet, gender, Atreus, Electra, *Avengers*, Greek and Nordic mythology

One of the seminal battles in the establishment of gender hierarchies in western culture takes place in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In the trilogy Klytemnestra defends older matriarchal rights and blood relationships against rising patriarchal rights and the privileging of legal relationships established in the founding of the Law Court of Athens during Orestes trial. Klytemnestra kills her husband, Agamemnon, upon his return from the Trojan War in vengeance for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Klytemnestra is killed in turn by her son Orestes in revenge for her murder of Agamemnon. Orestes is finally acquitted of her murder by Athena's newly established court in Athens. This act creates a gender hierarchy that favors the male and legal rights over the female and blood rights. At the same time, Aeschylus has the female furies literally driven underground to become benevolent females in the service of the state.

The importance of this gender conflict as well as the self-devouring family dynamics of the House of Atreus makes it a crucial narrative to reincorporate into our cultural understanding over the millennia. The story has reappeared in count-

less novels, plays and poems over the centuries, as well as films and comic books, and more recently it has emerged on the World Wide Web in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. My paper examines what revisions take place in the reincarnation of the House of Atreus in cyberspace. I will investigate what shifts in values and what changes in gender hierarchies take place by moving the House of Atreus to the Internet.

Myriad web sites adopted the names of various members of the House of Atreus—including: *Electra.com*, *Iphigenia.com*, and *Orestes.com*. *Agamemnon.com* is *Agamemnon Film*, owned by Charlton Heston and his son Fraser. By 2021, however, all these domain names were unused and for sale with the exception of the Charlton and Fraser Heston site. Interestingly, *Agamemnon*, the dominant patriarchal figure of the family, survives in cyberspace.

But let me look back at some of these sites. *Orestes'* website gives some indication of the attraction his name still holds even though his story has been obscured. *Orestes.com* was the homepage for a Finnish media agency that designs websites.¹ When I asked the webmaster, Tapio Nissilä, how he chose the name *Orestes*, he responded (in an email of 7/23/99) that the name was chosen more or less “randomly.” The Finnish company needed an “international” name (i.e., not identifiably Finnish) and *Orestes* “sounded attractive.” *Orestes* name still holds cultural weight, even though the Finnish group was clearly unaware of his actual story. Once I inquired, the company researched *Orestes'* story and actually changed the domain name to “*Identia.com*”. Mr. Nissilä expressed the hope that “our name is not any kind of offence to you or any other person interested in ancient mythology” (email 7/23/99). Since the website began with a handsome, well-dressed young man who looked as though he was in charge of a business, I thought it would be appropriate for a late twentieth-century *Orestes*—a new kind of economic king for a rising group of young entrepreneurs in a stock market gone wild at the end of the millennium. I regretted that I had inadvertently removed a classical figure from cyberspace.

The males from the House of Atreus, *Agamemnon* and his son *Orestes*, thus land on the internet in eponymous websites that maintain their masculine appeal – either as contemporary macho screen figures like Charlton Heston (famous for playing other patriarchs like *Ben Hur* and *Moses*) or as young entrepreneurs. The avenging and vengeful mother *Klytemnestra* is the only one in the immediate family to lack a website of her own in the 1990s.² Apparently an axe-swinging fe-

¹ I first discussed this website in Komar 2003, 156–57.

² While *Klytemnestra's* daughters, *Electra* and *Iphigenia*, each have a “.com” address as does her son, *Orestes*, *Klytemnestra* herself lacks an electronic address in the 1990s. When I checked in De-

male persona who kills husband and king is one that neither men nor women care to immortalize in cyberspace. While Orestes' murder of his mother evidently did not blacken his name in the website arena, Klytemnestra's murder of her husband clearly did. The gender hierarchies established in their original story seemed to persist.

Although Klytemnestra dominated narrative texts and stage performances in the 1980s, the cultural scene – and cyberspace – both favor her daughters in the 1990s.³ The move from the 1980s to 1990s marks a shift in interest for women revisionist writers in particular from Klytemnestra and her founding battle for female rights against a rising patriarchal order to her daughters, Electra and Iphigenia – both of whom defend the very patriarchal order that Klytemnestra battled against. Her daughters, Elektra and Iphigenia, do (or rather did)⁴ have their own eponymous sites. The sites I will discuss here have since vanished along with the millennium and the domain names are for sale.

To provide some brief classical context for Klytemnestra's offspring, Electra and Iphigenia are the daughters of Agamemnon and Klytemnestra and sisters of Orestes. Iphigenia is sacrificed by Agamemnon when the Greek fleet that he commands is becalmed on the way to Troy.⁵ Klytemnestra will later slay Agamemnon on his return from Troy in retribution for her daughter's murder.⁶ After killing her husband, Klytemnestra treats her daughter Electra badly. Electra bewails her fate and waits for the return of Orestes to seek her own vengeance for their father's death. She and Orestes plot to kill their mother, and Orestes carries out the deed.⁷ Both Iphigenia, by accepting the sacrifice of her life for the good of the Greeks, and Electra, by avenging her father and the patriarchal order at the

cember of 2004, both Clytemnestra.com and Klytemnestra.com were still available. I checked again in March, 2022, and the domain name "Clytemnestra.com" is for sale for \$2000. "Klytemnestra.com" produced a threatening message about hackers and privacy. Although Klytemnestra does not have her own ".com" address, one of the most fascinating and confusing revisions of her story, entitled "The People versus Clytemnestra," can be visited at http://members.tripod.com/NWO_2/index.html (last accessed 10/02/2025). For an analysis of this website, see Komar 2003, 161–67.

3 See Komar 2003. The study focuses on the battle between Mother Right and the newly arising patriarchal law as depicted in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and replayed by a number of contemporary women writers in the 1980s.

4 The past tense here is due to the fluid nature of the world wide web on which websites appear and disappear over time. Many can still be accessed via "The Wayback Machine" site that archives old webpages.

5 See Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (c405 BC).

6 See Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 BC) for Klytemnestra's, Electra's and Orestes' actions.

7 See Euripides' *Electra* (413 BC) and Sophocles' *Electra* (414? BC) for two different interpretations of these events.

cost of her mother's life, support the rising patriarchal system that their mother fought.

Perhaps the most fitting "re-inscription" of Electra as the millennium came to a close was electronic.⁸ Of all of Klytemnestra's progeny, Electra, the rebel daughter who stands up for (male) right and for her betrayed father, who breaks free of her mother's domination in order to mourn her father and find a life of her own seemed most attractive in the late 1990s. Given Elektra's popularity, Klytemnestra was still seen as the betraying and murderous wife, the destructive woman. But Elektra elicited passionate sympathy, admired for her determination and loyalty. This kind of admiration – generated partly by the revival of Electra on Broadway⁹ – made Electra a recognizable and positive icon, whose name was sufficiently well known to merit being used for a website.¹⁰ Electra conquered the internet by having a virtual empire built in her name as the millennium closed.

Described in a *Time digital* article as a "hip women's site,"¹¹ The Electra.com of the late 1990s began (at least in the week when I first visited the site in March 1999) quite unintentionally ironically with a 1950s-vintage drawing of a mother hugging her baby daughter next to the quotation, "Your Mom wanted the best for you, don't you deserve it?" with the name Electra in bold and highlighted beneath the quotation. The authors of this site are clearly not troubled by (or appa-

8 One wonders if the aural proximity of Electra's name to "electric" or "electronic" contributes to its choice as a title for Electra.com. I attempted several times to contact both Gerry Laybourne and the webmaster for Electra.com to get more information on the choice of names for the site, but I got no response.

9 Frank McGuinness's adaptation of Sophocles' *Electra* under the direction of David Leveaux ran quite successfully on Broadway (at the Ethel Barrymore Theater) in December 1998, was extended for several months, and was nominated for several Tony Awards. In the 1990s, the House of Atreus revived in several areas of the country and in varied artistic media. Garrett Fisher's opera *Agamemnon* played in Seattle's Nippon Kan Theater in June of 1998. Euripides' *Orestes* was revived in April and May of 1998 at the Franklin College Theater in Indiana. Ellen McLaughlin staged *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* at New York's Classic Stage Company in 1995, and Ruth Margraff presented an opera, *The Elektra Fugues* in New York's HERE Theater in 1997, and later played in Culver City, California in 1999. *The Greeks*, an adaptation by Kenneth Cavander based on Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles and commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare in 1980, ran in Los Angeles in a six-hour production in September 1999.

10 There was a film entitled *Elektra* in 2005 with Jennifer Garner as lead character. This film seems, however, to have no real connection with Greek Elektra story. Garner plays a superhero assassin motivated partly by her mother's killing. So there appears to be little consciousness of the classical Elektra involved. The film was an economic and critical failure.

11 Hamilton 1999. *Time digital* is a printed magazine with an accompanying website (www.time-digital.com), distributed by *Time* magazine and featuring technical and internet materials. Its subtitle was "Your Guide to Personal Technology."

rently aware of) the classical legends that attend Electra and her “Mom.” The site is practically oriented, flanking the vision of a loving mom with an ad for online health insurance. The site does, however, capture some of the ancient Electra’s intensity and focus. In a section entitled “Simplify Your Life,” the site suggests that “Electra helps you *define what’s important* and weed out the rest.”¹² This ability was certainly one evidenced by the ancient Electra, whose single-minded focus on her mother’s destruction became legendary.

While she does indeed present a strong and successful female character, the ancient Electra is a much more troubled figure than her late twentieth-century counterpart. The end of the last millennium managed to remove Electra’s trauma-inducing mother, Klytemnestra, entirely in favor of a more unproblematically loving “mom.” Electra becomes the image of the strong and accomplished woman; the fact that she works entirely in the service of the male order in the classical texts has disappeared in the website along with her desire to execute mom. In short, despite her interactive mode, this 1999 Electra has become rather one-dimensional. Both Klytemnestra and her rebellious daughter Electra have been tamed and domesticated here, as have the other forces at work in Greek tragedy. Fate and the manipulative gods have been replaced by astrological forecasts. Apollo, Athena, and the curse of the House of Atreus have been replaced by our daily astrological chart. This website implies that our fates concern small personal events that do not often rise to the public and political power generated by the classical Klytemnestra or Electra. As the last millennium came to an end, women (at least as defined by this website) seem to have “cocooned” at home.¹³

This website implies that a viable family unit has been reestablished without Aeschylus’s battle to the death between matriarchal rights and father’s law. Interestingly, the Electra.com website does not mention the father at all. He has been displaced and replaced by a loyalty to the mother. In fact, the whole Electra.com world becomes a female domain. Men are mentioned only as potential dates or mates. But this women’s world has contracted drastically from that in which the ancient Electra operated. Issues of power, politics, struggles for dominance, and most crucially, the conflict between home and public arena are all airbrushed out of this reassuring picture. As the millennium drew to a close, the world of the classical Klytemnestra and Electra contracted back into the home. The Furies are tamed by helpful psychiatric hints, women learn to be well-adjusted wives and mothers who can hold down a job and tend the family simultaneously. The shrill,

12 All of my quotations here are taken from the Electra.com website of March 20, 1999.

13 See Komar 2016 for an extended discussion.

critical, female voices of feminists of the 1970s and 1980s became cheerier and more optimistic in the late 1990s—largely by constricting women’s field of vision.

To turn to the male members of the House of Atreus, I found that Orestes.com is still available. But the founding name of Atreus produced more interesting discoveries. When I searched “Atreus,” as a domain name, I discovered that it is still quite popular although almost entirely detached from any of its classical connections. Atreusglobal.com is a cloud solutions firm based in Indonesia, Singapore, and the UK; Atreusfitnesscancun is an exercise site in Mexico; Atreus.de is a management firm in Germany, and Atreus.technomancy is a keyboard design company in the US. In addition, a number of ships, an entertainment company and a race-horse are all named Atreus. The appeal of a classical name, the meaning of which is from the Greek *ἀ-*, “no” and *τρέω* “tremein”, “tremble”, thus implying “fearless,” seems to overshadow the fact that Atreus served up his brother’s sons in a stew after taking over the kingdom, thus continuing the saga of the self-devouring House of Atreus, as well as generations of intra-family incest and murder.

But perhaps the most interesting re-embodiment of Atreus on the internet is not in a domain name, but rather in a video game entitled “God of War” (fig. 1). The game was developed by Sony Interactive Entertainment and released for the PlayStation 4 in April 2018. This eighth installment of the “God of War” series defies geography and history to merge a fictional ancient Scandinavia and adapted Norse mythology with the Greek mythology of earlier installments. Atreus in this version is the son of Kratos, Greek god of war and a personification of strength, and a female Norse giant.

At the end of this installment, Atreus recalls that his mother called him Loki, a trickster god of Norse mythology. This consolidation of a ruthless and deceiving character from Ancient Greece and a shape-shifting, destructive deceiver from Norse mythology may be particularly apt as a hero figure in the age of the Trump administration.

This description reveals that Norse and Greek mythologies are thoroughly confounded or consolidated in this game. We can read this gesture either as confusion on the part of the game developers or more seriously as a metaphor for current political culture, or perhaps, on a more hopeful note, as an attempt to reconcile and marry two ancient traditions and create a multicultural vision. In any case, this game was the most successful of its series and gave birth to a prequel comic book, a novelization and a sequel scheduled for release in 2022.

The character of Loki also becomes a protagonist in his own right when Disney produces a six-part television series starring Tom Hiddleston as Loki. In the Marvel Comics series, Loki, God of Mischief, begins as a villain, but by the time the Disney television series *Loki* aired in 2021, the character becomes a more complex anti-



Fig. 1: Atreus and his father Kratos, from the Play Station 4 video game *God of War*. © Sony Santa Monica.

hero. He is also part of the *Thor* series of films and the larger *Avenger* film series. In these films, Thor and Loki are brothers.

The transmedia journey into comic books and film calls up a transition that is familiar in our current cultural scene. The material of the classical myths is moving across media from classical tragedy to contemporary theater and novels to digital material, graphic novels, and comics. The impulse to reinvent these classical figures as contemporary superheroes (Wonder Woman, Superman, the Flash...) is also evident in the Avengers and Justice League series of films. The need to create superhuman beings to save humanity from itself is a strong one, which requires the metamorphosis of some clearly destructive characters from Greek mythology (Atreus, Agamemnon, Kratos) into better versions of themselves who develop a desire to defend rather than destroy humanity. But it runs the risk of aggrandizing the ruthless, deceptive, and cruel as the foundation of heroic and redemptive characters.

This impulse to (mis)use classical material as a metaphor for contemporary issues is also evident in another reincarnation of the House of Atreus discoverable on the world wide web. *The House of Atreus: Abortion as a Human Rights Issue* (Praeger, 1999), a book by James F. Bohan. Bohan uses the tragically destructive relationship between parents and children in the House of Atreus as a metaphor for abortion and the abuse of children. This is an interesting take on the original material of the myth that sidesteps the issue of gender conflict and is blind to the issue of male versus female superiority or equality entirely. The issue of patriar-

chal versus matriarchal rights at the heart of the *Oresteia* becomes rather a defense of the unborn. But perhaps this is indicative of our current political situation in which women's rights are again in question in the United States and globally.

Interestingly, there has been a flurry of superheroes in film in the last few years. Marvel has produced four *Thor* films so far with another in the works. This is matched by four *Avengers* films from 2012–2019. These films combine our current cultural need for superheroes with our current fascination with and dependence on technology. Mythology and the tech world merge in characters like Iron Man or the Black Panther, both of whom appear in the *Avengers: Infinity War* to do battle with the destroyer Thanos (from Thanatos the Greek god who personified death). The film also creates an ethnic, racial, and interspecies collaboration (including the plant-based character Groot). This merging of Greek classical, Nordic mythic, female and male superheroes, and multispecies characters with advanced technology may be the most positive vision of a future world presented in media. These series imply that, while the human struggle to survive and to understand cultures remains a battle, cooperation – and technology – may yet save us all.

These contemporary films, computer games and the websites for Atreus, Electra and Orestes make us pause to reconsider their modern fates enwrapped in a new “net.” The internet takes us into new cultural territory in which not just the House of Atreus but the concepts of “high culture” and “founding moments” themselves are dialogized, atomized, and recast in a venue in which pop icons merge with their classical counterparts. We embark upon a new, more iconoclastic sense of “culture” and “authority.”

Revealingly, however, even the fleeting presence of Orestes, Agamemnon, and Electra on the World Wide Web with .com addresses indicates that the contemporary technological revolution is taking our founding cultural myths along with it into a new era as the *Avenger* comic books and films also attest. This interaction of ancient founding myths and absolutely contemporary media and technology indicates that culture continues to operate in an evolutionary mode—even if a radical one. While new cyber games appear, “high culture” infiltrates the web matrix to keep alive the narrative explorations of our most crucial cultural tensions. The political and cultural power struggle between men and women and among differing cultures and species remains embedded in the subtexts of websites, computer games and films that invoke classical characters and myths.

A second type of cultural incorporation in cyberspace is embodied in Electra.com. In this case only an echo of any ancient story remains—and that a faint one. Electra has metamorphosed into a later self who does participate in power and does share the kingdom. Her ancient self is no longer recognizable except as the powerfully focused and ambitious young woman who succeeds in enacting her will despite all obstacles. Electra becomes a vaguely positive invocation of the fe-

male with the details of her classical origins lost to view. Her homophonic relationship to electricity—and the etymological resonances of meteoric qualities and production of energy by friction—help Electra to gain footing in a new cultural arena that remains largely unaware of her heritage. This lack of genealogy may make sites like Electra.com more available for forging new female selves not staked to a traumatic past. Or such sites may indicate that contemporary young women remain unaware of the gender power struggles that shaped the western tradition – or are unconcerned with such “ancient history.”

The merging of genders, species, races, and cultures in the *Avenger* films may take us in a new cultural direction in which these factors are all secondary to simple human survival. Our current confrontation of climate change, pandemics, or nuclear devastation, underline the need for global cooperation if humanity is to survive. And popular media (film, comic books, websites) may be one effective strategy for promoting this idea. The fact that it incorporates ancient mythologies as well as advanced technology implies that the founding myths may still provide essential explorations of the underlying threats to our continued existence.

Orestes inclusion in cyberspace represents a third kind of relationship of “high culture” and founding cultural models to the contemporary technological revolution. Orestes’ name was used as a .com label without any real awareness of his cultural past. Once aware of Orestes’ story, however, his .com webmasters changed the name of their site. Having eliminated Orestes’ perplexing persona, Identia declares its mission to be “to carry our client’s identity to the new medias.”¹⁴ Orestes’ identity is replaced by that of the client (depicted dominantly as male), the consumer of technology. It is telling that Orestes still makes people so uncomfortable that knowing his story makes him too problematic to be used as any kind of logo figure. The difficulty of making Orestes’ murder of his mother palatable to western culture seems to remain insurmountable even on the internet.

Following the House of Atreus from its beginning in ancient Greece into Cyberspace and beyond allows us to begin to explore the complex interaction of “high culture” as embodied in founding texts such as the *Oresteia* and the new technology and power economies that shape western culture. This journey demands that we reconsider many of our founding cultural moments—particularly those that have to do with fundamental gender and power tensions such as those played out in the conflicts of the House of Atreus. The further embodiment of classical Greek and Nordic traditions in film and cyberspace suggests that we need to explore strategies for using technology in ways that take us beyond gender, race, species, and geography in order simply to survive.

14 Quoted from the Idenita.com website on June 30, 2000.

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Yorimitsu Hashimoto

Suspended or Suspenseful? Orientalism, Rat Torture, and Transmedial Fantasies

Abstract: Narrative representations of torture illustrate a dynamic history influenced by evolutions in both media and the wider culture. Despite a lack of documentation, Westerners attributed Chinese origins to especially barbaric methods like rat torture, reflecting both sensationalist Orientalism and shifting cultural anxieties. This development, reinforced by the fictional popularization of *lingchi* (death by a thousand cuts) and fears of reversed colonial power dynamics, fueled 19th- and 20th-century narratives in which Western characters suffer “Eastern” torture methods, as seen in Sax Rohmer’s *Fu Manchu* series and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The rise of cinema further refined portrayals of torture, heightening tension through techniques like cutaways. However, the 21st-century proliferation of real violent imagery online has diminished the impact of suspense. Recent horror films like *Sinister 2* acknowledge this shift, using rat torture reflexively rather than as a source of tension. This signals broader cultural changes, including the decline of media-based stereotypes about “Eastern barbarism” and Western fears of colonial retribution.

Keywords: Snuff films, censorship, horror tropes, George Orwell, *lingchi*

Introduction

Depictions of torture and execution have long been sensationalized in paintings, literature, and film, and frequently serve as propaganda. Even when explicit violence is absent in a narrative, the mere threat of torture increases tension. In cinema, the cutaway technique—for example, alternating between a character immobilized in terror and an impending threat like a train, saw, or laser beam—has nearly become cliché. Since Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842), in which a razor-sharp pendulum descends upon a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition (fig. 1), similar suspense-driven, torture-related tropes have appeared across novels, drama, and film. Notably, Poe’s story features a swarm of rats that, rather than attacking the protagonist, free him by gnawing through his restraints. Post-“Pit” depictions of rats in torture-related scenarios could be considered suspenseful variations of this motif, emerging under modern restrictions on violent depictions in literature and journalism.



Fig. 1: Byam Shaw's, *They Swarmed upon Me in Ever-Accumulating Heaps*, illustration in E.A. Poe, *Selected Tales of Mystery*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, p. 190. Source: <https://archive.org/details/selectedtalesofm00poeiala> (last accessed 10/02/2025).

Rat torture, in which a living victim's bowels are devoured by rats, exemplifies the torture fantasy, and it has been heavily explored in psychoanalytic contexts. In 1909, Sigmund Freud analyzed a patient known as the "Rat Man," who suffered ob-

sessive fears about a torture method he had learned about from a Czech officer. This technique allegedly involved placing rodents inside an overturned pot positioned on a victim's buttocks, then heating the pot to drive the rats into a panicked frenzy, forcing them to burrow into the victim's flesh. Freud diagnosed the patient with an obsessive neurosis fixated on the fear of rats penetrating "his anus."¹

The most plausible literary source for modern fictional depictions of rat torture, as Leonard Shengold has suggested in 1971, is Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* (*The Torture Garden*, 1899), which is set in China. Shengold interprets fictional depictions of rat torture from a psychoanalytic perspective, seeing them as a manifestation of primal fears of cannibalism: an embodiment of the dilemma of "eat or be eaten."² This broader psychological theme finds resonance in multiple cases, including that of George Orwell. Orwell, who harbored a lifelong fear of rats, wrote in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), "if there is one thing I hate ... it is a rat running over me in the darkness." Shengold argued that this fear influenced also Orwell's depiction of rat torture in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).³

Despite these psychological interpretations, the history of rat torture as a narrative device has been largely overlooked. How did this form of torture become so closely associated with Oriental despotism, particularly in China? This paper examines how rat torture, which in the Western context was initially documented during the Eighty Years' War (1566–1648), became attributed to China by the turn of the 20th century, a period marked by colonial intervention and imperial decline. By tracing this transformation, the paper explores the historical significance of rat torture's transmedial representations, from 19th-century novels to contemporary American cinema.

Mirbeau's Inspiration: Eastern or Western?

In *Le Jardin des supplices*, Mirbeau presents an eroticized, Orientalist vision of Eastern civilization through the experiences of an English woman, Clara, who travels to China and undergoes a painful yet ecstatic initiation, ultimately achieving enlightenment. A Chinese executioner, depicted as a wise master, introduces Clara to the refined art of torture, which Clara perceives as an extension of China's sophisticated culture. The executioner takes pride in his craft, portraying torture

¹ As for the details, see Shengold 2014, 42.

² See Shengold 1971.

³ See Shengold 1989, 80–85. For a recurring motif of the rat and its ugly ferocity in Orwell's writings, see Meyers 2010, 131.

as an esthetic practice that harmonizes human suffering with artistic mastery. However, *Le Jardin* is primarily an Orientalist fantasy: most of the tortures described were the products of Mirbeau's imagination and only loosely inspired by scattered references to Asian punishments.⁴

Of the few documented punishments from Imperial China, *lingchi* or "death by a thousand cuts," stands out for its lasting impact on the Western imagination. This method, which involved very slowly dismembering the condemned, reinforced the European association of "medieval" torture and China. Other historical punishments, such as water torture or waterboarding, were also misleadingly labeled "Chinese" despite their broader occurrence. One of the earliest Western accounts of *lingchi* came from John Francis Davis, a British diplomat stationed in Hong Kong in the 1840s. Davis observed that while bamboo beatings were the most common form of punishment in China, "*ling-chy*" was reserved for severe crimes. He emphasized that it had been incorrectly and sensationally explained as "cutting into ten thousand pieces" and that the idea that torture and executions were carried out in China based on "caprice or cruelty" was entirely unfounded. According to Davis,

vulgar daubs, commonly sold at Canton, and representing the punishment of the damned in Buddhist hell, have been absurdly Styled Chinese punishments, and confounded with the true ones.⁵

Nevertheless, by the late 19th century, *lingchi* had become a staple of sensationalist depictions of "Chinese" cruelty.

A decisive factor in its notoriety was the circulation of execution photographs in *The Peoples and Politics of the Far East* (1895) by British journalist Henry Norman. These images horrified and fascinated Western audiences, reinforcing their preconceptions about China's supposed brutality. One photograph had a profound effect on French philosopher Georges Bataille, who misinterpreted the victim's expression as one of "ecstatic agony" and used it as a model for his theory of eroticism as a fusion of pleasure and agony in *Les larmes d'éros* (1961).⁶ By the early 20th century, *lingchi* had become a widely recognized symbol of "Eastern barbarism," appearing in political cartoons to critique various injustices. For instance, a 1907 *Melbourne Punch* cartoon likened government economic oppression to the prolonged suffering inflicted by *lingchi* (fig. 2), while a German *Wahre Jacob* caricature in 1919 compared Japan's colonization of China to the same method of slow dismemberment (Fig. 3).

4 See Brooks/Bourgon/Blue 2008, 152–153.

5 Davis 1836, 227–228.

6 See Brooks/Bourgon/Blue 2008, 68–69, 222–242.



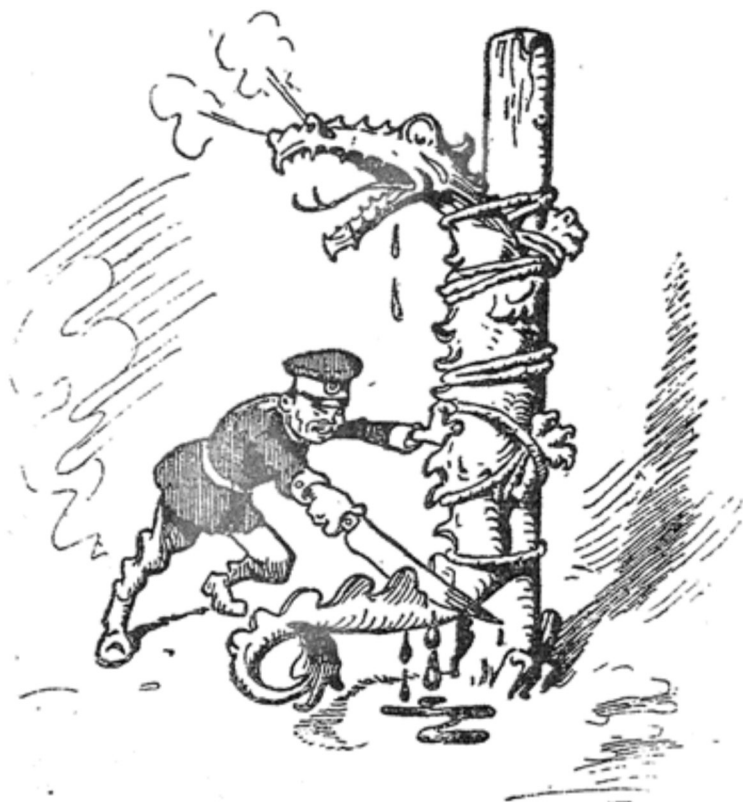
[Melbourne Punch.]

The Torturing Tariff.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: "Cut too much off, have I? Bless my soul, what are you crying out about? There's plenty left!"

Fig. 2: *The Torturing Tariff*, illustration in *Review of Reviews*, 36 (1907), p. 462. Source: <https://archive.org/details/TheReviewOfReviewsV36/page/n9/mode/2up> (last accessed 10/02/2025).

As these examples illustrate, *lingchi* was frequently interpreted in the West as "slow slicing" or "lingering death," based on the Chinese character *chi*, meaning "delay" or "lateness." In *Le Jardin*, the executioner contrasts this refined, deliberate infliction of suffering with the crude "progress" of Western military technology:



Wahre Jacob.]

[Stuttgart.

The Jap in China.

“ Wei-hei-wei ! So you wish to force a ‘ righteous peace ’ upon me also, do you ? ”

Fig. 3: *Jap in China*, illustration in *Review of Reviews*, 59 (1919), p. 422. Source: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31970028251095&seq=7> (last accessed 10/02/2025).

Art does not consist in killing multitudes... in slaughtering, massacring, and exterminating men in hordes. Really, it's too easy. Art, milady, consists in knowing how to kill, according to the rites of beauty, whose divine secret we Chinese alone possess. Know how to kill! That is to say, how to *work* the human body like a sculptor works his clay or piece of ivory, and evoke the entire sum, every prodigy of suffering it conceals in the depths of its shadows and its mysteries. There! Science is required, variety, taste, imagination... genius, after all. But today, everything is disappearing. The Occidental snobbery which is invading us, the gunboats, rapid-fire guns, long-range rifles, explosives... what else? Everything

which makes death collective, administrative and bureaucratic—all the filth of your progress, in fact—is destroying, little by little, our beautiful traditions of the past.⁷

This passage, with its metaphor of the torturer as a sculptor, suggests a connection to the discourse surrounding *lingchi*, though Mirbeau never explicitly mentions the practice. As in his *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (*The Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1900), his critique of industrialized society is layered with an attack on “mediocrity and bourgeois spirit.” The executioner, with mixed pride and resignation, laments a future in which these arts are no longer appreciated and China is overrun by Japan, a mere imitator of Western “civilization.”

Within *Le Jardin*, torture thus serves as a symbol of resistance to Western technological domination. The executioner proudly presents his methods as an art designed to extend suffering rather than to simply kill. Clara is particularly fascinated by bell torture and rat torture, neither of which have a confirmed historical precedent in China. In both cases, the goal is to maximize pleasure and transform it into unbearable agony. Bell torture subjects the victim to incessant ringing until the sound—initially a blessing—becomes a torment. Similarly, rat torture, as described by the executioner, exploits the dual sensations of “the combination of tickling and biting” to drive prisoners to insanity. Sensing Clara’s intrigue, the executioner describes the method in vivid detail: If “you introduce into the pot’s hole, an iron rod, heated red-hot at the fire of a forge,” the rat “first tickles and then tears with its nails, and bites with its sharp teeth, seeking an exit through the torn and bleeding skin.”⁸ Here, rat torture becomes a metaphor for repressed, unconscious sexual desires.

Although Mirbeau may not have known it, rat torture has alleged historical roots in early modern Europe, not China. Richard Verstegan’s 1587 anti-protestant pamphlet propagated an image of the execution (Figure 4), and in 1617, Gaspard de Coninck wrote the following satirical poem based on it:

the heretics shamelessly
Seized one named Master Jan Jeroenszoon [...]
Whom they laid [on the rack] with bare bellies upwards.
They put rats and mice on the naked belly
Under a copper vessel, on which they lit a fire.
The rats, feeling the fire take hold,
Bit the bellies and crept into them.⁹

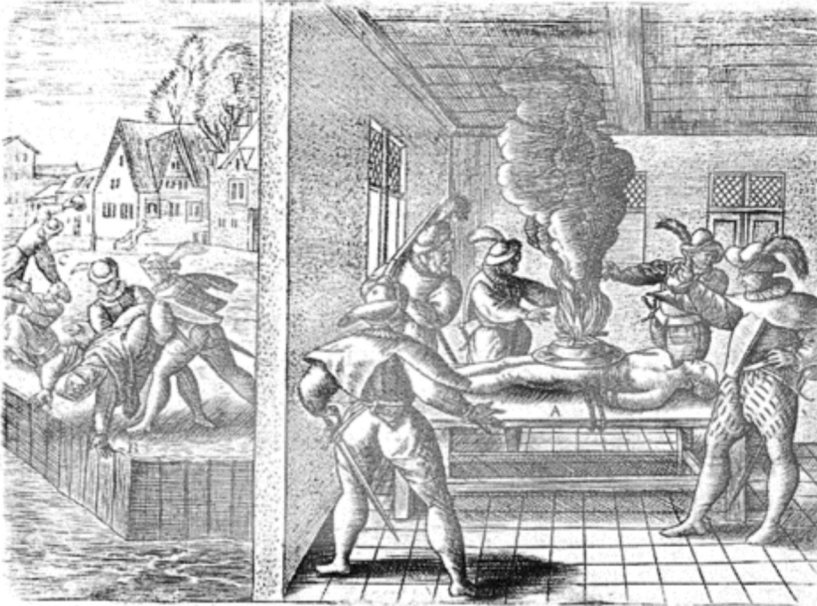
7 Mirbeau 1989, 83.

8 Mirbeau 1989, 84.

9 Quoted in Van Nierop 2009, 245.

Barbares cruautez des Gueus es pays bas.

67



*Le Scythe tant cruel, ny les Barbares fiers,
Qui du mont Caucasin habitent les rochers,
Nyl' Hetrusque tyrann, par enuieux venin,
Qui faisoit aux corps morts attacher les viuantz,
N'eurent cœurs si felons, si cruels ny sanglants,
Comme a la rauissant canaille de Calvin.*

12

PLVSIEVRS

Fig. 4: Richard Verstegan, *Cruelties against Catholics committed by Dutch Geuzen*, illustration in *Theatrum crudelitatum haereticorum nostri temporis*, Antwerp, Adrianum Hubertl, 1587, p. 67. Source: https://archive.org/details/gpl_3658536/page/66/mode/2up (last accessed 10/02/2025).

Pieter Bor later recorded this method in his *Origin, Beginning, and Continuation of the Dutch Wars* (1679), which may have influenced later literary uses of rat torture,

including by Mirbeau and Orwell.¹⁰ However, it is unlikely that the nearly forgotten Dutch chronicle directly influenced French and English writers two or three centuries later. A crucial intermediary may have been John Lothrop Motley's *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856), a widely read historical work translated into multiple European languages, including French. Motley's description closely mirrors Bor's account: "A number of rats were introduced" into a large earthen vessel and "hot coals were heaped upon the vessel, till the rats, rendered furious by the heat, gnawed into the very bowels of the victim, in their agony to escape."¹¹

In the same year as Motley's publication (1856), British politician George Thomas Keppel (6th Earl of Albemarle) delivered a speech in the House of Lords condemning torture practices in British India. He described a method allegedly used in Madras, in which "the carpenter beetle or other gnawing insect or some stinging reptile"¹² was confined inside a coconut shell and placed on a prisoner's navel, inflicting excruciating torment. Whether this practice truly occurred or was colonial propaganda remains uncertain. Nevertheless, reports of such "Eastern" tortures circulated widely in English and American newspapers, influencing the Western imagination.

Thus, while Mirbeau's rat torture likely emerged from a blend of historical fragments and creative embellishments, its transference from a European to an Asian context reflected a broader trend in Western representations of torture.¹³ From Dutch chronicles to British colonial reports, the attribution of rat torture to the East became part of a larger narrative in which the West displaced its own history of brutality onto the Other.

Orwell's Anxiety: Freud or *Fu Manchu*?

The paradox of civilization as both a bringer of progress and a source of pain, evident in *Le Jardin*, also resonated with late Victorian anxieties. Contemporary British popular fiction frequently explored the fear of inverted colonization, as epitomized in *Dracula* (1897). Similarly, Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) reflects

¹⁰ Van Nierop 2009 also notes the similarity between this record and George Orwell's rat torture (153, n.62), but does not mention any further connection.

¹¹ Motley 1858, 510.

¹² Keppel 1856, 5–6.

¹³ Of course, it is highly likely that French sources provided the inspiration. According to Roland Villeneuve, for instance, Fernand Nicolaÿ wrote in the 19th century about the use of the same torture in the 16th century wars of religion, which may have influenced Mirbeau. However, the reference is not noted. See Villeneuve 1985, 327.

colonial-era anxieties with its mysterious Egyptian who hypnotizes British citizens into the terror of being consumed by scarab-like beetles.¹⁴ This imagery recalls formication (a hallucinatory sensation of ants crawling beneath the skin), which is associated with hashish use, thus embodying British unease about colonial Egypt.

A potential precursor linking *Le Jardin* to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Perceval Gibbon's "The Idealist" (1904), an overlooked short story that depicts a British colonizer who refuses to retaliate even after his wife and children are killed by South African natives. He endures injuries from rat torture, reinforcing the theme of British vulnerability to the very people they once subjugated.¹⁵ While simplistic and jingoistic, the story is notable for using rat torture as a metaphor for colonialist anxieties about losing power. This fear persisted into the 20th century, with rat torture repeatedly symbolizing a reversal of colonial hierarchies.

Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series, which popularized the image of a Mandarin-robed villain embodying the Yellow Peril, presents an even more significant precursor to Orwell. In *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1916), Rohmer refers to rat torture as "the Six Gates of Joyful Wisdom," a phrase that appears to parody Enoch's six solar gates and lacks any basis in Chinese historical records. Like the executioner in *Le Jardin*, Fu Manchu describes torture as an art form integral to Chinese culture:

[W]e call this quaint fancy the Six Gates of Joyful Wisdom. The first gate, through which the rats are admitted, is called the Gate of Joyous Hope; the second, the Gate of Mirthful Doubt. The third gate is poetically named the Gate of True Rapture, and the fourth is the Gate of Gentle Sorrow. I once was honored in the friendship of an exalted mandarin who sustained the course of Joyful Wisdom to the raising of the Fifth Gate (called the Gate of Sweet Desires) and the admission of the twentieth rat. I esteem him almost equally as my ancestors. The Sixth, or Gate Celestial—whereby a man enters into the Joy of Complete Understanding—I have dispensed with, here, substituting a Japanese fancy of an antiquity nearly as great and honorable. The introduction of this element of speculation, I count a happy thought, and accordingly take pride in myself.¹⁶

It is uncertain whether Rohmer had read *Le Jardin*, as the first English translation (by Alvah Bessie) was not published until 1931. However, the first *Fu Manchu* film, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), omits rat torture in favor of bell torture, perhaps influenced by that very translation. In the early 20th century, rat torture became

¹⁴ One of the latest versions of this association of the Orient and formication or rat torture is repeated in the films *The Mummy* (dir. Stephen Sommers, 1999) and *The Mummy Returns* (dir. Stephen Sommers, 2001).

¹⁵ See Gibbon 1904.

¹⁶ Rohmer 1916, 293.

even more widely associated with Chinese culture, perhaps because *Fu Manchu* gained an international readership. During this period, Anglo-American fiction increasingly featured it. Notable examples include George Fielding Eliot's "The Copper Bowl" (1928), Ada B. Teetgen's "The Seven Gates" (1932), and Anthony Rud's *The Stuffed Men* (1935). These stories commonly depict Chinese villains using rat torture against Western protagonists as a form of colonial revenge, though the latter's protagonist outwits his torturer by applying "collodion laced with prussic acid to his abdomen," having anticipated the threat.¹⁷

By the 1930s, rat torture had also made its way into American sideshows. The famous exhibitors Messmore and Damon introduced an attraction called "The Torture Chamber" to Coney Island in 1935. It featured six chambers with animated figures, including "the Chinese Rat Torture, also known as the "Seven Gates to Heaven," a clear variation of *Fu Manchu*'s "six gates of joyful wisdom."¹⁸ Further evidence of this adaptation appears in the American serial *Drums of Fu Manchu* (1940), which renamed the rat-filled coffin as "the seven gates to paradise". Even Rohmer was inconsistent about the number of gates, also counting "seven" in *Emperor Fu Manchu* (1959), the series' final installation before Rohmer's death.¹⁹ Throughout, however, he consistently linked rat torture with "mediaeval methods," reinforcing the perceived connection between China and archaic cruelty.

It is likely that Rohmer himself coined the term "rat torture," which became popularized in pulp fiction and film throughout the 1930s and 1940s. While *lingchi* was recognized in the West as a brutal Chinese execution method, it did not evoke the same suspense in fiction or film. Another explanation for the rise of rat torture may be found in Freud's and Shengold's psychoanalytic theories. Like bell torture, rat torture could symbolize repressed sexual or masochistic desires, reversing the roles of predator and prey. The 19th-century stereotype of Chinese people as "rat-eaters" adds another layer to this reversal, inverting the colonial hierarchies of hygiene and civilization.²⁰ This anxiety was mirrored in *Fu Manchu*'s use of exotic creatures—snakes, scorpions, and spiders—to assassinate his enemies, a motif that recalls "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892). Just as Doyle's story portrays a venomous Indian snake being used as a weapon of revenge against the British, *Fu Manchu*'s rats symbolize Western fears of colonial subjects rising against their oppressors.

¹⁷ Pronzini 2018, 48

¹⁸ Stencell 2002, 91.

¹⁹ Rohmer 1999, 420.

²⁰ In 1883, in response to these stereotypes, Wong Ching Foo, a prominent advocate for Chinese rights, offered a \$500 reward to anyone who could prove that the Chinese ate rats or cats. See Seligman 2013, 101. For more on the idea of "flame sterilization" in Chinatown, see Mohr 2004.

In 1940, Orwell critiqued this racialized, outdated worldview in British popular fiction, accusing its narratives of remaining in a “pre-1914 world.” He observed:

If a Chinese character appears, he is still the sinister pigtailed opium-smuggler of Sax Rohmer; no indication that things have been happening in China since 1912—no indication that a war is going on there, for instance.²¹

Orwell’s analysis of British psychological mappings of race includes numerous absurd yet memorable tropes, such as “a Chinese [man] swimming for his life down a sewer with a swarm of ravenous-looking rats swimming after him.” Given Orwell’s own experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1938), it is possible that he personally encountered swarming sewer rats, which may have influenced *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s depiction of rat torture. The novel’s protagonist, Winston, hears that “in the poor quarters of this town [...] a woman dare not leave her baby alone in the house, even for five minutes,” because rats “will strip it to the bones.”²²

Despite his earlier criticisms of the context surrounding rat torture, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ironically reintroduces it while shifting its target from the abdomen to the face. While Orwell avoids the overt sexual implications present in earlier depictions, his version retains the primal fear of being eaten or penetrated by rats, a theme that had previously been explored by both Freud and Rohmer in different ways. It is no coincidence that Winston’s torturer, O’Brien, explicitly says that rat torture “was a common punishment in Imperial China.”²³ This line is also faithfully repeated in the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* film adaptation (1984), further solidifying the association of rat torture with Chinese cruelty in the Western imagination.

Nanjo’s Brutality: Domestic or Foreign?

In Japan, rat torture was similarly portrayed as a Chinese punishment. However, its representation took a unique turn due to the context and history of Eastern colonialism. The harsh subjugation of East Asia by one of its own regional powers influenced how such tortures were depicted. One of the earliest Japanese novelists to feature rat torture was Nanjo Norio, who was known for his popular samurai and swordplay dramas. Among his most notable works is the short story “Rat Gaol at

²¹ Orwell 1970, 517.

²² Orwell 2000, 328.

²³ Orwell, 2000, 329.

Fukui Castle” (1961), in which rat torture appears as the “six punishments by hungry rats,” allegedly originating from Tibet.²⁴ As *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* was not translated into Japanese during Nanjo’s lifetime, it is uncertain whether he was directly influenced by Rohmer’s “six gates,” though he may have encountered it through secondary sources.

As in many of his works, Nanjo’s story is set in premodern Japan. In it, a ruthless vassal employs increasingly brutal torture techniques to extract a confession from an assassin, ostensibly to protect his lord. The final and most extreme method is rat torture, where six rats—deprived of food for six days—devour six parts of the victim’s body. In contrast to *Le Jardin*, however, the captors deliberately avoid the internal and sexual organs to prolong the victim’s suffering. Following carefully staged progression, the rats consume flesh from the feet upward, eventually reaching the face as the victim descends into madness. This depiction closely parallels the “ecstatic agony” of *lingchi*. In Nanjo’s story, the victim “escaped beyond pain and humiliation,” emitting “sounds of laughter.”²⁵ Despite outwardly presenting rat torture as a Chinese practice, Nanjo may have also been drawing from his own knowledge of Japanese wartime atrocities, such as those depicted in “Jap in China” (Figure 3). His narrative thus transfers the cruelty of contemporary Japanese soldiers to feudal samurai, reimagining them as fanatically loyal and merciless enforcers.

Nanjo’s familiarity with wartime violence was not merely literary. Before becoming a writer, he was an accomplished economist. As a key bureaucrat in Japan’s wartime planned economy, he worked at the Shanghai office of the South Manchurian Railway Company in 1943, where he played a role in regulating the value of fiat currency. After returning to Japan, he became a professor in Tokyo, where he taught economics and later submitted his short stories to magazines. Many of his works focused on the cruelty of premodern Japan, often serving as allegories for Japan’s militaristic past. When asked why he wrote so many costume dramas centered on brutality, he offered the following reflection:

In Shanghai during the war, I saw cruel acts committed by Japanese soldiers. I did not know why. Were they brutal by nature? Or did the desperate environment drive them mad? While they lived in peace in Tokyo, they would shed tears if their birds died or panic if their children became sick. They used to be ordinary men working in grocery or bean curd shops. But once they went to war, they committed cruel atrocities [...] Personality does not explain enough. Does an abnormal situation change or influence their nature, I wonder?²⁶

²⁴ Nanjo 1961, 45.

²⁵ Nanjo 1961, 49.

²⁶ Ozaki 1971, 339–340.

This statement sheds light on Nanjo's decision to attribute rat torture to Tibet when vividly detailing the violence committed by loyal Japanese samurai. His narrative framework also mirrors *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in its depiction of torture as a systemic local practice justified in the name of order, regardless of its foreign origins. Orwell famously referenced Chinese torture as a lingering racial stereotype from the era of the *Fu Manchu*, using it to underscore the Party's absolute control over individual citizens. Likewise, Nanjo may have been implying that Japanese soldiers adopted foreign torture techniques in China, refining them into something even more horrifying than *lingchi*.

Sinister Suspense: Antiquated or Atrocious?

Nanjo's exploration of environmental determinism overlaps with the broader issue of censorship in depictions of torture. A central concern is how graphic portrayals of torture may influence audiences, particularly children. This section therefore examines how rat torture has been represented in 21st-century cinema, an era in which real-life atrocities are readily accessible on the internet.

Since the release of the film adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, cinematic portrayals of rat torture have evolved significantly and broached genres outside pulp and horror. One of the earliest 21st-century examples is *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003), a film primarily known for its high-speed car chases and large, diverse cast. Notably, Asian actors and Japanese cars are integrated into the film, reflecting its multiculturalism. A key moment involves an Argentinian drug lord using rat torture on a captured policeman, which may be a reference to real instances of this torture being used during Argentina's military dictatorship in the 1970s.²⁷ While the film consciously avoids racial stereotypes, the scene subtly maintains the association of rat torture with the East. A Buddha statue is positioned in the right corner of the torture room, reinforcing the trope's link to Eastern cruelty. As in the film *1984*, the victim complies with his captor's demands without sustaining severe injury. Both scenes effectively convey horror while avoiding explicit violence, making them more suitable for wider audiences.

In contrast, *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a Home Box Office (HBO) series, takes a more graphic approach. In one scene of "Garden of Bones" (Season 2, Episode 4, 2012), rat torture results in death, with tension heightened through close-up cutaways alternating between torturer and victim, a cinematic technique echoing Poe's suspense-building in "Pit." What is particularly groundbreaking about this

27 See Ginbar 2008, 77.

portrayal is the absence of any Orientalist framing. Unlike the earlier depictions influenced by Mirbeau, *Game of Thrones* presents rat torture as a purely “medieval European” practice (albeit in a fantastical setting). Nevertheless, the scene fueled debates on social media and online forums about whether rat torture has Chinese origins—a lingering effect of its long history in the Western imagination.

More recently, the horror film *Sinister 2* (2015) has marked another significant shift in how rat torture is depicted. Unlike previous portrayals in which it is used to extract confessions or achieve ecstatic agony, here it is purely an instrument of execution. The film is also the first to explicitly show a rat consuming human flesh in a rat torture-style killing. This shift deliberately eliminates both suspense and narrative tension: rat torture is no longer a threat looming over the victim but an inevitable, grisly fate. The film frames these scenes as snuff films, which, within the plot, serve as cursed objects: anyone who watches them is eventually abducted by an ancient Babylonian demon. This metahorror element reflects the challenge of making a frightening film in an era in which real-life violent imagery is easily accessible online. Rather than relying on suspense, *Sinister 2* confronts its audience with their own complicity in consuming violent media. This is reinforced through the film’s central characters, two brothers who react very differently to the snuff films they discover, thus embodying contrasting responses to cinematic violence. Their divergent reactions subtly critique contemporary horror audiences, mirroring the ethical discomfort surrounding the genre’s evolution in an age of internet-driven desensitization.

Conclusion

The transmedial representations of rat torture reveal a history of adaptation shaped by the evolving possibilities and constraints of media. In the 17th century, the advent of printing technology enabled the fusion of text and imagery, allowing for the first recorded depictions of rat torture in the Netherlands. However, by the late 19th century, censorship and self-regulation shifted the focus from medieval to the so-called “Oriental” torture, with a greater emphasis on detailed textual rather than visual depictions. This shift likely explains why rat torture, originally documented in the Netherlands, was later attributed to Chinese origins by Mirbeau and subsequently gained widespread recognition. Two key factors reinforced this phenomenon: the introduction of *lingchi* (a Chinese execution method that horrified Western audiences with its graphic brutality) and the deep-seated Western anxiety that their civilizing mission in the East might be reversed, inviting retribution. These fears fueled the popularity of narratives in which Western characters suffered Eastern tortures, a trend that persisted from the late 19th through the

20th century, most notably in Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The evolution of the media from literature to film further influenced these representations. While contemporary suspense-driven torture tropes can be traced back to Poe, cinema refined them, heightening tension through visual storytelling devices such as cutaways. Rat torture, a particularly cruel and unpredictable method, emerged as a by-product, distinguishing itself from more mechanized torture devices like the Iron Maiden due to its uncontrollable nature. However, by the early 21st century, the impact of such portrayals has diminished as audiences have largely become desensitized to fictionalized violence. The internet's proliferation of real violent imagery has largely stripped fictional torture of its suspense, making it less effective as a narrative device. *Game of Thrones* capitalized on cinema's ability to create visceral immediacy, using a realistic torture scene to balance between ratings and revenues. However, the oversaturation of extreme violence in digital media has continued to dull the shock value of fictional torture. This is particularly evident in *Sinister 2*, where rat torture is presented not as a suspenseful threat but as a past execution. The film self-consciously acknowledges the audience's conflicting emotions of attraction to and discomfort with violent imagery and suggests a growing self-awareness of complicity in consuming such content.

Ultimately, rat torture has largely faded into obscurity, much like the outdated stereotypes of the Middle Ages as a time of unrestrained barbarism or the West's fears of Eastern vengeance. This decline reflects broader cultural and media transformations, illustrating how representations of violence are shaped by technological advancements, shifting societal anxieties, and changing censorship norms. As audiences become increasingly exposed to real-life brutality, fictional threats of torture lose their narrative potency. The diminishing presence of rat torture underscores a larger cultural shift: the obsolescence of equating the medieval past with the East or sustaining colonial fears of retribution. As the media continues to evolve, so too will the ways in which we engage with and respond to representations of violence, leaving rat torture as little more than a relic of a bygone era.

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Giuseppe Previtali

The Gamification of Terror: The Imaginary of Videogames from the War on Terror to the Islamic State

Abstract: In the last decades, various scholars began to address the issue of the so-called gamification of warfare. Contemporary wars, according to this perspective, visually resemble the structure and the aesthetics of videogames (as the vast debates around the use of drones seems to demonstrate). Videogame has always been a crucial medium in the symbolic and visual economy of contemporary warfare and this process became even more apparent after 9/11, within the so-called War on Terror. The essay will analyze the role played by videogames in this context following two different but intersecting path. On the one hand, it will be argued that videogame played an important role in the process of legitimization of Bush's war, both in term of recruitment and of collective imaginary. On the other hand, the essay will show how jihadist organizations promoted a reappropriation of this medium in various and still widely unexplored ways.

Keywords: Visual culture, terrorism, war, videogames, Islamic State

The media battlefield

In his quintessential study on the connections between visual media and military technologies, Paul Virilio¹ highlighted the existence of a long and complex interplay between these two fields, that since Marey's *fusil photographique*, seem to share the same set of gestures and procedures. After all, the double meaning of the verb "to shoot" etymologically confirms that the act of seeing someone and the ability to preventively kill someone are part of the same "scopic regime."² Moving from this theoretical premise, still crucial for all the research at the crossroads between visual culture and military studies, it is possible to identify various possible connections between visual media and contemporary warfare technologies. Take for instance this striking example, provided by Stahl, that highlights how a game console could be used as a military technology:

1 Virilio 1989.

2 For the definition of this crucial concept, see the classic remarks by Metz 1982 and Jay 1988.

In March of 2000, the release of Sony's new PlayStation 2 hit a minor snag. The Japanese government classified the game console as a general-purpose product related to conventional weapons on the ground that it was powerful enough to be used as an actual missile guidance system.³

While the function of images in contemporary warfare has been widely explored by an ever-growing amount of literature,⁴ the role of videogames has been somehow less analyzed, regardless of continuous references to this medium in the context of drone warfare.⁵ Nevertheless, in a mediasphere that is more than ever convergent, transmedial and interconnected, the importance of videogames in defining the cultural imaginaries of conflicts cannot be underestimated, both in terms of justification of specific military actions and in terms of providing a set of visual and narrative references for war communication.

Let's consider, for instance, the strategic handbook *Joint Vision 2010*, released in May 2000 by the US Defense Department. In this crucial and still somehow unexplored document, the US army defines a plan of strategic development for future military interventions, trying to imagine the physiognomy of war in the upcoming century and to think ahead of their potential adversaries. In this context, the final objective to pursue in every instance is the so-called "full spectrum dominance", a condition to be obtained through a set of new strategic concepts such as dominant maneuver, precision engagement and focused logistic. The use of these tactic ideas will provide the US army with the possibility to dominate in every possible warfare scenario, ranging from deterrence operation to direct military involvement (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2010). Another crucial element of this new approach towards military operation has to do with the involvement of common citizens in the symbolic economics of warfare. While soldiers conquer the battlefield, every citizen is required to become part of what we might call an "extended army": in this respect, the document provides a new definition of what can be labelled as "military", where every individual that helps to legitimize and make relevant military operations in the political agenda becomes relevant. In this process, different cul-

³ Stahl 2006, 112; see also Stahl 2018.

⁴ See at least the classical studies by Mirzoeff 2005 and Mitchell 2011.

⁵ One of the main ethical issues in the debate on drones in armed conflict has to do with the feeling of disconnection between the drone operator and his acts, given the distance and the video-game-like setting in which, according to some scholars, he operates. In this context, the study by Cole, Dobbing and Hailwood (2010) became extremely popular due to its ability to summarize this problem with the definition of a "PlayStation mentality". However, both the theoretical value of this concept and the problem of the pilots' sense of unaccountability, are still debated (see Lee 2017).

tural products such as movies, tv series,⁶ and videogames, become quintessential and help to performatively generate this new “militarized” citizenship. As Der Derian pointed out in an extremely timely and relevant study, what is at stake here is the definition of what can be labelled a new “military-industrial-entertainment network.”⁷

Videogames go to war

In this networked ecosystem, the role of videogames cannot be underestimated, especially due to the immersive quality of their images and the consequential ability to generate a sense of simulated presence that highly strengthen the engagement of the player. It is especially in the context of the so-called War on Terror that the protagonism of the medium became evident, because many interactive texts were designed or used to justify American military effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, somehow updating the cultural role played by cinema in previous conflicts (from WWII to the Vietnam and Gulf War).⁸ In this context, the proliferation of military metaphors and the strict polarization of public discourse favored the commercial success of war-themed videogames that helped to naturalize the conflict’s narratives and to embed the players in a precise political position.⁹

Videogames tended to focus more and more often on narratives about (more or less) fictional events that had to do with the development of the war in the Middle-East, giving the players the possibility to experience it in a vicarial way, going through situation and problems that were lived by the soldiers, such as the supposed threat of Saddam’s nuclear weapons (*Conflict Desert Storm II*), the military capabilities of Iran (*Kuma War’s* mission *Assault on Iran*) or the capture Osama bin Laden (*Fugitive Hunter: The War on Terror*).¹⁰ In so doing, videogames became a highly politicized territory, that continuously reinforced and contributed to replicate the image of the War on Terror as a just and necessary conflict, a sort of Crusade to purge Afghanistan and Iraq from barbarian dictators.

This was made possible by some specific features of videogames: in an intriguing and often overlooked essay, Šisler highlighted that war-themed videogames seem to produce a “schematized image of the world,”¹¹ especially in the case of

6 Prince 2009; Hammond 2011; Page and Lacey 2015; Pope and Bryan 2017.

7 Der Derian 2009.

8 See at least Jeffords 1994; Westwell 2006; Donald 2017.

9 Stahl 2006, 118.

10 Riegler 2010.

11 Šisler 2008, 206.

Middle Eastern scenarios and characters. This highly simplified vision of the world is based on a reiteration of orientalist¹² stereotypes, that continuously propose the same set of schematized material (clothing, weapons, skin colors) and psychological (madness, brutality, atavism) attributes. Take for instance the well-known war simulator *Kuma/War*, that from 2003 to 2014 provided its players with realistic replicas of contemporary war scenarios, reproduced with an extreme attention for details and the military background. Here, the player was requested to fight as a heroic US' soldier against a group of stereotyped demonic aggressors, driven only by an insane and barbaric atavism.

Here and in other similar videogames, the role of the player is to counter an obscure force that threatens democracy and to do so he is justified to act with brutality, often going beyond the law (as the case of the ethically questionable TV-series *24* clearly highlighted). The realistic but ultimately fictional narratives proposed by many war-themed videogames played therefore a crucial role in the process of naturalization of problematic issues that are commonly referred to as forms of "black warfare."¹³ In these cases (I am thinking for instance of the series *Rainbow Six*) the key point is the unavoidable necessity of secrecy, a feature that is deemed crucial to protect citizens' freedom and the ideal of democracy itself. The possible outcome of this politics of legitimation may be recruitment, that is one of the main uses of videogames in war contexts, as the case of *America's Army*, developed by the US Army specifically for this purpose, highlights. Once again, however, it should be stressed that the vision of contemporary war proposed by the videogame is far from realistic and is on the contrary highly sanitized to promote an idealistic and heroic advertisement enlistment.¹⁴

Terrorism and videogames

As a crucial part of the contemporary interconnected and transcultural media-sphere, videogames have been also used by insurgent groups to promote their vision of the world. Although commonsensically and stereotypically reduced to primitive and barbarian organizations, jihadist groups have proven to know extremely well how to participate in the contemporary image warfare. The use of Internet as a medium to disseminate the jihadist vision of the world¹⁵ has been extremely use-

¹² In the sense outlined by Said 2003. For an application of this and other concepts of critical and postcolonial theory in the field of game studies, see at least Mukherjee 2017.

¹³ Riegler 2010, 57.

¹⁴ Stahl 2006, 123–4.

¹⁵ Tsfati/Weimann 2002; Awan 2007; Stenersen 2008.

ful to recruit disaffected members of European and Middle Eastern youths. In this sense, from the mid-00s', the ideal of jihad progressively migrated in the online space, also updating its visual models and strategies¹⁶ to be more appealing to young Muslims. As pointed out by various scholars,¹⁷ the fascination experienced by many young people towards jihadist visual rhetoric had to do with its ability to provide them with a sort of existential framing, the possibility to experience a sense of belonging that was normally frustrated in the countries where they lived, where they were exposed to systematic forms of social, cultural, and economic subalternity. In this sense, jihadist narratives can contribute to produce a new sense of agency in the younger generations, that make them feel entitled to act in every possible way to defend the Islamic community (Ummah).

Videogames have always played a part in this process, although their relevance, compared to other forms of media production (such as videos or printed magazines), often appeared marginal. Nevertheless, their presence in the jihadist media ecosystem cannot be underestimated, especially because it has been demonstrated that interactive media can act as useful learning tools for trainees, thus fostering an "open-source" attitude towards jihad.¹⁸ The use of videogames by jihadist groups began as early as 2001, when *Under Ash* was released in Syria. The game, that was successful enough to encourage the release of a sequel (*Under Siege*, 2005), promoted a sense of harsh hostility towards Israel and the violence of which its government was responsible. The events portrayed had to do with the Second Intifada (2000–2005) and were therefore extremely relevant for the Arab players (non-casually, the game was released only in Arabic).

Even more radical was the decision of the Lebanese party Hezbollah to release, in 2003, the game *Special Force*. The project was extremely innovative because the game could be purchased not just physically, but also digitally. The game was more explicit than *Under Ash* in promoting jihadist actions and ideology, especially because it presented "a training mode, which allowed the player to practice shooting skills on pictures of Ariel Sharon, as well as other high-profile Israeli political and military leaders [...]. Moreover, instead of ending credits, the game presented Hezbollah's martyrs killed by the IDF."¹⁹ In this sense, the game acted as the perfect recruiting tool, that provided the player with rhetorical justifications for his actions while giving him the possibility to virtually pursue his vengeance against the political and military ensemble that violently influenced the lives of

¹⁶ El Difraoui 2013.

¹⁷ Drissel 2007; Seib/Janbek 2011, 61–74; Benslama 2016.

¹⁸ Lakomy 2019, 386.

¹⁹ Lakomy 2019, 388.

so many Muslims in the Middle East. As in the case of *Under Ash*, also *Special Force* inspired a sequel (*Special Force 2: Tale of the Truthful Pledge*, 2006), released only in Arabic and “tailored to the tastes of children and teenagers in the Middle East for inspiration and recruitment purposes.”²⁰ The main limit of this first generation of jihadi videogames had to do with their low production value, that impacted on the quality of the final products. To overcome this issue, in various and illuminating cases, it was preferred to apply jihadist “mods” to already existing games, as in the cases of *Quest for Bush* (2006) and *Iraqi Resistance* (2006). Here, rather than producing a new game, jihadist groups modified the code of Western games to re-write their narratives, thus adopting that transmedia²¹ approach that is typical of the contemporary mediasphere (and that once again reminds us the necessity to stop considering jihadist visual culture as something completely disconnected from ours).

The idea that jihadist visuality needs to be fully integrated in the global perspective of the contemporary mediascape has been crucial for the systemic approach to media production promoted by the Islamic State (IS) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at least since late 2013. The unprecedented trait of IS’s propaganda, in fact, has precisely to do with its ability to produce a widely coherent and organic message while also being able to adapt it to the various media contexts and to the evolving geopolitical situation.²² According to Ingram,²³ three main traits helped to make IS’s media production extremely effective and valuable for recruiting purposes: the definition of a precise and immediately recognizable “brand identity”; the promotion of a “multi-dimensional, multi-platform approach” where messages are addressed simultaneously to supporters and enemies; and the merging of narrative and military action.

In this context, videogames proved to be important for IS’s media project, especially in terms of visual imaginary. In 2014, news about an Islamic State version of the well-known videogame *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*, 2013) began to circulate online through trailers and other promotional materials. To this day, it is still unclear if the game was produced or not, but the trailer originally uploaded on YouTube had a certain circulation even on mainstream media. The game was called *The Clanging of the Swords* and presented itself as a modified version of *GTA V* in which the player acted as a young jihadist and pursued violent actions. It is immediately clear by the trailer that the game was designed to attract young people that were familiar with the visual syntax and the codes of contemporary video-

²⁰ Lakomy 2019, 389.

²¹ In the sense highlighted by Jenkins 2006.

²² See Bayele/Boyd/Coan 2020.

²³ Ingram 2014.

games, granting them the possibility to experience first-hand the fascinating experience of war if they decided to join IS's ranks.²⁴

The trailer was composed of a series of in-game images that showed the character firing at police forces, making vehicles explode and sniping soldiers from a distance. Both the themes of these images and the ways in which these short, juxtaposed scenes were "filmed" are typical of IS's visual style and replicated stylistic features that can be easily found in every operational video produced by the organization. In this sense, the imaginary of videogames seems to play an important role in the visual definition of many themes in IS's media production. Ostovar studied for instance the visual *topos* of the Islamic State's soldier (mujahid), focusing specifically on his iconographic features. Dressed in black and presented as an intimidating and violent figure that recalls the past while projecting the Ummah towards a utopic future, the mujahid becomes a heroic and mythical subject, whose visual identity has a lot to do with cinema and videogames:

The jihadist [is seen] as a shadowy, but impressive, military fighter. He looks like he could be part of an elite special forces unit and would not be out of place as a character in any popular first-person-shooter video game. He is an idealized figure, one meant to portray strength and resolve, as well as to strike fear in the heart of his stated enemy.²⁵

Once again, this process of mythologization involves a recruiting subtext: the young spectator that experiences IS's propaganda recognizes the references to videogames narratives and iconographies present into its media production. This continuous reference to something so well-known is crucial in order to produce a sense of familiarity that ends up strengthening the potential fascination for these violent contents, especially when the idea that the participation of the Islamic Ummah is also in play. Through processes of transcodification and remediation that take place in a by-now completely interconnected and necessarily transcultural mediascape, IS is able to capitalize on the generational and subcultural value that videogames and their narratives may have on disaffected young people. While today the Islamic State is no more than a small and deterritorialized group, the importance of videogames in insurgency and war communication should not be underestimated, especially considering the role that virtual reality may play in the next future, especially considering its power to generate immersive simulated scenarios.

²⁴ Al-Rawi 2018. It is important to note, in this regard, that the trailer begins with a black chart in which this invitation to the viewer is written both in Arabic and English: "Your games which are producing from you, we do the same actions in the battlefields!".

²⁵ Ostovar 2017, 97–98.

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Lora Markova

Transcoding Migration: On the Transcultural Aesthetics of Socially Engaged Creativity across Europe

Abstract: This essay explores examples of socially engaged creative expressions – documentary cinema, video art, transmedia storytelling, and graffiti – that *transcode* negative representations of migration in Europe into creative strategies for building a transcultural imaginary. The study aims to map the emergence of a shared creative approach that can be defined as *transcultural aesthetics* – characterized by interrelated modalities of cultural and creative *transcoding*, such as: the representation of (trans-)cultural identities as a discursive strategy for the enunciation of cultural difference; the recontextualization of cultural repertoires in intertextual and intermedial order as an expression of symbolic resistance; critical media participation through a process of *encoding-decoding-encoding*, re-thinking Stuart Hall’s model of encoding/decoding (1973/1980) towards the generation of new meanings at the receiving end; and embodied aesthetic experiences that evoke transculturation at a non-verbal and sensorial level. Overall, the objective of this chapter is to articulate the aesthetic strategies and creative techniques used by artists and media makers to subvert processes of negative ‘othering’ and discursive racism across European societies.

Keywords: Socially engaged creativity, transcultural aesthetics, transcoding, Europe, migration, transmedia

Mainstream media representations of migration in Europe have fostered severe discrimination towards cultural ‘Others,’ reflected in socio-political phenomena, such as Brexit, loss of empathy towards refugees and newcomers, intra-European xenophobia, and stigmatization along North-South and West-East axes of division. Conversely, as Umberto Eco has famously put it: “the Third World is knocking at Europe’s door, and it is coming in, whether Europe wants it to or not.”¹ Kenan Malik, furthermore, recognizes that “immigration has become symbolic of the disruption of communities, the undermining of identities, the fraying of the sense of belongingness, the promotion of unacceptable change.”² From a historical perspec-

1 Eco 2015, 210.

2 Malik 2013.

tive, the radical difference of the foreigner, as Julia Kristeva writes, has been either domesticated (in the case of assimilation) or exorcised (by ethnic cleansing), so that in both instances difference has been obliterated. Hence, Kristeva proposes to accommodate cultural difference by imagining ourselves as “Others,” as *strangers to ourselves*.³

As creative expressions that have re-imagined migration in Europe can be considered Lars von Trier’s film *Europa* (1991) from his homonymous trilogy reinventing the social crisis in post-war Europe, the cinematic anthology *Visions of Europe* (2004) – also initiated by von Trier, and specifically the short *Invisible State* by Aisling Walsh featuring the poet-playwright Gerard Mannix Flynn whose spoken word poetry re-emerges as relevant in the context of ongoing refugee crises across Europe. The recurring migrant motives in the cinema of Céline Sciamma, Fatih Akin, and Aki Kaurismäki, among others, have also shaped the emergence of a transcultural European imaginary. Other artistic interpretations that have tackled a ‘European’ theme involve Rem Koolhaas’ new European Union flag rendered as a *Barcode* (2001) from fragments of member states’ flags and David Cerny’s controversial object-based installation *Entropa* (2009) on prejudices and clichés about EU nations (both, one might say sarcastically, commissioned by the Council of the European Union). Europe’s social realities have been also re-imagined by multiple transnational and community-based projects that merge diverse media platforms into forms of transmedia storytelling.

This chapter explores examples of socially engaged documentary cinema, video art, transmedia, and graffiti to map the emergence of a shared creative language that can be defined as *transcultural aesthetics*. The first section outlines the conceptual dimensions of the transcultural paradigm in relation to transformative practices of *transcoding*. Next, the discussion proposes that transcultural aesthetics is characterized by interrelated modalities of cultural and creative *transcoding*, such as: the representation of (trans-)cultural identities as studied in Sunny Bergman’s documentary *Our Colonial Hangover* (2014); the recontextualization of cultural repertoires as an expression of symbolic resistance in Banksy’s satirical street art; critical media participation through a process of *encoding-decoding-encoding*, showcased in the transmedia game *The Green Screen Diaries* (2015) within *Transeuropa Festival*; and embodied aesthetic experiences that evoke somatic transculturation in the video art installation *European Union Mayotte* (2016) by the artist collective *Superflex*. Overall, the aim of this chapter is to articulate the aesthetic strategies and creative techniques used by artists

3 Kristeva 1991.

and media makers to counteract processes of negative ‘othering’ within European societies.

Transculturation via practices of cultural and creative *transcoding*

The notion of *transculturation* was coined by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s to describe the fusion of Afro-Cuban influences within Caribbean culture. From a postcolonial perspective, Mary Louise Pratt uses the term to define the social space, or the *contact zone*, where dominant and subordinate cultures meet, clash, and interact.⁴ Stuart Hall has also insisted that the postcolonial “obliges us to re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries forever.”⁵

The transformative potential of transculture, according to Ellen Berry and Mikhail Epstein, emanates within creative communication and experimentation – “it may be conceived both as a mode of existence or cognition on the borders of existing cultures in their overlapping potential spaces, and a mode of cultural productivity involving the dialogue and interference between representatives of various cultural traditions.”⁶ In this sense, it can be observed that the transcultural paradigm borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogical model of culture. In reference to Bakhtin and Voloshinov’s theorizations, Stuart Hall has proposed that meaning-making, as a dialogical process, relates to practices of *trans-coding*: “taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings.”⁷ Stereotyping, hence, as a representational practice that (re)produces hegemonic meanings through essentializing, reductionism, and construction of binary oppositions, can be subverted by counter-strategies which are “*trans-coding* negative images with new meanings.”⁸ While Hall relates the notion of *trans-coding* to Bakhtin’s scholarship, the concept also emerges in Yuri Lotman’s structuralist semiotics and preoccupation with the topic of creativity – understood by Lotman as a process of generating new meanings. As Bogusław Żyłko elaborates, Lotman makes a distinction between a text with only a communicative function and a creative text – while the first one is composed of one code, the latter should be multi-structural in terms of

⁴ Pratt 1992, 4.

⁵ Hall 1996, 247.

⁶ Berry/Epstein 1999, 10.

⁷ Hall 1997, 270.

⁸ Hall 1997, 277.

coding. Zylko translates the notion of *recoding* as *transcoding* in Lotman's scholarship and emphasizes that meaning is created "when we have at least two sequence-structures and the ability of transcoding one of these systems into another."⁹ Lotman, moreover, understands culture in terms of a *semiosphere* – a "synchronic semiotic space which fills the borders of culture, without which separate semiotic systems cannot function or come into being."¹⁰

Departing from this conceptual framework, this chapter argues that a shared semantic space and a transcultural imaginary could be achieved via practices of cultural and creative *transcoding*, such as: the representation of (trans-)cultural identities as a discursive strategy for the enunciation of cultural difference; the sampling and recontextualization of cultural repertoires in intertextual and inter-medial order as an expression of symbolic resistance; critical media participation through a process of *encoding-decoding-encoding*; and embodied experiences that evoke transculturation at a non-verbal and sensorial level.

Representation of (trans-)cultural identities

Transcultural identity, as a mixture of various cultural influences, signifies a process of constant 'becoming' – "not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return," as argued by Stuart Hall.¹¹ Hall's analysis of signifying practices renders cultural identity as a discursive formation "which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."¹² In challenging dominant regimes of representation, such as *the spectacle of the Other*, Hall defines three strategies of *trans-coding*: *reversing the stereotype*, charging *negative* messages with *positive* meanings, and subverting representation *from within*.¹³ The representation of (trans-)cultural identities, hence, can also be understood as a *transcoding* strategy that subverts essentialism and reifies cultural difference.

In this context, we can consider the documentary expressions by the Dutch filmmaker and activist Sunny Bergman, whose work often contests racial and gender discrimination. For instance, her documentary *Our Colonial Hangover* (2014) deconstructs the Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) tradition celebrated during the feast of Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas) in the Netherlands. Traditionally, Dutch citizens put

⁹ Zylko 2015, 36.

¹⁰ Lotman 1990, 3.

¹¹ Hall 1990, 226.

¹² Hall 1990, 222.

¹³ Hall 1997, 270–4.

on a blackface make-up with red lipstick and wear curly Afro wigs and big earrings to dress up as Saint Nicholas's silly and clumsy black servant. The all-encompassing Black Pete experience economy involves black chocolate figures, kids' toys and carnival outfits circulated on the market of discursive racism. While channeled as an innocent festivity and an intrinsic part of Dutch cultural heritage, the celebration has stirred multiple civil protests and an appeal by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that has deemed the festivity as a *vestige of slavery*.

Sunny Bergman stages *the spectacle of the Other* in different socio-cultural settings to question Dutch society's renowned values of tolerance and inclusion. Her artistic intervention features the filmmaker herself in a blackface make-up and a Black Pete costume wandering around London and Hyde Park. Londoners meet her performance with perplexed and intense reactions, including a cameo appearance by the English comedian Russell Brand who states that Black Pete represents a Dutch *colonial hangover*. Bergman's parodic re-enactment of Saint Nicholas's little slave functions as a discursive counter-strategy that *transcodes* the representation of cultural difference *from within*. Her follow-up documentary *The Colour White* (2016) furthermore represents (trans-)cultural identities to subvert racial stereotypes and provoke decolonization of a persistent Eurocentric imaginary.

Recontextualization of cultural repertoires

The recontextualization of signs and cultural repertoires can serve as a symbolic form of resistance as studied in Dick Hebdige's theorizations on subculture and style.¹⁴ Hebdige articulates the subversive potential of punk's juxtapositions of signs by drawing upon early avant-garde practices of *bricolage*, such as Max Ernst's surrealist collages and William Burroughs' literary 'cut-ups.' In extension of Hebdige's work, it can be argued that creative practices of sampling, remixing and versioning could operate as *transcoding* modalities that generate new significations and transformative meanings.

Banksy's satirical graffiti that eloquently recontextualize existing content in intertextual and intermedial order can be studied as relevant creative expressions. For instance, in January 2016, an artwork representing Cosette from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* (1862) appeared on the French embassy's facade in London to criticize Europe's ineffectiveness in dealing with the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. The tears in Cosette's eyes and the depicted CS gas can condemned the use of tear gas

¹⁴ Hebdige 1979.

by the French authorities in ‘the Jungle’ refugee camp in Calais, France. The interactive and transmedia element of the work – the stenciled QR code – linked to a YouTube video of the police violations in the camp. Banksy creatively reified his criticism by recontextualizing the emblematic image of Cosette, based on a drawing by the French illustrator Émile Bayard, created for the first edition of the book. The illustration has been later transformed into an etching by Gustave Brion and has been largely used in contemporary cinematic and musical interpretations of Hugo’s novel.

Similarly, an earlier work by Banksy represented the late Steve Jobs (the founder of Apple) as an immigrant carrying an outdated computer and a bag of belongings. The graffiti was sprayed in ‘the Jungle’ in December 2015. It played with Steve Jobs’ personal background as a son of a Syrian immigrant to the USA and subverted common perceptions on immigration as necessarily downgrading for the host country’s economy. In both examples, the visual generation of new connotations through recontextualization of cultural repertoires can be understood in terms of critical and creative *transcoding* that expresses symbolic resistance.

Critical media participation via *encoding-decoding-encoding*

Stuart Hall’s communication model of encoding/decoding (1973/1980) emerged in the settings of mass media and a televisual circuit dominated by a one-way channel of transmission between producers and receivers of mediated content. Hall defines three variables of decoding – *dominant-hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* code – the last one of which relates to practices of *transcoding*.¹⁵ In the context of today’s open-ended interactive media, it becomes relevant to question audiences’ potential to construct alternative discourses and meanings, e.g. through user-generated content for political activism – defined by Henry Jenkins as *photo-shop for democracy*.¹⁶ Jenkins has revisited his early optimism on the democratic potential of our *convergence culture* by recognizing that mainstream media employ participatory practices to trigger audience engagement.¹⁷ Yet, critically engaged user-generated content can be conceptualized through a process of constant *encod-*

¹⁵ Hall, 2001 [1980].

¹⁶ Jenkins 2006, 206–239.

¹⁷ Jenkins 2016, 21.

ing-decoding-encoding – rethinking Hall's model towards the generation of new meanings at the receiving end.

In recent years, audience participation and community engagement have been fostered by a range of pan-European creative initiatives, such as *Transeuropa Festival* that explores the link between artistic imagination and political change. Organized by European Alternatives, it was launched in 2007 under the name *London Festival of Europe* and since then it has traversed various European cities. Its collaborative format resembles a transnational and a trans-local happening, connecting creatives, activists, and citizens. By tackling societal issues, the festival creates interconnected spaces of imagination and political agency – for instance, its 2022 edition followed the motto *Decolonize! Decarbonize! Democratize!*

In 2015, *Transeuropa's* closing event took place in Belgrade, Serbia, featuring the participatory transmedia project *The Green Screen Diaries* – designed as a travelling storytelling game for three to six players. Each group of participants (in a different European location) was provided with a box of instructions wrapped in a green cloth – to be used as a green screen for recording video diaries from the future. All participants could reuse each other's user-generated content in co-creating a shared narrative and re-imagining Europe's future. In this sense, the creative teams generated alternative meanings via participatory practices of critical and creative *transcoding* whose transformative potential constituted a shared European imaginary.

Embodied aesthetic experiences

(Trans-)cultural perception can be achieved through embodied spectatorship, as explored by Laura Marks's theory on *haptic visuality* suggesting that the body encodes power relations somatically – “in intercultural cinema, haptic images are often used in an explicit critique of visual mastery, in the search for ways to bring the image closer to the body and the other senses.”¹⁸ Drawing upon Trinh T. Minh-ha's essay films and her use of disruptive montage, Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev have also argued that cultural boundaries and invisible social realities could be transcended via *transcultural montage*.¹⁹ The rhythmic and affective potential of montage has been largely employed by multi-channel video art installations that *transcode* multiple screen realities into embodied aesthetic experiences.

¹⁸ Marks 2000, 151–2.

¹⁹ Suhr/Willerslev 2013, 1–15.

In this vein, we can explore the video works of the Danish art collective *Superflex* that often challenge socio-economic inequalities. The double-channel video installation *European Union Mayotte* (2016) employs the sensory potential of two screens and the contrapuntal correlation between vision and sound. The installation reflects on everyday life on the islands of Mayotte and Anjouan in the Indian Ocean – French colonies until 1975. After a 2014 referendum to re-join France, Mayotte was recognized as part of the European Union, becoming its outermost region and an entry point to the EU. Consequently, people from Anjouan and the surrounding islands embark on dangerous and illegal journeys with the hope of reaching European shore. Due to extreme weather conditions more than 50 000 migrants have not survived these deadly journeys, causing news media to dub Mayotte as *France's migrant cemetery*.

The installation juxtaposes footage of an empty boat floating on choppy waves with the documentation of handmade construction of fragile fiberglass boats. The monotonous routine of people's effort is emphasized by the persistent beat of an asynchronous hammering sound, which entails expectation of danger. The juxtaposition of sonic and visual textures constructs the affective diapasons of the work that evoke the sensation of unfulfilled journeys and loss. In this sense, the trans-cultural impulse of the piece is generated at a non-verbal and sensorial level. Conceptually, the work precedes *Superflex's* LED-based installation *We Are All In the Same Boat* (2018).

Towards transcultural aesthetics and a shared European imaginary

Artist, media makers, and creative participants have expressed critical engagement and have produced alternative narratives and aesthetic experiences that re-imagine migration in contemporary Europe, counteracting dynamics of exclusion and negative 'othering.' The discussed creative expressions signify the emergence of a shared aesthetic language that, as proposed herewith, can be defined as *transcultural aesthetics*. Its transformative potential, as argued, emanates through interrelated modalities of cultural and creative *transcoding*, such as: the representation of (trans-)cultural identities as a discursive strategy for the enunciation of cultural difference, as studied in Sunny Bergman's documentary *Our Colonial Hangover* (2014); the sampling and recontextualization of cultural repertoires in intertextual and intermedial order as an expression of symbolic resistance, exemplified by Banksy's satirical street art; critical media participation through a process of *encoding-decoding-encoding*, re-thinking Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding

(1973/1980) towards the generation of new meanings at the receiving end – showcased in the transmedia project *The Green Screen Diaries* (2015) within *Transeuropa Festival*; and embodied aesthetic experiences that evoke transculturation at a sensorial level – as manifested in the video installation *European Union Mayotte* (2016) by the artist collective *Superflex*. The discussed aesthetic strategies and creative techniques, moreover, accentuate that these transformative practices of cultural and creative *transcoding* are intrinsically related to the constitution of a shared semiotic space and a transcultural imaginary across Europe.

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Mario Tirino

The Same Film or Another One? Fansubbing as Resistant Transcodification Practice in the Postcinema Age

Abstract: This paper investigates fansubbing, as one of the most significant practices of post-cinematic mediascape as an example of the crucial role played by audiences in the informal distribution of films and TV series. More specifically, we intend to answer the following research questions: can fansubbing be conceived as a resistant practice compared to mainstream distribution policies? Can it overcome the constraints imposed by geo-blocking, censorship, and restrictions on the international circulation of films? How does fansubbing foster transcultural and transnational processes based on multilingualism and the dissemination of daring content? What kind of media object are the files associated with fanmade subtitles? How does formal distribution interact with the work of the fansubbers communities? Is there a distribution ecology, in which formal and informal apparatuses coexist?

Keywords: Fansubbing, postcinema, grassroots cultures, informal distribution, media transcodification

A resistant practice

The term *postcinema* describes the digital processes through which cinema, as a medium, dissolves into a constellation of objects, events, formats, and transmedia narratives.¹ In the postcinema age, audiences are confronted with other spaces, environments, and phenomena in which the relocation of cinema takes place.² The notion of spectator itself enters crisis. Audiences become more and more protagonists of the processes of production, distribution, and dissemination of global filmic cultures, in a new dimension that we define *postspectatorship*.³ This paper investigates fansubbing, as one of the most significant practices of post-cinematic mediascape. Fansubbing includes the production and dissemination of downloadable files containing subtitles, through specific platforms, by fan communities. It is

¹ Hagener/Hediger/Strohmaier 2016.

² Casetti 2009.

³ Tirino 2020.

an example of the crucial role played by audiences in the informal distribution of films and TV series.⁴ We intend to answer the following research questions: can fansubbing be conceived as a resistant practice compared to mainstream distribution policies? Can it overcome the constraints imposed by geo-blocking,⁵ censorship, and restrictions on the international circulation of films? How does fansubbing foster transcultural and transnational processes based on multilingualism and the dissemination of daring content? What kind of media object are the files associated with fanmade subtitles? How does formal distribution interact with the work of the fansubbers communities? Is there a distribution ecology, in which formal and informal apparatuses coexist?

Fansubbing symbolizes the global dimension of informal film distribution. According to Lobato,⁶ film distribution concerns all codified and stable systems, like mainstream distribution, independent circuits, off theatrical structures. Informal distribution is composed of a series of spontaneous practices, often developed by small communities and on the verge of legality. Formal distribution identifies traditional models in which studios control box office revenue, release the film through a coordinated system of theaters, and through hierarchical control of subsequent viewing windows.⁷ Informal distribution includes a range of practices that are difficult to frame as technological advances make accessible a growing set of opportunities, formats, and channels for film dissemination.⁸

Fansubbing is one of the practices of the informal distribution. It consists in the production and dissemination of downloadable files containing subtitles (in .srt or .sub format), through specific platforms, variously structured, such as Podnapisi, Subscene, YIFY Subtitles, Open Subtitles, Subtitle Seeker, Addic7ed, TVSubtitles.net. Fansubbing is one of the phenomena that best represents the global dimension of informal film distribution, since it is intrinsically linked to the techno-cultural characteristics of digital convergence: the variety of content, the users' propensity for multilingualism,⁹ the tension between mainstream and grassroots and between copyright and open access,¹⁰ the vocation for the dissemination of cultural materials¹¹ take concrete form in the so-called *sub scene*. It is the net-

4 Crisp 2015.

5 Lobato/Meese 2016.

6 Lobato 2012.

7 Iordanova 2012.

8 Lobato 2007.

9 Dwyer 2016.

10 Denison 2011; Hemmungs Wirtén 2011.

11 Leonard 2005; Dwyer 2012.

work of non-professional translators, communities, software, and tools for sharing translated materials.

The sub scene expresses the dimension of activism and cultural resistance with reference to geo-blocking, censorship, and the promotion of forgotten or undervalued materials.

Platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, and media conglomerates, aim at armoring their contents, through the legal protection offered by complex contracts, and by resorting to geo-blocking.¹² Geo-blocking is the practice whereby the holders of exploitation and distribution rights for an audiovisual product restrict, delay, or prevent its circulation in certain territories. Fansubbers can promote the dissemination of subtitles for media contents that are not yet available or no longer available in a given country. Fansubbers, by creating subtitles for movies and TV series not yet available in certain territories, bypass the constraints of geo-blocking. Thus, they challenge the diktats of a media industry whose official distribution systems are sometimes too rigid for cosmopolitan audiences, accustomed to following the international production of films and TV series.

Moreover, in some specific contexts, fansubbing has a political character. The distribution of audiovisuals is limited by censorship and control policies, especially in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes – although we must highlight a significant censorship activity in Western democracies as well. Thanks to the opportunities of technology, fansubbers distribute subtitles of works that have been censored in whole or in part. Numerous examples can be found in the Chinese case: Wang and Zhang¹³ describe how technological evolution allows fansubbers to bring out the paradoxes and inconsistencies of state censorship; Liang¹⁴ highlights how fan-made subtitles allow Chinese viewers to verify all the distortions of “official” subtitles, approved by the authorities; Guo and Evans¹⁵ reflect on the relevance of fansubbers’ activism in spreading international queer cinema in China.

Furthermore, fansubbing is a practice of cultural resistance to market forces. Streaming platforms and on-demand systems stimulate users the sensation of navigating in the age of media abundance.¹⁶ However, films and TV series have always been subject to the same economic laws as commodities: they are hidden or disappear from circulation when the subjects who own the rights can no longer profit from their distribution. Although many of the films subtitled are recent works and/or produced by majors and broadcasters, fansubbing also allows a wider knowl-

¹² Lobato 2019; Lobato/Lotz 2020.

¹³ Wang/Zhang 2017.

¹⁴ Liang 2018.

¹⁵ Guo/Evans 2020.

¹⁶ Boczkowski 2021.

edge of those works that strongly penalized by the neoliberal logic of exploitation of audiovisuals: experimental films and series, arthouse cinema,¹⁷ works from the past, and products never distributed in the official circuits. The sub scene therefore plays a valuable cultural role in safeguarding, promoting, and enhancing a cultural heritage that would otherwise risk being forgotten.

Ultimately, fansubbing is an interesting example of audience agency within the framework of participatory culture, as it represents a vanguard of cross-cultural communication.

Intercultural exchange

Fansubbing practices reveal the enormous potential of grassroots digital media to foster intercultural exchange. Fansubbers fuel an intercultural exchange based on language translation and enable a broad transnational dialogue. From a linguistic point of view, fansubbers offer viewers the opportunity to watch audiovisuals in the original language, with subtitles in their native language. These practices allow fansubbers to improve their translation skills by applying them to cultural objects such as films and TV series and by dealing with other translators daily. In addition, media users have access to many works, often banned, not distributed, or little publicized in their own country, while at the same time improving their linguistic skills by listening to the original audio and comparing it with subtitles in their own language. By fansubbing, language and territorial barriers are crossed, encouraging viewers to learn about other cultures and languages.

Intercultural exchange is an opportunity for all actors. Western audiences have access to little-known works from countries often excluded from commercial distribution.¹⁸ This opportunity increases contact with other cultures and benefits authors and cultural industries in these territories,¹⁹ which can expand their visibility through these informal channels. Audiences in emerging countries also benefit from fansubbing. They can access many Western works, often overcoming the limits imposed by censorship and impossibility of national markets to distribute foreign films.²⁰ Fansubbing, as a kind of transnational cultural infrastructure, expands the weight of informal distribution in the global system of audiovisual communication, making manifest the contribution of grassroots practices to transcultural and transnational cultural exchange.

¹⁷ Yu-Peng 2019.

¹⁸ Nornes 2007.

¹⁹ Gach 2021.

²⁰ Dwyer/Uricaru 2009; Hsiao 2014; Chang 2017; Khoshsaligheh et al. 2017.

Subtitles as media objects

From a media perspective, the forms of fansubbing are varied. Files, in .srt or .sub format, can be associated with the respective audiovisual sources through open-source software, such as VLC. These files can be pirated (from DVDs and Blu-Rays), sometimes with the help of automated translation systems (like Google Translate), or self-produced through cooperation between community members.

Informal distribution platforms can be presented as sites financed by invasive banners and pop-ups, or as self-financed databases. This indeterminacy of formats and formulas derives from fansubbers' ability to meet the needs of the audience in consonance with the evolution of available technologies. To respond to technological change, they pioneer media solutions. So fansubbing should not be interpreted simply as a resistant counterculture, but as a collection of cultural practices that relate in various ways to the distribution dynamics of the formal market²¹ and in some cases even reproduce its inequalities,²² due to the skills required to access these materials.

Beyond the analogue forms of fansubbing (late 1990s), the advent of the DVD format renews and reinforces the work of fansubbers. DVD stores audio files, which allow, via the menu or remote controls, access to dubbing in various languages of the same film and/or subtitles. The availability of freeware software, such as DVD Shrink, which allows users to easily extract and manipulate text and audio files stored on a DVD, opens multiple possibilities for informal distribution. By functionally separating audio, video, and text, the DVD format is the basis for the subsequent evolution of fansubbing.

The rapid spread of BitTorrent software in the mid-2000s²³ enabled the definition of new formats for subtitle files, centered on the written text. By freeing files from the constraint of the medium, torrents create the conditions for subtitles to circulate freely online in the form of text, shifting subbing practices from the television apparatus to computer apparatus (computers, software, networks). Moreover, by increasing the accessibility of subtitles, BitTorrent removes these materials from the exclusive availability of niches of *geeks* (able to operate the complex technological apparatus for analogue subbing), bringing them closer to new categories of users. Furthermore, open-source media player such as VLC can associate text and video files – whatever their respective origin – without having to physically burn the two streams of content on a physical support. VLC remediates

²¹ Condry 2010.

²² Mattelart 2012.

²³ Dwyer / Lobato 2016.

the DVD aesthetic by inviting users to select the available subtitles from a drop-down menu.²⁴ Around the same time, automated translation services such as Google Translate (2006) emerge. Thanks to advances in artificial intelligence systems, they gradually improve their performance, encouraging more users to become fansubbers.

Currently, text file-based systems, BitTorrent, and VLC, coexist with new translation technologies designed to work with on-demand streaming platforms. These technologies, with the integration of multiple sound and text tracks, recalls the unified video experience and multilingualism of DVD.²⁵ An example of this new generation of tools are captioning technologies, which allow captions and subtitles to be automatically generated for certain audiovisual streams. Captioning tools have already been integrated for some years in YouTube, which allows users to collaborate in the generation of subtitles, either by uploading specific text files or by using the technology provided by the platform. Although these tools were designed to facilitate the dissemination of semi-professional and copyright-protected material, captioning technologies and user-generated subtitles were later massively employed for pirated films as well – another confirmation of the permeability of formal and informal distribution. Another socio-technical software system designed for the current mediascape, focused on participatory cultures and streaming services, both legal and illegal, is Viki, a platform created in 2008. It implements innovative features, such as plug-ins and editors dedicated to the contextual collaboration of multiple users on the same texts, new browser-based translation interfaces, and timed comments.²⁶ The evolution of this service – from a platform for the free circulation of subtitles to a commercial streaming platform – also confirms the possibility that digital systems, technologies, and services, born in the domain of informal distribution, subsequently become part of formal distribution. Other video sites that originated within “pirate” economies have followed a similar fate.²⁷

However, the influence between the two poles of digital audiovisual distribution – formal and informal – works in the opposite direction. The rise of video streaming services alters the balance of fansubbing. Whereas earlier systems based the possibility of subtitle dissemination on the functional separation between texts and audiovisual content, the appeal of streaming lies in the feeling that all functionalities are already implemented in the platform. Fansubbers thus move between two seemingly irreconcilable systems: the widespread file sharing of the old model of subtitle dissemination and the industry-controlled

²⁴ Dwyer / Lobato 2016.

²⁵ Dwyer / Lobato 2016, 137.

²⁶ Dwyer 2012, 2016.

²⁷ Itō 2012.

and validated subbing, integrated into mainstream video-streaming platforms (such as Netflix, which has massively invested in the production of subtitles, to promote the global circulation of its products). Fansubbers have bypassed the boundaries imposed by the opposition between downloading and streaming, for instance by developing tools to convert .srt files into the DFXP (Distribution Format Exchange Profile) format, which can be read in association with Netflix streaming.²⁸ The pirate service Popcorn Time is another example of overcoming the boundaries between subbing and distribution services. Thanks to a collection of algorithms for torrent search, aggregation, and playback, it allows pirate files to be played automatically associated with user-generated subtitles.

This archaeological look at the forms of fansubbing reveals that, historically, such practices have contributed to reshape the film medium, laying the foundations for the current post-cinematic condition in which heterogeneous formats, devices, and technologies proliferate. Moreover, the transcodification of audio dialogues in a different language into written subtitles, created by a collaborative translation process,²⁹ generate a new kind of filmic experience – separate from the one related to watching a dubbed film. First, this media experience requires the domestication of an apparatus composed of media player, computer, subtitling files, and so on. Second, it favors a new perceptual set-up, based on the realignment of eye and ear. The spectator's gaze moves between the band of the frame in which the subtitles are written and the rest of the frame. Moreover, the images and texts are coordinated with the spoken word, heard in the form of original dialogues. The media user is stimulated to process multiple streams of information, and this produces an increase in linguistic knowledge and intellectual curiosity. This media experience is thus incomparably richer than the ordinary one.

Between formal and informal

The relationship between the “official” industry and fansubbing can be understood in more depth through the analysis of the forms of social interaction within fansubbing communities. Several studies have analyzed the structure of fansubbing communities, their internal organization, forms of identity and professional construction, motivations, and relationships with other communities.³⁰ Like other informal distribution communities, fansubbers' groups are organized hierarchically,

²⁸ Dwyer / Lobato 2016.

²⁹ Massidda 2015, 2020; Addeo / Esposito 2015.

³⁰ Bold 2011; Kung 2016; Massidda / Casarini 2017; Wongseeree 2020.

so that tasks and functions are assigned according to the level of experience gained in translation. This organization not infrequently leads the most assiduous contributors to pursue professional paths. The communities have forums, chats, Facebook groups, and other media by which they address translation issues, share works among fansubbers, regulate the functioning of the community, and welcome suggestions for new subtitle productions from a broader audience. The motivations of fansubbers relate to gratification (resulting from the public appreciation of their work), prestige (gained by climbing the rungs of the community hierarchy), competition (intra-community, with others in the same community, and inter-community, with competing communities), and cooperation (since each work is the result of a coordination of several resources applied to single pieces of the film or serial episode). In the current mediascape, the abnormal increase in the number of audiovisual materials, especially those related to television series, puts pressure on the official translation circuits. These are unable to absorb the amount of work needed to satisfy translation and subtitling requests. Fansubbing responds to the overwhelming demand for subtitles from the audience. This practice has reached such a level of legitimacy and quality – also by virtue of the progressive professionalization of its members – that its subtitles are often indistinguishable from those produced by the formal supply chain. In many cases, video streaming platforms and national and international television groups have resorted to subtitles produced by fans, outside of any recognition (not only economic) of their work.

By progressively approaching more and more complex tasks and by constantly working with other translators, the most frequent contributors of the fansubbing communities reach such a level of competence that they subsequently become professionals under contract to official media companies.

Conclusion

As a hybrid media form that associates a written text with a stream of audiovisual data, fansubbing reaffirms the metamorphic nature of cinema (and TV) – its constitutive openness to hybridizing multiple media forms – and its propensity for cross-media dissemination in multiple contexts.

Fansubbing represent, also metaphorically, the instability and indeterminacy of informal film distribution. At the same time, the subbing practices experienced by users at a global level are part of the processes of audience participation in the distribution of film cultures at a transnational level. Moreover, in the processes of subtitle translation we can appreciate forms of audience agency, which are not limited to replicating or disseminating a content, but alter its quality, format, def-

inition, and packaging.³¹ Fansubbing contributes significantly to broadening the distribution of audiovisual products, both by reinvigorating cross-cultural communication practices, and by allowing linguistic minorities access to otherwise unattainable film materials.

Finally, access to fansubbing practices requires a range of linguistic, translational, and media-technological skills: the need to have such skills constitutes an objective barrier to entry into these specialized communities.

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31 Dwyer / Lobato 2016.

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Chiara Scarlato

Inside of the Technology of Surveillance: Notes on Shu Lea Cheang's 3x3x6

Abstract: In this paper, I will consider Cheang's 3x3x6 (Venice Biennale, 2019) as a case study in order to provide an account of transcodification, remediation and intermediality in reference to the relationship between bodies and devices within the technological world. More precisely, by adopting a Foucauldian perspective, I will consider: 1) the role of the visitors in the activation of the transcodification process triggered by Cheang's multi-layered artwork; 2) the interaction between real and virtual bodies in the remediated space of the installation-exhibition; 3) the function of the intermediality in the double practice of being-controlled by the others and being-controlling the others, a function that enables also a challenging overlapping between the site of the installation and the technological world.

Keywords: Shu Lea Cheang, Michel Foucault, body, control, technology

The correlation between viruses, bodies, and technology is a recurring theme in the artistic *oeuvre* of Shu Lea Cheang, a Taiwanese-American artist who has been internationally lauded as a pioneering innovator in the realm of digital media art and Internet art. Evidence of this correlation can be seen not only in Cheang's cyberpunk movies *FLUIDØ* (2017) and *I.K.U.* (2020), but also in both the exhibition *Virus Becoming* (2021) and the project *UKI Virus Rising* (2018–2021), where that is the prevailing theme along with issues concerning sexual pleasure and critical accounts regarding policies in data collection. During an interview with Maxence Grugier (2021), Cheang asserted that her interest in these topics was a direct consequence of the period she spent in New York from 1980 to 1990, when she began to think about the relationship among bodies, sex, and the political devices of control, while the AIDS epidemic was dramatically increasing. In this social context, Cheang began to explore the conceptualization of viral power from a biological perspective. Specifically, she theorized viral power as an external (and infective) “agent” that would also be responsible for the internal evolution (or destruction) of a singular organism.¹

¹ According to Matthew Fuller (2019), in her *oeuvre* “a mobile set of concerns including sex, futures, gender, ecology, money, media, and food combine in a highly differential manner, with a set of open working methods” (18). See also Brodsky 2022, 75–90.

Over the past three decades, Cheang has expanded upon these themes through a diverse array of artistic expressions encompassing installations, movies, web series, and performances. These works show Cheang's continuous and profound interest in gender issues, and particularly in sexual diversity and queer culture with constant concerns for technology, body politics, bioethics, and biotechnologies. In the interview referenced above, by mentioning the sci-fi installation *Virus becoming*, Cheang had the chance to clearly affirm that the virus "hints towards a virus-embedded body. The virus enters the body, the body accommodates and submits to the viral self, the body becomes the Petri dish that permits virus to grow, to mutate within, to fork the variants that venture out to conquer the world."² In the same occasion, the artist further clarified that this vision was informed by the theoretical perspective developed by Jussi Parikka in *Digital contagions – A media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (2007)³. Viruses, therefore, function as signals of an external attack (a bug) that disrupts a constituted state of affairs, while also serving as figurative landmarks that would indeed facilitate the comprehension of pervasive surveillance practices in the contemporary world.

As Parikka does, also Cheang makes explicit and direct references to Michel Foucault's thought and, particularly, to *Discipline and Punish. The birth of the Prison* (1975), the essay in which the French philosopher provides a comprehensive analysis of the concept of "discipline" by examining historical institutions and practices that have influenced the emergence, growth, and development of disciplined bodies within normalized societies. By translating Foucault's predominant argument on discipline in her artistic production, Cheang represented the system of procedures and techniques that tend to reduce the body to a mere emblem of obedience. In artistically translating these circumstances, she also recoded how each act of disobedience was (and is still) punished through detention and/or detailed penalties that concern also the relationships between body and technology.

By conceptualizing the particular case of the body as a vector subjected to a technological apparatus of control thereby preventing any sexual infection through the fear of a possible viral infection, I will argue that Cheang's specific reflection on the relationship between technology and sexuality enable us to contemplate some of the mechanisms of surveillance that affect human beings living in the contemporary technological world. In doing so, in the present paper I will focus on Cheang's work *3x3x6*, a complex key project which has been curated by the philo-

² Grugier 2021.

³ By investigating the computer viruses in association with the human viruses, Parikka 2007 posits that the "virus can be seen as a key cultural condensation point of network culture, a sort of fundamental object" that constitutes "a passage to analyzing certain traits of formation of network culture" such as "security, body and (artificial) life" (286).

sopher Paul B. Preciado and which was presented in occasion of the Taiwan Exhibition organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum at the 2019 Biennale Art in Venice.⁴ Assuming Cheang's exhibition as a case study, my contention is to provide an account of transcodification, remediation and intermediality, with the objective of determining: 1) the role of the visitors in the activation of the transcodification process triggered by this multi-layered artwork; 2) the interaction between real and virtual bodies in the remediated space of the installation-exhibition; 3) the function of the intermediality in the double practice of being-controlled by the others and being-controlling the others. To that end, I will adopt a Foucauldian perspective with particular reference to the concepts of control and surveillance.⁵

Control and transcodification: the world and the site

Through her 3x3x6, Shu Lea Cheang transformed the four rooms of "Palazzo delle Prigioni" – a sixteenth-century Venetian prison that was in function until 1922 – into a space for reflection on technological control, as well as a space of pervasive control.⁶ The installation – whose title refers to the current dimensions of a prison cell normally used for the detention of terrorists and people reported for sexual crimes, namely a space of 3 by 3 meters monitored by 6 cameras throughout the whole day – has offered an opportunity to explore issues related to the mechanisms of surveillance and detention in the contemporary society. In detail: by proposing a new (and inverted) elaboration of the Panopticon – the ideal prison projected by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 and extensively analyzed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*⁷ –, Cheang conducted a thorough examination of the selected site's historical implications, culminating in the creation of a sophisticated apparatus that transformed the conventional "surveillance apparatus" into a "projecting

4 Preciado shares with Cheang the same research interests around various concerns such as human body and pornography, sex and sexuality, control and subversion, gender issues and queer culture. To deepen Preciado's research, see, among others Preciado 2000; 2008; 2010.

5 This theoretical choice derives from Cheang's declarations on the deep relationship between 3x3x6 and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

6 She herself describes the project as an "immersive and subversive media installation scripted with trans-punk-fiction of gender and sexual dissidence" (Grugier 2021). And, as underlined by Ping Lin, the Director of Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the work "is tailor-made for the space, and the issues it explores are born of it: from bodily imprisonment, hegemonic domination, gender conventions and the contemporary surveillance society" (Lin 2019, 9).

7 See Foucault 1977, 195–228.

apparatus". The central objective of her endeavors was twofold: firstly, to enhance the visual presence of a central and "inverted" surveillance tower that *projected* images through a technological apparatus, and, secondly, to devise a system that could *project* a situation as opposed to the configuration of standard power-knowledge relationships.

The entry room (Room A) thus emerged as the pivotal space in the Cheang's panopticon design: within this chamber, the surveillance tower projected the portraits of twelve individuals (nine individuals and a team of three people) through ten cameras which connected these images to a 3-D camera surveillance system. Room B and C were equipped with ten monitors, each displaying ten 4K films that fictionalized the narratives of the individuals depicted in Room A, namely people who had been imprisoned due to "gender, sexual, and racial nonconformity"⁸. Room D (the "cube", shaped on Hugh Hefner's media control room at the *Playboy Mansion*) was where visitors could discover the operating system of the surveillance apparatus in its entirety. But, above all, in order to access the exhibition, visitors had to consent to being recorded through the surveillance system and, subsequently, to becoming part of the artwork itself.

Through a process of remediation, the visitors' individual features were neutralized, so to speak, insofar as the images of their bodies were stored and recoded within a hybrid and virtual dimension which rendered impossible to redetermine the original personal and morphological details. Within such a condition, each visitor's face and body were collected and modified to be reproduced in the streaming flux of the installation. Data collection was further enriched by a dedicated application that enabled external individuals to contribute their selfies and dance videos, thereby becoming part of the remediation project that operated in Room A.⁹ This approach enabled individuals who were not physically present to virtually participate at the exhibition held in Venice, thereby transforming the *digital* transcodification process into a *viral* transcodification process. The complementarity of the surveillance system and the app was also instrumental in demonstrating the interaction between visitors and non-visitors by recoding it in the opposition between the internal space of the surveilled site and the external space of the technological world.

⁸ Preciado 2019, 70. Preciado also highlights that Cheang has personally collected the narratives of twelve individuals reported for sex crimes, emphasizing the artist's decision to fictionalize certain details of these events for reasons of privacy and legal compliance.

⁹ The dance videos were in sign of solidarity with Maedeh Hojabri, the woman arrested in Iran in 2018 because she posted her own dance videos on Instagram.

***Dispositifs* and remediation: real bodies and virtual images**

In accordance with the definition proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation* (1999), the process of remediation occurs through the utilization of another medium. This mechanism is of particular importance in contemporary life as the use of personal devices has inevitably resulted in a shift in the power-knowledge relationship. This relationship appears to be closely connected to the bodies or, more specifically, to the interaction between human bodies and their technological devices. This dynamic renders human beings embodied entities inhabiting a technologically saturated world, perpetually observed, delineated, and apprehended through the lens of *dispositifs* or *dispositives* (apparatus or devices) in constant interplay with other *dispositifs*.¹⁰ This is particularly evident during sanitary emergencies as the AIDS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic have shown. In this general framework, as Cheang showed in *3x3x6*, human beings are subjected to surveillance practices that regulate physical contact among them, by demanding particular attention to their sexual behaviors.

More precisely, human bodies occupy a pivotal role in the system of technological surveillance that is thought to regulate human interactions within the context of data circulation. In Cheang's exhibition, the interaction between the artwork, the site, and the visitors' bodies serves as a symbol of this control system notwithstanding the technological remediation process that renders it impossible to determine visitors' individual characteristics, such as gender and racial morphing.¹¹ The remediation of the visitors' bodies into virtual images was purely intended to emphasize the crucial dichotomy between being controlled by the others and being controlling the others. As Preciado underlined, "[h]acking digital surveillance technology and social media, Cheang uses the historical site of the Venetian Renaissance prison to create a real-time dissident interface that the visitor is invited to enter."¹² In *3x3x6*, the connection between technology and reality was, therefore, mediated by a complex system of technological devices which interacted with visitors' bodies that, in their turn, went through a process of a viral and virtual transcodification in which they were "invited to construct a queer counter-history

¹⁰ On the meaning of *dispositif*, see Deleuze 2006; Agamben 2009, 1–24; Esposito 2012. On the *dispositif* of sexuality in Foucault, see During 1992, 161–163.

¹¹ As Cheang clarifies to Paula Gardner, "the surveillance camera capturing visitors and the dance videos submitted were further manipulated and programmed at intervals to 'intervene' in the projecting loops in the gallery A" (Cheang 2021).

¹² Preciado 2019, 88.

of sexuality for digital times.”¹³ Through the fictionalized narratives presented in the ten 4K films, visitors were indeed confronted with the opportunity to subvert the prevailing power-knowledge system, which tends to rely on established narratives concerning the social construction of the self.

Ten bodies under intermedial surveillance

The 4K films, reproduced in rooms B and C, provided with a sort of catalogue of crimes variously related to sex and sexuality, covering a significant historical period through both past and contemporary cases of individuals reported for sexual crimes. The juxtaposition of real authentic narratives and their fictionalization proved to be a particularly captivating aspect, especially in the cases of the three most prominent characters in this series, namely: Giacomo Casanova (who spent a period of detention in Palazzo delle Prigioni), the Marquis De Sade, and Michel Foucault, who were respectively played by the Taiwanese-American dancer, actor, and performer Enrico D. Wey (“Casanova X”), the visual artist and performer Liz Rosenfeld (“Sade X”), and the French actor Félix Maritaud (“Foucault X”). During an interview with Tedd Edmonson, Preciado has affirmed, together with Cheang, that the films represent “typologies of cases”:¹⁴ instead of focusing on the historical particular case, for instance “Casanova X” is aimed at providing a brief fictional account of the use of condom and, as Preciado maintains, in “the late eighteenth century” Casanova “was one of the first people to publicly promote the condom.”¹⁵ The imprisonment of Casanova, Marquis de Sade, and Foucault experienced in different historical periods and cultural contexts, thus, were meant to provide an opportunity to transform personal and dramatic events into general knowledge of resistance. This perspective is further substantiated by the seven additional narratives that Cheang has fictionalized in her films.

¹³ Preciado 2019, 75.

¹⁴ “So for instance one of the typologies of cases is how HIV-positive status became the object of surveillance, in particular of legal and state surveillance, and this is the case very much in Taiwan, according to which, if you are HIV positive, immediately you are put into a state program in which you have to disclose your status to any institution in which you are working and to any of your possible partners. Which means a full disclosure of your biological status at every point: at the professional level, institutional level, your school, university, any kind of professional work that you do, and, of course, your ‘private’ life” (Edmonson 2019).

¹⁵ Edmonson 2019. By referring to “Casanova X”, Preciado adds that Cheang “depicts not the Western icon of male heterosexuality but an image for the first sexual educator: a pioneer of sex safe, who went beyond the stereotypical differences between straight and queer sexuality” (Preciado 2019, 76).

In detail: “B X” chronicles the tale of a woman who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2013 for mutilating her husband’s penis and disposing of it in a waste disposal unit; “MW X” narrates the story of a man who was similarly condemned to life imprisonment in Germany in 2006 for entering into a contract that stipulated engaging in sexual activities with a man, subsequently slaughtering him and consuming the flesh of his body; “00 X” concerns a Taiwanese man who was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for deliberately spreading the HIV virus through chemsex; “D X” is the narrative of a transgender person who was charged for rape by fraud in 2010 with six years of detention; “R X” is the tale of a Muslim man who was detained for ten months in solitary confinement for “alleged sexual assault and rape in 2018;”¹⁶ “L X” is a case concerning a Chinese woman who was charged with four years of prison for the dissemination of obscene articles through the social media; “FSB X” recounts the case of three women – who are currently detained at Harare’s Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison – who were formerly known as “sperm bandits”, due to their involvement in raping men and collecting their semen for the purpose of sale.

As Preciado emphasized, Cheang has integrated net-art with a particular group of social issues which are addressed through what can be termed “fictional disobedience” because her “ways of coding and narrating oppose the hegemonic narrative that criminalizes sexual, gender, and racial minorities” whilst “she questions the norms that have established the difference between the normal and the pathological, the real and the virtual, the socially recognized and the invisible.”¹⁷ Furthermore, as Cheang herself seems to suggest,¹⁸ the videos constitute an intermedial system insofar as the characters are linked one to each other through a mechanism of media crossing. For instance, “Casanova X” encounters “00 X”, “Foucault X” speaks with “B X”, “MW X” meets “Sade X”. This phenomenon of interweaving fiction is predicated on a sophisticated form of intermediality that prompts visitors to contemplate their social role within the exhibition space.

In this regard, Paul B. Preciado employed a bright pun to suggest that Cheang has transformed a system of surveillance into a system of *souveillance*, restaging “the four rooms of the Prigioni as a high-tech surveillance space, dedicated to questioning the ways different visual and legal regimes construct and normalize gender, sexuality, race, and health.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Preciado proposed the conceptualization of Cheang’s panopticon as a “sexopticon”, a term that amalgamates Foucault’s research on surveillance with a ‘counter-history of sexuality,’ aimed

¹⁶ Preciado 2019, 136.

¹⁷ Preciado 2019, 88–89.

¹⁸ See Edmonson 2019.

¹⁹ Preciado 2019, 73.

at subverting the intricate dynamic of knowledge, power, and control, which often tend to normalize sex and sexuality within an institutional system. Also in this way, Cheang's *3x3x6* has realized a "trans punk fiction, queer, and anti-colonial imaginations hackling the operating system of the history of sexual subjection".

By directly inviting visitors to consider their own position in the system of knowledge about sexuality, the primary aim of Cheang's work was to deny any form of identification with the artwork, thereby allowing the proliferation of a counter-system of knowledge. Furthermore, the looping reproduction of the ten films within a centuries-old context of a prison building – a structure par excellence of control and confinement – was intended to provoke a form of remediation among the real bodies of the visitors, the app users, and the virtual bodies of the performers. By engaging in direct interaction with the virtual representations of the performers within the four chambers of Palazzo delle Prigioni, visitors were encouraged to contemplate their own bodies in relation to virtual *dispositifs*: while they interacted with the high-tech surveillance system, they had also to agree to play a passive part in the remediation process activated by the technological high-tech control system.

To put it another way, through *3x3x6*, the visitors were presented with the opportunity to reflect on their position in the external space of the technological world, where their bodies were normalized within a system of surveillance (or *sousveillance*). On thinking of human bodies in terms of technological devices, Cheang's viral reflection on bodies, technology, and sexuality, was finally meant to "deconstruct" forms of subjection and subjugation to technology in favor of the dissemination (and the creation) of images of bodies 'resistant' to the normalization of human experiences into comforting and reassuring tales.

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Francesco-Alessio Ursini

Japanese Space Opera and Intermediality

Abstract: The goal of this chapter is to discuss how intermediality has shaped the creation of composite art works in Japanese Space Opera. We discuss three foundational case studies that guided the development of multi-authorial, intermedial franchises in this genre: Matsumo's works, *Gundam* works, and *Ginga Eiyū Densetsu* works. We analyze how these works present early examples of highly interconnected narratives. We then discuss how they paved the way for composite works and world-building as a "creative methodology" within the domain of Japanese Science Fiction.

Keywords: Intermediality, space opera, world building, manga, anime

Introduction

Intermediality is often used as a label that encapsulates the interconnectedness of artistic creations extending across different media and formats. Intermediality can also be interpreted as an artistic methodology: authors can create multi-layered narratives by implementing ensemble-like creative teams.¹ Intermediality thus allows authors to pursue *world building* goals: the creation and thematic growth of fictional worlds.² Within the genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy, world building has become a foundational, lucrative practice, as globally renowned franchises such as *Star Wars* show.³ Thus, the development of complex narrative universes and the fictional worlds composing these universes may involve the contribution of hundreds of writers, illustrators, CGI programmers, game designers, fans and several other creator communities.

Intermediality and world building can thus be conceived as interwoven narrative practices. Irrespective of the medium, each work exploring an established narrative world can contribute to the development of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, "composite art work."⁴ The creation of multiple worlds composing an inter-connected "narrative universe" can thus involve different authorial groups, visions and media, often

1 Jensen 2016.

2 Jameson 2007; Wolf 2013.

3 Wolf 2013, Ch. 2.

4 Fusillo/Grishakova 2021.

resulting into an open-ended creative process.⁵ However, a research problem that seems to emerge when one looks at intermediality in Science Fiction involves cultural coverage. Outside Anglophonic works and worlds, studies investigating intermedial composite works are still relatively scarce.⁶ Case in point, Wolf (2013) offers an appendix of fictional worlds created across different media that includes *Gulliver's Travels* but lacks *20000 leagues under the sea*. Hence, the importance of non-Anglophonic composite works can certainly be investigated in more detail.

The first goal of this chapter is to ameliorate this situation by showing how intermediality has shaped the creation of complex composite works within the Japanese Science Fiction *milieu*. We focus on Space Opera as a sub-genre, given its historical and foundational role within this cultural tradition.⁷ The second goal is to show how and why composite art works within this sub-genre developed intermedial narrative universes via world building, thus influencing several other works. The three case studies that we analyze to pursue these goals are: Matsumoto Leiji's works; Yoshiyuki Tomino's *Gundam*-based works; Yoshiki Tanaka's *Ginga Eiyū Densetsu*'s cycle. The first reason for choosing these three cases is based on the fact that these authors act as the "founding fathers" of otherwise multi-author, multi-work universes, and as deeply influential figures of Japanese Science Fiction.⁸ The second reason is that these case present differing degrees of cultural relevance and influence within and outside Science Fiction communities.

Before we start, we propose definitions and abbreviations that may be useful to streamline the discussion. *Space Opera* is defined as a Science Fiction sub-genre in which faster-than-light travel and epic scale narrative structures with hyper-ensembles are the norm.⁹ "Hyper-ensembles" is considered a semi-formal term; however, it is useful for us to describe narratives with dozens if not hundreds of characters.¹⁰ We define *anime* as Japanese(-style) animation; *manga*, as Japanese(-style) graphic narrative.¹¹ "Worlds", instead, can be conceived as representations of states of affairs.¹² Texts can introduce *fictional* worlds, or worlds that readers can interpret as fictional because of their narrative premises (e.g. faster-than-light travel).¹³ Within Science Fiction studies, the term "narrative universe", is

⁵ Booker/Thomas 2009, Ch. 1.

⁶ Orbaugh 2009.

⁷ Sawyer 2009.

⁸ Orbaugh 2009.

⁹ Sawyer 2009, 505.

¹⁰ See also Jannidis 2013.

¹¹ Schodt 1996, Ch. 1.

¹² Ryan 2001.

¹³ Bell/Ryan 2019.

often used to refer to composite works that introduce manifold fictional worlds.¹⁴ We use this term as it highlights the cohesive yet flexible nature of the composite works that we analyze. We introduce other terms imported from narratology as we proceed.

Matsumoto Leiji's works

Matsumoto Leiji (born Akira) rose to authorial fame during the late 1960's and early 1970's, building a reputation as visionary artist within *manga* and *anime*.¹⁵ In 1974, he was involved in the development of *Uchū Senkan Yamato* ('Space Battleship Yamato'), a 26-episode anime with a manga counterpart.¹⁶ *Yamato* imagines a war between humans and Gamilas, aliens attacking Earth and eerily resembling the historical Third Reich, in their social and military organization. The spaceship Yamato, modelled after Japan's flagship during World War II, is the sole weapon that can reach planet Iscandar and save humankind from oblivion. The series experienced low ratings and budget woes, but due to fans' demand a first movie was released in 1977, thus offering a first ending to the series.¹⁷ A second movie offering an alternate ending followed, along with further *anime* series and a controversial copyright battle with producer Yishizaki Yoshinobu.

Matsumoto created two other Space Opera series: *Ginga Tetsudō 999* ('Galaxy Express 999'), and *Uchū Kaizoku Kyaputen Hārokku* ('Space pirate Captain Harlock'). The first work started as a manga¹⁸ soon adapted into an *anime* series.¹⁹ In *Ginga/Galaxy*, the protagonist Tetsuro boards a steam-powered train that can however travel through the universe at fantastic speeds. Along with the mysterious woman Maetel, Tetsuro traverses galaxies and visits hundreds of planets, usually learning a moral lesson after each visit. *Harlock* was released in dual format: manga and anime were released synchronously over the same time period.²⁰ The works chronicle the fight of Harlock against a corrupt and complacent Earth government and the Mazon, aliens aiming to conquer Earth for their own survival. Ultimately, Harlock can fend off the Mazon's invasion, though Earth is nevertheless devastated by the war.

¹⁴ Hubble/Mosutzanis 2013, 170–172.

¹⁵ Orbaugh 2009, McCarthy/Ashmore 2022.

¹⁶ Matsumoto 1974–1975.

¹⁷ Lamarre 2002.

¹⁸ Matsumoto 1977–1981.

¹⁹ Nishizawa 1978–1981.

²⁰ Matsumoto 1977–1979.

Each of these works is loosely connected to the others via subtle thematic relations. Harlock was originally designed to appear in *Yamato*'s original run, and appears as a co-protagonist in the first *Ginga/Galaxy* theatrical movie (1979). Further *anime* and *manga* develop each of these characters and their narrative in sometimes complex manners. For instance, the series *Harlock: Das Rehingold der Nibelungen* combines Wagner's eponymous cycle with characters from *Harlock* world (e.g. Captain Harlock as Siegfried). The two series *SSX Waga Seishun no Arcadia – Mūgen Kidō Esu Esu Ekkusu* (*Arcadia of My Youth: Endless Orbit SSX*)²¹ and *Space Captain Harlock: Outside Legend*²² might be respectively considered a prequel and a sequel of the original series. However, both present events that are often in contradiction with the events presented in the first series. Its respective director, (Matsumoto and Rin (Taro), wished to create new renditions of Harlock, other characters, and key events in their narratives (e.g. Harlock's loss of his right eye).

Matsumoto's original visions lead to the development of intermedial and narratively complex composite works. Matsumoto's admiration for Richard Wagner's creations, as well as knowledge of Michael Moorcock's works appear to have been key influences.²³ Michael Moorcock created several narrative cycles presenting alternate renditions of an archetypal protagonist, the "Eternal Champion". Similarly, Matsumoto created "parallel worlds" in which versions of key archetypal characters (e.g. Harlock as the "romantic hero") acted as protagonists. He used *manga* as a central medium to introduce these characters and worlds. His directorial work on their *anime* adaptations led to the development of collaborations with other artists and directors to popularize these characters and themes. Thus, he acted as a "founder" of a complex artistic vision that became a collective, composite work over different decades and media. This methodology influenced subsequent Space Operas, as we discuss next.

The *Gundam* composite works

Kidō Senshi Gandamu ('Mobile Warrior Gundam', 1979–1980) is an *anime* series created by Tomino Yoshiyuki, Yoshikaku Yazuhiko and "Haijme Yatate", Sunrise *anime* studio's collective group of writers. This *anime* imagines a future for humankind known as the "Universal Century" timeline. Most humans live in space colo-

²¹ Katsumata 1982–1983.

²² Rin 2002.

²³ Greenland 2013, Ch. 7; Clute 2021.

nies, since Earth is a depopulated place ravaged by centuries of famine, poverty, and wars. “Spacenoids” or space citizens are treated by the Earth Federation military government as second-class citizens and exploited for economic purposes. Colony 3, renamed as “Principality of Zeon”, starts an independence war against the Federation, exploiting the superior fighting power of humanoid robots (“Mobile Suits”). The series thus chronicles their “One Year War”, the horrendous conflict between Federation and Zeon forces, for political supremacy in the Earth sphere.

The original series, planned for 52 episodes but cut to 43 due to low ratings, may be conceived as a loose transposition in space of the fight between Axis and Allies powers during WWII.²⁴ The series developed a cult following and then an increasing popularity via the compilation movies and Bandai’s line of licensed toys. A second series, *Gundam Zeta*,²⁵ chronicles the events occurring seven years after the “One Year War”, attempting to transpose various aspects of the Cold War period in the Universal Century timeline. *Gundam*’s success led to the release of a *manga* magazine dedicated to the franchise (*Newtype*, 1985–current), and a vast line of models, videogames, and other lucrative merchandise. Tomino Yoshiyuki progressively developed dissatisfaction towards the franchise’s direction, ceding intellectual copyrights to Sunrise in 1993.²⁶

From the 1990’s onwards, other authors have developed re-interpretations of the core *Gundam* themes in new animated series (e.g. *Shin Kidō Senki Gandamu Uingu* ‘New Mobile Report Gundam Wing’).²⁷ Tomino also maintained a leading creative role by writing “light novels” (illustrated novels for young adults) and *manga* in which he developed the Universal Century’s history and narrative world in painstaking detail. Similarly, Yoshikazu Yoshikaku created a *manga* offering a re-telling of the original anime series (*Kidō Senshi Gandamu: The Origin*, 2001–2011), which offers a background narrative regarding how Zeon leaders created the political climate leading to the “One year War”. Hence, if we conceive *Gundam* as an independent narrative universe, then this narrative universe has grown in two directions. One direction is Universal Century timeline, which offers the widest number of anime series, *manga*, and tie-in products, and on which Tomino Yoshiyuki’s novels still act as “blueprints” for adaptations into other media. Another direction consists of alternate renditions of the “original story”, which however tend to be self-contained and limited in development to their contingent commercial popularity.

²⁴ Vernal 1995; Tennant 2006.

²⁵ Tomino 1985–1986.

²⁶ Vernal 1995.

²⁷ Ikeda/Takamatsu 1994–1995.

Intermediality in *Gundam* thus represents the central mode of narration, and world building is perhaps the central creative engine. A central theme that unifies these parallel worlds and timelines is the one introduced in the original *Gundam anime*. War driven by fundamentalism is the greatest tragedy that can befall human beings, though individuals can make wise choices to avoid further misery.²⁸ Thus, each *Gundam* work (and world) offers an interpretation of this original theme in possibly unique manners, though certain themes (e.g. mobile suits) act as constants. A distinctive feature of the Universal Century timeline/world, however, is that Tomino's novels act as "canon" works, thus establishing a narrative priority in how this composite work has been developed over the decades. A similar picture emerges with Tanaka's works, as we discuss next.

The *Ginga* composite works

Ginga Eiyū Densetsu 'The Legend of the Galactic Heroes' is a series of books by author and literature scholar Yoshiki Tanaka (1982–1989). During the 28th century, a reactionary officer of a galactic-spanning alliance of planets seizes power and forms a galactic empire based on the 19th century German 2nd Reich. A group of rebels founds the "free alliance of planets" in the 34th century, thus reverting part of the galaxy and its planets to a democratic, though corrupt rule. A galactic war ensues between the two forces, lasting over a century. The novels chronicle the events surrounding Admiral Reinhard von Lohengramm and his ascension to power in the empire, and admiral Yang Weng-Li's attempt to avoid annexation of the alliance back into the Empire. While the Empire is ultimately victorious except for a handful of planets, grassroots pressure leads to the development of a full constitutional monarchy for this expanded force.

Aside its perhaps eccentric re-imagination of European history in Space, the series is notable for featuring a veritable hyper-ensemble of over 200 characters. Though these characters originate from all social backgrounds and political sides, they are mostly male. Female characters are rare, though they invariably play key roles in their respective factions (e.g. admiral von Lohengramm's chief political aide is his wife). The series received a first *anime* adaptation from Artland studio,²⁹ notable for its sophisticated use of classical music as a soundtrack, and two manga adaptations. A theatrical adaptation by the Tarakazuka review troupe (2013) is also notable for featuring only male characters, though the troupe's policy is to include

²⁸ Tennant 2005: 4–7.

²⁹ Ishiguro 1988–1997.

only women as stage actresses. A second *anime* adaptation by Studio I.G. is currently under development,³⁰ with the studio adapting one book volume's narrative material per year. At the moment of writing, three volumes have received a full adaptation. The series also involves other related products (e.g. spaceships models, videogames), though their popularity is certainly not be comparable to *Gundam* models.

A central characteristic of this composite work is that the adaptations present non-trivial forms of re-interpretation of the original saga. The classical narratological concepts of *fabula* and *syuzhet* can help us to analyze these forms.³¹ If we assume that Tanaka's *oeuvre* presents the central *fabula* (i.e. order of events) underpinning this complex narrative, then each re-interpretation works with a different *syuzhet*, or order of events. For instance, the first anime adaptation starts with a short feature movie focusing on a battle in which admiral von Lohengramm and admiral Wen-Li clash for the first time (34th century). This battle occurs near the end of the first volume, as Tanaka opens his saga with a description of the empire's birth (28th century). Both manga adaptations follow a similar narrative course, though the first manga adaptation is notable for changing the gender of several primary and secondary characters.³² The second anime adaptation, instead, has so far switched to a chronologically linear rendition of the events portrayed in the books.

We can thus observe that the *Ginga* saga presents a more specific though certainly important case of intermediality within the Japanese Space Opera tradition. The original books present the "canonical" *fabula* that teams of authors, illustrators and other artists have adapted into different media forms. These adaptations present different *syuzhet* forms but also thematic variations (e.g. gender swapping). Most importantly, however, these adaptations follow Tanaka's invitation of offering distinctive re-interpretations of the original saga, and with them differing but equally acceptable views on the political themes underpinning the saga. To an extent, they exist as parallel and inter-medial "versions" of a narrative universe originating in Tanaka's literary canon.

³⁰ Tada 2018-current.

³¹ E.g. Thon 2016, Ch. 2.

³² Michihara 1986–2000.

Discussion and conclusion

Let us take stock. Matsumoto Leiji, Tomino Yoshiyuki, and Tanaka Yoshiki have created complex Space Operas which seem to have defined a certain methodological approach to the creation of inter-medial composite works. Matsumoto's works introduced archetypal stories (e.g. *Yamato*) and protagonists (e.g. *Harlock*) via *manga* that subsequently found re-elaborations in other media and from other authors. Thus, these works established the creation of "parallel worlds" within a narrative universe as a way to found a complex, collective and cyclic re-interpretation of these stories. Tomino's vision of *Gundam* via novels has shaped the Universal Century timeline as a vast inter-medial network of *anime*, *manga*, and other works. As in the case of Matsumoto's works, other re-iterations of the "original" vision define parallel narrative worlds. Tanaka's creation of *Ginga...* co-exists with alternative narrations that play with *fabula* and *syuzhet*, as well as subtle thematic variations. A small but clear kaleidoscopic set of inter-medial *syhuzet* has emerged from a central literary *fabula*. Each creator's view of a world/universe has been refracted and amplified through manifold re-interpretations.

Our overview suggests that the synergy between different media systems inherent to the Japanese artistic *milieu* offered a natural support for the "projection" of these visions. Case in point, Matsumoto's co-synchronous work on the *manga* and *anime* versions of *Yamato* established a case in which the same story was presented via different media and perspectives, as well as authorial groups (Matsumoto and his assistants on the *manga*; the animation studio on the *anime*). Though Tomino's *Gundam* novels quickly became works offering canonical interpretations of Universal Century events, their adaptations into *manga* and *anime* often introduced further clarifications on these events, usually acting as "new drafts" (Vernal 1995). Studio I.G.'s version of *Ginga* has a telling secondary title in German: *Die Neue These* 'the new thesis', as it presents one more new *syuhzet* of the original *fabula*.

Each of these works has been deeply influential within and outside Japan, with respect to both methodology and themes. For instance, the electronic music duo Daft Punk has collaborated with Matsumoto on the music movie *Interstellar 5555*.³³ The two musicians were part of a French generation who grew up with Matsumoto's (adapted) works, and thus dreamed of collaborating with their most inspirational author on a multi-media project. *Yamato* and *Gundam*'s portrayal of war has influenced many subsequent works, including TV series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and

33 Nishio/Irotoshi/Matsumoto 2003.

Babylon 5.³⁴ Many subsequent Japanese Space Opera and Science Fiction works have invariably followed similar narrative trajectories. For instance, Masamune Shirow's *Kōkaku Kidōtai* 'Mobile Armoured Riot Police' (i.e., *Ghost in the Shell*) originated in a short cyberpunk *manga* (1989–1991), but the world presented within this *manga* was amply expanded via the eponymous movie and subsequent *anime* series and video-games. Subsequent Science Fiction composite works (e.g. *Space Dandy*),³⁵ also follow this complex, composite, collective approach to the creation of narrative universes.

In conclusion, we have reached our first goal by showing that, since Matsumoto's founding works in the 1970's, intermediality is a distinguishing feature of Japanese Space Opera and, more in general, Science Fiction. We also have reached our second goal by showing that composite art works within this genre tend to originate in one author's vision but expand through different media and works (i.e. the "how" question). This can be the case because the original vision lends itself to possible re-interpretations and narrative re-elaborations which allow new authors to offer their voice on these worlds (i.e. the "why" question). The emergence of "hyper-composite art works" becomes a perhaps natural consequence of this pluralistic view on world building and narration. Ultimately, these are just three case studies on intermediality, a feature that permeates modern Japanese art works: hundreds more could be discussed (and analyzed). We leave such goals for future endeavors, however.

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³⁴ Lamarre 2002, 339–340; McCarthy/Ashmore 2022, Ch. 1.

³⁵ Watanabe 2013–2014.

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