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# The Real and the Intermedial



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# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Malgorzata Bugaj</i>  |     |
| The Impression of Reality and the Awareness of the Medium in Alexander Sokurov's Family Trilogy . . . . .  | 7   |
| <i>Giacomo Tagliani</i>  |     |
| Pictorial Real, Historical Intermedial. Digital Aesthetics and the Representation of History in Eric Rohmer's <i>The Lady and the Duke</i> . . . . . | 27  |
| <i>Katalin Sándor</i>  |     |
| The Polaroid and the Cross. Media-Reflexivity and Allegorical Figurations in Lucian Pintilie's <i>The Oak</i> (1992) . . . . .                       | 45  |
| <i>Hajnal Király</i>   |     |
| Looking West: Understanding Socio-Political Allegories and Art References in Contemporary Romanian Cinema . . . . .                                  | 67  |
| <i>Judit Pieldner</i>  |     |
| Magic Realism, Minimalist Realism and the Figuration of the Tableau in Contemporary Hungarian and Romanian Cinema . . . . .                          | 87  |
| <i>Cecília Mello</i>   |     |
| Art and Reality in <i>The Arbor</i> (2010). . . . .  | 115 |
| <i>Francesco Zucconi</i>   |     |
| When the Copywriter is the Protagonist. History and Intermediality in Pablo Larraín's <i>No</i> (2012) . . . . .                                     | 129 |
| <i>Paula Blair</i>   |     |
| Accommodating the Mess: The Politics of Appropriation in <i>It for Others</i> (2013) . . . . .   | 149 |
| <i>Mark Player</i>   |     |
| Media-Morphosis. Intermediality, (Re-)Animation and the Medial Uncanny in Tsukamoto Shinya's <i>Tetsuo: The Iron Man</i> (1989) . . . . .            | 167 |
| <i>James Verdon</i>  |     |
| Indexicality or Technological Intermediate? Moving Image Representation, Materiality, and the Real. . . . .  | 191 |





# The Impression of Reality and the Awareness of the Medium in Alexander Sokurov's Family Trilogy

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**Abstract.** Drawing on Brigitte Peucker's question – “in cinematic experience, what promotes the impression of reality, and when does medium awareness come into play?” – I examine how Sokurov's family trilogy constitutes a certain oscillation between the immediate and the constructed. The films under discussion connect with the sensual, physical-biological and socio-political reality, while, simultaneously, they emphasize the artificial and stylised. *Mother and Son* employs distancing painterly images which de-emphasise the figures of the characters while it finishes with the extreme close-up exploring the skin as a raw material used to construct image with its varied colours and textures. *Father and Son*, on the other hand, enters the dialogue with medicine; through the employment of haptic images and medical appropriations, the film focuses on the sensual along with the biological dimension of the body. Set within a clear socio-political context, *Alexandra* explores the senses which are not readily available in cinema, that is touch and smell, and thus emphasises the trace of the physical presence on screen. This paper demonstrates how Sokurov's family trilogy situates itself on the intersection of the Bolter and Grusin's “desire for immediacy” with the mediated and remediated.

**Keywords:** Alexander Sokurov's family trilogy, intermediality, painterly images, haptic and sensual cinema.

Alexander Sokurov's *Mother and Son* (1997), *Father and Son* (2003) and *Alexandra* (2007) are interlinked narratively and stylistically. Their stories are simple and sparse: in the first, a mother dies, in the second, a father and son explore their emotional bond knowing that the latter will soon leave, while in the last, a grandmother visits her grandson, most probably for the last time. As allegories of idealised familial relations, these films give a physical form to emotions. Additionally, they display formal homogeneity through their

meditative pace along with minimalist dialogues and narrative. Most importantly for this argument, Sokurov's family trilogy is a certain oscillation between the material and abstract, or immediate and mediated.

Sokurov's family trilogy constitutes an intensified investigation of the trace of material presence on screen. The films under discussion heighten the cinematic illusion of reality by connecting with the sensual, the physical-biological and the socio-political in a variety of ways. Firstly, haptic images – which “search the image for a trace of the originary, physical event” (Marks 2002, xi) – emphasise the multi-sensory experience of the world and accentuate bodily sensations. Secondly, references to the discourse of medicine (*Father and Son*) introduce scientific analysis of the physicality of the body. Thirdly, these films insistently examine presented worlds from different angles and proximities, frequently coming intimately close to the subject. These strategies work together to evoke Bolter and Grusin's “logic of immediacy” (1999, 5), Peucker's “material image” (2007, 8) or de Luca's “sensory realism” (2014, 1).

Simultaneously, however, *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son* and *Alexandra* revel in their nature as mediated and remediating. This is pointed to by Beumers and Condee who, considering Sokurov's oeuvre, remark: “his work is often a non-narrative visual experiment, somewhere between photography and painting, rather than film in the traditional sense of the term. Basically, we would suggest, Sokurov challenges that cinema conceived as a method either to capture or narrate reality” (2011, 1). The presence of the medium is underscored in the family trilogy by conspicuous distortions and manipulations of the image as well as references to the domain of painting and medical images. Such remediations bear similarities to Bolter and Grusin's examples of Dutch painters incorporating maps in their works or literary texts viewed online (1999, 45). Through repurposing other arts, Sokurov's family trilogy enters the dialogue with older media and makes us aware of the presence of the new medium: film.

The present analysis is an attempt to provide an answer to Brigitte Peucker's question: “in cinematic experience, what promotes the impression of reality, and when does medium awareness come into play?” (2007, 1). In other words, by examining all three films constituting the family trilogy, this paper demonstrates how *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son* and *Alexandra* situate themselves on the intersection of the “desire for immediacy” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 23) with the mediated and artificial.



## ***Mother and Son***

*Mother and Son*, the film opening Sokurov's family trilogy, is the poetic tale of a son (Alekssei Ananishnov) who tends to his dying mother (Gudrun Geyer). The story takes place within a single day during which they begin a journey through an ethereal landscape. [Fig. 1.] The plot of the film is simple, the number of characters is limited to the titular pair. Time, space and the bond between them hold symbolic meaning and constitute an exploration of ideal family relations; this is a representation of a myth, a certain ideal world. Most shots in *Mother and Son* are broad painterly panoramas of landscapes, the figures of characters lost in overwhelming nature. Less frequently, the camera frames them in medium shots. In contrast, the film finishes with prolonged extreme close-ups of the characters' skin, carefully drawing attention to the recognisable physical features of the human body. The bodily surface of the aged mother is juxtaposed with that of her young son as Sokurov creates skinscapes constructed of layers of human skin.

While Sokurov's oeuvre has been considered exemplary of slow cinema (Jaffe 2014, de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016, Lim 2014, Flanagan 2010), *Mother and Son* is its most pronounced representative. The film operates within what Hänsen calls the "aesthetics of still images" (2011, 44), with stillness created using long takes and long shots, minimal movement both of the camera and within the frame, repeated silence and depictions of landscapes fixed on screen. Other traits particular to slow cinema include "the fictive characters who appear in them sidestep the frenzy and modernity" (Jaffe 2014, 6) and "the minimal narrative structure" (Flanagan 2008): *Mother and Son* follows characters living on the fringes of civilization through their walks, punctuated by frequent rests and reminiscences. The slower pace renders subjective time palpable, which makes the film an exploration of experience, another characteristic of slow cinema (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016, 14). Here, it is a liminal bodily experience – the death of one of the characters.

Correspondingly, according to Botz-Bornstein, Sokurov's cinema can be discussed in a way akin to traditional oil paintings: the landscapes chosen by the Russian director, the organisation of figures, the particular focus on texture and the use of colour make his films look "more painterly than typically 'cinematic'" (2007, 32). These tendencies are particularly prominent in *Mother and Son*, with scenes "condensed to a few shots like cinematic paintings" (Hänsen 2011, 50). Szaniawski, in turn, finds parallels in the works of classical painters, primary Caspar David Friedrich, whose influence is recognizable in the film (2014, 128).

Friedrich's atmosphere of stillness, limited range of colours, nostalgic tone and focus on landscape rather than the human figure are echoed throughout the film.

*Mother and Son* frequently deploys an array of experimental techniques, such as shooting through painted glass, or using mirrors and anamorphic lenses. In the film – “stylised and aesthetically controlled to the extreme” (Szaniawski 2014, 127) – distortions of the image are introduced from the very first shot where we see the stretched silhouettes of the protagonists. The film explores skewed perspectives (for example, in a scene when the son walks down the path), and unreal colours in landscape (e.g. in the depiction of the wind moving crops); it also emphasises a flatness of composition as well as focus on textures. Distorted on screen, nature in the film is distancing and alienating “as a result of which the audience's emotional engagement may be retarded, if not arrested” (Jaffe 2014, 60).

If, as Bolter and Grusin claim “the goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate other media” (1999, 56), *Mother and Son* rehabilitates tenets ordinarily associated with painting. Long takes coupled with particularly strong stylization in the film do not emphasise reality, but, rather, attempt to recreate an engagement with the image which is similar to that experienced with a painting. This slow, deliberate gaze encourages the viewer to ponder and admire the surface of the image. In this way, the film translates the modality of the painting into the aesthetics of the moving image. This confirms Szaniawski's remark that “with *Mother and Son*, the medium procuring the commentary (film) comes several steps closer to the medium commented upon (painting)” (2014, 128). By highlighting the presence of the new medium (film) and entering into a dialogue with the older medium (painting), *Mother and Son* draws attention to the self-reflexive potential of cinema.

Painterly references in *Mother and Son* are also emphasised through the film's reliance upon long takes and long shots to place its subjects within a wider context. Here, the scenery plays the lead role; the silhouettes of the characters are often lost in the landscape. The camera frequently abandons its focus on the human figure in order to explore the space that surrounds it. For example, in a scene when the mother and son discuss their memories, the camera assumes a more distanced position in order to focus on their surroundings leaving the characters' silhouettes relegated to a third of the screen. Correspondingly, in the sequence where the son carries his sick mother on a walk, the characters are presented as if they were travelling through a painting and can be distinguished from the background only through their movement. The rich texture of the surface, the limited colour palette, and reduced depth of the image resolve the

silhouette and background into a single plane. The landscape is in tune with the human form merged with its surroundings; the bodies of the characters appear as objects overwhelmed by nature.

A similar de-emphasis can be observed in the scenes depicting the mother against a backdrop of conspicuous surfaces. In these, she is presented in medium shots or close-ups focusing on her face. After the son sits her on the bench beneath the tree, their bodies and clothes in varied hues of grey and brown appear to merge with the background. As the woman rests, her eyes half closed, the bark of the tree mirrors her dry, wrinkled face. Later, when she lies amongst the crops, her pale face echoes the colour of the field behind her. Towards the end of the film, we watch the pale, sickly face of the mother melt into her surrounding: a stonewashed wall and the white sheet the son covers her with. In most scenes, composition, light and colour function to valorise the setting, to purposefully avoid distinguishing or isolating the figure from the background.

In contrast to de-emphasising the figures of the characters, the three-minute-long final scene comes intimately close to their bodies and compels viewers to focus on the texture of their skin. The son mourns after the death of his mother: the close up of her wrinkled, still hand against a backdrop of rough fabric fills the screen. The man's face comes close to his mother's inert body, first only as a shadow. His hands, young and glistening, travel slowly over the uneven surface of the woman's pale fingers, examining the delicate folds of her skin. As he moves further, an image of his throat stretched over the hand of his mother is brought to prominence and the film focuses on the trembling muscles and tendons of the sobbing son. The heavy silence of the final fragment is punctuated by the son's cries while the steady camera corresponds to the stillness of this moment.

Shown in extreme close-ups, the surfaces of the mother's and son's bodies are de-familiarised through scale and the attention they receive. This artificial amplification accentuates recognisable properties of skin: its roughness and dryness along with pores, hair and wrinkles. Here, the film focuses on skin as a raw material constructing an image with varied colours and textures. The surfaces of the individual bodies – that of the young son and the elderly mother – comprise different parts of the image. Here, the film recalls the hilly scenery it presents in the preceding scene with the image constructed from varied typographical features; however, the geography of the landscape is replaced with that of the body. By presenting in close-ups the contrasting surfaces of the body, Sokurov creates a “surface-scape” (Quinlivan 2012, 99), or more precisely, a “skinscape” composed of different layers of skin.

This extreme close-up contrasts with the previous depictions of the characters as either lost in overwhelming landscape or merged with their surroundings. In the closing scene, the bodies become the centre of attention (with almost no other elements present) and bring to the fore their material nature through emphasising the texture and hues of the skin along with the breath of the protagonist. Strikingly, this turn to materiality occurs in the moment of mother's death: the on-screen space is transformed to reflect the emotional state of the character – it is the mother's dead body that overwhelms the son.

Hänsgen claims that “to Sokurov, the traditional medium of the fine arts serves as an inspirational reservoir of image motifs, shot compositions as well as perspective, light and colour arrangement” (2011, 50–51). *Mother and Son* is the most stylised part of the family trilogy: the presence of a new medium (film) and references to an older medium (painting) are heavily underscored throughout the film. However, the use of an extreme close-up in the final scene, concentrating on the texture and colour of skin, represents an emphasis on the materiality of the body. By coming intimately close to its characters, *Mother and Son* opens up a space in which it can engage with the trace of the physicality of the characters' bodies and produces what Peucker calls “the material image” (2007, 8).

## ***Father and Son***

*Father and Son* is a story of a war veteran father (Andrei Shchetinin) and his son, Alexei (Aleksei Neymyshev), a cadet in a military school. Shot between St Petersburg and Lisbon, the second part of the family trilogy is set in what Szaniawski aptly describes as an escapist, imaginary realm (2014, 207). Equally allegorical is the relationship between the parent and child: it is loving and tender, frequently translated into physical closeness (Alaniz 2010, 283). The harsh military ethos of their shared army background contrasts strikingly with the “deep, visceral desire to restore the idyllic fusion between children and parents” (Iampolski 2011, 109), or what Szaniawski calls the “Sokurovian utopia of proximity and intimacy” (2014, 193).

The opening scene of the film – the recollection of a dream – links us back to *Mother and Son* with images of similarly stretched silhouettes and the same desolate scenery in an identical colour palette. Moreover, the presence of the medium is here also clearly accentuated through a number of techniques: colour filters, soft focus, anamorphic lenses and chiaroscuro effects, as well as filming through transparent objects, such as glass or X-ray photos. Alaniz notes another

link between both parts of the family trilogy: their allusions to the paintings of the great masters. In the case of the earlier film, the reference point is mainly Caspar David Friedrich, in the case of the latter, Rembrandt (Alaniz 2010, 290). Crucially, however, *Father and Son* moves mostly between close ups and medium shots – the camera is brought much closer to its subject than in *Mother and Son*. In contrast to the first part of the family trilogy, *Father and Son* explores the bodies of its characters at varied proximities: from the investigation of their muscular figures as encountered in everyday experiences, through extreme close-ups registering the skin (and breath) in the first scene, to an exploration of the father’s bodily interior inscribed in the medical discourse. Such juxtaposition of different perspectives – as well as the intertwining of medical and haptic images – enhances an illusion of the materiality of the presented corporealities.

*Father and Son* pursues its preoccupation with the human corporeality by focusing on the sculpted bodies of two soldiers. The exploration of their physical figures begins with the opening scene where the main characters are presented half-naked and in each other’s embrace. Throughout the film, we watch the father weightlifting on rooftops, or the son stepping out of the shower. Alexei is observed during martial arts training, or exercising on a ladder. The father and son play football and talk about their physical fitness; their muscular physiques are accentuated by sleeveless tops and tight T-shirts. Such underscoring of muscularity which, in turn, implies strength and fitness, echoes Dyer’s analysis of male pin-ups in which he notes that muscles are generally associated with “hard bodies” (1992, 274); strikingly, in Sokurov’s film this hardness is nonetheless presented through soft focus.<sup>1</sup> The film’s frequent references to sport (e.g. football, wrestling and gymnastics) provide yet another illustration of Dyer’s note that “sport is the area of life that is the most common contemporary source of male imagery” (1992, 271). Additionally, the camera and lights highlight the physicality of characters who are usually submerged in saturated sun-lit yellows and oranges or subdued sepias which emphasise the skin, and frequently in close-ups underscoring texture and proximity. Repeatedly, subjects within the frame are partially obscured by a shadow thus creating a chiaroscuro effect which sculpts the bodies.<sup>2</sup> *Father and Son* can be viewed as a certain glorification of the male physique, but while the film offers spectacles of corporealities turned into

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1 As Szaniawski notes, the film “is bathed in hues that connect it to at least one major landmark of queer cinema” (2014, 185–186).

2 This prompted Alaniz to point to the similarities of the opening scene to Rembrandt’s *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (2010, 290).

bodies-to-be-looked-at, it remains ambiguous as to whether these are displayed for the erotic gaze.<sup>3</sup> [Fig. 2.]

This ambiguous eroticism is particularly strong in the opening scene. *Father and Son* begins with a few seconds of a blank screen before we begin to distinguish the anguished breath<sup>4</sup> of two men, one trying to console the other. In the ensuing sequence, the soundtrack continues the close exploration of breath, while an image appears. We can see the distorted surface of the bodies presented in close-ups and in soft focus: the depiction of struggling hands and naked chests pressed to one another. The next cut is to an image of open lips – stretched on screen through an anamorphic lens – which recall a dark cave surrounded by a fold of skin; it is the space where the sound comes from. Finally, the image resolves into the clear figuration of two embracing men.

The beginning of *Father and Son* presents a certain incompleteness: first it is the lack of images, then distorted close-ups fragmenting the bodies. The sonic and, later, visual puzzle, “offering a vague sensation rather than specific information” (Elliott 2011, 171), refers us to Marks’s notion of haptic visuality and her statement that “rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the objects into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction” (2002, 16). Here, the spectator needs to create mental pictures based on sound while the concealed image is gradually revealed. After the image appears, the camera draws close, as if probing the body. Akin to the final scene of *Mother and Son*, the exteriors of two different corporealities create layers that construct the image; our eyes linger on the corporeal surfaces that fill the screen. With these skinscapes, the close-ups of the father and son’s bodies register their intimacy, as well as the muscularity of their silhouettes (which is similarly emphasised later in the film). This scene exemplifies vividly the family trilogy’s play between the immediate and the mediated. It is vibrantly sensual and immerses the audience in the bodily experience of the characters. Yet, as Szaniawski pointed out, it is “verging on abstraction through close-ups and distortions” (2014, 193). The apparent attempt at creating haptic immediacy

3 The ambivalent sensual and erotic charge of the film evoked contrasting responses from the critics: Iampolski, for example, dismisses the reading of the film as homoerotic (2011, 116), while Szaniawski points that Sokurov’s previous films feature strongly sexualised representations of beautiful male bodies (2014, 185–187).

4 The proximity of the camera to the bodies of the father and son is additionally emphasised by evoking breath. For Quinlivan, “hearing the ‘grain’ of a breathing body posits a dimension of breathing visuality informed specifically through sound and its haptic implication” (2012, 137). To foreground breath is to engage in intimacy, to recall the trace of the material object on screen and to “offer a profound sense of the palpability of the body” (Quinlivan 2012, 139).

is connected with conspicuous artificiality of this scene, which points to the presence of the medium.

*Father and Son* considers the surface of the body not only as the site of sensations, but also as a cover, its appearance belying the condition of that which is beneath. This use of medical images revealing the bodily interior – an x-ray and an anatomical poster [Fig. 3] – can be considered in terms of remediation, “representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 45). Here cinema enters into a dialogue with medical science, but the awareness of the original scientific discourse is retained. Medicine – with its focus on measuring and regulating (cf. Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*) – understands an individual as primarily a material and biological entity. Under the auspices of science, the human body is turned into a biological specimen and investigated in the same way as an object of any other scientific observation; in Leder’s words: “the human body, while perhaps unusual in its complexity, is taken as essentially no different from any other physical object” (1990, 5). By introducing medical elements, *Father and Son* comments on the bodies of the characters from the perspective of medicine.

Consider, for example, the scene when Alexei returns home from the military academy and finds an x-ray of his father’s ribcage. The medical photograph is first presented in close-up, the hand of the son slowly, almost tenderly travelling across its surface: the screen is filled with a black and white image of the corporeal interior. The film then cuts to his blurred portrait shot in soft focus. The camera briefly dwells upon the father’s silhouette as it “appears behind him [Alexei], ghostlike, more a hazy reflection of Aleksei’s inner thoughts than a concrete figure” (Alaniz 2010, 297). It then quickly returns to an examination of the son’s expression that changes from a smile to a distressed frown as he investigates the Roentgen representation. This time the face of the son is filmed through the x-ray which softens it even more: at this point the image is not clear – it is blurred and partially hidden in the shadow. “It’s your portrait,” explains Alexei to his parent, “it’s still a photograph. Just a little more revealing. You’re not hiding behind clothes...nor your muscles.” The son, who studies medicine as a part of his course, is capable of reading the photo, yet refrains from discussing it with his father.

As the hand of the son moves slowly across the surface of the radiographic photograph, almost caressing it, the film juxtaposes the exterior of the body with its interior. This close-up of the hand, with its focus on human skin and the act of touching, echoes the emotional overtones and intimacy of the opening scene. Additionally, the strong stylisation of this fragment – it is filmed through soft

lenses with subtle hues – adds a personal and artistic touch to the image created in the detached and objective context of medical analysis.

X-ray images denote certain impersonal (that is, medical) realities of the body. By penetrating the skin and unveiling the viscera, medical imaging technologies, such as Roentgen rays, offer views that are unavailable to the naked eye. Skin ceases to be the boundary of the visible, the gaze of the observer is able to reach deeper, “the border of the self is no longer the skin, the shape of the body no longer just the outline in the mirror, and the story of an individual body no longer just an autobiography” (Helman 1991, 99). In *Father and Son* the x-ray creates a more comprehensive biography of the individual by adding yet another dimension. While photos shown later in the film and the dialogues throughout characterise the father and son (the history of their relationship and the father’s war experiences), the x-ray conveys information about the father’s war injury and reveals a mystery hidden within a seemingly healthy body.

Another comment on the medical perception of the body can be found in a scene which follows a game of football between the father and son. Alexei – pictured in medium close-up - is shown standing almost still between the spread arms of a painted figure in the background. This image is of a flayed human form portraying a gymnast on rings, his skin removed in order to demonstrate the anatomical position of muscles. The son smiles, appearing lost in his thoughts, his face lit by soft hues of sunlight as he listens to his father calling his name. The camera moves slightly around the Alexei’s head, revealing more of the écorché figure and then, abandoning it, follows him as he walks around the apartment. Again, this scene is filmed through soft lenses and sepia filters, shadows and light playing within the image.

This scene points to early anatomical drawings and their distinctive aesthetic take on medicine. With a complete human face (as the locus of the self), a stylized pose, and a prop (the rings, which place the body in context), the picture of the flayed figure appeals to the imagination of the lay audience. Anatomical drawings dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century – the most significant examples of which were created by Andreas Vesalius, Charles Estienne and Juan Valverde de Amusco – intertwine the scientific (distanced and objective) with the artistic (painterly and stylised) (Benthien 2002). In such depictions, bodies demonstrating certain aspects of human anatomy frequently assume the poses of classical sculptures, and are presented against the background of a landscape, or supplied with a prop (Rifkin, Ackerman and Folkenberg 2006, 16). These images were designed to correlate the human body as it appears every day and the human anatomy within.



In *Father and Son*, the scene presenting Alexei exercising on the rings draws parallels between the anatomical image of the flayed figure and the son's body, as both are portrayed in the same position. This is also another way the film underscores the perfect physical form of the son. The x-ray, in turn, is similarly associated with the hidden depths of his father's body. Through the introduction of the medical realism, the film examines the characters from yet another angle – that of scientific, quantifying medical analysis; the focus is on the physical-biological.

*Father and Son* accentuates the stylised and the constructed through the use of colours, light, soft focus as well as distorting lenses. However, the manipulations of the image highlight the physicality of characters. Moreover, the film juxtaposes the body caught in haptic expression with that pictured with scientific detachment; through immersion in the bodily experience, particularly strong in the opening scene, the second instalment of the family trilogy film fulfils Bolter and Grusin's "logic of immediacy" (1999, 5). The penetration of the inside and outside, as well as the juxtaposition of the haptic and the medical, calls attention to the material and biological dimension of the human body and thus emphasises the trace of the physical presence on screen.

## ***Alexandra***

Continuing the military theme of *Father and Son*, this time in a Russian army camp in Chechnya, *Alexandra* sketches a portrait of a grandmother (Galina Vishnevskaya) who visits her grandson, Denis (Vasily Shevtsov), a captain in the Russian army. The elderly woman travels together with a group of military men and stays with them in a camp. *Alexandra* extends the trilogy's preoccupation with family ties, but is less concerned with myth and contains fewer intermedial references than the previous films. As Szaniawski notes, "it certainly boasts the most transparent, 'televisual' style of *mise-en-scène* and editing in his [Sokurov's] corpus, and is very 'realistic' in every other aspect: shot on location, with real props and costumes." (2014, 242). Indeed, the mediated is here less conspicuous, but still present: *Alexandra's* employment of a limited palette of desaturated greens, greys and yellows is strengthened by the use of filters. Also, in contrast to previous parts of the family trilogy, this film is situated in a definite socio-political context and can be read as a comment on the Chechen war (Szaniawski 2014, 241–2). Additionally, by exploring materiality and by offering vivid depictions of the landscape, objects and human bodies interpreted through multiple senses, *Alexandra* lends greater immediacy to the cinematic experience.

The final instalment of Sokurov's family trilogy begins with a sequence presenting Alexandra's body from different angles. She is portrayed in medium close-up from the back (she sits inside a bus, her hair pinned in a bun), the camera pans down to focus on her feet (as she leaves the bus), it shows her from the front (she examines her surroundings) and then moves slightly around the character. Finally, a zoom out reveals her whole figure: she stands against the background of a desolate landscape, looking slightly lost. With its insistent gaze, the camera examines Alexandra's body from different angles and proximities.

In the next scene Alexandra, accompanied by a few soldiers, walks to a train station. She is greeted by men in military uniforms entering the carriage: the camera is fixed on the woman's face while the recruits only flash by as they pass. After the young men assume their places, the camera scans their features: we watch similar bodies, in the same uniforms and with an identically organised sets of activities. The soldiers stare at Alexandra emphasising her incongruence. This part of the family trilogy is founded on contrasts: the elderly titular character is compared with the young soldiers; her wrinkled, dry skin is contrasted with their sweaty muscles. The film juxtaposes the individual and the group, youth and maturity, women and men. [Fig. 4.] This series of opposing pairs calls attention to the physical properties of the main character's body.

As Donaldson claims, "some films are prominently textured, featuring elements of clothing, environment and bodies that appeal to our tactile sense" (2014, 1). *Alexandra* is one of those densely textured films. Its narrow colour range calls attention to the textures of objects (steel, wool, wood, rubber), bodies (skin) and landscape (dry and sandy). Rough surfaces clash with smooth ones, slick and glossy with coarse and dusty. Alexandra has ample opportunity to investigate the space in close proximity. After the first night spent in the army camp, she wakes up in bright daylight and notices a man curled on the bed on the other side of the room. He is asleep which gives the woman a chance to examine his body and his belongings. The camera assumes her point of view and offers close-ups of the objects she investigates: a pair of boots and socks along with a military uniform. As Alexandra leans over her sleeping grandson; she focuses on the head and arms of the soldier. Her gaze slowly moves down to Denis's bruised feet. This scene pays particular attention to the conspicuous textures: the uneven surface of the unpolished wooden floor, mud on the leather boots, the roughness of his woollen socks and military uniform fabric.

Correspondingly, Alexandra examines objects soldiers interact with; the camera mimics her gaze through persistently repeated close-ups registering "haptically

charged surfaces” (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 124). The film explores military vehicles and weapons: the metal of tanks and cars – greasy and glistening just like the skin of soldiers – and the rubber of the tires. In a scene inside a tank, Alexandra is surrounded by steel, cables and rubber; these are slowly investigated at intimate proximity. When the soldiers clean their weapons, the camera observes the clash of textures – those of oil and stone – and examines the rough texture of a cloth presented against a background of unpolished wood. Here, the shiny, greasy surfaces of guns collide with that of leather and wood.

As Balázs notes, “the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail” (2010, 38). In Doane’s words, the close-up “supports the cinema’s aspiration to be the vehicle of presence” (2003, 93). Through frequent use of tactile close-ups, texture in *Alexandra* becomes central to the viewer’s experience. Attention to textures enriches the film in order to heighten awareness of the materiality of the presented world.

As a newcomer and outsider, the titular character explores new and unfamiliar places with very acutely tuned senses, particularly touch and smell. Although the final instalment of family trilogy is set in the masculine domain of the overtly detached army camp the film features numerous moments presenting – or alluding to – touch. In one of them, the grandmother begins unbraiding her hair and Denis helps her. In two repeated, almost identical scenes, the camera closes in on his hands and follows the movements of his fingers in extreme close-up as they play with the woman’s hair. The image, composed of hair and skin against a background of textiles, fills the screen. The focus, again, is on the textures: of Alexandra’s dry hair, her dress, and that of the rough hands of Denis. After a while, when the haptic returns to the optical, we can see the woman in the embrace of her grandson. A few moments later, following an intimate conversation, Denis combs and plaits Alexandra’s hair. As the grandmother and grandson recall tactile memories from the soldier’s childhood, he repeats a ritual from when he was a little boy.

In her meditations on film’s power to call on senses other than vision and hearing, Marks considers cinema’s capacity to appeal to touch. For Marks, “the vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes” (2000, xi). Tactile vision imitates touch, or rather, constitutes a certain attempt at evoking traces of the tactile. The gaze “moves along the surface of the object” (Marks 2000, xiii), thus, as a viewer, one is (figuratively) “touching a film with one’s eyes” (2000, xi). In Sokurov’s film, close-ups of contrasting textures – the dry skin of Alexandra and the young shiny skin of Denis – encourage the vision

to linger on the surface of the characters' bodies. Additionally, the depictions of the characters immersed in tactile experiences index physical and emotional proximity and appeal to the memory of the sensation (Marks 2000, 113). This evocation of touch and textures captures not only the closeness, but also emphasises the on-screen trace of the physical.

Moreover, *Alexandra* pays ample attention to olfactory sensations in the army camp. Military life is characterised by a variety of smells: of male bodies, weapons, tents, wooden structures, machines, military vehicles and food. The titular character is immersed in odours that are new to her and, as a visitor, she perceives them more intensely. Inside the tank that Denis shows to her, she remarks: "It smells." "It's the guns, the iron, the men. You'll get used to it," replies her grandson. In another of her excursions, the woman comes upon a sentry post and encounters two soldiers. They reluctantly allow her to sit down in their hut: "It stinks of dog in here," warns one of the soldiers. "It always smells of something here. I am getting used to it," answers Alexandra. The act of smelling features next to the experience of touch in a gentle encounter between Alexandra and her grandson. Denis smells his grandmother's hair in order to evoke memories from his childhood.

Through her references to the soldiers' heat-oppressed and sweaty bodies we are constantly reminded that they are not indurate.

"You can wash your clothes," she states when a soldier helps her leave the train, and upon meeting Denis for the first time since her arrival, she jokingly comments: "You're all sweaty! Where are your manners?" Such comments make us aware that this setting should be understood also through the sense of smell; the film suggests the haptic (olfactory) qualities of the images. Odours enhance the experience and understanding of the on-screen space. This resonates with Marks's statement that "haptic visuality inspires an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision and must be approached through other senses – which are not literally available in cinema" (2000, 191).

With the opening scene exploring the body of the main character from different angles and proximities – and placing it firmly both within a clear socio-political context and in contrast to other bodies – *Alexandra* establishes itself as a film preoccupied with the material. Such an approach is strengthened by the film's investigation of the proximal senses of touch and smell as well as contemplating details and conspicuous textures via the close-ups of the camera. *Alexandra* encourages spectators to "almost touch" the places its central character explores contributing to a heightened illusion of the physicality of the presented world and evokes de Luca's "sensory realism" (2014, 1).

## Alexander Sokurov's Family Trilogy: Self-Conscious Stylization and the "Reality Effect"

Sokurov's family trilogy juxtaposes representations of what de Luca calls "realities highlighted in their sensory, phenomenal and material plenitude" (2014, 11) with strong effects of mediation and remediation. In the case of *Mother and Son* – a cinematic experiment bearing strong references to painting – the strong stylisation is distancing, however, the final close-up draws attention to the physical properties of the represented bodies. *Father and Son*, in turn, enters the dialogue with medicine; through the employment of haptic images and medical appropriations, the film focuses on the sensual along with the biological. Set within the clear socio-political context, *Alexandra* draws attention to the multi-sensory aspects of the presented world, especially through references to touch and smell. Viewed together, these films create what could be interpreted as an orchestrated search for the trace of the material in cinema.

As Peucker states, "the film image itself is both material and referential, a fusion of art and the real" (2007, 1). *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son*, and *Alexandra* consciously employ techniques underscoring the artificial and those that strengthen the 'real.' Additionally, as a result of meditative pace of these films "narrative interaction is dissolved in favour of sensory experience and aesthetic apprehension" (de Luca 2014, 10); they invite to contemplate the images presented on screen. Both distancing and intimate, the family trilogy brings the viewer closer to the presented worlds and highlights the awareness of the medium. In all three films, however, the conspicuous stylisation amounts to the intensification of the impression of the physical world represented on screen.

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## Figures

**Figure 1.** Alexander Sokurov: *Mother and Son* (1997).

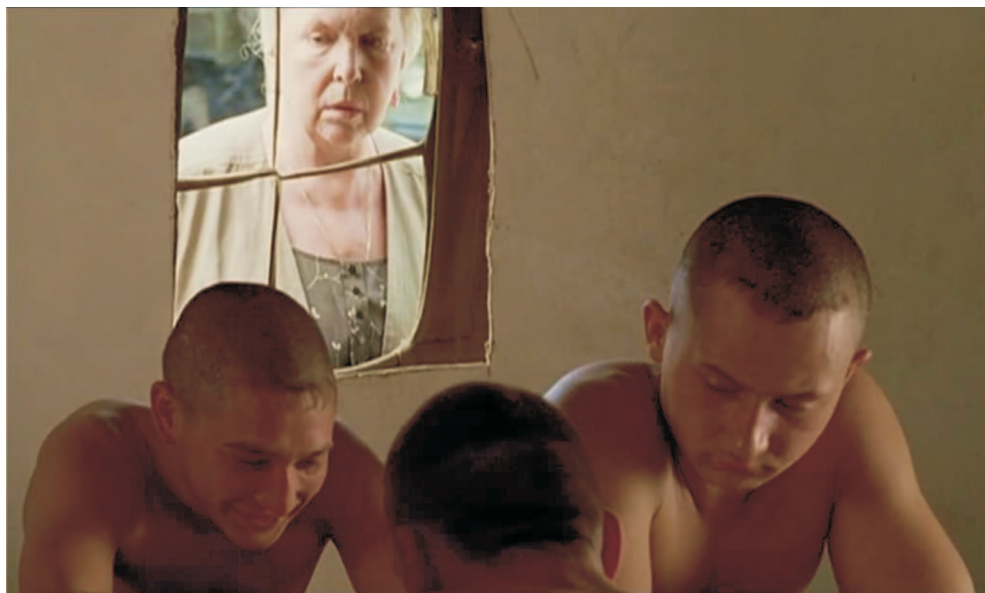


Figures 2–3. Alexander Sokurov: *Father and Son* (2003).





**Figure 4.** Alexander Sokurov: *Alexandra* (2007).







# Pictorial Real, Historical Intermedial. Digital Aesthetics and the Representation of History in Eric Rohmer's *The Lady and the Duke*

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**Abstract.** In *The Lady and the Duke* (2001), Eric Rohmer provides an unusual and “conservative” account of the French Revolution by recurring to classical and yet “revolutionary” means. The interpolation between painting and film produces a visual surface which pursues a paradoxical effect of immediacy and verisimilitude. At the same time though, it underscores the represented nature of the images in a complex dynamic of “reality effect” and critical meta-discourse. The aim of this paper is the analysis of the main discursive strategies deployed by the film to disclose an intermedial effectiveness in the light of its original digital aesthetics. Furthermore, it focuses on the problematic relationship between image and reality, deliberately addressed by Rohmer through the dichotomy simulation/illusion. Finally, drawing on the works of Louis Marin, it deals with the representation of history and the related ideology, in order to point out the film’s paradoxical nature, caught in an undecidability between past and present.

**Keywords:** Eric Rohmer, simulation, illusion, history and discourse, intermediality, *tableau vivant*.

The representation of the past is one of the domains, where the improvement of new technologies can effectively disclose its power in fulfilling our “thirst for reality.” No more cardboard architectures nor polystyrene stones: virtual environments and motion capture succeed nowadays in conveying a truly believable reconstruction of distant times and worlds. In the last few years though, a different strategy has emerged producing a thread of intermedial discourses, which view history through its representations more than through its mere events. Many reasons can be adduced to explain this – economic, aesthetical, ideological – but perhaps the most important is the historicization of the “time of mechanical reproducibility” of the image. In the turn towards its “technical producibility,” the cine-photographic image wholly becomes a

historical witness, paradoxically exploiting its (lost) indexicality, what Roland Barthes defines the “emanation of the referent” (1981, 80), or, with a formula better conveying a historical concern: *ça-a-été*.

But what if the reconstructed events took place before the age of mechanical reproducibility? Can painting play such a testimonial role within the filmic text? And if so, what space of the real do cinema and painting manage to construct, especially when their relation underscores “film’s heterogeneity,” as in the *tableau vivant* (Peucker 2007, 31)? What relation with the world does this strange hybrid disclose? What sort of testimonial discourse does their combination produce?

I will tackle these issues by analysing Eric Rohmer’s *The Lady and the Duke* (*L’anglaise et le duc*, 2001), in order to outline the specific digital aesthetics deployed through a particular interplay between *simulation* and *illusion*, to conclude with some remarks about the representation of history and its ideology. Here, I argue, the interpolation between painting and cinema produces a visual surface tending to gain in verisimilitude, but at the same time highlighting the represented nature of the images, in a complex dynamic of “reality effect” and critical meta-discourse.<sup>1</sup> This dynamic partially recalls the double logic of remediation involving the concepts of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy* – as proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin – which lead on the one hand to “the transparent presentation of the real” and on the other hand to “the enjoyment of opacity of media themselves” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 21). Or, tracing back a little further, it is also possible to make reference to Walter Benjamin’s claim about the “equipment free aspect of reality” fostered by cinema (1969): that is the curious dialectic between, on the one hand, “the production of mechanical images, whose illusion is to be free of technological artifice” and, on the other hand, the inspiration for “the utopian longing for a reality free of technological mediation” (Rodowick 2001, 39).

This convergence has a particular name in the present time: transparency. According to the widespread use of this word, we can state – following Byung-Chul Han (2015) – that the ideology it produces is the hallmark of our society, with deep aesthetical and political implications. Through a close analysis of the filmic multiple layers, this paper will attempt to put into question such a concept,

1 Ágnes Pethő has addressed this very issue by analyzing Jean-Luc Godard’s, Agnès Varda’s and Louis Guerin’s works. Her analysis highlights the specific self-reflexive dimension of these films that, far beyond any playful attitude, propose a thorough reflection about topics such as memory, knowledge, and the present condition of cinema itself (Pethő 2009). However, as I will try to show, Rohmer’s work pursues a slightly different strategy, whose original mechanisms is the main concern of this paper.

eventually to sketch few conclusions about the strategies of representation of history from a strictly visual point of view.

## Pictorial Real and Historical Intermedial

At the age of 81, Eric Rohmer decides to confront himself for the first time with the digital technology to represent the quintessential event of French history, the Revolution and the beheading of Louis XVI. The plot is based on the diary of Grace Elliot, the Great Lady, and depicts the Age of Terror, lasting from 1790 and 1793. He focuses on Grace's friendly relationship with the Prince Philip, Duke of Orleans, and their different visions of the revolutionary process: whereas the hopes and illusions of the Duke are soon frustrated by Robespierre's taking of power, the Lady's worst premonitions come true. With the killing of the king all the symbolic boundaries shatter and all the aristocrats are endangered, included those having supported the revolution since then. The fall of Robespierre and the end of Terror establish a new order, but it is too late: in the meantime, the Duke has been beheaded. Once freed from imprisonment, Grace flees to England, her home country, never coming back to France any more. This simple plot finds a resonance in the *mise-en-scène*: twelve tableaux inspired by French genre painting represent the historical scenario of Eighteenth Century Paris, a steady and immutable plan on which the actions of the characters take place [Fig. 1]. The shots filmed in a studio with a green screen are digitally superimposed on the corresponding live view, controlling the conformity of gestures and settings. On the other hand, the interiors are completely reconstructed: these are mostly small spaces not allowing the actors or the camera a great freedom of movement, overtly stressing the tableau-effect [Fig. 2].

Keeping his stylistic features and his interest for the staging of History, as attested in works such as *The Marquise of O* (*Die Marquise von O...*, 1976) and *Perceval* (*Perceval le Gallois*, 1978), the French director thus provides an unusual and "conservative" account of the Revolution by recurring to classical and yet "revolutionary" means. Somehow, *The Lady and the Duke* seems to reach the highest point of Rohmer's idea of cinema as a continuation and a synthesis of the other arts, able to renew their lost classicism (Vancheri 2007, 55).<sup>2</sup> However, this film remains an isolated episode in his filmography, which will conclude ten years later with a "primitive" – in strictly aesthetical terms – work, *The Romance*

2 This Hegelian conception evidently recalls Eisenstein's theoretical proposal as formulated in *Nonindifferent Nature: Film and the Structure of Things* (1988).

of *Astrea and Celadon* (*Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, 2007), trying to trace back to an originary time, both visual and historical.

The attempt to “accord” the time of the enunciation with the time of the enunciated, the representation with the represented, is what seems to lie at the basis of *The Lady and the Duke*. Rohmer himself indeed declares that the use of painted backgrounds works for a search for verisimilitude – that is, this very accord, we may say – which contemporary Paris is not able to supply any more. The impression of reality here does not affect the relationship between the film and its spectator, nor does it concern its ontological bound with the world, but rather it looks totally inscribed within the space of the representation. The link between cinema and painting is therefore developed in two directions. On the one hand, we can point out the creation of a pictorial environment in the interiors, which overlays cinema with painting. This is a pictorial effect that allows one medium (namely cinema) to encapsulate certain features of pertinence taken from another one (namely, painting); on the other hand, in the exteriors we can identify a juxtaposition of the two expressive systems in order to give birth to an intermedial synthesis.<sup>3</sup> In particular, this latter strategy enables cinema to fulfil a whole *sample* from painting (beyond the simple quotation of a single picture into one film), and at the same time it *inserts* the film into the pictures, therefore animating the painting’s immobile surface and providing it with an own temporality.<sup>4</sup>

Between these two poles, the former classical and the latter more original, in the coach sequences we can also detect a third position that is able to put into relation interiors and exteriors and their respective strategies. On a functional level, the coach combines the antithetical features of inside and outside, thus becoming an element of junction between two spatial universes that the film depicts as ontologically different: we can define them respectively as *pictorial*

3 Irina O. Rajewsky defines these two strategies respectively as “intermedial references” and “media combination” (Rajewsky 2005, 51–53). Whereas the former is very common in cinema (we can recall Bazin’s defense of a “mixed cinema”), the latter is more problematic, at least in Rohmer’s film: I will develop this issue in the next pages.

4 By analyzing the functions of library pictures in cinema, Marco Dinoi proposes an empirical taxonomy of the traces that the historical past could leave within the filmic text. Dinoi describes three types of this relationship: the *sample*, the *insert*, and the *graft*. The sample is the presence of an object belonging to extra-textual reality within the filmic text, as such supposed to be recognizable by the spectator. It is the concept of quotation in the narrow sense and it encompasses any media, from newspapers to films. The insert is a manipulation by filmic text of facts or events directly referable to official history; it discharges a metalinguistic function, especially when it connects texts related to different media, showing the difference among production systems. The graft – maybe the more frequent type – concerns every, more or less accurate scenic reconstruction of extra-textual objects, subjected to the economy of the diegetic mechanism (Dinoi 2008, 176).

*real* and as *historical intermedial*. Painting is the surface of inscription of the narrated events that surrounds the space of the real, its external limits, but also its frame of meaning. To move from one universe to another, both the Duke and the Lady have to first operate a “framing” – or a *mise-en-cadre* – of themselves, thus turning into real *tableaux-vivants* [Fig. 3]. And yet, if the *tableau vivant* is classically defined as the “staging of well-known paintings by human performers holding a pose” (Peucker 2007, 30), producing a tension towards movement and three-dimensionality,<sup>5</sup> in this case we assist to an opposite process, that is the transformation of a human performer into an image, defined as such by a frame, thus creating a tension towards stillness and two-dimensionality.

## Simulation and Illusion: Digital Aesthetics

It is through this framing process that *The Lady and the Duke* manages to share features belonging to monadic realities. The figure of the monad has been extensively used to describe virtual environments. According to Gilles Deleuze, the monad is the autonomy of the interior, an interior without exterior, which, nevertheless, has a correlated exterior, one without interior. It has no empty holes but just different densities of matter: where the rarefaction is at the maximum level, there are windows and doors, exclusively opening onto the outside or from the outside (Deleuze 1992). *The Lady and the Duke* perfectly represents the peculiar nature of the monad. The exteriors propose a painted historical world, which does not presume any out-of-field: each tableau is a sort of virtual theatrical scene whose principle is rooted in a logic of *simulation*, granting an interaction between characters and scene [Fig. 4]. In contrast to this, the interiors are real environments, whose relation with a real outside is completely broken. From the few windows, only a painted world can be perceived, a subtle inversion of Western painting’s fundamental postulate: *the window on the world is a picture*. However, one detail reshapes this framework: the walls of the rooms are decorated in *trompe-l’oeil*. This increases the tableau-effect provided by the diegetic choices, such as the minimal camera movements, the gestural linearity of the characters, and the chromatic uniformity, which flattens the depth of field. Thus, this is another coherent world with no out-of-field, whose principle is yet rooted in a logic of *illusion*.

Both strategies seem to tend towards a common aim, i.e. the creation of a hybrid representation, whose core is the anachronism as synthesis of different

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the famous coloured scenes in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *La ricotta* (1963).

times.<sup>6</sup> This anachronistic and intermedial tension is effectively staged at the very beginning of the film. There, a series of still images works as a background for the voice over of an external narrator providing information in the past tense. The shifting from exteriors to interiors creates an illusion of material continuity between the spaces depicted: a painted world seems to unfold in front of our eyes creating the illusion of contemporaneity with fictional time. But when the story begins, transforming the past tense into a historical present tense through the indication of the date in which the events take place, the representation “comes to life,” making us rethink our belief in the images just shown and in their temporal regime. This illusory strategy is not the result of a playful attitude; rather, it constructs the possibility for an account of the past to be disclosed by a specific aesthetic discourse.

Two episodes taken from the travelling coach push the limit of this analysis a little further. In the coach, the Lady is literally framed by the window, while behind her the other window frames the landscape. This squared structure deploys a succession of planes which define the out-of-field of the real as a painted world: an intermedial universe plunged into an anachronistic temporality. But suddenly something happens to shatter the symbolic surface which detaches the plane of the represented from the plane of the representation [Fig. 5]. From the painted historical background, two figures break into the space of the real, somehow reminding us the famous sequence of Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), where the characters move between the two sides of the screen. But in Rohmer’s film, as we have seen, the complexity of its intermedial nature implies the negation of the limits between levels of representation, introducing a broader reflection involving different expressive devices, different regimes of time, different discursive strategies.<sup>7</sup> A solution that makes superficiality and depth, transitivity and intransitivity, transparency and opacity collapse, eventually questioning the opposition between simulation and illusion.<sup>8</sup>

In this way Rohmer points out the very contradictory tangle at the basis of the digital image in the present time: he exploits its technological potential for *representing* a virtual environment, which is nevertheless deliberately analogical. This results in a sort of “handcrafted digital landscape,” where

6 On this topic, see Didi-Huberman (2005).

7 Similar remarks in Pethő (2009, 60).

8 Moreover, drawing on Luc Vancheri’s survey about cinema and painting (2007), this work with different representational layers encompasses three modalities of this elective relationship: the passage (e.g. the continuity between two different media), the sharing (e.g. the specific painting within the filmic image) and the presence (e.g. cinema’s fascination for its illustrious ancestors).



the idea of intaglio or worked matter, peculiar of an analogical and modernist aesthetic (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 38; Pethő 2009, 50) is not only kept but even highlighted. Otherwise said, there is a separation between ontological dimension and production of meaning, characterizing the film at the same time as wholly digital and wholly analogical.

## **The Representation of History**

At the beginning of this paper, I have posed the question whether painting can provide information about historical events or not. French theoretician Louis Marin has provided a convincingly positive answer, transposing onto the iconic enunciation the concepts of history and discourse proposed by Émile Benveniste. In short, we can say that historical enunciation is the account of past events not implying the direct intervention of a speaker (the events seem to narrate themselves), whereas discourse is marked by the presence of a speaker who attempts to influence a listener, determining the contemporaneity of the utterance and the instance of enunciation (Marin 1995; Benveniste 1971). In the former, there is a negation of the instance of the enunciation, which seems not to address a listener, a reader or a beholder directly; in the latter, two subjects share a dialogical horizon implying their simultaneous presence within the space created by the discourse.

In *The Lady and the Duke*, the creation of twelve tableaux inspired by French genre painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century assigns the role of historical witness to painting: no authorship (an anonymous – or at least not directly recognizable – source), no subjectivity (negation of enunciation), realism (stylistic naturalism), that is, transparency and truth of the historical narrative. The verbal enunciation in the film, both written and oral, serve the same aim. At the very beginning the heterodiegetic narrator proposes a short contextualization in the past tense referring to actual historical facts. Through a temporal reference (namely, the frame stating “1790”) the narration then shifts to a historical present, exploiting the role of eye-witness of Grace Elliot, whose diary is the main source for the narrative. This develops a continuous dialectic between effects creating distance and presence, and which contribute to the testimonial effectiveness of the film. But this surface of transparency is questioned by episodes and recurring details that produce opacity. In particular, three moments could be recalled to show this process.

Within the initial succession of still images, the two main characters are introduced by their portrait hung on a wall [Figs. 6–7]; the contextualized setting,

the historical reference and the pictorial impression suggest their value as a document, that is, a sample taken from the past, except revealing their present nature as the actors appear in a scene. Through this deceit the temporal relations are thus overturned, questioning the nature of the links of the representation with the represented. The central scene – the beheading of Louis XVI – pushes this opacification a step further. On a terrace, the Lady and her maid anxiously wait for the main event of the Revolution, hoping it could eventually not happen. However, they assume antithetical positions, the maid by looking with a telescope towards the painted background, the Lady by turning her head and refusing to watch [Figs. 8–9]. In the symbolic centre of the narration, the encounter of private memory and historical fact does not take place. The thematization of the different attitudes towards the regicide (the will to watch and the will not to watch) turns into an impossibility to watch for the spectator: someone is looking on behalf of us but she is not our delegate within the diegesis. We missed the show, what Michel Foucault called in a chapter of his book, *Discipline and Punish* (1979) the “spectacle of the scaffold:” the scene of the event is literally too far.

In both cases the intermedial editing is in charge of defining the limits of the real that we as spectators have access to. This epistemic relation with the historical reconstruction is filtered by the figure of Grace Elliot. In the guise of the painted portrait at the beginning, she invites us into a space where history and memory coincide through “an interpellation”<sup>9</sup> implying a dialogic contemporaneity of the screen’s two sides (Casetti 1999, 23); her refusal to watch the king’s beheading instead expels us from the space of the history, showing its impossible coincidence with memory. This leads us to the third moment, the very last sequence [Figs. 10–11]. There, a writing stating the Duke’s death in the past tense is superimposed on his painted portrait: the history is definitively disjointed from memory. The objective value of the written word is for the first time not associated with excerpts from the diary, but assumes the same function of the heterodiegetical narrator in the beginning. Whereas the Duke remains in the history, the Lady moves into the domain of memory and then of discourse: her final appearance states another contemporaneity with the spectator but now in the present tense. Illusions preside over the representation no more: the theatrical ending – a filmic place that functions as an enunciative sign, allowing subjectivity to emerge within the surface of the discourse (Metz 2016, 11) – provides a second-degree frame which turns the narrated world marked by a transitive transparency into a commented world characterized by a reflexive opacity (Ricoeur 1986, 68).

9 Casetti’s term (cf. 1999, 48–49).

## A Paradoxical Ideology?

The analysis presented here has aimed to outline the peculiar intermedial play presiding over the space of the filmic discourse. By exploiting old means within a new setting, *The Lady and the Duke* thus seems to question the transparency and immediacy of the representation of the past through the constant enhancement of new visual technologies, challenging innovation rather than nostalgic conservation. Still, the choice of staging a certain historical event with a specific and unusual point of view raises some questions and controversial issues. To this end, in this last section I will try to deepen the analysis so far proposed with further remarks involving both the narrative and figurative planes.

To begin with, the historical horizon of the story has to be taken into consideration. In fact, Rohmer does not deal with the whole revolutionary process, but he focuses only on the central part of it. By doing so, the beginning and the end of the Revolution are not encompassed within the space of the narration: the taking of the Bastille – the other main symbolic event together with the beheading of the king – is, for instance, never mentioned by the plot. This choice seems to soften the critical discourse proposed by the film, which actually does not involve the ideological basis inspiring the French Revolution, but rather focuses on the alleged degeneration of its principles. Here comes a second controversial point: this degeneration seems to lead directly to the “taking of power” of the people of Paris. As long as the Revolution was confined within institutional limits – Rohmer seems to claim – its disruptive force was under control and therefore the accord between ideas and deeds was kept. Not by chance, Robespierre is depicted as a radical yet reasonable figure, who appears to be overwhelmed by the angry stubbornness of the other revolutionaries.

This superficial observation is reinforced by the intertextual mechanism<sup>10</sup> and the topological distribution of values. As a matter of fact, the interiors and exteriors belong to different domains: the former to culture, the latter to nature. Every scene happening in the city streets or in the countryside deals with a state of danger dominated by passions, what Deleuze would call an “originary world” (1986), whereas every interior represents a kind of sanctuary, a space of inviolability where reason prevails, also the revolutionary one. This is particularly evident in the coach sequences. I have already pointed out how the

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10 By resorting to the term “intertextuality,” I am suggesting that this concept can better underscore the specific semantic aspect of an intermedial chain; about this distinction, see also Rajewsky (2005).

coach assumes the antithetical features of inside and outside, depicted by the film as ontologically different: that is, what I have named pictorial real and historical intermedial. Beside a connective function, the coach also fulfils a second task, preserving the Lady from the blind and bloody desire embodied by the people. This immunizing function clearly recalls the most famous coach in the history of cinema, John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939); there we have the Indians, here the sans-culottes: in both cases, there is a challenge between reason and irrational drive, culture and nature. More than sixty years later, the effectiveness of the coach in preserving the passengers from the contact with the otherness radically changes: Ford's optimistic and organic view is replaced by Rohmer's disillusion about the heritage of Enlightenment.

According to Daniele Dottorini (2004), there is however another deep intertextual reference: that is, Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1954). Rossellini's film was a real turning point for the then young critic of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, who defined it "my own way to Damascus." In particular, Dottorini suggests, what Rohmer subtly recalls in *The Lady and the Duke* is Ingrid Bergman's trembling after the encounter with an octopus taken from the sea [Fig. 13]. This unbearable vision, anticipating the ancient ritual of the tuna fishing, makes the image go beyond the limits of an ingenuous realism, deeply affecting the French director's poetics. Likewise, the head of the Princess of Lamballe exposed on a pike is shown to Grace by a sans-culotte. [Figs. 14–15.] In spite of being safely on her coach, the Lady cannot hide her feelings, starting to cry and tremble in front of such an obscene spectacle, whose force could not be endured by her gaze.

But that head is also reminiscent of another visual configuration, particularly useful for the purposes of this analysis. The beheading is a recurrent topic in the ancient mythology and has been widely represented in the history of the Western art. However, its most striking figuration was probably created by Caravaggio with his well known the *Head of Medusa* [Fig. 12], a painted shield allegedly belonging to his early period. The thematic affinity between the two heads is clear,<sup>11</sup> but once again the film's relationship to painting is not limited to a simple quotation process. As a matter of fact, Rohmer redistributes the features of Caravaggio's *Medusa*, rendering explicit what was implicit in the painting, that is, the relation with the beholder within the space of the representation. In contrast to the *Medusa*, the Princess's head is still and inexpressive: but that missing cry – so

11 Moreover, *Medusa* is a snake-headed figure, which evidently recalls the tentacles of the octopus. This detail reinforces the role of *Stromboli* as an "intercessor" between *The Lady and the Duke* and *The Head of Medusa*, even beyond Dottorini's remarks.

striking in the shield because of its expressive force – in fact migrates to the Lady’s face, showing her disgust and horror in front of such an obscenity. If we take a close look at the two facial expressions and the perspective apparatuses, we may find that the similarity of the two images is striking [Figs. 12, 15]. From a certain point of view, painting and the real definitively blur their boundaries: indeed, the pictorial quotation deeply affects the space of the real, eventually completely transforming the Lady into a tableau, even if for a brief moment.

Marin, who extensively dealt with Caravaggio’s *Medusa* in his book, *To Destroy Painting*, recalls some remarks proposed by Cesare Ripa and defines “the head of the Medusa as a symbol of the victory of reason over the senses, the natural foes of ‘virtue,’ which like [the political and] the physical enemies [in the myth of the ‘origin’] are petrified when faced with the Medusa. The head of Medusa, then, is the defensive and offensive weapon wielded by wisdom in its war against the passions” (Marin 1995, 113). It is easy to understand – according to Rohmer’s vision – why Grace turns herself into Medusa: her enemies are not her own internal passions, but rather those belonging to the external world, which flourish in the blind and bloody turmoil characterising the Terror. The apotropaic function of Medusa’s head is fulfilled by the Great Lady, the diegetic delegate and the source of the (hi)story.<sup>12</sup>

But Marin pushes his analysis even further, concluding that the *Head of Medusa* is a historical painting. How is it possible? Because this painting – Marin argues – overlaps two different moments of the history. This creates a paradoxical situation where the painting is both the shield of Perseus (Medusa is self-petrified by looking at her own reflection in the mirror/shield), and therefore it is in a never-ending present tense, and a real painting, which represents in the past tense the mythological episode in the very moment of contraction of the time of the account, that is, the beheading of Medusa. The painter remains hidden, similarly to the speaker in a historical narrative: the image seems to present itself autonomously. Can these few remarks be transposed onto Rohmer’s film?

If we agree that the Lady turns herself into a picture through an operation of *mise-en-cadre*, then the overlapping between the pictorial real and the historical

12 On this very topic, see also Brigitte Peucker, who draws on Marin’s work about Caravaggio to “focus on sculpture and painting in their relation to representational issues in Hitchcock’s films” (2007, 69) in two chapters of her book *The Material Image*. These issues primarily concern the relationship between the film and its spectator involving the construction of the gaze and the illusion of reality produced. A pivotal element in this dialectic between art and the real is the *tableau vivant*, able to elicit a corporeal and emotional response from the spectator. However, I leave aside the Lacanian reading informing Peucker’s analysis, to focus on the enunciative dimension that represents the core of Marin’s approach.

intermedial finds in this very moment its point of highest condensation. The history is nothing but some curly hair (so close to the snake-headed Medusa) in front of a *tableau vivant*, plunged into an intermedial environment as a result of two heterogeneous times. If Caravaggio – I draw on Marin’s analysis once again – disguises himself as Medusa,<sup>13</sup> Rohmer seems to recover this manoeuvre in order to instate his own vision within the space of the discourse without being recognized. And this operation of negation of the “I” of the enunciation is accomplished through figurative means, which properly configures *The Lady and the Duke* as historical cinema. But this enunciational strategy, as I have attempted to show in the previous section, is always floating and unstable because of the stratification of the surfaces of representation, which results in a paradoxical temporal regime of the images and a variable density of the enunciative relations between the film and its spectator.

As for Caravaggio’s *Medusa*, history and discourse overlap, configuring “opacity” as a main topic of Rohmer’s film, which proposes a resolutely anti-populistic version of the founding moment of European modernity and fulfils the director’s vision of cinema as a classical art (Vancheri 2007, 53). And yet, this double outcome is obtained through an avant-garde employment of new technologies: once again, a paradoxical undecidability between past and present.

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13 The French theoretician reasonably argues that the self-portrait as a beheaded character is one of the most peculiar gestures of Caravaggio’s work. In this case, the result is not only (self) satirical, but more properly it represents under pictorial means that “disguise” of the enunciation which is specific of the historical narrative (Marin 1995, 133).

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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). Historical intermedial and pictorial real.



**Figure 3.** Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). The *mise-en-cadre* of the human performer or, the “reverse” tableau vivant.





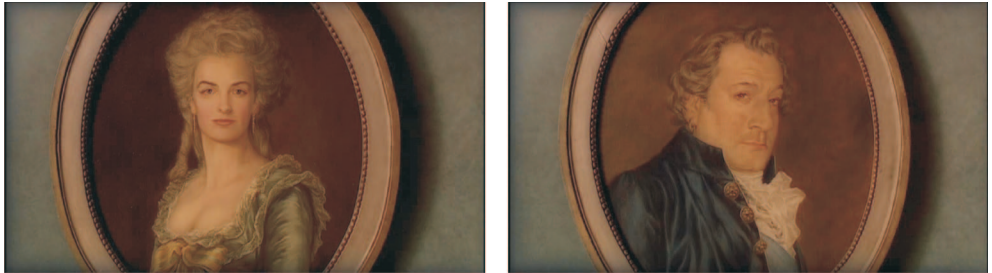
**Figure 4.** Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). The “analogical” virtual environment and the logic of simulation.



**Figure 5.** Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). Crossing the surfaces of representation.



**Figures 6–7.** Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). Painted characters.



**Figures 8–9.** Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). The king's beheading.



Figures 10–11. Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001). History and memory.



Figure 12–13. Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli* (1954). The octopus and the unbearable vision.



Figures 14–15. Eric Rohmer: *The Lady and the Duke* (2001).





# The Polaroid and the Cross. Media-Reflexivity and Allegorical Figurations in Lucian Pintilie’s *The Oak* (1992)

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the question of media reflexivity and allegorical figuration in Lucian Pintilie’s 1992 film, *The Oak*. Through a fictional narrative, the film reflects on the communist period from the historical context of the post-1989 transition strongly marked by the after-effects of dictatorship and by political, social and economic instability. By incorporating a diegetic Polaroid camera and a home movie, *The Oak* displays a reflexive preoccupation with the mediality and the socio-cultural constructedness of the image. The figurative, allegorizing tendency of the film – manifest in the subversive recontextualization of grand narratives, iconographic codes or images of art history – also foregrounds the question of cultural mediation. I argue that by displaying the non-transparency of the cinematic image and the cultural mediatedness of the “real,” the media-reflexive and allegorical-figurative discourse of the film can be regarded as a critical historical response to the social and representational crises linked to the communist era, but at the same time it may be symptomatic of the social, cultural, political anxieties of post-1989 transition.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Pintilie, *The Oak*, media reflexivity, allegory, intermediality.

In Romanian film history Lucian Pintilie’s cinematic oeuvre can be regarded as an intriguingly transitional discourse. From a historical perspective, Pintilie is among the few Romanian directors whose work extends over the period of the Ceauşescu regime and post-communism. In state socialism, within the constraints of censorship, normative cultural policy and propagandistic film production, he experimented with the possibilities of dissident, socially critical, self-reflexive

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cinema,<sup>2</sup> then, in post-communism, he reflected on the altering socio-economic, cultural, and media-historical conditions of transition. The sensitivity of his oeuvre towards both social and cinematic actualities also marks his collaboration with the directors of New Romanian Cinema.<sup>3</sup>

After the 1972 banning of his stage adaptation of Gogol's *Inspector General*, Pintilie's exile and work in France enabled an in-between perspective, a travelling gaze between East and West European cultural contexts. This is particularly noticeable in his post-1989 films that reflect on an ambivalent transition (marked by the socio-political, institutional, and economic "heritage" of state socialism) to a more democratic system and a rapid (and uncritical) opening towards capitalist structures<sup>4</sup> and the so-called Western world. Hajnal Király rightfully considers that Pintilie repeatedly adopts the somewhat self-othering "Outsider's gaze," using "Western art references – music, painting or sculpture – to ironically depict a post-communist Romanian society ignorant of individual dramas resulting from the collapse of industry, economy and infrastructure. He repeatedly thematizes institutional miscommunication, coexisting with a preference for Western cultural and civilisatoric forms without content" (Király 2016).

The in-betweenness of Pintilie's cinematic oeuvre is manifest not only in its historical and cultural aspect, but also in the aesthetics and politics of the image, in the inclination towards a quasi documentary gaze and media-reflexive practices and a more figurative, allegorizing discourse.<sup>5</sup> While under state socialism allegories and parables could function as modalities of evading censorship and even of coding "dissident" messages (as in his 1982 *Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitică?*), in Pintilie's post-1989 films allegorical figurations may be symptomatic of social and representational crisis in which narratives and images of European cultural memory are revisited within the unsettling historical actualities of the transition period.

2 As in his films *Reconstruction (Reconstituirea, 1969)* and *Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitică? (De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?, 1982)*, both of which were banned before 1989.

3 As in *The Afternoon of a Torturer (După amiaza unui tortionar, 2001)* with Cristi Puiu (as counselor, cf. <http://aarc.ro/newfilm/film/dupa-amiaza-unui-tortionar-2002>) and in *Niki and Flo (Niki Ardelean, colonel în rezervă, 2003)* with Cristi Puiu and Răzvan Rădulescu (as scriptwriters).

4 Analyzing the cultural and socio-economic context of New Romanian Cinema, Hajnal Király underlines that "[t]he rapid advent of globalization after the change of regime triggered the inauguration of 'wild' capitalist structures on a faulty institutional infrastructure" due to the lack of social and political structures and of the practice of a civil society (2015, 173).

5 The presence of media reflexivity and allegorical discourse can already be observed in Pintilie's *Reconstruction* (1969). As Gorzo argues, "[t]he behavior of some characters [...] and the backdrop against which they evolve (through its elegant indeterminateness) are characterized by a certain allegorical stylization" (2013, 6–7). For the discussion of allegorizing tendencies in Pintilie's *Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitică?* (1982), *An Unforgettable Summer (O vară de neuitat, 1994)*, *Too Late (Prea târziu, 1996)*, and *Tertium Non Datur* (2006), see Király (2010 and 2016).

*The Oak* (Balauța, 1992), a French-Romanian co-production<sup>6</sup> that marks Pintilie's directorial return in Romanian cinema after the end of the communist regime, literally performs an act of transition: through a fictional narrative, it reflects on the absurdities and traumas of the communist regime *from* the historical context of post-communism still strongly marked by the political and institutional legacy of dictatorship and by political, socio-economic and cultural instability. The protagonist of the film, the dissident Nela (played by Maia Morgenstern) seems to embody the provoking in-betweenness of Pintilie's filmic discourse: we see her carrying a Polaroid camera and – in a short scene – a funerary cross [Figs. 1–2], being figured both as an image and as a subject making and questioning images, both as a more abstract, allegorical body and as a discursively, socially uncontainable corporeality. Through adopting a photographic gaze and incorporating a diegetic Polaroid camera and a home movie, *The Oak* displays a reflexive preoccupation with the mediality and the socio-cultural constructedness of the image. The figurative, allegorizing tendency of the film – manifest in the subversive recontextualization of grand narratives and iconographic codes – also foregrounds artifice and mediation. As Ismail Xavier argues, allegory “is a signifying process most identified with the presence of mediation, with the idea of cultural artifact that requires specific frames of reference to be read, quite distant from any sense of the ‘natural’” (2004, 333). By foregrounding the non-transparency of the cinematic image and the cultural mediatedness of the “real,” the media-reflexive and the allegorical-figurative tendencies of the film “respond” to social, cultural and representational crises at a particular historical moment.

## **Performing Reflexivity through Home Movie and Polaroid**

In Pintilie's films media reflexivity involves a critical approach to the medium which is foregrounded not only as the embodiment of an apparatus, technology or code,<sup>7</sup> but also as a social practice implicating individuals, interpersonal negotiations, power relations, private and institutional contexts and modes of

6 The film is based on Ion Băieșu's novel, *The Scales* (Balauța, 1985). The censored version of the novel was published in 1985, the uncensored one in 1990. Băieșu co-scripted the film with Pintilie.

7 Cf. “A medium is not just a set of materials, an apparatus or code that ‘mediates’ between individuals. It is a complex social institution that contains individuals within it, and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces (stages, studios, easel paintings, television sets, laptop computers)” (Mitchell 2005, 213).

reception. Within this set of conditions, the technical apparatus does not merely record an intact, self-same reality, but intervenes into and constructs what counts as “real.”<sup>8</sup> In *The Oak*, the incorporation of a fictional home movie and a diegetic photo camera within the film enables a reflexive approach to the question of mediation through disturbing the transparency of the cinematic image. Discussing the broader question of intermediality, Joachim Paech highlights the disruptive function of media reflexivity, arguing that in the case of cinema the mediality of the image is exposed by the “*breaks, gaps, and intervals* of the form processes” that “refer to the media conditions of their construction” (Paech 2000, emphasis mine, K. S.). These “breaks, gaps, and intervals” are observable in various instances of montage, superimposition, or framing techniques, as well as in “appearances or traces of materiality and dispositive construction which ‘figure’ in the film” (Paech 2000).<sup>9</sup> However, the filmic discourse incorporating a photo camera and the projection of another film can be described not only through the figure of the break or gap, but also as a textural medial layeredness or fold (as it will be pointed out later).

In *The Oak*, home video and Polaroid photography<sup>10</sup> are embedded into a particular socio-historical and media historical context within diegesis: the years before the end of the communist regime. The narrative infused with macabre irony and humor evolves around the dissident, outspoken, eruptive Nela, daughter of a former colonel of the Securitate (i.e. the secret police in communism). After the death of her terminally ill father, Nela is assigned a teaching job in the heavily polluted industrial town of Copșa Mică. Following a both apocalyptic and absurd train journey, she reaches the town where she is raped by a gang, being eventually saved by Mitică, a rebellious doctor (played by Răzvan Vasilescu) in the disastrous hospital of the town. The doctor (kept under surveillance by the Securitate) is imprisoned for striking a state official, but due to his professional

8 Media reflexivity has a historically changing critical function in Pintilie’s oeuvre. Before 1989, in the context of the normative cultural policy of the totalitarian regime, cinematic reflexivity could function as a subversive act (as in *Reconstruction*) through unmasking the crisis of representation and the mechanisms of state-sanctioned propagandistic image production. After 1989, media reflexivity exposes the altered socio-cultural conditions and media practices of post-communism, for example, in *Niki and Flo*, see Sándor 2016).

9 The disruptive aspect and the critical function of media reflexivity is also underscored by András Bálint Kovács, who considers that reflexivity “creates a *hole*, [...] in the texture of the fiction through which the viewer is directly connected to the aesthetic apparatus of the fiction” (2007, 225). Reflexivity can function (especially in late modernism) not only as mere self-referentiality, but also as “a fundamental *critical approach vis-à-vis the medium* within which it is realized” (Kovács 2007, 225).

10 In the adapted novel *The Scales (Balanța)*, Ion Băieșu does not mention either home video or Polaroid. These result from Pintilie’s own intervention into the script.



fame, he is released. Nela and Mitică – after the burial of a former patient of the hospital and a carnivalesque funeral feast in the countryside – bury the ashes of Nela’s father under an old oak. The film ends with the couple witnessing how young soldiers massacre children and the rebels (or rather “desperados”<sup>11</sup>) who took them as hostages. Nela and the doctor return to the oak unsettled, bring up the possibility of having a child, and re-assert their rejection of (politically, socially) imposed normality.

According to Alex Leo Șerban, *The Oak* “unfolds by means of constant audiovisual embeddings and *mise en abymes*: home movies, Polaroid photos and reconstructed events from the past, culminating with the apocalyptic finale – itself a *mise en scène*” (Șerban qtd. in Nasta 2013, 99). The film begins with Nela and her dying father watching a home movie about a carnivalesque Christmas party from Nela’s childhood: the little girl is filmed while playing with an unloaded gun and “exterminating” the adults who play dead for the sake of the game.<sup>12</sup> [Fig. 3.] The Super 8 home video, the projector and the Polaroid camera in a fictional narrative set in the Romania of the late 1980s may recall the historical context of a political iconoclasm in which “[o]rdinary people’s possession of film cameras – just like of any other type of communication technologies – was considered a subversive act and as such, suspicious in the eyes of those in power” (Blos-Jáni 2013, 89). Due to centralized market and state control, the possession and the use of film cameras or other communication technologies was related to social and economic tactics and to socio-political status within the system (Blos-Jáni 2013). In the film, the ownership of the projector, the home movie, and the Polaroid camera (even if the latter is at times used in a reflexive, critical way) marks a privileged social and political status within the regime<sup>13</sup> (Nela’s father is a former colonel of the Securitate). These apparatuses also function as fetishized, de-contextualized components of Western consumer culture. In a frame, the Polaroid camera is somewhat didactically displayed in a “still-life” composition

11 Kaufman-Blumenfeld points out that the episode of the massacre is “based on a real, similar incident that took place near Timișoara airport” (1998, 270).

12 Dominique Nasta evokes Pintilie’s remark that these scenes originate from his having had access to Ceaușescu’s own home movies (2013, 100). In Gabriel Kosuth’s documentary about the making of *The Oak* (*Shooting [Filmare]*, 1992) Pintilie comments on the home movie scene and the girl playing little Nela as follows: “She is Zoia. This is what the relationship should look like” (Zoia is the name of Ceaușescu’s daughter).

13 It is not the photo camera itself that alludes to social privilege, but the trademark (Polaroid) absent from the official market during state socialism. Unlike film cameras, photo cameras were largely available during the 1970s and 1980s. Although photography was a “national pastime,” as Simina Bădică argues, it was also tamed into “a benign form of artistic expression” and withheld from becoming a means of social critique (2012, 45; 59).

with a Marlboro shopping bag and Kent cigarettes [Fig. 4], all iconic products of American culture and synecdoches of capitalist consumerism, circulating in socialist Romania as a kind of unofficial currency that could “buy” or allude to social, economic privileges.

The scene of the daughter and the dying father watching the farcical home movie in a suffocating, dirty apartment infused with the sublimity of non-diegetic Wagnerian music is staged as an uncanny medial and corporeal experience. The helpless, dying body of the colonel and his present de-privileged status within the system is juxtaposed with the filmic image of his youth that reenacts the iconography of power as if paraphrasing official propaganda images of the communist dictator holding children in his arms and being surrounded by his entourage. [Fig. 5.] Moreover, the scene apposes in an ambiguous intimacy the dying father, a former representative of the regime with his dissident daughter, who rejects the same regime and, as a child, playfully “kills” the father and his entourage in the home video.<sup>14</sup> The home movie is connected to an uncanny fold between the “real” and the carnivalesque play,<sup>15</sup> life and death, past and present identities, (mediated) presence and absence. The body of the dying father becomes motionless, while the absent, mediated characters are animated, alive and perform death as a role. According to Laura Mulvey, the photographic index “reaches out towards the uncanny as an effect of confusion between living and dead” (Mulvey 2006, 319), between presence and absence, past and present, here and there. In Pintilie’s film, the medial experience of watching the home movie is a continual displacement between still bodies and moving images, life and death, corporeality and technology, seeing, touching<sup>16</sup> and being touched. [Fig. 6.] In terms of media reflexivity, the film projected within the film may disclose the medial-discursive conditions and the textural quality of the moving image. Within diegesis, home movie and the presence of the projector display a paradoxically both prosthetic and intimate contact between the medium and the body. The walls of the room are patterned by moving shadows and images that expose the (im)materiality of the projected home movie (and of the main film).

14 The ambiguity of the father–daughter relationship is also summed up by the sentence Nela utters when burying her father’s ashes near the oak: “Tată bun, tată tiran, tată fricos.” (‘Good father, tyrannical father, cowardly father.’)

15 The home movie projected in the diegetic world also functions as a narrative *mise en abyme* prefiguring the merciless massacre of the children and the rebels at the end of the film. The amateur film about the familial past enters the diegetic present also through metalepsis, when a ringing doorbell seems to interrupt something both in the diegesis of the home movie and of the main film.

16 Nela is touching her dead/dying father’s hand while watching his “lively” filmic image.

The faces and the hands touching are “palpated” by the light and the shadows of the projector placed in the immediate proximity of the characters’ bodies. The fictional, carnivalesque home movie, besides pointing to former socio-political relations of privilege (and reenacting the iconography of power), becomes the archival site of private memory and the medium of a both unsettling and intimate connection between father and daughter, past and present, image and body.

Polaroid photography is foregrounded in the film both as object and as practice, and is linked to the protagonist’s perceptual, interpretive, documenting or critical acts of relating to the world. Thus, photography becomes an extension of the corporeal gaze, a prosthesis folding the technological into the corporeal and enabling a photographic vision that shapes the protagonist’s way of seeing.

The cultural and media historical particularity of the Polaroid, “the photograph of attraction,”<sup>17</sup> as Peter Buse calls it (2010, 192), has been related to its instantaneousness, to the white frame and the limited size of the shot that display the act of segmentation, to the thingness of the photo as object, as well as to its practice as a social event of picture-taking that turns the camera into a sort of social catalyst (cf. Buse 2010, 194, 202). The idiosyncrasy of the Polaroid can also be linked to its hesitant, quasi nostalgic temporality between past and present and to its volatile chromatic aspect lingering at times between the photographic and the painterly.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Oak*, Polaroid photography discloses the reflexive concern of the film with image-making itself, while the immediacy of the photos resonates with the occasionally fast-pace editing of the film. The instantaneousness of the Polaroid enables the immediate reduplication and “othering” of the “real” through the medial which inscribes a relation of similarity and difference, of (irrecoverable) presence and absence in-between the “real” and its indexical trace.<sup>19</sup> The constant use of the Polaroid camera by Nela and the frequent insertion of Polaroids into the frame impregnates the film with the awareness that the “real” is being framed, (re)constructed, mediated. On the diegetic level, the *mise en abyme* of the image within the image, frame within the frame exhibits the act of testing the difference of the photographic trace by comparing it to the “real” [Figs. 7–8],

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17 As Buse explains: “the emphasis in its use is on the display of photographic technologies rather than the resultant image” (2010, 189).

18 As Hervé Guibert writes, the beauty and the force of the Polaroid “reside in the fact that it is something that has been disgorged, something hurried and fragile, and in its anguished race for immediacy, its backing away from time” (2014, 110).

19 This difference can be sensed, tested or “caught in the act” of picture taking, almost as in digital photography.

but simultaneously it foregrounds the filmic image itself as an act of framing. The limited size and the pronouncedly framed aspect of the Polaroid displays a miniaturization of the “real” through scale reduction and framing, whereas the *mise en abyme* composition points to the excess of the “real” that escapes both the photographic and the filmic frame. Lúcia Nagib reflecting on Wim Wenders’s *The State of Things* argues that the “reproduction of the real through gadgets and different artistic media is a means for the characters to come to terms with an overwhelming, crushing reality, which they fail to comprehend and to subject to their own ends” (2014, 193). In a somewhat similar way, when Nela uses the Polaroid camera, she attempts to relate to the incomprehensibility of the “real” through miniatures, through small size photographs. Mary Ann Doane<sup>20</sup> (referring to Susan Stewart) argues that “[a]lthough the miniature appears completely intelligible and knowable, the gigantic... exceeds the viewer’s grasp and incarnates the limited possibility of partial knowledge” (2009, 63). In Pintilie’s film, the cinematic image of a monstrous industrial landscape, an embodiment of the forced industrialization of communism and of industrial modernity in general is juxtaposed with a less ambitious, miniaturizing Polaroid “leg selfie”<sup>21</sup> as a perhaps (self-)ironic acknowledgment of an unframable excess.

The reflexive use of photography in (analogue) film may expose the photo not only as the medium of memory but also as the memory of the cinematic medium, a kind of technological or medial unconscious, disclosing what Mulvey considers the film’s uncertain, unstable materiality “torn between the stillness of the celluloid strip and the illusion of its movement” (2006, 26). Through showing the few-second process in which the Polaroid develops, the film displays the becoming of an image, a medial event of difference [Figs. 9–10], foregrounding the photo as a figure of medial in-betweenness. The background of this medial occurrence is static, whereas the photographic image displays a short temporal process, as if figuring the volatile mediality of the cinematic in-between stasis and becoming. The Polaroid performs an act of becoming that is nevertheless archived and replayed through the filmic. Thus we see “not just an ‘inscription’ of one medium into another, but a more complex ‘trans-figuration’ taking place, in the process of which one medium is transposed as a ‘figure’ into the other, also

20 Mary Ann Doane relates the effects of the manipulation of scale on the spectator to the growth of capitalism and considers that it situates the subject “as epistemologically inadequate, as incapable of ever actually mapping or understanding the totality of social forces that determine his or her position” (2009, 63).

21 The “leg-selfie” also displays self-perception and self-representation as shaped by the fold of the photographic and the corporeal gaze.

acting as a figure of ‘in-betweenness’ that reflects on both the media involved in this process” (Pethő 2011, 4).

In *The Oak*, the photographic act is also assigned a critical function of confronting the viewer with the “real” through its medial trace: the juxtaposition of the photo of the living calf and of the same calf killed during a military exercise is used by Nela to confront a bewildered soldier with the brutal side-effect of military action. [Fig. 11.] Juxtaposing separate photographic images to generate meaning-making functions within diegesis as a reflexive, critical or as a humorous metaphorical act (e.g. a photo of Mitică juxtaposed with that of a calf [Fig. 12]), while as a meta-filmic figure it may foreground the relational aspect of the semantics of cinema,<sup>22</sup> based on an indexical and iconic relation of the image to the “real” and to the viewer’s previous media experiences, as well as on the relationship of one image to another manifest in the principle of montage.

The ambivalence of the (critical) photographic gaze and of Nela’s dissidence is exposed by the fact that even if she rejects the totalitarian ideology of the regime, she is occasionally coerced to reproduce its objectifying mechanisms. After a failed attempt to save Mitică from prison, she uses the Polaroid camera in a farcical scene to stage an adultery and blackmail the prosecutor with photos of him naked. The fact that she “documents” an adultery that did not actually happen (being interrupted precisely by the photographic act itself), shifts the question of the (unstable) photographic proof towards the staged and de-contextualizing aspect of the photographic act. Nela reproduces the method of false evidence and blackmail (also used by the Securitate) through appropriating the indexicality of the medium. Her ambivalent dissidence points to the pervasive mechanism of totalitarian power that is partially interiorized and reproduced by the (dissident) subjects, who are coerced to imitate the strategies of power in order to make themselves heard.<sup>23</sup>

The ritual use of the photos by Nela in the burial scene reveals a quasi-naive, animistic, even archaic understanding of the image, according to which the photograph as an object and as a set of (social) relations becomes a replacement,

22 Cf. “The semantics of cinema is fundamentally relational. [...] Cinematic meaning is always contextual and signification relies on a set of relationships: the relationship of the image to the real world (its indexicality and iconicity: the way it resembles what we already know in the real world, and the way we magically interpret the image as the real world, etc.), the relationship of one image to another (meaning forged by the cinematic montage, the famous Kuleshov effect, for example), the relationship between the media constituents of the film, between the present film and our previous experiences” (Pethő 2011, 59).

23 In another scene, Nela tells Mitică (the other dissident and ambivalent character with both anti-authoritarian and authoritarian attitudes) how she reproduced a technique of punishment applied by the police on her: she used a hose with water jet to discipline the pupils at her school, commenting that at least she learned something from the police.

a surrogate of the body. Nela attempts to detach herself from her sister (whom she considers a “filthy” Securitate agent), as well as from her chosen, talented pupils through burning and burying their photos.

In the film, Polaroid photography is exposed in its volatile mediality that resists essentialization. The instantaneousness of the Polaroid may enhance its malleability or adaptability to most differing uses, gestures, and social contexts. Polaroid works as a (reflexive) remediation or a critical intervention into the “real,” as memory prosthesis, or as a social act of image-making, but also as an arbitrary appropriation of the “real.” The photographic gaze as an extension of the corporeal one and photography as practice intertwine with the female protagonist’s dissident, interpretive acts through which she relates to the world around her. Through exposing the act of looking and image-making, Polaroid and home movie are linked to the reflexive concern of the film with its own artifice and with the role of images in accessing, mediating, interrogating, and ultimately “carving for” the (immediacy of the) “real.” Thus, in *The Oak* the reflection on absurd, disturbing realities from the recent communist past is performed through a fictional filmic discourse preoccupied with the historical, medial, and socio-cultural conditions of representation itself.

## **Allegorical and Intermedial Figurations**

Besides media reflexive practices, the presence of mediation is foregrounded in *The Oak* through an allegorical discourse that revisits grand cultural narratives and images whose dismantling or re-alignment may foreground the question of socio-cultural and representational crisis during the communist regime and the post-1989 period. In Ismail Xavier’s understanding, allegory – as a figurative discourse that connects forms of representation and specific social conjunctures – articulates “certain conceptions of human experience in time or an encompassing view of history in a condensed way” through personifications, juxtapositions, given models, iconographies, or narrative patterns (2004, 361). The figurative tendency of Pintilie’s film is marked by the historical shift of emphasis that characterizes modern and postmodern allegory. According to Xavier, “allegory has acquired a new meaning in modernity – more related to the expression of social crisis and the transient nature of values, with special emphasis given to its connection with the sense of the fragmentation, discontinuity, and abstraction” (2004, 360). Xavier considers that allegory can point to the crisis of representation characteristic of “periods of transition and accelerated technical-economic changes which enforce

people to revise their views of identity and shared values” (2004, 359–360). *The Oak* was released in an ambivalent, unsettled transition period in which economic and political instability, the crisis of (collective) identity, as well as the socio-political, economic, and cultural “heritage” of the recent period of dictatorship called for the renegotiation of previous meanings and modes of representation.

In *The Oak* the allegorical tendency is manifest in narrative patterns that subversively recontextualize biblical motifs, interrogating the validity of grand narratives (or shared values). The brutal extermination of the children and the rebels at the end of the film might recall the motif of the Massacre of Innocents, and the image of the oak with the two dissident, “untamable” protagonists might refigure the iconography of the primordial scene of the first couple.<sup>24</sup> This scene is staged in the film as a sort of shadow image or quasi-monochrome sequence: due to the direction of the light, the colors and nuances are erased and the characters appear as shadows in front of a sepia background. The transparency of the image is suspended through a subtle medial opacity; the scene unfolds as abstract, two-dimensional and pronouncedly theatrical, as an aestheticized spectacle that might favour an allegorical approach to the image.<sup>25</sup> [Fig. 13.] Moreover, Nela’s journey, her dissidence and her intention to change the status quo (e.g. to intervene into the uniformizing practice of an ideologically appropriated education system<sup>26</sup>) may reenact the narrative of an anarchist, resistant savior or rebel.

Doru Pop implicitly situates Nela’s rape within an allegorical framework, arguing that *The Oak* deals with rape not only as “symbolically charged social criticism, but also as a liberating path” (2014, 200). The rape, unsolved by the militia, “is a reference to the social rape made acceptable by the Communist regime” (Pop 2014, 200). This interpretation seems to allegorize Nela’s body conceiving it as a more abstract, discursive body: the corpus of a society or nation “violated” by the oppressive mechanisms of the regime. Nevertheless, in the film as a whole, Nela’s character and corporeality retain an unincorporable otherness, invalidating unequivocal discursive categories or oppositions, such as victim

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24 As Dominique Nasta underlines, Pintilie himself has described the epilogue “as yet another variant, following *Reconstruction*, of the biblical Massacre of the Innocents” (2013, 102).

25 However, the previous scene of burying the father’s ashes next to the tree displaces allegorical reminiscences through a more secularized, profane corporeality and through the ironic contamination of cultural codes: the cremated body of the father (a colonel with an ambivalent past in the communist regime) is transported in a Nescafé bottle, a synecdochic “container” of the Western world.

26 However, Nela’s project is somewhat contradictory: on the one hand, she tries to reject ideologically embedded uniformization and normalization through selecting talented pupils to teach them separately (“collecting” them as the members of a chosen group captured through Polaroid). On the other hand, she creates a segregated group rejected by their own fellows.

versus an oppressive regime (she cannot entirely escape the mechanisms of the repressive system she rejects).

Nela is not containable within the concept of passive victimhood or appropriated corporeality: she seems to be able to distance herself from her own body similarly to the way she perceives the world through a photographic gaze that performs an act of reflexive detachment. The photographic gaze merging the technological into the corporeal might become a prosthetic mode of both perception and self-perception. Nela's detachment from the traumatic event of the rape could apparently be explained through the dissociation model that emphasizes the inaccessibility of trauma: the experience of trauma is so overwhelming and entails such a disruption and alienation within the self that it cannot be uttered, dealt with or cognitively processed. Instead, it is delayed, split off, and engraved as a special form of "bodily memory" that "ends up only leaking its disturbing and ambivalent traces in the typical traumatic symptoms of flashbacks, hallucinations, phobias, and nightmares" (Kaplan–Wang 2004, 5). After being physically punished by the police, Nela's taking a handful of pills could be related, among others, to the delayed corporeal eruption of this unprocessed trauma. Nevertheless, her traumatic experience cannot be explained through the dissociated self alone. Nela, empowered with irony, agency and assertiveness, is able to reassemble her identity against power abuse, trauma or appropriation. After being raped, she falls asleep at the police station while the officer interrogates her. Kata Kiss, discussing later films, considers that the ability of female characters (like Mona in Szabolcs Hajdu's *Bibliothèque Pascal* and Grace in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*) to fall asleep after a traumatizing event displays a particular kind of resistance since the sleeping body is the most vulnerable, but at the same time sleep enables a most autonomous state of subjectivity (Kiss 2011, 53). Even though Nela is raped, her body and subjectivity remain within a vulnerable, exposed, yet resistant otherness that is beyond the containable.<sup>27</sup> Her corporeality does not coincide either with mere biological givenness<sup>28</sup> or with socially validated (patriarchal) norms of femininity, since she persistently interrogates such patterns. Thus, embodiment means a continual negotiation between discursive, social relations (of control) transcribed onto the interpretable body and a more uncontainable corporeality that exceeds the social and the discursive.

27 Mitică senses the traumatic and does not approach or touch her until the last scene of the film, when they embrace each other.

28 The body never coincides with itself as a biological entity, "never achieves a stable identity, being continually shaped by historical and cultural systems" (Madison quoted in Sobchack 2004, 4).



Along with narrative allegorizing tendencies, “the presence of mediation” (Xavier 2004, 333) is also manifest in intermedial figurations that reenact the optical regime of other media or paraphrase individual paintings of the Western canon, performing an iconographic anamnesis through the film medium. In her study about the reconceptualization of *tableau vivant* in contemporary East European cinema, Ágnes Pethő – besides linking cinematic tableaux to the desire of objectification, of becoming an image in recent artistic practices – interprets the tableau as a figure of return in Lyotardian terms. According to Pethő, post-postmodern films that tackle with universal themes and refer to art history and Christian imagery through *tableaux vivants* or tableau compositions can be viewed as metafictional allegories of the “urge for reconstruction, reinstatement, and re-embodiment of myths” (2014, 69), as attempts “to open up the small, local, often minimalist narratives through the insertion of the ‘grand image’ towards equally grand (biblical, archetypal, mythical) narratives”<sup>29</sup> (2014, 67). Nevertheless, the *tableau vivant* may also perform “paradoxically, a movement of ‘détournement,’ both by placing the cinematic image into the much less stable ‘shadow of the arts,’ and by consistently counterpointing the aestheticism of the tableau constructions with a subversive emphasis on bodies and senses” (Pethő 2014, 69). The productive tension of Pintilie’s film is brought about – among others – by this bifold movement of return and *détournement*: grand (biblical, mythical) narratives, images or iconographic codes of European cultural memory are subverted by the ironic (and at times carnivalesque) discourse of the film, or are imploded by the corporeal that escapes allegorical, aestheticizing modes of representation.

In the film, Nela as an image is often framed by spatial figurations such as the space of a train compartment, the straight lines of the railway, grids, or door frames. Here the film image does not necessarily reenact a particular work of art through a cinematic *tableau vivant*; it rather remediates conventions, techniques, (iconographic) codes, compositional patterns pertaining to a specific (visual) art form. The train compartment rhythmically lit by moonlight, and “artificially” by the light of a cigarette, becomes (for a short while) a space of artifice and aestheticization framing a chiaroscuro spectacle: Nela’s face seems to be “painted” on a dark background, counterpointing the rough reality of the train journey.

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29 Cf. According to Pethő, the favorable reception of contemporary East European cinema in the Western festival circuit may be connected to the fact that “universal themes, references to art history and Christian imagery can be expected signs of sophistication” for Western audiences that associate these films with art house cinema. Therefore, “these easily recognisable references can facilitate connections to a wider cultural and artistic heritage perhaps as manifestations of a self-colonizing instinct” (2014, 64).

[Fig.14.] Her image with a hamster framed by the door case [Fig. 15] might evoke and simultaneously displace pictorial conventions of portraiture from art history in the context of Romanian actualities from the late 1980s. Whereas the inscription on the frame reinforces the conventions of portraiture (framing Nela as a sort of dissident “lady with a hamster”), the meaning of the text (‘place for banging your head’) as a possible commentary on existential and social actualities ironically unframes the image and disturbs the aestheticizing potential of the frame.

Nela’s figure is also inscribed by the iconographic codes of a subversively recontextualized Christian imagery. Following Titi’s coffin, a former young patient of the hospital and self-proclaimed “apostle” of a new moral order, the atheist Nela carries the funerary cross and Titi’s “scripture,” a blue notebook. [Fig. 2.] This gesture and her one-person resistance to oppressive structures, imposed normality and power abuse displace the Christian narrative of the savior towards a secular and feminine perspective. Moreover, the grotesque scene in which the car transporting the coffin breaks off and the coffin accidentally opens, favors the carnivalization<sup>30</sup> of cultural codes and the (temporary) fluidization of socially, politically codified roles and identities: the atheist Nela, wearing Mitică’s clothes, carries the cross, the caricatured Securitate agents change their roles by giving up surveillance and carrying the coffin of the trailed person. The allegorizing, carnivalesque tendency of the film manifest in the subversive reconceptualization of narratives and (cultic) images of European cultural memory is further reinforced by the scene in which twelve participants, assembled as a “collage” of social classes and roles (teacher, doctor, secret agent, priest, mayor, villager), attend the quite profane funeral feast and drinking party after Titi’s burial in a room straightforwardly decorated with a cheap reproduction of a copy of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* (1494–1498) and a fragment of an Orthodox icon.

However, Nela as an image remains uncontainable both within iconographic or aesthetic “frames” and within the socially acknowledged concepts of femininity. When she consciously uses stereotypical requisites of male fantasies of femininity (e. g. *femme fatale* or prostitute “accessories”) to seduce and blackmail the prosecutor, her masquerade seems to evade objectification: she both constructs and detaches herself from an appropriating “image” of femininity.<sup>31</sup> The way

30 The carnivalesque shapes Pintilie’s filmic discourse both thematically and conceptually, being related in film criticism (cf. Király 2010, Pop 2014) to the literary and cultural legacy of Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912), a Romanian playwright whose work is associated with a particular dark humour, irony and social criticism.

31 Nevertheless, the use of the *femme fatal* and the prostitute clichés for blackmail does not radically contest their stereotyping mechanism but partially relies on it.

Nela posits her own corporeality displaces the possessive gaze, and she resists being fetishized as inert surface, as mere “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 2006). She situates herself as the subject of looking through her acts of photographic intervention and through the reflexive relation to her own body. Through her commentary and her defiant, de-eroticizing gesture of casting her naked leg on the table where male filmmakers discuss movies, the film critically unmasks the cinematic fetishization of the female body, its fragmentation and reduction to body parts. The same assertiveness directs her de-fetishizing gesture when, after being raped, she forcefully casts her naked leg on the table in the cabinet of the nonconformist doctor, Mitică – asking for a shoe. Her leg covered with dirt disrupts the imagery of the female leg as fetish and dislocates the possessive gaze.

The allegorizing, figurative tendency in the narration of Nela’s story and in the construction of her image is continually disturbed by the eruption of the corporeal into the discursive regime of the allegorical. The dirt on Nela’s body is not disturbing in itself. The dirty body is unsettling in social contexts in which it marks the displacement of a boundary and remains an excess that is unincorporable by existing normative categories or socially disciplined bodies. Elizabeth Grosz, discussing Mary Douglas’s concept of dirt and impurity, underlines that “[n]othing has the intrinsic property of disrupting or disturbing, but can only be regarded as such in a specific context and system where order is imposed at the cost of the elements being thus ordered” (1994, 192). Dirt marks “a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability insofar as the status of dirt as marginal and unincorporable always locates sites of potential threat to the system and to the order it both makes possible and problematizes” (Grosz 1994, 192). The dirt on Nela’s body imploding the concept of socially disciplined corporeality is also related to the dirt in her father’s apartment, to her drinking dirty water from a vase, as well as to her intimacy with the sphere of the animalistic that contests the cultural hierarchy of human and non-human (she shares her apple with a hamster). All these corporeal transgressions point to something that is unincorporable and threatens socially consolidated control, exposing Nela’s ambiguous resistance and sensitivity not only as conceptual-ideological, but also as disquietingly corporeal.

In *The Oak*, the body becomes a site where figurative, allegorical modes of representation intersect socio-political contexts and the excess of the corporeal. The image of Titi’s dead body, the former patient of the hospital and self-declared “apostle” of a new religion,<sup>32</sup> is incorporated into clinical space in which the

32 As it is stated in his blue notebook, he also “plans” a vegetarian and (somewhat) Spartan school

(corpo)real is articulated at the intersection of the disturbing actualities of a dictatorial regime and the broader interpretive context of European cultural memory. The hospital, which in Foucauldian terms is a space for the discursive, institutional, socio-political control of the body and the subject, appears in the film as a dilapidated and dysfunctional institution where surveillance is performed not only by the clinical gaze but also by the all-pervasive institution of the secret police. Socially, politically uncontainable patients, such as Titi, and the rebellious doctor, Mitică, who defies institutional hierarchy and bureaucracy, are continually situated at the intersection of different, politically informed controlling gazes. Thus, the hospital is exposed in the film as a heterotopic space (Foucault 1986) in which faulty, dehumanizing institutional practices intersect the absurd power mechanisms of a totalitarian regime.

The “apostle’s” dead body filmed from a static, frontal camera position and exposed in its fragile horizontality might evoke – in a conceptual rather than pictorial manner – representations of Christ that foreground his humanized, carnal existence.<sup>33</sup> The image of the dead body suspended in-between allegorical meaning and the non-meaning of carnal corporeality is displaced towards the secular and the corporeal; behind the frail corpse, a door frames another image, that of random naked dead bodies lying on the floor as cadaverous flesh unredeemed by allegorical codes. [Fig. 16.] Staging the dead body of the so-called “apostle” in a dysfunctional Romanian hospital from the late 1980s may ironically confront the (in)validity of grand or utopian narratives (and ideologies) of redemption with the context of unsettling historical realities. Moreover, the image of the corpse as a hesitant figure oscillates between allegorical allusion and mundane, corporeal laughter (e. g. the nurse lights a candle for the dead Titi, then hides his “apostolic” blue notebook in her large underpants where the Securitate will not supposedly find it; she also prepares the body for funeral, displacing the institutional, clinical practices towards human intimacy and traditional funerary rituals). The subversive contamination of cultural codes exposing the mediatedness and the heterogeneity of the “real” along with the continual disruption of the allegorical by the corporeal (and at times by the carnivalesque) may point to a historically embedded social and representational crisis, as well as to the way collective or individual trauma and crisis – besides

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for his future disciples.

33 E. g. Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520–1522). Julia Kristeva connects the melancholy of Holbein’s painting to the isolation and solitude of the figure which she interprets as humanized, carnal and yet indecipherable, detached from pathos and from the promise of resurrection (Kristeva 1989).

revealing “the bankruptcy of the prior symbolization” – “intensifies the urgency of re-symbolization” (Kaplan–Wang 2004, 14).

## Coda

In *The Oak*, both the media-reflexive and the allegorical, figurative discourse foreground the artifice of the film and disclose the medial and socio-cultural conditions of image-making. The allegorical, figurative tendency is manifest in narrative constructions or intermedial figurations that subversively recontextualize familiar narratives and images of European cultural-iconographic memory. Released in 1992, the film – through its reflexive preoccupation with the “presence of mediation” – may critically point to the role of images in accessing, questioning, and (re)assembling the narratives of the recent past. Ismail Xavier underlines that “[t]he dynamics of allegory, with its typical dialectics of fragmentation and totalization, is far from a closed system; rather it is a signifying practice deeply involved in, and formally permeable to, the vicissitudes of historical change” (2004, 361). The allegorizing discourse of *The Oak* does not reinstate semantic, ideological or aesthetic totality, but rather it is articulated in the productive tension between allegorical figuration and de-figuration, between acts of remembering and dismembering cultural-iconographic memory. The process of allegorical and intermedial displacements in the filmic discourse can be regarded as symptomatic of the social and representational crisis linked to the period of dictatorship, but at the same time it may be a critically reflexive response to the cultural, social, political anxieties of post-1989 Romania marked by the (economic, socio-political, institutional) legacy of the communist era.

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## List of Figures

**Fig. 1.** Nela with the Polaroid camera. **Fig. 2.** Nela carrying the cross.



**Fig. 3.** The carnivalesque home video of Nela's childhood. **Fig. 4.** Synecdoches of American (consumer) culture on display.



**Fig. 5.** Reenacting the iconography of power. **Fig. 6.** Seeing, touching and being touched.





**Figs. 7–8.** Framing and miniaturizing the “real.”



**Figs. 9–10.** (The) becoming (of) a Polaroid.



**Fig. 11.** Facing the “real” through the medial. **Fig. 12.** Making meaning through juxtaposed images.



**Fig. 13.** “Shadow image.” **Fig. 14.** Chiaroscuro spectacle in the train.



**Fig. 15.** Nela framed as “lady with a hamster.” **Fig. 16.** The “apostle’s” corpse.





# Looking West: Understanding Socio-Political Allegories and Art References in Contemporary Romanian Cinema

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**Abstract.** The representation of other arts in cinema can be regarded as a different semiotic system revealing what is hidden in the narrative, as a site of cultural meanings inherent to the cinematic apparatus addressing a pensive spectator, or a discourse on cinema born in the space of intermediality. In the post-1989 films of Romanian director Lucian Pintilie, painterly and sculptural references, as well as miniatures become figurations of cultural identity inside allegories about a society torn between East and West. I argue that art references are liberating these films from provincialism by transforming them into a discourse lamenting over the loss of Western, Christian and local values, endangered or forgotten in the post-communist era. In the films under analysis – *An Unforgettable Summer* (1994), *Too Late* (1996) and *Tertium Non Datur* (2006) – images reminding of Byzantine iconography, together with direct references and remediations of sculptures by Romanian-born Constantin Brâncuși, participate in historico-political allegories as expressions of social crisis and the transient nature of values. They also reveal the tension between an external and internal image of Romania, the aspiration of the “other Europe” to connect with the European cultural tradition, in a complex demonstration of a “self-othering” process. I will also argue that, contrary to the existing criticism, this generalizing, allegorical tendency can also be detected in some of the films of the generation of filmmakers representing the New Romanian Cinema, for example in Radu Jude’s *Aferim!* (2015).<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** allegory, figuration, mimicry, miniature, Lucian Pintilie.

## The Time of Historical Allegories

The tendency of allegorization in cinema has been commonly regarded by the new generations of filmmakers and critics as an obsolete means of figuration

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that effaces burning socio-political questions. National, historical allegories are seen as belonging to the declining project of modernity that once propagated belief in progress, national identity and nation states. Temenuga Trifonova in her analysis of post-communist Bulgarian cinema talks about a “weak” national cinema that, under the circumstances of extensive transnational movements, still holds to an allegorical expressionism “which is challenged only occasionally by less provincial styles of film-making” (2015, 128). As she argues, this type of figuration characterizes by simplicity, transparency and “a self-imposed limit on the meaning one wants to convey and the means one believes are necessary (or sufficient) to convey it” (2015, 129). Without, however, elaborating on the theoretical background of such cinematic discourse, she dismisses it as “provincial” on the basis of a surface and hidden meaning duality that targets a narrow public familiar with it on the level of the narrative and not that of the visual representation (2015, 130–131). In Romania, the rejection of an allegorical, cinematic language by the directors of the so-called New Romanian Cinema or Romanian New Wave<sup>2</sup> appears more as a generational attitude towards a highly figurative trend in the 1990s, represented by the films of old masters like Mircea Daneliuc and Lucian Pintilie. This attitude is all the more paradoxical because it coexists with a certain reverence for emblematic films of these two directors, such as *Reconstruction (Reconstituirea)*, Lucian Pintilie, 1968) and *Microphone Test (Probă de microfon)*, Mircea Daneliuc, 1980), both marked by a tendency of allegorical signification. Moreover, critics have detected mildly allegorizing tendencies in some of the films of this new generation, such as *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu)*, Cristi Puiu, 2005) and the films of Cristian Mungiu (*4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days [4 luni, 3 săptămâni, 2 zile]*, 2007 and *Beyond the Hills [După dealuri]*, 2012) that epitomize a neutral, metaphorical, generalizing approach to the events presented.<sup>3</sup> As I will argue

2 The denomination of this group of directors as representing a New Cinema or a Romanian New Wave has been largely debated by critics and the directors themselves. According to Andrei Gorzo, the first refers to a series of stylistic features shared by a number of internationally acclaimed films that became a mainstream style in contemporary Romanian cinematography, while the second defines simply a generation of successful directors. According to Gorzo, the Puiu-Mungiu-Muntean line is not completely fulfilling the conditions of a New Wave in the sense consecrated by the French New Wave, for example, that developed on the ground of a theoretical reflection on film (Gorzo 2012, 266–267). Doru Pop shares this opinion claiming that Romanian New Wave is already represented by Pintilie, Daneliuc and Ciulei (Pop 2010, 20).

3 Andrei State writes about the ambivalent, metaphoric character of Mungiu’s films that, despite an objectifying appearance represent exactly the opposite of the realist project (2014, 76–77). See more on this tendency the essay of Veronica Lazăr and Andrei Gorzo on *Aferim!*, praising the novelty of Jude’s film in terms of its political criticism (2014, 301–312).

below, Radu Jude's latest *Aferim!* participates in the same historico-political allegorical, even didactic discourse started by Pintilie at the beginning of the 1990s, with the aim to illuminate the historical background of a societal crisis generated by huge social inequalities and a persistent patriarchal structure. Just like in the case of Pintilie, this didacticism seems to reveal a self-assumed artistic responsibility to evoke events of a distant past in order to find solutions to the problems of the present. As Herbert Kitschelt points out in his methodological essay on post-communist social diversity, "in periods of societal crisis, people are capable of activating their long-term memory and scan its content in order to interpret their strategic options under conditions of uncertainty. Moreover, technical and institutional memory enhancers (scripture, literacy, media of communication, education, professionals in charge of preserving memories) (...) extend the capacity of human actors to retrieve and process information over lengthy periods of time" (2003, 62).

I argue that allegory has become a discursive mode capable of establishing a link between past and present by conferring new meanings to old signifiers, in an artistic effort to establish national values, circumscribe a national identity and character, as well as to thematize the position of the own country on the map of Europe. In this respect, a number of films by Lucian Pintilie made during the long and chaotic period of transition that followed the '89 events in Romania, do not simply display a continuation of a highly figurative artistic style that in the communist era was meant to mislead censorship. They rather serve as historical lessons highlighting recurrent situations in which under irrational, authoritarian leadership human values become endangered and are doomed to perish. Pintilie, the most distinguished representative of an older generation of Romanian filmmakers, now 82, and Radu Jude from the new generation of Romanian filmmakers with *Aferim!* apparently assume the task mentioned by Kitschelt, to retrieve distant memories from times that preceded the far too long communist era, but not in order to show up coping strategies, but rather to reveal *the causes of the inexistence of such strategies*. In the case of Pintilie, this attitude corresponds to a political standpoint represented by the independent, non-governmental association called The Group for Social Dialogue (Grupul pentru Dialog Social), of which he used to be an active member. The political program of this association reuniting prominent personalities of the Romanian cultural life proposes to defend and promote democratic values, human rights and liberties, as well as to reflect critically on fundamental problems of the Romanian society. I contend that all three films by Pintilie under analysis can be seen as allegorical discourses contributing

to this social dialogue around the difficulties of a Romanian implementation of democratic, European values. They represent three distinct moments of Romanian 20<sup>th</sup> century history that can be seen as allegories of a national destiny impossible to overcome: *An Unforgettable Summer* (*O vară de neuitat*, 1994), set in the Romania of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (a few years after the formation of Greater Romania, incorporating Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia) tells the story of the family of a Romanian officer, exiled to the politically unstable border with Bulgaria, because he refuses to accept the way one of his superiors approaches his wife, a charming, sensitive woman with Hungarian and Romanian ancestry and Western education (played by Kristin Scott Thomas). The short film entitled *Tertium Non Datur* (2006) presents an official meeting between two German officers and their Romanian allies during the Second World War, consisting of a single, highly dramatic scene in which what was meant to be a strategic discussion turns into a humiliating situation for the Romanian party. *Too Late* (*Prea târziu*, 1996) is set in the late 1990s, a few years after the infamous second revolt of the miners, in a mining area facing mysterious murders and the danger of apparition of a new type of man, the so-called “sub-human.”

These films can be seen as historico-political allegories that manage to avoid “provinciality,” that is, to provide meaning not only on the narrative level, a story well known by the natives (as Temenuga Trifonova characterizes the allegorical expressionism of Bulgarian films). As I will argue below, visual figuration is crucial in Pintilie’s films in the creation of a universal discourse on endangered human and democratic values. In what follows, I propose to analyze the manifold roles of intermedial references in these films, ranging from narrative and poetical to more sophisticated, philosophical, ideological or discursive ones. These mainly pictorial or sculptural references to either specific works of art or a certain visual art (painting, photography, sculpture) as system (colours, lighting effects, composition, style),<sup>4</sup> besides their immediate figurative role in the respective narrative, tend to function as separate, autonomous discourses of the artistic creation and often of the socio-political context of the film in question. As such, they often appear as an excess to the reality, reveal something that can only be shown, not verbally formulated or narrated, thus qualify for what has been termed “the figural” by Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze or more recently by D. N. Rodowick.<sup>5</sup> The interconnectedness of intermedial figuration with allegory is

4 See Irina Rajevsky’s distinction between individual and system intermedial references (2005, 53).

5 See on this Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure* (2011), Deleuze’s book on Francis Bacon (2004) and Rodowick’s *Reading the Figural* (2001).

enabled by allegory's inherent affinity with mediation and artificial signification. As Ismail Xavier points out, "allegory has come to the foreground, and one strong reason for its reawakening in modern times is the fact that it has always been the signifying process most identified with the presence of mediation, with the idea of a cultural artifact that requires specific frames of reference to be read, quite distant from any sense of the 'natural'" (2004, 333).

In Pintilie's films, visual clues ensure the transcendence of the narrative meaning in an allegorical discourse that also enables the emergence of the figural, elevating actual signification to a discursive, theoretical level. The figurative language charged with intermedial references attracts theoretical discourses susceptible to illuminate the visual representation of cultural values in the context of political, historical crisis. Such a discourse appears in connection with historical and national allegory that, in line with Benjamin's concept of history seen not as a progress, but as a disaster, becomes an ingredient of what can be called "the spirit of our time," incompatible with the realist form and rather demanding a cognitive mapping of social phenomena. As Ismail Xavier in his interpretation of cinematic national allegories points out: "allegory has acquired a new meaning in modernity – more related to the expression of social crisis and the transient nature of values, with special emphasis given to its connection with the sense of the fragmentation, discontinuity, and abstraction provided by compression of space and time in our contemporary technological world" (2004, 360).

The Outsider's gaze that Pintilie repeatedly adopts attracts another discourse concerned with national identity, otherness and self-othering. Based in France, he often uses Western art references – music, painting or sculpture – to ironically depict a post-communist Romanian society ignorant of individual dramas resulting from the collapse of industry, economy and infrastructure. He repeatedly thematizes institutional miscommunication, coexisting with a preference for Western cultural and civilisatoric forms without content. This paradoxical attitude of the insider-outsider can be best described with Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, defined as "an ironic compromise animated by the desire for a recognizable Other, the subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite (not white)" (1994, 86). Finally, in some of Pintilie's films, the visual, discursive figuration of the crisis of societal values, that of national and individual identity, is realized with a visionary, spatial poetics of miniaturization. According to Gaston Bachelard, the miniature, while proving that the acts of fantasy are as real as those of reality, becomes the shelter of greatness by concentrating and enhancing values. Miniature is created by a

vertical vision and a distance: as Bachelard puts it, from distance everything is neatly arranged, accessible and ready to be taken in possession (1961, 159). In these films, smallness figurates a far too big distance from core values and an urge for control, connected with a fear of devaluation and a growing national and individual inferiority complex. Although Pintilie's films and *Aferim!* do not present emblematic historical events, they are working with events, situations and characters susceptible for allegorical interpretation of national identities that, according to Xavier, emerge in a labyrinth of political ideologies and instability characteristic of Eastern European countries (2004, 359–60). Pintilie's films under analysis and *Aferim!* epitomize allegory as both "Thirdworldish" (as Jameson has controversially put it) and a mode of discourse attracting a "high" reflexive modernism (Xavier 2004, 335–336). This combination of depiction of a local, Eastern-European crisis with the discursive practices of modernism can be best identified in visual compositions establishing an intermedial dialogue with an Orthodox Christian iconography and the cultural codes it represents.

## **Orthodox Christian Iconography and Allegorical Signification**

In the light of the new meanings acquired by allegory, discussed by Xavier, the allegorical films of Pintilie and other Eastern European directors refuse to provide humanity with an aesthetic redemption of the world in perfect forms, "rather interacting with historical fractures and violence, especially when observed from the point of view of the defeated" (2004, 346). For the defeated, in this case the Eastern European nations, history is not seen as a progress, but rather as a repetition of a long line of frustrating events that cannot be fully compensated with the Christian belief in a cosmic order that endows human history with internal logic (Xavier 2004, 342). Accordingly, unlike Christian allegories revealing destinies of salvation where every pain had a meaning, the films under analysis show pain and humiliation as meaningless, not connected with historical or social progress whatsoever. Moreover, the defense of Christian and human values is not connected with redemption or reward: the protagonists fail, become alcoholic, migrate to the West and lose faith in everything. The allegorical superimposition of timeless truths of the Christian faith with the historicity of human experience is recurrent in scenes depicting interactions of the protagonists with representatives of the Orthodox Church, for example in Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills* and Jude's *Aferim!*. These instances work with



stereotypes, constant ingredients of allegories, as in them, according to Xavier, a social group finds its “illustration” or embodiment in a single image or narrative specially composed to confirm that false generalization. Orthodox priests, just like doctors, officers and representatives of the law (policemen, constables) can be seen as personifications of questionable moral values in national allegories provided by these films, their reading strategies depending heavily on the socio-political context of the reading itself (Xavier 2004, 341).

The socio-political role of Christianity, and in the particular case of Romania, that of the Orthodox Church, is represented as a purely formal one in compositions reminding of Byzantine iconography and implying cultural codes specific of Romanian society. Besides stereotypical narrative situations, characters and dialogues, there is a recurrent visual feature in the post-communist Romanian film, a composition with three figures in a scene staging the mechanisms of authority. But this authority – represented by doctors, police officers, priests or TV managers – is regularly revealed as empty, a “form without content” (Boia 2012, 38). Cristi Puiu in the production notes to *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* points out his and his co-scriptwriter Răzvan Rădulescu’s preference for scenes with three characters: “Two people talk, the third person mediates. But I also find that this triangular relationship does not work at all.”<sup>6</sup> The scene with three characters finds its visual abstraction in many films of the new Romanian cinema: Doru Pop is the first to point out the affinity of this triangular composition with the Orthodox Christian iconography representing the Holy Trinity, more specifically Andrei Rublev’s *Troitsa* (1425–1427) [Fig. 1]. In his interpretation of the closing scene of *Police, Adjective (Polițist, adjectiv*, Cristian Porumboiu, 2009) Pop emphasizes an obvious transformation of the religious Trinity in a reversed, mundane “trinity” (2010, 37). This representation of an authority without content through an act of de-sacralization or profanation resonates with Xavier’s statement about “overall cultural systems” (in this case archaic religious formalities) outliving the material defeat of their subjects (2004, 334). These iconographical references do not simply figure the role of a formal authority that the Orthodox Church represents in Romanian society, but participate in a wider allegorical, critical discourse on the forms without content in post-communist Romania. These can be detected, according to Boia, in various aspects of Romanian society, including informal (coping) strategies, clientelism, authoritarianism, attachment

6 Interview with Cristi Puiu on the site of Balkan Black Box festival, quoted by Diana Popa (2011, 120). See also Popa’s analysis of a representative scene from *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, where the failure of communication between three people is also revelatory of a powerless authority (Popa 2011, 120–125).

to symbolic leaders, the habit of submission that is fought only with passive resistance (2012, 38–41). In this respect I find illuminating another reference of this tripartite composition, emphasizing the formal, authoritative influence of Eastern Christianity and revealing, at the same time, the patriarchal, hierarchical structure of Romanian society. These images can also be interpreted as allusions to the icons depicting the three patriarchs or three hierarchs of the Byzantine Church, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom. They played pivotal roles in shaping Christian theology, by providing explanations to religious theses and laws, as well as a moral example in faith and purity. They are represented with gospel books and scrolls that stand for guidance in Christian faith [Fig. 2]. Intriguingly, in Romanian films this composition often appears in situations where protagonists – representatives of the Church, Police or Justice – are facing a hard decision, a conflict between human values and institutional rules, and try to explain, clarify, implement laws in order to protect authority and to avoid anarchy and chaos. In Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills*, for example, the presence of the visiting girl is against monastic rules and her disruptive behavior is feared to undermine the stability of a community in formation. The scenes in which the protagonists debate the conditions of the outsider’s stay show the same triangular composition [Fig. 3]. This visual model illustrates even more elaborately the discourse on an empty authority in Porumboiu’s *Police, Adjective*, a film epitomizing what Andrei State terms as “semantic realism.”<sup>7</sup> As State points out, consciousness and law are recurrent terms in the film that appear in various contexts and configurations, in turns with denotative and figurative meanings, slipping between different, legal, philological and police registers (2015, 84). In the last scene of the film, concluding a long process of observation and formal (empty) reporting, three policemen take a decision in the case of three teenagers smoking marihuana, stiffly relying on the explanation of the word “consciousness” in the dictionary. Their position in the triangular composition clearly defines a power relationship (with the commanding officer in the middle), ensured by the possession of terms, rigid terminology and taken for granted knowledge. While the explanatory, patronizing style and quest of meaning is figured in a Byzantine iconographic composition, the disruptive standpoint of the young detective, who does not want to ruin the youngsters’ life only because they smoke pot, is represented by a modern, Western European pictorial reference, free from a semiotics of authority: a still life, a plate with

7 State talks about “realisms” in the case of New Romanian Cinema and specifically that of Porumboiu, distinguishing between situational, semantic and conceptual realisms (2014, 80–87).

fruits in the middle of the table separating the protagonists [Fig. 4]. Ágnes Pethő identifies in this rigid, tableau-like scene an “abstract theatre” in which the bowl activates “a touch of the deadpan humour based on incongruities” (2015, 56). The profanation of the spiritual meaning of the Byzantine iconography, originally depicting eternal truths and values (here represented by a purely semantically defined law), is also emphasized by the intrusive presence of this different pictorial tradition focusing on the detail, the “here and now,” the very materiality, transitory quality of the items depicted, or simply: life.

This spiritual-material duality is a common ingredient of the Byzantine style that Schraeder in his book *Transcendental Cinema* detects in films of Robert Bresson. He quotes Barthélémy Amengual, who describes Bresson’s style as a “dialectic between concrete and abstract, the proximity, almost the identity, of the sensual and the spiritual, of emotion and idea, of static body and mobile mind” (Schraeder 1988, 99). Apart from the tripartite composition and the sensual-spiritual opposition, the films of the Romanian New Wave often share other striking features of the Byzantine iconography already detected in Bresson’s minimalistic cinema by Schraeder, namely frontality, non-expressive faces, hieratic postures, “the long forehead, the lean features, the closed lips, the blank stare, the frontal view, the flat light, the uncluttered background, the stationary camera” that make these protagonists “objects suitable for veneration” (1988, 100). But Porumboiu’s film, while representing the static body and the focused, immobile gaze of the detective watching the movements of the teenagers in long real time scenes, also exemplifies the ways the trajectories of a mobile mind get short-circuited by an authority sticking to empty terminologies. This feature resonates with Schraeder’s remark on Byzantine iconography, seen as a purely formal function of the liturgy, where “[t]he individual became absorbed into the collective order, the collective order hardened into a form, and the form expressed the Transcendent. Consequently, the icons became stylized, rigid hierarchical, further and further apart from the world of verisimilitude and sensation” (1988, 98).

This rigid, hierarchical structure serving a collective order that alienates individuals from each other is modeled in Jude’s *Aferim!*, with its title already pointing at a formality applied from the exterior (a Turkish expression of recognition). In this Western Wallach set at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the story of a local constable charged to capture a Gypsy (slave) fugitive, the encounters with the authority (religious and worldly) reflect upon the same empty form lacking a reliable substance. On the road at some point they (he and his

son) are joined by a priest, who provides a quasi-theological explanation for the judgmental stereotypes reiterated in the film (misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia and antisemitism), while the triangular composition reflects, once again, upon a socio-political system that finds its articulation in superstition and religion, both serving political and class oppression (Lazăr and Gorzo 2014, 304–305) [Fig. 5]. Without being overtly political, through visual and verbal generalizations (an overwhelming use of proverbs reflecting on Romanian-ness and human condition in general) Jude's film engages in a very subtle way actual social discourses. In this respect it continues the cinematic tradition started with Pintilie's allegorical films from the 1990s, contradicting many critics' view on the new generation's Oedipal complex reflected in a full break with the "father figures."<sup>8</sup> The visual clue of tripartite compositions representing the mechanisms of authoritarian power relationships already appears in *Too Late*, in images showing the miners "lost" in the darkness of the mine. In a final denunciation of patriarchal order, we see them in a composition miming the icon with the patriarchs who "brought light into people's lives," then, with a turn of slapstick comedy characteristic of Pintilie's films, they appear covered in white cement and raised, as statues, above a grey crowd of miners [Figs. 6–7]. In the case of Pintilie these visual compositions also mediate between the theatrical and the filmic, in a media-historical reflection on the *tableau vivant*: in film, this preserves its original role to concentrate the dramatic meaning of a theatrical scene. An internationally recognized director of theatre, Pintilie uses these static images as a culmination of the drama, in the spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century theatrical practice.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the film the same composition reappears in the symbolic scene where the prosecutor releases the "sub-human" with two assistants, on the surface, in full light, against the instructions of his superiors.

These visual references participate in a national allegory not only by revealing the ineffectiveness of state institutions and of those who are meant to take leadership and show example, but also by means of personifications, when a single character or a community is taken as standing for the entire nation. This is the case of the mining community in *Too Late*, exposed to the danger of moral and social devaluation and becoming sub-human (a concept illuminated by the proxemics of the film, showing, in a rather pedagogical way, a repetitive descent deep into the mine) after the collapse of the communist industry. The same

8 See on this Doru Pop (2010, 29–30).

9 On the affinities of the *tableau* with theatre and film see Steven Jacobs' *Framing Pictures* (2011, 88–89).

applies to the family exiled to the Southern border in *An Unforgettable Summer*, a figuration of the liminal position of Romania in the European community and its imminent Balkanization. This vision can be traced back to a historical critical attitude of the other two principates (Transylvania, Moldavia) to the Byzantinism of Walachia, the three forming today's Romania. As Lucian Boia argues, these tensions are paired with a paradoxical relationship to foreigners and Western Europe, oscillating between xenophobia and a wish of imitation of a Western European cultural production. Lucian Pintilie's films that followed the regime change often thematize this identity crisis with allegories in which art references figure the attitude assuming its image of "the Other" of Europe.

## Figurations of the Self-Othering Attitude

As Ismail Xavier points out, intermedial references revealing the intimate connections between forms of representation and specific social conjunctures express in contemporary Eastern European films the labyrinth of political ideologies and national identities that shape the contemporary history in these countries suffering from a chronic instability. He also emphasizes the new trend of storylines involving multi-national encounters of protagonists who belong to distant cultures but are led to an unexpected interaction, most of the time of a clearly private nature, in mostly international co-productions that engage different European countries (2004, 360). *An Unforgettable Summer* and *Tertium Non Datur* depict such types of encounters, in which national identity is shaped through the Western gaze and a self-othering process.

Lucian Boia (2012) describes the remarkable imitative performance of Romanian artists as symptomatic of a national attitude venerating Western (mostly French) culture, without, however, reaching its standards. National painters like Nicolae Grigorescu, Ion Andreescu, Gheorghe Aman and Ștefan Luchian, some of them manifesting strong French influence, are remarkable but not exceptional, not reaching the level of a Gauguin or Cézanne. In order to turn this urge for imitation into mimicry, slippages and excesses are needed to affirm the difference of Homi Bhabha's already mentioned "recognizable other" (1994, 86). While imitation loses itself in the process, mimicry characterizes by a partial representation and a double vision that subverts colonizing, narcissistic authority (in this case the French artistic influence) through excesses and an ironical affirmation of difference (1994, 88). The celebration of national identity while assuming one's difference, the ability to elevate the particular and provincial to the status of allegorical and

universal is a rare artistic competence, represented by few Romanian artists: the works of Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Tristan Tzara, Constantin Brâncuși and, we can add, Lucian Pintilie, testify for colonial mimicry as self-affirmation through ironical and partial imitation, repetition of European models and discourses. The double vision over Romanian identity of the insider-outsider – of Romanian artists settled and becoming famous in France – is epitomized by the work of Brâncuși, who is considered the father of modern sculpture, with works of art mixing abstract geometrical forms with Romanian folklore motifs. In a similar vein, while adhering to a European arthouse cinematic tradition and its figurative tendencies, Pintilie never misses to anchor his discourse in the Romanian social reality. In his films, Western art references usually become catalysts of the self-othering process: in *Too Late*, *An Unforgettable Summer* and *Tertium Non Datur* they also participate in allegories of loss of humanity and (Western, democratic) values amidst barbaric and de-humanizing social conditions. Not surprisingly, some of these references are the works of Constantin Brâncuși, depicting humanistic values like individual freedom, love, spiritual emancipation, evoked in narrative contexts of war and social restlessness. In *An Unforgettable Summer*, for example, in the childhood memories of a voice over narrator, the mother of Central and Eastern European origin, but educated in England, a woman of a remarkable artistic sensitivity, beauty and kindness, who follows her officer husband to the Romanian-Bulgarian borders in a mission to control Bulgarian insurgents, is shown in the pose of Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* (1910), just before traumatic, inhuman events destroy family peace [Figs. 8–9]. This reference can also be interpreted as the figuration of a counter-colonization represented by the work of Brâncuși, of the Eastern gaze turned back onto the colonizer (Pintilie's camera capturing British actress Kristin Scott Thomas's body), as well as a dissolution of East-West differences through art and beauty.

In this allegory of Romania's liminal geopolitical position in Europe, family becomes "the exemplary microcosm that condenses the entire nation" (Xavier 2004, 357), a society where frustration stemming from useless fights with phantasmatic enemies at the borders (figured by the Bulgarian partisans in the film) counteracts the integration process in a post-revolutionary, optimistic New Europe. The mother is the personification of a welcoming, even idealistically colonizing Central-Western European attitude: she decides that she likes the deserted place, calls the neighboring hill the Fujiyama and fills the rooms with singing and piano play from operas by Mozart. The diegetic music has a similar figurative role in *Too Late*, where four young, idealistic students from the capital

city come to the mining area in order to bring hope to desperate people living amidst inhuman conditions and poverty. They settle at the entrance of the mine, playing string quartets by Schubert, but fail to stop the crimes and the collapse of the whole industry and of the respective community, a metaphor of the Romanian society of the 1990s. One of them, a girl, even falls victim to the barbaric events she witnesses: the opening and final scene of the film shows her in a metro tunnel (a kind of replica of the mine) playing cacophonous music with her long hair in her face, in a disturbed state of mind similar to the mother's in *An Unforgettable Summer*.

In fact, both the reference to Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* and classical music can be read as a figuration of a brief, euphoric encounter between idealized and idealizing European and local moral and aesthetic values. In this respect this film is, together with other post-communist films of Pintilie, a cinematic version of a historical discourse represented by Lucian Boia, that aims to reveal the causes of Romania's difference from the rest of Europe. As he points out, Romania's image as a country where everything can happen and is difficult to make a difference between truth and lie, is a consequence of complex socio-historical and geopolitical factors, such as its distance from the centres, cultural-civilizational developmental delays, a hereditary weakness of the state, instability generating power abuse, as well as hierarchical and patriarchal social structures. As we have seen, a similar artistic attitude appears in Radu Jude's *Aferim!*, twenty years after Pintilie's film: in an apparently changed political context – Romania became member of the European Union – this film chooses events from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Walachia dominated by huge social inequalities as well as a Turkish and Greek influence, in order to allegorically illuminate a hierarchical contemporary Romanian society regressing to historical (Balkan) models instead of following progressive democratic programs. In fact, Boia's book and Pintilie's allegories represent the same discourse of a growing number of Romanian intellectuals (many of them members of the Society for Social Dialogue) criticizing the political comedy of the country: its paradoxical and chaotic aspect, its lack of authenticity and credibility, the tradition of incorrect games discrediting institutions and laws (cf. Boia 2012, 59–108). This political background implies a strong inferiority complex combined with periodic outbursts of national pride that finds an inspired visual figuration in miniatures, most elaborately in Pintilie's (until now) last short film, *Tertium Non Datur*.

## Miniaturization: Values under Reconstruction

As a figuration of endangered values, in *Too Late*, on the table of the state attorney, reluctant to solve the case of mysterious murders in the mining area, there are miniatures of Brâncuși's masterpieces, the *Column of the Infinite*, *The Gate of the Kiss* and the *Table of Silence*, looking fragile under a kitschy lamp that stands on a sturdy elephant-leg menacing to tramp over them, in a plastic figuration of how little Western European democratic and artistic values or local traditions count in the midst of socio-political anarchy [Figs. 10–13]. This image also alludes to the inferiority complex and loss of moral values of a society that does not appreciate progress and beauty or its intellectuals capable of ensuring the spiritual opening towards a democratic Europe. The two invasions of the miners in the capital city in the 1990s, evoked in the film through television documentaries, appear as a brutal force tramping over (beating up on the street) presumed intellectuals, men and women.

The use of miniature in Pintilie's film epitomizes Bachelard's thesis that the artistic imagination is capable of seeing the totality in the small, the individual drama and endangered cultural values exposed to great historical movements (1961, 157). According to Bachelard, the poet always sees the same thing, regardless of the microscope or telescope he uses: in the poetic vision resembling the augmenting gaze of children there is a constant transaction between small and grand: the microcosmos and macrocosmos are correlatives (1961, 157–159). The switch of scale in the image mentioned above confirms that the detail augments the objects, the miniatures exposed on the table becoming a shelter of (artistic) greatness and values (1961, 145–146). As Bachelard emphasizes, distance creates miniatures, but also isolates, revealing them as nests of solitude (1961, 159): Pintilie also warns that the distance ensuring this Lilliputian vision is too big to grant the possession of values represented by the miniature. This distance concerns both sides: for Western Europe, Romanian contribution to a shared cultural heritage is almost unknown, while for Romanians democratic, Western cultural values remain inaccessible, simple forms without content.

In *Aferim!*, the marionette play seen by the constable, his son and the captured Gypsies (the adult and the kid) on their way back to the boyar's, reveals a similar reflection of the great in the small, as well as an artistic distantiation obtained through a *mise en abyme* solution: the puppet show as miniature reflects upon both the actual story and its protagonists, as well as contemporary Romanian society and its stereotypical characters. The traditional Romanian puppet show *Mărioara*



and *Vasilache*, usually played in fairs and popular festivities, presents a cunning and intelligent character (*Vasilache*) who has the sympathy of the public despite being amoral, opportunist and disrespectful towards authority and women.<sup>10</sup> This description fits more than one protagonist of the film who keep voicing their racist, misogynistic and xenophobic opinions throughout and subordinate everything to their social ambitions. Intriguingly, the puppet show also discloses a society preserved in infancy by patriarchal authorities that treat adults as children and children as adults: the Gypsy boy is sold as a slave at the very same fair.

The miniature as metaphor of a national identity in which acute complex of inferiority and excesses of national pride coexist, finds its most elaborate representation and central narrative function in *Tertium Non Datur*. Set during the Second World War, this is the anecdotic story of an official meeting between Romanian officers with their allies, a German officer and his assistant of Eastern European origin. But what was meant to be a strategic encounter turns into a humiliating situation that, in the end, prompts the Romanian participants to reconsider their national and individual pride and patriotism. The scene of intercultural exchange that Ismail Xavier considers typical for the European cinematic production of the last two decades (2004, 360) is an obvious allegory of Romania's negotiations with the European Union, before becoming a member in 2007, just a few months after the release of Pintilie's film. The two officers represent two different attitudes of the European Union towards Eastern Europe in general and Romania in particular: indifferent distantiation (the German general does not utter a word during the meeting, remains distant and expressionless) and the curiosity of the collector, attracted by an exotic other (the enthusiastic assistant of the general). During dinner it turns out that the young officer has in possession a rare Romanian stamp of a considerable value with a Moldavian crest on it, one of the two existing in the world. The stamp gets lost unexpectedly and in a highly emotional and dramatic scene the Romanian general orders his officers to undress full monty to prove that nobody has stolen the valuable object. Eventually, it turns out that the stamp got stuck to a plate, the guests take their leave, and one of the officers confesses that he actually owns the other stamp, a present from his mother, a cherished amulet meant to protect him in need. However, after the aforementioned, humiliating scene he chooses to burn the stamp, a miniature figurating privacy and national pride, but turned into an

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10 It is worth mentioning that the marionette *Vasilache* appears in a contemporary Romanian novel as a figuration of the manipulated, brainwashed individual under communist dictatorship in Lucian Dan Teodorovici's *Matei the Brown* (2011).

image of the “other” by an external, Western gaze [Figs. 14–15]. The title (*Tertium Non Datur* – ‘no third option possible’) uttered by the assistant of the general in Latin to emphasize the limited number of the rare stamp, can also be interpreted as a reference to the confrontation between the two identity discourses modeled in the film: the national, patriotic one and that of the self-assumed “otherness.”

In the light of the analyses above and Ismail Xavier’s theoretical approach, allegory comes to express the historicity of human experience and values in times of social crisis, serving, in the cultural production of post-communist countries, the process of self-understanding and re-invention of national identity. As I have shown, intermedial references – either to painting as system (composition, iconography) or to individual art objects – are central ingredients of this allegorical approach. Intriguingly, these references, even those to Western art, do not serve the dissolution of cultural boundaries between East and West, on the contrary, they are emphasizing difference. As Lucian Boia points out in his book *Why is Romania different?*, this alterity is mainly due to historical delay, an essentially patriarchal and hierarchical society and a merely formal adoption of Western values. As we have seen, the new generation of Romanian film directors manages to sublimate the identity crisis by assuming and thematizing difference in many award-winning films. By doing so, they also orchestrate, in line with Xavier’s argumentation, the international affirmation of Romania through a cinema of “otherness” (2004, 352).

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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** Reminiscences of Byzantine, triangular iconography in the New Romanian Cinema: reference to Andrei Rublev’s *Troitsa* (1425–1427) and the iconic representation of the three patriarchs.



**Figures 3–4.** Byzantine iconography as reference in situations of hard decision and implementation of rules (*Beyond the Hills*, Cristian Mungiu, 2012), reflecting on an empty authority (*Police, Adjective*, Cristian Porumboiu, 2009).



**Figure 5.** Triangular composition used in a pseudo-theological conversation in Radu Jude's *Aferim!* (2015)



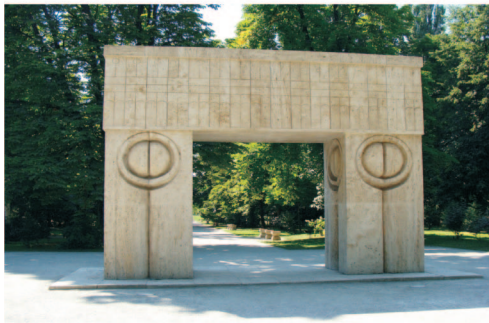
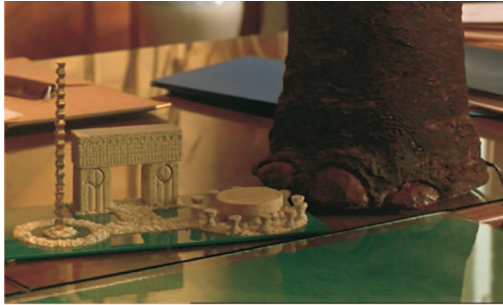
**Figures 6–7.** The debilitating effect of an authority keeping the population in the dark, conveyed with ironical theatricality inside triangular compositions in Lucian Pintilie's *Too Late (Prea târziu)*, 1996).



**Figures 8–9.** Reference to *The Sleeping Muse* of Constantin Brâncuși in *An Unforgettable Summer (O vară de neuitat)*, Lucian Pintilie, 1994), a figuration of endangered (European) values.



**Figures 10–13.** Kitschy miniatures of Brâncuși’s masterpieces on the table of the politician in *Too Late* (*Prea târziu*, Lucian Pintilie, 1996), standing for a provincial degradation of universal ideals and values.



**Figures 14–15.** The miniature (the stamp) as figuration of two different discourses on national identity in *Tertium Non Datur* (Lucian Pintilie, 2006).





# Magic Realism, Minimalist Realism and the Figuration of the Tableau in Contemporary Hungarian and Romanian Cinema

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**Abstract.** The paper surveys two modes of representation present in contemporary Hungarian and Romanian cinema, namely magic realism and minimalist realism, as two ways of rendering the “real” in the Central Eastern European geocultural context. New Hungarian Film tends to display narratives that share the features of what is generally assumed as being magic realist, accompanied by a high degree of stylization, while New Romanian Cinema is more attracted to creating austere, micro-realistic universes. The paper argues that albeit apparently being forking modes of representation that traverse distinct routes, magic realism and minimalist realism share a set of common elements and, what this study especially focuses on, converge in the preference for the tableau aesthetic. The paper examines the role of tableau compositions and *tableaux vivants* in representative films of the Young Hungarian Film and the Romanian New Wave, namely Szabolcs Hajdu’s *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010) and Cristian Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills* (*După dealuri*, 2012). An excessive use of the tableau can be detected in both films, with many thematic connections, in subtle interwovenness with female identity and corporeality performed as a site of traumatic experiences, upon which (institutional, colonial) power relations are reinscribed. The tableau as a figuration of intermediality performs the tension between the sensation of the “real” and its reframed image, and proves especially suitable for mediating between low-key realism and highly stylized forms.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** magic realism, minimalist realism, intermediality, tableau, trauma.

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## 1. Introduction. The Challenge of the “Real”

The paper addresses particular ways in which contemporary Hungarian and Romanian cinema accounts for what is sensed and labelled as “the Eastern European reality.” Since the fall of the communist regime in the Eastern bloc countries, the socio-cultural realities have undergone a sea-change and, at the same time, have preserved many aspects of the previous regime, resulting in a present, transitional state in-between “the post-communist condition” (Groys 2004)<sup>2</sup> and “capitalist realism” (Fischer 2009).<sup>3</sup> The past and present cultural landscape of these countries, marked by a general malaise following the euphoria of the regime change, arising from anomalies and incompatibilities – in the economic conditions, interpersonal relations and institutional systems, as well as due to the clash of global supermodernity and local, cultural and religious traditions – poses a challenge for all art forms that wish to come to terms with “the real” in this particular geocultural region, often perceived as “the Other” of (Western) Europe.

Contemporary Central Eastern European filmmaking, albeit obviously characterized by great generic, thematic and stylistic diversity, betrays a special appeal to the current socio-cultural realities with roots deep down in (20<sup>th</sup> century) history. Whether in the shape of lavish, carnivalesque or austere, low-key cinematic representations, whether in fictitious or “ready-made” narratives, the haunting, almost obsessive presence of this inescapable, grotesque and tragicomic reality of Eastern European existence can be detected – or at least, a wish to grab the essence of its *couleur locale* is present. In general, Eastern European films are characterized by the embeddedness into the specific cultural context and space, which, in particular cases, cannot avoid the traps of superficial, self-exoticising misrepresentation, but which constitutes an integral part of the aesthetic constructedness and international recognition of a great number of auteur films. The critical-theoretical reception of contemporary Eastern European cinema shares the view that the relationship among body, image, memory and narrative results in characteristically different figurations of identity and subjectivity than in Western Europe or other parts of the world (Győri and Kalmár 2013).

2 “(...) to speak of the post-communist condition means giving serious consideration to the historical event that communism was and earnestly inquiring what traces still remain of communism and to what degree the experience of communism still marks our present reality – but it also means asking why communism can at all be regarded as a mere historical intermission” (Groys 2004, 163).

3 “[Capitalist realism] is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher 2009, 16, emphasis in the original).



Central Eastern European cinema reflects the identity of the region marked by a sense of inferiority and marginality in relation to Europe “proper,” alongside an underlying skepticism towards the tendencies of globalization.

As special nuances on the palette of East Central European cinema, contemporary Hungarian and Romanian films are products – and reflections – of the same “trauma culture,” in the sense that many of their protagonists face crises, traumas or are on the way of processing traumas experienced in the recent communist past; they are trapped by identity patterns, places and institutions, and seek their identity by changing place, adrift in-between the East and the West (Király 2015). Andrea Virginás points at “a generational resemblance and a common sensibility” of the Romanian New Wave and the Hungarian Young/New Film, in terms of the innovatory style or mode of representation; the stories told; the objects, sites, places and human bodies represented; and cinematic allegories created on screen (Virginás 2011, 132). Besides this shared thematic and discursive complexity, however, various modes of representation can be distinguished in the contemporary cinema of the two neighbouring countries, together with various stylistic-rhetorical particularities deemed characteristic in films signed by Hungarian and Romanian directors respectively.<sup>4</sup>

The present study is aimed at investigating two particular ways of rendering the “the real” in Young Hungarian Film and New Romanian Cinema, namely the magic realist tendency characterizing the former and minimalist realism related to the latter. Certainly, it would be far-fetched to link these modes of representation to distinct national cinemas, so much the more that the transnational aspect of film production is increasingly gaining ground. However, on a comparative basis, New Hungarian Film tends to display narratives that share the features of what is generally assumed as being magic realist, accompanied by a high degree of stylization, while New Romanian Cinema is more attracted to creating austere, micro-realistic universes. With significant exceptions on both sides,<sup>5</sup> both discursive tendencies are inspired by and showcase the Eastern European socio-cultural realities, albeit resorting to distinct modes of constructing narratives and cinematic imagery.

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4 This study examines the specificities of Hungarian and Romanian cinema in terms of their discursive and rhetorical constructedness, ignoring further aspects of Eastern European cinema such as transnational production and domestic and international recognition, which are widely discussed in current specialist literature (see, for instance, Imre (ed.) 2012; Nasta 2013).

5 To bring counter-examples, the Hungarian *Father's Acre* (*Apaföld*, Viktor Oszkár Nagy, 2009) can be mentioned as a film akin in style to Romanian minimalist realism and the Romanian *Somewhere in Palilula* (*Undeva la Palilula*, Silviu Purcărete, 2012) as one sharing the characteristics of magic realism encountered in contemporary Hungarian films.

## 2. The Magic Realist Code in Young Hungarian Film

In the Hungarian prose of the 1990s the revival of a mode of writing stemming from, and displaying “locally adapted” versions of, classical magic realism can be detected. In these writings the Eastern European geocultural landscape emerges as a hybrid zone in terms of mixed ethnicity, superimposition of old/premodern and new/post-communist life and identity patterns, and the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary, which the narrative voice takes for granted and presents in its “already existing familiarity” (Jameson 1986, 304), in the spirit of magic realism where supernatural phenomena grow out organically from the depicted reality. A related tendency can be identified in Young Hungarian Film, especially among the directors belonging to the so-called Budapest Film School, whose productions are characterized by a penchant for creating visual universes similarly floating in-between the real and the unreal, allowing for excessive and carnivalesque modes of cinematic representation. With a new zest of storytelling and creativity, these cinematic narratives take us to the border zone of the real and the fantastic, where everyday absurdities come to life in form of ingenuous narrative twists and exuberant spectacle. The films that qualify for the label “magic realist” in contemporary Hungarian cinema present the social, cultural and ethnic diversity of Central Eastern European existence through the clash of the trivial and the extravagant, of the local and the global, the taste of adventure against the backdrop of plain and bitter realities. In these films, magic realism may appear as a genre-shaping dominant, e.g. in Szabolcs Hajdu’s films (*Tamara*, 2003, *Bibliothèque Pascal*, 2010), or as a quality adding to the visual rhetoric of films belonging to well-determined genres, e.g. in Diána Groó’s road movie entitled *Vespa* (2009). The expectation of a miracle, the fairy-tale like atmosphere characterizing some contemporary Hungarian film productions, such as the recent *Liza, the Fox-Fairy* (*Liza, a rókatündér*, Károly Ujj Mészáros, 2015), can be traced back to an existing tradition of visual stylization, abstraction and allegorical representation in Hungarian film history, in which Ildikó Enyedi’s films, pervaded by elements of legends, fairy tales and myths, represent a special nuance.<sup>6</sup> Thus,

6 In Ildikó Enyedi’s films, especially in the *Magic Hunter* (*Bűvös vadász*, 1994) and *Simon Magus* (*Simon Mágus*, 1999), “magic” is present both at a thematic level and as an inherent quality of cinematic representation. In this latter respect, the term “magic realism” was already used by Miklós Erdély, father-figure of the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde, with reference to the distinct quality of films made by Gábor Bódy, András Jeles, Béla Tarr and Péter Gothár in the 1970s and 1980s. Erdély tried to find the proper term for the new forms of expression through which these film directors sought – and found – ways to transgress the limits of filmmaking: “Some kind of realism... I don’t know: neorealism – isn’t it too used up? New neorealism – well, this is a

an openness of contemporary Hungarian film towards the mythical, the legendary, the miraculous, towards alternative modes of storytelling can be detected, shaping a multilayered Central Eastern European mythological space marked by a strange compound of familiarity and foreignness.

Magic realism, one of the most important trends in 20<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary fiction,<sup>7</sup> is perhaps also one of the most controversial terms of literary theory. The juxtaposition of “magic” and “realism” in the collocation tends to be conceived as an oxymoron, where two opposite meanings are set against each other; however, as Alejo Carpentier used the term *real maravilloso*, magic is an inherent quality of reality, it emerges from reality; reality is in itself magical. According to Wendy B. Faris, the basic requirement for a literary work to be included in the canon of magic realism is “a preponderance of realism that includes irreducible elements of significant magic in it” (Farris 2002, 102). Tamás Bényei regards magic realism as a *mode of writing* and proposes to discuss magic realism in terms of the poetical and rhetorical specificities inherent in magic realist novels. He speaks of “double condensedness”<sup>8</sup> characteristic of magic realism, at the level of the narrative code and that of figurative logic. Bényei contends that what is perceived as “magic” and “real” in a text is equally an effect created by the narrative. He emphasizes the performative, subversive and transgressive character of magic and outlines the figurative modality of magic realism in terms of: “ontological democracy” of the fantastic and the ordinary; subversion of boundaries; magic causality as a rhetorical trope; implementation of an analogous logic as opposed to the binary logic characteristic of rationalist thinking; the act of storytelling as the basic principle of magic realism; the importance of names and genealogy; hybridity, carnivalization; and ultimately, the poetics of excess that is present at all levels of the magic realist narrative (Bényei 1997).

Magic realism is essentially conjoined to socio-cultural realities where, despite the overwhelming impact of modernization, new technologies and the altered conditions of consumerism, there is an inherent premodern spirituality that these societies fall back on, accompanied by a simultaneous surrendering and resistance to the tendencies of globalization. Magic realism thus renders this amalgam of the premodern and the (post)modern, the local and the global, the central and the peripheral preserving a sense of in-betweenness and transitoriness.

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little convoluted. Surely, some kind of realism... Magic realism?” (Erdélyi 1991, 195, translation mine, J. P.)

7 Tamás Bényei defines magic realism as an internationally spread mode of representation constituting an integrative part of the postmodern discourse (Bényei 1997).

8 In the Hungarian original: “kettős zsúfoltság” (translation mine, J. P.).

The theoretical discourse around magic realism has been transferred to film as well. Frederic Jameson regards magic realism as “a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism” (1986, 302) and proposes to grasp the specificities of films creating poetic visual realities in terms of three representational codes that he calls *history*, *colour* and *narrative*. Jameson identifies this mode of representation in films that turn to recent historical events in close connection with the present, “history with holes, perforated history, which includes gaps not immediately visible to us, so close is our gaze to its objects of perception” (Jameson 1986, 303); colour, in Jameson’s usage, implies the perceptual heterogeneity inherent in these films; and he perceives some kind of narrative reduction that allows for the seamless manifestation of visual experience, “to the benefit of a seeing or a looking in the filmic present” (Jameson 1986, 321).

Aga Skrodzka examines the role of magic realism in the Central Eastern European self-understanding and self-representation, as a transnational phenomenon. The author contends that the Central Eastern European condition, often perceived as provincial and behind the times, arrested in recurrent patterns of transitoriness, particularly favours this anti-realist, alternative and subversive mode of representation. With antecedents, among others, in the Czechoslovak New Wave, there is a growing tendency in contemporary East Central European cinema to render augmented realities through carnivalesque imagery and grotesque stylization, to resort to the hybridity of the magic realist mode as a response to the hybrid formations to be found in this region, in terms of ethnicity, life standards, identity patterns, space perceptions, etc. Aga Skrodzka is preoccupied with the East Central European socioeconomic conditions that provide a fertile soil for the proliferation of this popular trend and discusses films set mostly in rural or small-town environments which set the trivial, the private against grand history and reenvision reality by combining the real and the unreal, the familiar and the uncanny. Traditionally linked to similar sociocultural conditions, the author suggests, magic realism proves to be a strategy of responding to processes imposed by history that are much beyond the control of the petty individual: “Magic realism helps the provincial subject to make sense of the centre-enforced currents of history by introducing a pause in history, by exposing history as always a mixture of magic and logic. This strategy is especially important when people are victimised by a history that they can neither control nor fully comprehend” (Skrodzka 2012, 2). Magic realism associated with the East Central European zone can also be discussed in postcolonial terms, both temporally, as a territory

recently liberated from under the Soviet ideological colonialism, and spatially, in terms of the “European colonization of its own margins” (Skrodzka 2012, 3).

### **3. Minimalist Realism in New Romanian Cinema**

Another direction of dealing with the Eastern European realities can be identified in New Romanian Cinema. Interestingly, the Czechoslovak New Wave is regarded to be the common root of both trends: magic realism and a more stringent, less flamboyant mode of representation, the much discussed austere realism of contemporary Romanian film. The awareness of this common root leads to the recognition of a number of shared features of these distinct modes of representation, namely the carnivalesque style, the sensitivity to the East Central European absurdities, and above all, black humor and (self-)irony. In contradistinction to magic realism, the realist discourse of New Romanian Cinema much relies on the toolkit of observational documentarism, albeit applied in fictional narratives.

In the attempt of grabbing the specificity of the kind of realist discourse introduced by the new generation of Romanian filmmakers in the 2000s, the creator of which is regarded to be Cristi Puiu – he lies its foundations in his first film *Stuff and Dough* (*Marfa și banii*, 2001) – Italian neorealism is often referred to as the film historical model for contemporary Romanian cinema, which did not have a similar neorealist period, as filmmaking in the 1950s was deeply compromised by the communist propaganda. Thus, historically, the realist mode may be regarded as a gap filling endeavour, however, its emergence cannot be limited to this diachronical aspect. Synchronically, as Radu Toderici (2014) points out, it can be placed in the wider context of European new realism of the 1990s, a kind of social realism employing peripheral characters who are emblematic for the social environment they belong to, and from the mid-1990s on, the emphasized tendency of the Dogma '95 reinventing the cinematic discourse of *cinéma vérité*.

Cristi Puiu's hand-held camera, present in the unfolding of the events as a supplementary character standing for an observing viewpoint, stands closest to the new realism of European filmmaking. The impetus provided by Cristi Puiu launches a cinematic discourse that is heterogeneous in terms of a great diversity of form and evolving into several directions even within the productions of one single film director, but homogeneous in terms of the “ambiguity of represented reality and the author's distance from its own subject matter. For this reason, the new films often delimit themselves from the ethical or the political; it is not accidental

that the major conflict within New Romanian Cinema has never been one related to subject matters but to style” (Toderici 2014, 149–150, translation mine, J. P.).

Although not all directors admit their categorization into any kind of film school (see Fulger 2006),<sup>9</sup> there seems to be a consensus in the critical discourse to speak about contemporary Romanian movies in terms of “New Wave” and to characterize their mode of representation in terms of realism, micro-realism, verism and documentary style. Doru Pop surveys the terminological variations of New Romanian Cinema (“new wave,” “post new wave,” “new-new wave”), offers an extended as well as a short list of filmmakers<sup>10</sup> and maps the common elements shared by films belonging to this trend, among which he mentions the penchant for documentary style filming; the preference for the long shot; realistic construction of space; unity of time and space; addressing direct and abrupt issues; authentic narratives; de-centred plots; breaking the “fourth wall;” contradiction between realism and theatrical representation; and recurrent iconographic references to religious Orthodox icons and masterpieces of art history in profanated reversals and mundane contexts (Pop 2010a).

Minimalist realism is a term widely used for New Romanian Cinema, grasping its specificities in terms of both subject matter (micro-realistic approaches with limited tendency of social allegorization; films concerned with “slices of life” of the recent past and the post-communist transition; *Kammerspiel* type family dramas, interpersonal conflicts, often banal, tragicomic situations placing in the centre the “everyman” – anti-heroes, provincial and petty figures – of contemporary Romanian society) and style (minimalist handling of time and space; lack of non-diegetic music; minimalist setting, *mise-en-scène* and character construction; understated acting; the employment of the fixed frontal camera position; the preference for long takes shot in real time; closeness to documentary style). In the chapter *Less is More. Puiu, Porumboiu, Muntean and the Impact of Romanian Film Minimalism* of her book on contemporary Romanian cinema, Dominique Nasta discusses Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu and Radu Muntean as the three most important representatives of minimalist realism, with the significant contribution of the script writer and novelist Răzvan Rădulescu, who wrote many of the scripts of the Romanian art films directed in the 2000s. Minimalism primarily refers to low-key realism as the preferred filmmaking practice of these film directors, their films, however, are by far not minimalist in terms of their

9 Mihai Fulger includes the following film directors in the Romanian New Wave: Nae Caranfil, Thomas Ciulei, Alexandru Solomon, Cristi Puiu, Hanno Höfer, Cristian Mungiu, Florin Iepan, Radu Muntean, Cătălin Mitulescu, Tudor Giurgiu, Constantin Popescu and Corneliu Porumboiu.

10 Cristi Puiu, Radu Muntean, Corneliu Porumboiu, Cristian Mungiu and Cătălin Mitulescu.

affective potential, what is more, in any utilizable sense of the term, as Andrei Gorzo states prior to the release of Nasta's volume, polemically arguing against the superficial use of generalizing conceptual terms such as minimalism or realism in connection with New Romanian Cinema (Gorzo 2012).

#### **4. Convergences in the Tableau Aesthetic**

These two distinct modes of representation, the former aimed at excess and ornamentation, the latter at minimalism and austere realism, constitute alternatives to rendering the feeling – and trauma – of experiencing the Central Eastern European human condition. The innovatory style of both is evident, and a great bulk of films are preoccupied with the representation of dreary and dilapidated post-communist sites and of bodies as carriers of power relations; however, sensing the “real” seems to emerge in distinct templates.

I argue that albeit apparently being forking modes of representation that traverse distinct routes, the so-called magic realism and minimalist realism in Hungarian and Romanian cinema respectively, do share a set of common elements and, what this study especially focuses on, converge in the preference for the tableau aesthetic. I also argue that what is generally regarded as “minimalism” apparently aimed at sensing the real as an experience of immediacy, at fulfilling the spectator's “insatiable desire for immediacy,” actually achieves this by creating a highly poetical and painterly universe, providing hypermediated experiences of “reality” according to the “twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy” in Bolter and Grusin's sense of the terms (1999, 5). According to the theorists of remediation, “[h]ypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real” (1999, 53). They base their argumentation on Derrida's concept of mimesis, conceived not objectively or ontologically, i.e. in the sense of a relation of resemblance between representation and the represented object, but intersubjectively, in the sense of the reproduction of the impression of resemblance in the perceiving subject: “‘True’ *mimesis* is between two producing subjects and not between two produced things” (Derrida 1981, 9, emphasis in the original). Bolter and Grusin highlight the interdependence of the immediacy and hypermediacy of experience by noting that even the most hypermediated media productions may strive for, or can result in, a sense of immediacy. Such instances of interconnectedness are what Ágnes Pethő (2009, 49) calls “hypermediated cinematic experiences of the real;” at the same time, she emphasizes the role of

intermedial practices in the encounters of these – not at all antagonistic – modes of representation.

In her recent studies (2014, 2015) Ágnes Pethő points out the great diversity of the use of *tableaux vivants* and tableau compositions in contemporary Central and Eastern European cinema as autonomous images arresting the cinematic flow and emerging as sites of medial in-betweenness. While, according to Brigitte Peucker, the *tableau vivant* “figures the introduction of the real into the image – the living body into painting – thus attempting to collapse the distance between the signifier and the signified” (Peucker 2007, 31), Ágnes Pethő contends that “the tableau does not attempt to merge representation with the real and to collapse the distance between signifier and signified, but emerges as a site for cultivating their distance in the opposition of sensual form and abstract meaning, moving image and static painting, live bodies in action and objects contemplated as a visual display, framing their intricate plays of in-betweenness” (Pethő 2014, 53). The medial in-betweenness of the tableau as an instance of “figured permeability” (Peucker 2007, 9) between the real and the image proves highly suitable for rendering the manifold aspects of in-betweenness profoundly characterizing the experience of the “real” in this region.

In order to illustrate the convergence of magic realism and minimalist realism in the figure of the tableau, I wish to refer to two films that stand for the paradigms under discussion, Szabolcs Hajdu’s *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010) and Cristian Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills* (*După dealuri*, 2012). Thematically, the two films share a set of common elements: they deal with unsettled – and unsettling – female fates experiencing and processing trauma (with more or less success), adrift between the East and the West and struggling to find their places between the desired intimacy and safety of private life and the abusing institutions they confront with, the brothel and the monastery respectively. Both films are preoccupied with female trauma and corporeality, exhibiting the female body as a carrier of the spirit of the place and of power relations. In a sense, magic is also a common element, albeit with opposite signs: in Hajdu’s film it appears at the level of metadiegesis, Mona’s act of storytelling being a means of “saving” the protagonist from death, whereas in Mungiu’s film it is present at a diegetic level, irrational, magical thinking characterizing the institutions of the monastery and the hospital, as residues of medieval mentality, leading to the protagonist’s decease.



#### 4.1. Szabolcs Hajdu: *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010)

Szabolcs Hajdu's *Bibliothèque Pascal* is regarded in Hungarian criticism as the peak of the director's exuberant magic realist style. Actually, the film combines austere realism, to be found in the frame story of the narrative, and magic realism, present in the embedded story, only to subvert and subtly relativize this diegetic antagonism by the end of the film. The story begins in the children's guardianship office, where the protagonist, Mona Saparu, has to give account of her recent past in order to gain back the custody of her child, as she has worked some time abroad and left behind her little daughter. Mona tells the story of her encounter with Viorel, the father of their future daughter, a man with the magical capacity of projecting inner dreams. They experience a fantastic common dream in which they wear traditional costumes. Viorel, wanted by the police, will be killed; their daughter, Viorica, inherits the magical capacity. In her attempt to find work abroad to raise her child, Mona falls victim to human trafficking, being sold as a prostitute. She gets to Bibliothèque Pascal, a bizarre luxury brothel in Liverpool, frequented by personalities of high rank, where the women are held in chambers and reenact literary figures such as St. Joan, Desdemona or Lolita. Mona is forced to reenact St. Joan first; then, as a punishment, she will be forced into Desdemona's role in latex suit. In the meantime, in her absence, her daughter is abused of by her aunt, who will make shows for money out of the child's dreams visible for others. The ultimate reality of Mona's being a sexual commodity turns into the realm of magic: the brass band led by Mona's father emerges from Viorica's dream and rescues Mona from the brothel right when she is almost asphyxiated in her role of Desdemona in bizarre circumstances. This is the story that Mona tells the official, but he rejects it, in his report he translates the magical story into a "real" one. However, he does not remain untouched by Mona's account and will finally give the custody to the mother. The film ends with the image of the mother and daughter in a cosy family scene, accompanied by the lofty tones of the *Holy Night*; however, it becomes obvious for the spectator that they are in an IKEA shop like simulacrum environment where they enact the familial scene; the camera also unveils the film director's presence, by this the film gains an additional framework, a metareferential touch.

It is at hand to interpret the film as an East Central European redemption story; the multiple narrative structure is built upon jigsaw puzzles of social realities (the fate of an unmarried mother, enforced migration and prostitution) combined with a retreat into the fantasy world with the implied ironical suggestion that

salvation is only possible through “divine” intervention. As Bényei notes, the act of magic is invoked when there appears a gap, a fissure in our relationship with the world, and we try to fill the gap by resorting to some non-rational force or forum (Bényei 1997, 94). The diegesis of the film, with the implied metaleptic turn, that is, the border crossing between the “real” and the “magical,” seems to confirm this argument.

*Bibliothèque Pascal* intersects the postcolonial discourse at several points. The film unveils the contemporary European scene as a heterogeneous territory carrying the residual traces of colonizing power relations. Mona’s subjective narrative told from a double – ethnic and gender – minority position contrasted with the objective viewpoint of the official may be regarded as the repressed, silenced voice of the colonized; the marvellous element of her narrative grows out of, and seems to be compensating for, this subjected position. Mona, the enforced prostitute, and Pascal, the name giver of the Liverpool brothel, reproduce, again, a colonial relation. The Eastern European female emigrant’s road intersects the path of the Albanian emigrant taking up his quarters in the Western world and basing his living upon the exploitation of other emigrants.

The film does fit into the magic realist paradigm: it contains “the irreducible element of significant magic” (Farris 2002, 102), that is, the magical capacity of projecting dreams shared by father and daughter, Viorel and Viorica, organically sewn into the texture of the film narrative, which confers playfulness at the level of the narrative and a high degree of stylization to the film, resulting in the “double condensedness” of magic realism. In line with the magic realist centeredness upon storytelling, here the act of narration is also of crucial importance: the embedded story, related by Mona to the guardianship official, is the product of a narrative transaction between man and woman evoking the archetype of the Arabian Nights (storytelling as the condition of survival, the implied magic of stories). The woman’s surrealist story meets a sceptic male listener, with an additional contrast between the spoken and the written word, evoking the age-old debate between oral and written culture (their opposition is displaced in the closure, when the official refuses to record the heard story in writing, still, yields to the power of storytelling, noting down a negotiated “official” version of truth, which ultimately reverses the relationship between fiction and reality). The centrality of dreams (the father’s and daughter’s magical capacity of making their dreams visible for others) is also a magical realist characteristic, similarly to the importance and determining power of names (Mona’s name predestines her to the enactment of *Desdemona*’s role in the luxury brothel; in the case of father and daughter, the

passing on of the name, Viorel–Viorica, entails the inheritance of the magical zest). The film also exhibits the transgressive and subversive character of magic (magic intervenes in situations of exposedness and entrapment) as a singular form of resistance to reality. Hybridization appears at several levels: as mixed language usage (there appear six languages spoken in the film, signaling uneven interpersonal relations and social disparities); at the level of ethnic belonging (the protagonist is half Romanian, half Hungarian, “*jumi-juma*” ‘fifty/fifty,’ as she says, reflecting the hybrid character of Transylvania, a contact zone with a mixed ethnic population; the owner of the luxury brothel is an emigrated Albanian, etc.); in terms of manifold cultural references (the diegesis of the film embraces Eastern and Western locations, juxtaposing dilapidated post-communist settings and exuberant Western luxury places); as a generic mix (the women’s transport by train, through the La Manche tunnel, to become prostitutes in the West evokes the tradition of slave narratives; the female protagonist’s vicissitudes call forth the pattern of the road movie); and, last but not least, intermedial connections, the presence of the other arts (painterly, theatrical, literary references and their convergence in the utilization of the tableau).

In terms of form, I wish to argue that the heterogeneity of magic realism is taken over by the representational heterogeneity of the tableau. Whether present as tableau shots/compositions or *tableaux vivants*,<sup>11</sup> tableau moments in film, conjoining painting, sculpture and theatre, stand for a sort of “intensified intermediality,” as Brigitte Peucker suggests.<sup>12</sup> The tableau, as a particular site of representational hybridity, arrests the flow of moving images, confers them a touch of perceptual difference, and initiates an especially fruitful dialogue between the “real” and its artistic rendition. The tableau aesthetic intersects the magic realist representational mode at several points. First and foremost, what connects them is the desire for excess. “Excess is the hallmark of the [magic realist] mode” (Zamora and Farris, 2005, 1); similarly, tableau moments confer the cinematic image a sense of saturation and density. Further on, the transgressive and

11 According to Ágnes Pethő, “the *tableaux vivants* proper (i.e. images imitating a particular painting or sculpture) together with other, similar techniques in cinema (static, *tableau*-like shots, inserts of photographs, and photographic reproductions of paintings) not only reflect on the connections between the visual arts, but, perhaps even more importantly, enclose and cultivate almost irreconcilable extremes: from a sensation of corporeality in pictures coming alive as embodied paintings to the distancing effect generated by conspicuous artificiality and stylization” (Pethő 2014, 54).

12 “Tableau vivant moments in film set up a tension between the two – and three – dimensional, between stasis and movement, between the ‘death’ of the human body in painting and its ‘life’ in cinema. Further, because tableau vivant exists at the nodal point that joins painting, sculpture and theatre, its evocation in film is a moment of intensified intermediality” (Peucker 2007, 26).

performative character of the magic realist representational mode also provides a contact surface with the transgressive and performative structure of the tableau. Whereas magic realism is transgressive in a narrative sense, in terms of crossing the boundaries of the “real” and the “magical,” the tableau is transgressive in a medial sense.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the “magical” finely sewn into the texture of the magic realist discourse is congruent with the enigmatic stance of the tableau in film: “The tableau in film is in itself an *a*-narrative figure which may however work its way into the fiction as metaphor, a secret: a representation that hides another. As Bonitzer points out, ‘[as] parody, homage or enigma, the shot-tableau always provokes a splitting of vision and gives the image a quality of a mystery, whether in the religious or in the detective-story sense’”<sup>14</sup> (Vidal 2012, 120).

Szabolcs Hajdu’s film under discussion much relies on the performative power of the tableau. It abounds in images serving to create visual excess on the screen; at several turns of the film the visual excess changes into haptic imagery, effect which is achieved through the intervention of tableau moments. The magic element inherent in the film narrative and the enigma posed by the tableau converge in the figure of the female protagonist. Mona’s figure is repeatedly captured in long takes, from a fixed frontal camera angle, the protagonist looking into the camera, in a series of tableau compositions slightly reminiscent of Frida Kahlo’s painterly autobiography (cf. Sándor 2014). The enigma is Mona herself; it is perhaps not accidental that *Mona Lisa*, the indecipherable enigma of the history of painting, also resounds in her name. Her cinematic portraits, inserted in the flow of her subjective narration, display the female figure who is simultaneously the subject matter and the agent of narration, the object and the owner of the gaze. This tension is perhaps most powerfully made perceivable through the protagonist’s direct address; the tableau moments capture her as the object of the (male) gaze but which looks back and thus resists the panoptical gaze and her total reification as sexual commodity. [Figs. 1–2.]

The encounter of Mona and Viorel, rendered in a series of tableau compositions, is perhaps “the most magical” moment of the film. [Figs. 3–4.] Mona cannot leave Viorel, who has taken her hostage, because the man’s dream comes to life in front

13 “I regard the cinematic tableau not only as a unit defined by certain fixed and flexible parameters, as a set of stylistic markers, but as a highly *transgressive* and *performative* structure. The tableau is always able to bring forth the intermediality of cinema as a productive in-betweenness, assigning the form of one medium (e.g. painting, photography, theatrical *mise-en-scène*) to act as a medium for a specific figure (the tableau shot) in the other medium (cinema)” (Pethő 2015, 41).

14 Reference: Bonitzer, Pascal. 1985. *Décadrages. Cinema et Peinture*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/l’Étoile. Author’s translation.

of her eyes; the surface of the “real” is torn up and giving way to oneiric wonder. On a next tableau shot they sit face to face, wearing folk costumes of different ethnicity, Transylvanian and Spanish respectively, and their environment gets animated in the spirit of magic realist novels. This shot, together with the accompanying oneiric portraits of the woman and the man, represents a highly stylized, ornamental type of tableau, blending the “real” and the unreal, which may evoke in the spectator the densely decorated, gilt texture of Orthodox icons. As Katalin Sándor (2014, 83) writes, “[t]he projection of the dream, the uncanny in the animation of static pictures questions the delimitability of the living, the corporeal and the phantasmatically pictorial or oneiric, exposing Mona’s narrative in which the imaginary, the unreal infuse or disrupt the real in a peculiar mode of interpreting the world.” The *tableau vivant* presenting Viorel’s execution at the seaside is rendered through a multiplied intertextual reference to *La Belle Captive* (Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1983) [Figs. 5–6], which reconnects to Édouard Manet’s series of paintings *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867–68) in a Magrittean reframing. [Figs. 7–8.] Both films are concerned with metaleptic transgressions between dreams as inner, mental images and paintings/culturally coded images, which Mónika Dánél interprets as a metacinematic gesture, as the intimacy of the cinematic image capable of projecting the inner images of the spectators’ private visual archives (cf. Dánél 2011, 2015).

The corporeality of the tableau, being traditionally concerned with “making real,” provides a liminal surface where the female subject turns into an arrested image. Mona’s figure challenges the representational layering of the tableau: besides evoking painting in the aforementioned manner, she is also connected to the theatre (she performs puppet theatre in a fair) and sculpture (in latex suit as Desdemona, rendered almost dead, in the last brothel scene). Mona’s story is about the gradual loss of freedom, and the tableau moments play a key role in visually rendering this downward process. Mona finds herself in ever narrower spaces, from being held hostage by Viorel in the seaside cottage, through being taken prisoner, travelling by train in close confinement and being locked in a brothel room, to the final brothel scene where the space around her is restricted to the latex suit she is dressed in and the latex bag providing only a mouthful of air (cf. Varga 2015). The various hypostases of her captivity are rendered through tableau shots that suggest entrapment. The series of tableau compositions staging the rooms in the brothel evoke the “other” tradition of the tableau, that of pornographic *tableau vivants*. As the title of the film suggests, the Liverpool luxury brothel is conceived as a library – a heterogeneous place in itself – where

prostitutes reenact canonical personalities of Western literature. St. Joan, Lolita, Pinocchio, Dorian Gray and Desdemona are all roles that evoke possessive relations and perform instances of reification of the Other. [Figs. 9–10.] These tableau shots stage the appropriation of the (female) body and perform the state of being enslaved within the image, enframed by the appropriated narrative/dramatic text. The magical moment of the rescue – Mona’s father emerging out of Viorica’s dream, leading a brass band and liberating Mona from the brothel – is a narrative metalepsis set against this visual-corporeal entrapment.

The final scene of the film, Mona and Viorica “playing family” in an IKEA or KIKA shop, offers yet another tableau composition: they are boxed in an artificial environment which, for some moments, the viewer perceives as real but which then turns out to be only a simulacrum of reality. The genre image of harmonious domestic life accompanied by the tunes of the *Holy Night* blends pathos and irony; the tableau is then reframed by the presence of the director’s figure, which is simultaneously a gesture of cinematic self-reflexivity and of relativizing the notions of “fiction” and “reality.” In Hajdu’s film magic realism rendered through the tableau aesthetic performs the deconstruction of “reality” and measures the power of words and that of images against each other. Mona’s narrative will prevail in the end, by virtue of the atavistic power of words stemming from a “reality” that is, in essence, “magical.”

#### **4.2. Cristian Mungiu: *Beyond the Hills* (*După dealuri*, 2012)**

In line with the credo of the New Romanian Cinema, Cristian Mungiu generally draws on stories that are profoundly embedded in social and geocultural realities. In interviews he emphasizes his interest in stories that he knows and his express intent of making his films as realistic as possible. In connection with his film entitled *Occident* (2002) he said: “I drew on real stories. [...] I can only tell stories that I know. I wanted it to be very realistic.” (Mungiu qtd. in Nasta 2013, 186) The event that serves as the inspiration of his *Beyond the Hills* (2012), namely the exorcism of a young nun by an Orthodox priest and four nuns at the Monastery of Tanacu, ending in the novice’s death, is a story that everybody knew in Romania in 2005, as it stirred great media scandal. The circumstances of the traumatic event divided public opinion at the time: for nonbelievers the event got contoured as an evidence of medieval mentality propagated by the Orthodox Church, adding to the negative image of Romania at the threshold of entering the European Union; within the group of believers, some had to reconsider

their relation with the Orthodox Church, others put the blame on its members implied in the event. The event generated further interpretations: as a reaction to the strong opinions formulated in the media, the journalist Tatiana Niculescu Bran published a nonfictional novel entitled *Deadly Confession (Spovedanie la Tanacu, 2006)*, written with the claim of documenting the real life events. In spite of the intent of documenting the events, there is a touch of subjectivity characterizing Bran's account of the events; the "close reading" of the novice nun's tragical story is completed with a suggestive and dramatic representation of her being possessed, with the presentation, by resorting to literary devices, of the parallel world unfolding in her mind inhabited by her devils inside. Thus, to a good extent, subjectivity overwrites the nonfictional stance claimed on the cover of the book. The book was written, as the author said, with the intent of correcting the media image of the event.

The reception history of the Tanacu event continued in 2007 with a theatrical adaptation, the performance of The Andrei Șerban Travelling Academy entitled *Deadly Confession/Spovedanie la Tanacu*, the result of cooperation between Andrei Șerban and Tatiana Niculescu Bran, presented on the stage of the La MaMa Theatre in New York and at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest respectively. The stage performance also aimed at staying close to the "real" event, however, the documentary purport was, again, blurred by symbolic elements and by the implied aim of exercising an emotional impact upon the audience. In the following year Tatiana Niculescu Bran published another book, entitled *Judges' Book (Cartea Judecătorilor, 2008)*, which deals with the trial of the priest and the four nuns implied in the ritual of exorcism. As it can be seen, artistic representations join in the debate stirred by the media, transforming it into a field of investigation and formulating possible artistic responses. There is a struggle for getting closer to truth in the various transmediations, the "real" being "there" as a puzzle awaiting to be solved but at the same time evaporating behind the generic-stylistic conventions of distinct artistic media.<sup>15</sup> The reception history of the Tanacu event, encompassing literature, theatre and also film through Mungiu's contribution, truly dramatizes a process of signification in which the "real" as the ultimate signified becomes unattainable in the Derridean sense of the infinite regress of the "real."

In 2012 the release of Mungiu's film reopened the field of discussion. The film relies on the previous literary and theatrical transmediations but cuts back

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15 For a detailed analysis of the reception history of the Tanacu event, with a special focus on its artistic transmediations, see Iftene (2013).

the subjective and mystical aura created around the Tanacu event. It renders the “real” behind the veil of fiction by changing the names of the protagonists (the victimized nun, Irina Maricica Cornici appears as Alina and her childhood friend, Paraschiva, is named Voichița) and also by locating the scene of action in a fictitious place, referred to in the title as a nowhere place, without exact coordinates but imaginable anywhere, similar to the story which becomes emblematic of the spatio-temporal and spiritual confinedness of particular social layers in Romania. Besides this spatial (non-)reference, the “beyond” in the title may have further associations: in the context of the transmedial search for truth, it may be read as an imperative that urges us to look “beyond” the facts and restage the happenings at a more universal level; it may also be interpreted as bearing transcendental, metaphysical connotations, which become the target of cinematic rendition.

The story is “simple:” Alina, an orphan girl returning from Germany where she has been working, visits her childhood friend, Voichița, who is now a nun in a monastery from Moldova, a place ripped from time and space, “beyond the hills,” with the intention of convincing her to go with her to Germany. However, Voichița’s onetime affection towards her has turned into profound religiousness. Although Voichița has a passport made, she cannot make up her mind to leave with Alina, she sticks to the monastery, which triggers Alina’s alienation from the place. The film suggests that Alina is burdened by past experiences (especially the affection beyond friendship between the two girls which used to compensate for the lack of love in the orphanage) that are interpreted as “sins” within the monastery and she is urged to confess. Alina shows the first signs of deep distress; after the first crises she is hospitalized and then taken back to the monastery. She does not find her place there, she is taken back to her foster parents but there she faces the situation that she has been “replaced” with another girl; she decides to go back to the monastery. When she realizes that there is no place for her anywhere (Voichița can no longer love her the way she used to because she has devoted herself to God; her family has virtually disowned her; the monastery has deprived her of much of her saved money on behalf of the compulsory “contribution to the monastery,” and although she has confessed, the symptoms of her illness return), her crises become so wild that at a certain point she is tied (with the rope of the bell and the chain of the dog), then subjected to the process of exorcism, during which the priest reads Saint Basil Prayers of Exorcism above her chained body in order to relieve her from the devil inside. In the process of weakening “the evil within her,” she does not resist and the priest and the nuns



awake realizing that they have committed a crime. The film ends with their being taken to the police.

Mungiu's film translates the Tanacu event into the troubled relationship between the two female protagonists whose intimate bond has been disturbed by the evolution of their destiny, adrift among the non-places<sup>16</sup> and heterotopias of contemporary society that provide only transitory patterns of identity (orphanage, Western workplace, monastery, foster parents' home, hospital, police). In this respect, *Beyond the Hills* reverberates with *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, Cristian Mungiu, 2007) as the story of a friendship facing a moral test; this time the events are set in the post-communist period, marked by the institutional legacy of communism and by the legacy of the Middle Ages in terms of mentality. It is the institution of religion, together with the medical institution, that victimize the protagonist, outlining a moral scheme in which no one is to be blamed, everyone has their own truth. An intimate family atmosphere at the monastery, caring benevolence that surrounds Alina – still, her death is deemed as murder. While nobody can be individually blamed for, the protagonist seems to be victimized by a whole social apparatus, an accumulation of individual irresponsibilities leading to her death. In the light of the girl's unusual and mysterious pathological case the deficiencies of both the Orthodox Church and the Romanian medical system are revealed. In the distorted mirror of Alina's illness, the film points at the transitory state and disfunctionality of Romanian social organization.

The film continues the minimalist mode of representation characteristic of Romanian New Wave and of Mungiu's earlier films. The almost obsessive use of long takes, claustrophobic shots and fixed frontal camera angle creates the effect of visual entrapment and renders a slice of Romanian "reality" stuck in a rural, premodern way of life and breathing medieval mentality. Life in the monastery is centred on the "father figure" of the priest; Alina's case displaces his unwavering authority and confronts the religious micro-community with its own limits. The film, however, does not exercise direct criticism, but rather entrusts the spectator with this task, a characteristic which is also in line with the discourse of the New Romanian Cinema. Instead of exercising direct moral judgement, the film creates painterly images, powerful enough to turn the moving image into a contact zone of unsettling intermedial encounter.

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16 "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 1995, 77–78).

The film betrays the penchant for iconographic references, for “imaginary symbolism” that Doru Pop lists among the features of the Romanian New Wave and identifies especially in Cristian Mungiu’s and Corneliu Porumboiu’s film art. Their cinematic practice powerfully relies on the utilization of cinematic references to masterpieces of the history of painting, alongside compositions in the spirit of Orthodox icons in profane contexts, reversing their original signification and displaying patterns of cultural-spiritual emptiness or emphasizing the grotesque-ironical aspect of the particular situation (Pop 2010a). Mungiu’s great achievement in this film is that he chooses to relate a story that thematically motivates the introduction of references to Orthodox religious icons, upon which a subtle metathematic, even metacinematic reference will be layered.

*Beyond the Hills* abounds in tableau compositions; it is perhaps not exaggerating to say that it renders the story virtually through tableau shots. Alina’s arrival at the nowhere place of the monastery is rendered in a landscape tableau shot, in which the tiny figures of the two girls appear against the vast panorama of the landscape, with the village and mountains in the background, suggesting the power of the place that swallows the powerless individual doomed to become one with the place. Later, Alina and Voichița are represented indoors, sitting on the bed in Voichița’s room, at the outset of Alina’s staying in the monastery; she hopes that they can return to their former intimacy, but Voichița has distanced from her; the two-figure tableau composition makes perceivable the feeling of loss and foreshadows Alina’s downturn. Actually, both the open-air and the interior tableau shots stage the heroines’ confinedness and entrapment. [Figs. 11–12.]

The almost obsessive utilization of the tableau opens up an intermediary space between cinema and painting, the latter providing not simply the painterly quality of moving images but, much more significantly, the impetus for evoking the invisible “beyond” the visible. And this is the point where the thematic layer of the film resonates with a metacinematic layer, namely the – old and new – theoretic discourse of the “real” in cinematic representation. The film goes “beyond” the concerns of realistically representing a real event and doing justice in moral terms, and engages in a discussion, held over the decades of film history, about the relation between the visible and the invisible, situated at the core of the metaphysics of the moving image. The presence of painterly references raises in the spectator this metaphysical expectation; the film masterfully counterpoints this by simultaneously pointing at and withdrawing the metaphysical aura of the images, resulting in a subtle game of deconstruction, showing the presence as absence, turning the invisible into a metaphysical hole. The tableau shots

in Mungiu's film constitute intermedial figurations where the immanent, the material, meant to bring forth the transcendental, the spiritual, becomes the signifier of absence. It is this absence, the lack of divinity, the regress of the transcendental signified that is inscribed in the profanated appropriations of cultic images of religion and art.

The majority of tableau shots in the film, finely woven into the texture of realist representation, reconfigure the iconography of Orthodox icons, creating triadic compositions reminiscent of the classical icons. The Orthodox icon is a sacred image, the portrait of Divinity; its name suggests the idea of the perfect "copy" of the image of Christ. The primeval model of the icon is the Veil of Veronica as the first instance of material representation of the face of Christ. In the Orthodox religious practice, the icon serves to mediate between the earthly and the otherworldly as the image of another reality that is *more real* than the earthly world. Thus, it is at hand to create the analogy between the icon and the cinematic image, which carries on itself the imprint of reality as the Veil of Veronica according to André Bazin's realist aesthetic.<sup>17</sup>

In the practice of New Romanian Cinema, the iconography of the Orthodox icon is intensely utilized and subverted in profane contexts. In *Beyond the Hills*, the series of tableau shots, thematically grounded in the religious context, are not only restricted to the genre images of life in the monastery but also extend to slices of life outside it, and offer a great diversity of the triadic composition, rendering more and more grotesque representations, replacing religious iconographic elements with everyday objects (e.g. a grid of eggs, a huge teddy bear) which become markers of the profane that seeks its way into the sacred, documenting the process of Alina's downfall. [Figs. 13–16.] Above the doctor's seat in the hospital room there hangs a triptych-like composition which consists of an Orthodox icon, a landscape painting and a reproduction of *Mona Lisa*, the ironic effect being amplified by the "Holy Trinity" of those present: the male doctor dressed in white in the centre, facing the camera, and the two female figures, Voichița and the prioress, dressed in black, facing him, and turning their back to the camera. This "mundane trinity" confronts Alina's "helpers," the – similarly patriarchal – medical system, the Orthodox Church as well as her friend, and mocks at their inertia when faced with Alina's case. [Fig. 16.]

17 As Doru Pop expounds on this analogy: "In the same way the icons 'capture' an essence that is beyond the reality of this world and the materiality of the support, cinema's essence is beyond the reality it needs in order to transmit a message. Like the icon, cinema is projected on a surface – the screen is only an intermediary between the viewer and the reality (never present) that is viewed" (Pop 2010b, 82).

Besides the great number of tableau shots evoking the Orthodox icon, and above all, the *Trinity*, in mundane configurations, suggesting a kind of predeterminedness by the representational tradition, the film abounds in various types of tableau compositions. Such is the group representation of the priest and nuns emotionally reacting to the happenings that disturb the peaceful life in the monastery, created in the spirit of Caravaggesque dramatism, making use of the *chiaroscuro* effect. Further on, the tableau compositions of table scenes should be mentioned, devised, again, in line with the iconography of Orthodox icon painting. New Romanian Cinema abounds in table scenes; let me only refer here to the supper sequence of Mungiu's *432*, lasting for more than six minutes, a real *tour de force* which makes use of the off-screen space and simultaneously places the protagonist visually in central position and aurally at the periphery (cf. Nasta 2013). Similarly, in *Beyond the Hills*, the tableau compositions representing table scenes also perform this simultaneously central and peripheral position of Alina's, showing the germ of her gradual alienation from the religious community, especially the one which shows the priest positioned in the centre of the image in the foreground, turning his back to the camera, accompanied by the nuns on either side; Alina is positioned off-frame,<sup>18</sup> which is indicative of her exclusion as the "other" of the patriarchal community. The crowded composition characterizing the film's table scenes may evoke in the spectator the famous representation of *The Last Supper* created by one of the leading 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian icon painters, Simon Ushakov. [Figs. 17–18.]

Finally, the performative character of the tableau should be mentioned. The excessive use of tableau compositions performs a predetermined "reality," suggesting entrapment and stigmatizing the female body. In one of the final sequences of the film, Alina's living corpse, at the threshold of death, is isolated in a separate building in the yard of the monastery. [Fig. 19.] The tableau composition that shows Alina's lying body following the process of exorcism, unchained by Voichița, then left alone and arrested in a long take, represents the body in-between life and death, in a spiritual vacuum. Thus, the exorcized nun's story, relating the quest for identity against the backdrop of the patriarchal order of the Orthodox Church, turns into an unsettling story of sacrifice.

18 Ágnes Pethő distinguishes between "off-screen" and "off-frame" as follows: "the *tableau* shot is usually remarkable not only for what it boxes in but also for what it boxes out. As opposed to the notion of 'off-screen,' which denotes according to Pascal Bonitzer (2000) an imaginary/fictional dimension, 'off-frame' can be conceived as an actual, material space, outside the cutting edge of the frame encompassing both the extension of the diegetic world and the space of the spectator facing the screen" (Pethő 2015, 51).

## 5. Conclusions

To conclude, there are many thematic elements that connect the two films discussed above, belonging to the magic realist and minimalist realist codes respectively (e.g. the traumatized female body; the implosion of female identity and individuality within exploiting institutional framework; spatial and temporal entrapment; the presence of magic; the power of the spoken word, albeit with opposite signs). In both cases the medium of manifestation of the magical is the female body. In the light of each other, the two films perform the dialogue of views upon corporeality distinctly coded in a cultural sense (the female body conceived along the “literary canon” of perverted sexual fantasy in *Bibliothèque Pascal*, and in terms of religion infused with beliefs and superstitions in *Beyond the Hills*). In their turn, both films subvert the meanings of “magic” and “reality” and display the Central Eastern European region as a space characterized by the incursion of magic into the “real,” where reality in itself surpasses any kind of magic or fiction. As Aga Skrodzka suggests, “[w]hether the cinematic vision is a compensatory ideal or a hyperbolic dystopia, it is crucial to see the connection between the two; both are ways of reimagining the unsatisfactory reality” (2012, 24).

Ultimately, what this paper has aimed to suggest is that, perhaps more significantly, the figurativity of the tableau, albeit with distinct uses, is what relates the two modes of representation, not as each other’s opposites but as alternatives of accessing and deconstructing the same “reality,” the same unspeakable “trauma culture.” In Szabolcs Hajdu’s *Bibliothèque Pascal* the presence of tableau compositions and *tableaux vivants* translates the notion of magic realism, difficult to grasp in formal terms, into the materiality of the cinematic image, the discursive excess of magic realism into the visual excess of the moving image; in Cristian Mungiu’s *Beyond the Hills*, the tableau becomes the signifier of absence in the context of minimalist realism. In a way, both can be translated into the *excess* of the moving image that renders the *absence* experienced at the level of the “real;” they stand for alternatives of creating profoundly affective images at the level of spectatorial reception. As this paper has tried to demonstrate, the tableau as a figuration of intermediality, as one of the various aesthetic practices, rooted in the tradition of artistic representation, that testify to “pleasure of movement between the real and the image” (Peucker 2007, 11), performs the tension between the sensation of the “real” and its reframed image, and proves especially suitable for reconciling distinct representational modes in contemporary cinema, for mediating between low-key realism and highly stylized forms.

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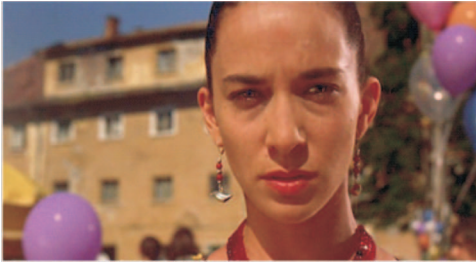
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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** Direct address in *Bibliothèque Pascal* (Szabolcs Hajdu, 2010).



**Figures 3–4.** Ornamental-oneiric tableau shots in *Bibliothèque Pascal*.





**Figures 5–6.** Intertextual dialogue: *La Belle Captive* (Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1983) and *Bibliothèque Pascal*.



**Figures 7–8.** References to Manet and Magritte in *La Belle Captive* (Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1983).



**Figures 9–10.** Tableau shots evoking brothel roles in *Bibliothèque Pascal*.



**Figures 11–12.** Open-air vs indoor spaces, tableau shots in *Beyond the Hills* (*După dealuri*, Cristian Mungiu, 2012).



**Figures 13–16.** Triadic compositions in *Beyond the Hills*.



**Figures 17–18.** Tableau composition in *Beyond the Hills*. Simon Ushakov: *The Last Supper* (1685)



**Figure 19.** Alina's living corpse in *Beyond the Hills*.





## Art and Reality in *The Arbor* (2010)

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**Abstract.** This article offers an in-depth analysis of 2010 British film *The Arbor* by Clio Barnard. The director's debut feature is a groundbreaking work dedicated to the lives of playwright Andrea Dunbar and her eldest daughter Lorraine. Dunbar grew up in the Buttershaw Estate in Bradford and drew on her own experiences to write her first play *The Arbor* at the age of 15, followed by *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!*. She struggled with alcoholism and died of a brain haemorrhage in 1990, at the age of 29. Lorraine's life followed down a difficult path as she became a drug addict and was jailed for manslaughter for causing the death of her two-year old child by gross neglect. My aim is to explore how the film combines different media, namely theatre, television and radio, in a cinematic experience defined by multiple registers and multiple voices, and how this structure works towards creating as much as conserving individual and collective memories, highlighting the fictional nature of memories. This leads to a reflection on the lip-synching technique, employed as the main vehicle for memory in the film, which provokes as much empathy and compassion as it does critical thinking, thus turning Brecht's binary equation reason-emotion in its head.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** realism, intermediality, British cinema, Brecht, film editing.

Lorraine Dunbar stands on an empty stage and reads out the final words from the verbatim play *A State Affair* by Robin Soans (2000). Her presence on screen and on stage seems uncanny, almost phantasmagorical. It is her voice we hear, reading from the book of the play ten years after it was first staged by the “Out of Joint” theatre company at the Soho Theatre in London, under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark. Then, Lorraine's words, extracted from interviews conducted with her at the Buttershaw estate in Bradford, were declaimed by actor Emma Rydal. Now Lorraine speaks the words again, yet on screen we see actor Manjinder Virk lip-synching to their sound. What follows is one of the most powerful ellipses of contemporary British cinema, sending us back to the 1980s.

1 Research for this article was supported by FAPESP – São Paulo Research Foundation, Brazil.

Sitting at the audience is none other than Lorraine's mum, Andrea Dunbar. She smokes a cigarette and listens to what her daughter has to say about her, a speech that ends with these words: "One night, when she thought I was asleep, I heard her say she wished she'd had an abortion with me. How could she say that? Every day I feel hurt, pain, anger, hate. That's why I went on heroin...to block out those feelings". [Figs. 1–2.]

This scene belongs to the film *The Arbor*, made in 2010 by artist filmmaker Clio Barnard. The director's debut feature, co-produced by art organization Artangel, is a groundbreaking work dedicated to the lives of playwright Andrea Dunbar and her eldest daughter Lorraine. Andrea grew up in the Buttershaw estate in Bradford, England, and drew on her own experiences to write her first play *The Arbor* in 1977, at the age of 15. The play was later developed and performed at the Royal Court Theatre "Young Writer's Festival" in 1980, under director Max Stafford-Clark, who was so impressed by Andrea's precocious talent that he commissioned a second play, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982), also set at the Buttershaw estate and equally based on the author's own experiences. Through the 1980s, Andrea's work was critically acclaimed and she received a great deal of media attention, but at the same time she struggled with alcoholism and died from a brain haemorrhage in 1990, at the age of 29. Ten years after Andrea's untimely death, director Max Stafford-Clark and writer Robin Soans revisited the Buttershaw estate and collected interviews with several of its residents, later placed in a dramatic context and edited as the verbatim play *A State Affair*, written from the actual words and phrases recorded on site. In a community weakened by heavy drugs and crime, Stafford-Clark and Soans came across Lorraine, the fruit of Andrea's inter-racial relationship with Yousaf, originally from Pakistan. Lorraine's life had followed down a difficult path after her mum's death, as she became addicted to heroin and crack cocaine.

*The Arbor* thus appears as third in a lineage of works concerned with life at the Buttershaw estate, and was also inspired by a wish to return to this place and not only reflect on its current condition but also on its previous representations in theatre and on film. For two years, director Clio Barnard recorded lengthy interviews with members of Dunbar's family, neighbours and friends, most still residents of the estate. It was during this time that Barnard found out how Lorraine's life had taken a turn for the worse since the production of *A State Affair*: in 2007 she had been jailed for manslaughter by gross neglect for the tragic death of her two-year old son Harris, who overdosed on his mum's methadone. Lorraine then became a focal point of Barnard's interviews, and in more than one

occasion the director uses Andrea's plays, personal letters and footage from old television programmes as a means to trigger Lorraine's childhood memories. The interviews were then edited in the manner of an audio screenplay, which became the main guiding line for the film, composed from a variety of sources such as television programmes, an outdoors performance of Andrea's eponymous play and, most notably, the technique by which actors lip-synch to the pre-recorded interviews collected by Barnard, in order to reconstruct the two tragic lives.

In this article, I will endeavour to show how *The Arbor's* aesthetic experience with mixed media and the lip-synching technique puts into question accepted notions of fiction and documentary in film, connecting realism and intermediality in an original way. I will first reflect on how its complex editing structure manages to interweave different media, namely theatre, television and radio, to generate a cinematic experience defined by multiple registers and multiple voices. I will then look at how this original structure works towards creating as much as conserving individual and collective memories, highlighting a question analogous to the paradoxical nature of this film, that is, the fictional nature of real memories. This leads towards a reflection on the interview and the lip-synching techniques, employed as the main vehicle for memory in the film, which provokes as much emotion as it does critical thinking, thus turning Brecht's binary equation reason-emotion in its head. I will conclude by suggesting that *The Arbor* cannot be contained or explained by dualisms such as fiction-documentary, reason-emotion, form-content, history-poetry. It is a film that dares to speak of the real and of realism through an overtly reflexive and mediated structure, both continuing and departing from a certain tradition of British audiovisual media.

## **Intermedial Film Editing and the Paradox of Memory**

*The Arbor* is, first and foremost, a film dedicated to the lives of Andrea and Lorraine Dunbar, and marginally to those around them such as Andrea's other children Lisa and Andrew, her siblings, ex-partners, friends and acquaintances, as well as Lorraine's foster parents Ann Hamilton and Steve Saul, all of whom lived or gravitated around the Buttershaw area in Bradford. Born and raised on Brafferton Arbor, at one point considered to be the toughest street of Buttershaw, Andrea drew inspiration to write her plays from her life experiences. In an interview to BBC Arena in 1980 she clearly stated her claim to realism: "You write about what's said. You don't lie. ... I called the play *The Arbor* because the street I lived on is called Brafferton Arbor. It's always known as The Arbor and a lot of

these things actually happened on the street”.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that her three plays *The Arbor*, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* and *Shirley* (1986) contain almost a catalogue of social problems such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, racial tensions, teenage pregnancy and unemployment. Andrea writes from an “insider’s” point of view and offers a picture of some of the effects of the severe social and economic changes that unfolded during the years of Thatcher’s administration (1979–90), which saw the steady erosion of manufacturing jobs, the massive widening of the north/south divide and the gradual de-industrialization of the country. And despite the deep-rooted regional element in her work, it ‘travelled south’ to London’s prestigious Royal Court Theatre and later gained national notoriety through its translation to cinema in the hands of director Alan Clark, via producer Oscar Lewenstein (*Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, 1987, co-produced by Channel 4 Films).

Art and reality are thus, from the outset, inextricable from each other in Andrea’s work, and Barnard’s film sets out to both investigate and question the nature of this relationship. In order to do so, it employs an overtly intertextual and intermedial structure in which the main reference is the theatre. While it is an accepted fact that film is, by its own essence, an intermedial phenomenon, the total work of art *par excellence*, *The Arbor* distinguishes itself by embracing intermediality into its style, narrative structure and character construction to the point of disturbing the audience’s expectations with regards to the notion of documentary film and its modes of representation. It is also a well-known fact that any documentary contains a fictional element, an issue that has been widely discussed in audiovisual theory.<sup>3</sup> Yet *The Arbor* seems to pose a more complicated problem. It concerns itself with true stories and has an ethical responsibility to the lives of the people behind these stories, which, as Bill Nichols points out in relation to documentaries in general, “though represented in the film, extend well beyond it” (1991, 109). At the same time, other elements such as the play’s performance, the lip-synching technique and the fact that *The Arbor* was shot with a RED ONE Digital camera, as analogous to 35 mm as light and portable DV cameras would be to the immediacy of 16 mm and 8 mm, swerve the film away from documentary conventions. Its style has little to do with the urgency of “direct cinema” or “cinéma vérité,” experiences associated with the 16 mm format and which seem to have returned to the fore with the rise of digital technology and the possibilities it affords. Moving against the tide, *The Arbor* was storyboarded

2 From BBC Arena, 1980, extract included in Clio Barnard’s film *The Arbor*.

3 See, for instance, Nichols (1991, 107–198).

and shot in the manner of fiction, “with actors hitting their marks and carefully lit tracking shots” (Barnard quoted in Edwards 2010). Moreover, regardless of the various sources and registers used in the film, the editing employed is far removed from a rapid or fragmented style; rather, it gently interweaves the different intermedial strands as if composing a mosaic. Hence the impossibility of solving this film’s paradox by either saying that it introduces fictional elements into a documentary or that it brings the “document” (such as interviews, letters and television/film footage) into fiction. The vague impression one has when confronted with its heterogeneous structure is that *The Arbor* cannot be defined in or against these terms. Documentary is no longer the opposite of fiction, and fiction no longer the opposite of documentary, just as cinema is neither the same nor the opposite of other media.

In order to assess how the film combines different media and different sensory regimes through the editing, it is important to consider its intermedial and intertextual structure in some detail. *The Arbor* is composed of five distinct but interrelated strands. Its backbone is made of the audio interviews conducted by Barnard, which present a contradictory view of the lives of Andrea and Lorraine. This audio material was edited in the form of an audio-play, akin to a radio documentary, and then lip-synched by actors playing the parts of the real people interviewed. The second strand in *The Arbor* are dramatic reconstructions of events mentioned during the interviews, a technique largely employed by television documentaries but that assumes different forms in the film. The third strand is a performance of Andrea’s first play *The Arbor*, set in Brafferton Arbor itself, thus signalling the film’s crucial relationship with theatre. The fourth strand refers to the medium of television and cinema itself, and is made up of footage from different programmes – documentaries or news broadcasts – relating to Andrea and Lorraine, such as a BBC Arena documentary from 1980, BBC News Look North from 1982, Yorkshire’s TV The Great North Show from 1989 and BBC News Look North from 2007, as well as extracts from Clark’s film *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*. Finally, the fifth strand corresponds to contemporary images of the estate, punctuating different sequences as well as opening and closing the film.

Despite the schematic description provided above, these five strands are intertwined in a very careful fashion through the film’s editing. This shows not only how different media come together rather than clash within the film’s structure but also how fiction and documentary/art and reality are inextricable from each other in Andrea and Lorraine’s world. One such example refers to the use of documentary footage from television and film archives. Rather than

making “unmotivated appearances”, these extracts are mostly introduced by the “characters” having access to them via television sets. The first instance of this can be observed in the scene where Lorraine opens an envelope inside her prison cell, containing some of her mum’s personal letters, books and a DVD, which she then sits down to watch. We see an over-the-shoulder shot of her watching the television screen displaying images of Andrea in the BBC Arena documentary, followed by the television footage that, with a noticeable increase in the sound quality, takes over the whole screen. Here, and in other similar passages where Lorraine comments on her family on the television screen in a typical surprised or exclamatory tone (“Is that Pamela? Oh that’s granddad!”), it is not only the intermedial nature of film that is highlighted but also the intermedial nature of Lorraine’s memories, triggered by television programmes, books and letters belonging to another time. [Figs. 3–4.]

More prominently, the performance of Andrea’s original play *The Arbor* in the green space by the estate is organically articulated with the other strands of the film, composing meaningful editing transitions. The scene in which “the girl” (the character based on Andrea is referred to as “the girl” in the play) gets hassled by a group of lads for sleeping with an Asian man, for instance, is followed by an interview with Andrea’s friend Gemma Norman, who recalls how difficult it must have been for Andrea to have a mixed-race baby on the estate. Another such connection stresses an almost genetic or deterministic history of violence and abuse: it starts with Lorraine recalling how she was imprisoned and abused for over ten days by a drug dealer, followed by her reading from the book of the play inside her cell (“Act 2 Scene 8”), the sound bleeding over to the next shot where “the girl” lip-synchs to Lorraine’s real voice, and finally the actual scene from the play, in which “the girl” tells a friend that Yousaf has beaten her up on a number of occasions, and how she worries about what will happen to the baby (Lorraine) once it is born. And even when the parallel is not established in such a straightforward way, it is still harrowing to see how life and art are integrated in *The Arbor* by hearing Lorraine say “I didn’t ask to be conceived, I didn’t ask to be born,” and a few minutes later see Act 2 Scene 5 of the play in which “the girl” discusses with Yousaf whether she should or should not keep their baby.

The complex editing structure of the film [Figs. 5–8], which travels backwards and forwards in time and through different media, is also behind the scene described at the start of this article, which establishes a connection between the theatre – via *A State Affair* and the stage where Lorraine stands, and television documentary – via an extract from BBC Arena of Andrea sitting in the dark of



the audience. The approximation of theatre and television through the medium of cinema thus makes it possible for Lorraine to “speak” to her mother 20 years after her death, and for Andrea to stare attentively and “listen” to her daughter. And it is not by chance that this interaction happens within the confines of a theatre, which works as a sort of intermediary between art and reality for both Andrea and Lorraine, who finally communicate through drama and through the shot-reverse shot editing structure.

*The Arbor*'s use of mixed media and its complex editing structure also highlight the complex nature of memories, be them real or imagined, individual or collective. This happens especially through the drama reconstructions, as can be observed in one of the first sequences of the film where Lisa and Lorraine recall the day their bedroom caught fire. The reconstruction of this event is presented in a complex way, for Lorraine's memory of it does not match Lisa's: locked in a room as kids, Lorraine claims she lit a fire inside the bedroom to keep her siblings warm. Still according to Lorraine, they were trapped in their bedroom because Andrea had the habit of removing the door handle in order to keep them in. Yet Lisa claims it was her who had accidentally pulled the handle out. The pairing of two accounts of one single event allows for the element of contradiction to emerge, a contradiction in this case inherent to Andrea's own personality: was she a terrible mum or a good mum? How is it that one child's memory of her can be so distinct from another child's memory? The uncertain circumstances of the event are ever so more enhanced by the uncanny impression of the lip-synching technique and by the fact that Lorraine and Lisa become, from the outset, multiple presences in the film: the two sisters are seen concomitantly as children, with child-actors playing their parts, and as adults, with adult actors playing their grown-up versions, lip-synching to the audio interviews or acting out the event. This doubling becomes a tripling if we add their real voices as a third presence.

These reconstructions also serve to emphasize both the present nature of memories and their spatial connection. In *The Analysis of Mind*, Bertrand Russell describes how the memory of a past event is in fact contained, or has a causal connection, with the present: “Everything constituting a memory-belief is happening *now*, not in that past time to which the belief is said to refer” (1924, 160). In *The Arbor*, the present tense of memories is explicit in re-occurring shots which bring together the past and the present through instances of internal editing. In the sequence described above, for instance, Andrea is seen writing in bed late at night in a reconstruction scene, and she is observed by grown-up Lisa and grown-up Lorraine, who wonder through the house – a site of memories

– and recall the day the bedroom caught fire. Another poignant example can be found at the end of the sequence in which Andrea’s brother David watches his younger self get arrested in the play’s performance by Brafferton Arbor. As he is taken away by the police, the camera catches up with his older self, and through the lip-synching technique and the direct address he comments on his memory of the real event – which in turn had been transposed by Andrea onto her play. In this single shot David is also a triple presence – his young version in the play, his older version of the interview and his real voice, and this “multiplication of the self” works as a distancing effect in the film, at the same time conferring density and a prismatic quality to each “player” in the story.

As well as comingling in the edit in a way which allows for the encounter of past and present and for the communication of ideas, *The Arbor*’s incorporation of mixed media also brings to the fore the complicated rapport between the very concept of memory and notions of truth and subjectivity. Lorraine’s opening statement actually works as a point of entry into the theme of memory and its unstable nature, which renders it unreliable as a key to real events and the notion of truth: “I’ve got loads of childhood memories, but none of them are really good. I don’t think you remember the good stuff”. The subjective nature of memory, which usually appears as the reversal of Lorraine’s declaration (as popular belief has it, one tends to remember the “good stuff”), suggests that the theme of memory in *The Arbor* is from the outset a complex one. Yet it also suggests that it is not interested in finding out “the truth” about what happened, or in siding with one perspective against another, in order to put forward a thesis. At the beginning of the film, for instance, Lorraine mentions something about having suffered sexual abuse as a child, but this allusion is never brought up again. Whether this actually happened or not, or who molested her, remains a mystery. Therefore, *The Arbor* quite clearly chooses to incorporate diffuse or disparate memories of real events, articulated through its intermedial structure so as to compose a fragmented portrait of these lives.

## **Reason and Emotion**

The main vehicle for memory in *The Arbor* are the audio interviews conducted by the director with the following individuals: Lorraine Dunbar, Lisa Thompson and Andrew Dunbar, Andrea’s children by different partners; Andrea’s sisters Pamela and Kathy and brother David; Andrea’s on and off partner Jimmy ‘The Wig’; Lorraine’s foster parents Steve Saul and Ann Hamilton; members of the

Buttershaw community Gemma Norman and Jamie Timlin; theatre director Max Stafford-Clark and Out of Joint actor Gary Whitaker. As mentioned before, these interviews function as the film's backbone, which is to say that a great deal of emphasis is placed on the "word," most often than not the point of origin for the heterogeneous images arising from these people's recollections. The value of the "word" in the film is, primarily, that of a document: its soundtrack is mainly composed of *real* voices, *real* accents, intonations, pauses and stresses, and ultimately of the emotions which lie behind these voices. These words and emotions derive from the interview process, from an encounter with the filmmaker, a technique which is common currency in most types of documentaries. Here, Ismail Xavier makes an important point about the use of the interview by Brazilian documentarist Eduardo Coutinho: "The interview, as a public speech, reveals one's intimacy and transforms the person who speaks into a 'character' in the etymological sense of the word: a 'public figure'. ... Despite being a stranger, [the filmmaker] is an anticipated visitor, but there is an observance of decorum on both parts, marking a difference between a filmmaker's and a psychoanalyst's mode of listening'." (2009, 215.)

Xavier's reference to the interview as a public speech in relation to documentary practice is intrinsically related to what he terms the "camera-effect" (2009, 213). Despite using the interview as a structural element, *The Arbor* substitutes the camera-effect for the lip-synching technique, and this marks a crucial distinction between its mode of representation and most interview-based documentaries. Interviewees in the film were not subjected to the camera-effect, and so did not have to sustain the "camera gaze." The interview process was mediated by the less intrusive medium of the sound recorder and the microphone, and this is reflected in a difference in tone between the interviews collected for *The Arbor* and interviews on camera, allowing the speech to veer, more often than not, towards the confessional. While it would be wrong to equate the role of the interviewer with that of a psychoanalyst, the mode of listening employed and the nature of what is being said (Lisa, Lorraine and Andrew talk mainly about their mother) could suggest a parallel with a psychoanalytic mode of listening. This observation does not take into account the exact circumstances surrounding each interview, but only how these interviews are presented in the film, that is, in the form of free-flowing monologues rather than dialogues. Specially in Lorraine and Lisa's case, they often seem to be reclining on an analyst couch, with their backs to the listener, able to speak freely, given time to make sense of tragedy and painful memories, some recent and some buried deep under. Lorraine even

seems to achieve some sort of progression in the process, as Barnard recalls: “There was a significant shift in my final interview with Lorraine. She began to accept that Andrea did love her, was able to stop blaming her and she was able to find it in herself to empathise with her mother” (2010, 3). Equally significant are the gaps in the two sisters’ discourse – perhaps their unconscious at work – and which are partially filled in by mediation and remediation, that is, the play, the TV programmes and cinema itself, pointing once again to the conundrum that lies at the heart of memory and at the heart of the film.

Yet, as relevant as the parallel with psychoanalytic listening may be, it would still be naive to discuss these interviews as pertaining to the world of psychoanalysis. In spite of the less intrusive medium of sound recording, the interviews were still mediated, and those who spoke were not completely unaware of an “audience.” Theirs is thus a “public speech,” shaped and directed towards this audience, and later edited as an audio-play. Rather than choosing not to call attention to the artifice inherent to this process of recording and editing, the director embraced it in the boldest of ways by employing the lip-synching device. Real words by real people acquire different faces, bodies and movements, and with them a different value.<sup>4</sup> This can be described, on a first level, as a Brechtian distancing device, which exposes the artifices of representation and invites an active mode of spectatorship. As is well known, Brecht’s alienation effects for the theatre included a number of devices relating to structure, language, the non-illusionistic use of production elements and more prominently a particular approach to acting which proposed that the actor should stand apart from the character. In *The Arbor*, this is mainly achieved by the splitting of the common documentary interview technique in two, so that the voice and the face/body emerge from different sources to become a congregate actor. This meant that the actors were necessarily standing apart from their characters, engaged in an original delivery in which they were the ones who sustained the camera gaze rather than the real people speaking. And they did so in such a way that would have been impossible for Lorraine or Lisa or Steve or Anne or any of the other interviewees to do so, especially given the almost unbearably tragic nature of their memories.

The effect of this candid direct address to camera is of an at once theatrical anti-naturalist nature akin to Brecht’s Epic theatre techniques and, paradoxically, of a heightened level of intimacy, which seems to draw the spectator in closer to the stories being recalled. As Barnard herself acknowledges: “I hoped to achieve a fine balance – so that, perhaps paradoxically, the distancing techniques might

4 With the exception of Gary Whitaker and Jamie Timlin, who appear as themselves.

create closeness, allowing a push pull, so an audience might be aware of the shaping of the story but simultaneously able to engage emotionally” (2010, 2). Lorraine’s and Lisa’s testimonies are the finest examples of this: while there are shots in which they walk or perform tasks in their home or inside the prison, other moments employ the neutrality of the static medium close-up taken from a frontal angle. Unfettered by hand movements or distracting elements around them, they simply talk, sustaining the gaze of the camera or occasionally lowering their eyes, only to raise them again and face the lens, the director and the audience. It is so, perhaps, that the true innovative aspect of the lip-synching technique in *The Arbor* does not lie in its Brechtian distancing effect but in its reversal of Brecht’s reason-emotion/mind-body dichotomies. As Lúcia Nagib points out à propos Brecht’s notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* and his epic theatre, “revolutionary though this proposal was, it did not break away from well-established Western traditions. On the philosophical front, it embraces a Christian-inflected body-mind dualism harking back to Kantian metaphysics” (2011, 200). So, if on a first level the interviews in *The Arbor* appear to embrace distancing, they in fact go one step further by combining it with emotion, for while their constructed nature is exposed, putting the spectator into a critical thus distanced position in relation to what is being told, they never seem to lose their emotional power, enhanced by the use of a less intrusive medium (the sound recorder) and by the inescapable direct gaze at the camera, sustained by the actors. [Figs. 9–10.]<sup>5</sup>

This point of view, however, does not take into account the evolution perceived in Brecht’s thoughts and theories during the 1930s and 1940s. As Bela Kiralyfalvi demonstrates (1990), while Brecht started off by rejecting any emotion-based aesthetic, which he perhaps superficially equated to Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, he came to modify his allegiance to a reason-emotion, mind-body dualism by stating in letters and diary entries, and finally in his “Short Organum for the Theatre,” that Epic Theatre does not deny or renounce emotion altogether, only “empathy,” which would be inductive to passivity (Kiralyfalvi 1990, 28–29). So emotion came into the equation especially in his later plays, only a type of emotion

5 *The Arbor’s* articulation of memory and its use of distancing techniques find a prolific parallel in Jia Zhangke’s *24 City*, shot in the Chinese city of Chendu in 2008. Jia’s film is concerned with a specific place, Government Factory 420, which is being knocked-down to give room to a large complex of modern apartments and offices. Structured around interviews, the film combines the testimony of real characters with four ‘fictional ones,’ played by well-known actors Lü Liping, Joan Chen, Chen Jianbin and Zhao Tao. Interestingly, another film, made in the same year and that employs a similar technique, was Eduardo Coutinho’s *Jogo de Cena*. Both similarly perform a reversal of Brecht’s reason-emotion dichotomy, for while the audience is at all times aware of the artifices of representation, they still empathize and are moved by what is being said.

not tied to a character's psychology but related to more generalized concepts such as the sense of justice and the importance of freedom. Brecht, however, continued to equivocally equate empathy with catharsis and thus continued to reject what he thought of as the Aristotelian dramatic theatre. Still, there is no denying that his late rejection of the reason/emotion duality signified a move in a different direction. To go back to *The Arbor's* sophisticated use of the alienation effect, it seems though that the question remains open. Could it be read as an instance of late Brecht's thoughts on Epic Theatre, given that it produces emotion despite distancing? But what about empathy, which alongside sympathy could constitute a kind of identification, how does it fit into this equation? Perhaps *The Arbor* is a film which provokes empathy through distancing, and if this is the case, it indeed poses a conundrum to the Brechtian-inflected aesthetics which refuse identification as politically backward.

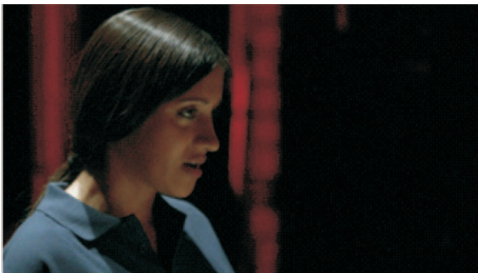
Here, as way of conclusion, I would like to go beyond the issue of distancing to suggest that *The Arbor* ultimately derives its political force from its aesthetic combination of realism and intermediality. The choice of approaching the relationship between art and reality via Andrea Dunbar's work and through the medium of cinema highlights a connection between *The Arbor* and the much-discussed tradition of social realism in the British cultural and artistic landscape. Barnard's film thus engages in a dialogue with this tradition and with the dialectics of realism at the heart of British cinema history, but rather than espousing a rhetoric of rupture or an opposite desire to establish some sort of continuity in relation to the thorny concept of social realism, it dares to do so in its own terms. This means that, in order to focus on the wider environment for both Andrea and Lorraine's tragedies, one set in the 1980s and the other in the 2000s, *The Arbor* embraces not representation but intermediality as the only aesthetic effect capable of revealing just how close real life and art can be. This to me seems to be the film's more overtly Brechtian gesture. In its highly sophisticated structure, all the different pieces that make up *The Arbor* – the street and the estate, its racism, violence and desolation, the people who lived or still live in it, the plays produced in and around it, and all the different voices, impressions, documents, actors and real people, everything comingles into a collective, intermedial memory of a community, as well as in the film itself. In the street, in the play and in the film called *The Arbor*, reality creates art and art creates reality.

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## List of Figures

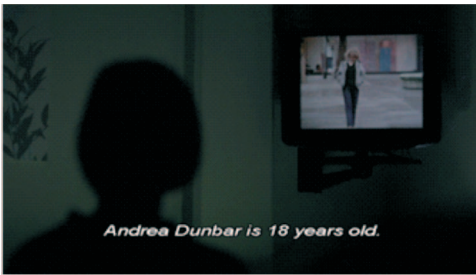
**Figures 1–2.** A powerful ellipsis: Lorraine speaks to her mother Andrea.



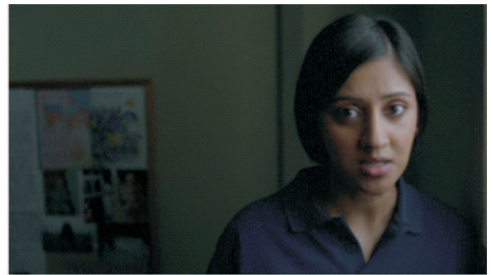
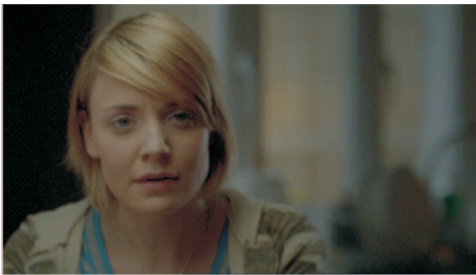
Figures 3–4. Lorraine’s intermedial memories.



Figures 5–8. Intermedial Editing.



Figures 9–10. Lisa and Lorraine sustain the camera gaze.







# When the Copywriter is the Protagonist. History and Intermediality in Pablo Larraín's *No* (2012)

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**Abstract.** Through films such as *Tony Manero* (2008), *Santiago 73*, *Post Mortem* (2010), and *No* (2012), the productions of Chilean director Pablo Larraín have focused on the historical and political themes that marked the last decades in the life of his country: the putsch against Salvador Allende and Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. This paper analyses the last film of the trilogy, dedicated to the 1988 Chilean national plebiscite and the communication battle between supporters of the “Yes” and “No” sides. Why does Larraín identify the copywriter René Saavedra as the main character of the film? And why does the film accord such importance to the advertising campaign in recounting the historical reality of democratic transition? How does the fictional film remediate the archival footage of the 1988 campaign? To answer these questions, this paper investigates the film as an audiovisual form of interpretation of historical events and film montage as an intermedial “authentication” of the archival documents relating to this traumatic past.

**Keywords:** the Chilean democratic transition, heterotopia and utopia, history and intermediality, intermedial “authentication,” Pablo Larraín's cinema.

## The Trilogy as a “Theoretical Work”

The early productions of Chilean director Pablo Larraín focus on the main historical and political issues that have marked the life of his country over the past 45 years: the putsch against Salvador Allende and Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Although he has always acknowledged a great debt towards the Chilean master of the documentary, Patricio Guzmán, Larraín does not seem to embrace a “direct” view of history. Instead, he has looked for unusual perspectives and an alienated point of view. He seems to be more attracted to the transfiguring potential of fiction rather than to the realism of documentary. Indeed, he appears to be oriented toward overcoming this sort of opposition, guided by his efforts to

reveal to the spectator the different “fictional levels” of social reality. The writing of history has its own rules and forms. Some of these rules and forms do not take into account anachronism, syncretism and allegory. Those who expect to find in the trilogy an illustrative representation of Chilean history between 1973 and 1988 may be disappointed.<sup>1</sup> But the director’s choice to adopt an oblique perspective on Chilean history corresponds to the capillary and multiple nature of historical events, which make any “realistic” reconstruction impossible.

The main hypothesis of this article is that Larraín’s “Chilean dictatorship trilogy” – *Tony Manero* (2008), *Santiago 73, Post Mortem* (2010), and *No* (2012) – must be conceived of as a “theoretical work” inspired by historical facts. Beyond historiographical, sociological and philosophical theories themselves, films of this kind need to be analysed as “thought forms.”<sup>2</sup> All three films show the “true events” that happened during the Pinochet regime, but – through the narrative and expressive tools of cinema – also conceive and develop an idea of the dictatorship and its political mechanisms. Starting from these premises, it seems possible to attribute to Larraín’s films the status of cultural testimony: a testimony that leads to critical reflection on Chilean history and memory between 1973 and 1988, and even into the twenty-first century. This article focuses on the last film in the trilogy, dedicated to the 1988 Chilean national plebiscite and the communication battle between supporters of the “Yes” and “No” sides. First of all, it is necessary to contextualize *No* within the trilogy. The first section describes the similarities and differences of the characters and the spaces distinctive to each film. It gives particular relevance to Michel Foucault’s concepts of “heterotopia” and “utopia,” which enable us to understand the passage from the dictatorial regime to democracy. The article then investigates the choice of identifying the copywriter René Saavedra as the main character in *No* and the use of massive archival footage showing 1988 political communication within this fictional film. The intention of my analysis is to show the process of building a new social aesthetics, conceived according to the commercial television imagery of the 1980s, which reflects the historical conditions of the political transition.

1 For a critique of the conception of history in Larraín’s cinema, see Santa Cruz Grau (2014) and Rother (2013).

2 On the concept of the “theoretical object” in the field of image theory, see Bois, Hollier, Krauss, Damisch (1998). On film as an autonomous thought form, see Deleuze (1989), Rancière (2006), and Badiou (2013). Located between film theory and image theory, see Casetti (2008) on the concept of “theoretical work.”

The third section examines in depth the fictional representation of the 1988 campaign and proposes a dialogue with research from the social sciences that has focused on the social and political implications of the Chilean national plebiscite. While keeping in mind the *mise en scene* and editing strategies that characterize *No*, the article introduces the concepts of “videocracy” and “bioaesthetics” in order to explicate the postdictatorial political scenario that is consciously described by the film.

Finally, the fourth section thematises the so-called post-memory point of view – and hence the role played by the director himself and the younger generation in the traumatic events that marked the history of Chile and South America during the twentieth century. In particular, the text analyses the specific construction of the final part of the film. In one of the last sequences, the copywriter, the hero of the plebiscite, apparently rejects the glory of victory. These sequences, in which René adopts a sombre and reflective attitude, invite the spectator to reflect on the political condition of Chile after the dictatorship, in the context of the democratic present, characterized by the suppression of the traumatic past and the on-going persistence of social injustice.

Over the past few decades “intermediality” has emerged internationally as one of the most important concepts in film and media studies.<sup>3</sup> Instead of attempting a general contextualization or broad reconstruction of such a complex and vast theoretical topic, the article aims at observing how intermediality works in one very specific film. In order to address the issues we have described above concerning *No* and the representation of the 1988 plebiscite, it is therefore necessary to focus on intermediality in terms of the “intermedial montage” (Montani 2010; Zucconi 2013) of different archival and fictional images. Analysing a “theoretical work” like *No* is therefore an opportunity to observe the ability of the film to hold, rework, and expose the social discourses and forms of life that characterise a historical period. What emerges is the ability of cinema to go beyond itself – in other words, to think critically about the world – just as it reflects on itself. It is in the liminal space between one image and another, as well as in the gap between the archival documents and the fictional *mise-en-scène*, that we recognise the theoretical depth distinguishing *No* and the whole trilogy.

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3 See: Gaudreault and Marion (2002), Rajewsky (2005), Peucker (2007), Schröter (2011), Pethő (2011).

## Looking for the Way Out. Heterotopies of Dictatorship

All the protagonists of Pablo Larraín's dictatorship trilogy are lonely men. Mario Cornejo – the main character in *Santiago 73* – has a good government job and no social relations; he tries to escape from daily life by going to the theatre and looking for an unusual encounter with his neighbour Nancy, a dancer. Raúl Peralta – the protagonist of *Tony Manero* – is a performer in a dance company located in a run-down club in Santiago; he goes in and out of the movie theatres of the city, where he identifies himself with the main character of the cult movie *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977). René Saavedra and Luis Guzmán are both copywriters, working together for the same advertising agency, who eventually come to occupy rival positions in the propaganda surrounding the 1988 Chilean plebiscite.

All of these characters live in bourgeois, proletarian or subproletarian apartments, at a very low level. They go out into the street with wary attitudes and they yearn to enter a theatre as soon as possible. They look for a way out, a path that can lead to the outside, towards a nonhomogeneous space and time. Larraín's historical and political cinema observes the characters in their attempts, always failed, to definitively escape the everyday experience of dictatorship through access to *heterotopic* spaces, such as theatre halls. As in Foucault's description, these spaces "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (1986, 24). The different characters can access spaces such as cinemas, theatres and television studios by entering through a doorway, paying for a ticket or taking out a subscription, fully aware that the entry promises a way out and therefore a return to the spaces and times of social life.

Thus, in *Santiago 73* theatrical entertainment seems to trigger a happy period in the life of Mario marked by the encounter with his neighbour, but the violence of the *coup d'état* of September 11th prevails over everything else, provoking extreme feelings in the protagonist and extreme actions: namely revenge and the lust for oblivion. Likewise, in *Tony Manero* Raúl attempts to lengthen the cinematic experience beyond the limits of the screening, but he ends up renouncing all other interests. He consequently takes heinous actions in order to cultivate his obsession in a country traumatized by state violence. As they choose heterotopy, these characters cannot escape the dictatorial *dispositif* that marked Chilean history for more than 20 years. After all, the heterotopic space is "connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village" (1986, 25).

If the first two films of the trilogy express the impossibility of extending the domain of the imaginary over the well-defined spectatorial spaces, the third seems to focus on the difference between a heterotopic temporary escape from dictatorship and the lasting change ensured by a possible utopia [Figs. 1–2]. As Foucault wrote in the opening pages of one of his most famous books, “*Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things” (2002, xviii). By contrast, “*Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical” (2002, xviii).

*Santiago 73* and *Tony Manero* therefore deal with the impossibility of harmoniously articulating the passage between the topical space – to be here, in history – and the heterotopic space – to take place, provisionally, in an elsewhere – and in doing so they show the sense of waste as well as the verbal tics and postural disorders that assail the subjects. Instead of presenting a single man who enters a theatre in order to escape from reality, *No* follows two men who are building a utopian imaginary that is accessible nationwide: a wonderful Chile that will be able to accommodate everyone and no one. Following Luis, and especially René – no longer two desperate spectators but two professionals who work with images – *No* reflects, and invites us to reflect on the social conditions as well as on the cultural and political implications of the way out from the dictatorship.

By setting out in the footsteps of the copywriter figure it therefore becomes possible to conceive of the battle of images as an experiment of social values and a political way of shaping the democratic transition.

## Building the Rainbow

*No* was inspired by the theatrical performance *El plebiscito* written by Chilean playwright Antonio Skármeta, a former member of the *Movimiento de Acción Popular y Unitaria*, who was exiled after the putsch. Larraín and the screenwriter Pedro Peirano began working on the film in 2010. From the very beginning, the director decided to shoot it in 4:3 format, using the original U-Matic cameras from the 1980s so as to interlace the visual components of the fictional scenes with

the photographic “grain” of the television archival footage that was incorporated into the movie. “I grew up in the 1980s, during the dictatorship,” the director stated after the film’s release. “What I saw on television was a low-definition, dirty imagery that you could not reproduce cleanly. The collective memory is full of darkness and impurity.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus the director aims to reproduce the low-resolution, dirty imagery that, according to Marshall McLuhan (1964), characterizes television as a “cool medium.”<sup>5</sup> Such dirty images are the ones seen by René Saavedra – the protagonist of the last film in the trilogy – when he is invited to express a strategic assessment of the video produced by members of the Committee for the “No” side, to be screened during a 15-minute slot each day (as permitted by the regime in the days before the plebiscite).

In one sequence in the film, a transition intervenes when an umpteenth act of violence is perpetrated by the military against the demonstrators. This transition articulates the passage from document to fiction and from full-screen archival image to a TV set that is reproducing the video for the fictional anti-Pinochet militants [Figs. 3–4]. The first propaganda video against Pinochet that is shown in Larraín’s film is the only one that has been reconstructed *ex post* by the director himself, on the basis of the testimonies of people who conceived the “No” campaign.<sup>6</sup> This video bases its communication effectiveness on the self-evident truth of the violence perpetrated by the Pinochet regime. It resorts to the impressive power of numbers: “34,690 tortured. NO;” “200,000 exiles. NO;” “2,110 killings. NO;” “1,248 disappeared. NO.” It demonizes the geometric rigour of military parades and exalts the spontaneous aggregation of people.

“Is that all there is?” René asks the militants from the “No” side. It is a very naive, cynical, and provocative question. The copywriter suggests “something lighter,” “a little more enjoyable.” Is the goal of the communication to win the plebiscite, or to take the opportunity to bear witness to, and create public awareness of, the violence of the dictatorship? Through these questions, there emerges the ability of the young copywriter to compromise between the representatives of the *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia*, which gathers together the majority of the opposition parties. René aspires to achieve communication targets – above all, to reassure and bring to his side the undecided – even at the price of

4 See: <http://www.latercera.com/noticia/cultura/2012/05/1453-461597-9-pelicula-chilena-sobre-el-plebiscito-de-1988-es-aclamada-en-cannes.shtml>. Last accessed 06. 01. 2015.

5 For a rethinking of McLuhan’s typology relating to the new millenium mediatic forms, see Casetti and Somaini (2013), and Casetti (2015).

6 See the director’s declarations (Solis 2013).

neglecting the need for truth and repressing the desire to show the “true face” of Pinochet for the first time, on the TV screen.

To develop the new contents of the videos, René organizes a creative meeting with internationally experienced staff. The crucial idea is that since Pinochet himself is trying to take over the idea of democracy, the opposition must also reclaim the concept and design it as a commercial product. Rather than looking to the traumatic past, the democratic future of Chile must be represented through images of happiness, such as the spring, festivities, the calm after the storm, the colours of the rainbow, and so on. Therefore, by editing together a series of pop images – as a utopian transfiguration of Chile’s desire for justice and freedom – the rhetoric of “No” expresses a euphoric and positive attitude [Figs. 5–6]. It says an enthusiastic “Yes” to the future. Against those who conceived the 15 daily minutes of television offered to the opposition as an opportunity to reveal the “truth” of the dictatorship, René opposes happy images able to fully coincide with the Western consumer society imagination of the 1980s.

Despite the fierce criticism from the most intransigent members of the “No” side after the presentation of the teaser, René carries on his project and progressively involves an increasing number of artists and citizens. These are the most choral sequences of the film, in which the opposition’s ability to reactivate the different creative skills that have been suppressed during the 15 years of dictatorship is shown. One can refer here to the aesthetic of the “Neo-Baroque” (Calabrese 1992) or *Neobarroco* – using the Spanish word that has led to the global success of this term – to describe the “No” campaign. It thus appears fragmentary, many-sided and playful, and it grows beyond a static conception of genres and formats as well as rejecting the separation between “high culture” and “low culture.” The *pastiche* form, which structures each 15-minute episode of the campaign, makes it possible to accept requests from certain *Concertación* members to insert various kinds of engaged content within René’s frivolous communication frame: above all, the video dedicated to the mothers of *desaparecidos* and the *Doña Yolita* spot [Figs. 7–8], which focuses on the economic crisis and social injustice in the country.<sup>7</sup>

As shown in Larraín’s film, during the second half of the 1980s the importance of the collective imagination was no longer circumscribable within the heterotopic experience of the spectatorship of a movie theatre in which the spectators watched *Saturday Night Fever* or something else. Time passed, and even in Chile the 1980s presented the characteristics of the “postmodern condition” (Lyotard 1979). The domain of mass media aesthetics influenced lifestyles, while a new

7 For an analysis of the original “No” campaign, see Piñuel Raigada (1992) and Hirmas (1993).

global taste was about to become hegemonic. The Milton Friedman and “Chicago Boys” project that had made Pinochet’s Chile a neoliberalist experiment needed a global re-launch.<sup>8</sup> It was time for “democracy” to be – as in Foucault’s terms – a utopian, “comforting, wonderful, smooth” transfiguration of social reality. This means a model of reality capable of addressing social and individual lives.

After the socialist politics and culture of Salvador Allende and after the rise to power of the pro-US dictatorial government of Pinochet, the *Concertación por la Democracia de Partidos*’ creative staff articulated a new stage in the relationship between forms of collective consciousness and forms of government. This can be considered a new formulation of Walter Benjamin’s idea of the “spectacularisation of politics” (1973). In this sense the “*pueblo unido*” sung by Inti-Illimani must be reconceived in terms of “people” and “pop.” The “No” campaign thus appears as the laboratory for a new social aesthetics.

## Marketing Democracy

The intermedial montage proposed by Larraín’s film articulates the relationship between the archival materials and fiction and between the present and the past. Consequently, it questions the utopian, euphoric image of Chile associated with the “No” campaign, and by doing so invites the spectator to reflect on the unfulfilled promises and long-term consequences of the new imaginary. It shows that the only way to create a utopia is to create a “degenerated utopia” (Marin 1984) as a kind of hyperbolic transfiguration of the ideologies that structure a society at a certain moment in history, and which, as such, are subject to the consumption of time.

In particular, in one of the sequences showing the process of artistic creation of the new social aesthetic, Larraín combines archival images of the young artists Tita Parra, Cecilia Echenique and Tati Penna singing Isabel Parra’s song *No lo quiero No, No* with other shots showing René and the other characters in the film coordinating the same group of singers, who now appear older, however, than in the archival images. The idea of shooting *No* with U-Matic tape helps to reduce the contrast between the real historical images and the staged ones. Despite this, spectators who watch this sequence can perceive a slight chromatic and temporal difference that becomes more accentuated when they are able to recognize in the fictional part the singers Tita Parra, Cecilia Echenique and Tati Penna standing in front of René – 24 years older than they were in the original movie [Figs. 9–10].

8 On neoliberalism and social transformation in Chile, see Taylor (2004) and Winn (2004).



The same choice is repeated with some other public characters who took part in the 1988 campaign and agreed to interpret themselves 24 years later in the fictional movie.

The recording of Patricio Aylwin's speech is emblematic in this regard. The sequence shows an elderly man, corresponding to the Christian Democratic-oriented politician who presided over the transition process as Chile's First Minister between 1990 and 1994. He enters the production studio and sits down after having approached René. A reverse shot shows René's troupe and then a shot from behind the television operator. With a slow movement, the camera goes back to the machinist and when the speech starts – "*Los demócratas trabajamos a la luz del día...*" – it sinks down and shows a spy monitor. The image shown by this monitor is only indirectly compatible with what is actually framed by the camera. It consists in the original recording of the speech that Aylwin gave as the spokesperson of *Concertación* in 1988 [Figs. 11–12].

Why does Larraín's film combine the image of the old ex-President, who appears as an "actor" in the fictional film of 2012, with the original document of his own speech from 1988? Does this sort of combination between fiction and the media archive – as well as between the actor and the public figure – represent a cinematic celebration of those involved in the 1988 campaign? Does it have another meaning? The impression is that by making a comparison between the archival images and their cinematic reproduction<sup>9</sup> Larraín is attempting to thematise the inner anachronism encrusted in every historical narration. Furthermore, the *mise-en-scène* and the editing aim at the production of anachronistic articulations and "dialectic images."<sup>10</sup> It is the present that poses the conditions under which we can look back to the past and it is precisely from the present historical coordinates that it becomes possible to ask new questions about history, as well as to glimpse the "visual symptoms" (Didi-Huberman 2005) of social and cultural dynamics and long-term policies.

On the one hand, the President's cameo is an expression of a willingness to play with his own public image, as Larraín's intention is to involve the protagonists of this historical moment directly in the production of his film. But on the other hand, it is inevitable that we find in this sequence the sign of critical reflection. The double figure of Patricio Aylwin, who is at the same time a media document and an actor, corresponds to the spokesperson of the liberation political front that

9 On the different forms of archival footage remediation within the fictional film, see Dinoi (2008, 176–192).

10 On the writing of history in terms of the production of "dialectical images," see Benjamin (1973).

identifies itself with the rainbow symbol, but he is also the first Chilean president after the dictatorship. He personifies the end of the Pinochet dictatorship and at the same time he expresses the disillusionments encrusted in the democratic transition, namely the irrelevant outcome of the “Commission for Truth and Reconciliation,” the recovery of the neoliberal model, and the persistence of an acute economic disparity. In other words, he stands for the failure to achieve utopia.

Through the intermedial montage of the different pieces of archival footage, Larraín’s film tells us about a communicative battle and takes into account its immediate result – the winning of the “No” with 55.99% of the votes – as a medium-term consequence. The film does not limit itself to celebrating the heroic mission of those who have overthrown a cruel regime thanks to the power of creativity: it also takes a stand in this and leads us to reflect on the transition from a dictatorial neoliberalism to a democratic one – that is, on the ability to gain international consensus through the mass media.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the heterotopic evasion in cinemas and theatres during the dictatorship that featured in the lives of the main characters in *Tony Manero* and *Santiago 73*, *No* presents the utopian exaltation of social life. With Chile’s turnabout in 1988, the country started a hard and difficult process towards democracy, but the close encounter with Western commercial television imagery was instead easy and immediate. With the aim of highlighting the evolution of the relationship between the entertainment machine and social life, in his 2012 film Larraín inserts archival footage that shows the American actors Jane Fonda, Richard Dreyfuss and Christopher Reeve (alias Superman) endorsing the “No” movement [Fig. 13]. Whilst the dictatorship – supported by the alliance between the Chilean Right party and the army – was a political model that responded to the hegemony of the United States in South America, by the end of the 1980s the changeover toward “soft power” was complete. This meant the establishment of a paradigm of governance that is able to grasp the imaginary realm so as to facilitate a specific visual culture as a form of control and orientation.

In the case of a director like Larraín – who, in *The Club* (2015), dares to deal with the relationship between religion, ethics and law – one might justifiably draw on the concept of “iconocracy” formulated by the French philosopher Marie-José Mondzain (2004) in her research into the Byzantine origin of the contemporary imaginary. Or more simply, one might refer to the idea of “videocracy” in order to visualize the critical aspects encrusted in the political and communicative vision produced by René’s staff and its contextual frame in the autumn of 1988. This

11 On this point, see the analysis by Benson-Allott (2013).

makes it possible to perceive the risk of the strategic communicative machine becoming impossible to stop once it was mobilized during the plebiscite. It would go on to become a form of governance in a state asset that still lacked a solid structure and a democratic balance in its institutions.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, taking from the work of Julia Paley (2001), inspired by the theories of Antonio Gramsci and Foucault, one might call on the concept of a *marketing democracy*, which refers to a double process, both political and economic, that has pervaded the Chilean social imaginary since the 1980s. A more critical aspect in Larraín's film, as we will see in more detail below, is precisely his focus on communication as the most important way of obtaining consensus, as well as his focus on the embodiment of a national political fight, represented by the opposition between René and Luis. Indirectly and in retrospect, the copywriter is allowed to assume a decisive role in the new political and economic model. In such a model, as a marketing campaign supporting foreign investments claims, "Chile is no longer just a nation. It represents a new international opportunity" (Paley 2001, 117).

More generally speaking, by rethinking the role played by the entertainment machine in films such as *Tony Manero*, *Post Mortem*, and obviously *No*, it is possible to argue that the Chilean trilogy represents a reflection on the conservation of power and the social order through the deliberate use of violence by Pinochet but also, and above all, on the establishment of new governance models based on the control of imagery. One can speak in terms of "bioaesthetics" – understood in its more negative meaning – as a media technique and a discursive strategy oriented towards directing desires, shaping lifestyles, limiting the dialectical articulation of common sense thought, and anesthetizing the spectator. It thus performs a "regression of feeling in sense – and dries the emotional and cognitive processes – that differentiate the perception from the sense" (Montani 2007, 94–95).

Staying with Larraín's narrative of the plebiscite, the "No" campaign presented the conditions for an encounter between politics, aesthetics and life. At the same time, the mitigation of the role of the traumatic past assumes a programmatic aspect. After all, as Nelly Richard (1998) and Macarena Gómez-Barris (2009) have noted in their investigation of Chile's political and social issues in the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called democratic transition was only possible on the hard condition of freezing any social demands related to the traumatic memory of the dictatorship. Before bowing out, in the middle of the democratic transition, Pinochet would have had the possibility to conserve positions of power for

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12 On the relationship between forms of government and forms of representation, see Debray (1993).

himself and his “lieutenants.” After the plebiscite, the governments of Aylwin and Eduardo Ruiz-Tagle mostly avoided any possible tension with the armed forces. After the dictator’s death and until the Socialist Government of Michelle Bachelet, the traumatic memory of dictatorship mostly remained latent in public policies and debates.<sup>13</sup>

By the same token, the memory of the political laboratory of socialism drastically interrupted by the putsch of 1973 seems to find only a small space in René Saavedra’s campaign for the “No” side. Like many scholars and intellectuals, in his film Larraín invites viewers to reflect on this blank. Salvador Allende’s democratic socialism thus remains one of many broken paths of South American history in the twentieth-century.

## Post-Memory Montage

The last film in the Chilean trilogy makes extensive use of archival images. Furthermore, through its use of 1980s video techniques *No* is a film that, through “camouflage methods,” presents itself as an historical document. This strategy by the Chilean director was targeted by several critics in Chile and abroad. The idea of conducting a critical reflection by focusing on the movement for “No” – namely, the movement that was on the “right side” of history – spurred some detractors to attack the director’s family origins. Pablo Larraín is the son of Hernán Larraín and Magdalena Matte, famous representatives of the right-wing party *Unión Demócrata Independiente*, created in 1983.

While many protagonists of the events that took place in autumn 1988 agreed to take part in the film, Genaro Arriagada, executive director of the “No” campaign and historical alter ego of the fictional character, criticized the importance that Larraín assigned to communication in enabling social and political transformation. Above all, he denied the rigid opposition between the vindicated demands of the radical parties and the strategies of the copywriters. Arriagada contested the idea that “There was a group of antiqued and ideologized politicians and suddenly a new copywriter had appeared saying: ‘This is what you must do.’”<sup>14</sup>

Broadly speaking, other critics have focused on Larraín’s decision to shoot with U-Matic film and, consequently, on the risk of blurring the distinction between fiction and reality as well as that between historical events and their manipulation

13 On the public space assigned to the traumatic memory during the phase of transition, see Violi (2014).

14 See: <http://www.quepasa.cl/articulo/politica/2012/08/19-9152-9-el-no-de-arriagada.shtml>. Last accessed: 06. 01.15.

– especially for new generations who did not experience those events. “To what extent can a filmmaker selectively condense and simplify complicated true events and still claim to have made a work faithful to what really happened?” – Larry Rohter (2013) asked in the *New York Times* article that summarizes the most relevant criticisms directed against Larraín. A question of this sort posed by an American journalist echoes the myth of historical accuracy and the ideology of mirroring that an entire century of film theory has tried to deconstruct.

Even if Larraín’s film denies the rigid opposition between archival truth and fiction, it continues to reflect on the role of images as “cultural objects”: the *cause* and *effect* of social phenomena. Instead of reproducing the “postmodern” self-reflexive tendency of the seventh art, this film aims to highlight the problematic relationship between images and power as one of the main drivers of the new global governance. Beyond the category of authenticity and fidelity to historical events, Larraín’s film enacts a process of intermedial “authentication” (Montani 2010) with regard to the media documents of a past that otherwise risks being gradually relegated to oblivion or becoming obscure and of no interest to new generations (as in the case of Pinochet’s dictatorial apparatus), or that even risks continuously reproducing itself (as in the case of the marketing machine). No achieves this through the intermedial montage of historical documents and fictional images, which leads the audience to take them seriously and to evaluate both their effectiveness and their capacity to transform. The film thus offers us the chance to think about the ways through which social discourses mediate, articulate and orient forms of belief and forms of life, and shared images of reality.

In the last part of the film, when all the members of *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* share the joy of victory, René – the intradiegetic director for the whole duration of the movie – seems to be detached. Rather than the protagonist and the campaign leader, he becomes a secondary spectator who observes reality as if it was an image. The camera frames him from behind, as a kind of silhouette that stands out, backlit by the images of the victory. Then the camera follows him while he passes behind all the spotlights and the television operators, who are busy working [Fig. 14].

Unexpectedly, in the sequence of the celebration René assumes a very particular posture, similar to the attitudes embodied by the protagonists of *Santiago 73* and *Tony Manero*. He walks alone amongst the exultant crowd and the images of the politicians that mill around the “No” general quarter. The very moment the utopia becomes real, he seems to experience a sort of heterotopic space. He feels and makes the spectator feel the threshold between Foucault’s “words and

things.” But unlike Mario and Raúl, who seem to succumb to the dictatorship by consciously giving up on observing everyday reality, René recreates the testimonial potential of the heterotopic experience. He moves amongst the limits that divide different social spaces, political discourses, and mediatic genres, and by doing so he finally gets to take on the position of witness that the protagonists of Larraín’s previous films had left vacant.

One might wonder if the Larraín trilogy is just thematizing itself with this final sequence. Do the *No* fictional images really detach themselves from the archival repertoire to which they had belonged until then? In other words, does the film – completed more than 20 years after the plebiscite of 1988 – make it possible to match the historical point of view represented by René, and the posthumous one held by Larraín himself? Is this the new generation’s critical point of view embodied by Simon – René’s scared, blonde son whom he carries amongst the exultant crowd – which is able to interpret retrospectively the turning point that took place in 1988? Or is the film’s perspective that of René, who walks away and casts a critical eye over the utopia that he has created by his own hands?

One could argue that it is only the “post-memory” (Hirsch 2012) point of view of those – like the director, born in 1976 and educated during the democratic transition – who did not experience the shock of September 11, 1973 who can express these events in an original and narrative way. Or maybe it is the same copywriter who is able to recognize the risk of the social and political results of his own campaigns. The great communicator is able to deconstruct the utopia at the same time as he presents it in its seductive form. There is no need for him to wait for history to come. Teary eyes and a veiled smile seem to appear in the face of the 1980s copywriter. This is probably due to his awareness that the development of social aesthetics is a risky business, consisting of continuous negotiations between the need for justice and social peace, between the reasons for memory and the desire for oblivion. It is also due to an awareness that the future is a construction and a projection, as well as an easy lever for propagandist speeches. But it is also the historical place of judgement for the acts and political choices that inevitably take shape in the present.

By making a copywriter the protagonist of the film, an awareness of the importance assumed by the mass media in social and political life, and in the turning points of history, becomes possible. By conceiving of the political battle as a battle of communication, Larraín not only tells the story of a success and its corresponding feeling of euphoria, he also proposes a critical survey of the hopes and prophecies that made the 1980s so important, in both South America and

Europe. He shows the confidence in the development of a new political, social and aesthetic feeling that is open to “difference” and capable of overcoming the political authoritarianism that characterized the previous decades. At the same time, he invites spectators to reflect on the complex relationship between images and power, so as to assume a critical attitude towards history and perhaps to take a political position concerning their present and future.

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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** Pablo Larraín: *Tony Manero* (2008) and *Santiago 73, Post Mortem* (2010). Looking for the way out.



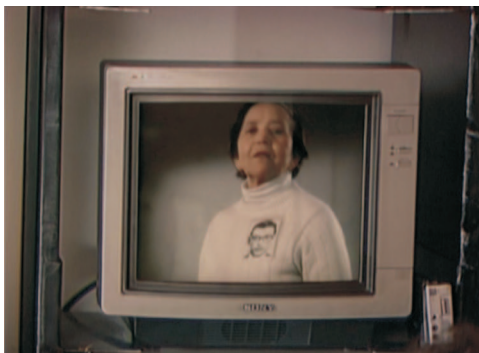
**Figures 3–4.** Pablo Larraín: *No* (2012). One of the passages from *document* to *fiction*.



**Figures 5–6.** Pablo Larraín: *No* (2012). Building the rainbow.



**Figures 7–8.** Pablo Larraín: *No* (2012). The video dedicated to the mothers of *desaparecidos* and the *Doña Yolita* spot.



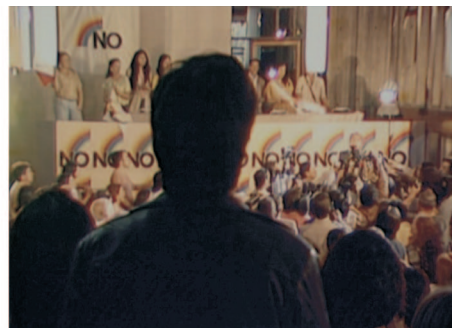
**Figures 9–10.** Pablo Larraín: *No* (2012). Tita Parra, Cecilia Echenique and Tati Penna singing Isabel Parra’s song *No lo quiero No, No*.



**Figures 11–12.** Pablo Larraín: *No* (2012). The double image of Patricio Aylwin.



**Figure 13.** Pablo Larraín: *No* (2012): a very special endorsement. **Figure 14.** The silhouette of Gael García Bernal.







## Accommodating the Mess: The Politics of Appropriation in *It for Others* (2013)

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**Abstract.** In response to Chris Marker and Alain Resnais’s collaborative meditation on art and colonialism in *Statues Also Die* (1953), Duncan Campbell’s video installation *It for Others* (2013) takes a complex approach to presenting a Marxist criticism of the commoditization of art and culture. This article considers the intermedial and intertextual properties of *It for Others* as an example of convergence culture that transcends postmodern quotation and pastiche. While the film is apparently a bricolage of visual artefacts, it is in fact an intricately woven audiovisual essay concerned with the appropriation of not only colonized objects as its narration makes clear, but also of still images, moving images, written texts, sound samples, and the labour that produced them. The article examines how the film troubles notions of documentary realism and truth through its acts of appropriation that reflexively criticize the commercial appropriation and commoditization of artworks and histories. It also reflects on the film’s Marxist approach to related issues around authorship, ownership and access to artworks, particularly in the light of the film’s acknowledgement in prize culture.

**Keywords:** video installation, appropriation, intermediality, intertextuality, circulation.

Primarily situated in the art gallery, Duncan Campbell’s films problematize the authority of documentary film and probe its relationships with time, memory and the archive. They trouble notions around indexical truth and fixed accounts of history while teasing the boundaries and functions of cinema, television, video art, performance and photography. While *Bernadette* (Campbell, 2008) and *Make It New John* (Campbell, 2009) largely consist of televisual material, they are far from being categorized as television documentaries. These art films that re-mythologize the lives of the socialist-nationalist Ulster politician Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and the American car manufacturing mogul John DeLorean – lives which in the 1960s to 1980s played out under the close scrutiny of the

Western media – will never be shown on television even though many of their archival components have appeared in more conventional expository compilation documentaries.

In reassessing the histories of figures whose own accounts railed against populist versions, largely through the reconstitution of available resources mixed with original materials, Irish-born Campbell's films invite questions around the authorship of history and the authorship of film. They reframe and dissolve fixed borders by working with exclusions from collective memory to re-evaluate historicized memories. The ways that they reveal how selectively framed images of real life can often jar with reality encourage critical thinking about the mythologization and memorialization of historical figures and events. Unlike more traditional modes of documentary, Campbell's works reflexively question their own construction using modernist techniques of fragmentation, repetition and disjunctive editing including sound montages. At a remove from the commercial cinema space, they facilitate the realignment of documentary with the early modernist cinema's potential for revolutionary politics. This article examines how Campbell's most ambitious film to date, *It for Others* (2013), achieves this realignment to produce a measured critique of the commoditization of artworks, and the mythologies that arise in conjunction with their circulation and exhibition.

## Documentary Politics

*It for Others* is a 54-minute film presented in four chapters. Much of it is narrated by British actress Kate Hardie in a standard English accent using a tone reminiscent of French-Canadian actress Alexandra Stewart's narration in the English-language version of Chris Marker's *Sunless* (*Sans Soleil*, 1983). The film most explicitly references Marker and Alain Resnais's controversial critique of the West's colonial appropriation of African art in *Statues Also Die* (*Les statues meurent aussi*, 1953) as well as incorporating a vast range of intertexts across various media modes. Ranging from the obscure to the recognizable, the nod to Nicholas Keogh's interactive sound systems constructed from used product packaging is rather esoteric and perhaps mainly recognizable to viewers familiar with localized art scenes in the UK and Ireland [Fig. 1], while similarities to Marker's *La jetée* (1962), Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962) and Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) (1971) may be more discernible to the cine-literate. There are also evocations of Bruce Nauman's Beckett-inspired performances to a fixed camera, while the voiceover narration, printed text, and many of the

originally-filmed sequences are infused with Marxist criticism of the political economy of capitalism. The film's complex transnationality, intermediality and intertextuality facilitate a reimagining of the nature of documentary, particularly at a time when converging media modes and technologies that come packaged in desirable commodity items appear to be causing shifts in perceptions of reality. Such schisms are indicated in Campbell's documentaries when they reflexively expose their own construction in ways that complement the films' socialist politics. Given the fragmentation, repetition and, at times, the disjunction between image and sound in his work, Campbell's approach to documentary film is one which harks back to early documentary's indistinguishability from the modernist avant-garde.

In his important reassessment of the division between avant-garde cinemas and the form of filmmaking John Grierson shaped as documentary in the late 1920s, Bill Nichols explains that documentary's appearance "involves the combination of three preexisting elements – photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation – along with a new emphasis on the rhetoric of social persuasion." While explaining the contentious nature of this combination, he asserts that the element "with the greatest disruptive potential – modernist fragmentation – required the most careful treatment. Grierson was greatly concerned by its linkage to the radical shifts in subjectivity promoted by the European avant-garde and to the radical shifts in political power promoted by the constructivist artists and Soviet filmmakers. He, in short, adapted film's radical potential to far less disturbing ends." (2001, 582.) Due to this concern, as documentary developed as a distinct mode of filmmaking, its connections to modernist approaches to film that became aligned with political cinema were increasingly repressed, largely thanks to Grierson's writings and lectures that contributed to their omission from the historical origins of documentary. The socialist impetus of post-war and post-revolution Russian constructivism and Kuleshovian montage certainly jars with the Griersonian documentary form that flourished in Britain in the 1930s. While Esfir Shub, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein's films were critical of the bourgeois-serving class system, poetic films such as *Industrial Britain* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1931) and *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936) upheld the status quo in their romantic representations of Britain's otherwise invisible labour. Given the transformative potential of international avant-garde practices, Nichols suggests that Grierson's denial of European and Soviet techniques is part of an urgency in the post-war 1920s and 1930s to affirm the individual's place within national identity and their

responsibilities to the state. This is certainly a way of evaluating the British documentary movement of the 1930s, which privileged depictions of diligent male workforces and cultural heritage, with notable omissions including the partition of Ireland, shifting regional borders, women's suffrage, migrant communities and growing multiculturalism across the UK.

In addition to cinematic depictions of the workforce, the growing popularity of cinema as an entertainment for workers in the early twentieth century also coincided with the increasing leisure time and expendable income afforded by industrial capitalism. As Peter Burke points out, the very distinction between work time and leisure time that emerged after the Industrial Revolution is itself a product of modernization (1995, 137). The modernist avant-garde cinema, however, was too disruptive in its attacks on the viewer to effectively deliver political messages that would reach or be embraced by labourers (for example, Buñuel and Dalí's anarchic yet highbrow *Un Chien Andalou* [1929] and *L'Âge d'Or* [1930], the latter of which was famously banned for fifty years). At the same time, the revolutionary potential of fragmentation and juxtaposition in documentary were perhaps undesirable to authorities who required relatively contented, or at least unquestioning, workforces. It follows, then, that celebrating British industries, stoicism and work ethic while maintaining the colonial project in anthropological ethnographies would prevail in Grierson's pioneering documentary movement. It is an interesting development later in the twentieth century and beyond that artist-filmmakers would utilize alternative modes of production and spaces of exhibition to reunite documentary with modernist devices to probe those "disturbing ends" of film's radical potential to intersect with politics – Carolee Schneemann's *Viet Flakes* (1965) comes to mind. In his re-presentations of history and reality, Campbell tends to adopt an associational style of montage similar to Marker's that refrains from employing the Soviet intellectual montage and is subtler than the Surrealists' more explicit conjunctions. The fluidity of modes, the form, and the complex network of content in *It for Others* shatters the established body politic of British documentary traditions, and indicates what documentary could yet become as screen cultures continually converge and as artworks with documentary elements become more commonplace in art galleries.<sup>1</sup>

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1 It is notable that the work of all four artists nominated for the 2014 Turner Prize, awarded that year to Campbell for *It for Others*, in some way involved aspects of documentary. This is indicative of a growing trend, certainly in the UK, but also perhaps internationally, as concepts of the real and representations of the real are becoming more and more slippery.



## Intermediality and Intertextuality

In weaving a vast array of intertexts together in *It for Others*, Campbell channels Marker's ability "to accommodate the mess" (to borrow from Beckett), which includes original footage in juxtaposition with archival material. The original sequences in Campbell's documentaries tend to be shot in 16mm, meaning that the similar textures and colour tones can cause difficulties in differentiating Campbell's footage from the archival material (usually of an era when broadcast recordings were filmed on 16mm), particularly when the whole film is digitized and transferred to DVD for exhibition.<sup>2</sup> This is certainly the case in chapter one, which looks uncannily the same as *Statues Also Die*, but in fact Campbell re-made the sequence in his studio using replicas, in part due to the British Museum's non-response to a request to film the original artefacts it holds that are similar to those in the Musée de l'Homme.<sup>3</sup> Imitating Ghislain Cloquet's cinematography, the featured statues are lit and given movement as if they were living beings [Fig. 2]. Together with the extensive use of photographs in chapter four, the film implicitly embarks on an investigation of the relationship between still and moving images, and the nature of time and memory evoked by such objects. The use of film-based media that are digitized to create video art at a time when most commercial films are produced using digital technologies is inherently intermedial. Given the further inclusion of performance to camera, sculpture, commodity items, and superimposed print text into an already busy mixture of film, photographs, television, sound samples and a spoken essay, *It for Others* is at the very least an intertextual, cross-medial film. While this is true of all films to an extent, *It for Others* is transparent about it and incorporates this self-awareness into the (self-)criticisms it presents.

The opening sequence establishes the film's Marxist approach to understanding the production, appropriation, circulation, use value, exchange value, and display of objects. Like *Sunless*, *It for Others* begins with the voice heard against a black screen, stating: "Objects exist outside of us. It is the confrontation of mind with matter that brings an object into being. Through their use they provide

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2 The differences are easier to discern in *It for Others* than in the earlier *Bernadette* and *Make It New John* largely due to the jump in *It for Others* between widescreen and standard aspect ratios. The distinctions are also indicated when the narrator discusses the filming process and when her comments directly engage with what appears onscreen. Such continued use of 16mm in video-making poses an interesting resistance to "new" and "digital" media which until recently pervaded the gallery, but have shifted to the commercial cinema.

3 This claim is made in *It for Others* and in a promotional video made for the Tate gallery upon the film's nomination for the Turner Prize.

subsistence, satisfy other human wants, and become the means and processes to produce more objects.” The narration immediately echoes chapter 1 of *Capital* (Marx 1867), which outlines the concept of the commodity and distinctions of valuation. The colonial/globalized scope of the production and exchange of objects with which the film engages becomes clearer as the narration continues: “The wealth of our societies exists as a vast accumulation of objects. This is a film about objects. It refers to another film about objects, specific African objects, a ballad of their mortality and death: *Les statues meurent aussi*.” Before the objects in question are shown, the face of a white man is seen apparently viewing such objects in a museum in a similar way to patrons of the Musée de l’Homme in *Statues Also Die* [Fig. 3]. However, the frame around his face is cropped into the shape of a vehicle’s side-view mirror, thus the art viewer becomes a reframed (and de-/re-centred) object to be scrutinized – and perhaps reflected – by the film’s viewers. From the outset there is an indication that acts of seeing and perceiving are as objectified in this film as the objects to which it explicitly draws attention. Indeed, a work’s impact can only be measured by monitoring its viewership.

To enable its production, *It for Others* had to engage in the very acts it and its most explicit referent criticize. For example, during the opening *Statues Also Die* section, an African-style mask is shown in mid assembly with gesturing hands arranging the precisely cut fragments to be attached to the main block rather than skilfully carved intact [Fig. 4]. Whereas such sequences acknowledge the film’s fictions masquerading as truths and reveal the labour that constructed them, it is not always trustworthy as it also makes claims that misdirect the viewer. This is most prominent in the film’s iconology of a photograph of IRA volunteer Joseph McCann under analysis later. *It for Others* also borrows heavily – much more so than from *Statues Also Die* – from *Cléo from 5 to 7*, Varda’s film about a privileged celebrity embarking on a profound period of self-reflection while awaiting the results of cancer tests. Perhaps conscious of her Left Bank comrades’ earlier film, Chapter III of *Cléo from 5 to 7* momentarily focuses on replica African masks in two separate shop windows in Paris as Cléo (Corinne Marchand) asks the taxi driver (Lucienne Marchand) to turn the radio off as one of her hit singles plays. When the driver mistakes Cléo’s request to stop as an order to stop the car, the camera whip-pans from Cléo to the shop window and quickly cuts to brief close-ups of the masks. Similar sequencing occurs moments later when they are stopped by the flow of traffic. Additionally, a later scene shows Cléo visiting her friend Dorothée (Dorothée Blanck) as she life-models for an art class. Before reaching the session, a tracking shot subjective to Cléo regards several figurative

clay sculptures placed around shoulder/head-height as she moves through a studio before reaching the class. The spectral presence of this film underpins the issues raised around art production, as well as the stilling of time and the anthropomorphized renderings of humanity in the statues, photographs and commodity items seen throughout *It for Others*.

Towards the end of the *Statues Also Die* section, the narration gives way to text overlays, often disappearing too fast to read in full. As a pensive spectator able to pause the film while re-viewing it for study,<sup>4</sup> I note that the series of statements appearing over pans of the statues point out that establishments like the British Museum in London, whose initial functions were to house “looted art during imperial and colonial rule,” can place these objects in their context as “part of universal human history.” [Fig. 5.] While in some instances reparations have been made or artefacts repatriated, for the most part, the text states, “the museums also now appear to claim ownership of the cultural patrimony of these objects by enforcing copyright claims.” Given the “weak connections” modern nations have with “the culture, spirit, and race of the ancient peoples who produced these objects,” the case is made that their return “would be to advance petty nationalism and identity politics; to obscure their true meaning and to close down our understanding of them.” The continuing statements point out that if the artworks were to be moved from the central locales of Paris, New York and London, far fewer people could access them, while, on the other hand, Africans are denied “access to these artworks through enforced localization – no Western country will grant an African a visa merely to visit a museum in Europe or America.” Where *Statues Also Die* makes the point that the artworks are displayed in Paris’s anthropological “Museum of Man” rather than its home of fine art, the Louvre, Campbell’s inclusion of the replicas in *It for Others* meant they became part of a touring work of fine art. When the film was nominated for the 2014 Turner Prize, a prestigious award for young contemporary artists practicing in the UK, the film was shown from October 2014 to January 2015 in London’s Tate Britain – a major centre for fine art situated just two miles from the British Museum. Although there remain tensions around ethnographic representation (of which the film is apparently self-critical), the national and cultural claims of ownership discussed in the film contribute to wider concerns around the authorship, ownership and access to cultural products more generally.<sup>5</sup>

4 Warm thanks to Duncan Campbell for giving me access to a digital copy of the film. For more on the pensive spectator and stilling the moving image, see Mulvey (2006).

5 With regards to access, it is worth noting that I viewed *It for Others* for free when it was shown as part of the *Wildscapes* exhibition in Belfast’s Catalyst Arts in May 2014, but had to pay a £10

The film's second chapter exemplifies the extent of its collaborative authorship. Instead of a voiceover with equations appearing onscreen as might be expected in more traditional expository modes of documentary, the choreographed movements by the Michael Clark Dance Company demonstrate Marx's economic equations from *Capital*. For example, the sixth of eight movements illustrates measures of value when two of the dancers make an exchange of objects represented by circular mirrors held facing upwards [Fig. 6]. At first one dancer refuses an equal exchange of her one object for one of the other dancer's objects, but then accepts an exchange of her object for both of his objects. The sequence was filmed in black and white 16mm in a fixed overhead view. Dressed fully in black, the dancers perform on a white floor, which, given the high camera angle, serves as a backdrop or canvas for the shapes they make with their bodies and props. As seen in movement 6, at times the dancers pull white textile sheets across the floor (the manufacture of which in China is indicated towards the end of the film in another example of its self-awareness as a product of global neoliberal capitalism), and their unfurling reveals the partially printed equations completed by the dancers and objects. Without reflexively revealing the arrangement of the printed sheets onscreen, the viewer could easily assume that the text was added in post-production, such is the flattening effect of the overhead wide angle and grainy texture when stilled. Michael Clark's off-camera directions to the five dancers are also heard on the audio track, as are the dancer's footsteps and the scraping sounds they make as they slide themselves and other objects across the floor.

The adaptation of text into a studio performance delivered to camera evokes North American artist Bruce Nauman's performance-to-camera works such as *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (1968), in which he enacts an arduous series of actions derived from passages in Samuel Beckett's plays and prose. In a similar way to Nauman's, the performances in *It for Others* often extend beyond the frame while the shouted directions and sounds of movement continue. This is where the distinction between documented performance art and performance-based video and photography as identified by Philip Auslander (2006) becomes complex. Like Nauman's, this private pre-arranged studio performance was designed to be filmed. While the camera is observational and at a distance, the pre-arranged text onscreen using the printed sheets together with the planned performances are a conceptualization of the documentary device of re-enactment.

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entry fee (on top of travel to London) to see the Turner Prize exhibition, such is the prestige of the event. It is also important to bear in mind that even when it is freely accessible, there does remain a knowing disconnect between modern/modernist art and the average consumer of cultural products.

In this instance, it converges with the expositional conceptualization of the issues Marx examines in *Capital*. In this sequence, documentary filmmaking, performance-to-camera, contemporary dance, printed textiles, and adaptation all converge as one, while the modernist repetition and use of figurative shapes effectively outline without direct quotation Marx's discourse on the emergence and growth of systems of commerce, and his criticism of the disjunction between an object's use value and exchange value. Following the conceptual description of Marx's equations, chapter 3 ruminates on the commodified object, and the commoditization of the labour it takes to make commodified objects. The narration is illustrated by hand performances depicting a white North American (indicated by the narrator and the brands of cigarettes and products they use) working class heterosexual couple at a dining table. This is intercut with studio shots and excerpts of television advertisements for a range of international products presented in anthropomorphic packaging – the montages of which are timed to the jazz drumming from *Statues Also Die*. The socialist message pervades the *mise-en-scène* in their various sequences: a red tablecloth, *The Socialist Worker* mock-up newspaper, the woman's red nail varnish, and an array of red foodstuffs including Campbell's tomato soup [Fig. 7]. A further cutaway from the domestic table involves the red-nailed hand repeatedly setting down the soup tin against a white backdrop [Fig. 8]. Notably, the shots were re-filmed rather than looped, acknowledging Andy Warhol's individually screen-printed *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), as well as referencing Campbell himself in a way that reflects his methods in practice and the tension between authorship and mass re/production.

The fourth and final chapter of *It for Others* is titled "Reflexes." It is the only section to be demarcated as such, and begins not long after the voiceover talks through the film's process of being shaped into an inquisitive narrative to be presented in "four or five chapters." The title appears over a close-up of the scattered contents of a purse, including the broken shards of a mirror, dropped on tarmac [Fig. 9]. This is a contemporary reconstruction (denoted by the use of Euro notes instead of Francs) of the "Chapitre XI: CLÉO de 18 h. 04 à 18 h. 12" section breaker in *Cléo from 5 to 7* when Cléo drops her purse. As Dorothee helps retrieve the items she remarks that the broken mirror is an omen of death. The inclusion of this visual reference continues Campbell's device of re-filming, and thereby reiterating and recirculating, extant works with connections to the modernist avant-garde, while also identifying links between texts otherwise not immediately relatable to one another. The shot also spectrally calls to mind the symbolic shattering of a character who initially embodies shallow consumerism

in her long-winded purchase of a winter hat in midsummer – an item which brings her momentary pleasure that she soon forgets about and cannot wear for long due to the heat. Cléo's desire for the hat early in the film symbolizes the absurd natural conclusion of an item's use value; it is what consumers are told to desire whether or not it is fit for purpose and provides a fair exchange value. *It for Others* is imbued with Cléo's growing self-awareness and her questioning of what in life brings real fulfilment beyond the constructed desirability of commodity items. Yet her journey is shaped by constant encounters with death omens that negate her sense of the future.

*It for Others* ends where *Cléo from 5 to 7* begins. The closing credits appear over an almost shot-for-shot black and white homage to Cléo's tarot reading in what is the only colour sequence in Varda's film [Fig. 10]. Similar to the earlier overhead shots, the sequence imitates the high angle with the lightshade making a semi-circle to the right of the frame as the older pair of hands deals the cards and beckons to the younger pair to make a selection.<sup>6</sup> Tarot raises further issues around the authorship of histories and predetermination of the future. The cards present another visual medium that produces narratives told in image sequences that beg interpretation, like a series of photographs. When played for the purposes of divination, tarot operates on the possibility that life's pathways pre-exist and can be deciphered. The cards are chosen by the person being read, and interpreted by the reader. The reading is not set in stone, but rather is usually the description of possible outcomes that rely on the paths chosen by the individual but can also be determined by encounters with others. The paths we take are contingent on many factors; there is no one identifiable author of any life. The information to which the viewer is privy regarding Cléo's fate at the start of the film contrasts what she learns at its close, and neither outcome is necessarily what will transpire. The film is a slice of time, a compressed linear two hours of a character's life, which, like the momentary duration of a photograph, extends into the past and the future.

The apex of the arguments in *It for Others* comes in another visual omen of early death, namely the photograph of Joe McCann. Leading up to its presence onscreen is a series of photo cards held in front of the static camera. The sequence consists of a long static close-up of hands holding the photos and placing the top one to the back (that is, recirculating them) in time with a narrative of connected

6 The credit sequences are also similar, with Campbell adopting the same typeface as that used in *Cléo from 5 to 7* throughout *It for Others* and presenting the first names in lowercase with the surnames in uppercase.

memories delivered by a different, more personal, voiceover. In an American accent, a woman reads short letters to Freda, presumably the speaker, sent by Alan, who seems to be a friend. As well as similarities in the form, the sequence contains references to Marker's *La jetée* [Fig. 11] and Frampton's (*nostalgia*), both of which engage with memory and the photographic image. Hardie's narration returns and the series of photographs ends on McCann's – an image the film uses to analyse the commoditization of the photographic object, and the subsequent commoditization of the mythologized martyred figure it depicts [Fig. 12].

## Re-presenting History

The photograph of a silhouetted figure holding a gun and kneeling under a flag remains onscreen in silence for a few moments, allowing time for contemplation. The year 1972 appears onscreen over the hands holding the photo card. The narrator explains: “This photograph was taken by Ciaran Donnelly. On the 10th of August, a group of six official IRA volunteers led by Joseph McCann took over Inglis's Eliza Street Bakery in the markets area of Belfast. During the incident, the photographer captured the profile of McCann in silhouette, hunkered down, an M1 Carbine resting on his knee, a Starry Plough flag fluttering above him. It is an image so dramatic and so visually striking that it seems almost composed. [...] Mistaking the flag, the American correspondent Jordan Bonfante wrote: ‘Beneath the Irish Republican tricolour, Joe awaits a counterattack by British infantry during the battle of Eliza Street. Joe was a tall, thin man who moved only in leaps and crouches’.”<sup>7</sup> Here the commentary raises issues concerning “the mythology of content and intent” that mark tensions between art and the telling of history. Whether the flag was genuinely mistaken by Bonfante or not, the reference to the Irish tricolour clearly signifies nationalist/Republican political struggles against British colonialism in Ireland, whereas references to the Starry Plough may need more specialist knowledge and explanation to successfully convey the relevant sense of identity and cause. Reduced and romanticized at the same remove, McCann's appearance in this much-reproduced image presents him as a dynamic revolutionary. The photograph became a *memento mori* of McCann, and for the same Irish Republican movement that ceased fire in 1994 and became fundamental to the Northern Ireland peace process. This unplanned image, or rather, its legacy, has preserved memories of McCann while appropriations of it have transformed

7 Much of this commentary was appropriated and paraphrased from John Mulqueen and Jim Smyth's 2010 *History Ireland* article.

him into a commodity. In doing so, this image and its derivatives precariously straddle the fissures between history and art, and reality and mythology.

For what is perhaps the only time in *It for Others*, Hardie's voiceover takes a first-person stance in claiming not to agree that "the use of appropriation, irony, or cropping gets us any closer to a consideration of the original use or exchange values. The implicit critique is overwhelmed by the power of the original image." This is troubled, however, when the original image is replaced in popular memory by subsequent versions, as is largely the case with the famous Che Guevara poster designed by Jim Fitzpatrick, to which the voiceover soon alludes. Just as the romantic silhouette of McCann looks staged and has been easily appropriated, Alberto Korda's original photograph of Guevara was easily altered to transform the socialist revolutionary into a confident and powerful icon for all leftist political movements. The poster has instead been widely traded on the free market, and its meaning diluted. In telling its version of the narrative of the McCann photo, *It for Others* parodies these specific commercial appropriations of uncopyrighted images by stating – and showing – that prints of the photo headed with "RESISTANCE" appeared on a range of Christmas stockings. What better than a reference to a commercialized religious festival to concisely satirize the commoditization of histories and martyred figures? Fitzpatrick did in fact produce a poster of McCann bearing similarities to the Guevara poster that is now iconic in popular culture, but it was not rendered from one of Donnelly's photographs.<sup>8</sup> The silhouette of McCann with gun and flag, however, does appear on commercially available merchandise as well as anonymously made posters. As the narrator states while the photograph is onscreen, "art activity as it becomes useful, even to the extent of entering culture, becomes no longer art, but history, history being perhaps the most viable tool of differential political power." The narrative the film constructs around this photograph is the process of art not only becoming history, but of rewriting history, and in doing so, it produces a different political, indeed a different kind of socialist message regarding ownership and authority. With knowing irony, the film is subject to its own criticisms.

The hands holding the photograph of McCann retract leaving the tablecloth filling the frame for several beats before cutting to archival colour news footage. As children point out the bullet holes in a wall, the voiceover describes the official account of "the manner of his death: shot ten times by British paratroopers while lying unarmed and wounded on the pavement in April 1972." The interior and

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8 As Mulqueen and Smyth (2010) point out, two were taken in quick succession bearing minor differences. Both have been used for different posters and magazine covers.



exterior shots revealing more bullet holes are intercut with extensive footage of a populated funeral procession. It is clear that it is a Republican funeral taking place in Belfast (against the backdrop of Black Mountain to the north of the city at times in frame) but, interestingly, there are no clear indicators identifying it specifically as McCann's. Furthermore, the sequence has been edited in such a way as to make the depicted events cohere as one. While they likely are from McCann's funeral, which by all recorded accounts was a substantial affair, the sequence resembles so many similar recordings of paramilitary funerals from the same era that they are rendered generic and interchangeable. The narrator alludes to this, stating that "since the 1790s, large stage-managed funerals as political demonstrations have been a staple of Republican mobilization." The individual is immaterial as the funeral fronts a public demonstration for the cause, which in the process martyrizs the person being buried. In this scenario, the surviving images of subjects like McCann become signs of resistance at all costs. But, "resistance to what?"

The voiceover discusses the failure of the Irish Republican movement, drawing attention to issues of class and human rights which became masked and forgotten once the upheaval turned sectarian by the beginning of the 1970s. The movement, the narrator observes, became distracted by interior territorialism that gave rise to hierarchies of power and control amongst groups and communities. There is a suggestion that this is also true of the political economy of the art world and globalized industries. Original use values have been forgotten. More than forty years after McCann's death, and nearly twenty since a devolved power-sharing government was established in Northern Ireland, the images of him that continue to circulate represent a cause that is economically, socially and politically not currently viable. In an essayistic fashion, the film uses this point to make another: "If you take this representation of Chinese textile workers as an epitome of the international division of labour, in forty years' time, what will its function be?" The observational documentary footage (which appears to have been shot in high-definition digital rather than 16mm film) consists of wide angle shots and pans of large, busy factory floors, stacked warehouses, operatives working at large machines (processing long white sheets), and workers exiting the factory at shift's end. The self-conscious admission that this representation has been included, not to ethnographically document Chinese labour making items for export, but to make a socialist point about the international political economy and commodity exchange, again calls attention to the film's self-awareness as a circulating art object. Not only has its production relied on the substantial appropriation of other objects, it too is an object that could in time be carved up and re-appropriated.

## Self-Reflection

The film's self-awareness persists as it comes under its own interrogation: "And what about this film? Is it possible to take its anti-commercial self-representations at face value, to appreciate it in a social vacuum, to ignore the context that is shown?" *It for Others* is primarily a video installation; it is a work that while exhibited will be replayed countless times and will only be viewed in part by most gallery visitors. It is not available to buy or for public view online. It cannot be re-watched by general viewers once the exhibitions close. With knowledge of later events such as the Turner Prize award, and research into the film's intertextual references, only some of which are examined here, this article shows that the film's "anti-commercial self-representations," in addition to the range of contexts it evokes, beg critical interrogation, and know it. The film recognizes that it has a figurative shelf life, but perhaps it also foresees its mummified preservation and recirculation in reviews and scholarly analysis, just as it has done with the statue replicas, photographs, archival footage, textual references and sound samples that contribute to its genetic makeup.

To expand a little on my vague reference to Bazin's comparison of photography to mummification, *It for Others* is pervaded by notions of death which are synonymous with acts of preservation. The final instance of this occurs when the voiceover's detailed closing discussion of the art market is juxtaposed with the tarot's death omen. In speculating on its value, the voiceover asserts that "a key factor in pricing this film would be its length in minutes," suggesting that longevity in art equates value. Durational – that is, limited – time is also evoked by the contents of the final four trump cards including the Hanged Man and Death which match the four cards that predict Cléo's untimely death at the beginning of *Cléo from 5 to 7*. In particular, the final images, now in colour, copy the extreme close-ups of the Death card, notably the bottom depicting Death's scythe cutting off the heads of those he stands upon (symbolizing life cut short [Farley 2009, 76]), and the top revealing the skeletal representation of death before the frame cuts to black. Of course, drawing the Death card can also indicate renewal, an end giving way to a beginning, which is also ambivalently suggested at the end of Varda's film. Indeed, "making it new" lies at the core of the broader modernist project. What this complex work indicates for the future of visual art, documentary film and cinema is that while the old apparatus may no longer be turning reels, new means and modes of preservation and circulation are in full spiral. Survival means accepting death. The cinema is dead. Long live the cinema.

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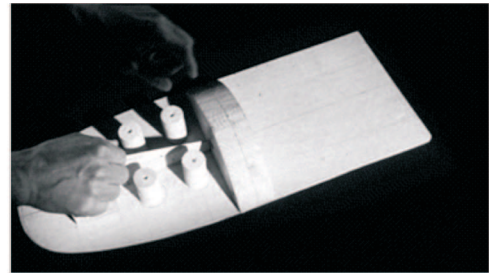
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## List of Figures

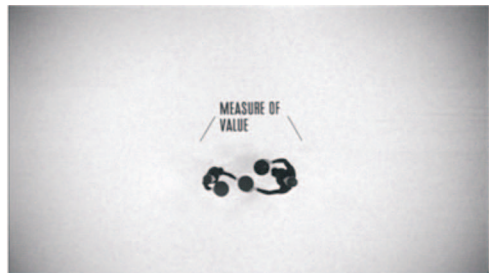
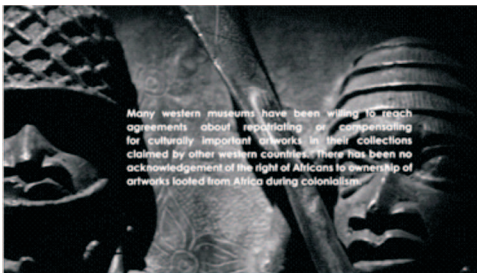
**Figure 1.** A radio made from garbage in *It for Others* (Duncan Campbell, 2013). Note the depiction of the hand's labour with the product. **Figure 2.** Re-filming *Statues Also Die* (Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, 1953).



**Figure 3.** Turning the gaze onto the spectator. **Figure 4.** Constructing a replica African mask.



**Figure 5.** Reviving the criticism of colonial appropriation and claims of ownership over cultural artefacts. **Figure 6.** Demonstration of exchange value by the Michael Clark Dance Company.



**Figure 7.** Socialist reds in the domestic setting in *It for Others*. Note the photographs on the table, particularly the nod to Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). **Figure 8.** Campbell's Tomato Soup.



**Figures 9–10.** Referencing the chapter markers from *Cléo from 5 to 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962) and a remake of Cléo's tarot reading from Varda's film.



**Figures 11–12.** Reference to *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) and Ciaran Donnelly's photograph of Joseph "Big Joe" McCann.







# Media-Morphosis. Intermediality, (Re-)Animation and the Medial Uncanny in Tsukamoto Shinya's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989)

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**Abstract.** Operating self-sufficiently on the fringes of the Japanese film industry for almost his entire career, the work of independent filmmaker Tsukamoto Shinya<sup>1</sup> is perhaps best-known for its uncompromising, musical freneticism, as well as its corporeal spectacle. However, Tsukamoto's dynamic clashing of visual media signifiers, such as those of theatre and television (industries within which he also operated prior to his film career during the 1980s), and how these impact upon his reflexive cinematic style, has yet to be fully considered. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's conception of the 'uncanny' in response to cinema's potential to confuse animate and inanimate, as well as Tsukamoto's own under-discussed background in experimental street theatre and television advertising production, this essay seeks to examine Tsukamoto's unique method of stop motion photography within his signature, self-produced feature *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989). The intention is to show that these hyperbolic sequences instil not only an uncanniness in their live-action subjects, who are rendered inanimate then reanimated to form staccato, cyborg characters, but also a 'medial uncanny' that simultaneously emulates and subverts the qualities of a vast range of visual media, particularly television and its associated post-medial peripherals and artefacts.

**Keywords:** intermediality, Japanese cinema, uncanny, animation, pixilation, post-media.

Through his adoption of multiple production roles, as well as his insistence on working largely outside of Japan's studio system, fiercely self-sufficient writer, director, actor, editor, cinematographer and production designer Tsukamoto Shinya has cultivated a tactile filmmaking sensibility that is both reflexive and wrought, corporeal and textural; and one that frequently blurs the definition

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1 This essay adheres to the native ordering of Japanese names: family name first, given name second. Thus in this particular instance, Tsukamoto is the family name and Shinya is the given name.

between form and content. It is a sensibility that, according to Steven T. Brown: “pushes the boundaries of contemporary Japanese film, not only transgressing the conventions of genre and investigating the limits of cinematic form, but also offering biting social commentary on some of the most pressing issues confronting Japan” (2010, 55).

Although his filmmaking career spans nearly 30 years, the international reputation of Tsukamoto (born in 1960) still largely rests on his professional feature debut *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989). A feverish nightmare cocktail that is equal parts lo-fi, cyberpunk delirium and Cronenbergian body horror, *Tetsuo* was widely embraced at film festivals overseas, establishing Tsukamoto as a figure of cult status, and perhaps remains his most stylistically instinctive and playful film.

Set in a sparsely populated, post-industrial Tokyo that appears to stand on the precipice of ruin,<sup>2</sup> *Tetsuo* features two characters that find themselves transforming into mechanized humanoid monsters who are barely in control of their own bodies. We are first introduced to a character known as *yatsu*, meaning “guy” (but is generally credited as the “metal fetishist” [played by Tsukamoto himself]), who looks to enhance his body by inserting pieces of metal inside it. Following a crude surgical insertion of a metal rod into his leg, the Fetishist panics after the incision becomes suddenly infested with maggots. Fleeing down the street, he is knocked down by a car driven by a Salaryman (Taguchi Tomorrowo). With the help of his girlfriend (Fujiwara Kei), the Salaryman decides to hide the evidence of the collision by dumping the body in the woods. Time passes, and after finding a small shard of metal from his electric shaver protruding from his cheek, the Salaryman starts to undergo a fantastical metamorphosis whereby organic scrap metal erupts from the flesh and appendages mutate into various power tools and cybernetic weaponry. He slowly mutates into the “Tetsuo” of the film’s title,<sup>3</sup> much to both the repulsion and perverse fascination of his girlfriend. Meanwhile the Fetishist, who has not only survived the accident but is also experiencing similar metallic changes to his body, returns to Tokyo to exact revenge by laying siege on the Salaryman’s apartment, prompting further transformations and an extended, super-powered battle through the streets.

2 Coincidentally, *Tetsuo* was released immediately before the collapse of the Japanese asset price bubble, which saw mass inflation of Japanese stock market prices throughout the 1980s. The bubble began to waver towards the end of 1989 and had burst altogether by 1991, precipitating a national economic collapse colloquially referred to as the “lost decade” that would persist throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

3 *Tetsuo* is derived from the Japanese word *tetsu* (鉄) meaning “iron.” It can be translated as “iron man,” “iron husband” or “clear (thinking) man” depending on the kanji characters used.



In a parallel most appropriate for a story about metal breaking through the surface of the flesh, the stylistic execution of *Tetsuo* is one where the mechanized process of the filmic image is also made visible. This is most apparent during the film's many sequences of juddering live-action, stop-motion photography, which are used to instigate (and, from a production standpoint, facilitate) transformation, and allow the Fetishist and Salaryman characters to engage in superhuman travel and hyperbolic combat.

Steeped in multifaceted, transnational science fiction and horror genre iconographies, many Western film journalists and scholars have previously chosen to unravel the audio-visual complexities of *Tetsuo* via the citational mode of intertextuality, where they revel in diagnosing the various artefacts that Tsukamoto appears to be quoting. Ian Conrich has pointed out how films such as James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) and Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* (1987), as well as the work of filmmakers David Cronenberg, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Norman McLaren and Sam Raimi, among others, were a prominent aspect of the reviews of *Tetsuo* upon its release outside Japan (Conrich 2005, 97). Tsukamoto himself has not exactly been shy when talking about the films that have inspired him, stating that he considers Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) as the "parents of *Tetsuo*" (Mes 2005, 40).

However, this intertextual approach can only take us so far in our understanding of the dynamic practice on display in *Tetsuo*, as, to borrow the terminology of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), Tsukamoto's style frequently generates friction between the "immediate" (the eradication of mediation) and the "hypermediate" (the multiplication of mediation), which is realized via heightened acting and blocking, corybantic camerawork, rigorous editing and propulsive music. This awareness of mediation, both in terms of erasure and amplification, naturally lends itself toward a more expansive awareness of the relationships between different media and their points of intersection. As has been previously suggested by Werner Wolf, an intermedial framework serves as a logical continuation to the intertextual (1999, 1–2), exploring more broadly the relationship between the signifiers of varying types of media and how their usage can challenge what could be described as "medium specificity." Intermediality has become an especially potent praxis in film studies due to the argument that cinema functions as a "mixed" or "inter"-medium that fuses the signifiers of a malleable panoply of other media. Thus cinema, as noted by Jürgen Heinrichs and Yvonne Spielmann, "highlights the transformative quality of intermediality that can be found in the varying interrelationships between two or more media forms" (2002, 6–7).

Along similar lines to Bolter and Grusin, Ágnes Pethő has suggested two possible templates for reading cinematic intermediality. The first is a “sensual mode” that invites the viewer to be involved at “the proximity of entangled synesthetic sensations,” where one intuitively absorbs the kaleidoscopic impressions generated through media signifiers, resulting in “a cinema that can be perceived in the terms of music, painting, architectural forms and haptic textures” (2011, 5). Pethő likens this model to that of a wandering stroller or driver who naturally take in their surroundings.

The second template is a more hands-on “structural mode,” whereby the cinematic flow of images is broken down into its medial components. Pethő summates that: “The *structural mode* thus involves either a fragmentation, a shattering of the world into pieces of media representations or the experience of some kind of juxtapositions, jumps, loops or foldings between the media representations and what we perceive as cinematic reality. This kind of intermedialization may take the form of diegetic reflexivity, or it may result in the world appearing as a media collage” (2011, 5–6). This in turn has the potential to lead to “metaleptic contrasts between the ‘natural,’ the seemingly ‘unmediated’ and the ‘artificial’ within the image” (2011, 6).

Through his use of stop motion animation, as well as frequent engagement with the post-medial superset of television (both its cathode ray tube technology and its associated disseminative peripherals), I would like to propose that Tsukamoto’s distinctive filmmaking approach with *Tetsuo* is just as potent a site for both “sensual” and “structural” intermedial cross-pollination as it is for intertextual comparison. By demonstrating the potential ramifications of such fusions, we shall see how Tsukamoto’s melding of live action and animation can create tension between conceptions of what could be termed as the “rational” and the “uncanny” within media. I would also like to propose that this notion of “medial uncanny” may be a more appropriate paradigm when observing the resultant subversions of these media fusions; more so than other established theories of the uncanny within technology. The most famous of these is perhaps the “uncanny valley,” as proposed by Japanese robotics engineer Mori Masahiro (2012).

Before this however, it is worth expounding upon Tsukamoto’s seldom discussed creative development prior to *Tetsuo*, which took place in the arenas of underground self-produced 8 mm filmmaking (*jishu seisaku eiga*), experimental street theatre and professional television advertising production. In doing so, the potential for intermedial discussion concerning Tsukamoto’s film work becomes all the more palpable.

## Primitive Tsukamoto: 8 mm Films, Street Theatre and TV Advertising

As a teenager, Tsukamoto self-produced a number of 8 mm films throughout the 1970s, using his younger brother Kōji and school friends as cast and crew. The first was *Genshi-san* (which can be translated as *Mr. Primitive* or *Mr. Primeval* [1974]), a short film featuring an oversized caveman stomping on a (model) city, which was effectively a 14-year old Tsukamoto's love letter to the *daikaijū eiga* (or "giant monster movies") that had featured so strongly in his upbringing – particularly Daiei's *Gamera* films from the 1960s (Mes 2005, 17). He would go on to self-produce six more 8 mm film projects of varying ambition; one of these – *Jigokumachi shōben geshuku nite tonda yo* (translation: *Flying in a Helltown Piss Lodge*<sup>4</sup> [1977]) – was over two hours in length. However, towards the end of the decade, Tsukamoto soon became disenfranchised with filmmaking as his attention drew increasingly towards the stage after acting in various school plays. He would go on to form two theatre troupes of his own. The first was *Yumemaru* – meaning "dream circle," which was established during Tsukamoto's final year of secondary school in 1977 and continued to operate throughout his attendance at Nihon University (where he studied art), disbanding in 1984. The troupe would perform continually revised iterations of three plays written by Tsukamoto. In 1985 Tsukamoto founded *Kaijū Shiatā* – or "sea monster" theatre, that would stage another updated version of each of Tsukamoto's plays and was typically devised within a small, purpose-built tent adorned with a large papier-mâché sea creature, which was fashioned by the troupe members themselves (Mes 2005, 31–37).

Meanwhile, Tsukamoto's work for the advertising company Ide Production in the early 80s saw him produce commercials for items such as Casio keyboards, fur coats and Nikon cameras. His interest in filmmaking subsequently rekindled and, with the help of his *Kaijū Shiatā* troupe, produced two 8 mm films in quick succession. The first was *The Phantom of Regular Size* (*Futsū saizu no kaijin*, 1986), an 18-minute short filmed in and around the Ide Production offices that was ostensibly a prototype for *Tetsuo*, featuring the same basic conceit of two characters (played by Taguchi and Tsukamoto) undergoing bizarre, and primitively realized, metallic metamorphoses. The second was the 45-minute project *The Adventure of Electric Rod Boy* (*Denchū kozō no bōken*, 1987), a cinematic remediation of one of Tsukamoto's own stage productions concerning a

4 The English translation of this film title is credited to Mes (2005, 25).

time-travelling high school student who finds himself in a dystopian future world where a trio of vampires conspire to have the sky cloaked in eternal darkness.

These two films that followed his activity in *Kaijū Shiatā* and *Ide Production* are markedly different from those 8 mm films produced before, most notably due to their experimentations with live action, stop-motion hybridity; liberating Tsukamoto from the temporal and spatial constraints of intimate stage performance, as well as from the self-described “one scene with one cut” approach of his earlier filmmaking attempts. In *Basic Tsukamoto* (Muramatsu Masahiro, 2003), a television documentary about his work, Tsukamoto explains that: “Until now I was making films focus on the story almost like a stage, one scene with one cut, a pretty still film like that. From *Denchū kozo*, [there are] many cuts on a scene... like riding a rollercoaster.”<sup>5</sup>

These innovations would continue to be utilized in *Tetsuo*, which was, once again, produced by the same core group of personnel from Tsukamoto’s former theatre troupe. As such, *Tetsuo*’s production was also characterized by a strong degree of spontaneity. Speaking with Dan Persons for an interview with *Cinefantastique*, when *Tetsuo* and its sequel/companion piece *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992) were starting to see circulation in North America, Tsukamoto talks about how limited production resources led to decisions over how certain elements of the film were realized, stating that: “Originally, we thought [*Tetsuo*] would be a parody. Because it had to be one take, we ended up doing a more exaggerated, overacted style, which is easier” (Persons 1993, 52). As a result of a very tight shooting ratio of around 1:1 (i.e. as few takes as possible), a less subtle style of performance commensurate with the more in-the-moment qualities of street theatre was favoured. However, from a cinematic standpoint, Tsukamoto’s main concern for *Tetsuo* was creating what he referred to in the same interview as a “sensuous image [...] showing the relationship between the metal – the materiality and the flesh – and the body” (Persons 1993, 52). Moving forward, let us consider Tsukamoto’s usage of crude stop-motion photography in more detail, as its introduction into his filmmaking is essential when discussing the existence of what I had termed earlier as the “medial uncanny.”

5 See: *Basic Tsukamoto*. DVD. Directed by Muramatsu Masahiro. 2003; Japan: Kaijyu Theater/There’s Enterprise, 2004.

## Pixilation and Uncanny Bodies

Tsukamoto's method of live action, stop-motion hybridization instantly aligns itself with the animation technique known as "pixilation," where live actors are used as the subject for animation, as though living puppets. Rudimentary use of pixilation can be traced all the way back to the earliest years of cinema and animation. One example being the short Spanish silent comedy *The Electric Hotel* (*El hotel eléctrico*; Segundo de Chomón, 1908), where guests are seen being pampered by automated grooming appliances. But perhaps the permutation of pixilation that resembles Tsukamoto's work the closest lies in the films of the aforementioned Normal McLaren. McLaren's most famous work, the Academy Award-winning short *Neighbours* (1952), uses pixilation techniques to reanimate two men who fight over the ownership of a flower that sprouts between their houses. Being reanimated by pixilation allows them to skid, levitate and glide across their lawns [Figs. 1–2]. As a result, the film prefigures the mechanized human locomotions and sound effects that would be amplified considerably in *Tetsuo*. Tsukamoto's iteration, however, differs from that of McLaren in that many of his pixilation sequences are executed with a non-fixed camera. In *Tetsuo*, an actor strikes a pose on the street; a single still frame is taken of them. They move forward a little and re-pose, and, crucially, the camera position is also moved and another single frame is then taken. The process is repeated over and over, resulting in the visual effect where the character appears to glide along the surface of the road, with both the camera and audience along for the ride.

It should be acknowledged that this method of animation, much like the theatrical style of performance used throughout the film, would have just as likely been born from logistical necessity as it was from creative experimentation, as the filmmaking technologies required to achieve these effects "professionally" would have been way beyond Tsukamoto's initial investment of 5 million Yen (Persons 1993, 52), which is around 50,000 Euros in today's money. In the Japanese film industry of the 1980s, filmmaking technology such as motion control was reserved only for high-profile, mega-budget studio productions. A notable example being Toho's *Sayonara Jupiter* (Hashimoto Kōji, 1984), an ambitious, multi-lingual space opera that utilized the same Dykstraflex computer-controlled camera system first developed during the production of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977).

However, Tsukamoto's more punk-inspired, do-it-yourself approach – the taking of still photographic frames and arranging them sequentially as a means of reanimating their subjects – yields an important side-effect. Brown has noted that

Tsukamoto's method of live-action, stop-motion hybridity "produces an effect of the uncanny by blurring the boundaries between the animate and inanimate" (2010, 93). In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey ruminates on the photograph's role both as mechanized imprint that preserves life after death and its innate ability to conflate the two. She states that: "Uncanny feelings are aroused by confusion between the animate and the inanimate, most particularly again associated with death and the return of the dead. The photograph's suspension of time, its conflation between life and death, the animate and the inanimate, raises not superstition so much as a sense of disquiet that is aggravated rather than calmed by the photograph's mechanical, chemical and indifferent nature" (2006, 60–61). It is at this moment, according to Mulvey, that a sense of the uncanny presents itself. Mulvey describes the phenomena as "often experienced as a collapse of rationality" and as "a property of the human mind and its uncertainties" (2006, 55). (I shall return to this notion of "collapsed rationality" later on.)

Unlike the more expressive movements in McLaren's animations, Tsukamoto's method of pixilation, in many instances, results in the actors barely moving beyond set poses, appearing stilted and tableau-like. Minor fluctuations of said positions notwithstanding, these sequences are orchestrated so that their live, animate subjects appear as inanimate as possible. This effect can be viewed in the scene where Tsukamoto's Fetishist character traverses the city to the Salaryman's apartment. He flies along the abandoned urban streets holding a bouquet of flowers in an outstretched hand. Scrubbing through the sequence frame-by-frame, the inanimate poses of Tsukamoto become even more apparent as the temporal constitution of cinematic illusion gives way to the sequential stasis of a photographic slide show [Figs. 3–8]. As such, this sequence, among many others, represents a tactile, production-centric extension to the film's central theme of flesh merging with metal. Specificity between animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, living and non-living, and perhaps even form and content, are continually challenged and blurred as human bodies are turned rigid and metal materials are rendered pliant and flexible. In the same sequence, a road sign and a bicycle buckle, crumple and collapse into balls of twisted alloy through the pervasive power of stop motion. Furthermore, the rapidly changing non-fixed camera of these particular sequences also creates a further subversion between subject and environment, as the actors often find themselves confined, or perhaps "anchored," to a particular spot within the frame while the surrounding urban and industrial space – consisting of buildings, lamp posts, fences etc. – competes for the eye's attention as it appears more visually "alive" than the human subjects

of a given shot. This stands in sharp contrast to mainstream usage of stop-motion animation, which, during the 1980s, was still the preferred method for filmmakers intending to bring non-living or fantastical characters to life. Their chief concern was to, firstly, animate their inanimate subject(s) and then integrate said subject(s) into live action settings as seamlessly as possible, all the while maintaining what we commonly refer to as “suspension of disbelief.” Let us take, for example, Paul Verhoeven’s *RoboCop*, a modestly budgeted Hollywood film produced just before *Tetsuo*, that also features cyborgian characters and was cited earlier by Conrich as a point of comparison in critics’ reviews for *Tetsuo*. *RoboCop* uses fluid stop-motion techniques to animate the imposing body of ED-209, the malfunctioning enforcement drone, which were supervised by veteran visual effects artist Phil Tippett. Tippett had previously pioneered a stop-motion technique referred to as “Go Motion” while working with Jon Berg during the production of *Star Wars* sequel *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), which involved “connecting rods from a puppet to computer-controlled stepper motors as a means of partially executing character movements” (Duncan 2010, 69). Interviewing Tippett for the fan magazine *Star Wars Insider*, Jamie Painter elaborates on the benefits of the process, stating that it is “a technique to reduce the problem of strobing, a common problem inherent in stop-motion animation. By using computer-controlled motors to blur the motion of the manually-animated models during photography of individual frames of film, [Tippett and Berg] brought stop-motion animation to a new level of realism” (1997).

Realistic motion has been a longstanding concern for animators and, like pixilation, rudimentary precursors of the “Go Motion” concept can be traced back to the earliest years of the stop-motion animation process. This can be seen as early as the 1920s in the puppet animations of Russian animator Władysław Starewicz (perhaps better-known by his Francocized name Ladislav Starevich). Famous for entomological stop-motion vignettes of embalmed insect corpses turned anthropomorphized puppets such as *The Cameraman’s Revenge* (*Mest kinematograficheskogo operatora*, 1911) [Figs. 9–10], Starevich pioneered a style of stop-motion that was unusually fluid for the time period, shooting more than 500 frames per 30 seconds of film (Bendazzi 1994, 35).<sup>6</sup> Starevich continued to develop techniques that were, in principle, similar to “Go Motion” in many of the films that he subsequently produced upon relocating to France, including *Love*

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6 Another of Starevich’s insect animations, *The Beautiful Leukanida* (*Prekrasnaya Lyukanida*, 1911), was seen as being so realistic that “London newspapers wrote that the insects were alive, trained by an unidentified Russian scientist” (Bendazzi 1994, 36).

in *Black and White* (*Amour noir et blanc*, 1923) and the live-action, stop-motion hybrid *The Voice of the Nightingale* (*La voix du rossignoi*, 1923).

Throughout the history of animation, the purpose – or rationale – of creating motion blur during the photographing of a frame was to generate the appearance of natural fluidity by effectively creating movement between movement, which minimizes the staccato effect inherent in the process of placing continuous still images next to one another. Animation scholar Richard Neupert has noted that “for many historians, ‘breathing life’ into the inanimate is the ontological core of animation, if not all cinema” (2014, 61). *Tetsuo*, by contrast, makes absolutely no attempt to create believable motion. As previously mentioned, the film perhaps “breathes” more “life” into the urban and industrial environments that surround its rigid, dehumanized characters, which in its own way subverts the intent of Neupert’s notion of the “ontological core of animation.” Tsukamoto’s conflation of the animate and inanimate image advocates the inverse of this statement by “sucking life” from the “animate,” rendering his human characters into uncanny automata.

## Robot Humans and Human Robots: A Brief Sojourn into the “Uncanny Valley”

Tsukamoto’s fictional robots – humans engineered to appear mechanistic through the heavy mediation of photographic form – also yields a further inversion to that of the actual robots – mechanisms engineered to appear humanistic through the careful design of person-like features – being developed by Japanese robotics engineers during the country’s high technology boom of the 1970s and 1980s. Bruce Grenville makes the case that the emerging figure of the cyborg in post-war Japanese culture did not form “in a binary of fear and fascination, good and evil, human and machine,” but instead as “the product of a culture that successfully integrated a history of handcrafted production into the process of industrialization.” As such, Grenville asserts that the object of the cyborg “retained its animistic<sup>7</sup> spirit” and was seen as an “entity in its own right, worthy of respect and admiration” (2001, 44). Finally, he notes, by way of an observation from cultural anthropologist Oda Masanori, that it was the Osaka Expo 70 that

7 Animism is the attribution of a living soul or spiritual essence to non-human entities and inanimate objects. It is a recurring theme in many artefacts of Japanese visual culture that feature cyborgian characters; perhaps the most famous examples being the anime features *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii Mamoru, 1995) and its sequel *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (Oshii, 2004) (cf. Brown 2010, 13–53).



“reawakened a national interest in animism,” particularly amongst the younger generation (Greenville 2001, 44). This “reawakening” can be attributed to the high number of advanced robotics on display throughout the six month-long exposition – the first of such scale to be hosted in Japan. The aforementioned robotics engineer Mori Masahiro notes that: “Plans for the event had prompted the construction of robots with some highly sophisticated designs. For example, one robot had 29 pairs of artificial muscles in the face (the same number as a human being) to make it smile in a humanlike fashion” (2012, 100).

Mori’s observations concerning his colleagues’ quest to instil affinity in their robots through human emulation lead to the publication of his 1970 article *Bukimi no tani*, which literally translates as “Eerie Valley,” but is better known as the “Uncanny Valley.” The “valley” of the title corresponds to the sudden drop in a graph that plots a person’s increasing affinity towards a particular entity the more humanlike it appears. The “valley” appears shortly before the entity in question reaches a level of affinity typically ascribed to a “healthy person” [Fig. 11]. The suggestion is that if an object, a robot in this case, is a compelling replica of a human being but features minor deficiencies in appearance, movement or behaviour, the result brings forth a psychological aversion; an “eerie sensation” galvanized upon the viewer realizing that the perceived robot, although appears incredibly humanlike, is ultimately an imitation of life (Mori 2012, 99). Mori’s observation also applies to still effigies of the human form – a child’s doll, a *bunraku* puppet<sup>8</sup> etc. – and has more recently been applied to the realm of virtual human characters, such as those created by motion capture technology and those that are found in computer animation and modern video games (cf. Geller 2008; Tinwell 2011), where once again, minor faults in appearance, movement and behaviour (among other factors) reveal their uncanny artifice.

Movement is perhaps the most important determining factor however, as, according to Mori, movement “changes the shape of the uncanny valley by amplifying the peaks and valleys” (2012, 99). To emphasize this importance, Mori produced a second graph featuring two “valleys:” a “still” valley for inanimate objects (represented by a solid line), and a “moving” valley for animate objects (represented by a perforated line) [Fig. 12]. Both valleys are overlaid together on the same continuum, peppered with a range of examples – an “industrial robot,” a “stuffed animal,” a “prosthetic hand” and so on. Lurking at the bottom of the

8 *Bunraku* is a traditional form of Japanese puppet theatre dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Resembling human proportions, these flexible puppets range in size and are generally operated by a trio of puppeteers, who are often plainly visible on stage but wear black robes to minimize their presence.

relatively shallow, “still” valley is the corpse, which appears human but lacks the minutia of a living being; at the bottom of the deeper, “moving” valley is the “zombie” – i.e. a reanimated corpse of something that was once alive and “healthy.”

The conflation of life and death and its perpetuating of the uncanny plays into Mulvey’s observations on the uncanny in cinema. Although Mori chooses to filter those entities that are moving (“animate”) and those that are still (“inanimate”) into separate uncanny valleys of varying severity, Mulvey points out how the uncanny in cinema stems from the “photographic index” that underpins the illusion of the moving image: “The mechanical, even banal, presence of the photographic image as index takes on a new kind of resonance, touched perhaps by nostalgia [...]. As a trace of the past that persists into present, and one in which, in the case of the cinema appears to animate the inanimate human body, the photographic index reaches out towards the uncanny as an effect of confusion between living and dead” (2006, 31).

This takes us back to the inversion of terms at the beginning of this section: The “robot humans” that Mori observed at Osaka Expo 70 and the “human robots”<sup>9</sup> of Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo*. The robot humans start their journey before the valley, climbing the slope of affinity towards the ultimate summit of complete human likeness. Tsukamoto’s human robots, on the other hand, undergo a process of being reverse engineered on account of them being portrayed by human actors; they begin at the summit by default. However, the use of non-fixed pixilation, paradoxically rendering subjects into both moving and static entities, chips away at their affinity, resulting in them slipping down the ravine of the uncanny valley; but which valley? Although the ultimate effect yields motion, the pixilation in *Tetsuo* elicits confusion between the “moving” and “still.” Placing the roboticized humans of *Tetsuo* on Mori’s graph, then, becomes problematic as their perpetual oscillation between “moving” and “still” leaves little recourse but to either exile them to the hinterland between the deep “moving” valley and the shallow “still” valley, or place them at one of two points where the “moving” and the “still” intersect. These intersections occur a little over half way down either side of each valley, as per Mori’s graph, and also happen to occur on the borderline between positive and negative “affinity.”

9 Grammatically speaking, I am aware that one could make the case that the terms “robot humans” and “human robots” could be swapped in this instance depending on whether one chooses to regard the first word of either expression as an adjective. Indeed, such interchangeability of terms only emphasizes the confusion and potential for uncanny between the human-like robots as observed by Mori and the robot-like humans as created by Tsukamoto. I myself switched these parallax terms around several times before (reluctantly) settling on the present order.

Furthermore, this conflation of “moving” and “still” facilitates another medium-specific rupture between the material of film and the illusion of cinema, effecting the opposition between what Mulvey refers to as “film time” – “the inscription of an image onto the still frames of celluloid” – and “cinema time” – “the structure of significance and flow that constitutes the temporal aesthetic of any movie” (2006, 30). By calling attention to “film time,” the illusion of cinema is brought into question, as is the veracity of filmed human movement. Thus, the corruption of this illusion also brings with it a corruption of the human forms depicted within it. The deliberately staccato results of Tsukamoto’s reanimations affirm an interest, if only latently, in playing with cinema’s mechanistic division of human movement into hidden micro-gestures lasting a 24<sup>th</sup> of a second each, by making said gestures plainly visible to the viewer.

If we now return briefly to the mode of intertextual citation favoured by scholars’ previous analyses of *Tetsuo* with these developments in mind, new and perhaps better-positioned citations present themselves. Rather than the North American genre films mentioned by Conrich, perhaps *Tetsuo*’s intentions are better compared to like-minded avant-garde film experiments taking place in Europe during the latter half of the 1980s. For instance, *Piccolo film decomposto* (1986), by the Italian filmmaker and photographer Paolo Gioli, reanimates the human subjects from the chronophotography of Eadweard Muybridge, whose work originally set out to break down complex locomotion and arrange them in sequential cells for scientific study. Another Gioli experiment, *Quando l’occhio trema* (1989), reworks material from Luis Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou* (1929) to manipulate cinematic human movement, in this case, the fluttering eye. Similar film manipulations were also performed by Viennese artist Martin Arnold, whose very first work, *Pièce touchée* (1989), takes a short excerpt from the Hollywood film *The Human Jungle* (Joseph M. Newman, 1954) and elongates, reverses and repeats it to obsessively scrutinize the hidden robotization of the human form as it is caught on camera. Mulvey has observed that: “In *Pièce touchée* [Arnold] draws out a man’s entrance into a room, in which a woman is waiting, by repeating frames in series similar to the effect of flicker films. [...] a couple of seconds are stretched out over minutes. At the same time, the rhythm of the repeated gestures begins to resemble mechanical movements” (2006, 171–172).

Arnold’s scrutinizing of movement not only yields a sense of mechanism in the broken gestures of the characters but also within the medium as a whole, as Mulvey continues to observe that “subject to repetition to the point of absurdity, they lose their protective film worlds. Furthermore, the repeated frames that

elongate each movement and gesture assert the presence of filmstrip” (2006, 172). “Film time” and “cinema time,” then, ebb, flow and cross-fertilize in ways that defy their original logic.

So it could be said that the work of both Gioli and Arnold during this period not only instils a sense of the uncanny in the human figures depicted in these intensively remediated, pre-existing works, but that such remediation also instils a sense of the uncanny in the medium itself, as the methods employed by these artists severely corrupt their original context, both physical and temporal, as well as what could be referred to as the “rationale” of the media in question. Can, for example, the stuttering discontinuity of *Pièce touchée* or the freshly reanimated continuity of *Piccolo film decomposto* be considered artefacts of cinema and chronophotography respectively? Or, to paraphrase an earlier quote from Mulvey, could it be said that a “collapse of rationality” galvanized by such manipulation is in effect – creating an artefact that at once emulates or embraces certain fundamental media signifiers, while at the same time eluding or subverting others? As we are now dealing with the deficient minutia of the media itself, rather than the human and humanlike figures it depicts, Mori’s widely accepted proposition of the “uncanny valley” is no longer a viable tool to contextualize these discrepancies of form. Instead, could these phenomena be better described as instances of “medial uncanniness”?

## Media Mimesis: Towards a Sense of the “Medial Uncanny”

Although Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo* is unique to these previously mentioned examples in that it is not a direct manipulation of a pre-existing text, it could be said that a medial uncanniness is generated in the way that its sequences of non-fixed pixilation are executed, playfully oscillating between the rationale that respectively characterizes cinema, animation and photography. Tsukamoto arranges photographic frames in a manner that resembles continuous motion. The truth, however, is that this sense of continuity is merely an uncanny emulation, even though cinema by its very mechanical nature is made up of a rapid succession of still images. Film editor Walter Murch offers an interesting distinction concerning moving image continuity and the context that we, as viewers, subconsciously place upon it: “Each frame [in cinema] is a displacement from the previous one – it is just that in a continuous shot, the space/time displacement from frame to frame is small enough for the audience to see it as motion within context rather than as twenty-four different contexts a second” (2001, 6).

Murch then goes on to say: “On the other hand, when the visual displacement is great enough (as at the moment of the cut), we are forced to re-evaluate the new image as a different context” (2001, 6). Tsukamoto’s do-it-yourself pixilation method, where motion is created through rigorous cutting, exists between these states, constituting motion *resembling* context, as the displacement between his similar yet autonomous snapshot images is perhaps too great to be considered *within* context but not so much that it qualifies as a *different* context. Again, Tsukamoto’s limited resources, coupled with the fact that he was working predominantly in urban Tokyo streets, as opposed to a dedicated studio space, did not afford him the opportunity to create sufficiently discrete motion displacements, or to create movement between movement as was the case with Phil Tippett and Go Motion. In animation terms, Tsukamoto’s sequences seem to be made up exclusively of “key frames” – i.e. the defining moments animators use to map out a particular movement – and without the “in-betweens” that fill the gaps in space and time to seamlessly join them together. The results, then, are sequences that appear so successive that they corrupt the frozen temporality of photography, but so staccato that they challenge the continuous fluidity of motion that sets cinema apart from its ancestor medium.

This fixation with medial heritage chimes not only with Mulvey’s early observation of the tendency for frame-by-frame manipulation to “assert the presence of filmstrip,” but with another observation made by Steven T. Brown concerning the live action, animation hybridity of *Tetsuo*, where he notes that Tsukamoto’s stop-motion technique “exposes the very origins of cinema in the stillness of a single frame,” in addition to its confusing of the animate with the inanimate (2010, 93). Tsukamoto’s self-described “sensuous” approach with *Tetsuo* resonates across the entire spectrum of moving image evolution by liberally picking the signifiers and by-products of its technologies and contorting their conventions to accentuate his narrative.

The film’s progressively arranged yet ultimately independent images channel the intentions and broken physicality of chronophotographic cells, flicker films and the illusions conjured while peering into a spinning Zoetrope. Its monochromatic film stock, 1.33:1 aspect ratio and its use of overriding music yield uncanny impressions of silent cinematic aesthetics and conventions. Tom Mes has drawn further comparisons between *Tetsuo* and silent cinema, noting that “image composition, lighting patterns, performances and make-up are strongly expressionistic in nature,” further citing “high contrast light, over-accentuating face paint, [and] exaggerated body movements” as key visual components (2005, 63).

The film also plays with the stroboscopic textures of cathode ray tube television screens, mimicking in extremis the telecine process of transferring film to video. Such an extreme representation of CRT, achievable through adjusting a film camera's shutter speed so that it is disharmonious with the scanline refresh rate of the TV it films, modifies, melds and corrupts the visual textures of both mediums [Figs. 13–14]. The film also comingles more broadly with the post-medial signifiers of television's disseminative peripherals such as VHS and Betamax recorders, as well as associated commercial outputs that saw massive proliferation during the 1980s, such as the music video, video games and, particularly within Japan, anime. Additionally, the rapid cutting of many of the film's sequences reflects the increasingly excessive editing techniques being popularized by certain strands of television programming such as MTV<sup>10</sup> and also fashions an aesthetic comparable to "channel hopping." While the percussive and somewhat ancillary music of industrial musician Ishikawa Chū<sup>11</sup> can be likened to the behaviour of silent film scores, it can also provide uncanny links to the music video as Ishikawa's collaboration with Tsukamoto involved him producing a batch of tracks of differing styles and tempos. Tsukamoto would then select his favourites (Mes 2005, 55), leading to scenes being recut to better compliment these choices, instead of the music being specially composed to accompany specific narrative beats.

Although there are certainly similarities between *Tetsuo* and the aesthetics and themes of technology-obsessed anime texts of the period (Ōtomo Katsuhiro's feature-length anime *Akira* (1988) has always been a popular comparison with critics and fans alike [cf. Conrich 2005; Mes 2005, 60]), Tsukamoto's brand of pixilation also tries to mimic some of their formal conventions. This is especially the case with the ways in which animators of the era choose to depict the increasingly hyperbolic brawls of their characters in anime series such as *Fist of the North Star* (1984–1987) and *Dragon Ball Z* (1989–1996). These shows often feature sequences, or even isolated shots, where hyper-masculine characters are placed against a background of abstract, stylized lines that strobe past to emphasize their building, directional rage. In *Fist of the North Star*, Kenshirō,

10 In Japan, MTV originally featured as a programming block on the Tokyo Broadcasting System, starting in 1989. Tsukamoto was subsequently hired to produce a TV Ident for its permanent successor, MTV Japan, which launched in 1992. The ident features the same uncanny pixilation techniques that were used throughout *Tetsuo*, as a man is consumed by sentient metal cabling before hurtling down a busy city street.

11 Founder of the industrial groups Der Eisenrost and Zeitlich Vergelter, Ishikawa has composed soundtracks for almost all of Tsukamoto's films. *Tetsuo* marks their first collaboration together.

the series' protagonist, is seen in compositions like this before facing off against numerous opponents. In *Tetsuo*, there is a composition where Tsukamoto's tormented Fetishist character is situated in a similar abstract space where the white noise of a scrambled television broadcast serves as a backdrop [Figs. 15–16]. And the characters of the Salaryman and the Fetishist hurtling along city streets is comparable to innumerable physical confrontations in *Dragon Ball Z* where its characters behave likewise.

And finally, the way in which characters are often anchored to a particular point in the frame during these fast-travelling sequences is redolent of the “third person” perspective of video game syntax (which places the viewer/player outside of the game character's point of view). Also, the strobing nature of Tsukamoto's stop-motion and the rapidly scrolling background environments can be likened to any number of arcade racing games available on the market at the time. One such game being Sega's *Out Run* from 1986, whose repetitious music and repeated sound effect samples of roaring engines and skidding tyres also bear resemblance to the hyper-mechanical music and over-dubbed Foley effects of *Tetsuo* [Fig. 17–18]. Although the film obviously lacks the interactive qualities of a video game, it can be said to emulate certain visual qualities and even some of the rhetoric associated with the medium. The most apparent in the latter instance being the use of the expression “GAME OVER” after the film's end credits [Figs. 19–20], a playful substitute to the more traditional cinematic signoff “The End,” often expressed in Japanese films with the kanji character 終 (*tsui*) or 完 (*kan*), meaning “end” or “complete.” Returning briefly to Pethő's conception of “sensual” and “structural” modes of intermedial recognition, *Tetsuo*'s scrolling third-person sequences could be classified as “sensual,” as they offer a mere impression of video gaming mechanics without necessarily conforming to its rationale, leaving it open for the viewer to make or reject that connection independently. Tsukamoto's use of the term “Game Over,” however, could be described as “structural” as it represents a clear indexical borrowing of a component that is demonstrably associated with another medium.

Tsukamoto Shinya's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* represents a melting pot of medial mimesis, simultaneously borrowing, eluding and subverting the signifiers of several image-based media. Through its sequences of live action–stop-motion hybridity, it offers a fused non-linear “historiography” of the animate and inanimate image. And through its hyper-mediate use of post-medial signifiers, such as television broadcast and video gaming, it offers a vibrant nexus of intermedial collaboration that not only builds further upon this “historiography” but also creates a dynamic

pallet of synesthetic reflexivity commensurate both with Pethő's intuitive "sensual mode" and the more explicit media collage of the "structural mode." *Tetsuo* takes the animate and inanimate, the filmic and the televisual, the medial and post-medial, and collapses their respective rationalities to construct new uncanny ones. The so-called "medial uncanny," then, cannot exist without a prior sense of "medial rationality" and this binary in itself is perhaps worthy of further investigation. But as a result of Tsukamoto's sensuous desire to explore the relationship between metal and the body, his spontaneous reflexivity also invites exploration between media and the body, as well as in-between media, and in doing so, unexpectedly corrupts the rationale that we expectantly place upon them. *Tetsuo*, then, allows us to reflect without preconceived restraint on the fundamental nature of media signification in a way that feels both implicit and explicit, immediate and hyper-mediate, sensual and structural.

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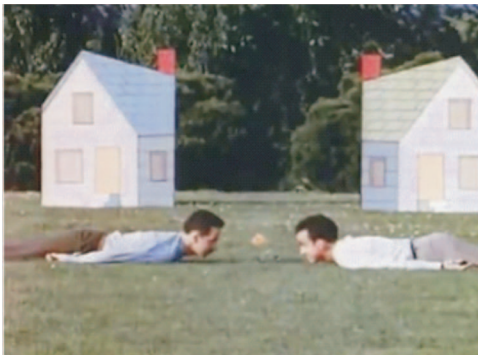
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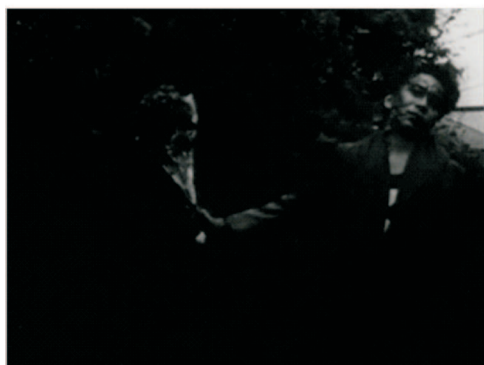
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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** Norman McLaren uses “pixilation” techniques to reanimate his human subjects in *Neighbours* (1952).



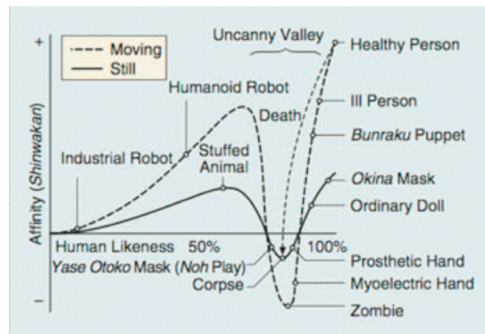
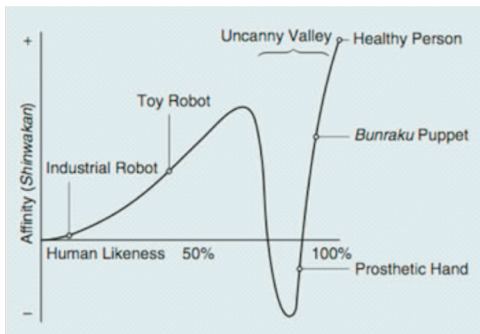
**Figures 3–8.** Frame-by-frame scrubbing emphasizes the statuesque tableaux of Tsukamoto during a pixilation sequence in *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989).



**Figures 9–10.** The use of embalmed insect corpses results in a literal (and uncanny) reanimating of the dead in *The Cameraman's Revenge* (Starewicz, 1911).



**Figures 11–12.** Mori Masahiro's *Uncanny Valley* (1970) plots “affinity” versus “human likeness.” “Affinity” plummets as “human likeness” nears 100%. Meanwhile, while likening “moving” entities to “still” ones, the trajectory of the valley changes dramatically. However, a pronounced drop in “affinity” remains in both cases. (These graphs were sourced from: Mori 2012.)



**Figure 13–14.** Flickering cathode ray tube textures corrupt the filmic image in *Tetsuo*.



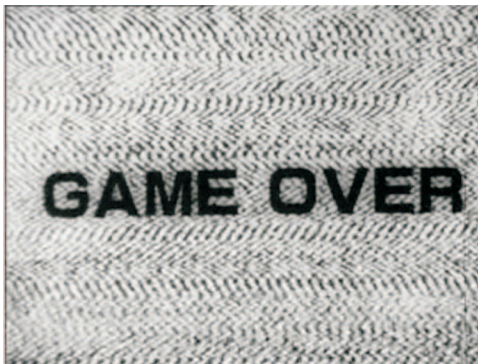
**Figures 15–16.** An aggressive Kenshirō is placed in an abstract background in anime series *Fist of the North Star* (1984-86). Meanwhile, a tormented Metal Fetishist is seen in a similar, stylized limbo of angst in *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*.



**Figures 17–18.** Scrolling backgrounds, and repetitive music and sound effects, are common features of 1980s’ arcade racing games such as *Out Run* (Sega, 1986). Meanwhile, pixilation techniques in *Tetsuo* allow human characters to behave like motor vehicles, as the streets and other vehicles “scroll” past them.



**Figures 19–20.** *Tetsuo* ends with the expression GAME OVER, which is atypical for cinema but common practice for video games of the era. See, for instance, the GAME OVER screen from *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), one of the most famous and commercially successful video games of the 1980s.







# Indexicality or Technological Intermediate? Moving Image Representation, Materiality, and the Real

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**Abstract.** Drawing on the application of C. S. Peirce's notion of indexicality, this paper argues that iterative imaging technologies modulate the manner in which moving images represent reality and determine how they are traced back to that referent. Rather than subscribing to the canonical divergence between analogue and digital technologies, the paper argues that current moving image theories do not sufficiently acknowledge the granularity of technology when describing indexical relationships between moving images and the reality they represent. Despite a shared use of analogue technologies, film's technique of fixing a full frame of movement to a momentarily static strip of light-sensitive celluloid or Mylar is profoundly different from analogue video's parsing of the image frame to its constituent parts and then recording this signal to continuously moving tape or broadcasting the resulting images. These are particularities of technique and technology, not easily ranked in terms of verisimilitude. The paper concludes that despite a widely accepted indexical analogue/digital divide, the indexical status of analogue video is no different to that of digital video images because both consist of discrete and non-continuous picture elements.

**Keywords:** C. S. Peirce, indexicality, reality, analogue video, imaging technologies.

“What we are seeking to explain or understand, very broadly speaking, are the moving image screen or screens, what is displayed on these screens, and the nature of our encounter with them. In thinking about these things, we may focus variously on the screen itself, on our mental processes, on our bodies, or on the heterogeneous ‘surround’. This is a wide-ranging remit. Moreover, what we are seeking to understand or explain is not only diverse but also in a process of changing and becoming” (Kuhn 2009, 5–6).

## **Introduction**

The evolution of imaging technologies is a central instigator of Kuhn's "becoming" and the representation of reality is central to studies of the moving image. The status of mimetic relationships between moving images and reality is often premised on a divide between analogue and digital technologies. The conversion of continuous reality into binary numerical values – the digital, irrevocably mutates the "real" world into a less verisimilitudinous representation of the reality it depicts (Mulvey 2004; 2006; Stewart 2007; Elsaesser 2009).

I argue that claims of a metamorphosis requiring digitisation overlook the role, processes, and contribution of analogue electronic moving images to this transfiguration. Enduring articulations made about the relationship between moving images and reality are often anchored in notions of indexicality, the term referring to a single class of signs defined by Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's notion of the index is concerned with mediation and more specifically, identification through relational signs. Within a metonymic framework it attempts to describe the relationship between signs and their referents – "objects" in Peircian terms. Rudolph Arnheim succinctly summarises this relationship as "the object does not only resemble reality but is a product of it – mechanical reproduction" (1957, 27).

Manovich (1999; 2001) writes of the material origin of digital images and how they ignore lineage, that a photograph, a computer generated image, and digital 2D hand drawn animations are digitally indistinguishable from each other. Mulvey (2006) argues that the viewer's ability to break the flow of motion in digital moving images by pausing a DVD-Video for example is a rationale for this severance. Even Rodowick, who attempts to present a balanced view, characterises the shift from analogue to digital "as a one-way street in which the causal link to physical reality becomes weakened or attenuated," eventually conceding a "discontinuity" (2007, 118; 120). In this paper I clarify how arguments proposing an indexical break for solely digital moving images are heavily weighted toward solely theoretical considerations and that they omit inherent technological properties of moving images, that is, their material form.

## **Peircian Indexicality**

In making a case for indexical relationships between reality and moving images that is dependent on specific technologies, this paper also offers an alternative alignment to broadly accepted structures that form histories of the moving image.



This revision pays particular attention to the indexical transformation through technologies of moving images in relation to pro- and a-filmic reality. Much has been made of the indexical relationship between moving images and reality having been altered alongside changes to image making technologies. Rodowick, as noted above, leaves no room for capitulation in his summation, declaring that “because of the discontinuity of inputs and outputs, the force of indexicality in digital-capture devices stops when light falls on sampling devices, whether they be the charge-coupled receptors of digital cameras or the samplers of digital sound recordings. From this moment forward, light and sound become symbols, and therefore manipulable as such” (2007, 120). I argue, however, that extant histories of the moving image do not sufficiently acknowledge the subtlety of pivotal technological processes when considering indexical transformations of the moving image.

A Peircian sign represents an object as an Icon, an Index or a Symbol. These classes are part of a larger intricate taxonomy of sign classification that Peirce offers and the trichotomy of Icon, Index and Symbol is one of the earliest and least cumbersome of Peirce’s classifications. Peirce revised and added to his typology of signs over numerous published and unpublished papers spanning more than forty years, resulting in a plethora of sign classifications. Burks’ and others’ studies of Peirce’s sign theory reveal inconsistencies, confusions and confluences (Burks 1949, 675; Weiss and Burks 1945; Goudge 1965; Hoopes 1991; Atkins 2005; Short 2007, 207).

This paper concerns only the earliest single trichotomy of categories, reasoning that this is the set of classifications that in various forms is most often referred to by film and media theorists. Burks was part of the first generation of twentieth century philosophers to interpret Peirce’s work and much of his criticism of Peirce’s arguments naturally do not take into account Peirce’s writing published after this time that addresses some of these criticisms (Atkins 2005). There is substantial debate concerning the robustness, exceptions, classifications and logic of Peirce’s taxonomies and shifting terminology and much of this detail is extraneous to this paper (Atkins 2005; Short 2007).<sup>1</sup> This paper deals with Peircian

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1 Causality is one of these issues that are extraneous but relevant to indexicality for moving images. Without direct reference to Goudge (1965, 55) or Burks (1949, 679–670) notable threads of philosophical debate around Peirce’s index and the conflation of causality and semiotic relations as demonstrated by Peirce’s examples of the weathervane and the North Celestial Pole Star, T. L. Short (2007) for the most part resolves this point. He first quotes the distinction between a Peircian Icon not requiring a causal connection but denoting its object by “virtue of characters of its own which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object exists or not” (Peirce qtd. in Short 2007, 215). Short then goes on to identify Peirce’s definition of indices shifting across multiple papers, noting that Peirce in 1903 characterises an index as “a sign

Indices as one part of a larger taxonomy and the legacy of that relationship as it has been applied to the moving image. The paper does not undertake an audit or exploration of Peircian semiotics excepting indexicality that has become a trope of representation for photographic imagery in its own right.

Tom Gunning frames this as a reductive approach, arguing that Peirce's index has been "largely abstracted" from its framing taxonomy and treated as simply an "existential trace or impression left by an object" (2007, 30). Gunning goes on to argue that "what we might call a diminished concept of the index may have reached the limits of its usefulness in the theory of photography, film, and new media" (2007, 31). I agree that the use of a reductive or abstracted notion of the index is problematic. But focusing moving image representation through the lens of successive technologies in combination with accurately portraying Peirce's index presents a more precise reading of the relationship between moving images and reality than has been offered previously.

Additionally, through these benchmarks I challenge the canonical view that a division between analogue and digital technologies forges a necessary Peircian indexical uncoupling.

Peirce's triadic structure of icon, index and symbol are classes that describe how a sign stands in for its referent. Icons represent the object through a quality of the object such as colour. They exhibit a likeness in the way a landscape painting represents that terrain whereas indexes represent the object through an existential and, at times, causal relationship. An analogue photograph is the crucial example from Peirce here – it indicates. Notably, it is also iconic in that it is a likeness and further, is symbolic in that there is a visual language that must be understood to apprehend the photograph as a representation of reality in terms of flatness, scale, colour, and temporal shift. The photograph additionally employs symbols to represent the object (and at times the sign) through accepted use, via a rule or

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which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object". Yet at a similar time, Peirce also defined the index as "a sign [...] which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity [...] nor [by association] as because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or the memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other" (Short 2007, 219). Short concludes that a spatial connection must be between two actualities, existing or occurring, but does not require one to be the cause of the other: "the dynamic relation of index to object depends on the existence of the latter" (2007, 219). Even if the causal condition is debatable, "delineating the role that causality plays [in Peirce's index] is not an easy task" (Atkins 2005, 22). The photograph exhibits but does not require causality and so although important to a Peircian taxonomy, the point may be largely put aside in the context of this paper. What remains, however, is the insular quality of Peircian Icons, not requiring causal relationships with their object and not even necessitating their existence.

usual designation. Signs will be interpreted as such and are general indicators for which meaning is understood through usage, as with books or words.

There are several attributes to an indexical sign including the index forming an inseparable pair with its object, necessitating the object's existence; the object being an individual thing; the index intrinsically showing its object but not describing it; and the relationship being non-rational (Goudge 1965; Atkins 2005). These are all important conditions but the most important attribute of indexicality to this discussion is that an index has a direct physical relationship with its object. This means that for one of the numerous examples Peirce offers – the photograph – the relationship between image and reality is one for which the index is pure or genuine.<sup>2</sup>

## The Indexicality of Photographs and Moving Images

From Peirce's descriptions and then interpretations of Peirce's writings, it can be argued in a non-contentious fashion that film-based photographs – both still and moving – have an indexical relationship with the pro- or a-filmic reality they depict. This is primarily, but importantly not a necessary attribute of indexicality, because of the causal nature of photographic representation. The light falling on the filmic substrate that records the images is shared with the light illuminating the depicted scene. There is a direct and physical relationship between the image recorded and the reality it represents. The light that inscribes the latent filmic image and so allows the viewer to see a resultant image is the same light that allowed the Peircian Object to be discerned.

Three valorised twentieth century film theorists make links between still photography and the moving image as having the same photochemical base and recording images in much the same fashion. André Bazin (1960) famously

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2 The photograph, given by Peirce as an example of a Second and having a corresponding indexical relationship with the reality it depicts, can be observed to also have qualities of Firstness and Thirdness – iconicity and symbolism. These are not as important as the qualities of Secondness however. The general iconic resemblance that the photograph has to the scene depicted and the shared symbolic understanding of the visual language enabling the photograph to be read as a representation of the scene depicted is subsumed, in terms of the relational status between the indexical sign and Object, by the indexical relationship that exists between them. In Peircian taxonomy, a photograph as index may have an icon incorporated within it and similarly, a symbol may have an icon or index incorporated within it. Further, the object must be a *particular* thing in Peircian taxonomy and so a photograph as a first or an icon, exhibits a likeness that cannot be said to be only a likeness of that particular object. Peirce holds that only indexical relationships can be formed with particular objects (Short 2007, 215). The iconicity possible within photographs however, is central to the relationship that digital, rather than analogue, images have with their Peircian objects.

argues for the mechanical origins of photography as offering an objective view of the depicted scene and his contribution to representations of the real in cinema continues to influence theoretical discussions of cinematic realism. Bazin's argument, similar to Panofsky's (1997), which considers the proximity of still photography and the moving image against other forms of representations, is useful here in establishing an essential link between photography and the moving image: "painting was forced, as it turned out, to offer us illusion and this illusion was reckoned sufficient unto art. Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism [...] for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. The film delivers baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were. Those categories of resemblance which determine the species photographic image likewise, then, determine the character of its aesthetic as distinct from that of painting" (Bazin 1960, 7–8).

Siegfried Kracauer (1997), reviving a predominantly early 20<sup>th</sup> century concern with the specificity of film and building on his earlier writings on still photography, writes of the filmic image as being an extension of photography. For Kracauer, the value of the moving image is its ability to record and show reality. He writes of moving image indexicality as not only an inscription of reality, as is often cited, but also as a medium that estranges the world it represents. It is the uncanny and the strangely familiar that film promotes through its photographic foundation. This trait has particular resonance with contemporary fantastical representations created through digital technologies presenting hyper-real and impossible photorealistic images.

A third key theorist to notably link the medium of photography with the moving image is Stanley Cavell. He argues that photography and the moving image share optics as an essential common element: "what Panofsky and Bazin have in mind is that the basis of the medium of movies is photographic, and that a photograph is of reality or nature. If to this we add that the medium is one in which the photographic image is projected and gathered on a screen, our question becomes: What happens to reality when it is projected and screened? That it is reality that we have to deal with, or some mode of depicting it, finds surprising confirmation in the way movies are remembered, and misremembered" (1979, 16).

It is clear that intuitive and compelling materially-based arguments can be made for photographic moving images as sharing the central properties of still photography and functionally extending these to include motion in creating film, video and less convincingly, digital moving images. It is also clear and non-contentious that for both still and moving images there is an indexical severance when pro- or a-filmic reality is recorded or manipulated digitally. In this paper I use the predominantly mathematical term “discretisation,” literally the process of rendering images materially discrete. It is considered in opposition to these images’ indications to continuous profilmic reality. In digitally recorded images, the photoreceptors in digital cameras are the first step in a sequence that converts light into the binary ones and zeros often cited as evidence of an indexical break with reality. As part of this process, sampling occurs and the continuous reality recorded is transformed into a data set that is an incomplete or non-continuous recording of the pro- or a-filmic event.<sup>3</sup>

Images created through film, then, clearly have an indexical relationship with reality. Applying the same Peircian criteria, it can also be seen that digital moving images clearly do not have an indexical relationship with reality. This leaves analogue electronic moving images represented by pre-digital video and television and having no direct still-image correlate, as a special case.

It is important to note at this point that criteria for indexicality are made based on an analogue/digital division rather than a mechanical/electronic distinction. Gaut argues typically for this distribution: “but I will say little about it [analogue video] here, since its salient new features relative to traditional film are its capacities for live broadcast, for enhanced image manipulation and for a degree of interactivity. Digital cinema also possesses the first of these features, while taking the latter two to wholly new heights. So for the purposes of exploring differences between cinematic media, digital cinema is a more striking and useful contrast with traditional film than is analogue electronic cinema. My main point of comparison with traditional photographic cinema, then, will be digital cinema” (2010, 10).

Mulvey also sets the analogue in relief to digital, writing that “however significant the development of video had been for film, the fact that all forms of information and communication can now be translated into binary coding with a single system signals more precisely the end of an era” (2006, 18). I agree and argue that there is impreciseness to the indexicality of analogue electronic

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3 Similarly, analogue images that are digitally manipulated also undergo an indexical break for these same reasons, even if subsequently returned to an analogue state as occurs with the Digital Intermediate (DI) process that traditionally commenced and finished with a film print but underwent digital manipulation in-between.

moving images and that these images do not clearly share all indexical attributes of either the analogue moving images that came before them or the iconicity of the digital images that followed.

As framed above, Peirce's index conventionally occupies a severing role in understanding the shift from analogue to digital moving images near the end of the twentieth century. The transformation of reality into the ones and zeros of binary data to digitally represent the world on screen has been widely accepted as the location of a break in the essential relationship between moving images and the actuality they point toward. This paper refers to that process as a combination of sampling and quantisation that converts continuously variable reality into a finite number of discrete elements. In Digital Signal Processing (DSP) terms the reduction of a continuous time signal to a discrete set of integer values generates what are known as quantisation errors. It is these errors, generated by the absence of a continuous signal, that substantially contribute to an accepted break in an indexical link between digital moving images and reality.

There is a finite proportion of error though and this is measurable because there are a finite number of signal samples. The maximum quantisation error for an analogue to digital conversion is typically less than the error for an equivalent analogue signal (Santina and Stubberud 2007, 48). It is then crucial when considering an indexical break between the moving image and reality to examine not only the transformation processes leading to changes in the inherent qualities of the image, but also the resultant signal and its veracity to the original.

A voltage with a corresponding amplitude value that varies over time can represent both analogue and digital electronic moving images. This amplitude can be perceived as the subjective brightness – based on the measurable luminance – of the recorded scene. Voltage is sourced from the camera sensor that generates a specific value when exposed to varying amounts of light. Sampling for moving images is the measurement of this voltage at discrete intervals, generating discrete values and then reconstituting these signals as a continuous time signal. This marking of regular intervals in order to arrive at a discrete time signal is commonly employed as part of an image digitisation process.

## **Image Digitisation**

There are broadly four steps in the digitising process. The first is nominated as digitisation. This step is the sampling of grey values on and around a set of points on a grid array. The next step in the sequence is sampling. Here, “sampling means

that all the information is lost except at the grid points” (Jähne 2005, 246). The third step is reconstruction through an interpolation of the sample points. The process of reconstruction is, then, the inverse of sampling. Most importantly, the results of these operations are still continuous grey values. The values are still part of an analogue signal. They are not yet quantised. One way to describe the difference between a sampled signal and a quantised signal is that the former has a discrete range but can still contain continuous values within that range, whereas the latter always has discrete values within that range. This global process of discretisation is known, confusingly, as “sampling” while the sequence of its constituent parts can be referred to both as “sampling” and “quantisation.”<sup>4</sup>

The final step in digitising analogue moving images is quantisation. This process plots continuous grey value pixels onto a finite number of discrete grey values. Quantisation always introduces errors, as the true value is replaced by one of the quantisation levels. The general aim of quantisation is that no grey value steps (between luminance levels) should be discernible by a human visual system in a similar way that individual pixels are not visible in many digital images without magnification despite those images not being continuous.

Considering the inherent material forms of the moving image from an engineering perspective, the term “sampling,” often referred to as breaking an indexical link between moving images and reality, can be more correctly referred to as quantisation with the sampling stage of the process preserving a continuous signal that is the benchmark for an indexical link with its Peircian object. This use also stems from the global process being colloquially referred to as “sampling.”

The use of the term “sampling” to describe the transition from analogue to digital moving images is not only arguably incorrect but more importantly to this discussion, is not just an issue of language. Simply replacing instances of “sampling” with “quantisation” does not negate this problem. Longstanding and widely accepted arguments regarding the process of transformation from analogue to digital moving images cannot be resolved by referring to quantisation rather than sampling because of the fundamental differences between these processes and the materiality of the moving images they are applied to. Similarly, qualifying the term “sampling” as referring to both sampling and quantisation does not account for the analogue output of the constituent sampling phase of the global sampling process. Broad references to “sampling” that ignore the

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4 The term “sampling” employed here is distinct from the optical engineering terms “measurement sampling,” “analysis sampling” and “display sampling” (Brady 2009, 253–255). Here, “sampling” refers to both the process of drawing discrete measurements from a signal and the representation of a signal using discrete numbers” (Brady 2009, 255).

analogue output of the constituent sampling process have become fundamental assumptions in theorising the effect that digital technologies have on the moving image and the subsequent relationship such images have with reality.

Added to this is the issue of sensor sampling and the indexical status it then confers on analogue images and their subsequent indexical relationship with reality. As Jähne notes, “sampling may already occur in the sensor that converts the collected photons into an electrical signal. In a conventional tube camera, the image is already sampled in lines, as an electron beam scans the imaging tube line by line” (2005, 243).

## **Discretisation and Continuity**

Bill Mitchell’s view in a footnote to his description of digital images is in agreement with much other commentary on this point. He introduces explicitly his position on the distinction between analogue and digital images: “It is important to distinguish carefully between analog and digital electronic images. Video images are analog, not digital. Although video images are subdivided into a finite number of horizontal scan lines, the variations in intensity along scan lines are represented by a continuously varying signal” (Mitchell 1992, 228).

My issue with Mitchell’s (1992) argument, however, is that, as Jähne (2005) notes, the “continuously varying signal” may be a sampled one. The distinction between sampling and quantisation is again brought to the fore. Whether a sampled image that retains some continuity but with a reduced range of values (rather than an image that is quantised and clearly iconic rather than indexical) is sufficient to maintain an indexical link with its referent object is not clear.

This vexing problem of indexicality for specifically analogue electronic images continues to present a conflicted status when determining what distinguishes electronic analogue moving images from digital images. It is clear that representations of electronic analogue moving images are subject to reduction and approximation – i.e. “sampling,” in similar ways to digital images but without quantisation.

The engineering proofs of the argument that sampling occurs when creating analogue video images are found in the specifications for analogue video signals as prescribed by the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) standards (SMPTE 1998; 2004). There are a finite number of vertical lines for image recording and display and a specified scanning rate, alternately scanning odd and even lines of the raster image and a limited colour palette as confirmed by Jähne (2005), Watkinson (2008), Case (2001), and Poynton (2003).



Materially, electronic moving images are constituted by two essential components: luminance and chrominance, and it is useful here to confirm the qualities of these components. It is also useful to consider the fixed bandwidth determined for both analogue and digital video images. This is a restriction that renders images spatially and temporally finite through sampling the data used to represent moving images that in turn represent pro- or a-filmic reality.

The SMPTE describes analogue video as follows: “the composite color video signal shall contain an electrical representation of the brightness and color of a scene being analyzed (the active picture area) along defined paths (scan lines). The signal shall also include synchronizing and color reference signals that allow the geometric and colorimetric aspects of the original scene to be correctly reconstituted at the display” (2004, 2).

Analogue NTSC Standard Definition video for example, is described as being limited to 525 lines, 59.94 fields per second achieved by a 2:1 interlace with an aspect ratio of 4:3 (SMPTE 1998; 2004; 2006). The colour component of an analogue video image is similarly constrained in that there is a colour palette restricted to specific display values by virtue of needing to be addressed on the fixed array of a raster display. These bandwidth parameters restrict the brightness, range and intensity of colour stored and displayed.

A dichotomy between continuous and discrete then, is widely considered to be the distinguishing feature when comparing analogue with digital images. The process of digital imaging can record and display greater veracity than its analogue counterpart; it has a larger spatial and temporal resolution; better colour fidelity; and greater exposure latitude, all resulting in superior perceptual realness. These, however, are not the measures employed for Peircian indexical fidelity. The distinction between analogue and digital moving images is emblematically argued by Berys Gaut as being one in which “an analogue image is one that is completely specifiable only by continuously varying values. Object-generated, handmade, photochemical images and pre-digital video images are all analogue. In contrast, a digital image is one composed of discrete values, typically integers” (2009, 76; 2010, 9; 14). Rodowick correspondingly, but subscribing to a causality approach at odds with Short (2007) and Atkins (2005), argues that analogue and digital images may be “qualitatively distinguished according to the types of causation involved in the acquisition of images and by ascertaining whether the causal relations between inputs and outputs are continuous or discontinuous. Here (analogical) transcription should be distinguished from (digital) conversion or calculation” (2007, 116). Regardless of Gaut’s or Rodowick’s positions

regarding the causality argument, continuity and discreteness are agreed to be the key criteria defining the indexical status of images.

Attending to the SMPTE prescriptions, however, it can be seen that arguments relying only on a rationale of discretisation are problematic when considering an indexical distinction between analogue and digital images. With reference to the SMPTE data and excepting the reference to integers, Mitchell's introductory description of digital images now reads uncannily like a description of analogue video: "images are encoded [...] by uniformly subdividing the picture plane into a finite Cartesian grid of cells (known as pixels) and specifying the intensity of color of each cell by means of an integer number drawn from some limited range" (1992, 5).

## **Spatial Discontinuity in Analogue Video- Imbrication and Halftoning**

Arguments that locate analogue electronic moving images alongside mechanical filmic images and in opposition to digital images are ironically centred on that which was used to separate video images from the earlier technologies creating film images in the twentieth century. These in turn reflect earlier arguments that differentiate photography from painting and theatre. Analogue video and television are perceived, on the one hand, to render a continuous and faithful recording of reality. This is unlike their digital counterparts that grasp snatches of reality and then sample and compress them into packets of digital data, subsequently throwing out parts of the recorded scene in an often perceptually transparent but always materially destructive manner. On the other hand, analogue video is considered to record continuously but against film's stop-start recording method. (Williams 1990; Cubitt 1998; Spielmann 2008; and Mulvey 2006).

### **Imbrication**

This argument is premised on what Yvonne Spielmann calls a "lack of fixity" in the video signal (2008, 49). Analogue video employs recording of fields in which sequential frames are displayed in an imbricated fashion, mixing images from one frame to the next with upper and lower fields alternately presented on screen. This is contrasted with the filmic image comprising a "fixed motion image of the film [...] tied, at shooting and projection, immovably to the template of a vertical ordering of the single image frames on the filmstrip. Video cancels such demands" (Spielmann 2008, 48).

Spielmann describes video generating a “flow type of image as an unbroken stream [...] constantly moving [...] express[ing] the flow of electrons” (2008, 47). This description and particularly its language, almost contrarily recasts the syntax used to describe film together with analogue video as continuous, against the discretisation of digital signals. The argument, however, is intended to distinguish television and video from film, not from digital images. In this flow model, it is the film image, not a digital one, that is discrete, with video and television images being contrastingly continuous. This focus on analogue video inadvertently congregates material similarities between film and digital images in a way that is not often considered.

Problematically, this view of analogue video and television as continuous only functions for the reconstituted form of these media. In both storage and editing, video and television are frame-addressed as single images in the same way film and digital images are. A further attribute that links analogue video with digital images is that, unlike video, film’s constituent parts, excluding latency, remain the same in all states. Film is formed from photo-chemically integrated frames.<sup>5</sup> Analogue video, television, and digital images all share the attribute of smaller distinct constituent parts forming the screened image, with the deconstructed forms delineated from the constituted image in materiality and appearance. This can be regarded as an electronic form of latency, a term more often associated with the mechanical photographic image. What is useful in this and other iterations of the continuous video model is that the distinctions being made by Spielmann (2008) are between mechanical and electronic technologies, not between analogue and digital ones.

In arguing for a continuous temporal flow for video, an unacknowledged spatial discontinuity is realised through Spielmann’s argument. The construction of the imbricated video frame that aims to reduce flicker and the bandwidth required to present the image is at once required for temporal continuity, but at the same time prompts a spatially discontinuous video image by breaking the frame into multiple discretely addressed odd and even fields. As Spielmann concludes but without conceding this point: “this makes it clear that the ‘video image’ essentially

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5 The latency of film can be argued to affect only its exposure or alternately it can, I believe, be more strongly argued that photochemical processing does alter the material form of the film stock, as does any film contact printing. This questions the veracity of the relationship between photographic negatives and prints for still imaging and contact printing for motion images. It could be argued that this positions a recording camera obscura or daguerreotype or ambrotype, for example, as more direct forms of representation than the analogue camera and imaging technologies that followed.

represents an incomplete and discontinuous type of image” (2008, 49). So, the essential temporal continuity created and required by analogue video’s raster scanning process inherently instigates a spatial discontinuity by demanding discrete interlaced fields within each video frame. The frame is no longer whole or continuous – no longer indexical – despite being an analogue image.

Although both analogue video and digital media are formed from segmented parts, the nonlinearity of the digital, what Spielmann nominates as “optionality” (2008, 49), differentiates it from its analogue counterpart and it is this rather than Mitchell’s (1992) or Spielmann’s continuity that provides a tangible material distinction. However, this is only one of many effects available to digital media. Crucially, it is as effortless for digital moving images to operate linearly as nonlinearly.

## Halftoning

There is a further spatial discontinuity inherent within analogue video displays and this second discretisation is more pronounced than above. It is the spatial discontinuity created by filtering the video image as it reaches the phosphor coating positioned at the cathode ray screen. To better understand this effect, I propose a comparison with halftone images [Fig. 1]. Analogue halftones were first developed in the mid-nineteenth century and can be readily seen in a variety of historical and contemporary non-photographic (non-continuous) printed images.

These images can be regarded as instances of sampled photographs. Halftones are the product of converting continuous tone images into images made up of different sized dot patterns or different intervals between dots of the same size to create the effect of continuous grey tones, usually for printing.<sup>6</sup> Halftones then are discontinuous in that a halftone dot-screen filters the pictorial content, using only a subset of the image elements and discarding others. Halftones are examples of discrete, rather than continuous, analogue images. Under a Peircian framework, halftones do not have an indexical relationship with their referent objects because they are not photographic, not continuous, despite a cursory visual appearance of continuous tone and one of their primary uses being the reproduction of photographs.

There is a strong similarity between the process of generating images through halftone printing and through analogue video. A conventional analogue video

6 There are also digital halftones that achieve similar halftone effects but do so through dithering algorithms. This technology is distinct from analogue halftoning and is not considered here. For more on digital halftoning see O’Quinn and LeClair (1996, 280–294).

monitor is based on the hardware of a Cathode Ray Tube (CRT). These devices have a shadow mask or an aperture grill at the receiving end of the tube that filters the received light and maps it onto the screen [Fig. 2].<sup>7</sup>

A shadow mask is a sheet of perforated metal placed just behind the phosphor-coated glass at the front of the screen. It functions as a filter to refocus the light from three electron guns that are activating the individual phosphor dots on the screen, each aligned to particular colours by a triadic arrangement of light-sensitive dots. The differing angles of the guns, as they are most often physically separated at the back of the tube, mean those lights pass through the mask holes at slightly different angles and so only reach the appropriate colour-sensitive target. These dots then, arranged in a triangular form, each receive only light from one of three electron guns.<sup>8</sup>

To achieve a similar effect, the aperture grill (or tension mask) system uses a fine mesh of vertical wires to separate the different colours into vertical strips rather than the triangular arrangement of the shadow mask solution. Aperture grill CRTs can produce brighter images because of a design that allows more light to pass through the mask but are also susceptible to light bleed between the slots, creating a softer image. Shadow mask screens offer more edge definition because of the smaller apertures concentrating light for additional sharpness but have to increase the electron beams' strength to compensate for the light lost outside of the tiny apertures.

The visual and procedural similarities between the screening mesh for analogue printed halftones and electronic analogue screens, requiring some kind of aperture grill or shadow mask, are arresting. The photograph as source image for the printed halftone is akin to the video signal as recorded to be displayed on a CRT. Both display technologies feature discrete picture elements – analogue pixels – which reconstruct a representation of the original continuous tone image in a discrete fashion. Both techniques sample a continuous tone image and present a discretised photographic representation of their referential Peircian object.

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7 This is not to be confused with either a *spatial aperture effect* in which the electron beam – having a finite radius, exhibits a Gaussian distribution of energy across its diameter or a *temporal aperture effect* that can introduce a time-lag as the image is scanned right to left, top to bottom. See Watkinson (2008, 77–79) for an introduction to these effects. The spatial aperture effect is related to the overall envelope of the image, effectively limiting the bandwidth of the image but not affecting continuous values within that envelope.

8 For a historical account of the introduction of shadow masks to television in the late 1940s and early 1950s, see Abramson (2003, 40–42).

## Conclusion

It is evident that confusion exists between sampling and quantisation as criteria for establishing Peircian indexicality for moving images. Underpinning this is the notion that the key attribute of indexicality is continuity with a Peircian object. It is also evident that there are two discontinuities present in analogue video. The first of these is the breaking of continuous video frames into discrete spatial fields as part of the electronic process of generating analogue video images and then an imbrication of these fields in display. The second discontinuity is a halftone-like spatial sampling of the video image resulting in discrete analogue pixels on-screen.

In Peircian terms, either of these ruptures is sufficient to sever an indexical relationship with the image's referent object. This is despite these being analogue photographic images. In strong contrast to a canonical analogue/digital divide regarding indexicality, the indexical status of analogue video imagery is no different to that of digital video images because both fundamentally consist of discrete or non-continuous picture elements: pixels. It is crucial that an enquiry framework examining the indexicality of moving images accounts for differing technologies of representation rather than a less granulated analogue/digital divide as predominantly occurs now.

An indexical break between automated moving images and reality does not first occur historically as part of the transformation from analogue to digital moving images in production and reception but through the transformation from images mechanically rendered to those analogue electronic images experienced as video and television, decades prior to the introduction of digital imaging.

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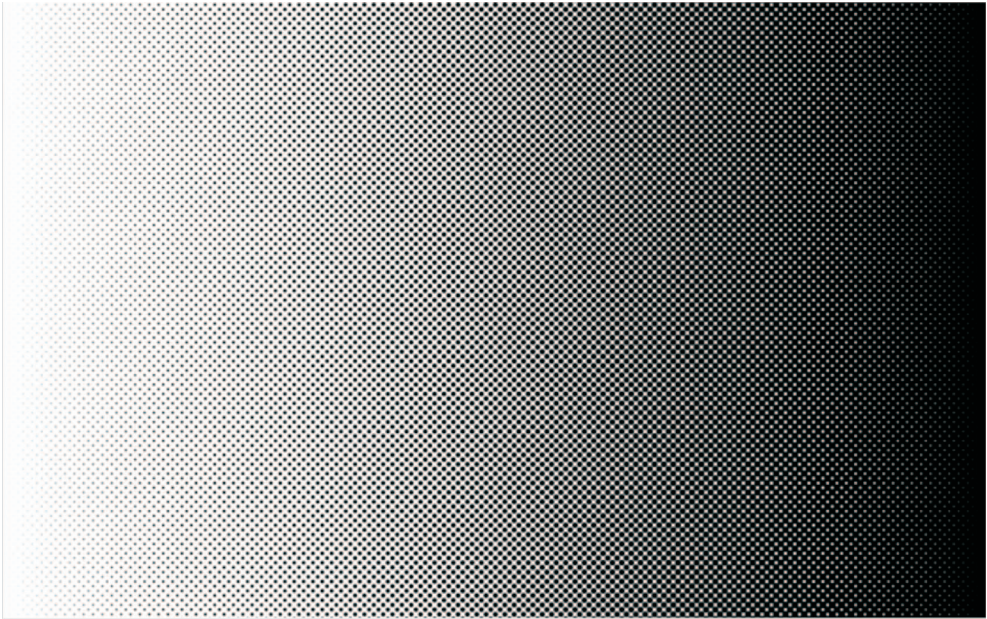
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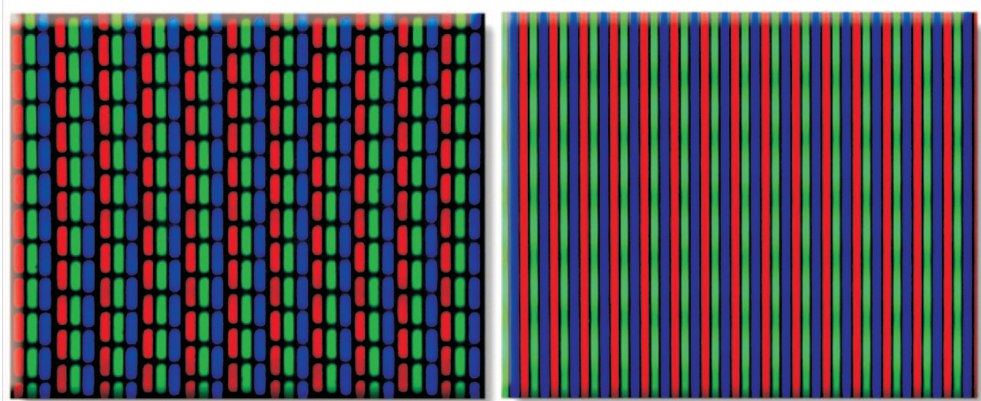


## List of Figures

**Figure 1.** Generic analogue halftone screen – magnified.



**Figure 2.** Television shadow mask and aperture grill (Harward 2007).





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