

“The Moving Form of Film”: Conference Overview on IntermIdia II (6–8 November 2017) Fátima Chinita¹



Figure 1 – Poster and art work of the conference

The IntermIdia conferences and project

The IntermIdia Conference II, entitled “The Moving Form of Film: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method”, took place at the University of Reading on 6–8 November 2017 in the Minghella Building located at the Whiteknights Campus. As the numeral II after the name of the project entails, IntermIdia II [in Portuguese, Intermídia] is a follow-up act to another conference held in 9–11 November 2016 at the University of São Carlos, state of São Paulo, in Brazil (“Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema”). Both conferences took place within the scope of the research project “Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method”.

This two-year project, which started on 1 October 2015, was funded by the AHRC – Arts and Humanities Research Council, in

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the UK; and by FAPESP – a foundation for the support of research in the State of São Paulo, in Brazil. The Tate Modern museum in London, the Reading Film Theatre, and the Brazilian Cinemateca were active partners and hosted some of the initiatives of the project. For more information, see <https://research.reading.ac.uk/intermedia/> The InterMedia project focused on cinema's hybrid nature as a mixture of arts and media, and aimed at producing the first, groundbreaking intermedial history of Brazilian cinema. It also explored the uses of intermediality as a historiographic method applicable to cinema as a whole. It brought together scholars from the Department of Film, Theatre & Television, University of Reading, in the UK, and the Centre of Education and Human Sciences, in the Federal University of São Carlos, in Brazil. Overall, it combined expertise in cinematic intermediality, Brazilian cinema, film history and film theory. One cannot stress enough the originality of this project inasmuch as intermediality had not been applied to cinema as a historiographic method before.

Conference structure

The conference sessions were divided among three conference rooms: the cinema, a large auditorium which is a film theatre; and the Bulmershe and Bob Kayley Theatres, two studios that were very effectively adapted for this purpose. Some films were screened in the cinema, but the keynote speeches and plenary sessions were distributed equally among the three rooms. Despite less comfortable seating than that of the cinema, the Bulmershe and the Bob Kayley Theatres were actually very cosy and contributed to the familial atmosphere and overall bonding throughout the conference. This type of intimacy is extremely rare in medium-size thematic conferences like this one, and the organisers must be lauded for it. No doubt the close proximity of many of the researchers involved in the InterMedia project contributed to this atmosphere, but it quickly spread to all the participants and ultimately the event felt more like an academic residency than a conference.

Apart from all the interesting and varied activities planned by the organisers for this conference period, and the special contributions by invited academics (see below), there was a rich assortment of thematic panels to choose from, scheduled as follows: Brazilian Cinema and Music History; Intermediality as Alternative Historiography; Intermediality and Film Technology; Portuguese Cinema and Technology; British Cinema and Intermediality I and II; Intermediality across Film History; Intermedial Documentaries in Latin America; Passages; Intermediality; New Waves and New Cinemas; Auteurs and Intermediality; Asian Cinema and Intermediality; Multimedia Performance Arts.

Keynote speeches

Luciana Araújo (Federal University of São Carlos) talked about “Cinema from the Stage Perspective”. Araújo made an academic travel to the past and conveyed the way in which Brazilian cinema of the 1910s and 1920s stemmed from the existing theatre in the said period, and how the two art forms intermingled quite productively for mutual benefit. On the one hand, many films were adaptations of stage plays and employed many theatre professionals; on the other, cinema was the subject of many plays (“cinemania” was the genre’s epithet). The intermedial relation extended to the venues, with theatres located next door to cinemas. According to Araújo, the Brazilian “*teatro de revista*”, a specific type of vaudeville, was influenced by Mack Sennett’s *Bathing Beauties* and its peculiar stage *mise en scène*, and resulted in the female body being more exposed on stage from then on. This brought about the massification of this kind of theatre and the establishment of theatrical sessions with tickets sold at the same price of those of the cinema. The comical, unpretentious *teatro de revista* had its cinematic equivalent in the “*chanchadas*”, as the musicals of the 1930s, 40s and 50s were known in Brazil. The bottom line of Araújo’s thorough investigation, richly illustrated with digitalised documents of the addressed period, obtained in physical archives was, as she mentioned, that viewers in the 1910s and the 1920s were equally knowledgeable of both media, theatre and film.

Ismail Xavier (University of São Paulo), presented a speech with the long title “Found Footage, Media Archaeology and Intermediality: A Study of *Santoscópio=Dumontagem* (Carlos Adriano, 2008)”. The project analysed in this presentation was Carlos Adriano’s doctoral dissertation, an experimental 40-minute long video, which deliberately plays with the repetition of iconic motifs and variations. The film uses found footage of Carlos Drummond de Andrade, the Brazilian aviation pioneer, and explores it in all its materiality using a myriad of forms of repetitive combinations of the same excerpt. Xavier stressed the way in which the repetition of images involves a choreography that encompasses the sound as well, and argued that intermediality, in this study case, is foremost derived from the interaction of technical media. He observed that the film contains a strong ludic and poetic stance, creating a tension between the sound and motion patterns contained in the video flow and the actual content of the images. Intermediality, thus, becomes synonymous with the dynamics of form (pace) + matter, and technical accomplishment + aesthetic intention. Laying claim to the idea that “video is a form that thinks”, Xavier argued that in this case video thinks what cinema does. In other words, Carlos Adriano explores the cinematic possibilities available to him and uses them in an experimental video that also draws humorously on the theatre and the circus.

Robert Stam (New York University) presented a paper entitled "Trans-concepts". He started out by claiming that all periods have "trans" words, such as "transdisciplinary" or "transmedial". According to Stam, the prefix "trans" is a mixture of the prefixes "multi", which means a multiplication of something, and "inter", which entails a relationship between two or more terms. Consequently "trans" refers to the transformation of something into something else. Stam argues that the *trans* word of our period is "trans-modernism", which he perceives as encompassing *pre*-modernism, modernism, and *post*-modernism. Also, that the prefix "trans" points to a double meaning, conjoining the sense of "through" with a notion of "trance" (referring here to possession). The former meaning indicates a multi-temporality in which one is in multiple times at once, as Maya Deren in the film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943); whereas the latter calls upon the fact that some religions are multi-artistic, which reflects on dance practices, music, choreography, costumes, and so on. According to Stam, in trans-modernism one cannot disentangle the arts employed by the creators, since everything is interconnected. The Brazilian films *Terra em Transe* (Glauber Rocha, 1967) and *Macunaíma* (Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, 1969) are two such examples.



Figure 2 – Robert Stam (left) and Ismail Xavier (centre right)
among the audience during the Alain Badiou session
Photograph by Hsin Hsieh | © 2017 by InterMedia Project

The philosopher Alain Badiou was supposed to have presented his contribution as a keynote, entitled "Hegel and

Cinema”. Health issues prevented him from attending the conference in person, but he sent a short paper which was presented by a designated reader. Badiou’s text considered cinema to be dialectic because it is, simultaneously, art and non-art. On the one hand, cinema is an “industry” (therefore, it is less an art than nostalgia for a period when real art existed); on the other hand, cinema has a totalising effect, since it accomplishes a totalisation of the arts. According to Badiou, cinema is architecture because of the “temporal architecture of the shot” (i.e. editing); it is painting and has always been (as the existence of freeze frames, landscape painting, and the advent of colour proves); it is capable of conveying “the temporal movement of music” (and it also uses musical excerpts); it uses dramatic poetry and theatrical performance; and it is becoming sculpture, due to the existence of the 3D. Thus, according to Badiou, cinema has a clear dialectic function: it is both an industry, and it helps to do away with the conditions of its creation.

Other activities

Two members of the advisory board were invited to take part in a plenary, functioning as a sort of twofold keynote session.

Ágnes Pethő (Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania) presented a paper entitled “The Double Helix of Intermediality” in which she drew on the concept of intermediality, mentioning fundamental contributions by Dick Higgins, Lars Elleström, Joachim Paech, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Raymond Bellour, and Lúcia Nagib. Pethő distinguished three paradigms, based on different metaphors describing intermedial phenomena: one that uses the metaphor of the blurring of media borders and describes the operations involved in media transpositions; another one, which describes intermediality as a state of being in-between and maps the contact-zones of media, perceiving intermediality as an ever changing configuration; and finally, the rethinking of the idea of in-betweenness itself, placed at the intersection of art and non-art, the real and the intermedial. Drawing on Bellour’s metaphor of the “double helix”, through which he explained the complexity of *l’entre-images* (images-in-between) in the digital age, she also presented some recent examples of cinema intertwining with installation art.

Lisa Shaw (University of Liverpool) presented an overview of the “The Brazilian *Chanchada* of the 1930s–1950s”. Shaw highlighted the importance of the radio and the popular songs in the advent of the *Chanchada* films. Actually, the plots of these Brazilian musical films were a simple pretext to include well-known musical numbers, made famous on the radio. Carmen Miranda, who was already an established popular singer, played in the film *Alô, Alô Carnaval*

(1936), a backstage musical revolving around the milieu of the radio. Her ready-made performance style (i.e. rather stylised) opened Hollywood doors to her, and enabled the export of the Baiana, a typical figure of the *chanchadas*, to America. The USA, in turn, exported the blackface performances, styled after Al Jolson, to the Brazilian vaudeville theatre (*teatro de revista*). The result was a hybridisation between North American and Brazilian musical dance genres, responsible for the foxtrot, the samba, and the Carnival march.



Figure 3 – Ágnes Pethő (left), Lisa Shaw (centre), chaired by the keynote speaker Luciana Araújo (right)
Photograph by Hsin Hsieh. Copyright © 2017 by IntermIdia Project

Film screenings and open discussions

During the opening session, several audiovisual essays directed by members of the IntermIdia project and the trailer of a feature directed by Lúcia Nagib and Samuel Paiva were projected, as a means of introducing the context of the research project and some of the work already produced. Other film sessions were on the programme, scheduled without competing parallel sessions, so that all the delegates could attend.

On the first day of the event, the audience had the chance to watch Jia Zhangke's film *Dong* (2006), a documentary about the painter Liu Xiaodong, who was an academic – with a tenure-track position at the Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing – and a painter. The screening was followed by a discussion with Cecília Mello

(University of São Paulo), author of *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke* (2018), and Corey Schultz (University of Southampton), author of *Moving Figures: Class and Feeling in the Films of Jia Zhangke* (2018). Both experts on Zhangke advocated that *Dong* is a film made by an intermedial artist on another intermedial artist. Whereas Mello stressed the importance of landscape painting and murals, Schultz observed that Xiaodong was a cinematic painter, who included a lot of movement in his paintings.

On the second day of the conference the film session “Stephen Dwoskin: An Intermedial Life” included the following works, directed by the late Stephen Dwoskin: *Soliloquy* (1967, 9’); *Shadows from Light: The Photography of Billy Brandt* (1983, 10’ extract); *Some Friends (apart)* (2002, 24’). A group of experts – composed by Rachel Garfield (University of Reading), Jenny Chamarette (Queen Mary University London), Lucy Reynolds (University of Westminster), Henry K. Miller (Slade School of Fine Arts), and Darragh O’Donoghue (Tate Archive Curator) – was assembled in order to comment on the films and to offer their perspective. Stephen Dwoskin is one of the greatest intermedial avant-garde artists of all time, having focused on the materiality of cinema (e.g. the technical properties of space, time, and motion) and the combination of diverse elements to the point of embracing cinema as a completely impure medium. Dwoskin was also an *über* intermedial director, responsible for all sorts of performances – happenings, dance, theatre, installations, among many others – and who adopted a painterly approach to film: in fact, he considered that his mission in art was to lead people to see.



Figure 4 – Cecília Mello (right) and Corey Schultz (centre) chaired by the conference convener Lúcia Nagib (right)
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