

Fátima CHINITA

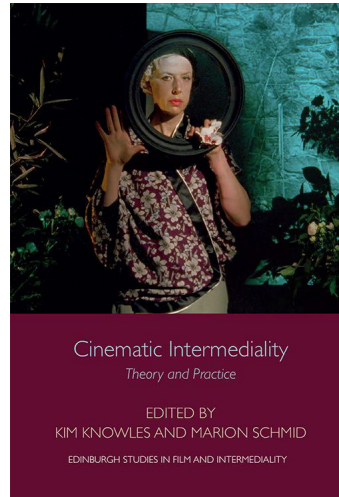
Intermediality: A Performative Approach

Review of:

Cinematic Intermediality. Theory and Practice
Kim KNOWLES and Marion SCHMID, Eds. (2021)
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 206 pp.
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In the Introduction to their edited collection, Kim Knowles and Marion Schmid, echoing André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion (2015), observe that cinema, contrary to several predictions, never really died, but rather underwent several ‘deaths’ that are equivalent to transformations. Extremely elusive, to the point of escaping definition, “the medium of film has always, to some extent, been defined by its intersection with other art forms and technologies” (Knowles & Schmid 1). It is fundamentally hybrid, endowed with unperceivable limits, and in the current age of digital revolution is more intermedial than ever. Thus, posed *beyond* medium specificity, cinema is nowadays a theoretical and practical in-betweenness, the editors claim.

This editorial rationale is manifest in the fourteen chapters that compose the four book



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parts: Part I, “Mapping the Interzone,” broaches the growingly fluid relationship between cinema and other art forms; Part II, “The Intermedial Avant-gardes,” concentrates on “a moment of heightened intensity for intermedial thought and practice” (the 1960s and 1970s) (5); Part III, “Technology, Apparatus, Affect,” focuses on reception and the cinematic *dispositif*; Part IV, “Intermedial Creation,” sheds light on several intermedial *praxes* as analyzed by some artists themselves. The recurrent motif which ties up all the chapters is the dissolution of medium specificity. Together, these chapters succeed in updating the field of artistic intermediality on several fronts, pertinently adding to the ongoing theoretical debate and the empirical case studies available. This is undeniably a must-read book for that reason alone. However, the editors highlight yet another factor which also connects all the articles in an intermedial whole even more praiseworthy than the sum of its chapters. Whether this *topos* was intentional or not, the fact remains that the book, across all its sections, is a fundamental overview of cinema’s performative dimension.

Chapter 1, Stephen Barber’s “Film and Performance: Intermedial Intersections” sets off this extremely interesting and productive approach. Barber surveys mostly theatrical performances as depicted in films, but there is a sense that the cinematic medium itself is performative. For example, Eadweard Muybridge’s early experiments in sequential photography are considered repetitive gestures and, thus, performative (13) as is projection itself in early cinema, because it requires concentration and technical competence on the part of the projectionists (19). Barber explicitly mentions the current existence of “performative dimensions (beyond those of acting),” having to do with “rapid editing, filmmakers’ interventions in the screening space” and expanded cinema (14). In chapter 8, Boris Wiseman, writing on the origins of cinema, defines the cinematic as the relationship between motion and stasis, more specifically the transformation of one into the other: “cinema [is] the qualitative transformation of an image over time” (124). Intermittence, temporality, and narration are considered by Wiseman as cinematic features even before the existence of cinema as we know it. It was common to different apparatuses, such as Émile Reynaud’s Théâtre Optique in which the manipulation of the previously painted strips by the operator in real-time equaled that of a puppeteer in which “a system of mirrors and refracted light beams” had substituted the puppets’ strings (129). Thus, cinema is equated to animation.

In chapter 2, Steven Jacobs, in his analysis of Michelangelo Antonioni’s short film *Lo Sguardo di Michelangelo* (referring to his famous Quattrocento namesake), discusses the ways in which the mobility of the film camera and the creativity of the editing process *animate* statues: “Film not only transforms the statues; it also makes them move” (33). Likewise, the contemporary artist Adam Roberts, in chapter 11, likens dance films to statuary: “Dance filmmaking is a procedure in which the bodies of dancers are like statues. It is as if they are a series of paused moments” (169). Their gestures, according to Roberts, are replete with “infinite possibilities” (i.e., different versions and alternative developments). In chapter 12,

Isabel Rocamora—an artist who conceives non-narrative, non-dramatic, and non-literal performances—explains how she tries to integrate the physical motion of the bodies in films that break away from the traditional valences of theater, literature and cinema (176). In other words, films devoid of gestures, text, and moving images. Her films stage the ontological presence of the performers in the world, in an admitted phenomenological stance (180).

Ágnes Pethő's concept of the "photo-filmic," in chapter 3, allows for a mixture of movement and stasis in "visual events" which are an "amalgamation" of cinematic, photographic, and painterly features (40). The performative quality that she attributes to these phenomena (40) has to do with the "mutual permeability" of film and photography (49), whereby the quality of the photographic is infused into cinema, "halting the flow of images" [...] "or the other way around, through introducing cinematic movement into the still frames" (39). In chapter 13, Anna Vasof—a contemporary artist working at the confluence of video, performance, photography, and cinema—uses animation and fine arts as a *praxis* nearing expanded cinema (192). Her work is the exact opposite of Muybridge's serial photography in that she composes a moving flux of forms that were previously non-existent. This process, that she calls "non-stop stop-motion films," requires a *dispositif* composed of that she conceives, a video camera that she controls, and involves preparation prior to the recording act. It is a performance of sorts, she claims, adding: "However, in this case, I do not use my body to perform an expression: I activate an illusion; I become a cinematographic mechanism" (191).

The alleged schism, in the 1970s in England concept artists and structural filmmakers, both involved with the use of 8mm and 16mm cameras for artistic purposes, is convincingly questioned by Lucy Reynolds in chapter 6. Although geared towards the exhibition in art galleries, the cinematic documentation of general actions and events undertaken by the concept artists is akin to the practice of the structuralists, prone to experimenting with the cinematic medium as a creative instrument conceived for dark theaters. In the end, both artistic affiliations supply their human performers with "instructions or tasks to activate a performance in dialogue with the film or video apparatus" (93).

Generally, the theories and practices featured in Knowles and Schmid's collection reveal that the overall cinematic performance is imbued with intense hapticality. The hybrid artworks approached in the volume both engender (in)visibility (due to the above-mentioned intermittence) and palpability (because of the underlining of textures and plasticity). The "multi-sensory viewing, recognizing hapticality and texture as essential components of the film medium" (Jacobs 31) is equally applicable to, for instance, chapter 4, in which Martine Beugnet approaches the "effect of 'absorption'" which "grows out of a painting style that encourages engagement with atmosphere and mood rather than with narrative content" (57). The use of the blur is, according to Beugnet, a memorable sensorial experience for the film viewers, engaging them at a physical level while keeping them at a cognitive distance. In turn, in Gabriele Jutz's account of the photogram as cinema's "blind spot" (137), in chapter

9, the author claims that cinema's movement and photography's stillness may come together in practices that question the meaning of the "filmic," such as her own films made without a camera, and partly shown by other means than a film projector. This fact contradicts the generalized idea that the apparatus is the core of the medium's identity (143). Based specifically on the photogram, Jutz's films simultaneously are and are not cinema because photograms once removed from their original context cannot go back to where they came from.

Christopher Townsend, in chapter 5, calls for "a generation of young scholars indifferent to boundaries, whether of discipline or medium" (84). It is my contention that Knowles and Schmid, through their judicious selection of chapters, go a long way to support that goal. Firstly, they contribute to an existent body of topics and work but also expand the field with other opportunities for intermedial reflection. Secondly, they do it across practice and theory, a duality that is seldom so well balanced in one single book. All the chapters are very interesting and pertinent and only the lack of space prevents me here from a more detailed account. This collection succeeds in positioning cinema as emerging "here and there, in different forms, including accidental, in between media, in between technologies, in between different kinds of viewing experiences and in between viewing spaces" (131), as claimed by Wiseman in relation to the origins of cinema. Such prominence and pervasiveness not only evince the role played by the other art forms in the shaping of cinema but also reveal that today it is cinema that challenges and improves the other art forms.

References

Gaudreault, André and Philippe Marion (2015), *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 14–15.

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