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Specular Affinities: From (Self-) Reflexivity to Intermediality via *Mise en Abyme*

This article is a theoretical account of the convergence between cinematic self-reflexivity and intermediality. Agreeing with Petr Szczepanik, who considers that “reflexivity constitutes a fundamental feature of all kinds of intermediality” (2002, 29), I ponder their mutual self-constructed and self-revealing nature. I stress the importance of an authorial discourse in this dynamics, which is informed both by a formal and a conceptual makeup. In Lucien Dällenbach’s account, *mise en abyme*, the key figure of artistic specularity, combines the enunciative surplus at the level of enunciation (whereby intradiegetic creators and spectators are revealed at their activities) with a fictional mirroring at the level of the story itself. Ultimately, *mise en abyme* reinforces the frame-breaking devices of cinematic self-reflexivity, but it also conveys the appropriation of other art forms by cinema, either as media transformation or as transmediation. Departing from the idea that the arts among themselves generate an exchange that invokes the materiality of the media and hence the self-reflexive potential of the art forms, I posit that an additional meaning of in-betweenness is in order. Adapting Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the crystal-image (1985) to this intermedial context, I argue in favour of an “inter-media image,” consisting of a perpetual flux of qualified media in which the *mise en abyme* generates a true constellation of ever-new inter-art combinations.

All types of artworks are produced, but not all of them evince this constructedness; some hide their artefactual essence and pretend to simply be, as if created *ab nihilo*. This purported realism of an artwork which metaphorically conveys the world as if through a mirror held up to nature, as William Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene 2),¹ is precisely what reflexive cinema in general disrupts. Instead of a mirror which is simply reduced to a frame, letting nature be perceived *through* it as if it did not exist, one is made to perceive it as an opaque duplicating device, a reflective machine. Along these lines, Robert

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1 Ironically, this is a scene in which the protagonist, Prince Hamlet, intent on unmasking the craftiness of his royal uncle, instructs theatre players of an intradiegetic play on how to best accomplish his own goals. This is a *mise en abyme*, as the play in the play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, mirrors the actual situation of the play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare (ca. 1600).

Stam defines reflexive cinema (also known as anti-illusionist) as the one that questions its own filmic conventions, revealing the artifice upon which all art is based: “Reflexive works break with art as an enchantment and call attention to their own factitiousness” (1992, 1).

Therefore, reflexive cinema explicitly manifests what I have elsewhere called an “authorial discourse” (Chinita 2013b), which at its simplest, formal level is a combination of the more encompassing activity of a physical intentional agent with a designated locus (a metaphorical voice) present in all films, resulting in restricted and particular enunciative marks explicitly present in a specific film. This discourse thus refers to all the technical and aesthetic work undertaken by the author(s), regardless of the level in which it manifests itself: in his/her own name, through an interposed diegetic agent, or even in an apparent filmic neutrality (through the mediation of the recording camera) (Chinita 2013b, 138). This amounts to considering that, broadly speaking, technically explicit cinema is always a reflexive construction; it always manifests the *self*-consciousness of the author(s) involved and the enunciative practices they employ.

Christian Metz (1991), who, *stricto sensu*, considers the film text an “impersonal enunciation,” actually distinguishes between two artistic enunciations where intentionality can be explicitly devised. He differentiates between those works that reflect aspects concerning the cinematic practice in general from those that reflect aspects pertaining to *their own* construction as a specific film object. He calls the former film type “metacinematic reflexivity” and the latter “metafilmic” or “discursive reflexivity” (which corresponds to what is known as the self-reflexive variety). For example, at a visual level, a direct disclosure of the apparatus is obtained via the presence of diegetic cameras, booms, lighting projectors, screens, etc. during the production and/or film viewing operations, whereas an indirect perception of the apparatus is achieved through a flare, a gaze at the camera, an object or liquid thrown at the lens, or the realization of technical devices that point to the artificiality of the film, such as a split screen. The two strategies may be combined when, for instance, the actual recording camera is glimpsed in a diegetic mirror.²

At a more conceptual level, my notion of authorial discourse entails a marked and assumed ideological position on film: a *discourse* on the mechanisms of creation and reception has to take place throughout the entire picture for it to be considered an authorial enunciation about the seventh art (Chinita 2013b, 118). The film director, as responsible for the film’s shot list and *mise-en-scène*, has to resort to specular strategies that reinforce the enunciative component of the film work and its cornerstone: the *mise en abyme* (i.e. mirror images).³ It is precisely here that intermediality crosses paths with metacinema, as Stam’s above-quoted comment on the artificiality of all art already presupposes.

2 The sound may also contain revealing strategies of both types.

3 For simplicity’s sake, I will use the French denomination throughout this piece.

The *mise en abyme*, which carries innate narrativity, is the key figure of artistic specularity implying the mirroring of an element within the confines of an artwork. According to André Gide, who first used the concept,⁴ the duplication involves the figures and facts of a diegesis and not the image per se. Lucien Dällenbach's narratological theory of mirror images in literature (1977), which may be adapted to the field of cinema,⁵ broadened the scope of this interpretation of mirroring to include the mechanics of both the storytelling (enunciative *mise en abyme*) and the story told (fictional *mise en abyme*). In the workings of the storytelling, the characters are performative – as is the case with Federico Fellini's film *8 ½* (1963) – creators or spectators of any kind, and the action involves the process and the context of their activities, calling attention to the psychic and artistic makeup of creation and reception at large and to the auteurs' and film viewers' roles. The story that is told, on the other hand, may involve all sorts of characters and diegetic universes or situations. Yet, it is fully dependent on the narrative structures used to depict them. In this category, fictionality and enunciation are intertwined although the story is made to prevail. Thus, a mirroring may be produced inwards and be embedded in the story, taking place either once or multiple times (which Dällenbach describes as *ad infinitum*). Conversely, an aporetic reduplication may occur when a supposedly "fictional" world is mirrored by an apparently "real" one, placed outside of it (however, they coexist in the same film, and both are naturally diegetic). Furthermore, embeddedness may be combined with aporia in a single film, which, once more, is the case with Fellini's *8 ½*, which depicts a film director in the process of pre-producing a film while experiencing artistic and existential angst. This sends him into a labyrinth of memories and fantasies which interrupt the normal development of his work.

Christian Metz (1991) argues that self-reflexive films need to be regarded as something in process in which a surplus of enunciative devices is used. Among those enunciate, ed implements listed by Metz in his book *L'énonciation impersonnelle* (1991) as part of the *mise-en-scène*, to my mind, some are more clearly specular than others: the already mentioned *mise en abyme*, but also films in the film, the use of mirrors, the camera gaze, and the disclosure of the apparatus. More importantly, *mise en abyme* as a backstage revelation of filmmaking and film viewing (a type of product known in the American film industry as the Hollywood on Hollywood Film/Movie)⁶ may be – and often is – used together with mirroring devices that strengthen the authorial discourse both formally and

4 Thus, for him, a work of art contained in the character's own world (that is, "reduced to their scale") the self-same subject-matter of the artwork as a whole. André Gide, *Journal 1889–1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948, 41. quoted by Dällenbach 1997, 15 – my translation). Within the pictorial field, as long as image is figural, sustaining the repetition of a situation within different media formats, Gide's postulate remains true.

5 Cf. *The (In)visible Spectator* (Chinita 2013a, published in Portuguese) and Fevry (2000).

6 Cf. P. D. Anderson (1978), Parish, Pitts, and Mank (1978), Laurence Soroka (1983), Christopher Ames (1997), to name only the more academically inclined.

conceptually. However, in order to effectively link (self-)reflexive cinema to intermediality, two aspects have to be broached: (1) the relationship between cinema and other arts, (2) the consideration of film as a medium among other media.

In the first case, mirroring as represented and produced in film extends far beyond cinema and accommodates other art forms. For example, Dällenbach himself allows for other artworks – such as a painting, a theatrical play, a piece of music, and so on – to be present within a narrative with the explicit purpose of representing a work of art (1977, 95). Hence, they are not mere decorations or neutral objects, but they stand for art forms themselves. The sheer existence of a frame in a painting or a photograph, an architectonic barrier such as a windowpane, a doorway, an arch, a store window, a mirror, a camera framing, a stage and/or a curtain, a book page, and so on may operate as frame-breaking devices. Some of them, such as the mirror, are mentioned by Metz (1991) as downright specular tools. Marcello Walter Bruno (2001) claims that the self-reflexive variety of cinema – which he calls “implicit metafilm” – does not require the representation of the artistic context (the so-called cinema world); it is solely dependent upon the film being perceived as a work of art, that is, as “artefact, artificial and artful” (2001, 16, first column – my translation). Gilles Deleuze (1985, 103) considers the *hyalosign*⁷ an “*oeuvre au miroir*” (“a mirrored image”), which includes all forms of artistic inlays: either films in the film or other artworks such as theatre plays, shows, and paintings.⁸ This line of thought culminates in Petr Szczepanik’s concept of “intermedia reflexivity,” which takes into account the differences between media in order to see how they merge into one another and originate “hybrid forms of images” (2002, 29). He argues that “[R]eflexivity constitutes a fundamental feature of all kinds of intermediality” (2002, 29). Although Szczepanik writes about media, while Dällenbach, Walter Bruno, and Deleuze focus more specifically on art forms, they are all part of the same debate.

As pointed out by Joachim Paech (2000, 13), following Niklas Luhman: “Every [artistic] form is a form solely because of a medium which is only observable in the form it has made possible.” There can be no art forms without media. Adopting the notion of “qualified media” propounded by Lars Elleström (2010, 24–27) allows us to eliminate any confusion and simultaneously dismiss what would be an unnatural separation between two things which are tightly connected. Elleström distinguishes between “basic media,” identified by their modal properties (involving materiality, sensoriality, spatial-temporality, and meaning), and “qualified media,” cultural media types strongly dependent on their historical, social, and cultural circumstances as well as certain variable conventions. Art forms belong to the latter category, although some overlap is

7 Whereupon the modern bifacial image is composed of two halves perpetually interchanging between a visible and an invisible side.

8 When these embedded occurrences become indiscernible from one another, he calls them “*l’oeuvre en germe*” (Deleuze 1985, 102).

admissible (Elleström himself provides the example of “moving images” in reference to films). Szczepanik (2002) corroborates Paech (2000) by defining intermedia reflexivity as “a process of mutual reflecting and self-reflecting of two or more media forms, correlated within one single image or the diegesis” (2002, 30). As Paech claims, “[T]he arts, in their relationships to one another or respectively to older [...] and newer technological media [...] are only special cases of intermediality which occur at times when forms that originate from contexts defined as art [...] and passed on as artwork or text appear in other art forms [...] or in mechanical-technological production” (2000, 16). For Lars Elleström, “media transformation” is a transference of media characteristics among media, which may take the form of a qualified medium being represented in another one (2014, 28–30). Such a representation is what Paech calls the symbolic level of intermedial relations, either of other film(s) in the film – one of the mirroring processes listed by Metz (1991) and which entails an enunciative *mise en abyme* of reception – or of other arts (paintings, theatre, etc.) in a film (Paech 2000, 17). The more built-in this medial reflection is, presumably the more self-reflexive it may be considered to be, exposing traces of the receiver medium itself, into which the others are embedded.

According to Elleström (2014), when some features of a given medium are transposed to another medium, “transmediation” takes place. In the case of qualified media, groups of media products “tend to trigger similar representations” (Elleström 2014, 22). Paech calls this process “material intermediality,” inasmuch as it is not about the representation of media as part of the object or theme of the work, but it rather involves the representational layer itself reappearing “constitutively in a different medium” (for example, a painted or photographed picture) (2000, 17). Szczepanik’s concept of intermedia reflexivity addresses this duality. Indeed, he distinguishes between two levels of the phenomenon: one which is a mere figuration of different media in the filmic diegesis and another one that is more elusive and intermediate (in the sense of in-between), which he designates as “image-surface” (2002, 31).

Concerning cinema’s mediality, Walter Bruno argues that cinema is a meta-medium because it not only manages to reproduce referential images (that is, reality) but also fantasy images derived from other artistic media (screen-mediated reproductions of static photographs, television images, verbal and written language, and pictorial canvases, among others). According to him, this multimedial nature is what makes cinema a medium so prone to *mise en abyme*. Consequently, I posit that cinema is a multiplier and exhibitor of media in a way that none of the other so-called art forms can be. Its reflective and representational properties are immense.

The element of the cinematic apparatus that makes it particularly inter-artistic and self-reflexive is the frame. In Pascal Bonitzer’s opinion (1987), the cinematic “reality” is always illusory: as long as there is a frame, the viewers are made to be aware of the medium, that is, the flat surface on which the images

are projected.⁹ That rectangle is not a manifestation of the profilmic, neither is it a representation of the world. “It is an agency of volumes, masses, forms, and movements” (Bonitzer 1987, 21); it is a conjunction of effects and the result of choices. Werner Wolf, referring to frames in general, observes that they allow interpretation and are, therefore, meta-phenomena (2006, 3). He considers two types of frames: the cognitive, made of schema that help us interpret reality and the artefacts, and the artistic, consisting of physical frames that surround artworks and help us perceive a coherent whole (2006, 5). In this context, “framing” is the activity of decoding that artworks require in order to be considered as such, and the rules enabling that activity are called “framings.” Inasmuch as they may involve more than one medium, frames may be explicitly intermedial. In turn, framings flaunt their condition: they have both a self-referential and a meta-referential function and are frame-breaking devices (2006, 30). They enable viewers to either concentrate on the artefact or the artifice; to either see the frame (the art object as qualified medium) or the picture (the contents of the image as representation), and to possibly see it in conjunction with other art forms. The relationship between arts generates an exchange that invokes the materiality of the media and, consequently, the self-reflexive potential of the art forms. As Ágnes Pethő states, “[T]echniques of intermediality [in general] effectively break the transparency of the filmic image, and while they sort of close the image upon itself, they can also open it up towards illusory inter-media and inter-art ‘transgressions,’ ‘crossovers’” (2011, 96). Intermediality is more than reflexive (as per Szczepanik 2002, 29); it is always self-reflexive because specific media cannot be removed from the equation, no more than cinema can be truly appreciated without taking into consideration other art forms. However, applying the Deleuzian logic of the hyalosign (1985) to this inter-arts context, we obtain a specific meaning of intermediality in which the very often discussed in-betweenness of media (cf. Pethő 2018, 165–176) resides in the qualified media’s perpetual movement *towards* other media, an “inter-media image” so to speak.¹⁰

In what concerns cinema alone, Deleuze postulates a propagation of the inner reflex of the bifacial image, characterized by a permanent interchange between its two sides: the visible/actual and the invisible/virtual. When such an image, intrinsically indiscernible in itself, due to its constant movement, enters in contact with an environment (in French “milieu,” meaning *medium*), endowed with reflective properties, the whole medium is “crystallized” and becomes fully visible in all its magnitude. Expanding upon this concept, let us consider the medium of cinema as a whole, as actually Deleuze himself does when he

9 In the current post-cinematic age, the flat surface of projection is being replaced by more volumetric ones, owing more to sculpture than to painting, but the same type of anti-illusionist and medial reasoning applies.

10 This also takes into account the sound. Indeed, Deleuze calls the bifacial sounds “sonic image(s)” (*son-signes*).

writes about the four types of crystal-image in relation to time (1985, 111–128). According to him, cinema as a medium endowed with reflective properties may be a “perfect crystal,” presenting the world as a theatrical spectacle (as in Max Ophüls’s films); a “crystal in formation,” showing life as a spectacle, *tout court* (as in Federico Fellini’s works); or a “decomposing crystal,” revealing the atemporal dimension of the arts and incorporating the world as a theatre (as in Luchino Visconti’s works).¹¹

This conception of the crystal-image is already intermedial, but nevertheless restricted, because it is reduced to a single departure medium (cinema). Now, if one thinks of cinema as part of a cluster of media, interchanging with several media,¹² then one obtains the perfect intermedial crystal-image, or, as I said above, yet another (and, it seems to me, better) meaning of in-betweenness. In this context, the expression does not refer to something which is in the middle, to something that crosses paths with other media specificities, or to hybridity in some way. It is more than that: it points to an intrinsically intermedial substance in constant permutation, a perpetual flux of qualified media bursting with anti-illusionistic possibilities, a true symbiotic cinema. None of this would be possible without the *mise en abyme*, which, beyond generating an internal audiovisual mirroring, begets a true constellation of ever-new inter-arts combinations.

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11 Yet another, fourth, type of crystal is the “flawed-crystal” (as in Jean Renoir’s films).

12 A true mirrored polygon as Deleuze suggests of the shattering mirrors scene of Orson Welles’s *The Lady from Shanghai*, which he takes to be the best example of crystal-image (Deleuze 1985, 95).

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