11

‘Transgenic Art’: The Biopoetry of Eduardo Kac

Claus Clüver

The various forms of ‘New Media Poetry’ documented and theorized in 1996 in an issue of Visible Language edited by Eduardo Kac\(^1\) included such forms as digital poetry in a number of forms and genres (some of it interactive), other forms of cyberliterature, videopoetry and holographic poetry (or holopoetry). The concept of ‘poetry’ involved in this practice and its theorization expanded the convention of considering as ‘poetry’ all forms of manipulation of and experimentation with the verbal medium and its written and aural representations which dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century and had come to be labelled as visual, concrete or sound poetry, respectively. The Brazilian poet and artist Eduardo Kac (b. 1962) first gained international recognition in the early 1980s with his computer-generated holopoetry. Over the past 20 years, he has more radically explored the possibilities of contemporary media technology for artmaking, a development documented in Telepresence & Bio Art: Networking Humans, Rabbits, & Robots (2005), a collection of Kac’s essays published between 1992 and 2002,\(^2\) with the essays grouped under the headings ‘Telecommunications, Dialogism and Internet Art’, ‘Telepresence Art and Robotics’ and ‘Bio Art’. The most notorious of his ‘bio art’ creations is the GFP Bunny (2000), the green fluorescent rabbit Alba, a product of what Kac calls ‘transgenic art’ – ‘a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering to create unique living beings’.\(^3\)

The first of Kac’s ‘transgenic’ artworks, Genesis (1999), was also his first ‘biopoem’. Kac has written an essay\(^4\) detailing the conception and execution of the work and reflecting on its implications. In describing it I shall have to rely heavily on Kac’s own description. The work was executed in three phases. The first led to the creation of an ‘artist’s gene’ – ‘a synthetic gene that I invented and that does not exist in nature’.\(^5\) It involved the transformation of a verbal text into DNA. The text chosen was a statement by the God of the biblical Genesis as rendered in English in the King James Version of the Bible: ‘Let man have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Genesis 1.26).
The ironic appropriateness of choosing these lines to be transformed into a gene is obvious. Kac has pointed out that the choice of a translation, instead of the original Hebrew, and of the King James Version with its claims, its complicated history and its ideological contexts, was deliberate. Next, the letters of the alphabet were replaced by the symbols of the Morse code. Kac explains that ‘Morse code was chosen partly because, as first employed in radiotelegraphy, it represents the dawn of the information age – the genesis of global communications’. I do not know what other code could have provided Kac with such a suitable base for conversion into DNA. Kac used the Morse dashes and dots for two of the four letters in his own conversion code: dashes represented the letter T (thymine), dots the letter C (cytosin); word spaces represented the letter A (adenine), letter spaces the letter G (guanine). The entire DNA resulting from this conversion represents the new synthetic gene. Kac reports that he had to ‘e-mail the gene to a company specializing in DNA synthesis’ and two weeks later received a ‘package with a vial containing millions of copies of the gene’. He realized that by itself the gene cannot do anything because…to be meaningful it needs a context. The context of the gene is the body of an organism, and the context of the organism is its environment. In the case of my *Genesis*, the organisms are bacteria…, and their environment is at once their dish, the gallery, and the Internet.

The Petri dish with the bacteria into which the *Genesis* gene was introduced was displayed in a gallery. In fact, it contained two kinds of bacteria, both genetically engineered to glow: one kind, which contained the synthetic gene, emitted blue light, the other kind, which did not, emitted yellow light. Spectators could not only observe these bacteria in their dish, they could also turn on an ultraviolet light that would cause real biological mutations in the bacteria. The entire work exists as a multimedia installation in a blackened room (see Figure 11). According to Kac, it employs a petri dish with the bacteria, a flexible microvideo camera, a UV light box, and a microscope illuminator. This set is connected to a video projector and two networked computers. One computer works as a Web server (streaming live video and audio) and handles remote requests for UV activation. The other computer is responsible for DNA music synthesis. The original music, which employs the *Genesis* gene, was composed by Peter Gena. The local video projection shows a larger-than-life image of the bacterial division and interaction seen through the microvideo camera.
opposite the projection is the text in Morse code, and on the left wall the DNA. Even thus made visible and tangible through the employment of many media, the project still seems to require a verbal narrative in the form of annotations or a descriptive text to enlighten the viewer about the project and the processes involved.

Kac reports that, at the end of the first exhibition of *Genesis* in 1999, the gene ‘was decoded and read back in plain English’, but the mutations had caused slight changes: ‘The mutated sentence read: LET AAN HAVE DOMINION OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA AND OVER THE FOWL OF THE AIR AND OVER EVERY LIVING THING THAT LOVES UA EON THE EARTH’.  

There were two other phases to the project that I will not describe in any detail here. One dealt with the protein produced by the synthetic gene. It involved ‘the visualization of the three-dimensional structure of proteins produced by sequenced genes’ and investigated ‘the logic, the methods, and the symbolism’ of the process ‘as well as its potential as a domain of art making’. The last phase ‘focused on giving tangible expression to important aspects of the genomic and proteomic developments of *Genesis*’. A pair of large black granite tablets contains the laser-etched texts that were painted on the walls in the installation, as well as the inversion, with the mutated DNA sequence on top, their Morse equivalent below and the changed verbal text at the bottom. According to the artist, the ‘triadic configuration of [these] *Encryption Stones* critically exposes the intersemiotic operations that lie at the heart of the contemporary understanding of life processes’. There were four additional sets of objects that made aspects of the project tangible in more material form.
In his essay, the artist claims that

[a] critical stance is manifested throughout the Genesis project by following scientifically accurate methods in the real production and visualization of a gene and a protein that I have invented and that have absolutely no function or value in biology. Rather than explicating or illustrating scientific principles, the Genesis project complicates and obfuscates the extreme simplification of standard molecular biology descriptions of life processes, reinstating social and historical contextualization at the core of the debate.\footnote{14}

Instead of entering into the ongoing discussion of the scientific and ethical implications of this transgenic artwork and of the others Kac has created, I shall briefly explore, in the context of the present project, the intermedial processes in its constitution, among which transposition and transformation are dominant. I shall focus on the first phase, and more specifically on the processes leading to the Petri dish with the glowing bacteria. I shall consider the ways in which the entire work as a set of intermedial transformations and ongoing processes is communicated to the reader/observer, and its implications for the discourse on media and intermediality and for the notion of ‘poetry’.

The initial medium is verbal language as represented alphabetically in writing, using modern spelling and no punctuation. The fact that the text is a specific and familiar translation leads to reflections about the changes of meaning that will have occurred in its transformations from its earliest oral formulation and about other versions of this passage in the same language and in others. These considerations will also involve the realization that any other version would have led to a different DNA – and the question whether this would have changed the final result in any significant way, given the self-contained nature of the project. The slight changes of the original text that would have occurred by the time of the re-‘translation’ of the mutated genes would be different but of no imaginable consequence, especially since any decoding, including that of the original text, would always have different and uncontrollable results, which would also depend on the time allowed for the process of mutation.

The re-presentation of the alphabetic English version of the biblical text in the signs of Morse code does not necessarily depend on a written text, although seeing the letters will undoubtedly help; nor does the text in Morse code need to be written out. In fact, the code was invented to send telegraphic signals, electronic impulses received primarily as sound (and replicable through knocking or other rhythmically produced sounds). However, the subsequent transformation into a genetic code, represented by a string of capital letters of the Latin alphabet, is difficult to imagine without the model of a visual version of the Morse text.
It is only when the three texts are seen on the walls of the gallery space that we are physically confronted with the fact that writing is a medium of its own, though usually intimately connected with verbal language. The letterforms used for the verbal text suggest to the modern reader the era when the translation was produced, and the font used for the DNA string will be associated with contemporary technology. The visual version of the text in Morse code of the very same text spelled out in letters, signals a change in the production and means of communication: the verbal message is the same, and there has been no change in alphabet, but the lines and dots and spaces serve only to visualize the groups of electronic impulses representing the letters conveyed over a distance. Moreover, as painted on the wall (not shown in the illustration) and etched into the Encryption Stones, the visual symbols do not indicate the spaces between the letters in the encoded text.

In my view the representation of letters in Morse code, even as visualized for this project, does not constitute a form of writing. That may sound like a precarious statement, because it may seem to question the status of so much writing that occurs in electronic media and is perceived in virtual space. Media poetry ‘takes language beyond the confines of the printed page’, as Kac wrote in his ‘Introduction’ to New Media Poetry, ‘simply because the textual aspirations of the authors cannot be physically realized in print’. Nevertheless, in its concrete manifestations the physical appearance and organization of letters and letter combinations and their placement in (three-dimensional, dynamic) space are manipulated with even greater abandon and inventiveness than previously happened in print and manuscript and calligraphy, with transformations only now made possible by the new media, and approaching illegibility even more freely than some two-dimensional experimental poetry. All these possibilities for manipulating written signs that are inherent in any writing system and have been explored for centuries in many cultures are independent of verbal language, even when the writing serves to communicate a verbal text, and quite frequently in order to enhance such a text. The choices of typeface, letter size and visual arrangement of the biblical text above the Morse code version, and the DNA string below it, are a modest indication of the effectiveness of writing as a medium. The dots and dashes and spaces of the Morse code version do not invite or even permit such manipulation; and while the physical (or, to use Lars Elleström’s term, ‘technical’) media may be changed, the sequence of the signs cannot. Moreover, removed from that particular context, they fail to function altogether, while there have been many stimulating visual compositions made of elements of writing without any ostensible connection to verbal language, especially in the past hundred years.

In this reading, a written verbal text constitutes a combination of two media, although this fact only becomes significant when the shape, size and placement of letters attract attention to themselves as constituents of
the text’s meaning. Since the visual codes on which such a text draws are not part of the verbal sign system, we would be reading an intermedia text. Contrary to multimedia and mixedmedia texts, the media involved in intermedia texts (for example, many logotypes and graffiti, concrete and holographic poetry) are fused and not separated by any boundaries.17

All written languages are based on particular codes that have developed over long periods of time. In alphabetic languages, the letters are written signs that must be distinguishable one from the other but are independent of the specific fonts or typefaces used in the production and manipulation of ‘writing’. It is the alphabetic version of the biblical text, which can also be spelled out orally, that serves as the basis of the text in Morse code. The text’s transformation into a version in Morse code, which is entirely reversible, does not affect its status as a verbal text at all, but it makes it difficult if not impossible to read, especially as painted on the wall, without separation of the coded letter signs. However, if properly transmitted by telegraph, the signals will be received, and can be decoded and pronounced, as letters. It is best to consider the Morse code as exactly that, and the transformation as a switch of codes of the representation of alphabetical verbal signs, and not as a change of media, even though the physical media involved are different: the voice or visual signs in manuscript or print on one side, telegraphic media for the text in Morse code on the other.

The next step in the sequence of transpositions, however, is entirely different, even though its visual representation may at first sight show similarities to the original written text. The uninterrupted chain of capital letters is the result of an identification of the four elements of the visual version of the biblical text in Morse code (the dots, the dashes, the pauses between letters and the pauses between words) with the four elements that constitute the genetic code. These elements have names, and the initial letters of these names function, as capitals, to identify them. The capitals have been assigned, apparently in an arbitrary fashion, to the four elements of the Morse code, and the exact sequence in which these elements appear in the transformed biblical text thus determines the DNA of the gene that results from this process. While the DNA is represented in alphabetical form, the gene itself is an entirely different medium. Is it, in fact, a medium altogether?

Even though it was formulated over two decades ago, and in spite of the current general agreement that any single-phase definition of ‘medium’ is bound to be inadequate, it may still be useful in this context to cite the definition proposed in 1988 by Rainer Bohn, Eggo Müller and Rainer Ruppert, which I have translated as: ‘That which mediates for and between humans a (meaningful) sign (or a combination of signs) with the aid of suitable transmitters across temporal and/or spatial distances’,18 for it provides a few terms to be considered in our investigation. If we apply it to the artificial genes contained in the bacteria in the Petri dish, our question about the medial
nature of the gene does not find a straightforward answer. The blue bacteria convey to us, as they were instructed to, that they contain the gene. They do that both in the gallery and electronically whenever the work is installed in a gallery and the installation is accessible via the internet, including the possibility of clicking a button to turn on the ultraviolet light. The bacteria might thus be considered suitable transmitters of a meaningful sign invisible to the naked eye – genes constituted by the transformation of the original text, in a process that can be reversed. Are the bacteria transmitters of signs, or are they themselves the sign, the media configuration considered as a ‘biopoem’? If the latter is the case, then what is the medium in which they can be configured as a sign?

The core of the actual work, the product of several transformative intersemiotic processes, consists in the synthetic genes inhabiting the bacteria in the dish. However, it is crucial that the disk also holds bacteria that do not contain the artificial gene, because the project requires the possibility of mutations under the influence of ultraviolet light. The medial core configuration, thoroughly manipulated and controlled, is thus the Petri dish with two different-coloured sets of bacteria, one of which contains the artificial gene, accessible by the light. The medium enabling this configuration is any suitable controllable environment where bacteria can interact under certain conditions. Such an environment ordinarily does not serve to enable the transmission of meaningful signs between humans – part of the definition cited above. Arguably it becomes a ‘medium’ only by being made to function as an integral part of the Genesis project. The complex sign communicated by this particular laboratory setting is primarily self-referential: it concerns the use of ordinary biological procedures to make us aware of the possibility of genetic engineering through the creation of a gene resulting from particular transformative processes, and through the consequent, less controllable life processes resulting in mutations that can be demonstrated by decoding. That is indeed all the re-translation can tell us, besides the fact that the original text has been substantially preserved. The actual changes that have occurred will inevitably make the text less intelligible, and their extent, while otherwise uncontrollable, will depend on the time allowed for the process of mutation to take place.19

The gene itself is entirely inaccessible to the gallery visitor. Its ‘meaning’ in this specific case is completely artificial; in ordinary biological circumstances the ‘meaning’ of a genetic code is understood and used in totally different contexts. The alphabetical representation of the DNA, by itself unintelligible to the ordinary viewer, nevertheless makes it accessible in a different medium – writing – which also mediates the verbal text from which it originated via its translation into Morse code (also contained in the display and known to most viewers, at least in principle). However, its crude representation in a substantially different medium, alphabetic writing, indicates only the first step in the process of the gene’s production. On the other hand, the
fact that the reverse process of decoding will end up in a very similar chain of capital letters that can then be re-translated, via the Morse code, into an intelligible and identical (though slightly distorted) verbal phrase indicates that the letter chain, though not a part of the genetic medium, is an integral part of the constitutive transformative process.

Any understanding of the projected image of the bacterial interaction will depend on an entirely different readerly competence. Again, most viewers will bring some knowledge of these processes to the experience, in different degrees; and these differences will be reflected in the readings of the entire project that viewers will produce. A few may even come close to the artist’s own assessment, who states emphatically that he is interested in creating artworks that reflect on the multiple social implications of genetics, from unacceptable abuse to its hopeful promises, from the notion of ‘code’ to the question of translation, from the synthesis of genes to the process of mutation, from the metaphors employed by biotechnology to the fetishization of genes and proteins, from simple reductive narratives to complex views that account for environmental influences. The urgent task is to unpack the implicit meanings of the biotech revolution and, through art making, contribute to the creation of alternative views.20

For viewers interested in questions of intermediality the large-scale projection of the bacteria in the Petri dish will raise a set of additional questions and trigger reflections concerning the media-specificity of the enlarged living organisms moving around and emitting the two kinds of light. As we observe them, they are entirely the creatures of human imaginative activity exploiting recent scientific discoveries. It is this knowledge, derived from an external source, which makes us see them not only as biological specimens but as elements of a media discourse. We know that they owe their existence to a profound shift of codes in which the original meaningful sign, the verbal text, was obliterated to be reconstituted as a ‘biopoesis’, a living organism that yet contains in its genetic structure that very text, subject only to the mutations provoked by bacterial interactions. While these interactions can be influenced by human intervention (activating the ultraviolet light), the poem-carrying bacteria in the dish constitute a medial configuration whose behaviour follows its own rules or, as Kac put it somewhat anthropomorphically, its own ‘interests’: ‘the biopoesis’s internal interests as a living creature (which are independent of you and me, or even of the verbal components of the poem), i.e., the poem, being alive, has interests that go beyond its status as a poem’.21 The poet offers another observation about a consequence of transforming a verbal text into a living organism, this one concerned with what Elleström (in this volume) calls the ‘spatiotemporal modality’:
There is also the fundamental question of what I call ‘biological time’, i.e., contrary to the temporal structures already known in poetry (oral performance, silent reading, simultaneities, recording and manipulation of voice, use of video editing, etc.), the biopoem evolves according to its own time, from a dynamic relationship between its internal metabolism and its response to the environment, to environmental conditions, which include the care we give to it (or not). Biological time gives the poem its own irreducible pace, following the rhythm of life as we live it.22

If the bacteria in the dish constitute the actual biopoem, it is a text made up by the fusion of at least two usually very distinct media and is as such an intermedia text. One can argue, however, that what is really communicated is the creative concept, especially since that which makes it a poem, the presence of a radically transformed verbal text in the DNA (which can nevertheless be recovered by a process of decoding), is invisible to the eye (and thus, like other concept art, it raises questions about the ‘sensorial modality’, to use another of Elström's terms). On the other hand, the entire project is not only a multimedia installation appealing primarily to the sense of vision and exchanging the materiality of the printed page for the painted shapes on the walls, which thus appear materially similar to the projections of the enlarged image of the Petri dish, while the technical media retain the most solid material presence. The materiality of the work’s other aspects in the various media involved is also made tangible by the additional objects created as part of the work but not of the installation.

There is another medium involved in the work as installation: electronic music, on which Eduardo Kac offers no further comments. It is apparently generated by the DNA and does not exist independently.23 It most likely does not directly and immediately affect our understanding of the transformation project; but being surrounded by Peter Geno’s ‘gene sound’ will certainly affect our experience, and on reflection we realize that the genesis of a sonorous dimension in yet another medium is a further demonstration of the interplay of natural language, genetics and binary logic that forms ‘the triple system of *Genesis*’, according to the artist, who sees it as ‘the key to understanding the future’.24

At the core of the work is the act of what Irina Rajewsky, following others, has called ‘medial transposition’: the “original” text, film, etc., is the “source” of the newly formed media product, whose formation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process.25 Her classification of this as a ‘production-oriented, “genetic” conception of intermediality’ seems particularly appropriate in this case, but the case is also unusual, and not only because the target medium is not normally involved in intermedial operations or an intermedial discourse. While in
such media transpositions as film adaptations of literary texts, elements of the source text will always be incorporated, more or less transformed, into the new media constellation, in the case of *Genesis* the entire source text, radically transformed, has been incorporated into the biopoem – in fact, its presence makes it a poem, but also an intermedia text. As such, it falls into Rajewsky’s second category of intermediality, that of ‘media combination’.

Intermediality serves in this project as a bridge between usually unrelated discourses. What enables the inclusion of the genetic medium in the game of intermedial transformations, at least in this case, is the fact that the gene is the carrier, and indeed a version, of a verbal text. Mimicking all genetic engineering, the conversion of this arrogant ancestral self-definition attributed to their god in an imaginative act that questions it by carrying the phrase to an unexpected extreme can indeed be considered as another extension of poetry. Kac told me again in 2007 that in the end he considers himself a poet. In ‘Biopoetry’, a contribution to a book currently in press, Kac proposes ‘the use of biotechnology and living organisms in poetry as a new realm of verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal creation’ and outlines 20 projects, including a few, like *Genesis*, already completed. Project number three reads thus:

Marine mammal dialogical interaction: compose sound text by manipulating recorded parameters of pitch and frequency of dolphin communication, for a dolphin audience. Observe how a whale audience responds and vice-versa.

Here any kind of human interaction, a fundamental component in the definition of ‘medium’ cited above, is at best secondary to the communication among other mammals. If we again consider the project a specimen of concept art where the idea is more interesting than its execution, we remain entirely in the human sphere, of course. Whether executed or not, however, the substitution of any element of verbal language by human-induced sounds of dolphin language takes the concept of ‘poetry’ well beyond the presence and role of verbal language in *Genesis* and also beyond most if not all boundaries of ‘poetry’ accepted in the work of experimental poets of the last hundred years, from the inarticulate vocal productions of Dada performers and concrete ‘sound poets’ to the illegibility of certain printed texts or calligraphic productions. What connects this particular project with such radical versions of ‘poetry’ as well as some types of media poetry is the non-metaphorical use of ‘language’, albeit that of non-human mammals. Poetry can exist in many media, and its boundaries are constantly being redefined. On the other hand, ‘biopoetry’ occupies only one area in the apparently thriving realm of ‘bio-art’.
Notes


5. Ibid., p. 249.

6. Ibid., p. 251. In a long note, Kac added that he ‘employed Morse code not out of a technical need but as a symbolic gesture meant both to expose the continuity of ideology and technology and to reveal important aspects of the rhetorical strategies of molecular biology’ (p. 261). Morse was an ardent nativist: ‘the nativist platform was racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic.’ To Kac, ‘the translation of the KJV Genesis passage into Morse code represents the continuity from fierce British colonialism to the bigotry of nativist ideology’ (p. 261).

7. Ibid., p. 251.

8. The image was taken at the installation of Genesis in the Julia Friedman Gallery in Chicago. An eight-page fold-out catalogue, Eduardo Kac: Genesis (May 4–June 2, 2001), contains an essay by David Hunt, ‘Eduardo Kac: Metaphor into Motif’, and colour reproductions of all the elements of the work, including the text faces of the two Encryption Stones.

9. Ibid., p. 251.

10. Ibid., p. 254.


12. Ibid., p. 256.

13. There is also Transcription Jewels, ‘a sculpture encased in a custom-made round wooden box’ and consisting of a small glass bottle containing purified Genesis DNA and ‘an equally small gold cast of the three-dimensional structure of the Genesis protein’ (Kac (2005) Telepresence & Bio Art, p. 257). There is further a set of Fossil Folds, a series of sculpted tablets based on Kac’s ‘artist’s protein’ (ibid.), a five-page portfolio called The Book of Mutations and In Our Own Image, ‘a pair of digital video-sculptures that present, respectively, moving images of Genesis bacteria and the Genesis three-dimensional protein’ (ibid., p. 260). In 2001, all these elements were brought together in the solo exhibition in the Julia Friedman Gallery.


19. Gallery visitors and internet viewers can interfere in the process by switching on the ultra-violet light; but it would be misleading to think of this as an interactive situation, because these viewers do not respond to any sign coming from the dish. Kac apparently attributes a greater significance to these viewer-induced mutated texts: ‘The ability to change the sentence is a symbolic gesture: it means that we do not accept its meaning in the form we inherited it, and that new meanings emerge as we seek to change it’ (‘Artist’s Statement’ quoted by Jennifer Eberbach (2007) ‘Eduardo Kac’ in B. Stirrat and L. Stephenson (eds) Human Nature. Exhibition catalogue (Bloomington: Indiana University School of Fine Arts Gallery), p. 66). Kac’s Genesis was shown as an installation in the SoFA Gallery’s ‘Human Nature II’ exhibition, 9 February–9 March 2007.


21. E-mail to the author.

22. E. Kac, e-mail to the author, 20 April 2009.

23. The 2001 catalogue of the installation in the Julia Friedman gallery notes on p. 8 that ‘The Genesis Net installation has original DNA music by composer Peter Gena’.

24. Kac likens it to the three writing systems recorded on the Rosetta stone, by which Jean François Champollion, in the nineteenth century, produced ‘the key to understanding the past’, because it made the Egyptian hieroglyphs readable (Kac (2005) Telepresence & Bio Art, p. 254).


12

Photo/Graphic Traces in Dubravka Ugrešić’s The Museum of Unconditional Surrender

Katalin Sándor

In Dubravka Ugrešić’s novel, The Museum of Unconditional Surrender, the reader ‘enters’ the text through a photograph, the single photograph of the text: in different editions this can be found either on the cover or on the first page of the book. What follows is a disjointed archive, the first-person narrative of a female Croatian intellectual in exile after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, a memory-work about a dismembered cultural, historical and geographical ‘body’, about personal and collective pasts. Ugrešić herself retells in an essay the story of Simonides, the ‘inventor of memory’ from Cicero’s De oratore: during a banquet the hall collapsed on the guests, disfiguring their bodies. Only Simonides was able to identify, to re-member the unrecognizable fragments by using space as a mnemo-technical strategy, remembering where the guests had sat at the table. Ugrešić’s novel itself seems to work as a somewhat Simonidesian experiment, often appropriating photography, albums, collage, film, cards as ‘mnemonic’, (re)mediating strategies for remembering the dismembered body of the past, which appears not as something to be accessed but as something to be (re)constructed, (re)assembled, interrogated. The wrecks of/from the past are recollected in a text that remains unsettlingly dissected, traversed by white lines of interruption. In this process, photography is not primarily relevant as a document, as an indexical evidence of/from the past (being often connected to oblivion and to questionable referentiality), but as an intermedial modality to frame, thematize and/or critically reflect on identity, on the representability of personal and historical past, on remembrance and forgetting, on what Ricoeur would call ‘the enigma of memory as presence of the absent encountered previously’. The text of this novel is connected to photography in many respects: (1) the photographic medium and the scopic experience is thematized throughout the narrative, the text itself recurrently foregrounding
photography and albums as its own self-interpreting, metadiscursive patterns; (2) the single photograph of the book is rewritten and displaced in two similar ekphrastic texts; (3) the narrator repeatedly adopts the position and the lens of the camera as representational modalities, making textual ‘clicks’ and inserting ‘snapshots’ into the text. This is at times connected to a narratorial attitude of limiting her role to that of a collector, withholding commentary and judgement, sketching a picture, inserting a quotation, a piece from a story and leaving it to the reader (‘let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord’); (4) the text interrupted by textual ‘snapshots’, by numbered fragments and quotations, is not only a discourse on albums, but also an unfastened album-like arrangement; (5) photography and albums are also intermedial practices in relation to which historiographic and biographic representation are problematized by foregrounding their mediated and mediating-constitutive aspect precisely through the ‘objective’ of the camera.

Thematizing photography is also a way to expose the medial heterogeneity of discourse. In this sense, the text might be called ‘photo/graphic’ – alluding to Mitchell’s notion of the ‘image/text’ which designates ‘a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation’ and ‘an unstable dialectic that constantly shifts its location in representational practices, breaking both pictorial and discursive frames’. In Ugrešić’s text (which might also be an ‘imagetext’ – as Mitchell understands it – combining text and photography), the ‘photo/graphic’ seems to work as a gap or break in the text, an interruption or an unsettling enigma retaining silence within discourse, or a mediating modality that shapes remembrance and representation.

The photo/graphic could be an instance of intermediality as Paech defines it: intermedial processes manifest themselves as events of difference, ‘as configurations or as transformative inscriptions of mediality in a work, text or intertext’. The in-between rhetoric of intermediality produces medial displacements, figurations of medial difference and the ‘re-transcription of the medium as form’ might insert ‘breaks, gaps and intervals’ into representation. Thus the term ‘photo/graphic’ (written with a slash) does not refer only to the single photograph in the book, but also to the way in which the text (desires or) aims at approaching (and thus simultaneously displacing or erasing) a medial ‘other’, as well as to the way photographic techniques of seeing, framing, focusing, clicking become ‘readable’ as figurative, textual transcriptions of the absent medium of photography or the absent pages of albums. Paech distinguishes this kind of intermediality as ‘symbolic’ (as opposed to ‘material’), since the medium is not present in another in its materiality, but ‘on the level of depiction’, of textual (re)constitution. However, the novel which ‘cites’ photography verbally but also incorporates a ‘visible’ photograph, could be located at times in-between symbolic and material intermediality.
Alternating between temporal unfolding and the open, spatial co-ordination of collage, this ‘mosaic’ or ‘album-novel’ can be read as a discursive attempt to recollect the dismembered past, and (re)read the present within historical and discursive conditions that do not offer any reference point around which a coherent narrative or identity could be constructed. The text on exile and displacement seems to be a text in displacement as well: several fragments are dislocated as if in transit, circulating and returning in the process of textual repetition. In this non-identical recurrence, the narrator experiences different modes of identification and self-effacement in different geographical and socio-cultural settings: Belgrade, Berlin, New York, Lisbon and so on. The process of textual, narrative displacements is often figured by ‘the map of the unreal’\textsuperscript{13}, by the interim dream-rhetoric of emigration, through the figures of heterotopic places like museums, mirrors, swaying houses, albums or the mutant, divided city of Berlin. These also outline a non-linear, self-quoting and self-inspecting discourse (at times more essayistic than narrative) in which some short textual fragments seem to return as the traces, specters or echoes of others.

A further metadiscursive pattern exposes the text as non-totalizing (and ‘visibly’ fabricated) discourse through ‘exhibiting’ the stomach contents of Roland, a walrus formerly living at the Berlin Zoo. This unusual display, which enlists the most common and yet the most unimaginable objects from the pink cigarette lighter to a baby’s shoe, becomes a site of de and recontextualized ready-mades, reflecting on the divergent, collage-like process in the (personal and collective) practices of remembering, forgetting, contextualizing and meaning-making. As Rothberg notes about collective memory (and memory in general), ‘Memories emerge in the interplay between different pasts and a heterogeneous present. I call this the multidirectionality of memory: the interference, overlap, and mutual constitution of seemingly distinct collective memories…’.\textsuperscript{14} The text abounds in sites and tropes of heterogeneity, multidirectionality and collage: Roland’s exhibited stomach, the Berlin flea-market, an artist’s studio, the German capital as a divided, mutant museum city, the tarot cards through which the stories of the eight friends and the eight different ‘histories’ of Yugoslavia are told, all scatter any singular, reliable narrative about the past whose coherent representability is contested throughout the text. Sontag claims that photographs expose history, present and past, as a set of anecdotes and ‘faits divers’\textsuperscript{15}. In this sense, the decontextualizing, fragmenting aspect and the contingency of photography (and collage) might also be relevant from a historiographic point of view: it questions the possibility and the politics of a master discourse, of an exclusive, hegemonic, uncritical and/or ethnocentric narrative about the recent past of former Yugoslavia by leaving room for multiple histories contesting and constituting each other.
A photograph at the centre?

In the processes of political, cultural and biographical dispersal, the narrator seems to be fixated on an old photograph of three unknown women bathers from the beginning of the twentieth century, an enigmatic image torn away from any specific context. The only clue is that the photograph was taken near the Pakra river, close to the narrator’s birthplace. The narrator takes the photograph everywhere and uses it in her intimate rituals of remembrance. This fetishization of the photo, which may already mark a displacement (being an exile’s surrogate for a loss), could possibly place it at the very core of the text. An especially interesting approach to this novel, that of Ilinca Iuraşcu, defines the position of the photograph as more or less central, as if it were the generator of the narrative: a ‘pivotal element of the Museum’ around which the text ‘will gravitate’; the ‘silence’ of the image will be interrupted within the narrative discourse and insistently counteracted by the language of gendered self-representations.

Nevertheless from another point of view the photo can be just an image, a recurrent one in the album-like arrangement of the text, a trace through which the past might address the viewer and might itself be addressed. At one point, the photograph is called ‘an old yellowing photograph’ in a list of other random bits of memory. The novel allegorized through the exhibited stomach of the walrus – which frames and rearranges the contingent – resists being read as a centred, hierarchical structure. The text evades any centralizing reading, the photograph of the unknown swimmers ‘disappears’ and reappears among other memory-fragments, or in the ekphrastic transcriptions which multiply its readability and (in)accessibility: it is a fetish, but also a laterna magica of textual anamnesis, a context for (textually) exposing other images, just an old yellowing photograph, or the only recurrent (and ‘transportable’) reality in the continuous dislocations of exile.

When the narrator’s mother and her missing photographs are thematized, we might recall Barthes’s Camera Lucida and the way Mitchell comments on it. According to Mitchell, in Barthes’s text the missing and only textually-re recuperated photograph of the mother seems to be placed at the core of the imaginary labyrinth made of all the photographs of the world; the text is a thread that leads to the centre of the labyrinth, which is an absence, a lack, a loss.

With Ugrešić we also have absent, only textually-re recuperated photographs of the mother, who is very much preoccupied with rearranging the family albums, the ‘archives’ of her own past. The constitutive aspect of remembrance is also relevant in the way in which the process of looking at the past and present and anticipating a future is connected to different modalities of identity-construction. The mother’s face and her photographs are figured as sites for practices of identification (and sometimes anxieties), as mirrors returning the narrator’s glimpse from the future, the glimpse of a
future ('older') self, a subject yet-to-be, splitting the sense of presence, oneness and sameness. The absence of the mother’s photograph is also linked to the narrator’s reluctance to take pictures, to the perception of the photograph as an act which prepares the body as a mummified trace – as Bazin would suggest – freezing the temporal existence of the subject into a still, lifeless picture, into absence and 'Death'. When the sick mother asks the narrator to take a picture of her, the latter is terrified by the thought that it would be her last photograph. Through the lens of the camera she watches her mother, a helpless prey, and is afraid of pressing the shutter to take a picture, which could bring the loss of the mother by preparing for or multiplying her absence. The camera is conceptualized by the latent metaphor of the weapon, as the lens of death, producing a picture and/but erasing a subject. The desire to preserve the body as a photographic trace is overcome by the anxiety that the photo will become a memorial image irrespective of any intentionality that produced it.

Recurrent as they may be, in Ugrčić’s text none of the visual or textual fragments can acquire the position that encapsulates all the others in the rhetoric of reading: the exhibition of the stomach of the walrus as a meta-discursive frame encourages not the trope of the labyrinth with a centre (even if that is an absence) but rather the pattern of collage in which the text does not lead the reader on a trajectory like Ariadne’s thread; a collage with multiple nodes in which the old yellowing photograph and the absent photos of the mother intersect with other texts or textually (re)constructed images.

Rewriting the ‘fetish’

The old yellowing photograph on the cover of the book is thematized several times, in various allusions or in two almost identical ekphrastic transcriptions. In both texts, the photograph is referred to as a ‘little fetish object’, and this is related to the way in which it is used by the narrator. In theoretical discourses on photography there seems to be a kind of overlapping in the conceptualization of this medium: one might notice the recurrence of certain features, such as fetishizing fragmentation, metonymy, cut, rupture, displacement, lack or absence. In Bazin’s realistic reading, the photograph is conceptualized as an act of mummifying time, for Sontag photos are memento mori or a ‘thin slice’20 of time and space, Barthes also relates it to lack, absence, death and a missing mother, and Mitchell, commenting on Said and Mohr (especially on the latter’s photographs about anonymous Palestinian exiles), observes that ‘photography re-doubles the exile of image from referent’.28

However, naming the photograph through the concept of the fetish is also likely to invoke psychoanalytic, Marxist and feminist discourses on fetishization. Relying on such discourses, Iurașcu rightfully observes that the photograph is the site for the fragmentation and fetishization of the female
body, for its reduction to an ‘item of visual inspection and exchange’ by a phallocentric scopic regime, as well as a site for reifying gendered, racial, national otherness within hegemonic power relations. Still – according to Iuraşcu – photography can be read in a subversive way by incorporating the image into a linguistic framework through commentary and caption. This is how ‘the photographic image may be allowed to “speak”, (…) and therefore to do away with the confines of “silence”, “death” and “absence” which have been shown to define the feminine subject within the phallocentric scopic regime’. We can completely agree with Iuraşcu that we should understand identity, memory, image and ideology in terms of technological constructedness, which opens them up to contestation. Nevertheless, she assigns the capacity of contesting, subverting the ideologically inscribed photo only to language and discourse, and seems to preserve to some extent the ideological pattern of dualistic oppositions in which the image is essentialized as static, silent, ideologically-fixed, feminine and lacking agency, whereas language is connected to voice, temporality, agency, intervention and the capability of subversion. Such an approach might play down the potentiality of photographs and albums to ‘intervene’ in the text as themes, representational frames and gaps, textual ‘clicks’ or mutable snapshot-like descriptions within a constant textual (!) displacement towards a medial ‘other’.

Photography and the photo/graphic: reading, looking at and diving into the picture

Ugrešić’s text on the old photograph (and photography in general) outlines certain ways in which the narrator uses the image, as well as the way her gaze adopts the perspective of the camera-eye. In the narrator’s scopic experience the photo is not reduced to a single (fetishizing) use: sometimes it is a ‘little fetish object’ whose real meaning is not known, a piece of material which keeps returning in the displacements of exile; sometimes it is an enigmatic, seductive image, or a laterna magica for unleashing memory-work: ‘like a lamp lit in a murky window, a heartening secret gesture with which I draw pictures out of indifferent whiteness’.

In the ekphrastic description, when the photo is ‘read’ as a picture, the narrator tries to ‘decipher’ it by applying historical and iconographic pretexts and codes: she recognizes (through discursive knowledge) the four gourds as old-fashioned swimming rings and sees the shape of the women’s arms as wings. The photo seems to be read through the iconography of the angel (the angel of history or that of oblivion), a recurrent trope in the text which also echoes the reminiscences of Wim Wenders, Walter Benjamin, Rilke and Klee, as well as allusions to Christian tradition. However, the conceptual indeterminacy of the photograph as a kind of unsettling silence cannot entirely be broken, it seems to resist utterance. At one point, the
narrator enunciates (only) what is not there, what does not appear as an attempt to preserve a gap, a void—namely, the absent, invisible something the women seem to be waiting for: ‘Around them hovers an oniric haze full of restrained light. They seem to be expecting something. For some reason I am certain that what they are expecting is not the click of the camera.’

The women’s look (‘expecting something’) undoes the frame of the photograph and exposes the act of taking pictures as decontextualization, as ripping out from a temporal and spatial continuum. The ekphrastic remediations of the photo might work in this way as never fully completed attempts to reread, recontextualize the image and invest it with meaning. But just as the women hide their hands in the photograph, something remains ripped away, unsaid and unsettling, in excess to meaning or to the readable. This may be somewhat similar to the way in which Barthes’s punctum or wound in photography touches the viewer by eluding or disturbing its studium, its culturally coded and intelligible meaning.

In the use of the photograph as a means for exposing different images from or of the past, the photograph cracks and is looked through (and not looked at) as a medium of anamnesis: the narrator’s gaze searches a temporal and spatial fissure, ‘a hidden passage’ to step out of linear or historical time and homogeneous space into the multidirectionality of memory.

The narrator’s scopic experience is described not only as a self-interpreting, self-inspecting, critical practice, but also as a self-effacing, immersive process, a surrender to the image. This is articulated in expressions that make the direction and the activity of the gaze indeterminate: ‘attracts my attention, hypnotically’, ‘stare at it’, ‘not thinking about anything’, ‘dive into them’, ‘plunge attentively into’ and ‘slip’. Ambivalence also persists in the way the photograph is dealt with throughout the text: aside from the more theoretical-essayistic, sometimes even too-perspectively self-reflective, demystifying practice of thematizing photography, there is also a more amateur, naïve, non-professional surrender to the seductive power of the oneiric, enigmatic old photograph. The narrator admits that she has no rational explanation for carrying this photo everywhere. She also makes a distinction between photographic ‘amateurism’ and ‘professionalism’: the advantage of the former over the latter is contained in the point of indistinct pain, pain which an amateur work (like extrasensory perception) can touch and thus provoke the same reaction in the observer/reader.

This process of losing one’s sense of self, of giving up to the (power of the) image, is somewhat similar to Barthes’s approach in which he disclaims a more professional, scientific, critical discourse in order to recuperate something from the magic of photography through being touched, attracted, wounded by the picture.

However, the desire to dissolve the medium and immerse in some memory behind it, is continually counterbalanced by multiple framing, by disclosing the act of mediation: the photo placed in a window frame (‘in the left-hand corner of the window, where the end of the lake can be seen’) is exposed
as a result of mediation and framing – a static, black-and-white square interrupting the continuity of the moving image of the lake which is itself an already framed, pre-mediated sight. The photograph as a requisite of exile transforms shifting contexts and is transformed by them.

The oscillation between the (cultural) readability of the photo and its unreadable wound-like, absorbing effect between its studium and punctum might also be observed (in a different sense) in the way the narrator’s voice continually alternates between a more critical, self-reflexive, distancing discourse exposing its own fabricated, ideological aspect (Was is Kunst? is a recurrent question) and a more intimate, confessional, immersive way of recounting the past.

**Remediation, discursive remedy or the (critical) intervention of the image?**

Conceptualizing the photograph as fetish does not automatically position the working of language as subversive and contesting, but rather as a dialectical relation, in which the image can also elude or (actively) intervene in verbal discourse. The narrator calls the photograph ‘a little fetish object’, which might position it as a substitute for the loss in what she considers to be the ‘neurosis’ of exile. Elizabeth Grosz asks in *Lesbian Fetishism* what the difference is ‘between the psychotic and the fetishist if both share disavowal and a rejection of a piece of reality’.

She concludes that the difference ‘seems to lie in the opposition between hallucination and substitution’ as far as the absent reality is concerned. In this instance, the narrator who uses the photograph as a fetish does not (cannot) hallucinate the presence of a lost reality, but continually substitutes and displaces it in the process of the desire to return. Or, as Edward Said notes in his comments on the photographs of Palestinian exiles: ‘You learn to transform the mechanics of loss into a constantly postponed metaphysics of return’.

The dialectical relation between photograph and text cannot be exhausted by the discursive, ‘voiced’ deconstruction of the (fetishizing) photographic representation. Iuraşcu’s most challenging approach seems to assign agency, voice and deconstructive potential only to language and discourse: ‘the death of the image allows for the emergence of narrative re/collection’ and ‘the photograph gains a voice which speaks “in memories” and therefore disrupts the silence imposed by the camera eye’. In this interpretation the critical, active, temporal aspect of speech, discourse and narration might seem to be overemphasized as opposed to the so-called static, freezing, fixating aspect of the (photographic) image which is unable to speak for itself. Language is conceptualized not only in terms of remediation but rather as a kind of remedy to the ideological constraints imposed by the photograph: it is words and discourse that contest the reifying representations of the past, the female body and the subject.
However, from a different point of view, photography also seems to ‘intervene’ in discourse, sometimes even in a quite ‘visible’ way: the text transcribes photographic techniques of image-making, often giving up narrative linearity and inserting textual clicks and interruptions; it performs a multidirectional memory-work which invokes the representational framework of albums, museums, artistic installations, flee-markets and collage. The narrator’s gaze often appropriates the perspective of the camera in ‘taking’ textual pictures, exposing the medial awareness and the constitutive aspect of the point of view and of framing, as well as the contextualizing, mediating role of other pictures and texts (present and past) in the act of perception and image-making. Thus the description of three women bathing in the Adriatic in the narrator’s present is related to the photograph of the three women from the beginning of the twentieth century: the depiction of the scene is already ‘photo/graphic’, produced by an ‘inner click’ through the ‘lens’ of the yellowing photograph. This textual snapshot produced through the memory of a picture could be read in-between discursive and pictorial frames: it produces a short, cut-out, mutable fragment in the text, the action is freeze-framed by a click, and but the words ‘click’ and ‘record’ are the medial metaphors of the act of writing. Thus we cannot reduce the image-text relations to the one-way appropriation, subversion and voicing of the image by the text. The slash in ‘photo/graphic’ would signal a split within discourse, a textual displacement towards a medial ‘other’, as well as the modality in which the text transcribes photographic techniques figuratively, producing and erasing the signs of their ‘presence’.

By citing the poetics of the album and photography, the text is cut up into fragments, whose arrangement allows for exchangeability and fluid structures. Whether it is the self or history to be narrated, the text works as an open, rearrangeable archive. Being traversed by the white, unfilled lines of interruption, it remains critical towards the concept of any homogeneous, exclusive, self-sufficient historical truth. One of Iurașcu’s most relevant conclusions is that ‘the “productive look” can act as a trigger for the resurgence of “othered”, marginal hi/stories which have been “muted” by the discourses of dominant ideologies’.47

The narration of the past displays – often through the absent lens of the camera or through the poetics of photography and albums – an awareness of its own partial, mediated and mediating aspect and also of the ‘plural’ realities it tries to recount. In Part III the eight friends’ stories named after tarot cards suggest an understanding of history, of personal and collective past in which different truths can be asserted simultaneously. The non-hierarchical working of collage or the continually rearranged albums and cards as strategies of relativization do not remove the problem of truth (and, consequently, falsehood) from the scene, but necessarily multiply it and expose it as relational, constructed and open to negotiation. Such problems are also addressed by contemporary theories of historiography, which,
according to Gábor Gyáni, do not abandon the problem of distinguishing truth and falsehood (this being related to the specific status of historiography within other collective practices of remembrance), but accept the fact that different truths can be affirmed simultaneously.48

The textual anamnesis, alternating between self-reflective, critical distance and immersive proximity, makes collages and albums rather than unambiguous judgements; it scatters the fragments of life-stories through collages, albums and snapshots whose ‘silence’ may nevertheless ‘speak’ for itself. The text does not complete a synthesis of heterogeneous memories; rather, it struggles with something which might (still) be outside the representable. Even if the narrator calls this something a ‘still verifiable’49 reality, she does not transform the verifiable into an explanatory narrative, into ‘the story of the local apocalypse’.50 If, in Mohr’s photographs ‘photography re-doubles the exile of image from referent’51, then in The Museum of Unconditional Surrender (photo/graphic) anamnesis – which produces a sense of otherness about the past – redoubles the exile of the remembering subject from her memories, making it difficult, if not impossible, to feel ‘at ease, at home (heimlich) in the enjoyment of the past revived’.52

Coda

The image–text relations in the text call for an understanding of intermediality in which the question of medial difference and aporetical tension (between and within media) is not necessarily settled. Therefore, the present essay does not attempt to straighten out the dialectical, equivocal rhetoric of the photo/graphic image/text. Neither does it try to reinforce the ideological opposition between a silent, static inert image and a temporal, voicing, empowering discourse. Rather, it places the problem back into the allegorical stomach of the walrus. Just like the ‘ready-made’ in that unusual collage, image and text may relate to each other in multiple and unpredictable ways, and at the same time may intersect with other questions: the different modalities of the subject’s (self)constitution and (self)effacement; the discursive and medial conditions of reminiscence, of historiographic and biographic representation; the contingency of photographic and linguistic archives; the multidirectional and medially heterogeneous work of remembrance. A non-totalizing (intermedial) approach should not necessarily reconcile but rather enter the ‘image/text’ aporia and trace the continuous dislocations of discursive and pictorial frames.

Notes

2. Whether this text can be read as autobiographical – a possibility apparently ‘discouraged’ in the text but, consequentially, foregrounded as a problem – would be a relevant question to ask, but it is beyond the limits of this essay.


4. Photographs not only ‘archive’ the past, but may also erase it: the framing act of photography also performs an exclusion, a rubbing out of what has been excluded: ‘I tried to remember something else, but my memories stayed tenaciously fixed on the contents of the photographs’: Ugrešić (1999) The Museum of Unconditional Surrender, p. 24.


8. Ibid., p. 83.

9. Ibid., p. 89.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 3.


24. Ibid., pp. 4, 169.


30. Ibid., p. 10.


32. Ibid., pp. 169–70.

33. Ibid., p. 170.

36. Ibid., pp. 4, 169.
37. Ibid., p. 28.
40. Ibid., p. 113.
42. Ibid., p. 109.
50. Ibid.
13
The Dance of Intermediality: Attempt at a Semiotic Approach of Medium Specificity and Intermediality in Film

Hajnal Király

During the centuries following the Italian Renaissance, numerous philosophers, theologians, literary men and artists found it necessary to delimitate poetic and visual arts, and, accordingly, to establish an accurate hierarchy of them. Intriguingly enough, this comparative tradition has persisted after the advent of the film, considered from the beginning – although pejoratively – a ‘mixed art’. The long-lived textual era, though it managed to level the differences between different arts by imposing a universal terminology and interpretation methodology (considering all works of art as simply texts, that is, as readable sign systems), mostly provided close readings of isolated texts, without attempting to place them in a wider, cultural and specific sign system, characteristic for different arts or media. As Mitchell puts it in his *Picture Theory*, the ‘pictorial turn’ has engendered

‘a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality. It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.), and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality’.

There is instead – we could add with Murray Krieger – an increased preoccupation with the socio-cultural-political *subtext* of works of art. Moreover, the late twentieth century witnessed the overturning of the classical narrative of art history (with, among others’, A. C. Danto’s subversive essays on ‘the end of art’). Different arts are no longer simply responding external theories, recipes, discourses, manifestos, illustrations of what they then become, but they tend to be *the discourses themselves*, and, most importantly *on themselves, their own mediality or/and intermediality*. Marshall McLuhan’s famous utterance ‘the medium is the message’ has never been this actual: the
medium is not only mediating, holding the message, but it is the message (of) itself.

Beginning with the 1990s, two powerful cinematographic trends have addressed— from various institutional backgrounds—the problem of medium specificity and intermediality in films: the so-called ‘writer’s movies’\(^4\) and the contemplative, extremely slow-paced, movies, mostly coming from the Far East, defying all complex narratological accomplishments of the film-medium. The writer’s movies, many of them from the popular and ‘midcult’ register—for example, Shakespeare in Love (John Madden 1996), Quills (Philip Kaufman 2000), Adaptation (Spike Jonze 2003), Topsy-Turvy (Mike Leigh 1999), A Cock and a Bull Story (Michael Winterbottom 2005)—represent writing and observing (spectatorship) as complementary and reciprocally conditioning activities. We are often seeing the writer struggling to write the story we are watching; or, conversely, we are witnessing the effort of a director to mediate between the writer and spectators. This is no longer simply a ‘self-reflective’, stylistically identifiable feature (formerly an exclusive characteristic of arthouse movies), but a mediatic gesture of self-awareness: both the writer and director are stepping over the limits of their own medium to satisfy the expectation of their spectators. Film does not need to define itself as ‘art’ anymore—the urge to delimitate itself from other arts, to prove its representational competence has expired. Instead it regards itself as a medium, inseparable—as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it in his Picture Theory—from its socio-cultural, institutional background and foreground, its spectators and the various discourses of spectatorship.\(^5\) This accentuated self-awareness, which deals with its own intermediality or mixed mediality (so ferociously attacked by the long lasting comparative tradition of ut pictura poesis . . .), is systematically overturning the strict delimitation between literature and film along with the idea of conceptuality of the first and visuality of the latter. In fact, the conceptuality of film has found defenders from the very beginnings of its history (the avant-gardes, Russian film theories, the Nouvelle Vague, the semiologic approach and, lately, the cognitive theory of David Bordwell\(^6\))—but this time the ‘meaning making’ is often happening (is being modelled) in the film diegesis itself.

The huge amount of visually extremely rich movies coming from the Far East, with their intensely chronotopic imagery and slow-paced, minimalistic narrative, on the other hand, continuously turn the ‘running time’ of the narrative into ‘space’, a static, ‘plastic’ visual work of art: a picture (for example, Zhang Ke Jia: Still Life, 2006). This is already an intermedial relationship involving film and painting: we are watching the film as we contemplate a painting, ‘scanning’ and ‘making meaning’ of all the details included in the frame. These versions of intermediality in films—the self-conscious inclusion of literary and painterly modalities—are not loudly proclaimed as they once were in the form of manifestos, as with isolated works of Jean-Luc Godard or Peter Greenaway, but appear as naturally integrated in films with the latest, avant-garde institutional backgrounds, belonging already to the everyday
experience of the film medium. Films have become our medium, our 'natural environment'. This is partly due to the 'nature' of the medium: as Joachim Paech puts it in his medium–form comparison, the medium is not observable in itself, only the form is, and the medium appears in whatever form it makes possible. 'The medium can only be observed in its Other'. Its disappearance aids the other's emergence, in which it participates in a 'parasitic way'. He continues:

The only possibility to reach the medium behind the form consists in self-observation of the observation and the re-entry of the medium as form or as a back link, in which mediality as the constitutive difference in the oscillation between medium and form becomes observable as the 'parasitic third', whose background noise renders the event of the difference, thus, the message, perceptible and comprehensible.\textsuperscript{7}

However, as already mentioned above, the 'noise' made by this parasitic third, the medium or the 'intrusion' of another medium, is becoming less and less perceptible: the 'surprising' forms of montage, superimpositions, framing techniques or sound-effects are now common characteristics for any film register – popular, midcult or arthouse movie. Instead, the film medium tends to appear in the complete lack of these learned or technological features – or, according to Paech's terminology, in the 'breaks, gaps and intervals' of the form: extreme (narratological) minimalism, uncomfortably long shots and almost complete lack of dialogue. Together with this obvious return to its origins – considered a sign of maturity by Rudolf Arnheim and Erwin Panofsky, among others – along with a growing interest in cultural and post-colonial studies, film is also acquiring an increased socio-cultural responsibility. It is showing, unmasking, symbolically representing cultural, social, political reality. These minimalist movies rely on the aesthetics of the frame, instead of that of the cut, and the changed role of the spectator consists of 'scanning' and interpreting the signs and symbols it contains. It is a more active form of spectatorship: a continuous effort of meaning-making instead of losing ourselves in a perfect diegesis. We become increasingly aware of the presence of the medium and our role as spectators. The – almost forgotten – semiotic analysis appears to gain relevance in the interpretation of these symbols, but, this time, it is strongly related to cultural discourses of the film as medium. As Marc Laverette argues in his contribution to Image and Narrative,\textsuperscript{8} the necessity of a discipline embracing both semiotic and medium theory principles – a so-called 'semiotic mediatics' – has never been so actual. The delay of this merger is possibly due to the fact that, with the emergence of medium theory, semiotics is already considered exhausted and old-fashioned:

Medium theorists need to incorporate semiotics into their paradigm to fully exploit, for content and the overarching importance of meaning.
And while medium theory needs semiotics to better understand the signs of life, semioticians need medium theory in order to better understand the ‘allness’ of our signified environment.

Below I attempt a semiotic analysis, going beyond close textual reading, of Hungarian director Béla Tarr’s adaptation of Satan’s Tango (1994). This seven-and-a-half hour long film merges both trends mentioned above; the writer’s movie, raising the issue of film–literature relationship and of the adaptation, and the slow-paced, contemplative trend incorporating the painterly tradition. Interestingly enough, in this ménage à trois or complex intermedial relationship, the painting mediates between the other two: the aesthetics of the frame, chronotopes such as the perspective, the circle, the interior–exterior (house and road) opposition and the threshold, are all transmediatic symbols which reconcile mediatic differences between literature and film. This approach, using Greimas’s semiotic square model, aims to contribute to the methodology of analysing medium specificity and mixed medium or intermediality, in the spirit of an old or new discipline: semiotic mediations.

Defining (inter)mediality: the tango metaphor

As often happens at the very beginning of a new theory or discipline, metaphors fill the gap of a missing terminology: early film theory is crowded with musical, painterly and architectural metaphors meant to grasp the ‘essence’ of the new medium. Similarly, intermediality has been described as a ‘dialogue’, ‘in-between-ness’, ‘translation’, ‘oscillation’ or ‘flickering’ between the involved media. As we know from W. J. T. Mitchell, there are always at least two media involved, for every medium is mixed by nature.

Béla Tarr’s adaptation raises a series of issues related to mediality, medium specificity, limits and limitations of media, medium experience and intermediality, the boundaries of media involved in adaptations, challenging classical oppositions such as spatiality–temporality, or perceptual–conceptual. Accordingly, the ‘tango’ or ‘dance’ metaphor from the title can be regarded not only as a thematic, but also, at the same time, as an extended theoreic figure. As a thematic figure, it interprets the hesitation of the characters to step out from their lethargic environment (an abandoned farm) which keeps them prisoner, and from the moral devaluation presented in the brughelian dance party just before the devilish pact with the false prophet (another possible meaning of ‘Satan tango’).

As a theoretical figure it presents, first of all, the experience of the medium as a dance of the spectator. Satan’s Tango crosses the conventional, institutional boundaries of the medium by exposing the viewer to a contradictory medium experience: at the beginning, the low-key images and an extremely slow camera movement make it difficult to watch, increasing the awareness
of our physical reality and body; then there is a gradual absorption due to
the hypnotic pace – or dance – of camera movement. We forget about our
body, being here as spectators of the movie and then in-there, as one of the
film’s observing characters. We continuously step in and step out, engaged in a
tango between the film diegesis and our reality. The camera itself engages in
a continuous oscillation between stasis and slow movement, a tango which
emphasizes the spatio-temporality of the film medium. Moreover, due to its
unusual length, the film is screened with three intervals, and the screen-
ing room along with the entire institutional apparatus (a small art-movie
theatre in Budapest, which had Satan’s Tango on its weekly program) thus
becomes a ‘frame’, enabling us to step out to our reality, and then back to
this overwhelming medium experience. In this film, the strong presence of
the medium overflows the form and appears, as Joachim Paech puts it, as a
parasitic third, a noise disabling the creation of a perfect illusionary world.
The form processes are continuously interrupted by breaks, gaps caused
by the extremely long shots and slow camera movements. Moreover, our
motionless bodies in the dark screening room are perfect analogies of those
of the characters who are sitting in the dark interiors, staring helplessly at
the window, the only source of light.

Then, there is another dance: the film, as an adaptation of Laszlo Krasznahorkai’s homonymous novel,10 also marks a relevant mediatic turn, another
border-crossing, strongly connected to the socio-political changes induced
by the fall of the communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc. Krasznahorkai’s
acclaimed novel appeared in 1987, shortly before the events of 1989, and it
thematizes, among other things, the ultimate responsibility of the writer to
document the events witnessed. In the iconophobic era of communism, in
which all images of reality were banned except those that were constructed,
writing and literature became the medium able to confront the interdiction,
in this case disguised in a parable about a group of people forgotten on a
farm, waiting for the arrival of a false prophet, who then takes them to the
town and turns them into informers for the secret police.

Tarr was immediately interested in adapting the novel, but it took him
almost eight years to realize this project, partly due to a lack of institutional
and material support persisting after the change of the political regime. Turn-
ing the parable into the reality of film images, shot on an abandoned farm,
thus using the medium as an unveiling manifesto, Tarr was one of the first
film directors in Hungary to take a position towards the recent past and the
present. As a film, Satan’s Tango became as thoroughly intertwined with the
socio-political message of its time as had the novel. The medium is the mes-
 sage: it mirrors the most actual preoccupations, needs and aspirations of its
time. The message is not only the content: it is identical with the inseparable
unity of form and content.

While the novel thematized the responsibility of writing, its adaptation
reflectively represents the observer, spectator and director. Moreover, and
most excitingly, the emblematic positions of the writer and director, repre-
senting the two different media, are here melded in the character of
the doctor. This proves to be a self-reflective gesture, which mirrors the
intentional annihilation of medium borders in this adaptation. The doctor
switches deliberately from observing or watching (not surprisingly, the only
point-of-view shots in the film are his) to taking notes. Watching or obser-
vying and writing or reading are shown as complementary activities: in this
respect, his name – ‘the doctor’ – (we know all the names of the other char-
acters) appears to be symbolic, as he is ‘healing’ the old aversions between
poesis and visual arts. This constant stepping back and forth or intermed-
iality as a dance or tango is, at the same time, a figurative representation of
the relationship between the writer Krasznahorkai and the film-director in
making this film. In this respect, this adaptation is more than a simple case
of what Joachim Paech calls material intermediality – a technical transpo-
sition – but is also a symbolic one, due to this double representation (the
picture shows itself), or mise en abyme. On the other hand, we see the doc-
tor writing the novel, the adaptation of which the film is: a reinforcement
of Marshall McLuhan’s principle that the old medium is always becoming the
content of the new one.

A further gesture denies a delimitation of the two media involved, and
thus excludes the ‘ut pictura poesis’ comparative method: nothing in the
film’s credentials alludes to adaptation or to any transformational works
undergone. Moreover, the writer of the original novel appears, along with
Ágnes Hranitzky and director Bálla Tarr, as the author of the movie. This
gesture overtly replaces the notion of the author, related to the concept
of artwork, with that of author function, defined by Barthes and Foucault:
this function, instead of granting the integrity of one specific text – the
novel or the film – is responsible for the connections between different
texts, and ensures the functioning and status of a discursive set in a given
society and culture.11 It is the principle of cohesion in an intertextual
web. Thus, this collective authorship participates in a collective, intermedial
‘meaning-making’.

Another tango: space and time, description and narration
in the novel

Lászlo Krasznahorkai’s novel already challenges the limits of the poetic
medium and its temporality due to an original approach to description and
narration. The central narrative feature of Satan’s Tango is the ‘fight’ between
these two: the world of silent, static objects is repeatedly overtaking that
of human action, which freezes all the time into stasis. The kitchen is set-
ing off, like a car, and the silent objects around the protagonists suddenly
start a nervous dialogue. The temporality of poetry and all literature, so
ferociously defended by the classic discourse of ut pictura poesis seems to
be overturned by this kind of narrative, celebrating the spatial effect of the freezing movement and the temporary extension of the description.

The floating character of the rigorously detailed description and the tendency of the action to freeze in a tableau vivant is characteristic of what literary criticism calls – in connection with the work of Gabriel García Márquez – ‘magic realism’, often cited as reference for the narrative style of Lászlo Krasznahorkai. This magic realism appears as an uncanny fusion between the preference for detail and materialism of the nineteenth-century narrative and the visionary images of the ancient myths. On this basis the narrative of Satan’s Tango may be called chronotopic: the transmediatic notion of the bakhtinian chronotope is a concrete, substantial unity of spatial and temporal characteristics. Time becomes form and space extends into a temporal continuity, space and time become reflections of each other. The characteristics of time are revealed by space and vice versa, space is measured and filled with content by time. The house, the threshold, the road are considered typically chronotopic, transmediatic forms, susceptible to such narrative categories as strange world, public life, encounter, time of adventure and such semantic contents as knowledge, power and desire. In Satan’s Tango, the mobility of characters is reduced to the house (the space of the observer) where they sit all day long, watching ‘how the damned life goes on’ and the muddy road (space of action), flowing away as a river (of time) after the autumn rains, makes it impossible to leave the house. Thus, the moving, acting character is replaced here by the observer, who participates, as Greimas puts it in his structural semantics, in the ‘spectacle of knowledge’. The News that They are Coming, Knowing Something, The Perspective, when from the Front, The Perspective, when from Behind, The Circle Closes – as these titles from the table of contents of the novel show, news and knowledge become central semantic contents, together with the chronotopic perspective, a major compositional element from the time of Renaissance painting (in which spatial and temporal aspects are intertwined) and also a symbolic form to express longing and desire.

**Reading out the picture: ‘meaning making’ in the film**

In Tarr’s film, perspective becomes a symbolic correspondent to the semantic content of knowing something, ‘thinking in perspective’, making plans or longing. Accordingly, all roads in the film are represented in perspective and the characters moving on them are shown from behind, except for the last trip of the doctor to the church, when we see him coming back, from the front, as he refuses to leave the farm: the circle closes.

The house and the road also become basic chronotopic components of a systematic language, as different frames – windows, doors, thresholds – and ‘liminas’ between interior spaces and exterior world, powerful visual symbols expressing the protagonists’ cognitive modalities, their ability to ‘see
through’ (that is, to understand their situation) and, consequently, to ‘step through’ (to change their lives). Through these visual elements all specific mediatic features such as the role of point-of-view in literary and film narration seem to dissolve into a more general language of visual media and visual anthropology. Thus, the semantic contents of understanding and power are not connected to the points-of-view of certain characters, but are represented through their relationship to frames and thresholds. This pictorial convention is represented, for example, by seventeenth-century Dutch painting, one of the most prominent examples being the series by Pieter de Hooch, showing the relationship of different characters of the household (a child, a maid) and to the outer world, in accordance with contemporary social codes. As Wolfgang Kemp has demonstrated, this convention is already present in the works of Giotto and his contemporaries.14 Similarly, in Satan's Tango, the characters' relationships to frames or thresholds represents their ability or inability to understand the satanic plan of Irinimas (allusion to prophet Jeremiah) and, accordingly, to step out of this trap.

Greimas's semiotic square seems to be a model capable of systematizing these different attitudes, which are responsible for the dramatic turns in the plot. This model, as well as the actantial system, is organized around the key notions of 'knowledge', 'power' and 'desire', and explores the 'meaning of human actions' and 'how man and the world are'. Claude Gandelman, in his Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts uses the semiotic square to demonstrate the cognitive and passage modalities identifiable in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings.15 According to this model, the distribution of the characters on the semiotic square 'to be able to see (through)' would be as illustrated in Figure 12.

![Figure 12](image-url)

Similarly, the semiotic square of passage modalities would appear as follows: ‘To be able to pass’ or freedom (Irimias, the doctor, Futaki, Essie after her flight from home), ‘to be able not to pass’ or independence (the Doctor and Essie), ‘to be not able not to pass’ or obedience (the Schmidts, the Halics family, the teacher, Essie on the no man’s land) and ‘to be not able to pass’ or powerlessness (Essie on the no man’s land and the farm’s inhabitants before their exodus) (see Figure 13).

This model not only ensures a categorization of different attitudes, but it is also able to draw the turning points of the narration, which, according to its classical definition, always has to include development. As depicted here, the majority of characters remain blindly obedient (unable not to see and not to step out, or more precisely, even though they step out in the end, nothing changes), while the diabolic freedom of the false prophets and the independence of the outsider doctor remain unchanged. Intriguingly, the only development occurs in the case of Essie, the little girl considered mentally disabled: she manages to step out from her obedient position and gain her independence and absolute freedom through suicide and a miraculous ascension, but this narration is cut short by the middle of both the novel and the film. This is as if to emphasize that narrativity is not an inherent specificity of the film medium, but a learned one. The tension is not created on the level of the story, but is due to a continuous struggle between action (connected to the road) and observation (associated with the house), narration and description, and (de)monstration. The drama of hesitation – Satan’s Tango – is not only that of characters, but evidently that of the ‘two faces’ of the medium: showing (or opening a window to) reality (the documentary tradition established by the Lumière brothers) and telling a story, creating a diegesis, the illusion, the magic of another world often associated with the pioneering work of Méliès. The film chooses the ‘descriptive mode’, thus creating or modelling a visionary world. According to Panofsky, the visionary has been drawn into images by perspective: ‘Perspective seals off religious art from the realm of the
magical, dogmatic and symbolic and opens it to something entirely new: the realm of the visionary, where the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder; to the realm of psychological, the miraculous finds its last refuge in the soul of the human being represented in the work of art.”

At the end of the film the doctor sets off to find out whether the bell he hears ringing is real or just an illusion. This can be conceived of as another statement in favour of the reality paradigm of film theory: films exist – as other works by Tarr exemplify – to show and document reality, not to create an illusion of it. After his return to the house (the place of observation) we see him boarding up the window: the fact that the closing of the window marks the end of the film, presents the medium as another frame erected between us and reality, enabling or not enabling us to see through – the old question of the medium transparency – or to pass into its diegetic world. Again, as Panofsky puts it in his Perspective as symbolic form, it is the perspective that transformed the entire picture into a window, ‘and we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into a space’. At the same time, this scene metaphorically reinforces the inseparability of the media involved in the adaptation.

Intermediality here appears as a space of close interaction between the writer and director, resulting in a transmediatic chronotopic language, the only kind adequate to present a parable on the human condition. This transmediatic chronotopic and symbolic language has been realized with the involvement of codes from a third medium: painting (such as composition, framing, perspective). As I already mentioned above, this is not an isolated tendency in contemporary film production, especially if we consider the wave of films coming from China, Korea, Hong Kong and Japan, currently conquering European cinemas. Their narratological minimalism and visual elegance – reminding us of the best tradition of European film (the work of Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrej Tarkovskij) – brings a refreshing new view to an exhausted Western production. This seems to reinforce the principle that the return to the beginnings is a sign of maturity of any art, already independent from the necessity to show technological competence. Similarly, the concept of medium is no longer reduced to technology. As Erwin Panofsky summarizes in his essay on perspective:

Such reversals, which are often associated with a transfer of artistic ‘leadership’ to a new country or a new genre, create the possibility of a new edifice out of the rubble of the old; they do this precisely by abandoning what has been already achieved, that is, by turning back to apparently more ‘primitive’ modes of representation. These reversals lay the groundwork for a creative reengagement with older problems, precisely by establishing a distance from those problems.”
This observation coincides with Rudolf Arnheim's prophetic conclusion of his desperate essay 'New Laokoon', on the incompatibility of film and sound: as these 'hybrid' forms are always unstable, there is always a hope of returning to 'pure forms'. As we have seen, the second century of cinema has proven itself promising in terms of 'mediatic purification'. Narratology tends to lose terrain, and the need of a semiotic mediatics has never been more urgent.

Notes


5. I am not dealing here separately with the technical aspects of the medium, as I consider it thoroughly intertwined with the aesthetical, cultural and sociological ones. In fact, all technical improvements (the colour, the size of the screen, the television) have added new aesthetical dimensions to the film. As I point out in my essay, film often tends to 'deny' its technical specificity (often identified with 'medium specificity') by turning towards the conventions of other media, such as painting or photography. Interestingly enough, in this case, the lack of learned conventions becomes a qualifying factor.


17. See ibid., p. 27.

18. Ibid., p. 47.

14
Media in the Cinematic Imagination: Ekphrasis and the Poetics of the In-Between in Jean-Luc Godard’s Cinema

Ágnes Pethő

A love of cinema desires only cinema, whereas passion is excessive: it wants cinema but it also wants cinema to become something else, it even longs for the horizon where cinema risks being absorbed by dint of metamorphosis, it opens up its focus onto the unknown.

—Serge Daney: The Godard Paradox¹

Intermediality, the cinematic ‘in-between’ and ekphrasis

The complex mediality of cinema is unique among all other arts in its paradoxes and raises a constant challenge not only to theorists who try to define its characteristics but also to filmmakers who consciously explore its boundaries. On the one hand, cinema is the most transparent or ‘invisible’ medium possible, operating with moving pictures that result in the illusion of reality (we seem to see the things themselves and not their representation), and engaging all our senses in their perception. On the other hand, it is also the most abstract and constructed medium possible that has no palpable material form (all the sensual complexity of the cinematic image being nothing but an illusion). More importantly, from a media theory point of view, the moving picture as a medium can remediate all other media forms used by human communication. The mixed mediality of cinema – although it has often been described in terms of the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal – is not a result of an additive process (a unity of moving pictures, language, sound and so on), but consists of a very unstable set of interrelationships that has undergone many changes in its configuration throughout its technical and stylistic history.²

Cinematic experience itself can be defined by the tensions of being in a state of ‘in-between’: in between reality and fantasy, in between empirical
experience and conscious reflection, in between words and images, in between the different art forms and in between media. The mediality of cinema can always be perceived as intermediality, as its meanings are always generated by the media relations that weave its fabric of significations. Cinema can be defined as an impossible, heterotopic space where intermedial processes take place, and where figurations of medial differences are played out. Moreover Foucault’s ‘heterotopia’ seems adequate to describe not only the way in which the images are being situated in a ‘place without place’, but also more generally, to describe cinema’s ‘place’ itself among the arts and media.

Jean-Luc Godard’s films have long been associated with the idea of intermediality, in fact it seems that no theory of cinematic intermediality can be forged without references to his works. Godard has discovered in cinema a ‘space’ in which all other forms of representations can be inscribed and all other media can be re-mediated. In his films images are always closely related to words and cinema is always conceived in a dynamic relation with the other arts, a relation that connects Godard’s cinema to a more general artistic tradition: the phenomenon known as ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis, as we know, is a rhetorical device elaborated in Antiquity consisting in the detailed description of a gallery of paintings or a group of statues, a case where a verbal text is produced in competition with the plastic arts. In essence, it is generally understood to stand for the urge of an artist working in the medium of language to express whatever falls beyond the realm of language, to use linguistic expressivity as a ‘tactile’ or visual sense and thus cross over into the domains of the visible. Ekphrasis has been a much debated question in literature, but its applicability to questions of cinema has not been thoroughly investigated. Nevertheless, in a medium so tied up with all other forms of human expression, questions of media borders are bound to emerge. We can say that certain tendencies in film history undoubtedly have aspects that can be related to what theorists call ‘ekphrastic impulse’, a tendency to challenge cinema’s conventionally established perceptive frames, and therefore it seems that the possibilities of a theory of cinematic ekphrasis are worth exploring. What should be clarified first of all, however, is why this particular term should be taken into consideration, and not the term ‘remediation’ that Bolter and Grusin consider as denoting a very similar process within media relations. W. J. T. Mitchell defines ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’, Bolter and Grusin call it ‘the representation of one medium in another remediation’. Are these two terms interchangeable, as Bolter and Grusin seem to suggest? Mitchell explains quite clearly that there is a possibility of overgeneralizing the term by considering ekphrasis as the name of an overarching principle, and he finally gives a definition that clearly concentrates on the presence of some kind of representation both as signifier (verbal representation) and as signified (visual representation). Bolter and Grusin in their more general
media theoretical framework consider ekphrasis as a case of media being incorporated, repurposed by other media. Taking into consideration both viewpoints, I consider that we should not merge the idea of ekphrasis with the idea of remediation or use the two terms as synonyms, but we should consider them as complementary terms. Given also the fact that the idea of ekphrasis is usually linked more closely not only to the idea of representation but also to the aesthetic value of texts, whenever the relations of cinema and the other arts, or the representations of other arts are involved, the term ‘ekphrasis’ seems more adequate; and whenever we can speak of more general media relations (like the use of written or verbal language within a film, for example), the term ‘remediation’ would be more suitable.

So what would be the main characteristics of a cinematic ekphrasis? Do all artworks represented in a film result in an ekphrasis? When can we consider that film attempts to ‘challenge its own boundaries’? To list only a few important aspects, the following conditions for the relevance of the term ‘cinematic ekphrasis’ can be named:

(a) A film cannot be called ekphrastic simply whenever it includes an embedded representation of another artwork.\(^{10}\) A condition for interpreting it as ekphrasis is that this embedded art form should go beyond the function of a diegetic representation (for example, a painting on the wall) and should be manifest as a medium that is different from that of the cinematic image in which it is embedded. In short, an ekphrasis requires the perception of intermedial relations, as ‘transformative inscriptions’ or ‘figurations’\(^{11}\) of mediality in a work.

(b) Cinema can also be perceived as ekphrastic not merely through the media differences of embedded other media forms, but on a more general level, in any case when cinema explicitly attempts to rival another art form (or style developed in another art form). Expressionist films in which we have the characteristically painted settings would be a good example of such an attempt to transform the moving pictures into a sequence of moving paintings.

(c) One of the most important features of cinematic ekphrasis is that in fact, in cinema, we can usually speak of multiple or multidimensional ekphrastic tendencies in which one medium opens up the cinematic expression in order to mediate towards the ekphrastic assimilation of another. In most of the cases when cinema imitates another art form this imitation is not the primary ‘target’ of an ekphrastic impulse, but a vehicle, a ‘mediator’ towards yet another medium, the essence of which is perceived as something ‘beyond’ concrete expression, something ‘infigurable’. Common examples of this are the so-called ‘picto-films’, which have acquired something of the status of a sub-genre among literary adaptations, and in which a sense of ‘literariness’ is conveyed through imitations of paintings or painterly styles.
An investigation into the ekphrastic aspects of Godard’s films seems to be extremely fruitful, as his films can be considered ekphrastic not merely because they often transpose representations from other arts onto the screen and foreground essential features of cinematic intermediality, but also because some of his films include explicit quotations from ekphrastic literature and thus engage in a multiple or meta-ekphrastic cinematic discourse. In what follows from the variety of intermedial relations that can be connected to the principles of ekphrasis in Godard’s films, I will outline four such types:

1. A multiplication of media layers ‘opening up’ towards each other and remediating each other.
2. Ekphrasis as a ‘figure of oblivion’. Ekphrasis via media erasures.
3. The function of ekphrastic metaphors.
4. The ‘museum of memory’ and the deconstruction of ekphrasis in later works.

The vertigo of media: ekphrasis and *mise en abyme*

In Jean-Luc Godard’s films there are instances of cinematic intermediality in which one medium becomes the mirror of the other in some way. In other words we can speak of an intermedial *mise en abyme*. One of the best known examples of this is Godard’s early masterpiece *Vivre sa vie* (1962, translated as *A Life of her Own/Her Life to Live*) which also includes a direct reference to the ekphrastic tradition itself.

Here, in the final scene, a young man reads out a fragment from Edgar Allen Poe’s short story ‘The Oval Portrait’, which includes an ekphrasis of a painting. Poe’s story is about a man reading a book about a painter painting a portrait of the beloved woman. The story within Godard’s story is also a story within a story. Moreover, the images are over-codified by the voice-over narration (in fact Godard’s own voice). The woman listening to the story of the painting, Nana (Anna Karina) becomes herself virtually a cinematic painting, losing all connections with ‘real life’ just like Poe’s model, whose life is paradoxically stolen away and transformed into the painted image. Throughout the film the protagonist is shown in a Brechtian split between actress (Anna Karina, casting occasional direct glances at the camera, implicitly at her husband-author) and role (Nana). In the ‘Oval Portrait’ sequence we are shown the face of Nana against a blank background, the camera outlining her portrait by nailing her to the wall, rendering her a helpless object of representation. All of this is additionally doubled by the mirror-like presence of a photograph of Liz Taylor pinned to the wall, while Nana herself is ‘painting’ her own lips in a mirror. In earlier sequences in the film, we see her in turn either as a mirror image of Dreyer’s Jeanne D’Arc, or a variation on the topic of ‘lonely courtesan in a Parisian café’ (so famil-
Hitchcock’s enigmatic multiple identity woman in *Vertigo* (1958). Godard’s film foregrounds cinema’s ‘ekphrastic impulse’ which aims at rivalling the other arts by remediating traditional forms of portraiture both in the visual arts and in literature. The embedded representations flaunt cinema’s multiple mediality, but they also result in an endless process of signification, an endless attempt at ‘figurating’ the ‘infigurable’ identity and beauty of Nana/Anna Karina. The ultimate image of Nana/Anna Karina that we get is placed somewhere in an impossible space between art and reality, between one medium and another, and in this way the film offers instead of the images of Nana’s life (as the title would suggest), the paradoxes of the life of the images of Nana/Anna Karina.

Similarly, in other Godard films the numerous reflections of characters in paintings, posters, comic book drawings, genre film iconography, literary figures and so on, can be seen in parallel with the remedial logic of traditional literary ekphrasis.

**Ekphrasis as a ‘figure of oblivion’**

Besides this ekphrastic model of multiple remediations we have several instances in Godard’s films in which quotations from post-Romantic French poetry are used both as a reference to a model for a relationship to cultural heritage that Godard adopts and also a means of infusing cinematic language with poetry. The poets referred to by Godard usually belong to a literary phenomenon that Harald Weinrich described as the ‘art of oblivion’. The traditional ‘art of memory’ (*ars memoria*) present in European culture since Antiquity was based on the principle of preservation of knowledge by way of mnemonic devices of visualization (association of images and places, for instance). In contrast, the poetry included in the ‘art of oblivion’ was mainly concerned with the renewal of poetic language, of finding new ways of reinforcing the power of words. The birth of a new poetic language is often allegorized in the poems of Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé or Valéry in a series of images that emphasize the magic moments of loss of consciousness that break up the process of remembering. Poetry derives its power from purification by way of oblivion paradoxically in the presence of ‘frozen images of the past’. Godard’s *Bande à part* (*A Band of Outsiders*, 1964) and *Pierrot le fou* (*Pierrot Gone Mad*, 1965) are full of quotations from these poets. The cited texts enrich the image and direct our attention towards another medium (poetry), distancing the image from the real life location and weaving around it a texture of pure imagination. There is no break in the pictorial flow, but another verbal picture hovers over the image that we actually see. The scenes gain an inner vibration. Godard’s ambition equals that of the quoted poets: he hopes to enhance the expressivity of the cinematic image, and thus give birth to a new kind of cinematic ‘language’ by remediating the poetry onto the screen.

In *A Band of Outsiders* there is actually a character whose name is Arthur Kipling. One of the first scenes in which he appears, together with his
opening remark, ‘It’s cold and lonely here’, paraphrases Verlaine’s famous poem, *Sentimental dialogue*: ‘In the old and frozen park, two figures have just passed’. The words that we hear from his friend as well as Godard’s own voice-over are also a mixture of quotations from Verlaine. The quotations are presented in a Brechtian manner, the words do not sound poetic at all: the poetic images seem to be ‘frozen’ into the text of a casual dialogue and voice-over narrative. At the same time, the image they are looking at resembles a painting, the river and the branches of the trees reflecting in the water, the fog veiling the landscape could well be an ekphrastic paraphrase of a number of poems by Verlaine, Rimbaud or Mallarmé. The spectacular landscape in the background appears as a frozen surface beyond which images of literature or painting can be sensed, but which is ignored by the two men.

In a traditional (literary) ekphrasis we have an active, speaking subject who contemplates a passive (and usually silent) object of the gaze. In Godard’s film we have an active, verbal component (speech) and a passive visual component (image) which are placed in the same cinematic frame and can both separately be called ekphrastic, but which are not in a direct ekphrastic connection with each other. They become interrelated only on a secondary level, where we recognize the type of poetry quoted here and project the images from this poetry onto the screen. The painterly setting ‘erases’ the medium of language (as these pictures replace the poetic imagery that they ‘translate’). The dialogue and voice-over narrative ‘erases’ the medium of the (poetic) image (the unmarked quotations become de-poeticized as they are woven into the casual dialogue). The opening up of the image into ekphrastic dimensions of poetry by way of both quoting its lines and ‘forgetting’ about them – first of all by ‘hiding’ them within the dialogue (that is always primarily decoded in its relevance regarding the diegesis) and also by way of remediating aspects of these poetic texts into the images – is paradoxical but effective.

There is another scene in *Band of Outsiders* that could also be linked to the ekphrastic tradition. Godard includes a concrete defiant gesture in his film that can be interpreted as an erasure of a traditional cultural space that usually hosts ekphrastic meditations. I am referring, of course, to the famous scene at the Louvre. The three young protagonists race through the Louvre in a record time of 9 minutes 45 seconds without looking at the masterpieces hanging there. The scene, which ‘forgets’ about canonized contexts and traditional visual artistry in favour of youthful spontaneity, ultimately expresses nothing else but this: the bursting energy of an act of sheer inspiration – something that could be a driving force behind any work of art.

Another example of ekphrastic ‘erasures’ is *Pierrot le fou* (1965), at the end of which Pierrot paints his face blue and thus makes it resemble both the Picasso painting and the portrait of Rimbaud shown earlier in the film. He is thus literally transformed into a cubist image even before, in the viewers'
imagination, his face is blown up into pieces similar to cubist portraits. The scene can also be interpreted as a concealed reference to Verlaine’s poem, ‘Pierrot’, in which a frightening face of a scarecrow seems to be blown up, his eyes sizzling in their hollow sockets. Once more, we have multiple erasures: first Godard erases the filmic character and remediates it as a painted portrait, and when Pierrot blows up his face as an image the scene also screens a literary allusion, opening up the image for literature.

Ekphrastic metaphors pointing to the Other of the filmic image

Sometimes the mutual erasure, replacement or displacement of text and image and an opening up towards the infigurable is achieved by a single ekphrastic metaphor in Godard’s films. This is the case with literary quotations of only a few words that are included within Godard’s film’s time and again without any specific mark or clue. On one level these short quotations which are introduced without reference to their source act as a kind of poetic unconscious of the images. On another level these unmarked inclusions of poetic texts have the effect of what Foucault described in his Las Meninas essay in connection with the interdiction of using proper names: ‘If one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as starting point for speech instead of an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must erase those proper names and preserve the infinity of the task.’

In certain cases, however, in Godard’s films exactly the opposite happens, as Godard randomly drops in references to specific names of authors and characters or titles of whole literary works. At the beginning of Pierrot le fou, for instance, the main character, Pierrot complains vehemently about the fact that people no longer think of Balzac when dialling the area code on their phone. This principle of associating literature by way of a one-word reference with commonplace, everyday phenomena is characteristic of many of Godard’s films. In the same Pierrot le fou, for instance, we hear the narrator say: ‘Marianne had the eyes of both Aucassin and Nicolette’. Likewise, in the Band of Outsiders, Godard tells us that the characters ‘stopped at a bookstand and Franz bought the novel which reminded him of Odile’. The reference acts as a sort of ‘ekphrastic metaphor’, as we have one word acting as a metaphor that refers to a whole literary text. It does not suggest one particular image, but points to something too complex to be captured within a single image, therefore ultimately unimaginable (we may either not know the texts referred to or know them and then the meanings generated are virtually infinite). However, this placement into a narrative textual context, this mise en histoire can also parody clichés of narrative cinema, which conventionally works by dissolving images within the process of storytelling. As we have learned from the cognitive theories of cinema, the classical dynamics of filmic narrative always consist in images having the role of
directing the viewer’s attention toward the construction of a coherent story. In this case the concrete image is projected into a void that the viewer is confused about how to fill. Classical ekphrasis operates with the absence of the image as the Other of the text, Godard plays with the absence of the text.

Such ekphrastic metaphors also work in the direction of painting. In A Band of Outsiders, for instance, we hear this: ‘The Seine resembled a Corot’. In the Le petit soldat (Little Soldier, 1963) the narrator similarly says that the ‘somber blue sky reminded me of a painting by Paul Klee’. The images of the foggy river or of the streets at night that appear throughout the film may resemble a painting in general but the particular image it is spoken over may or may not. The image is nonetheless displaced, the word (Corot or Klee) projects it into an impossible space between cinema and painting, just as the earlier example of Marianne’s eyes being compared to Aucassin and Nicolette’s projected the singular concrete image against medieval narrative literature and the whole myth surrounding it. Also in the Little Soldier there is another piece of conversation with a similar logic. First Bruno tells Veronica that she reminds him of a character in a Giraudoux play and later he muses upon the question of whether the colour of girl’s eyes is Renoir-grey or Velázquez-grey. Susan Sontag considers that such references are effective because the viewer cannot verify them. We must add that they cannot be verified not because of the ignorance of the viewer, but because of the structure of the reference: the concrete name is referring to a whole range of possible literary works or paintings.

Henk Oosterling compares the experience of intermedial in-between to Barthes’ notion of ‘punctum’. He says: ‘The spectator is hit: affected and moved by the punctum’. He considers that this resembles ‘the impossible experience of the breaks between two media’. In all these examples, the intermedial reference not only underscores the medial difference (a radical alterity) between cinema, literature or painting, but also identifies in these Others of cinema something that is beyond perception, yet essential in the filmic image. This intermedial opening up of the image achieves the ideal expressed more explicitly by Godard in his later works that ‘the real cinema is a cinema that you cannot see’. Oosterling considers this aspect as characteristic for the reception of intermediality itself, a process that entails that ‘the sensible, as a reflective sensibility, balances between presence and absence: going back and forth from one medium to the other, it is a movement in which positions are articulated in the awareness that they are principally relational and provisional’.

The ‘Museum of Memory’ and the calligrammatic rewriting of ekphrasis

As we have seen in the previous examples there appears to exist a permanent duality in Godard’s cinema: the almost tactile quality of the photographic
image in cinema, the *sensual presence* of things doubled with the *absence* of the physical reality that the image represents, or in certain cases, a void in the signification that can be pointed out by techniques of intermedial *mise en abyme* or ekphrastic metaphors mirroring the other arts and thus keeping the relationship between signifier and signified infinitely open, making the cinematic image reach beyond its own media boundaries and into the domain of the unnamable.

In earlier examples, the filmic image is placed in the ekphrastic, imaginary space created by fragments of poetic language and visual imagery which activate poetic sensitivity but erase literature or even painting as a directly perceivable medium and the institution of museum as a place for the arts or even as a place for meditation upon the arts. In the cinematic essays of the later period the idea of the museum is revived, but more in the spirit of Malraux’s *musée de la memoire*, a virtually never-ending flow of texts and reproductions of images that generate an also endless number of associations.

In Godard’s later films ekphrasis acts as a generative principle. One of the first examples of this can be seen in *Letter to Jane: An Investigation About a Still*, a film made in 1972 with the co-authorship of Jean-Pierre Gorin, in which Godard and Gorin meditate upon a photograph of militant actress Jane Fonda seen in the company of Vietnamese people during the Vietnam war. The process works both ways in late Godard films: there is a surge of texts interpreting pictures and pictures anchoring the meanings of texts. There is, however, an important deviation from the principle of ekphrasis involved here, namely, the fact that these texts and images are always conjured up not in each other’s absence, but in each other’s presence. So the underlying principle can be called ekphrastic, but otherwise we witness a more explicit word and image relationship in which the two media come to be mutually overwritten and intertwined.

The masterpiece in this respect and the ultimate ekphrastic work of Godard’s is undoubtedly the series of essays entitled *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (*Histories of Cinema*, a project that he worked on between 1989 and 1999). The ekphrastic nature of the film was consciously explored by Godard who conceived of the project first as the publication in book form of a series of lectures delivered at the request of the Conservatoire d’Art Cinématographique in Montréal, and then released together with the film version, an art book of reproductions and a boxed set of five CDs containing an edited version of the soundtrack (further multiplying the intermedial ‘trans-forms’ of the cinematic project). Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema* can be considered a meditation upon the archaeology of cinema, discovering in it layers of mediality and culture. From this perspective cinema is not defined by its storytelling capacity, but most of all by its possibilities of transcendence, of mediating first of all reality and/or memory. It is also clear from the beginning that for Godard mediation in the movies means remediation. As Jacques
Rancière wrote, ‘Histories of Cinema is wholly woven out of...“pseudo-metamorphoses,”...imitations of one art by another’. Cinema appears as painting in movement, as a musical composition of shadows, forms and colours.

Medially speaking, it is cinema deconstructed into a constellation of words and images. But which is the medium that ekphrastically reflects the other? It is not the usual case in which literature is seen through cinema or vice versa, it is not even the case in which a newer medium remedies an older one, but quite the opposite: cinema seen through the filter of a seemingly archaic medium of moving pictures. However, this is a form that was constructed in retrospection, a form that has never existed as such, never existed as a vehicle for cinematic storytelling; it can only be called ‘archaic’ because the techniques used were already available at the earliest stages of cinema. Godard took great care in using the most ‘primitive’ techniques possible: photographic inserts, slow motion, shadows projected on a wall and so on, deliberately avoiding the use of more modern technology, while repeatedly showing an old-fashioned editing table and a typewriter as each other’s metaphors in representing the kind of ekphrastic filmic writing he clearly prefers. Accordingly, text and image become equally important and subjected to the same visual compositional principles of fade, dissolve, superimposition. Text penetrates the image, and similarly rhythm and visuality appear as key aspects of language. Viewed from a closer perspective, the medium of the Histoire(s) is derived on the one hand from photomontage, and on the other hand from calligrammatic writing. A calligram-like shot (in fact a detail of the cover of Samuel Beckett’s book The Image) that we can see in part 1.B of the cycle entitled ‘Une histoire seule’ is perhaps emblematic for Godard’s technique. We see the graphic signs of the word ‘image’ appearing as the pupil of an eye in the midst of a white circle of light. The word seems to concentrate the meaning of the image, or the other way round, we can also say that it is the image, the bright circle of light that reveals the graphic signs as text. Moreover, the gesture of this cinematic découpage of the detail of a book cover is also somewhat ekphrastic, as it tears out the word from its literary context and transposes it onto the screen as an autonomous image, thus it actually performs not merely a decontextualization, but also, a multiple intermedial transfer and plunges the title of a well known author into the realm of common language (‘without proper names’, as indicated by Foucault) and pure visuality. By way of the cinematic calligram the aura of the author (and artwork) is lost, the aura of the word in its infinite possible relations and that of the image – that is ‘worth a thousand words’ – is regained.

As a whole, Histoire(s) du cinema accomplishes a uniquely paradoxical fusion of photographic collage and calligrammatic text with the musical and spiritual aspects of cinematic montage, and this intermedium is the one that mirrors what cinema is supposed to stand for in-between the arts.
deliberately using techniques that can be labelled as primitive or archaic, Godard presents the ‘tangible’ mediality of cinema as it once was: having its roots in photographic representation and indexicality, with its infinite connections with the arts and culture; the mediality of a cinema that came to be displaced, ‘out of time’, with the dawn of the digital era. No wonder that some of the most important literary quotations in the Histoire(s) come from Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu, as Godard forces us to experience once more the cinematic image in all its ‘palpable’, sensual glory and mystique. This process of rendering the invisible mediality of cinema itself visible by way of a complex set of ekphrases and (calligrammatic) remediations is in fact a feature that is consistent with the essential principle of any Godard film: in it we experience a cinema coming to terms with its own (inter)medial processes, a cinema that never ceases to open up towards other arts and media in a constant quest to become – to quote one section of Histoire(s) du cinema, borrowing a phrase from Malraux – no less than ‘the currency of the absolute’ (‘la monnaie de l’absolu’).

Notes

2. Technically we can think of such major changes as the shift from silent films to the talkies, or stylistically we can keep in mind that the medial characteristics of a neorealist film are very different from the multimodal extravaganza of a Peter Greenaway film, for example, which consciously constructs its visual texture as an interart palimpsest.
examples of filmic transpositions of paintings but is far from offering a more nuanced examination of ekphrastic phenomena within cinema.


12. The role itself, through the name Nana, is a hint at a literary text, Zola’s novel having the same title, *Nana* (the protagonist of which is also a prostitute who has ambitions of working in show business).


14. ‘The “self” is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the “other” is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object’: Mitchell (1994) *Picture Theory*, p. 157.


16. It is also consistent with Tamar Yacobi’s views according to which ekphrasis can consist of a single ‘ekphrastic simile’ of no more that one phrase, as this functions as an ‘abbreviated reference to a whole pictorial set of works which silently refers the reader to the original itself for details and extensions’: T. Yacobi (1997) ‘Verbal Frames and Ekphrastic Figuration’ in U.-B. Lagerroth, H. Lund and E. Hedling (eds) *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Interrelation of the Arts and Media* (Amsterdam and Atlanta GA: Rodopi), p. 42.

17. ‘The ekphrastic image acts, in other words, like a sort of unapproachable and unpresentable “black hole” in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, just shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways’: Mitchell (1994) *Picture Theory*, p. 158.


23. I am not disputing Paech’s argument that if the film’s main figuration is the medial difference between video as ‘individual’ medium (as video-graphic ‘writing’, a medium suitable for personal archives) and the dreamlike medium of film, I merely suggest that there are some other figurations that contribute to the medial complexity of Godard’s ekphrastic cinematic language. Cf. J. Paech (2002) ‘Intermediale Figuration – am Beispiel von Jean-Luc Godards *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*’ in J. Eming, A. Jael Lehmann and I. Maassen (eds) *Mediäle Performanzen* (Freiburg: Rombach), pp. 275–97.
Part V

The Borders of Media Borders