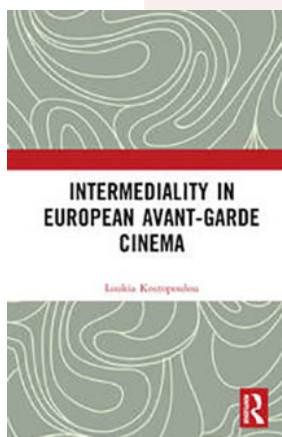


# Cinema and intermediality: Enhancing the spectator

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Loukia Kostopoulou

## Intermediality in European Avant-Garde Cinema

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The introduction to Loukia Kostopoulou's interesting work, *Intermediality in European Avant-Garde Cinema* (Routledge, 2023), explains that the book will address some "important research questions", such as: "How do intermedial experiments convey meaning in films? And how are the contemporary films of Jean-Luc Godard, Lars Von Trier, and Alexander Sokurov innovative and experimental?" The book lives up to its promise by proposing to gather these three contemporary filmmakers under the label of "avant-garde cinema," both for their experimental approach to film techniques, which includes work on the materials and forms of cinema, and for their search for contamination, transformation and hybridisation of languages in an intermedial way, for instance with respect to painting and theatre with the use of *tableaux vivants*, or with respect to literature and music. Kostopoulou draws a parallel between a certain modern and contemporary auteur cinema, or "art cinema," and the experimental cinema of Man Ray, Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp and Louis Buñuel (among others) in their quest for innovation, which challenges the limits of the medium and opts for non-linear narratives and the creation of "uneasiness to the audience" (p. 2). Kostopoulou accepts the critical hypotheses that place *art cinema and mainstream cinema*, or "classical cinema" and "post-classical cinema," in sharp opposition, with an experiential turn involving a shift towards

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“spectacle” rather than “narrative” (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002). Like any categorisation by opposites, the risk is sometimes to go to extremes, and to assume that experimentation in film history only comes from films that break with traditional narrative, bring their own “idiosyncratic personal vision”, and create stylistic and formal innovation. Art cinema is in fact a macro-category, which includes for instance almost all European directors studied in film history (from De Sica and Rossellini to Kubrick). For Elsaesser and Buckland, it is a matter of innovating by emphasising the modes of spectacle at the detriment of narrative, e.g. by challenging the spectator’s skills with respect to the conventions of cinematic techniques and genres. Within this macro-category, avant-garde cinema “engages the audience both intellectually and emotionally”, and Kostopoulou rightly recalls directors such as Michael Hanneke and Yorgos Lanthimos who do so in their films by practising the approaches theorised by Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, so as to activate the spectator’s critical skills, challenging her/him to understand. It is a dimension of political engagement that aims at “annulling the boundaries of the medium and assuming an enhanced idea of the spectator” (p. 9).

Quoting scholars of film history and visual and media studies, Kostopoulou explains that experimentation with the “intrinsic qualities” of the medium of cinema, such as movement and visibility, is a fundamental part of the research of the cinema of the historical avant-gardes, who work to find new ways through abstraction from representation, experiments with editing and collage, and the destruction of narrative logic, creating “intermedial crossover” (p. 112) with other art forms such as painting, photography, theatre, installations, and so on. Changing historical and technological conditions (primarily thanks to the digital turn), this research can be found in the contemporary directors that Kostopoulou chooses to investigate: Godard, Sokurov and Von Trier. The intermedial perspective in this book becomes both an aesthetic and a socio-cultural choice, with a focus on the effects on the spectator: “in this book, intermediality is used to refer to the mixedness or crossing of various media within the medium of film and to describe the implications these crossings have on the spectator and the nature of the medium itself” (p. 27). But it is important to note that this is not just about an intermediality understood as a “crossing the borders between media” (Rajewsky 2005), but rather an intermediality that becomes “deep imbrication” between media and the arts. In the films she analyses, in fact, innovation is produced through “transformation” and “fusion” (p. 31), creating “intermedial crossovers” that offer a “new sensuous experience to the viewers” (p. 40). In her research, Kostopoulou fully embraces the theoretical perspective of Ágnes Pethő, for whom “reading intermedial relations requires [...] an embodied spectator who gets ‘in touch’ with the world of the film” (2011: 1).

We should remember, however, that prior to the recent intermedial turn, structuralist textual semiotics used to reason about codes and systems of signification in relation to each other, at least since Metz’s definitions of “semiological interferences” (1971: 218)

among languages, with respect to borrowings, imitations and adaptations of signifying figures, e.g. between cinema and literature. In the transition from one text to another, according to Metz, a figure can not only produce a new signifier, but also change in meaning, and in many cases one does not share actual substances of expression with the other but an identical code, which manifests itself in two different languages. This occurs, for example, between pictorial *chiaroscuro* and that of cinema or photography, or when sharing rhythmic patterns between a visual series and a musical series in a film sequence (Metz 1971). In the 2000s, we reason about these “semiological interferences” in terms of intermediality and embodiment, but for contemporary media semiotics, these are basic problems of intersemiotic translation, which reopen the sensuality expressed in texts (in film and in the arts, as in music or the novel) (Calabrese 2000, Fabbri 2000, Dusi 2000, Marrone 2005), and produce media experiences for the spectator (Eugeni 2010). According to this perspective, it is at the sensory and experiential level that intermediality and translatability are accumulated by “figural” relations (Dusi 2015a). Pethő also puts a strong emphasis on figurality, but these themes remain implicit in Kostopoulou’s book. We will return to them at the end.

Jean-Luc Godard, the restless soul of the French New Wave, continued to experiment throughout his life. Among his many films, Kostopoulou analyses in particular *First Name: Carmen* (1983) and *Film Socialisme* (2010). In the former, Godard “multiplies intermedial strategies to reflect on the gestural nature of the cinematic image” (Giraud 2018: 127). In the latter, Godard experiments in a metanarrative manner with the hybridity of the digital medium, with a visual and narrative fragmentation, even at the verbal level (with dialogues in many languages and subtitles that confuse the viewer), “forcing the viewer to react, to watch closely, and to try to decipher its signification” (p. 56). This complicated media experience, which does not find a foothold and is instead disconfirmed on a perceptual and sensory level by the different sound and visual rhythms, is summarised by Kostopoulou with the Godardian formula of “dissonant resonances”, between contagion and difference (p. 60). As in all of Godard’s later films, for example in *Adieu au langage* (2014), the fragmentary, interrupted and syncopated narration annihilates the viewer’s expectations of coherence, adding to the difficulty of relating to and empathising with the characters: we could call it a *discontinuity* of narrative, of stylistic construction, of digital effects, seasoned with polyphonic editing and ruthless irony. This, for Kostopoulou, produces an “errant spectator” (p. 62).

From Alexander Sokurov’s films, Kostopoulou is interested in the “intermedial crossovers” of films such as *Mother and Son* (1997) and *Russian Arc* (2002), in which the director experiments with the relationship between cinema and painting, but also in a kind of “slow cinema [that] makes time visible and hence felt by the viewer” (p. 69). In *Mother and Son* Sokurov “wants the audience to focus on the details” (ibid.) particularly of the protagonists’ faces in close-ups. In the contrast between these, the use of slow pace

and long takes of landscapes, the film produces a tension between movement and stillness which approaches the pictorial mode. In *Russian Arc*, on the other hand, Kostopoulou investigates intermediality with respect to the “revitalizations” of *tableaux-vivants* (Pethő 2014), in the use of continuity shots of the sequence plan (the whole film is shot in a single take), blurring the boundaries between cinema, theatre and installation art, to create “an enhanced cinematic experience” (p. 86).

Looking at Lars Von Trier, Kostopoulou analyses the film *Dogville* (2003), in which experimentation with theatrical modes blends cinematic and performing arts techniques. Kostopoulou explains how the film achieves an effect of alienation for the viewer through the use of intertitles that narrate the film as if it were a novel, and the constant voice-over narrator who describes the context, the characters and the narrative situation. And clearly also with the use of the white lines that are drawn on the floor to designate the rooms of the village, the houses and the rooms, in a minimal and empty theatre space, that “creates space in the spectator’s imagination [...] enabling him/her to visualize the setting” (p. 102). At the same time, the film’s expressive power comes from the use of voices, noises and sounds contextual to the actions, which make the narrative situations grounded in realism, and open up to sensoriality and proximity to the actors’ bodies including through the fluid use of steady cam shots. Von Trier, indeed, “deploys specific techniques to emancipate the audience and make them more reactive to what they are watching rather than immersed in the plot” (p. 94).

The theoretical definition of avant-garde art cinema, which produces “intermedial crossover”, could be extended to films by many younger directors. They include, to name a few, Pietro Marcello, for instance in the 2009 documentary film *The Mouth of the Wolf*, for its use of film archives mixed with storytelling; Alice Rohrwacher, think of *La chimera*, from 2023, which mixes the modes of cinema with the oral modes of ballad-singing; and Radu Jude, whose provocative film *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, from 2020, mixes cinematic genres such as porn and satirical comedy with photographic modes and social denunciation, proposing three different endings. We would also mention Yorgos Lanthimos, whose recent *Poor Things* (2023) manages to hybridise the science-fiction genre with the search for visual innovations in framing and décor, and imaginative post-production creations. In all these films we can see both the search for an expressive intermedial innovation and the “distancing” effect for the spectator, preventing narrative immersion and the process of “secondary identification” (Metz 1977) with the characters. And leading the spectator to live in a kind of constant emotional discomfort and to reflect on the medium of film. To use the terms explained by Loukia Kostopoulou in her book, “avant-garde films aim at creating a degree of alertness in the spectator” (p. 94).

However, I would like to return to the definition of medium, understood as a “apparatus” or as a “assemblage”, to try to better understand Kostopoulou’s research. Indeed, cinema is not only a matter of techniques, codes and languages (to a greater or lesser

degree intermedial), but also a set of cultural conventions and discursive practices. It is precisely on these semiotic conventions that the notion of intermediality operates – which, as Kostopoulou reminds us, is not only the transfer and migration among media of forms and content (Gaudreault 1998), a transfer more transparent and immediate or more opaque and hypermediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999), but is above all intersections between media, thanks to sociocultural practices that construct hybrid configurations.

We would like to contribute to Kostopoulou's reflection by adding a focus on textual hybridity, as a product of a broader, intersemiotic and intercultural translation process, because if in intermediality "the material quality of each medium is affected" (Müller 2010: 18) we must bear in mind that "intersemiotic translation" from its earliest definitions (Jakobson 1959) deals with semiotic systems that are transformed in the shift from one medium to another, focusing in particular on the "matters, substances and forms" of expression (in Hjelmselv's terms, see Eco 2003) and their relation to the content plan in the new target text, particularly if it is a film (Dusi 2003, 2015b). The exchanges and overlaps made possible today by digital fluidity reduce the differences between media by drawing new border zones that are boundary lines or common areas, and in this direction the notion of intermediality draws attention to the dialogical dimension of intermedial relations. In my view, which partially follows the proposals of the Lotman School (Torop 2000), there is always intersemiotic translation in intermedial relations, but intermediality opens up a broader discourse on the notion of medium and the event of mediation, understood as an "assemblage" that is simultaneously a material communication channel, an organised set of technologies (a digital or analogue "device") and a set of semiotically organised cultural conventions (Zecca 2013, Eugeni 2015, Casetti 2015). Furthermore, the semiotic perspective allows us to grasp the translational and interpretive relations that bind or differentiate media products, thinking of a continuum that crosses the ecosystem. It thus becomes a "semiosphere" (Lotman 2005) of intertextual, intermedial, transmedia and crossmedia relations, that is, a complex set of relations that can be interpreted coherently (Saldre and Torop 2012, Dusi 2015a).

In her book, Kostopoulou cites many analyses by scholars with different theoretical perspectives, unfortunately leaving little room for her own analysis. But perhaps dealing with sacred monsters like Godard, Von Trier and Sokurov does not allow many alternatives. However, I believe that work on intermedial relations would benefit from a more defined methodology. Adopting that of textual semiotics, for example, it seems useful to distinguish the plan of expression from the plan of content, in order to be able to reason about the filmic languages (or codes) that organise and run across a film. If, for example, on the level of expression one analyses colours, brightness, spatiality, framing and movement, these are figures and formants of the "plastic" level of the film, which go on to configure the "figurative" or expressive level of the film (Dusi 2003, 2015a), thanks to the different forms of editing and precise stylistic choices. In terms of content, on the other



hand, each film structures not only the narrative level and modes of narration, analysed by Kostopoulou, but also a more abstract (or profound) level of values, and a discursive level in which thematic isotopies are developed supporting the more concrete and figurative ones. And one could consider how a stylistic coherence stitches together substances and forms of both expression and content (in the Hjelmslev sense), through what Greimas' semiotics calls "strategies of enunciation." In her book, Kostopoulou examines the level of enunciation, albeit without calling it that, when her analyses show the organisation of the substances and forms of a film at work, both in their internal interweavings and in their communicative openings towards the viewer (e.g. with the forms of the gaze shifting between objective, interpellative and subjective). Though without using semiotic metaterms, Loukia Kostopoulou's analyses equally touch upon many of these narrative, discursive and stylistic problems; and, we suppose, the lack of an explicit methodology then becomes a conscious choice, in order to open up to a wider readership and to be able to compare different theoretical and epistemological perspectives.

A recurring topic throughout the book is that of the spectator's experience of contemporary European avant-garde cinema. A *trait d'union*, as we said, is found in the construction of a critical, Brechtian distancing, which creates estrangement or discomfort in the spectator, while inviting him or her not to fall into identification and empathy with the characters. In order to investigate this mechanism, in my view, the media semiotics proposed by Eugeni (2010) is useful today. It distinguishes between "direct" and "medial" experience, and allows us to analyse the construction of the viewer's media experience through the different layers of an audiovisual product (a film or a TV series). In this perspective, through the filter of discursive construction, the sensory recognition of a film reconstructs a perceptual-sensory (plastic and rhythmic) design, which is linked to a narrative design, in which the viewer activates, for example, situational maps to understand the unfolding narrative. These two layers, the sensual and the narrative, are organised into the layer of "relational syntony" (or enunciation), where the characters relate to each other while the film relates to the viewer cognitively and affectively. The complex sociosemiotic interplay of these stratifications composes a "media experience design" (Eugeni 2010: 45).

One last consideration to reason about figurality. According to Pethő, intermediality should be conceived as a kind of excess, "a surplus in the cinematic image" (2011: 7), and in order to study it, it is necessary to address the sensual aspect of texts, which Pethő investigates as a problem of the figurality of intermedial relations. Following Lyotard and Deleuze, it is a textually excessive figurality, of the order of force and libidinal strength (in psychoanalytic and aesthetic terms): it is the figural studied by film and video art scholars, which is now part of the dictionaries of the image (Juhel, Vanoye, et. al. 2006). Nevertheless, textual semiotics proposes a second meaning of figurality, understood as a more abstract network of dynamic, semi-motivated

systems with “semi-symbolic” functioning. It is a poetic mode of language theorised by Greimas (1984) and Floch (1995), which is based on the affective and sensual logics that arise from the tensive, plastic and expressive construction of a text. This textually motivated figurality can be played out in analyses alongside the energetic, affective and impure figurality. It is this double gaze that allows us to find systems of coherence and cohesion in the intersemiotic and intermedial relations (Dusi 2015a), identifying a series of textually organised sensory and experiential logics that are in dialogue with the users of media products, semiotically producing affects and logics of sensation.

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