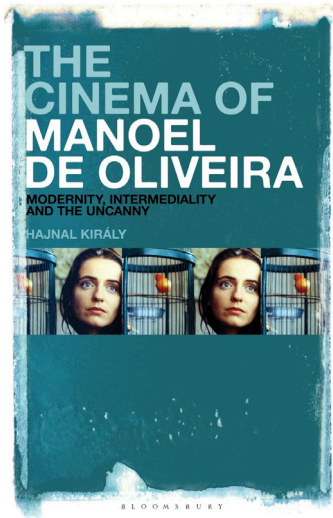


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The Strange Case of Manoel de Oliveira



Review of:

The Cinema of Manoel de Oliveira.
Modernity, Intermediality and the Uncanny,
Hajnal Király,
Bloomsbury Academic, 2022

The volume *The Cinema of Manoel de Oliveira. Modernity, Intermediality and the Uncanny* by Hajnal Király is the result of a productive encounter between an Eastern European scholar and the cinematic oeuvre of a filmmaker from the other end of Europe.

The Portuguese Manoel de Oliveira (1908–2015), the longest-lived filmmaker of film history, active until his death at the age of 106, is a peculiar personality of European art-house cinema, who produced in the nine decades of his cinematic activity—with a longer interruption during the Salazar regime, when his films were not supported by the film fund at the time—a particularly rich oeuvre spanning from silent cinema to the digital age, amounting to over 50 titles, overall, “an ‘exquisite delicacy’ for cinephiles” (Király 2022, 1). Thematically, Oliveira’s films are predominantly

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characterized by an “obsession with death, feminine mystery, the ambivalence of human behaviour, the impossibility of an ideal love, the stakes of sacrifice and redemption (both personal and national)” (Király 2022, 2). Out of these, the monograph under discussion addresses a selection of the full list of titles, including most of his feature films, among them *Aniki-Bobó* (1942), *Rite of Spring* (1963), *Past and Present* (1972), *Benilde or the Virgin Mother* (1975), *Doomed Love* (1978), *Francisca* (1981), *The Cannibals* (1988), *No, or the Vain Glory of Command* (1990), *Abraham’s Valley* (1993), *The Divine Comedy* (1991), *Voyage to the Beginning of the World* (1997), *Anxiety* (1998), *The Letter* (1999), *The Uncertainty Principle* (2002), *A Talking Picture* (2003), *Magic Mirror* (2005), *Cristopher Columbus – The Enigma* (2007), *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl* (2009) and *The Strange Case of Angelica* (2010), as well as *Gebo and the Shadow* (2012).

The approach of the monograph is, however, out of the ordinary, since it is not aimed at a chronological arrangement, divided into creative stages, of Oliveira’s filmmaking career. Instead, it adopts a complex perspective combined, as the title suggests, of three vantage points offered by the keywords “modernity”, “intermediality” and the “uncanny”. The result of this approach is necessarily a non-chronological approach, rearranging the order in which the films are discussed in accordance with the logic of theoretical benchmarks smoothly woven into the fine texture of film analysis. The author admits that this approach entails repetitive patterns and recurrent references to the same films, but it is not at all disturbing in the process of reading, on the contrary, it provides for the non-connoisseurs a better lead into the universe of the Portuguese filmmaker, enhancing the reader’s familiarity with this oeuvre.

The theoretical queries invited to dialogue betray the author’s scholarly habitus mainly characterized by a profound involvement in the intermedial conjunctions of art-house cinema, blended with a similarly deep-rooted interest in intercultural relations, with a background of several-decade research related to, and growing from, the school of intermediality studies hallmarked by Ágnes Pethő, professor of film studies at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania. She has, in the recent years, pointed out the benefits of “piecemeal theorizing” advocated by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eager to look closely at particular, subtle manifestations of intermedial sensations in films rather than merely speculating about the Grand Theory of intermediality.¹ The book is actually the “transnational” result of two projects, an individual postdoctoral project carried out in Lisbon and a group research project on intermediality led by Ágnes Pethő in Romania, the research horizons of which successfully meeting in the theoretical fundamentation of this monograph.

1 Bordwell, David and Noël Carroll, eds. 1996. *Post-Theory. Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, quoted in Pethő Ágnes, 2020, *Cinema and Intermediality. The Passion for the In-Between*. Second, enlarged edition. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Relying on a systematic account of the existing literature on Manoel de Oliveira, addressing his oeuvre from manifold perspectives, among which transnationalism, geopolitics, postcolonial approaches, adaptations and genre, Hajnal Király's work is, first and foremost, an ambitious addition to the scholarship on the Portuguese filmmaker, filling the gap in English-language research, in that it offers an overview on, and a possible perspective from which the entire Oliveiran universe, with all its multitudinous aspects that such a long cinematic career entails, can be approached. This approach is none other than the examination of film as an intermedial product, not in the sense of the inherent intermediality of film as a multi-medium from the outset, but rather its overt, excessive moments foregrounding intermedial connections in order to accumulate additional meanings, explored to the full in this analysis. The author formulates the thesis that "there is a relevant aspect of Oliveira's cinema that has not been addressed by critics: the figurative potential of its intermediality, in both personal and cultural terms. I refer here to the importance of the stillness–movement dynamics, the relevance of the single, still(ed) image (pictorial or photographic) as a surface of projection of artistic and philosophical ideas and emotions, or as a link between theatricality and film (the case of *tableaux vivants*), also responsible for the 'literariness' of Oliveira's literary adaptations" (Király 2022, 3).

The synergic productivity of the threefold combined approach, focusing on the myth of modernity, the intermedial relations and the uncanny effect respectively, is attested by comprehensive film analyses that open up Oliveira's cinematic universe.

Firstly, Oliveira's relationship to modernity is marked by absence. As the author of the book explains, "Oliveira missed most of the period of European cinematic modernism, as he stopped making films in the 1940s, except for some short movies and *The Act of Spring* in the 1950s and 1960s, returning to active filmmaking at the beginning of the 1970s. He could have caught up with the late modernism by simply adopting a modernist style. But he rather went back to the original modernity definition of Baudelaire and was re-enacting the myth of modernity *on film and by film*, staging its paradoxical position between the stability and stillness of plastic artworks—paintings and statues—and the futility represented by the moving image" (Király 2022, 20).

Secondly, this re-enactment of modernity sheds light on the powerful presence of the other arts in Oliveira's films, being a manifestation of an incessant dialogue between the moving image and the sister arts, pre-eminently painting, sculpture, theatre, literature and music. In elaborating the theoretical grounding on the figurations of intermediality, the author resorts to D. N. Rodowick's reading the figural² and Ágnes Pethő's regard of the intermedial cross-over as being "not merely an inscription of one medium into another, but

2 Rodowick, D. N. 2001. *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

a more complex trans-figuration, in the process of which one medium gets to be transposed as a figure into another, a figure of in-betweenness that reflects on both the media involved in this intermedial process” (Pethő 2020, 82). The detailed examination of the figurations of intermediality proves to be a viable access to Oliveira’s universe, with special focus on stylistic solutions such as repetition, interruption, doubling, mirror-effect and the live dialogue with the other arts, abounding, among others, in pictorial references to the Dutch Golden Age and the French Impressionists. A substantial part of discussion is dedicated to the trope of the doll as a recurrent pattern in several films by Oliveira, not only as an accessory of the narrative as a symbol of childhood and innocence but also as pertaining to the figural level, being a clue to the whole oeuvre.

And thirdly, the previous two perspectives are complemented with the concept of the uncanny—in line with Freud’s definition of it as the emergence of the unfamiliar in the familiar and the uncertainty whether something is what it seems to be—as revealing an essential characteristic of most of Oliveira’s films, and above all, of his vision of cinema, where the uncanny manifests in “his attraction to the magic of still and moving images, the stubborn repetition of certain topoi, the obsession with the image of the (dead and dying) woman, his relationship with a cinematic and wider cultural heritage, the link between recurring actors and their roles, as well as the effect all this has on the spectator” (Király 2022, 159). Beyond the familiar—unfamiliar duality, the uncanny quality of Oliveira’s cinema can be grabbed in the well contoured dialogue between stillness and movement, tradition and innovation, presence and absence, life and death, combined with all sorts of bizarre topics elaborated within the framework of slow, repetitive, allegoric narratives. The list of analysed examples reveal the predominance of imageness over narrative, manifested in moments of turning into a pure, superfluous spectacle.

In the three parts in which the chapters of the book are organized, *The Beautiful Automaton*, *Camões and Don Quixote* and *Doomed Loves*, the mentioned vantage points are organically complemented with insights of narratology, psychoanalysis, adaptation studies and cultural studies. As a significant part of Manoel de Oliveira’s work consists of adaptations, Hajnal Király has found in this research topic a fruitful terrain where she could continue her research into adaptations, started earlier as a doctoral research that concluded in a Hungarian-language treatise of the evolution of the theoretical discourse on adaptation, entitled *Könyv és film között. A hűségelven innen és túl* [Between Book and Film. Beyond the Fidelity Principle].³ A distinct issue pertaining to the word–image relation addressed in the chapters is the figural presence of letters in screen adaptations of epistolary novels, considered a “tired trope” by Belén Vidal but placed in a fresh discourse that identifies the cultural and symbolic background of letter writing and reading in their pictorial forms of representation.

3 Koinónia, Cluj-Napoca, 2010.

Beyond the ingenious solution of choosing the tropes, figurations of intermediality as the structuring principle of the monograph—which is a rare but all the more fruitful achievement in the field of film studies⁴ and a merit on its own, bringing a fresh, innovative view into a classical film historical/theoretical genre—, perhaps the most challenging task of this research has been the profound understanding of Portuguese culture by an outsider. Successfully avoiding the traps of exoticising the otherness of the other culture, the book offers, through the close reading of the ways in which Portuguese culture and history is reflected upon in Oliveira’s narratives, an enjoyable journey, a true cultural experience along the banks of the Douro where the filmmaker comes from, dissolved into a wider geocultural experience. It is also an uncanny journey during which the unfamiliarities of the other culture become familiar, and vice versa, its familiarities become unfamiliar, resulting in a consonance of tropes, meanings and sensations that cinema can offer for the viewer while exploring the uncanniness of the intercultural encounter: “Coming from a different culture, I found it difficult to penetrate the ‘familiar unfamiliarity’ of these films” (Király 2022, 2). The author living, for part of the research period, in the Portuguese culture most probably enhanced the look at this segment of Europe “from within”, still, it is the uncontested merit of this project to carry out the cultural encounter also “from the outside”, through the transmission of the tropes of intermediality, successfully interweaving the discourses of intermediality and interculturality. The research also touches upon the “transnational” aspect of Oliveira’s work, to be encountered in the filmmaker’s French-Portuguese co-productions, identified as heterotopias with Foucault’s term, “where different cultural discourses are reconciled and intermediality becomes a figuration of intercultural translation” (Király 2022, 97).

To sum up, Hajnal Király’s monograph on Manoel de Oliveira’s art of cinema, is a significant contribution, to the scholarship on the filmmaker, to a renewed view and updated methodology of monograph writing and, perhaps above all, to intermediality studies, being exemplary in carrying out the analysis with affective devotion and sensitive empathy, treading on the ground that Ágnes Pethő has called the sensual gateway to intermediality (2020) or, with a more recent term also proposed by her, affective intermediality. In the light of all mentioned above, what the author says about Manoel de Oliveira’s films applies to her book as well: it is “an ‘exquisite delicacy’ for cinephiles”.

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4 Such as Christopher Rowe’s intermedial monograph *Michael Haneke: The Intermedial Void* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).