STUDIA UBB DRAMATICA, LXVIII, 1, 2023, p. 159 - 171
(Recommended Citation)
DOI:10.24193/subbdrama.2023.1.09

The Decline of Significance in Today's Digital Media Formats

Alexandru STERIAN[1]

Abstract: Does modern digital media reconfigure the film's message? The ubiquity of interactive screens alters the social and emotional human interactions. Through the advent of digital media within the film workflow, the ontological referentiality of the analog support becomes obsolete. The medium digital support can influence the meaning and structure of the message, which gradually starts losing its primary meanings due to the shallow, inattentive film viewing. Starting with the aesthetic approaches and visual codes, the movie's distribution begins to replace some disputable values which the film as an art has preserved within its DNA, emotion and empathy. How much of the iconic stage of a sign is still embedded within a support without an ontic representativity, expressed today through mathematic algorithms and digital codes?

Keywords: intermediality, transmediality, analogue format, digital media, ontic values.

How can the ontological dimension of picture support trigger the viewer's subconscious reactions? Lately film scholars have addressed a valid question about film medium specificity due to the digital media convergence.

[1] Alexandu Sterian, Professor: National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale", Romania, email: alex.sterian@unatc.ro

The appearance of feature films has passed through a long conversion from all long established celluloid base to present day digital codes capture. This transition had to be as smooth as possible but, the need of control and globalisation norms imposed a quick and full transfer to digital movies distribution.

We'll try to explain if, through this transfer from analogue to digital, the meaning of the film and the viewer's connection with the pro-staged filmic space remains the same and how our senses are engaged through the visual, sound and haptic watching experience. The ontic link between medium and message, as stated by McLuhan, is weakened today through digital media convergence. The hypermediacy and hyper-abundancy of global markets forced the consumer to adapt to a fast-forward lifestyle which also applies to the cultural domain, theatre, film, video installations, painting, opera etc.

In his essay *The Implosion of Meaning in the Media* Baudrillard asserts:

> Finally, the medium is the message not only signifies the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no more media in the literal sense of the word (I'm speaking particularly of electronic mass media) - that is, of a mediating power between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another. Neither in content, nor in form.[2]

In Baudrillard's opinion, digital media, which also includes movies on-line streaming platforms, suddenly changes the established film paradigm which we've been experiencing for more than a century.

The visual message has been at the base of movie storytelling since its beginning. Trough the digital media convergence, which includes the film's distribution, the human being's perceptual values have been reconfigured. Bypassing some of the everlasting support references, the digital medium starts to lack some intrinsic "film" specificities including the corporeality of the support. The visual corporeal references are easily implied with ease by the appealing of paintings, sculptures, analogue photography and analogue film, but what does it mean? The texture given by light falling on clay, marble, painted canvas, aquaforte or oil paint have been assimilated by the

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 82.

film grain transfer to an analogue support (celluloid film base). Accepting the mechanical reproduction as the core of film and photography specificity, we're still within this ontological realm played by the film mimetic representation. All its intrinsic specificities have vanished through digital approximations and interpretations mediated by capturing codecs. The film's analogue support derived its own specificity from physically embedded values which have been used to mimetically capture a diegetic reality. This ontological support has been the media reference for most forms of art throughout history.

> For example, if we think of the medium as the material stuff out of which artworks are made, then painting comprises several media: oil paints, watercolors, tempera, acrylic, and others. Also, in this rather unambiguous sense of media, sculpture comprises a wide range of media, including at least: bronze, gold, silver, wood, marble, granite, clay, celluloid, acrylic (again), and so on.[3]

Aesthetic references and narrative visual keys have been "adjusted" according to the digital capture codes, electrical values which impoverishes the emotional structure of the movie. Aside from this, the movie's immutability is ruined by today's digital on-line distribution through which we can adjust or change its structure, decided by its creators. Usual features like selecting a chapter, freeze frame, fast-forward or back-word change the basic meanings of film as a work of art. The viewer can become a content creator by simply browsing, shuffling the movie or watching it on improper devices. The main perceptual codes, established from the beginning of movie history, are easily lost today trough the distractive viewing on smartphones, lap-tops or TV screens and in inappropriate viewing spaces (offices, subways, living rooms etc.).

If we agree with what Rodowick says about the medium, we should start with the assumption he made regarding the picture suport, therefore the analogical image is defined as "a transformation of substance isomorphic with the originated image regardless of scale."[4] Is that condition enough to

[3] Nöel Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 5.

[4] David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 31.

define the medium or "a medium should be distinguished from its physical support and channel of transmission, even if they share the same substance or material?"[5] Rodowick tries to define the film medium's specificity throughout its entire workflow, from the shooting stage to the distribution. Even so, today's on-line streaming distribution companies, tries to induce an unsustainable theory within which fulfilling the screening experience on similar levels as those found in cinema halls is mainly based on the medium's spatial resolution value (4K, 4096 lines horizontal resolution according to Netflix requirements).[6] Beside its physical values, the medium has to have some specification which, nowadays mainly refer to resolution. Is that enough to make a great movie or is there something else to consider to? The film strip, celluloid or nitrate base as used before the digital revolution, was the container on which we used to capture and screen movies from. Despite the capturing format, 8mm, 16mm or 35mm, filmmakers used the medium according to their intentions: experimental, film essay, documentary or feature films. When the analogue projection was replaced by digital technology in theatrical distribution, the main argument was the poor 35mm print spatial resolution and the lack of it on the cinema screen. According to image scientists this photo-chemical print resolution projected on a cinema screen can drop under 1K (1024 lines horizontal resolution), which is certainly disappointing for the viewer. Beside this scientific fact, the perceptual realm is built on physical and psychological values together and the poor spatial resolution wouldn't influence the overall watching experience, complimented with haptic and hearing dimensions. The viewing experience is different when we watch the movie on a TV screen sitting comfortably on a sofa in our living room compared to a cinema hall. The film's medium, as Rodowick mentioned is defined by all the stages it's been through to the final distribution support, nevertheless the film's own specificity also relies on the screening space as well. We cannot split the meaning and the strength of the support ignoring the power of a public audience screening. A partisan of this, Rodowick insist's on:

[5] Ibid., 32.

[6] Netflix capturing formats requirements, https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/hc/en-us, (accessed 02.02.2023).

> holding on to the specificity of theatrical viewing, because for me, intuitively, electronic images and screens are not "cinema"; that is, they cannot produce the social and psychological conditions of a certain pleasurable spectating.[7]

On the same topic of medium specificity, Noël Carroll investigates the relevance of the support and the phrase "artistic medium" as an ontological reference for film. For more than a century now, the motion picture as a medium, had a physical support for both sound and image, the celluloid strip. Nowadays the digital technology changes this referentiality to matrices of numbers decoded by algorithms on viewing devices (laptops, smartphones, TV screens), each of which acts like a small computer. Therefore, Carroll approached this topic to express his theory about medium specificity:

> If we think of the medium on the basis of the materials from which cinema images are made, our first impulse might be to say that the medium is obviously a film strip bearing certain photographic emulsions. But flicker films, like Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer*[8] (1960) can be made by alternating clear and opaque leader, sans photographic emulsion. And one can paint on a clear film strip and project it.[9]

The cited movie is a great example of what digital technology can do to change the psychological perception of an image. The analogue celluloid print strip, with its subtle artefacts (grain, scratches, frame leader and gauge instability) creates an imaginary space with a visual support for the message. Therefore, the same movie being recently digitised (*Arnulf Rainer*[10], 2018), lost all the photochemical references which, on the original version, composed a totally different meaning for the viewer. This physical support, sometimes used just as a base for random images (see Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight*, 1963) is enriched

---

[7] David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 33.

[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfy1cdRrAFU, (accessed 02.02 2023).

[9] Noël Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 6.

[10] https://vimeo.com/300995861, (accessed 02.02.3023).

by its own materiality, the grain, the transparency and density given trough the mechanical registration, captured by the lens and projected onto the photochemical surface. Picture message specificity of the support has played an important role in film theory. The film as a form of art has been identified with the analogical, indexical celluloid support from its very beginning. Nevertheless, we find recent film studies where the ontic structure of the film medium doesn't stand anymore for its referentiality:

> (...) after years of upheaval brought about by the proliferation of new technologies producing and disseminating moving images, the challenge of the so called "post media age" can also be identified in the fact that there seems to be an effect of uniformization among the different forms of the moving images.[11]

Despite what Pethő says, this inherent uniformization does quite the opposite. It creates a space dichotomy where digital technology makes a deep separation between medium and message, McLuhan's theory has to be readjusted according with the digital medium specificity, especially for on-line movie distribution. With the advent of Internet's hyper-mediacy anyone can readjust the structure of a movie, from its final form as intended by the creators, to a totally new one, a merry-go-round video installation where the viewer can easily create another version of *the oeuvre*. The movies intermediality specificity has been used stylistically trough film diegesis, one example of this being the "mise en abyme" which was used to address and define a stylistic or dreamlike narrative approach, a visual structure easily understandable by the viewer during the analogue times (interchanging film structure trough format, grain, color and size; 8mm, 16mm, 35mm).

Even if the results are close to the analogical picture referentiality, the digital code record and simulate reality, trough the capture device's algorithms interpretation, which gives a new meaning to the Aristotelian mimesis theory. Being a mechanical projection on a photochemical layer, the analogue support

[11] Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality. The Passion for the In-Between* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 27.

adds some of its inlay physical dimensions like film grain randomly spread inside the photosensitive gelatine, which is floating in a three-dimensional space moulded on a celluloid base.

Being an image simulacrum, this mimetic reality is mediated by the digital format which doesn't interfere with the apparatus that mediates this electronic registration. The digital recording is a "transparent" reproduction of the reality, the double mimesis concept doesn't apply to it because the capture parameters depend on the viewing device, the display itself with its characteristics reinterpreting the containers digital information and showing it accordingly. Because of the viewing conditions and the displays' performances, the picture we see on different screens differs from each and every one of it. The perceptual and emphatic experience of watching a movie on a smartphone, lap-top, TV or in a cinema gradually increases from the smallest (smartphone) to the biggest screen (cinema hall). Beside the aesthetic and visual norms which had to be readjusted for the small screens, the viewing environment can destroy and denature directorial narrative intentions. Laura Mulvey also approached the movies vanished immutability trough digital paradigm in *Death 24x a Second* where she says:

> (...) digital spectatorship also affects the internal pattern of narrative: sequences can be easily skipped or repeated, overturning hierarchies of privilege, and setting up unexpected links that displace the chain of meaning invested in cause and effect.[12]

The only way of keeping untouched the movie s entireness is by watching it in a cinema environment where the intervention of selecting chapters, pause or fast-forward is impossible. This simple fact of viewing a film inside a proper screening space, makes the spectator deliberately involved in the process, to have an immersive experience while watching a movie.

The motion picture transmediality can be experienced through all the current distribution mediums like cinema screen, DVD's or on-line streaming. Does it make any difference for the viewer, though? Rodowick think so, after

[12] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 27.

appraising the digital technology's advent on film industry, the author comes to a more subtle appreciation of medium references. Analysing the medium's specificities for Godard's movie *Eloge de L'amour* (2001) we're confronted with a stylistic anachronism: the accustomed meaning of visual supports which Godard uses for his movie are surprisingly overruled by the new ones. The story is structured on two parallel threads, present and past, and the key visual approach is based on two different supports; black&white analogue and colour saturated video. With the successive use of intermediality of paintings and by appealing to B&W essentiality, Godard invite the viewer to reconsider the image corporeality through his new aesthetic statement. The black&white 35mm film is used for today's visual stylistic approach while the colourful video format, the flashbacks, stand for the past. The meaning and the aesthetic opposition of those two references gives Godard the opportunity to a phenomenological examination of his movie support, foto-chemical and digital-video. As Rodowick comments in *An Elegy for Film*:

> curiously, the conceptual force of Godard's aesthetic choices is not completely lost when presented digitally; nonetheless, the perceptual density of the evidence of our senses is sharply attenuated. In even this well-mastered DVD, not only is resolution lost in the black-and-white sections, but the video images appear less color saturated and somehow more "natural". In the DVD version, the edges of two extremes are reduced to a happy medium: video color finds its home on the television monitor, while film is uprooted to a land where it will always rest an uneasy immigrant.[13]

Therefore, this transmediality is fully express when viewing the two versions of *Eloge de L'amour*, the digital video and the 35mm printed one. This exercise revealed Godard's intention to face this visual dichotomy, one of the last allegories on the present virtual life of film and the appreciation of the support corporeality. An impossible marriage between two mediums, a DVD version viewed on a TV and the 35mm print screened in cinema. In that respect we confront the current reality when "video may be the future of

[13] David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 90.

cinema, but, ironically, the color palette achieved in the second part of the movie is best accomplished when video is printed on film."[14] To enrich this transmedia theory, a different approach for this support specificity is taken by Chris Marker in *La Jetée* (1962) a movie within which the director plays with different visual paradigms to build a contiguous storyline. Marker uses the photography (paper prints) with all its corporeal dimensions for this time travel narrative structure. The prints' surface has been scratched, punched and peeled to add a different time dimension to the future that protagonist experiences. The whole *La Jetée* diegesis is film based oriented using mere film language: editing, zooms, dissolves, cross dissolves and so on. The voice over control and build the mood for the viewer except for the only "motion pictures" shot when the women, accompanied by an ambiant sound, blinks several times. That is the most impressive part of Marker's "movie" because of its sudden contradiction with the established visual style, that of a still photos. Therefore, Marker's *cineroman* specificity has been denied by the motion picture specificity, the shot with the women coming to life. Carroll had a comparative study regarding the ontic dimension of a character imprinted on film or photographed:

> (...) is a deep difference between a film image of a character, say from our imagined version of *La Jetée*, and a slide taken of that character from *La Jetée*. For as long as you know that what are you watching is a film, even a film of what appears to be a photograph, it is always justifiable to entertain the possibility that the image *might* move.[15]

Nevertheless, a different emotion is felt when we watch, or more appropriately read, *La Jetée* in printed version (Princeton University Press, 1993), supposedly a perceptual expression far from the experience of watching the same slide show on a film base projection. This paper printed edition is similar to a comic strip or a comic book version of the movie. Even compared to today franchise approach when we are used to seeing comic books adapted for the big screen, Marker's intention was to add an extra diegetic dimension to the story. The motionless visual triggers can widen the viewer's imagination which enrich

[14] Ibid.

[15] Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 64.

the whole story with complimentary plots and meanings. The photographic stillness is the norm in printed books, therefore we're not caught within a film diegetic values of scene length and transitions. We can look at the pictures, browse and stay on certain ones as long as we need to. The viewer is transmuted into a different paradigm, an exhibition hall or a museum. In this environment, subliminal aesthetic analogue codes can easily express universal meanings which on digital support have faded. In Marker's case, the negative fog value, film scratches, photographs with long exposure time, blurry edges and the photography paper surface has been used to underline and express the main character's emotions.

We assume that Marker's movie, like many other, being digitised will lose the creator's touch expressed through tactile, haptic remediation of texture and layers which in the digital realm are flattened, the digitising process not being a mirror of analogue structure but an interpretation of data on a mathematic matrices.

Remediating the analogue to the digital doesn't necessary means equalising and a full transfer of the intrinsic physical values of analogue into a digital signal. Digital referentiality aspires to mimic the real through the media's own stakes, computational images. The software interface through which this new reality is achieved seek for mimetic imitation, resemblance of recognisable items from the surrounding reality. Recently, even more transparent and simulated reality have been exposed as a narrative, fictionalised reality. The film's immediacy has been reconfigured by nowadays' digital technology through the AR and VR environments, within which the viewer loses his sense of space and direction as known into a 2D feature film. The claim of digital media remediation lost his goal since the digital technology became a medium itself. As Bolter and Grusin assert:

> (...) digital media that strive for transparency and immediacy (such as immersive virtual reality and virtual games) also remediate. Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real.[16]

[16] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 52.

Is it a human perceptual barrier which blocks perceiving the VR environment as a real one, or are the mediated reality cues too abstract for the viewer to connect with them? Scholars insist on highly mimetic stages achieved through 3D and VR spaces which don't respond to any viewer's expectations. Therefore, from a popular highly affordable type of show (cinema screening) nowadays we're currently facing a different approach to a trained and specialised spectator going to 3D and VR shows. The usual 2D triggers don't fit into this space anymore, attention and action continuity are broken, pro-scenic comprehension is hardly achieved by untrained viewers. The Albertian window ideal is ruined within a maze of technicalities, action cues and gyroscopic references.

Bolter and Grusin advance this theory and try to find a visual bridge to explain the Möbius strip paradox, "that hypermedia could ever be thought of as achieving the unmediated."[17] Addressing a 3D and VR space they name a second paradox where "hypermedia strive for immediacy, transparent digital technologies always end up being remediations, even as, indeed precisely because, they appear to deny mediation."[18] So, the human perceptual Holy Grail is denied by digital technology through which all the communication codes are rewrite in a totally reconfigured messages with the advent of Internet gimmick's. The multiple facets of support are melting down into a digital ocean with no hope of remediating or mimicking reality, digital finding itself in a distant realm without connections to a real person's feelings. The remediated analog support specificity makes sense for film aestheticians, which appraise within the classical motion picture approach; how a scene is shoot, how close or far to a simulated reality is and which are the used film tools; narrative's analytical approach, changes of sizes and shooting angles, the use of editing and so on.

The question is: Does the message organically adhere to the support, despite of its ontic structure? Seems like in today's digital convergence, the message changes its appearance and meaning every time we shift to another support. The film's immutability is untouched only when we see it in a cinema's

[17] Ibid., 53.
[18] Ibid., 54.

environment, every other support changing the movie's structure and message through the viewing device's interactivity, the medium's interference (on the movie's sound atmosphere) and the screen size. Nevertheless, the human perceptual threshold limits (visual and audible) are reached when we watch a movie on inappropriate environment with poor screen sizes, compared with the human optimal field of view (120º). The editing rhythm, the in shot perceptual time flow and frame sizes are seen differently based on the device we watch the movie on. The most relevant triggers for the viewer to engage with the story, the point beyond which spectators' immersion is guaranteed, are missing on interactive screens: empathy and full engagement with the story. The support transparency (Albertian window) when the viewer loses himself in the movie, means reaching a point beyond where the projection frame lines vanish, as they're being absorbed into the action they are watching. Any other viewing device, except the cinema hall, has a very defined contours, sharped edges with high contrast environment limits which distract the viewer's attention from the content he or she sees. The Internet draw a defined border between spectacular cinema and informational content. Today the work of art has lost its symbolic weight outside of the cinema halls; all the interactive denominations like DVD's, VOD, smartphones and tablets lead the viewer to another content (movie structure) which certainly differ as meaning, comprehension and emotion to the diegesis imagined by its creators. Within today's new digital media environment we're facing a revolution with disseminated weak versions of the movie's originals, the copies become the new originals for an overdraw and recycled content. Regarding today's feature film and digital media expressions, instead of the message convergence within the media, we witness an atomisation of messages caused by the hypermedia homogenisation (Internet), each expression form becomes a separate message and beyond that, every device have its own code of signs and communication trough size, interactivity and connectivity. The grip on realism is easily lost in the current digital "reality", a virtual and mediated reality reconstructed trough mathematical algorithms and decoded onto pixel array devices.

REFERENCES

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Bolter, David Jay, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000.

Caroll, Noël. *Engaging the Moving Image*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

Caroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994.

Mulvey, Laura. *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.

Pethő, Ágnes. *Cinema and Intermediality. The Passion for the In-Between*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

Rodowick, David Norman. *The Virtual Life of Film*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007.

ALEXANDRU STERIAN *is a Professor at the National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" (UNATC). From 2019 to 2022, he was Vice Rector for International Affairs at UNATC and since October 2022 he is Head of the UNATC Doctoral School. He teaches courses on cinematography, directing and production department at Master and Bachelor Degree levels and a course in the Doctoral Studies curriculum. During the last five years he published four books and numerous academic articles. An active cinematographer with a broad expertise ranging from feature films to documentary and advertising projects, which spans from 1994 to the present, he worked on seventeen features and short films, productions which have been selected at prestigious film festivals in Berlin, Cannes, Locarno, Sarajevo, Clermont-Ferrand, TIFF (Cluj-Napoca, Romania). Since 2009, he is President of the Romanian Society of Cinematographers (www.rscine.ro) and a Sony ICE representative (Independent Camera Expert) for the Sony cinema division.*