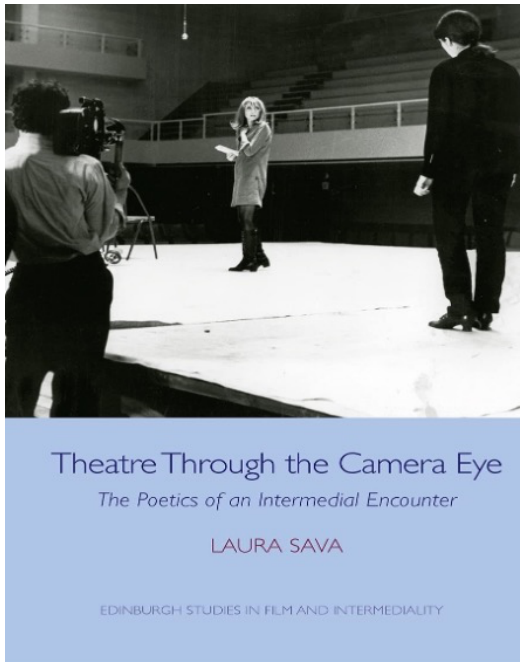


The Interweaving of Theater and Film

Fátima Chinita

Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa/ ICNOVA, Portugal
chinita.fatima@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7494-1039>



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In *Theatre Through the Camera Eye: The Poetics of an Intermedial Encounter* (2019), Laura Sava attempts to understand “the mechanisms of the two media,” film and theater (p. 2), placed in an intermedial relationship with one another. This is an important attempt, and the resulting study is a magnificent exposition of the dual relationship at stake, providing a detailed roadmap of this landscape permeated with invaluable film analyses. All the films deliberately belong to the arthouse cinematic category, evincing formal complexity and thematic nuances and representing a wide range of possibilities, covering several geographical and cultural origins. Diversity was clearly an aim, not only

in the nature of the films selected but also in the alignment of the book itself.

Whenever Sava mentions these two media, however, she is clearly thinking of them as art forms, or qualified media (as per Lars Elleström 2010, 24-27), despite the current technological turn that makes us concentrate mainly on the technical properties of art forms instead of on their semiotic import. She prefers to highlight what in theater and cinema is paradigmatic, what is congruent with a certain idea of theater that takes the most institutionalized apparatus as its norm—with a clear separation of the artwork on one side of the architectural space, and the spectators on the other side (placed in front of it). Consequently, instead of focusing on multimedial confluences stemming from postmodern theatrical practices that assemble cinematic images and sounds on stage, Sava does the exact opposite and focuses on films that integrate theater into them, analyzing case studies ranging from 1969 to 2010, many of which have become canonical by now. Maybe without noticing it—because although she mentions reflexivity, she does not stress it enough—Sava enters a meta-artistic territory that is both metatheatrical *and* metacinematic. That is why, in my opinion, the book makes such an important contribution to intermediality. Accordingly, it would have been preferable to avoid the word “medium,” especially because the concept remains somewhat vague throughout the book. Sava does not explain it in her own words, resorting instead to quick definitions provided by other commentators who do not specifically refer to either theater or cinema.¹ This is a weakness in Sava’s overall argument, but one that, nevertheless, does not taint her worthy undertaking.

The cinematic corpus selected by Sava is composed of thirteen films that, taken together, encompass many theatrical practices and cinematic structural devices. It is here, in this mixture of artistic genres and formal properties ending up in a metatheatrical (and metacinematic) theme, that the real intermediality takes place. The book comprises two parts: Part I, titled “Theatre, Interrupted: Strategies for Intermedial Embedment,” focuses on structural devices, and Part II, titled “Divided Attention: Intermedial Performers and their Split Audience,” concerns

¹ The same problem affects the concept of “performance,” which Sava nevertheless makes a point of distinguishing from theater. It would probably have been more productive to classify it from the start as essentially an impromptu behavior, although framed (i.e., observers need to realize that it is deliberate), as she hints at.

the actors' relationship with the viewers. However, these two main subjects are intertwined, because framing structures continue to be mentioned in the second part of the book, and rehearsals already play a part in chapters 2 and 3 of Part I. All the selected films contain plays-in-the-film, sometimes more than one, and some of the films also have intradiegetic audiovisual recordings. Sava considers them to be "theatrical" inasmuch as they have a performative practice (i.e., inner or intradiegetic acting) which is *para*-theatrical. A brief list of the thirteen films and their respective devices and subjects follows, in the order in which they are presented.

Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Véronique* (*La double vie de Véronique*, 1991, France, Poland, and Norway) is a metaphor of puppet theater using the practice of simple *mise en abyme* in which a single puppet performance, undertaken in an elementary school, echoes throughout the whole film and duplicates its narrative, pertaining to two girls of different nationalities that share the same name (both played by the actress Irène Jacob). Takeshi Kitano's *Dolls* (2002, Japan) opens and closes with scenes containing Banraku theater marionettes that serve as a frame-play for the rest of the film composed of three different stories whose characters very much resemble the marionettes themselves, meant to be understood as metaphorical narrators of said stories. Whereas José Álvaro de Morais's *The Jester* (*O Bobo*, 1987, Portugal) alternates between excerpts of a play-in-the-film and the rest of the filmic action; Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999, Spain and France) repeats parts of the same play with variations due to the different contexts of intradiegetic performance. Jacques Rivette's 252-minute film *L'Amour fou* (1969, France) verses on theatrical rehearsals cinematically conveyed through multiple narrative embedding. Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (2008, USA) portrays the relationship between life and the theater in a multiple regression structure what the narratologist Lucien Dällenbach calls *mise en abyme ad infinitum* (1977, 142). John Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1977, USA) depicts theatrical improvisation taken to such subversive extremes that it provokes metalepsis when the main actress steps out of her role and, unbeknownst to the play's audience, becomes her own inebriated self on stage. Eric Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter* (*Conte d'hiver*, 1992, France) focuses on the importance of text in a theatrical play by means of the competition between art forms, a phenomenon traditionally known as the *parergon*. Whereas Manoel de Oliveira's *I'm Going Home* (*Je rentre à la maison*, France and Portugal, 2001) portrays

the artificial aesthetics of traditional theater; Theo Angelopoulos's *The Travelling Players* (*O thiasos*, 1975, Greece) combines Brecht's distancing effects with the spectators' cinematic involvement and absorption. Louis Malle's *My Dinner with André* (1981, USA), featuring the actors André Gregory and Wallace Shawn as fictional versions of "themselves," highlights the power of language to convey performances that are not seen in the film, corresponding to the technique of ekphrastic monologue. Jonathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987, USA), featuring a monologue authored and acted by Spalding Gray in his very own stand-up comedy style, reinforces the cinematic operation of memory and its translation to film via a staged play. Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* (2010, UK), based on its namesake play by Andrea Dunbar, stresses the mismatch between the autobiographical reality of the original play is made and its artistic conveyance by actors who imperfectly mimic the lip-syncing of monologues, thus deliberately revealing the technique's artificiality and unmasking such monologues as unreliable ones.

Additionally, certain theatrical subjects such as illusion, memory, fictional worlds, and artistic truth, are openly approached in the films' analyses. Even though the analyses provide ample food for thought, the book lacks a more personal theoretical position about theater conveyed *through* cinema that could rise above the somewhat scattered discourse of other commentators. Moreover, in the epilogue, Sava observes that "this book has not explicitly asked what it is about the filmic representations of theatre that appeals to filmmakers and scholars alike" (p. 213). This, however, is a very pertinent question to ask and one that should have been answered, even if only cursorily, because it has further implications for the theme itself.

Indeed, the diegetic presence of "theatrical scenes, [actors'] performances, rehearsals, monologues," which Sava reinforces (p. 11), is not just an explicit reference to the theater (even if a "transformative" one). These occurrences are also—by osmosis—a representation of cinematic creation, of cinematic illusion, of cinematic self-conception. It is true, as Sava contends, that theater and film have some methodologies in common, namely repetition, involving rehearsals and different performances/takes (p. 54). However, the differences imputed by Sava to the two art forms are less obvious. One thing is certain: in a pure form, theater is consumed live; cinema is forever deferred. Everything else may be open to debate—including cinema's

pejorative “theatricality” and theatrical remediation or capture, which Sava alludes to on pages 54 and 56, respectively.

To concede that “theatricality” is prejudicial on film because of the medial difference between the two art forms—as Sava is ready to acknowledge—is implicitly to admit that there can never be theater in cinema, only filmed plays which, per Bay-Cheng, are “distorted” (quoted on p. 44). However, Sava does not consider her examples as filmed plays, quite the opposite, in fact. Therefore, there is a gap in her reasoning. Following her rationale as she presents it would lead us to conclude that such examples are not theater. Such a conclusion on my part is rather rhetorical and, to be honest, quite useless from an empirical perspective. It serves only as a reminder that much-underdeveloped theory can harm excellent analyses that should be able to stand on their own. It is quite logical, after all, that the forms of theater seen in films, and deployed through excerpts, are not the real theatrical experience, nor should they be misunderstood as such. They are, in Sava’s own words, “interrupted theatre” (p. 17), but no less important than cinema.

The title of Sava’s book is the real key to this equation: *Theatre Through the Camera’s Eye*. In the end, Sava’s book says as much about cinema (or more) as it does about theater. The selected films were chosen because they are “theatrical” and not really theater. The list contains allusions, tributes, fusional and hybrid works, as well as theatrical incrustations whose nature sometimes needs to be highlighted through a different directorial and/or performance style. They are, per Dällenbach, cinematic *mise en abyme(s)* of theatrical practices, either fictional, when they pertain to a downright fictional universe, or enunciative, when they concern the creators and/or consumers of the story(ies). Since the *mise en abyme* takes place inside a work of art (a film or a play, or a play-in-the-film), both categories are, in fact, intradiegetic. The so-called fictional creators and spectators emulate real extradiegetic counterparts. In a way, they represent what takes place outside of a work of art for it to exist and be appreciated (e.g., rehearsals). Due to the spatial coincidence of the theatrical and cinematic apparatuses and the existence of intradiegetic audiences in several of the films in the corpus, the extradiegetic production and reception are called forth and duplicated. *The Jester* and *All About My Mother* reverse the roles of creators and spectators often because they intermesh several excerpts of “theater” and of audiovisual media. The real is theatricalized and cannot be distinguished from illusion.

Additionally, many of the films in the corpus represent several other art forms as well, which makes them even more intermedial, by Sava's own admission. Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter*, for example, also includes photography and sculpture. As a matter of fact, in Rohmer's case, Sava is driven to declare cinema's superiority over theater because the finale of Shakespeare's play-in-the-film *The Winter's Tale* "shows and tells of a reunion, whereas the film that incorporates it not only shows and tells of its own reunions but also intensifies and orients theatre's showing" (p. 145). The same argument can be extended to all films in the corpus because they are the *containers* of theater; it is up to them to show theater, which they do in a cinematic way. They are not only reflexive; they are self-reflexive as well, inasmuch as they point to cinema's overall artificiality and to their own specific construction.

In choosing to introduce theater in their films in one form or another, the aforementioned directors that Sava insightfully selected for her book have called attention to their own art *as art* and have positioned themselves as creators across several art forms, literally becoming the subject of intermediality. Thus, Sava's corpus is both metatheatrical *and* metacinematic. Ultimately, *Theatre Through the Camera Eye* should interest not only researchers of intermediality but also those of metacinema (i.e., cinema on cinema), proving—if proof was needed—that intermediality derives from self-reflexivity as I advocate elsewhere (Chinita 2022).

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