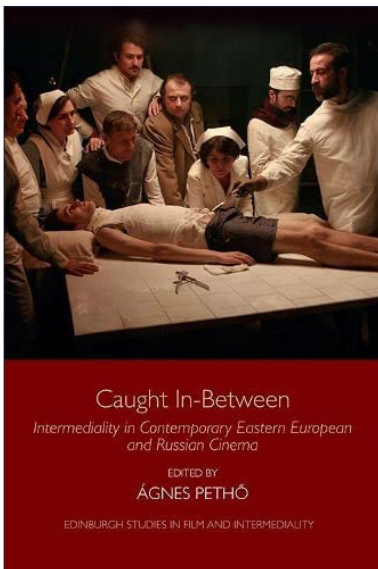


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In-Betweenness in the Post-Media Age



Review of:

Caught In-Between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema,
Ágnes Pethő (Ed.),
Edinburgh University Press, 2020

Ágnes Pethő is Professor of Film Studies at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) where she coordinated the Department of Film, Photography and Media. She is also the executive editor of the English language international peer reviewed journal, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film and Media Studies* and manager of several research programs. Her main research interests focus on intermediality and self-reflexivity in the cinema, theory of word and image relations, film and the other arts (film and painting, film and photography, film and literature, etc.), film in the post-media age, the poetics of modern and postmodern cinema. These areas of research have materialised in Pethő's publishing work which includes titles such as: *Cinema and Intermediality*. *The Passion for the In-Between* (2011) and the edited volumes: *Words and Images*

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on the Screen: Language, Literature, Moving Pictures (2008), *Film in the Post-Media Age* (2012), *The Cinema of Sensations* (2015) published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

In the very recently published book titled *Intermedial Encounters: Studies in Honour of Ágnes Pethő*, editors Melinda Blos-Jáni, Hajnal Király, Mihály Lakatos, Judit Pieldner and Katalin Sándor acknowledge Pethő's theoretical grounding work applied in film analysis, known and cited worldwide. For researchers of cinematic intermediality, her writings are not only foundational works but also texts that capture and subtly analyse the medial layering of the live film image and its nuanced inter-art connections, pointing at the in-betweenness of the painterly, the photographic, and the cinematic and inspiring further reflection (16). The editors end the foreword of *Intermedial Encounters* by quoting Ágnes Pethő's view on the necessity of doing research on socially embedded media use and intermedial relations. These endeavours „can help us to see the world in its complexity and thus to orient ourselves in it, to approach issues of art, culture, and social reality in its broadest sense in a critical, (self-) reflexive way, with greater empathy and sensitivity” (19).

In the current work, *Caught In-Between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema. The Art of In-Betweenness in Contemporary Eastern European Cinema*, intermediality is looked upon as a mode of investigating the variety of in-between strategies employed by contemporary Eastern European and Russian filmmakers, as effective means to communicate how the cultures of the region are caught in between East and West, past and present, emotional turmoil and more detached self-awareness. The East Europeans seem to be continuously struggling with the state of permanent transition the area has plunged into since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist Regimes. The multiple views and voices are structured in three main parts: *Entangled Sensations*, *Cinema in-between the Arts*, *Immersion into Memory*, *Culture and Intermediality* and *Reflections upon Reality, Representation and Power*.

This ensemble of studies sheds light on the Eastern psyche, social and political mind frame, as represented in various Eastern national cinemas. Ágnes Pethő manages to bring together a body of works that shows how the intermediality present in films can access new areas of meaning, encouraging spectators towards a more reflexive approach. In his book titled *Romanian Cinema: Thinking Outside the Screen* (2021), Doru Pop observes how these new linkages allow for circuits of meaning are formed, circuits that are not present in the images but belong to the outside mode of thinking generated within the intervals opened up by the filmmakers. In a similar manner, Pethő edits together works that open up a new way of thinking, creating theoretical linkages pointing towards the fact that the cinemas of Eastern Europe are looking something that actively ‘performs’ something, and not merely ‘is’ (4). The East Europeans resists containment and allows glimpses into an unstable and densely layered world, experienced with often contradictory perceptions.

As a practitioner, dealing both in non-fiction and fiction, I believe that the East can be defined as a transitional space where histories often overlap. Eastern Europe is characterised

by a state of in-betweenness, developed through its history as a way to survive the various political, social and cultural changes that occurred in this particular geographical space. Eastern Europeans have developed particular mechanisms of coping with sudden changes, with chaotic existences and an uncertainty of what the present and the future holds. These traits have made their way into the national Eastern cinemas, posing new ways of seeing and engaging with a cinematic text.

The first part of the book, *Entangled Sensations, Cinema in-between the Arts*, brings together works dealing with the female identity and the relation cinema and spectators form with objects and sculptural art. Hajnal Király's article titled *Intermedially Emotional: Musical Mood Cues, Disembodied Feelings in Contemporary Hungarian Melodramas* explores how extra-diegetic music doesn't reinforce the bodily expression of emotions in these melodramas, it rather complements visual stylisation: it is independent and initiates a dialogue with the image in a contrasting, competing way (41). Király observes how an unconventional image-sound relationship emerges, exploring the post-communist crisis of patriarchy. In the article titled *Black-and-White Sensations of History and Female Identity in Contemporary Polish and Czech Cinema*, Judit Pieldner elaborates on the fact that monochrome cinematic representation tends to make the viewer rethink the relationship between 'reality' and representation, to be engaged in a process of abstraction. Pieldner analyses various film titles, such as *Cold War*, *I, Olga Hepnarová*, *Ida*, in order to understand how the black and white representation builds a perceptual heterogeneity of the digital monochrome, marked by an awareness of the old while sensing the new regarding women in Eastern Europe. In their book titled *Naștera Cetățencei Democratice*, Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu elaborate on the changing gender roles in post revolution contemporary times. The two authors analyse how Romanian women adapted to the change of regime — "neither men nor women had the experience of a state that functioned as a provider of government services, but the experience of a state that provided care services in exchange for the exercise of paternalism unconditional. Liberation from the ubiquitous state is extremely confusing, because this state relieves man of the burden of freedom, dealing with him as a minor under guardianship. For both women and men the state was the great, omnipresent and omnipotent patriarch. Liberation from the strata patriarchy is a huge relief but also a very confusing experience" (2019, 252). This particular shift in power structure is a major change for women, as men often become disenfranchised because the loss of jobs, incapable for keeping the traditional patriarchal status in contemporary times. Women in Eastern Europe managed to take up the role of money earners, besides the ones appointed to them by the traditional patriarchal order, thus deconstructing the patriarchy form within.

Ágnes Pethő and Mareike Sera elaborate articles on how sculptures and objects define themselves in cinema, opening up spaces of intermedial in-betweenness. In her analysis titled *Sculpture and Affect in Cinema's Expanded Field: From Aleksey Gherman's Hard to Be a*

God to Aleksey Gherman Jr's Under Electric Clouds, Ágnes Pethő analyses how the Gherman father and son directing duo enfold sensations of the plastic arts through the intervention of sculptural elements. Sculptural formations present in the compositions are complementing the narrative and the language, offering deeper subtextual meanings to the text. Sculpture present in cinema can convey complex allegories of contemporary human existence, unravelling the very fabric of the world (86). Mareike Sera is interested in the works of Jan Švankmajer, especially in how the director engages object worlds on-screen. Objects are not approached as something already known. Rather, the films re-negotiate the conditions of communication (92). Sera's article is titled *Intermedial Densities in the Work of Jan Švankmajer: A Media-Anthropological Case Study*, it points to the fact that she is interested in exploring the shift from epistemological towards ontological concerns, while the desire to know moves towards the perception of bodily difference, wishing to engage with and accommodate bodily/objective multiplicity. Pethő and Sera develop on the fact that once objects or sculpture art are present onscreen, they are linked with various other elements that are intrinsic to cinema. These linkages develop new meanings that are situated between the cinematic and the epistemic object and sculpture acknowledgement. Thus, these work in relation with filmic constructions, creating new subtextual-meanings.

The second part of the book focuses on *Immersion into Memory, Culture and Intermediality*. The body of work composing this part encompasses usage of photographs in non-fiction, carnivalesque intermediality, trauma memorialisation and theatrical immersion. In her article titled *An Immersive Theatrical Journey through Media and Time in Alexander Sokurov's Russian Ark*, Fátima Chinita analysis how Alexander Sokurov's Russian Ark manages to stand out as a rare intermedial achievement, for two reasons: the quantity of media involved and the theatrical nature of the whole enterprise (178). Similar to Ágnes Pethő's recognition of the role sculpture can have in opening up new meanings, Fátima Chinita explores how the theatricality of Russian ark opens up a new space for meaning, alongside the mass references that are to be found in the paintings of the Hermitage, the place where the 90 minute one take movie was shot. The author concludes that *Russian Ark* is a metaphorical representation of theatrical performativity, of an act of theatre (164). If in the movie *Russian Ark* we are invited to immerse ourselves into history by the means of the *mise en scene*, in László Nemes's *Son of Saul* we are invited to explore various ways in which historical trauma and the crisis of representation may be addressed by 'acknowledging' the unrepresentable, the unspeakable within representation. In his article *Trauma, Memorialisation and Intermediality in Jasmila Žbanić's For Those Who Can Tell No Tales*, Katalin Sándor observes how elements that are outside the cinematic frame generate a space of aporetic conflict, working in an intermedial interval with the onscreen material. This kind of relation facilitates in the viewer identification and immersion into the represented traumatic events. A deep relationship is formed between viewer and off-screen events, similar to the one we have when engaging with our own reality

and historical world experiences. In the historical world hazardous experiences drive us towards the unknown future, our perception being framed by our capacities to work around the existential chaos surrounding us.

Melinda Blos-Jáni contributes to the body of texts with the article *Photographic Passages to the Past in Eastern European Non-Fiction Films*. When photographs are used in various non-fictional narratives, they gain new traits besides the indexical nature. For Barthes, cinema is a “flow of photographs,” and this very flow pulls the photographic image toward other images, leaving no room and time for the claim of its own reality (2006 81). Following on this observation, Blos-Jáni states that found footage films that combine photographs, films and videos or other type of visual documents can be understood as a dialogical form between ‘competing, unstable signs’ (128). Thus, non-fiction narratives that use photographs open up a space for the imagination that the viewer needs in order to compose the story from the photographs. For example, in Radu Jude’s *Dead Nation* photographs become traces of the world that is missing from it, and is represented by the voice-over narration in the film. Emphasising on the haptic quality of the analogue material of the glass plates in decay, indexical photographs become symbols of the lacuna and also the spaces of the imaginary, they fill in the black screen of the audio track (142). Other authors analysed by Blos-Jáni like Anca Damian, Vladislava Plančíková and Alexandru Petru Bădeleşă expand the photograph’s frames and act to integrate it into the non-fictional movie flux. Barthes’s statement is thus demonstrated, as one photograph interacts with a larger compositional frames or it is pulled towards a different one, that photograph is bound to give in its own indexical nature and create a new, complex and fluid one.

In the chapter titled *Trickster Narratives and Carnavalesque Intermediality in Contemporary Romanian Cinema* Christina Stojanova discusses intermediality generated by the inclusion of sequences featuring conspicuously heterogenic audio-visual media — the shooting of a film, TV reportage, a home video — and the key role it plays within the works by Romanian directors Mircea Daneliuc and Lucian Pintilie, as well as in films by Corneliu Porumboiu and Gabriel Achim from the New Romanian Cinema generation. Stojanova argues that by encompassing amateur, improvised or institutional audio-visual media, cinema creates new linkages that pass the master narrative, creating a complex experience for the viewers through the engagement of the spontaneity of the collective unconscious, thus predicating an active participation. Intermediality of various video sources can be seen as a trace of realism, validating the director’s point of view as being grounded in the historical reality. Following this line of thought, directors such as Pintilie, Daneliuc or Porumboiu question the amateur video veridicality, they bring into discussion the news bulletins claims, most likely endowing them with new and deeper philosophical and moral meanings. Eastern European cinema can be characterised as a rebel one. Directors see fit to question the official narratives. They filmmakers encompass heterogenic audio-visual media into cinematic texts,

exploring the nature of our chaotic eastern reality and shedding new light onto it through the intermedial linkages they create.

The last part of the book is titled *Reflections upon Reality, Representation and Power*. Ágnes Pethő brings together articles dealing with the in-betweenness that opens up once various cinematic texts are brought together. *The Real and the Intermedial in Alexander Sokurov's Family Trilogy* by Malgorzata Bugaj opens the third part of the book. Bugaj is exploring what promotes the impression of reality, and when does medium awareness come into play? The author traces Sokurov's processes in his Family Trilogy as it successfully opens a dialogue with other media not only by featuring them directly, but also by appropriating their techniques. Viewed together, these films create what could be interpreted as an orchestrated search for the trace of the material in cinema.

In his article *This is Not Magritte: Corneliu Porumboiu's Theory of Representation*, Zsolt Gyenge puts under scrutiny the simple categorisation of Corneliu Porumboiu's work as realist, stating that the director is merely theorising the possibilities of Realism, more precisely those of the representation of reality (203). Gyenge observes how the ways in which images, signs and symbols can communicate and the difference between the possibilities and limits of the various systems of signification seem to be crucial in almost all of Porumboiu's films. Using the film *Police, Adjective* as a theoretical starting point, the author examines the last scene of the movie in which a confrontation between the main character and his superior police officer occurs. Gyenge concludes that the real chasm is between reality and its representation in a system of significations, where meaning seems to be encoded in advance in the very nature of the pre-established set of signs that can be used (i.e. definitions in a dictionary, the language of the law). Thus the character is trapped in a paradoxical impossible situation, where his own moral values are negated by the system. This is a particular position in which many Eastern Europeans find themselves. While apparently being free to think and act as they wish, the Eastern political and social systems have a particular way of cutting one short of his morals and desires. This is the main source of the Eastern tragic-comical nature, a trait that helps inhabitants deal with oppressive regimes, kleptocracies and corruption, while also maintaining some of the most humane notions of acceptance and inter-human relationships besides some of the most pristine natural habitats that can be found in Europe. Maybe these are a consequence of the chaotic and quasi-organised way of life lived in the East, safe from the Cartesian Crisis troubling Western Europe and from the chaotic or autocratic regimes to be found elsewhere.

In the article titled *Intermedial Détrompe l'Oeil and Contemporary Polish Narrative Cinema*, Gabriel Laverdière questions the role video and digital images play in minor national cinemas, especially in the Polish one. Of course, nowadays almost all films are digitally created due to the advances in digital sensor technology, thus we can only speak about the role video has in such narratives. The author mentions the fact that video aesthetics encourages the

cinematic reflective potentialities, creating a different relationship between viewer and film. Laverdière concludes that the video is synonymous with the inner social self, inviting the viewer to engage with these kind of representations in a more personal level. Of course, we have to take into consideration montage when speaking about such linkages, how are the video and the cinematic cut and constructed is paramount to the analysis of perception.

The last chapter of the book is titled *Superhero Genre and Graphic Storytelling in Contemporary Hungarian and Russian Cinema* and it is written by Bence Kránicz. Ágnes Pethő does well to end the book with this title, as the author makes an in depth dive into the clash that is going on between the East and the West. The chapter's author brings into discussion how by adapting American superhero stories, Eastern national film industries open a third space through hybridity, mixing elements of both cultures, thus attempting to destroy the oppositions between 'centre' and 'periphery'. Kránicz focuses on the Russian newly developed *Black Lightning* heroic character — a teenage hero figure who drives a flying Volga car, fighting a power hungry rich business man who wants to get the technology powering the Volga car. This is a representation of the fight between the Eastern humility and naiveté versus the ruthless businessman (a general Western construct). This kind of thinking is enmeshed into the East European thought processes, as they/we define themselves/ourselves as people living in a space of in-betweenness, where ambitions like the businessman are not generally allowed. Integrating the visual elements of comic books in the cinematic context contributes to creating hybrid spaces of post-socialist discourse. The ambivalent relationship between Western and Eastern cultures are effectively highlighted by the adaptations of ideological Western (comic book) characters in Eastern European (filmic) contexts. The East tries to gain Western like recognition by adopting super-hero tropes, despite the fact that Eastern myths do not permit such individualistic endeavours and simple categorisations between a good character and a bad one. Eastern cinematic and philosophical thinking situates itself into the middle gray area, where things are not what they seem to be. Sub-textual meanings are always present and waiting to be discovered by accessing the space of in-betweenness opened up by intermedial practices.

Caught In-Between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema is Ágnes Pethő's way of cementing a concept she has developed since the 1990's. By bringing together various scholarly voices, she illustrates that fact that scientific research isn't just a way of creating knowledge, but also an opportunity for community building based on joint professional thinking.

Author's short bio:

Mihai Gavril Dragolea specializes in documentary and hybrid fiction filmmaking. He made some films that premiered at important film festivals in Europe and have garnered awards. Some of them are *The Golden Robot* (2015), *PhoeniXXX* (2017), *One month of their life* (2017), *Everything for Riana* (2020), and *A dog's life* (to be released in 2022). His documentaries focus on the destitute and unrepresented in the media, be it humans or other type of vulnerable sentient beings, on which subject he is also doing a PhD. He lectures on Documentary Practice, among other subjects, at the Faculty of Theater and Film of Babeş-Bolyai University.

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