

# THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

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## INTERMEDIALITY AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY IN PAUL AUSTER'S OEUVRE



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Debrecen, 2014

### **a. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation**

Contemporary critical opinion regarding intermediality<sup>1</sup> between different forms of art reflects a continuous awareness of the blurred boundaries between film and literary text, pointing at their interconnectedness, intermingling, as well as transmutation. As film and literature have different signifying systems, comparative analyses between the two are often limited to issues of adaptations, modes of engagement, and the ways of changing apparatuses of enunciation. Paul Auster is one of those writers whose works offer a compelling vision of the nature of literary works strongly influenced by the cinematic/graphic medium and of films that incorporate elements from other art forms: literature, photography, and concept art.

Although there has been a continuous interest in the intertextual dimension of Auster's writing, no research investigating the intermedial references in his oeuvre has been attempted. What justify the chosen theoretical foci of my dissertation are, on the one hand, to fill this gap in the critical body of Auster's oeuvre; on the other hand, to understand the cultural underpinnings and the motivations behind the various representations of artistic/narrative acts—whether literary, graphic, or cinematic—in his works. Thus the basic aim of my proposed thesis is to answer a deceptively simple question: can the various media forms in Auster's oeuvre (film, photography, literary narrative, concept art) reinterpret and influence each other in a state of in-between existence? Is there an interactive chemistry at work in Austerian intermediality? By “in-between existence” I mean a mutual influence, an interactive relationship in which media do not exclude or dominate but reinterpret and still preserve one another.

Regarding the concrete analysis of Auster's works, the justification of my investigation can be found in the different ways through which the participant-narrators can construct and deconstruct their (artistic/narrative) selves<sup>2</sup> with the help of media forms, can double one another, while thematizing the mutually reflexive relationship of the media they become part of. The dynamic medial interplays denote a particular formation of cultural meanings that enable the characters to construct a specific artistic universe for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Interpreting Rolf Kloepper, Ágnes Pethő prefers the term *transmediality*, to denote the blurring boundaries between film and literature and the continuous shifts regarding their apparatuses of enunciation. The term is also an analogy with Genette's concept of transtextuality (*Képtvitek* 34).

<sup>2</sup> Existing Auster criticism frequently concentrates on the analysis of selfhood from a metaphysical perspective, an approach I do not want to exclude; rather, I wish to view it from a different angle when examining the various possibilities of constructing or deconstructing a narrative as well as artistic identity and its implications with regard to intermediality.

My dissertation is an examination of a completely unexplored facet of the Paul Auster canon, as it will discuss the aspects of intermediation between different media forms, in relation to the formation of narrative identity in this author's works such as literary texts, films, and collaborative projects. Although I will occasionally refer to Auster's critical writing too, my dissertation will primarily be concerned with a selected body of his fiction and films. It will offer an intermedial reading of Auster's various texts through theories of adaptation as well as theories of image and text, also seeking to discuss the ways in which the visual elements affect storytelling in Auster's fiction and stimulate an interactive reader engagement. What justifies an intermedial interpretation in Auster's case is that he exposes a heightened sensibility for, and awareness of, the materiality and mediality of artistic practices and of cultural practices in general. All of his characters become artists (writers, photographers, performers, concept artists) and are engaged in some kind of art form through which they not only express themselves, but also erase and restore their identities in a continuous cyclical journey towards self-discovery. Moreover, some of these artistic acts blur the boundaries between the lived experience of performing a piece of art and the representation of it. What is it that lies behind the urge of the artist to engage in a performance over and over again, even if that act threatens to rob him of his life? What sacrifices are everyday people able to undergo in order to create a work of art or to find pleasure in it? Is an artwork worth one's life? Is pleasure to be found in the public's euphoria bound to the anticipation of the artist's imminent death?

In the present work the field of intermedial references—in the forms of individual reference (reference of a media product to another individual media product) and system reference (reference to another medial semiotic system)—will form the core. On the one hand, it is the way Auster adapts and subverts numerous intermedial references in his works that I will explore. On the other hand, my thematic focus will be on how—by what means—these intermedial relationships influence, and are thematized in, the building up and/or deconstruction of a coherent narrative identity in Auster's texts, with special emphasis on how media intrusions connect distinct spaces: the represented space inside a specific medium (film, photography, fiction), the space of representation (of the medium itself), and the extra-textual space of the reader/spectator. I will argue that Auster's works can be classified according to the different forms of intermedial references that they express, regarding both content and form. The forms of references I distinguish in his oeuvre are: the cinema motif, the photograph motif, individual intermedial reference, and intermedial system reference; the

last of which, in Rajewsky's view (52), indicates that the media product uses its own media-specific means, in order to refer to a different semiotic system of another medium.

### **b. Sketching the employed methods**

By making use of the notion of heterotopic intermediality the dissertation uses a nonhierarchical approach in discussing intermedial relations, yet, there are concepts in intermedia studies that might appear to be referring to various types of domination. My understanding of intermedial in-betweenness refers to intermedial relations that continually redefine and reexplore medial boundaries, so that various media forms can support and renew each other. If there is an in-between, there must be elements that make it possible, since an intermedial encounter requires elements that preexist the encounter. Thus, a tension occurs that continuously mobilizes, transforms, and produces more interactions. Indeed, there is a certain initial dominance and tension inherent in every media encounter, but this dominance is always shifting.

The shifting nature of the various kinds of media-presence may bring forth either a nonhierarchical or an extremely tense, hierarchical relationship. When using the term heterotopic intermediality, I refer to a mutually supportive, dialogic connection between media. In order to demonstrate that various media forms can be conjoint in a dialogical encounter (in which both difference and hybridity can coexist), I will use the terms "source text" and "adaptation" as well as "transmitting medium" and "receiving medium." Werner Wolf uses the terms: "dominant" medium (which is used by the work in question) and "non-dominant" medium (the medium referred to), that is actually present as an idea, as a signified and hence as a reference ("Intermediality Revisited" 23),<sup>3</sup> yet in my understanding such "semiotic dominance" is an absolutely necessary phenomenon for setting up intermedial in-betweenness in the case of heterotopic intermediality, since through intermedial imitation and/or thematization the medial other can make its presence, therefore both media are involved in the text.

There is, however, another type of intermediality that can be described in terms of tension and continuous struggle for medial authority: *palimpsestuous intermediality*. If

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<sup>3</sup> Media dominance is often a difficult question, because it refers to quantity, that is, to the question that media converge either in parts or in the whole text. In various media combinations one can find complete convergence of both media, that is, there is no dominance at all (e.g., opera, in which music and lyrics have the same importance). It is noteworthy that in using terms such as "media dominance" or "media authority," intermedia theorists do not refer to the fact that one medium is more valuable than the other; the concepts merely refer to issues of quantity within one work of art.

heterotopic intermediality is characterized by mutually reflexive, supportive, and nonhierarchical media relations, palimpsestuous intermediality foregrounds a multiplication of media layers, continually challenging, erasing, and overwriting each other, while they conceal as well as reveal their medium specificities. Such an increasingly tense relation can be understood in a narrow sense (that is, inside a medium, such as in the case of word and image relationship) or in a broad sense (that is, outside of a medium, such as in the case of the relationship between the source text and the adaptation). Media rivalry<sup>4</sup> manifests itself in constructing one medium's authority by deconstructing, displacing, or repressing another medium's authority. This process involves jumps, juxtapositions, and foldings between media representations and brings forth an intermedial trespassing that seems to be uncanny.<sup>5</sup> When the medial Other attempts to take charge, threatening to erase, assimilate, and repurpose the medium in question, a kind of intermedial anxiety occurs, that is, the repressed medium emerges as something that "ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud 10). In this sense, I tend to link intermedial uncanniness to the palimpsestuous-type of intermediality, because embedded representations might reveal the very representational layers of different media. The appearance of the medial double is the major source of intermedial uncanniness: it suddenly emerges, obstructs the medium in question, and apparently vanishes to return even more intensely. It generates a sense of *déjà vu* in the readers/spectators as well, since it reminds them of the medium referred to. The tensional differences between media forms, the intermedial uncanniness are often staged in Auster's various artworks as an allegoric confrontation/relationship between characters and/or as a building up and/or deconstruction of one character's (narrative) identity.

The above-mentioned analytical categories look at the questions of intermediality from a literary perspective. My approach is also strongly related to literary theory, and this, I feel,

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<sup>4</sup> Discussing the representations of doppelgängers in books and films, Kittler talks about a competition between media, linking it exclusively to the uncanny in Freudian sense. He contends that camera tricks can foreground the return of the imaginary more powerfully than books did before. "[F]eature films take over all of the fantastic or the imaginary, which for a century has gone by the name of literature" (154).

<sup>5</sup> Discussing the concept of the palimpsest and palimpsestuous intermediality, Ágnes Pethő offers an analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's art, and uses the paradigm of the "white page" (originally Mallarmé's notion, directly cited by Godard) as well as *camera stylo* (a term exclusively linked to the French New Wave, meaning camera as the pen of the writer), as these define the film screen as a surface awaiting the inscriptions and reinscriptions of various signs, that is, a surface that should be filled over and over again. These terms come to be associated with the concept of the *palimpsest*, the idea of a text that is created by repeated processes of erasures and overwritings (*Köztes képek* 184-232). Jefferson T. Kline's psychoanalytic approach also focuses on French New Wave cinema. He claims that filmmakers "may invoke one text to displace and/or repress another" and "the texts screened come to function as screens in the sense that Freud gave to the term, as a 'memory behind which lies a submerged and forgotten' phrase, event, or, in this case, text" (4). Both Pethő and Jefferson use these terms as referring to cinema, yet, I believe such associations may not be exclusively tied to moving images, but to other artforms as well.

may be justified by the very fact that most of my analysis refers to processes of adaptation (from a literary text to a cinematic/graphic/conceptual artwork).<sup>6</sup>

The method of my proposed inquiry will primarily be informed by the (close) reading strategies of intermediality theories. The dissertation will also concentrate on the nexus of literature, cinema, and photography; therefore, it will deploy comparative methodologies, will investigate basic similarities and differences between the given media forms, based on the theories of Linda Hutcheon, Brian McFarlane, William J. T. Mitchell, and Ágnes Pethő. Their concepts, with links to structuralist and poststructuralist narratology, will serve as a theoretical toolbox also for discussing the different functions of the cinema and photograph motifs in Auster's oeuvre.

Each of the four chapters is a case study of Auster's one or two selected works. Although there are numerous movies/novels (e.g., *Blue in the Face*, *Lulu on the Bridge*) that may also deserve detailed analysis, the present paper will focus on certain representative cinematic, literary, graphic, and collaborative texts in order to be able to offer an investigation in terms of intermediality as well as regarding the formation of narrative/artistic identity. Therefore, I decided on works that I consider being quintessential intermedial manifestations of Auster's oeuvre: *Smoke* (1995), *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* (2007), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), *City of Glass: the Graphic Novel* (1994), and *Double Game* (2007).

### **c. Enumerating the results**

Auster's fondness for intermediation renders intermedial elements and the various interactions between media forms a major structuring and supportive device of his oeuvre. At the heart of my intermedial investigation lies not only the simple purpose to locate boundaries of various media presence in the selected texts, but also to identify the dynamic movements/shifts from and to different media that challenge, even transgress, widely accepted intermedia concepts, or, on the contrary, aim at preserving them. Heterotopic intermediality as well as metaintertextual metaintermediality result continuously supporting and being formed by the construction and deconstruction of artistic/narrative identities.

In Auster's works, the participant-narrators can construct and deconstruct their artistic/narrative selves in and through various artforms; artforms that are in a mutually

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<sup>6</sup> Intermediality, in my view, is a concept that is continually reshaped, denoting a form of operation in progress. Certainly, the fields of "intermedia" are in need of discussion and extension, especially in terms of generating a coherent system that would provide a unified framework for all intermedial phenomena (such as audiovisual, digital, and so on).

reflexive intermedial relationship with each other. Such an “in-between” existence generates an interconnectedness between media forms, that is, media do not dominate but reinterpret and preserve one another. Artistic creation is not merely a means of self-expression for Auster’s characters; it can be understood as a strategy of survival and of finding one’s place in the “world.” One can witness a manifold intermedial presence in Auster’s oeuvre that manifests itself through intermedial imitations and thematizations. Intermedial occurrences and their relationships are responsible for, and are thematized in, the shaping up of an artistic/narrative identity in Auster’s own and collaborative texts, a process in which reader/spectator experience is closely tied to any of these intermedial practices.

Therefore, while establishing a specific intermedial scheme in Auster’s works under discussion, I have come to the realization that a pattern of intermedial practices is at work; not only particularly present in Auster’s works, but also generally valid for any intermedial construction. His intermedial works are comprised of three indispensable elements—or stages if you like—*intermedial uncanniness*, *intermedial suturing*, and *intermedial survival*.

Subsequently, character interactions with different media forms function in Auster’s collaborative projects as healing, life-maintaining, and -enhancing devices. In *Smoke*, for example, the characters’ continuous construction and deconstruction of their selves mirror, generate, and are determined by intermedial incursions. Auggie’s cigar shop signifies freedom, lack of hierarchy (symbolically pointing to the in-between coexistence of media forms), and interpersonal relations. Elsewhere, intermedial imitations and thematizations serve as means for identity construction (for David Zimmer) and deconstruction (Hector Mann). The script-like descriptions in *The Book of Illusions* can be interpreted as a specific intermedial dialogue in which each medium participates with its own system specificities.

The unique intermedial dialogue that characterizes *Double Game* relies on a repeated mingling of fact with fiction. The two authors’ self-conscious mutual intrusions and their use of each other’s works function as means of self-reflection and self-thematization, thus generating metaintertexts. Moreover, the self-conscious use of various intermedial elements together with these metaintertexts generate what can be called a *metaintertextual metaintermediality*. Metaintermediality can, in fact, be observed in Auster’s and Calle’s individual works as well. *The Book of Illusions*, *Smoke*, or *Double Game* will be cases in point, where certain characters intentionally use and live through different media forms.

**d. The author's publications published in the field of the dissertation**

1. "Identity Shaped by Intermediality: Monstration and Narration in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusion (2002)*" *(Inter)personal communication in a(n) (inter)cultural context*. Pitești: University of Pitești Publishing House, 2013. 27-37. Print.
2. "Intermedial Thematizations and Imitations in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*" *ELLE Proceedings*. Ed. Maior Enikő. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2013. 164-71. Print.
3. "On Media Combinations and Identity (De)construction in Paul Auster's *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*." *ELLE Proceedings*. Ed. Liviu Cotrău. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2012. 179-86. Print.
4. "On Intermedial References in Paul Auster's and Wayne Wang's *Smoke (1995)*" *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series 1.1 (2011) (new series)*. 20-31. Web.
5. "The Cigar Shop, the Frozen Father, and the Christmas Tale: Aspects of Intermediality in Wayne Wang and Paul Auster's *Smoke (1995)*". *CrosSections*. Vol. 2: Selected papers in literature and culture from the 9th HUSSE conference. Ed. Andrew Rouse, Gertrud Szamosi and Gabriella Vöö. Pécs: Molnár Nyomda, 2010. 377-89. Print.
6. "Penetrating the Labyrinth of Endless Steps: Identity, Space, and Narrative in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* and/or *City of Glass*." *The Round Table 1. 2 (2008)*. Web.
7. "On the Uncanny Double in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*" *The Round Table 1. 1 (2008)*. Web.
8. "New York City Anxiety." *HJEAS (Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies) 15.1 (2009)*: 202-05. Print.
9. "The world is an illusion: The Cinematic Storytelling in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*." *Partiumi Keresztény Szemle*. 2008-1. Nagyvárad (Oradea): Partiumi Egyetemi Kiadó, 2008. 117-28. Print.