

Cinematicity in Media History
edited by Jeffrey Geiger and Karin Littau

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
(ISBN: 978-0-7486-7611-8). 244pp.

Guillaume Lecomte (University of Glasgow)

Cinematicity in Media History is a collection assembled by film and literature scholars Jeffrey Geiger and Karin Littau (University of Essex). By focusing on the notion of cinematicity, or ‘cinematic trace’, the editors set out to examine the variety of forms and effects embraced by this concept across media (p.3-4). Affiliated with the field of Media Studies, the collected works challenge the traditional ‘compartmentalised approach’ of film history (Jenkins 2007). Here, cinema is aligned with the field of intermediality, a term for ‘remediation, premediation and cross-media phenomena’ (p.2). Within this context, media define themselves and exist in their relation to one another. In this regard the editors speak of ‘media ecology’ to describe this framework of influences and interferences (p.3).

Given this intermedial approach, the focus on cinematicity aims at redefining the interrelated evolution of the cinematic experience with other media rather than their opposition. The theoretical overview offered in the introduction is thus a necessary reading to fully understand what the notion of cinematicity encompasses. By pointing to the lack of consensus on the definition of this concept, the editors first dismiss the idea of ‘medial purity’ (p.2). Similarly to the ‘literariness’ of literature (Jakobson 1981, p.750), cinematicity traditionally suggested the set of properties specific to film: moving images, *mise-en-scène*, editing, and so on. As for Christian Metz, he

was speaking of ‘degrees of cinematicity’ to define the incursions of ‘film language’ into other art forms (Metz 1974, p.231). By rejecting these tendencies of Film Studies to ‘look inward’ (p.5), Geiger and Littau argue for cinematicity to now refer to ‘an instance of intermediality’ (p.2), an evidence pointing at the interaction between art forms. Therefore cinematicity becomes a ‘feel’ (p.2), the sense of ‘cinema as dynamic, interconnected and interrelated not only with those media it closely resembles, but with a broad range of art forms and expressive modes’ (p.8). Cinema history is here to be seen ‘as media history’, hinting at the interconnection of all media, and at the fact that they shape both the way we think and the way we think of them (p.4).

The collection is organised chronologically into four parts divided into three essays. Each of them seeks to locate the traces of cinematicity within different ideological and aesthetic frameworks from the end of the nineteenth Century onwards. The book thus highlights the reshaping of the notion of cinematicity throughout history, emphasising the malleability of the concept and its adaptability outside the traditional history of film medium.

As a result, it is in the opening and closing sections that the concept of cinematicity reveals its full critical potential. ‘Part 1: Cinematicity before cinema’ (before 1895) focuses on the vestiges of cinematicity present in proto-cinematic media (zoetrope, praxinoscope, or kinoscope for instance). For instance, in the introductory chapter Joss Marsh locates traces of cinematicity in Dickens’ writings; references to the magic lantern and its ‘dissolving view’ technique prefigured the Victorian audience’s taste for ‘fiction unchained from linear time’ that cinema will come to concretise (p.31). Further, Ian Christie concludes with an examination of ephemeral media. He

suggests that the techniques popularised by the kinoscope, praxinoscope and filoscope were not replaced by cinema but were included in it, thus conceptualising the origins of cinema as an 'ensemble of visual media' and not a 'succession model' (p.47).

As for 'Part 4: Digital Cinematicity' (from the 1980s onward), it discusses the 'death' of cinema, that is to say its production and consumption in a post-celluloid age. Here video games, animation techniques, mobile screens, smartphones, and digital photography participate in the expansion of notions of cinematicity. Ultimately this section crystallises how cinema, once a new medium, is now being influenced and reshaped by the even newer media that it participated to create. Leon Gurevitch starts with a reflection on the often simplified debate on the cinematicity of video games. He suggests that the development of animation and computer-generated images reshaped the 'aesthetic of astonishment', the 'vacillation between belief and incredulity' audience undergoes during the film experience (Gunning 1999, p.823). Here it is less the influence of cinema, but how cinema is created and perceived under the influence of media that matters. This critical question is also at the centre of the subsequent chapters. For example, Martine Beugnet highlights how the iPhone and other mobile devices recall the 'intimate' practice of the kinoscope's peephole, thus confronting us with the tension between individual and collective experiences of cinematicity (p.197).

Given the magnitude of the topic addressed here, extensive knowledge in both Film and Media Studies is a prerequisite to the reading. Postgraduate students and scholars in Film and Media Studies will certainly appreciate the full extent of the pioneering work that has been accomplished in this collection, though general readers might find it intricate. Indeed, if the heterogeneous aspect of cinematicity is

here applied to a set of very original occurrences, the multiple examples and references appear at times overwhelming. Perhaps the collection could have benefited from an extensive theoretical background in its introduction, given that each essay is an open way to a whole specific analytical field. Nevertheless this should not be seen as a weakness, but more as an overture. The concept of cinematicity developed here is compelling, and surely encourages a redefinition of how cinema ‘makes itself felt’ across media forms (photography and literature for instance) and platforms (such as gaming) (p.1). This reflection should now be taken further in our time of post-celluloid cinema as mobile and home devices certainly come to challenge the perception of cinematicity. To return to the aforementioned idea of ‘media ecology’, this collection is certainly the reflection of a complex, yet fascinating eco-system. And if ‘we must stop thinking of film history as the history of films’ (Elsaesser 2004, p.76), *Cinematicity in Media History* offers insightful essays that can surely make us do so.

Bibliography

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2004. The new film history as media archeology. *Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* 4(2-3). 75-117.

Gunning, Tom. 1999. An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator. In Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Reading*, 818-832. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Jackobson, Roman. 1981. What is Poetry. In Roman Jakobson and Stephen Rudy (ed.), *Selected Writings, Vol. III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, 740-750. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Jenkins, Henry. 2007 (16 February). From YouTube to YouNiversity. In *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
http://henryjenkins.org/2007/02/from_youtube_to_youiversity.html

(23 June 2013).

Metz, Christian. 1974. *Language and Cinema*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.