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## Book Review: Laura Sava, Theatre Through the Camera Eye: The Poetics of an Intermedial Encounter, (Edinburgh University Press, 2019)

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Laura Sava, *Theatre Through the Camera Eye: The Poetics of an Intermedial Encounter*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 256, ISBN: 9781474484282 (pb), £19.99; ISBN: 9780748697472 (hb), £80.00; ISBN: 9781474445900 (ePub), £80.00; ISBN: 9780748697489 (PDF), £80.00.

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Theoretical considerations of the relationship between the media of theatre and cinema have existed ever since the younger artform's inception. In the first half of the twentieth century, the primary concern regarded the independence of cinema as an artistic medium and its claim to be viewed separately from theatre and staged performance. Theatre was viewed as a threat to cinema's identity as an artform, and much attention was paid to the unique possibilities afforded by the cinematographic apparatus.<sup>1</sup> This focus began to dissolve with cinema's resolute mid-century establishment as a popular form of mass entertainment. In the post-war period, however, with the arrival of the European New Waves and their experimentation with reflexive narratives and intentionally jarring audiovisual presentation, critical attention shifted toward the ways in which modernist cinema began embracing a new form of an estranging, Brechtian 'theatricality'. What is generally meant by theatricality in this context is a deliberate propensity of a film toward appearing staged, exaggerated, and showy for the sake of generating a stronger critical (and often political) engagement of the audience.<sup>2</sup> Theatre, here, is invoked as a metaphor, and not a distinct subject of analysis. While valuable and taken up by countless scholarly works to this day, this application of the term 'theatricality' can, at times, be self-contradictory and methodologically unclear, not least because it generalises and trivialises a medium that is vastly heterogeneous. Quite possibly, a correction of this course lies in returning to the medium of theatre itself, in all its different forms and genres.

Laura Sava's book, *Theatre Through the Camera Eye*, takes this exact approach by establishing a clear focus on a direct form of interaction between cinema and the various forms of theatre, or as Sava calls it, the 'embedment' of the latter into the former. The central questions of this book are as follows: What can we learn about theatre and cinema by examining scenes where theatre is represented within the filmic diegesis? What does film 'think' of theatre, then, and 'how is this thinking formally carried out' (p. 210)? Sava's answers are both detailed (due to her attentive close reading of individual scenes and their formal components) and insightful (eruditely drawing on a broad selection of theoretical literature and carefully guiding the reader through the arguments).

Using the 'phenomenological observation of intermediality' (p. 7) as her theoretical method, Sava examines a large number of varied case studies across two parts and five chapters, bookended by an introduction and an epilogue. The overarching assumption of the book is that instances of cinema's (mostly) explicit invocations of theatre are inherently resourceful for the analysis of the interconnections between cinema and theatre. The book eventually proves this assumption emphatically correct. The selected corpus, comprising films produced in or after the 1960s – when cinema was no longer

viewed as encumbered by the ‘attempt of a newer medium to gain legitimacy by referencing an older and more venerable rival’ (p. 211) – is diverse in terms of genre, country of origin, and the forms and effects of its representations of theatre, which keeps the reader consistently engaged across the many sections of the book.

The brief introduction sets out the overarching theoretical concern of the book and introduces some of the key ideas related to its methodology and arguments. Here, Sava describes her approach as broadly intermedial, but remains careful to designate her use of intermediality as exclusively concerned with ‘the explicit representation of theatre in film and films in which theatre has a diegetic presence’ (p. 9). Since intermediality has a vast number of connotations and uses (some more theoretically fruitful than others), Sava’s concise categorisation in this section of the history and heterogeneity of this method is helpful. Theatre, in Sava’s book, is theorised as a medium concerned with, first, the transformation of space into a material or metaphorical stage, and second, the process of acting (that is, the designation of human or nonhuman objects as participating in a theatrical performance). This idea is introduced successfully via Ingmar Bergman’s illustration of theatricality. His experiment goes as follows: if an ordinary chair is described to the audience as somehow precious, significant, imbued with sentimental value (‘It was made for a small Chinese empress six thousand years ago’ [p. 1]), then the viewers will detest a character who dares to destroy that chair in a later scene. Here, a minimal form of theatre is shown to emerge when a quotidian object is introduced within a fictionalised context, or a kind of stage, which effectively prompts the audience to suspend its disbelief.

Each helpfully signposted sub-section focuses on usually one film and constructs an individual argument, effectively contributing to the book’s impression that instances where theatre is embedded within film cannot be reduced to a single overarching interpretation or subjected to a totalising analysis. The first part of the book, and its three chapters, examines instances where films insert actual theatrical performances into their diegeses. The type of theatre considered in the first chapter, namely puppetry, is an unexpected but exciting choice, immediately allowing Sava to focus on the visual ostentatiousness accompanying some representations of theatre within film. In the first sub-section, on *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991), Sava analyses the way in which theatre inserts in films may serve as a *mise-en-abyme*, a uniquely framed condensed version of the narrative concern of the entire film; the sub-section on *Dolls* (2002) is dedicated to the way in which Bunraku puppet theatre brackets the film containing them, framing its entirety as a quasi-theatrical work. The second chapter shifts the attention from the visuality of theatre’s representation to sound, particularly its repetition and rhythm, analysing how *The Jester* (1987) and *All About My Mother* (1999) frame

theatrical embedment using voice that is temporally disconnected and reminiscing in the former film and dramatically repeated for renewed narrative effects in the latter. The third, and maybe the best, chapter analyses the representation of theatre rehearsals in *L'Amour fou* (1969) and *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), where the framing of rehearsals using different cameras and a logically impossible, recursive narrative structure, respectively, are used to capture the unstructured nature and authenticity of the rehearsing process. The arguments of the second chapter are opaquer than those of the other two, but this should be attributed to the complex nature of the scenes and formal elements they analyse, rather than any fault in Sava's writing.

The second part focuses on the ways in which theatre represented in cinema may be shown to affect, or interact with, the diegetic theatrical audiences, and how this relationship can in turn relate to the viewer of the films themselves. *The Opening Night* (1977), *A Tale of Winter* (1992), and *I'm Going Home* (2001) all destabilise or challenge the process of spectatorship by ensuring that the film viewer is positioned to experience the diegetic theatrical performances differently from the inner-level theatre audiences. The lengthy concluding chapter, with *The Travelling Players* (1975), *My Dinner with André* (1981), Spalding Gray's memory films, and *The Arbor* (2010) used as its case studies, attempts to analyse how theatre inserts are audiovisually presented and disentangle the dialectical tensions inherent to the uses of theatrical monologue within the films, observing how they oscillate between opposite modes of audience engagement.

This part is followed by a brief epilogue, which vividly summarises the numerous observations of the book and hints at an important venue for further research, suggesting that film's propensity to embed theatre (and reflect on this embedment within its narratives) seems to affiliate it with a refusal to forgo the analogue in favour of the digital. Sava's text successfully achieves what it had set out to do all along, namely to 'place film and theatre in dialogue with one another in a way that expands understanding and appreciation of both' (p. 210). Perhaps the work's only issue is that, due to the sheer breadth and volume of its references, some of its quotations fail to engage with the quoted authors' texts in the detailed way that they deserve – a case in point is a mention of Michael Fried's notorious dichotomy of absorption/theatricality that never receives an in-depth application or contextualisation (p. 166). Still, overall, the balance which this book strikes between lucid film analysis and complex and diverse critical argumentation makes it one of the standout contributions to contemporary scholarship on theatre and/within cinema, a subject long in need of an astute theoretical intervention.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nicoll, Allardyce, *Film and Theatre* (Goemaere Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Rushton, Richard, 'Early, Classical and Modern Cinema: Absorption and Theatricality', *Screen*, 45:3 (2004), pp. 226–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/45.3.226>>; Kovács, András Bálint, 'Theatrical Styles', in *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980, Cinema and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 192–202.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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