Intermedial Thematizations and Imitations in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*

Borbála Bökös[*]

Partium Christian University, Oradea

Abstract:

Analyzing the motif of silent cinema the paper attempts to shed light on the numerous intermedial references in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*. In the novel's text the references to the cinematic medium involve a certain iconicity and imitation. The translation of effects occurs through the evocation and imitation of certain filmic techniques (zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing), and specifically through the insertion of filmscripts, which, in their turn propel the characters' (narrative) identity construction.

Keywords: intermediality, Paul Auster, American culture, literature, narrative, identity

Similarly to other works of Paul Auster that discuss the themes of uncertainty regarding the characters' identity, and the relationship between artist and his work, *The Book of Illusions (2002)* reflects upon artistic, more precisely upon cinematic creation as a medium of representations and/or illusions, while it presents the narrative identity formation of the main character as determined by the various media forms that are brought together in the novel (both explicitly and figuratively).

The narrator of the story is David Zimmer, a university professor, who loses his wife and children in a tragic plane crash. His response to this trauma emerges in his heavy drinking, depression and self-isolation, until he accidentally watches and begins to laugh at one of the silent comedies of Hector Mann. This actor is surrounded by mystery, as he disappeared from the showbiz in the 1920s. Zimmer dedicates his life to watching all of his movies and publishes a book about them, an activity that seems to draw him out of his melancholia. Then, he receives a letter from Hector's wife, who reveals to him that Hector is alive and invites him to their New Mexico home to attend the last days of the dying actor, as well as to pay tribute to his last films, never seen by anybody. The novel presents the life-story of Hector Mann and his silent movies transcribed by Zimmer into the written word.

---

[*] Borbála Bökös is Teaching Assistant at the Partium Christian University of Oradea. She is a PhD candidate at the English and American Doctoral Program of Debrecen University. She teaches American literature, American culture and civilization, Introduction to literature, and Studies in intermediality. Her area of research is intermediality, with special interest in Paul Auster's works. Email: bokosborbala@yahoo.com.

This initiates a healing process, as Hector's films become the source of happiness and motivation for Zimmer to stay alive.

According to Jim Peacock, the novel addresses a question in connection with art and aesthetics that is "whether art enhances life, precludes life or is in fact the only life we have. The very title boldly refers to itself as an aesthetic artefact. Uniquely, this book of illusions chooses to foreground a particular medium of representation—cinema" (54). Cinema appears in Auster's novel as its main theme as well as a cultural code integrated in the narrative, because it recalls the atmosphere of the silent movies in the 1920s. The construction of this special storytelling technique roots in Auster's abilities as a filmmaker and scriptwriter, as he stated in one of his interviews about the novel: "Sometimes an idea takes the form of nonfiction; in a couple of instances it took the form of screenplays" (Peters 42). I argue that in the novel descriptions similar to scripts function as sites of medial interactions and overlappings, linking the cinematic and the literary media. The scripts introduced into the literary text have the potential of exposing a rupture in the "texture" of the classical literary narrative, thus creating a heterotopic space, in which Hector Mann's fictitious films are connected to a specific identity development (narrative and/or artistic identity, in many cases both). Thus, the characters find a number of selves, each influenced by a certain medium.

On a thematic level they (Hector Mann's films) also provide sub-plots that mirror Zimmer's and Mann's artistic struggles. My intention is to demonstrate that Zimmer (re)constructs his identity precisely in the process of narrating, through inserting Mann's filmscripts into the story (intermedial imitation) and constantly discussing another medium—cinema—in his text (intermedial thematization).[1] Thus, this paper is intended to offer a summary of the most obvious examples of the above mentioned intermedial references.

In the novel's text the references to the cinematic medium involve a certain iconicity and imitation. The translation of effects occurs through the evocation and imitation of certain filmic techniques (zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing), and specifically through the insertion of filmscripts. Zimmer's attempt to write a book on the life and art of Hector Mann stems from the motivation to make up for a loss, to fill the void left after his wife and son's deaths. I will argue that Zimmer telling Mann's life story in the above-

mentioned way is a process of Zimmer's actual identity construction and a way of coping/surviving in the act of narrating itself.

Werner Wolf distinguishes two subforms of the intermedial references: explicit reference, or intermedial thematization, and implicit reference, or intermedial imitation. Intermedial thematization is present whenever another medium is mentioned or discussed in a text explicitly, when the representatives of other media also appear, for example painters and musicians as characters in a novel, and, of course, fictional viewers and listeners to music (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited," 24). Intermedial imitation occurs when the signifiers of a work or its structure are affected by the non-dominant medium, because they imitate its quality or structure. Examples of intermedial imitations include: pictorialization in realist novels, "filmicization" of fiction, and novels written as filmscripts (Wolf, "Intermediality Revisited," 25-26).

Going against Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette's definitions of "intertextuality," Dragon Zoltán insists on the use of the notion *dialogue* (as theorized by Bakhtin and Stam), and highlights "the interactive nature of any given text as an utterance necessarily and inevitably entering into dialogue with other texts or utterances" (Dragon 188). Accordingly, "while the intertext or dialogue displays a web of references that texts ostensibly share, it also operates as a hiding mechanism at the very same time" (Dragon 188). Veiling over the appearance of the intermedial space in the text has certain techniques in Auster's works. Quite often descriptions of film scenes occur in many of his novels, but most significantly in *The Book of Illusions*.

David Zimmer finds solace in the movies, more precisely, in Hector Mann's silent comedies. After the tragedy that happens to his family, Professor Zimmer isolates himself in his house and sinks into deep alcoholism. It seems that nothing can drag him out of his miserable condition until one night he sees an old film on television, starring silent comedian, Hector Mann. The footage makes him laugh, and suddenly he gets rid of his numbness.

As in many of Auster's works the sense of loss soon becomes a jumping-off point for the characters' artistic endeavor. Working through the trauma of death allows the discovery and maturation of artistic imagination for David Zimmer and Hector Mann. Similarly to the typical disconnected characters in Auster's novels Zimmer tries to quit his half human life – that is, to live in a state of numbness after Helen's death –, and to create a new self for

himself. However, as an academician used to literary studies and translations, he dedicates himself to a completely new research area, and becomes interested in the cultural implications of the cinematic medium. Thus, he transforms himself into an expert of silent films. This brings about a lacuna in the narrative: his self-narration transforms into the narration of Hector Man's life and films.

The first description of one of Hector's movies becomes symbolic for thematizing the coming together of the different media forms and the ways of suturing the intermedial gaps that occur in the narrative. The shift from Zimmer's narration to narrating a videoclip in which Mann plays a role happens smoothly, and introduces the motif of the hole. The movie's title is *The Teller's Tale*, and Zimmer watches a two-minute sequence from it, set in a bank, and featuring Hector in the role of a hard working assistant clerk. Upstairs repairmen are installing new planks in the floor of the bank manager's office. Hector is making immense efforts to continue his work—counting money—as if undisturbed, to protect his white suit from the falling dust, and to make eye contact with a pretty secretary girl:

> Each time Hector lost track of the count, he would have to start over again, and that only inspired him to work twice as fast as before. Each time he turned his head up to the ceiling to see where the dust was coming from, he would do it a split second after the workers had filled in the hole with a new plank. (Auster 11)

The always concealed hole does not only stand as symbolic for the veiling of the intermedial breaks, but also functions as a textual lacuna, and prefigures the changes that are about to happen on the narrative level. *The Teller's Tale* also thematizes and foreshadows Hector's destiny, that of the secluded artist, and the impossibility of finishing a work of art.

Watching Hector Mann's silent films, Zimmer realizes he is witnessing a dead art, yet vivid and fresh, because its cinematic language is based on images and gestures of the human body, employing a "syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis" (Auster 15), rather than on a spoken language. W. J. T. Mitchell also refers to the technological changes the film medium passed through: that is, the shift from the visual to the verbal, from the silent movies to the "talkies," thus the definition regarding the nature of "film language" becomes problematic (Mitchell 90). Auster's text brings us close to the atmosphere of the silent movies: Hollywood, the dream factory of the 1920s, its stars and directors are presented

through Hector's life and his films. The figures of the past and their magic are revealed through Zimmer's imagination, but it seems that they are entrapped by the flatness and two-dimensionality of the screen. Hector Mann's character is typical of the silent movies: his moustache and white suit serve as trademarks, his identity is reduced to the roles he plays and the gestures and movements of his body establish a unique cinematic language. The choreography of the moustache seemingly functions as a means of transcoding his thoughts, its description brings about the "iconology"[2] of Auster's text:

> Before the body, there is the face, and before the face there is the thin black line between Hector's nose and upper lip. A twitching filament of anxieties, a metaphysical jump rope, a dancing thread of discombobulation, the moustache is a seismograph of Hector's inner states, and not only does it make you laugh, it tells you what Hector is thinking, actually allows you into the machinery of his thoughts. Other elements are involved – the eyes, the mouth, the finely calibrated lurches and stumbles – but the moustache is the instrument of communication, and even though it speaks a language without words, its wriggles and flutters are as clear and comprehensible as a message tapped out in Morse code. (Auster 29)

Discussing the forms of physical expressions and the medium of slapstick in Hector's case Mark Brown states: "the appeal of slapstick lies in the unexpected resolution of its effects to provide comic effect, and Hector is an accomplished practitioner of this art form" (Brown 121). When Zimmer analyses the semiotic powers of Hector's face, he finds that "the moustache is the link to his inner self, a metonym of urges, cogitations, and mental storms" (Auster 31). As Brown observes, Zimmer "is introduced to a new form of non-verbal communication that opens the possibility of reading previously unencountered cultural forms" (121). However, the viewer only gets an illusion of knowing Hector's inner self, since the actor merely plays roles, as he is a "talented gag-man with exceptional body control" (Auster 12).

Besides the fact that the moustache introduces a way of communication between the actor Hector Mann and the spectators, it also serves as a means of framing. We cannot get first-hand information about Hector, he remains an abstract, imaginary figure. While Hector Mann is presented as untouchable, ungraspable, he also functions as a strong means of intermedial thematization. He brings into the text two media forms: theatre, through his

strong acts of performativity, and film, through his unusual movie directing methods. One of the characters, the daughter of Hector's friend, while talking to Zimmer provides a description of Hector's strange ways of perceiving the art of filmmaking:

> He broke a lot of rules. He did things film directors aren't supposed to do. (...) Voice-overs, for one thing. Narration is considered a weakness in movies, a sign that the images aren't working, but Hector relied on it heavily in a number of his films. One of them, The History of Light, doesn't have a word of dialogue. It's wall-to-wall narration from start to finish. (...) Hector used his freedom to explore things other filmmakers weren't allowed to touch, especially in the forties and fifties. Naked bodies. Down-to-earth sex. Childbirth. Urination, defecation. (...) Once you come to understand what's possible in his work, these so-called taboos and moments of explicitness blend into the overall texture of the stories. In a way, those scenes were a form of protection for him. (Auster 208-09)

What this fragment discloses is precisely the depicting of the intermedial dialogue conceptualized by Zoltán Dragon, a simultaneous interaction between two media forms, that of literary and cinematic, the unexplored potential that lies in combining their narrative techniques (shocking pictures and voice-overs). In short, he brings into play the distinctive features of the media elements involved in the cinematic process of signification. In this intermedial relationship each medium participates with its own system specificities. Hector's unorthodox directorial methods evoke independent filmmakers, and introduce the theme of artistic originality. According to Mark Brown, Hector's films are similar to Auster's in terms of breaking narrative conventions, of working without constraints, and most importantly, the creators (Hector and Auster) are independent producers, whose films are out of "the commercial loop" of Hollywood (125).

Hector Mann belongs to the world of illusions, as his real life is also based on a series of imaginary identities and roles he must play to survive. He is not given a personal narrative voice, his life story is revealed through different narrators. As Jim Peacock argues, he is always framed by others (64). Peacock also states that the transcriptions of a fictional filmmaker's work (Mann) by a fictional character (Zimmer) partake of the parabolic aesthetic,[3] therefore both forms of language – cinematic and literary – constitute frames through which the protagonists are viewed by other characters, the author and the reader

(65). When analysing the narrative mechanics of *The Book of Illusions*, Mark Poole arrives at the conclusion that it complies with the Film Noir tradition of a convoluted plot, and that its serpentine logic is "just as enjoyable and far less far-fetched than many film noir plots" (79). Poole also identifies many elements that allude to the aspects of the Film Noir in his reading of the novel as a hard-boiled detective fiction: for example, David Zimmer can be interpreted as a typical male film noir protagonist drawn into detecting Hector Mann's destiny and films, and his "emotional isolation can also take on attributes in terms of physical dislocation, leading the protagonist to wander, seeking either adventure, (...) or, in Zimmer and Mann's case, escape" (Poole 84). The illusion of the film noir is also given in the novel's text by the imitation of certain filmic narrative techniques, particularly characteristic of the classical film noir. One of these, as Poole observes, is the motif of the dead narrator speaking from beyond the grave. Within the novel's narrative structure, the reader has the assumption until almost the end that Zimmer survives the events of the book, but we learn in one final chapter that he himself is dead, and his *Book of Illusions* has been published posthumously: "when this book is published, dear reader, you can be certain that the man who wrote it is long dead" (Auster 318). Thus, Auster shares with Noir the introduction of the dead narrator and Poole argues that—in opposition with classical noir where death is announced at the beginning of the film—in the book

> by withholding the knowledge of the narrator's death (...) Auster seeks to create greater dramatic impact, thus making Zimmer's death, however undramatic it might be, the culmination of the narrative arc, the final link in the manacles of cause and effect that the events of the book have been chained to. (Poole 81)

Another borrowing from the Film Noir is the character of Alma Grund, seen by Poole as a femme fatale in the Noir sense of the term (85). Alma, the daughter of Hector's friend, shows up at the apartment of Zimmer and tries to convince him to accompany her to Hector's ranch, and is determined enough to threaten him with a gun.

> We were ten or twelve feet apart, and just as she stood up from the sofa, a fresh onslaught of rain came crashing down on the roof, rattling against the shingles like a bombardment of stones. She jumped at the sound, glancing round the room with a skittish perplexed look in

her eyes, and at the moment I knew what was going to happen next. (...) I knew that she was carrying a gun in her purse, and I knew that within the next three or four seconds she was going to stick her right hand into the purse and pull out the gun. (Auster 107-08)

This quote, according to Poole, "not only reads like hard-boiled detective fiction, while establishing Alma as a gun-toting seductress, but also introduces another trope of film noir: the thunderstorm, always a portent of histrionic acts in noir" (85).

The shifting narrative levels also function as means of framing. Auster's novel not only subverts the conventional expectations of fiction, but also deconstructs logocentrism, allying with postmodern logic (intertextuality, critique of origins, *mise-en-abyme* structures). While reading *The Book of Illusions* one might become confused, as D. T. Max states: at one point Auster narrates Zimmer narrating Mann, who narrates Martin Frost (one of his film characters), who is narrating his own story.[4]

The understanding of the frame is different in the various media forms. In films it means a picture, the smallest visual unit, while in literature it often denotes embedded narratives (frames stories, like the *Arabian Nights*, *Decameron*, etc.). Drawing on the concept of the cognitive "frame" Wolf analyses the different approaches to frames, and comes to the understanding of the concept as meta-phenomena (obviously culturally formed), arguing that the function of the frame is to "enable us to interpret both reality and artefacts and hence other concepts that can be applied in perception, experience and communication" (Wolf, "Introduction: Frames, Framings", 5). He adds that framings and frames are "transmedial phenomena, phenomena that exist in more than one medium (actually in all media)" (Wolf, "Introduction: Frames, Framings", 10).

Regarding the functions of the frame story framings they have a great illusionist potential, in that

they can combine the secondary 'narratorial illusion' with the primary 'experiential illusion.' For they usually combine the act of storytelling with the actions and happenings of a story (fragment), which provides a context for the embedded story and gives it perspective. (...) Through their narrator-characters as well as 'reception figures' [fictitious listeners or readers] framings can in particular set the embedded story in perspective by evaluating its characters and actions, by providing a motivation for its telling, by indicating its function and by drawing our attention to relevant frames of reference. (Wolf, "Framing Borders", 190)

Thus, in *The Book of Illusions* the structures of the frame narratives are used to reveal the characters' motivations and to blur the lines between what is fantastic and what is realistic. Furthermore they bring about dramatic suspense that leads to an unpredictable ending, and continuously prolongs the reader's active engagement in the aesthetic illusion. Postponing Hector Mann's flesh and blood appearance, the information that Zimmer is dead and speaks from "beyond the grave," foregrounding the fact that the story is going to be an essential piece of horror and "everything was a part of it, every link in the chain of cause and effect"(Auster 6) only to provide explanations for these in the embedded narratives (together with the characters' motivations) serve as great triggers of the readers' emotional response.

When talking about structural similarities between literary and cinematic texts there is indeed a certain way to bring about the presence of the cinematic medium. A literary text only through linguistic means and literary techniques can evoke or imitate actual movies. It may by analogy suggest cinematic structures through using motifs, juxtapositions, repetition of images, altering long and short sentences, and by doing so, will create the illusion in the reader's mind of experiencing a film. Subsequently, cutting is one of the most frequent devices employed in Auster's narrative. If there is a shift between sequences that help the viewer/reader to understand the new scene, the means of fade-in/fade-out are introduced to establish a bridge between two distinct images, as can be seen in one of Hector's films, *Mr. Nobody*:

> Hector's eyelids begin to grow heavy… A moment later he succumbs. The screen fades to black. When the picture returns, it is morning and daylight is flooding through the curtains. Cut to a shot of Hector's wife, still asleep in bed. Then cut to Hector, still asleep in bed. (Auster 51)

What this excerpt divulges is the transition from the means of fading-in/fading-out into a series of clear cuts that put together two distinct images, without any explanation, thus bringing about another cinematic technique: that of the parallel montage. The parallel montage involves a series of rapid shots, to represent events that occur at the same time but in different spaces. In *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, one of the movies directed by the

retired Hector Mann, one can notice the various uses of this parallel montage. The movie is about a writer, Martin Frost, who is looking for artistic inspiration therefore he retreats to one of his friends' country estate. There he meets a young woman, Claire, with whom he falls in love. Her role is to be a muse, encouraging Martin to write his masterpiece. But the better he writes, the more Claire is vanishing. The dramatic effect of the final scene is enhanced by the parallel montage,[5] making it possible for the two narrative lines to be interwoven through intercutting, thus establishing simultaneity. The parallel montage is realized through Zimmer's faithful transcription of the intercut scenes, as he numbers the shots and retells events in a very condensed narrative, using a great number of active verbs:

> 2. Martin … begins typing again.
>
> 3. We see the fireplace. The fire has nearly gone out.
>
> 4. A close-up of Martin's fingers, typing.
>
> 5. A close-up of Claire's face. She is weaker than before, no longer struggling. (Auster 266)

This description does not only employ the technique of the parallel montage, but also draws our attention to the cinematic process that is used in achieving the dramatic effect. The crosscutting, the shifting shot angles also bring about a unique treatment of time that was also considered to be distinctively cinematic: that film presents actions in the present tense, while novels traditionally use past tense in their narratives (McFarlane 29). However, in *The Book of Illusions* when Zimmer retells Hector's movies he continuously uses present tense or present continuous, and employs a series of active verbs, thus bringing about a sense of immediacy and the reader's perception of time as present. In another line of thought, apart from retelling Hector's movies exclusively in the present tense, Zimmer uses a traditional first person past tense narrative voice, and the first person singular subject pronoun, which, according to Poole in his comparison of the novel with Film Noir, is "similar to the cinematic convention of the flashback voiceover, where a normally reliable narrator relates relevant events from the earlier time" (81).

Conclusively in Auster's novel the basic rhythm of the text is given by the shifting of long and short sentences. The frequent pauses/silences can also function as means of emotional manipulation of the readers as they are allowed to take in the different scenes, thus absorbing their meaning. By retelling Hector's films and recording his life Zimmer is

freezing time, attempting to achieve some control over it. Paradoxically, by immersing himself in this world of illusions he manages to restore his relationship with the outside world.

Works Cited

Auster, Paul. *The Book of Illusions.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002.

Brown, Mark. *Paul Auster*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007.

Dragon, Zoltán. "Adaptation As Intermedial Dialogue, or Tennessee Williams Goes to Hollywood." *Theory and Practice in English Studies 4 (2005): Proceedings form the Eighth Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2005. 187-92. 10 Oct. 2011.

Max, D.T. "The Professor of Despair." Rev. of *The Book of Illusions,* by Paul Auster. *New York Times.* 1 September 2002: 6.

McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film. An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.

Mitchell, William. J. Thomas. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation.* Chicago: The University Press, 1994.

Peacock, Jim. "Carrying the Burden of Representation: Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions.*" *Journal of American Studies*. 40 (2006) I: 53-69.

Peters, Tim. "The Power of Storytelling." Interview with Paul Auster. *Publishers Weekly*. August 26, 2002, 42.

Poole, Mark. *"The Black and White World of Film Noir in the Black and White Text of Paul Auster's* The Book of Illusions.*" e-TEALS: An e-journal of Teacher Education and Applied Language Studies.* 3 (2012), 76-89.

Wolf, Werner. "Introduction: Frames, Framings and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media." *Studies in Intermediality 1. Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media.* Ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, 1-40.

Wolf, Werner. "Intermediality Revisited. Reflections on Word and Music Relations in the Context of a General Typology of Intermediality." *Word and Music Studies.* Vol. 4, No. 1. (October 2002), 13-34.

Wolf, Werner. "Framing Borders in Frame Stories." Wolf and Bernhart 179-206.

---

[1] These terms will be used according to Werner Wolf's interpretation.

[2] Mitchell introduces the concept of the "iconology of the text" as a response to the "linguistics of the image," arguing that it deals with the representation of objects, the description of scenes, the construction of figures, likenesses and allegorical images [...] (Mitchell 112).

[3] Drawing on Aliki Varvogli's ideas published in her *The World That is the Book*, Jim Peacock argues that many of Auster's novels and their extended anecdotes can be read as versions of the contemporary parable (61). He states that the modern-day parabolist only borrows the formal peculiarities of the biblical parable, but utilizes parables to reveal not a scriptural meta-text, but the crisis of the unavailability of any all-encompassing system of meaning (62). Because of the parabolic construction of *The Book of Illusions* (different narratives embedded in each other), the reader cannot receive Mann's voice directly, without the filters of multiple narrator figures (64).

[4] D.T. Max, "The Professor of Despair," review of *The Book of Illusions* by Paul Auster. *New York Times*, 1 September 2002, 6.

---

[5] The parallel montage is also known in Metz's terminology as an alternate syntagm that brings about the intercutting of two alternate events, in the same diegetic time (qtd. in Fűzi 4).