

Remediation in the Era of Hybridization: The Example of the Film Photonovel

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Remediation in the Expanded Field

Any debate on the role and place of remediation should start with a reflection on the concept of “medium,” which has been defined in many different ways as well as many different contexts and disciplines. In the following pages, the approach that will offer the theoretical framework of our reading of the film photonovel, is that defended by Stanly Cavell in his book on cinema, *The World Viewed* (1979). Although no longer perceived as extremely new or modern and often accused of falling prey to old-fashioned ideas of medium-specificity, Cavell’s theory still offers a very challenging agenda, which helps make sense of medium practices that escape the traditional taxonomies, as one can observe in the case of the film photonovel, an almost completely forgotten and highly hybridized form of film in print.

Cavell’s medium theory¹ can first of all be described as a holistic approach. For Cavell, a medium is an *automatism* that links three types of elements: 1) a *host medium*, that is the material channel that circulates certain signs (for instance a sheet of paper, a DVD, a screen, the human body, etc.); 2) a *sign* or group of signs, generally organized according to criteria of sensorial perception (it should be noticed that certain signs address more than one sense, for instance verbal signs, which are generally speaking both visual and oral); 3) a certain *content* –a medium aspect or dimension that is often overlooked by other medium theories; instead Cavell insists very much on the fact that each medium has to discover or reshape its own content, which cannot freely migrate from one medium to another.

This holistic and medium-specific approach, each medium being defined by its own automatism, is however not a rigid or deterministic conception. Two major reasons explain the *anti-essentialist* approach of Cavell’s take on medium-specificity. On the one hand, a medium is not necessarily defined by a cluster of medium-specific features or characteristics: all media can include elements from other media or mix elements from various media; what is specific to a medium is not the channel or the sign-type or the content that form it, but a certain automatic combination of all these elements that the receiver identifies as typical of this or that medium. On the other hand, all media can and do change over time, sometimes very radically

¹ See Baetens (“Le médium n’est pas soluble dans les médias de masse”) for a presentation of the difference between medium theory and media theory, the former emphasizing the notion of medium as social practice, the latter focusing on the medium as material communication channel.

as seen for instance in the graphic novel, which is no longer a type of comics but a type of literature, including in some extreme examples of *wordless* graphic novels (Beronä).

A medium, in other words, is the socially accepted idea of what a medium “is” at a certain moment and at a certain place, and this “idea” cannot be separated from the social practices that surround it. The shift from comics to literature, as in the case of the graphic novel, is for instance directly linked with dramatic changes in the way the medium is produced, designed, circulated, read, and eventually appropriated or continued by its readers (Baetens and Frey). Graphic novels do not only distinguish themselves from comics by the fact that they claim to be “serious stuff” for adult readers (as if comics were only meant for kids as mere entertainment), they are different from comics in that they are sold as culturally legitimate items in bookshops (instead of being offered for purchase in newsstands or by subscription only) and institutionally attributed to “complete authors” (that is authors that are in charge of all aspects of their work, as in *auteur* cinema, instead of being anonymous employees working on the chain in corporate owned studios).

This enlarged as well as holistic medium approach has many consequences for the concept and practice of remediation. First of all, it should be stressed that remediation can perfectly take place within a single medium, as shown for instance by the example of the shift from comics to graphic novels or that from black and white to color movies (a change that already happened long before the introduction of Technicolor, Kodachrome and Agfacolor film formats in the 1930s and their progressive implementation in commercial cinema, see Fossati et al.).

Second, and more importantly, remediation cannot be reduced to a one-to-one relationship or contrast between a remediated and a remediating medium. The process of remediation involves a wide range of aspects and features, which participate in various ways in the dynamism of remediation: some aspects may come to the foreground or become visible for the first time, others remain unaffected, still another type of medium characteristics may be fully transformed by the changes if not simply disappear. Graphic novels do not simply “add” adult content matter and issues of authorship to the field of comics: they change also our ways of looking at “style” (for instance when a visually or narratively less perfect or fluent style is no longer seen as a technical flaw but as a sign of artistic authenticity). Color movies do not simply “add” color to black and white movies, they also destroy previous forms and appreciations of hand-colored movies or the traditional interpretation of color filters covering parts or whole of the moving image (colors in color movies are seen as “real” instead of being interpreted as “subjective” or “symbolic”).

Third and last, this broader view of remediation also has an impact on the field itself, which ceases to be an independent field of research in order to become part of the larger cluster of

intermediality and transmedia studies, adaptation studies, and translation studies. If we take for instance the case of adaptation studies, it is clear that the study of remediation processes can only benefit from recent scholarship on topics that do not tackle the notion of remediation in any direct way, but that definitely help enrich its study such as the emphasis on the economic aspects of the creative industries, a key perspective of an important book by Simone Murray (*The Adaptation Industry*), or the transition from adaptation proper to the study of adaptability, as articulated by Jean-Louis Jeannelle in a short but essential article (“Réadaptation.”). According to the former, adaptation –and hence remediation– should not be studied as the mere reshaping of a work in another medium, but as the result of larger mechanisms that determine the transmedial and cross-platform circulation of cultural content in the media business. According to the latter, adaptation should not be studied as a single phenomenon but as multilayered process with very different steps (not all adaptations that are initiated are actually brought to an end) and many different stakeholders, each with his or her own point of view (the dream of a director to adapt a very special book can clash with the desire of a producer to have him or her adapt a run of the mill novel). Such a reconceptualization of adaptation and remediation makes room for an approach that merges the actual and the virtual and focuses also on the “(im)possible,” the failure, the censored, the forgotten, or the destroyed.

The Film Photonovel as a Case of Narrated Cinema

In this context, it makes sense to highlight the film photonovel, a medium that is definitely an unusual suspect in the encyclopedia of media that are under scrutiny in remediation theory, but that proves exceptionally rewarding when it comes down to study the concepts of medium and remediation in the larger sense that is defended in this essay. True, at first sight the film photonovel does not seem to be a good candidate for remediation theory. The medium is hardly known outside the small circles of film photonovel fans (and its quasi-absence in the Anglo-Saxon domain makes it even worse in globalized yet ruthlessly monolingual academia). It is also a medium that has always suffered from the lack of prestige of one of its formal components, that is the sentimental, low-brow photonovel, a genre whose “silliness” was described by Roland Barthes as “traumatizing” (Barthes 59-60; Baetens, *Pour le roman-photo*). Yet these (alleged) handicaps and flaws should not prevent scholars from having a very close look at the film photonovel, which may occupy a strategic position in the study of “film in print,” a rapidly growing subfield of the classic “film and literature” scholarship, as well as in the study of remediation theory in general, where it can serve as a laboratory for the study of what medium and remediation in the expanded field can really mean, that is how medium and remediation function as cultural practices.

But let us first define the film photonovel, that less known example of “narrated cinema” in general and of the “film novel” in particular (Autelitano and Re). Technically speaking, one might define the film photonovel as a kind of novelization (Baetens, *From Film to Novel*), that is the fictional retelling of an original movie or movie script, yet not with (just) words but with images and words (captions, balloons, speech panels) in a way that imitates the genre and medium characteristics of the photonovel magazines. A traditional adaptation or remediation approach of the film photonovel would involve a comparison of the “original” work (the movie) and one of its possible secondary reinterpretations (the film photonovel). It would ask questions on the success or failure of the film photonovel as a new creation and quite probably come to the conclusion that in comparison with the movie it adapts a film photonovel can only be seen as a deterioration, a less powerful form of storytelling than cinema. It should not come as a surprise that in traditional remediation theory “film,” which adds movement and music to still images, is seen as prevailing, if not authoritative. It is often argued that every picture tells a story, and it is probably not false to suggest that moving pictures are even more fit to tell stories than fixed ones –although this kind of general claims crudely underestimates the narrative potentialities of words. However, the exceptional commercial success of the film photonovel in the 1950s already suggest that a strictly formal or technical way of analyzing the link between film and film photonovel would be misleading, if not utterly deceiving. If the film photonovel was really the poorer version of the film, why would there be any interest for it?

A different type of question should therefore be asked. Instead of studying remediation in what happens in the move from one medium to another, the starting point should be that works—in this case films—always circulate in different forms and media—for instance film novels, but also trailers, celeb photographs, newspaper or television reviews, etc.—and the real question should be this one: how can one explain that at a certain moment in time (the mid-fifties) and in place (first in Italy, then in France), all types of film novels –and we know that there have always existed a rich variety of them– were suddenly being produced as film photonovels?

The Remediation Chain of the Film Photonovel

The answer to this question can only be a historical one. If the film photonovel became the hegemonic medium in the narrated cinema field, this has to do with a number of cultural and economic changes in the specific market where the film novel was being sold and read, namely the women’s magazines. These changes can be described in terms of a “remediation chain,” which starts after the Second World War, when the magazine market is being reinvented (Antonutti; Giet; Minuit et al.).

The first stepping stone in this chain is the invention—the word is not too strong—of the drawn novel (Baetens *The Drawn Novel*), a new type of comics that emerged in 1946 in the first issue of *Grand Hôtel*, one of the new Italian women’s magazines that targeted a popular audience, trying to seduce it by a well-thought combination of well-established features (film, fashion, romance) and completely new aspects, both economic (an extremely low price, more or less 50 eurocents in today’s currency) and aesthetic (and here the absolute novelty of the drawn novel comes in).



FIGURE 1:
 First page of *Anime Incatenate* (“Souls in Chains”), published in the first issue (1946) of *Grand Hôtel*.
 The drawn novel (in French: “roman dessiné,” no relationship at all with the “roman graphique” or graphic novel) clearly appears as a form of comics, yet updated and repurposed by many influences: although totally new, it is already an example of multiple remediations.

The drawn novel proves indeed a mash-up of many influences. First of all there is *film*, whose stories and stars are shamelessly copied and plagiarized. The audience of the women's magazines had no problems recognizing its favorite movie stars, although the magazines for obvious copyright reasons never credited these influences. The filmic intertext also determines the drawing style, which imitates the touch and feel of black and white glamour photography, including many aspects of Hollywood's lighting techniques. Second, there is *literature*, not through the examples of high literature adapted in comics format but through the influence of contemporary melodramatic: the type of literature that the drawn novel is referring to—supposedly successful American novels—bears no relationship at all with the patrimonial considerations of a series such as *Classics Illustrated*, which started in 1941. Third, there are press illustrations and cartoons: the master of the genre, Walter Molino, was already a famous press illustrator during the Mussolini era—probably the reason why he used American-sounding pseudonyms to sign his post war drawn novels.

An instant hit, the drawn novel of *Grand Hôtel* rapidly morphed into the unique selling proposal of the magazine and was immediately copied by all other magazines in the women's magazines niche. Its hegemony was both close to complete and very short-lived, for the stiff competition between the various weeklies and the extremely time-consuming production methods of the drawn novel engendered a form of scarcity that contributed to accelerating the death of the genre: there were simply not enough artists capable of satisfyingly producing all the material the market was willing to take. Hence an undeniable drop in quality in quite a few of the magazines, which ran drawn novels that did not reach the minimal standards. As suggested by Minuit et al., the poor visual qualities of quite a few drawn novels made the genre very vulnerable to the competition with other formats, easier as well as less expensive to produce. Hence, the decision by most publishers to replace the expensive drawn novel by a more cost-efficient format. The solution that will be found—and whose invention also appeared almost overnight as in the case of the drawn novel—is then the photonovel, the second step in the remediation chain that will eventually produce the film photonovel.



FIGURE 2:
 Fragment of *Ma vie n'est qu'à toi* (« My Life Belongs to You »), published in the photobook magazine *Marielle*, n° 41 (1970)

At first sight, the photobook can be described as a drawn novel that replaces drawings by photographs, much cheaper and faster to produce as well as technically closer to the world of cinema that continued to be imitated here as well. The photobook is however much more than

just the cheap alternative to a cultural hype that had become too expensive and too difficult to produce in massive quantities. Strongly promoted by two competitors of *Grand Hôtel*, namely *Il Mio Sogno* (“My Dream”) and *Bolero Film*, both launched in 1947, the photonovel rapidly abandons the idea that it has to resemble the drawn novel as much as possible (in the beginning many pictures were retouched so that they could look like drawn novel images) and manages to foreground its own strengths and particularities, both visually and ideologically. The photonovel, which can of course no longer use the Hollywood movie stars as characters, thus emphasizes the new glamour of the girl and the boy next door, for instance by organizing castings open to the readers of the magazines (the extremely short production of photonovels and the subsequent possibility to move from the photonovel business to the film business in a couple of weeks after the initial casting were a key aspect of the incredible success of the audience participation in the life of the magazines). It also elaborates its own rules at the level of photography techniques and page design, much less sophisticated than that of the drawn novel, but perfectly appropriated to the more realistic tone of many photonovels, which cleverly combined fact and fiction, or if one prefers neo-realism and romance.

The success of the photonovel, which in the late fifties and the early sixties was read on a weekly basis by one adult out of three, as shown by audience surveys commented by sociologist Evelyne Sullerot in the first general studies of the genre (Sullerot “Photoromans” and *La Presse féminine* 287-297), is clearly dependent on that of film as the dominant mass medium of the after-war years (roughly speaking till the penetration of television in the private households). In the case of the photonovel, there was even a strategic alliance that went much beyond the intertextual and intericonic references and influences of the drawn novel. The photonovel did not only participate in the film business as far as its casting aspects were concerned (it was seen as the bridge between the local beauty contest and the international film career, as seen for instance in the exemplary case of Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida), it also served as a cheap laboratory to test which type of stories and characters would be appreciated by the public and eventually be reused in actual film production. Finally, the photonovel world itself, its readers as well as its business aspects, were a frequent source of inspiration for movie directors. In Giuseppe De Santis’ 1948 *Bitter Rice*, photonovel reading is used as a way of characterization of the female heroines; in Fellini’s 1952 *The White Sheik*, the whole plot is based on the parodic clash between fact and fiction in the actual shooting of a photonovel and what happens when a real reader enters the fake world of romance.

The third and last step in the remediation chain is that of the film photonovel, which can be seen as the final—but here as well temporary—victory of the photonovel over the world of cinema that is its symbiotic other. The dramatic success of the photonovel, which attracts more readers than cinema attracts moviegoers, allows the medium to “appropriate” or “highjack” the

complete field of narrated cinema and film novel. For some years—1953-1955 in Italy, 1955-1964 in France—the photonovel became, not the only but the dominating format of cinema in print. Its hegemony condemned other, previously dominant formats such as the cheap illustrated verbal novelizations or the poorly captioned visual novelizations to a secondary position.



FIGURE 3:
Opening of *La Dolce Vita* (Sweet Life) in the film photonovel magazine *Nous Deux Film*, n° 81 (1960)

To a certain extent, one could call the film photonovel a form of anachronistic or “retro-remediation,” that is a form that combines two types of remediation that both seem to represent a kind of regression from the point of view of classic remediation, which underscores the mimetic and rhetoric drive behind the shift from one medium to another. As a form of novelization, a film photonovel should not be capable of competing with the power of the image: films on screen are supposed to tell their stories in a more compelling way than films in print. And as a form of photography, a film photonovel is not supposed to rival the power of cinema either: still frames or set pictures—since these were the two types of photographs that were used and often mixed in the film photonovel—are not expected to have the same strength as the mobile stories projected on screen. Yet in spite of all these handicaps, the “old” medium—in fact: the older media of print and photography—prove perfectly capable to remediate the “new” film medium. In purely technical or semiotic terms, this may seem absurd. In cultural and historical terms, however, this makes perfect sense. In the 1950s, the film photonovel was the most appropriate—if not for some the only possible—way to keep a material trace of the film experience or to serve as a substitute for a film experience that was out of one’s reach. Moreover, it was much closer than cinema to the dominating mass medium of these years, namely the photonovel.

The Film Photonovel as a Unique Storytelling Experience

Situating the film photonovel in the larger field of film in print and women’s weeklies does not suffice, however, to give a precise description of the medium characteristics of this singular remediation. What matters here is to underline that each of the major features of the film photonovel can only be understood in the larger framework of remediation itself, for the “new” medium—and as stated above the novelty of the medium is here the strange result of apparently rather anachronistic elements, at least formally speaking—is a mosaic whose various pieces are all reuses or reappropriations of older materials.

Five elements come here to the fore (for the analysis of a specific case study, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, see Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa). One: the page layout of the film novel is derived from the traditional “grid” of the photonovel page made of three rows of two images per page. This structure, which allows of course for some liberty (not all rows have to be strictly the same, not all images do have to stick to the same size), generally involves a dramatic cropping of the filmic images. On a similar note, one could add that this grid engenders a radical transformation of the viewer’s perception of the images, which are read sequentially (one image after another) but seen simultaneously (when reading a film photonovel, it is

impossible to focus on each image individually and to put between brackets the others: one sees the whole page, that is a whole sequence, from the very start).

Two: the way in which words and images are combined is that of the photonovel, which uses both speech balloons (for the dialogues) and captions as well as text panels (for the narrative voice). This is quite different from the material coincidence of sound and vision in cinema, where the perceiving subject does not have to choose between language and image. But even more far-reaching is the impact of the necessity to always combine the verbal and the visual: in film, many sequences can remain silent; in the photonovel, the rules of the medium—that is the rules of the medium as it has been turned into a commercially successful format in the women’s magazines, for other types of photonovels can of course be imagined—impose the systematic presence of a caption or a balloon, and since the film photonovel is obliged for purely commercial reasons to follow the rules of the photonovel, this may engender rather weird situations, such as in the case of the adaptation of the “existentialist” Antonioni movies, where the lack of communication between people and the impossibility to speak are essential characteristics. The film photonovel versions of these movies are necessarily “talkative,” even in those sequences where the adapting magazine editor has to invent missing dialogues, silence not being an option in the poetics of the film photonovel.

Three: film photonovels are also obliged to stick to the size of the magazine in which they appear, they must fill a certain number of pages (more or less fifty is a kind of default option) and cannot modify the page size (which can vary quite a lot, the prestige of a magazine being determined by the size of its pages).

Four: the film photonovel, which is of course obliged to reuse existing pictures, cannot freely choose which pictures to use or to discard. One might expect that the film photonovel version of a movie tries to build a string that contains all the dramatic highlights of the film. To a certain extent, that is the case (for fidelity is not a hollow word in this kind of adaptation: the public does not want to buy a “free” adaptation of the movie; it is interested in something that presents itself as its equivalent in print form). In practice, however, one notices that the pictures that are chosen are those that most resemble the prototypical photonovel pictures, that is extremely posed pictures, generally framed as medium to medium close-up shots.

Five and finally: the film photonovel has also to reuse the narrative genre that characterizes most of the photonovels, namely the melodrama. The results of this constraint are often astonishing, since not all movies that are adapted in film photonovel format are born melodramas. Film photonovels do not only remediate in visual terms, they also modify the generic and ideological framing of the stories, which all tend to become romantic and often very moralizing melodramas.

For all these reasons, one can wonder whether the film photonovel is a good example of what is now generally called remediation. What seems to be missing is the logic of “supersession” that represents the core of the remediating mechanisms studied by Bolter and Grusin, who insists on the fact that the remediating medium is perceived as more performing than the remediated one. This is clearly not the case here. Besides, the social recognition and impact of remediation, which Bolter and Grusin equally underline, seems rather shallow as well, as demonstrated by the systematic neglect of the film photonovel in film criticism, history and theory. In spite of the large commercial circulation of the film photonovel and the fact that during its heydays it was the most accessible way to obtain real images of a movie, critics, historians and theoreticians systematically ignore the medium, which has now also vanished from cultural memory. The film photonovel is not even criticized, condemned, parodied, or utterly ridiculed as it happens in the case of the photonovel, and when “ambitious” or upscale versions of the medium appear, the relationship with the popular forms of the film photonovel is never declared, the usual references being that of the more prestigious illustrated scenario or scientifically edited script.

This omission of the medium in the larger debate on the remediation of cinema in print is a regrettable lacuna, for the film photonovel presents a certain number of fascinating features that other forms of cinema in print do not possess. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the medium is its invention of a narrative voice, the remediating equivalent of a voice-over that is generally absent in the remediated movies. Film photonovels do not only make their characters speak when they remain silent in the movie, they also invent from scratch a highly intrusive narrator who both presents and comments the ongoing action, not only at the beginning of the action or at the end of the story, but at any time during the unfolding of the narrative. What makes this voice all the more intriguing, next of course to its dramatically intrusive and overtly moralizing character, is the fact that all film photonovels are by definition “anonymous.” Yet if the maker of such a work is never credited, its “location” is always perfectly clear: the narrative voice is a mouthpiece of the editorial voice of the magazine and both voices repeat and reinforce each other. The narrative framing of the film photonovel is in principle the faithful copy of the ideological stances defended by the magazine, as materialized in all kind of paratexts such as the “letters to the editor” section or, more surprisingly perhaps, the commercial announcements that litter many issues, ceaselessly delivering the same message, for instance on the value of family life, the possibility of forgiveness, the priority of heart and soul on physical appearance.

To conclude, it is important to stress the added value of the film photonovel case in the larger context of adaptation and remediation stories. Even if it is stimulating to try to list the formal

and narrative features of the film photonovel as the transformation—and not simply the mere and impoverished copy— of an underlying movie, it is crucial to highlight what the study of this particular medium can bring to the broader field. In this regard, three aspects are key: first, the possibility to use the case of the film photonovel in a broad reflection on medium and medium specificity (the film photonovel is not just a “channel,” it is a real cultural practice that has to be studied in various historical contexts); second, the invitation to rethink remediation no longer in terms of a binary remediated/remediating scheme but in terms of shifting relationships between clustered yet permanently reshaped networks of features and properties (the gap between film and film photonovel is not something that can be narrowed down to issues of moving versus fixed image); third, the necessity to abandon the teleological temptation that looms under much remediation theory (the film photonovel has everything to be an example of “failed” or “bad” remediation, but in practice it proves dramatically efficient and powerful).

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