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## **Gloria Withalm**

### **Reconsidering Filmic Self-Referentiality in Terms of Rossi-Landian Concepts**

At first sight there seems to be hardly any connection between the socio-semiotics developed by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and film semiotics. Although his writings are not directly related to movies, a close look at his concepts can help to solve some problems in film semiotics, and some concepts can be used to analyze a special case of filmic discourse.

#### *Film and Self-Referentiality – a brief introduction*

The topic of *film and self-referentiality* covers a vast domain and poses several problems. The difficulties start already with the ambiguity of the term “film”. When we just say “film” without any context to define how the term is used, it could mean many different aspects: the material film strip; something that has been produced and is subject to economic exchange; film as a cultural phenomenon, or a type of discourse; one concrete film (text); and finally in a certain way, the sum of the flickering light projected on the screen. It can also include further aspects of cinematic phenomena, such as studio and infrastructure, financing, technological moments, the impact of film on the audience, the reaction of the viewer and so on and so forth. To sum up, “film” stands for an object, a text, a complex sign system, or a socio-cultural system.

To establish a concise view of *self-referentiality* with regard to film is certainly not less complicated. To a small extent it is possible to draw on concepts developed in literary studies, but nevertheless we face some problems. First of all, and contrary to literature, film is made up of more than one sign system. Secondly, given the just mentioned fuzzy term film, we have to deal with various additional ways which film has developed throughout the decades to refer to film, and transtextuality (cf. Genette 1982) is but one. Self-referentiality and self-reflexivity can be found both on the level of the story and on the level of the discourse. Contrary to the view that this is a so-called postmodern phenomenon, I would like to stress that this is *not a recent development*: filmic self-referentiality is present from the very beginning of film. Moreover, unlike the case with literature, filmic self-consciousness is not at all confined to art cinema, and the various forms of self-referentiality can be found on all quality levels and in all genres – even low-budget sex movies use film studios as a backdrop for the poor plot. Likewise, the aims to be achieved by, and the reasons for, including self-referential/self-reflexive plot elements or discourses differ extremely: from

emancipatory and distancing strategies (in the Brechtian sense of the *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect), mere fascination with cinematographic possibilities or just mere fun, to a strengthening of the emotional bonds of the audience to movies and movie stars, or even the last chance to keep a media-glutted audience watching.

In order to cope with all these different aspects of self-referentiality or self-reflexivity we have to find, or create, models that go beyond the search for mere textual relations, be it the direct presence of one text in a second one or the allusion to another text, that is, a model which is oriented on reference to *film* in a broader sense than just the *film text*, a model that is able to take account of *cinéma* in the Metzian sense. In short, the model has to consider both aspects of film which are always present and necessarily interrelated: film as a complex sign system, and film as a complex socio-cultural system.

The only semiotic theory I know of which could serve as the foundation for such a model since it includes both aspects in its very concepts is the socio-semiotics of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. Given, firstly, the richness of his semiotics, and, secondly, the specific context of this paper, I will concentrate on just a few aspects of his theory.

### *Rossi-Landian Semiotics 1: Work and Sign Production*

Work – considered in an anthropological sense and with regard to both material and sign production – is definitely one of the main concepts of Rossi-Landi's semiotics. He distinguishes six elements which have to be involved in order to speak of work in the proper sense:

- (i) the material on which one works; (ii) the instruments (or utensils) with which one works; (iii) the worker; (iv) the working operations; (v) the end for which one works; (vi) the product of the work.
- (Rossi-Landi 1975: 39; 1985: 15)

According to the different working situations (work in the most general sense, work from an anthropocentric viewpoint, and actual productive work; cf. Rossi-Landi 1985: 12, 15-16; 1995: 142) the six moments can be reduced to three items. In the “fundamental triad”, a triad which “indica originariamente il rapporto dell'uomo con la natura” (Rossi-Landi 1985: 12), *materials* are transformed by *operations* (which comprise the worker, the actual working operations, the instruments and the aims) to the *product*. This triad is also the basic one for a particular kind of work: linguistic work, or more general: sign work. The basic triad can, of course, be understood in a dialectic sense (the material functions as thesis, the operation as antithesis, the product as synthesis; cf. Rossi-Landi 1985: 13), and it is the core element to build consecutive working cycles.

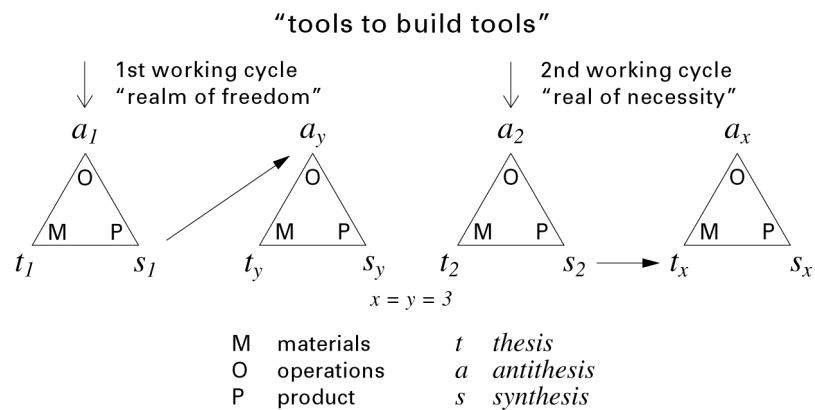


Fig. 1

Rossi-Landi distinguishes two different modes in which a consecutive working cycle can be based on the preceding one (Figure 1). In the classic dialectic sense (2nd working cycle), the *product* of the preceding working triad, the *synthesis*, is used as new *material* (or *thesis*) to work on. However, there is also another possibility (1st working cycle) where a new "sort of freedom [...] is beginning to emerge" (Rossi-Landi: 1995: 147): an existing *product* is used in subsequent work as the *instrument* (the *antithesis*) to work on other materials. The specific context in which Rossi-Landi first introduced this new concept of dialectic processes in the late 1960s – in a paper on avantgarde theater (Rossi-Landi 1966, 1972: 49-60) – shows that it is not only of interest for theoretical considerations, but might also be used with regard to complex cultural sign production.

### *Rossi-Landian Semiotics 2: Signs and Sign Systems*

As mentioned, sign work is a special case of work in general. Accordingly, the product of this work, the *sign*, is the result of working operations on materials. For Rossi-Landi, the sign is the (dialectic) totality of two parts, *signans* and *signatum*, which "are put and/or kept together by human work of various descriptions" (Rossi-Landi: 1979: 22).

[T]he sign is a mediation between the material (in the usual sense of this term) and the social. [In dialectic terminology, what happens when a sign is used is that a "social thesis" is mediated by means of a "material antithesis". The *signans* as an antithesis has immobilized that social piece and it has brought it at a new level as a *signatum*; [...]. (Rossi-Landi 1979: 31)

The four different types of sign work<sup>1</sup> show that sign production, semiosis and sign systems are deeply rooted in social processes. Even the individual sign production is "set in motion and conditioned by those forces which move the society" (Rossi-Landi 1985: 121).

Rossi-Landi's view of sign systems, which is extremely fruitful with regard to complex media like film, goes far beyond the usual description of sign systems. He shows in one paragraph that the various concepts in his semiotics are not separate parts but rather interconnected elements of one integrated theory about signs and society. The starting point of the well-known definition (Rossi-Landi 1985: 242) is once again (sign) work with *instruments on materials*, which is carried out by a worker according to rules. But a sign system must not be reduced to a mere code, it encompasses also the semiotic context or the entire communicative situation, including those who actually exchange messages:<sup>2</sup>

Un sistema segnico comprende almeno un codice, cioè i materiali su cui si lavora e gli strumenti con cui si lavora; ma comprende anche le regole per applicare i secondi sui primi (il *locus* delle regole è duplice: esse stanno in qualche modo anche nel codice, ma ancor più stanno in chi lo adopera), i canali e le circostanze che permettono la comunicazione, e inoltre gli emittenti e riceventi che di quel codice si servono. Un sistema segnico comprende dunque anche tutti i messaggi che si scambiano e si possono scambiare all'interno dell'universo che il sistema stesso istituisce. (Rossi-Landi 1985: 242)

At the end of the definition, Rossi-Landi explains the constitutive relation of sign systems to the core concept of his semiotics – *social reproduction*. *There is no social reproduction without sign systems and no human sign system can exist but within social reproduction:*

Un sistema segnico è insomma una fetta di realtà sociale, e non certo solo una macchina simbolica che se ne sta lì in attesa, a disposizione di tutti, sicché chiunque potrebbe adoperarla in una maniera che sarebbe allora per metà almeno storica. Non si dà riproduzione sociale senza sistemi segnici; né esistono sistemi segnici umani se non nell'ambito di un'istanza storicamente reale di riproduzione sociale. (Rossi-Landi 1985: 242)

In another context he gives an even more radical view of this relation:

Non si debbono sollevare i sistemi segnici al di sopra della realtà della riproduzione sociale. I sistemi segnici non sono una specie di scheletro della riproduzione sociale: sono, piuttosto, riproduzione sociale essi stessi. (Rossi-Landi 1985: 144)

### *Rossi-Landian Semiotics 3: Social Reproduction*

Social Reproduction is definitely the most comprehensive concept in Rossi-Landian semiotics, since:

La riproduzione sociale è l'insieme dei processi per mezzo dei quali una comunità o società sopravvive, accrescendosi o almeno continuando a esistere. (Rossi-Landi 1985: 175)

Unfortunately it would take too much space to discuss all the processes that act within social reproduction. So I will concentrate on the fundamental one which is

summarized in the *Schema of Social Reproduction* (and which is also the basis for my own model), the cycle of *production – exchange – consumption*. These are the “three indissolubly correlated moments” which social reproduction “always comprehends in a constitutive way” (Rossi-Landi 1975: 65).

1. External material **production** which, although *it uses signs*, produces not signs but bodies.

2. EXCHANGE, which is always, at the same time and constitutively,
  - external material EXCHANGE, that is, the process of exchanging not signs but bodies;
  - sign EXCHANGE, that is, communication, including as such within it:
    - sign **production**,
    - sign EXCHANGE in the strict sense, and
    - sign consumption.

3. External material consumption, which, even when *it uses signs*, consumes not signs but bodies.

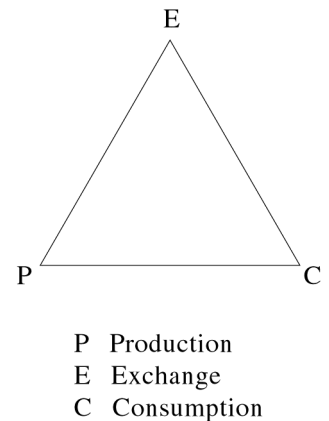


Fig. 2 & Fig. 3

At the center of the schema in *Figure 2* (Rossi-Landi 1975: 65; 1985: 38) is the twofold view on the moment of exchange consisting of both *external material exchange*, and *sign exchange*, or communication which comprehends the three, again “indissolubly correlated moments”: *sign production*, *sign exchange* and *sign consumption*. The three basic moments of this dialectic triad (*Figure 3*) are not only correlated but *interrelated*.<sup>3</sup>

Ogni modo di produzione e ogni istituzione ideologica sono *anche*, essi stessi, sistemi segnifici [...] nel modo in cui la produzione e il consumo sono scambio, così come lo scambio è produzione e consumo, dentro alla totalità sociale cui tutti appartengono. (Rossi-Landi 1985: 182)

Rossi-Landi adds further moments and processes which can be depicted as triads, such as *modes of production/structure – sign systems* {situated in the very moment of exchange} – *ideological institutions/superstructure*, which together build the entire Schema of Social Reproduction (for a discussion cf. the article of Jeff Bernard in this volume).

### *A Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality*

With this brief summary of some major aspects of Rossi-Landian semiotics I have tried to put together those socio-semiotic concepts which I adopted as the basis for a comprehensive view of filmic self-referentiality. As mentioned in the introduction, film has developed several ways of referring to *film* in the most general sense of the word

throughout the decades. Film is characterized by its double nature of *film as a text* which is always and necessarily embedded in *film as a socio-cultural (and economic) system*, and both aspects are the basis of self-referential and self-reflexive discourses and stories.

Any movie is subject to the fundamental cycle of *production – exchange (or distribution) – consumption (or reception)* as described by Rossi-Landi, both in the material sense and in the sense of signs. These *three indissolubly correlated moments* are actually used to describe the various phases in the “life” of a movie – from shooting to showing –, and the coincidence is more than a mere terminological affinity. Film is a complex sign system which fulfills all criteria of Rossi-Landi’s definition, which means that all materials and instruments, all messages (as products of sign work) which are produced, exchanged and consumed (or received/reproduced), and the entire communicative universe established by the system itself is part of the sign system. Accordingly, a model of texts in the sign system film has to combine the cycle of *production – exchange – consumption* with the aspect of film as *product*. Proceeding from the definition of sign system, self-referential semiosis is characterized by the fact that the messages produced can focus on all the various elements of the sign system as such.

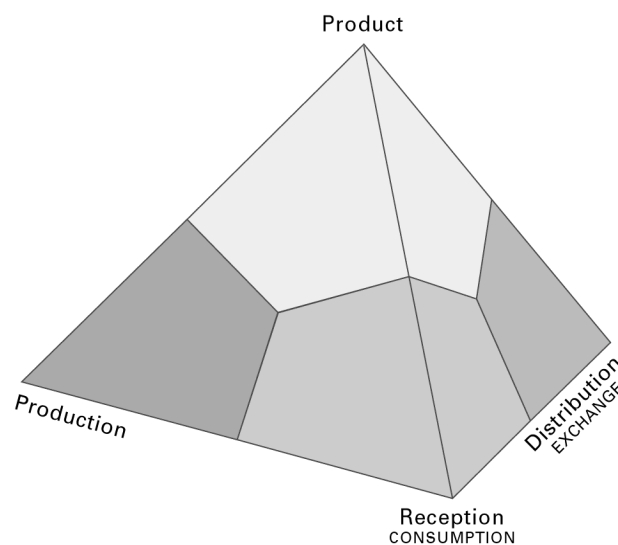


Fig. 4: Model of filmic self-referentiality

This *model of filmic self-referentiality* (Figure 4) includes all domains and states in the overall cycle which constitutes *film* (in the sense of the French word *cinéma*), and which were also referred to in filmic texts from the very beginning.

The cycle starts with the *production* of a film in the *world of the movies*, covering both the productional institutions and the people working in the movie business, and the *actual production* with the phases of pre-production, shooting, and post-production. To

include the production aspect in the plot – often labelled film-in-film or Hollywood on Hollywood – is definitely the most popular reference to film and cinema. The first films ever to offer a brief look at the work of a cameraman were produced by the Lumière Brothers in 1899: *La sortie de l'arsenal* shows how workers leaving a factory in Indochina pass in front of a cameraman filming how they leave the factory, and in *Concours d'automobiles fleuries* the cameraman shoots not only the parade of decorated cars but also another Cinématographe Lumière cameraman in front of him who is filming the same parade. Just a few years later *Making Motion Pictures: A Day in the Vitagraph Studio* presented the complete cycle from script to screen (US 1908, Vitagraph), and by the 1910s, self-referentiality is included in movie stories as a matter of course – just think of early Charlie Chaplin comedies mostly showing the havoc he caused on the set like in *A Film Johnny* (Mack Sennett, US 1914; Keystone) or *His New Job* (Charles Chaplin, US 1915; Essanay).

Throughout the decades, the audience has been allowed to watch film directors during their work,<sup>4</sup> or to follow the ups and downs in the careers of (real or fictitious) actresses or actors. Prominent examples are the aging silent star Norma Desmond in *Sunset Blvd.* (Billy Wilder, US 1950; Gloria Swanson, William Holden), or the various films on Rudolfo Valentino<sup>5</sup>.

As soon as it is finished, a film is subject to *distribution*. Topics included are: the *institutions* dealing both with the actual distribution and the marketing of a movie; the accompanying *documents* (the entire promotion, trailers, film magazines, critique, fanzines, etc.)<sup>6</sup>; and the domain of *evaluation* from censorship to film festivals.

Films of the third stage in the cycle tell stories about the *consumption* (or reception) of movies. They show the characters watching a filmic text or people working at the movie theaters.

The depiction of people watching a movie is also present from the very beginning. Already in spring 1896, *L'Entrée du cinématographe* (Lumière Brothers) shows the crowd leaving the Empire Theatre (on London's Leicester Square) after a film projection. A few years later, movies step inside the movie theater and start to present the showing itself. The plot's starting point is the depiction of the strange behavior of spectators who are unable to distinguish real events from those presented on the screen as in *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (Robert William Paul, UK 1901) or *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edward S. Porter, US 1902), and, ever since, the number of movies which show somebody closely watching a movie is uncountable.

Some of the films which focus on movie theaters are an homage to cinema, like *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, IT 1989) and *Splendor* (Ettore Scola, IT 1989).

Reference to the *product film* includes the most visible form of self-referentiality – *intertextuality*, which can range from play with film genres (for instance in parodies) or allusions to famous scenes to the actual and material (or today digital) quotation<sup>7</sup> of other films.

Another aspect of film referring to the product film – that is, making aware of stylistic devices and cinematographic codes – leads over to a particular category: *self-reflexive films* which transcend the *renvoi* to cinema as such.

### *Filmic Self-Reflexivity*

*Self-reflexive films* focus in one moment of the filmic discourse *on themselves*. Different cinematic devices are used to draw the attention of the audience to this *very film itself*: lines in the dialog, the “materialization” of filmic means, and, the rarest case, the showing of the *dispositif*.

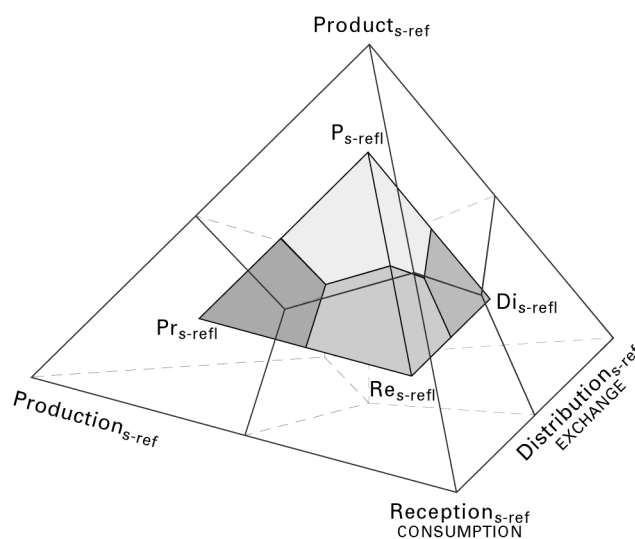


Fig. 5: Model of filmic self-reflexivity

Self-reflexivity can be found both on the level of the story and on the level of the discourse. Although it departs from the *product film* (or, more precisely, from one actual product it focuses on) it is not confined to this domain since it can include all three phases (production, distribution, reception). Accordingly, the entire cycle is reduplicated. However, the way of referring to aspects of these phases is more specific than the self-referential one: it is always related to the film in question.

When a self-reflexive film is dealing with *production*, it is not the production of a movie in general, but has to include the productional moments of this very film itself. Again, there are various modes, for instance revealing at one point the *studio and crew* of this film, as is the case at the end of *La nave va* (Federico Fellini, IT 1983). This presentation can even lead to a confrontation between characters and the crew. Contrary to the invisible camera in the classic Hollywood style, films focus on the *shooting camera*, thus making aware that it is thanks to a camera that we are able to see this scene in this special way,<sup>8</sup> and in some films the camera even ceases to be the invisible subordinate servant to the plot and starts to exist on its own. Actually showing the shooting camera, as for instance in *Jane B. par Agnes V.* (Agnès Varda, FR 1987), is definitely the rarest case. Making aware of the film as being produced can even assume the air that the film is not yet fixed and finished, but still a work in progress and subject to interventions in and changes to the movie made by the characters<sup>9</sup>.

The self-reflexive look at *distribution* can include the on-screen presence of the real film companies through the studio logo which can even be integrated into the diegetic world of the movie, or characters who are aware of their existence as characters of television series.

Among the variants of presenting the *reception* is the communication and interaction between the characters of the film and those which they are just watching on the screen, which culminates in the temporary dissolution of the barrier between the two worlds: members of the audience are able to enter the screen, characters from the movie on the screen step into the world of the audience, or the passage functions in both ways.<sup>10</sup>

Just like in the self-referential discourse, the *product film* is put in the center of the self-reflexive discourse on it by focusing on the cinematographic codes. However, the various stylistic devices are not only thematized but directly related to this film. Extradiegetic film elements are not only visible to us but also to the characters, who comment on something they are usually not supposed to see. In some films the devices even materialize and are suddenly physically present within the diegetic universe of the characters.<sup>11</sup> Another way to include film as product into the filmic discourse is the integration of film in the material sense, for instance when physical characteristics of the film strip like frame borders or sprocket holes become part of the world of the characters<sup>12</sup> or when the film strip as such breaks or starts to burn<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, the film, presenting itself clearly as a film, can enter recursive loops as it is the case in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, US 1994). At the end of the

film, the narrative we have just followed goes back to the very beginning and seems to turn into the film we have just followed.

### *Rossi-Landian semiotics and film semiotics – (future) connections*

Apart from using the basic concepts of the writings on social reproduction for modelling filmic self-referentiality, further close readings of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's semiotics can deliver other innovative and fruitful approaches to film semiotics.

Regarding the modes of filmic sign production (and the re-production by the recipients), the theory of *sign residues* (Rossi-Landi 1979) could also contribute to an integrated theory of film signs.

Although originally presenting the *homology* between *linguistic* and material production (Rossi-Landi 1968; 1975; 1985), film should in principle be included. A search for elements within the sign system film and within the general filmic discourse which correspond to the levels of the homology model should reveal whether filmic sign production is also characterized by a multiple articulation, following some characteristic consecutive steps of accumulation and qualitative leaps.

Finally, one of the most heavily discussed topics – the question of ideology in movies – can certainly be put on new foundations according to the detailed concepts of ideology as elaborated by Rossi-Landi in his *Ideologia* (1978) and, on an applied level, by a “homologous” generalization of the chapter “Criteri per lo studio ideologico di un autore” (Rossi-Landi 1985: 169-192).

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Rossi-Landi distinguishes four kinds of work: “a) The specific social work which has phylogenetically produced the various sign totalities since the first dawning of human communicabilities, b) The social work necessary to continue to produce each sign totality as a distinguished entity within the global sign production of the sign community. c) The work of transmitting sign totalities from generation to generation. [...] d) The individual work of reproduction of sign totalities.” (Rossi-Landi 1979b: 20)

<sup>2</sup> In the introductory chapter of *Linguistics and Economics* Rossi-Landi defines signs systems as the “dialectical sums of codes and messages actually used by transmitters and receivers in favorable conditions.” (Rossi-Landi 1975: 11)

<sup>3</sup> This specific interrelation was already discussed by Marx in his “Introduction” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, when he talks about consumption giving the product the “finishing touch” (Marx 1961: 623) and states:

“Das Resultat, wozu wir gelangen, ist nicht, daß Produktion, Distribution, Austausch, Konsumtion identisch sind, sondern daß sie alle Glieder einer Totalität bilden, Unterschiede innerhalb einer Einheit.” [“The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity.” Marx 1961: 630]

<sup>4</sup> Some well-known examples are: *Otto e mezzo* (Federico Fellini, IT 1963; Marcello Mastroianni); *La nuit américaine* (François Truffaut, FR 1973; François Truffaut, Jacqueline Bisset); *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Karel Reisz, UK 1981; Meryl Streep, Jeremy Irons); *Dangerous Game* [aka *Snake Eyes*] (Abel Ferrara, US 1993; Harvey Keitel, Madonna); *Shadow of a Vampire* (E. Elias Merhige, US 2000; John Malkovich, Willem Dafoe).

<sup>5</sup> *Valentino* (Lewis Allen, US 1951; Anthony Dexter); *Valentino* (Ken Russell, UK 1970; Rudolf Nureyev), *The Legend of Valentino* (Melville Shovelson US 1975; Franco Nero).

<sup>6</sup> The earliest example is again a Lumière Brothers film: *Les Colleurs d'affiches* (FR 1897) shows how their own poster announcing the genuine *Cinématographe Lumière* is pasted over the poster of a competing company called *Cinématographe Grand Four*.

<sup>7</sup> In a special case of filmic citation the quoted material is combined with the new material in a shot/reverse shot montage as if the two separated characters would directly interact. Film examples are for instance *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* (Marty Feldman, US 1977) with Marty Feldman talking to Gary Cooper (William Wellman, US 1939) or Carl Reiner's *Dead Man Don't Wear Plaid* (US 1982) which uses clips of some 17 movies to show Steve Martin in interaction with almost everybody who was famous in the film noir of the 1940s, from Humphrey Bogart to Lana Turner.

<sup>8</sup> An example in which the shooting camera is present throughout the film is *La tarea* (Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, MX 1990): a film academy student shoots a video for her final exams and from the very beginning to the end everything is shown from the single view-point of a camcorder and we are constantly reminded of the fact.

<sup>9</sup> *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (Edward Cline, US 1941; W.C. Fields) develops right before our eyes according to the script Fields is reading to a producer; some characters in *Hellzapoppin'* (H.C.Potter, US 1941) ask the operator to rewind the film; and *The Maltese Bippy* (Norman Panama, USA 1969) has three different endings which are invented by the characters themselves after they disagree with the original solution.

<sup>10</sup> The first character who enters the screen, although only in a dream, is the projectionist in *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, US 1924). More recent examples of this transition are *Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, US 1984), *Ladri di saponette* (Maurizio Nichetti, IT 1988), *Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, US 1993), or *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, US 1998).

<sup>11</sup> In *Volunteers* (Nicholas Meyer, US 1985), a Tom Hanks movie, two characters bend over to read the subtitles at the bottom of the frame. *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* (Marty Feldman, US 1977) has several examples, like a superimposed caption with golden letters melting in the hot desert sun, or an iris which not only ends a scene but almost chokes a character as it closes on his face.

<sup>12</sup> In *Hellzapoppin'* (H.C.Potter, US 1941) the film seems to run through the projector and suddenly a group of characters is separated by the horizontal border lines between the frames.

<sup>13</sup> Film burns appear in movies as different as *George of the Jungle* (Sam Weisman, US 1997) and *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, SE 1966).

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