

ARTS IN THE CHINESE REVOLUTION: THE INTERMEDIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CINEMA AND BALLET IN THE «RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN»

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The article aims to analyze the intermediary relationship between cinema and dance in the feature film *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961, Xie Jin) and in the filmed ballet of the same title (1971, Pan Wenzhan and Fu Jie). The films belong, respectively, to the so-called Period of 17 Years (1949–1966) and to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), years that comprise the government of Mao Zedong. The analysis takes into account the peculiar development of Chinese cinema since its beginnings, and its aesthetic originality based on the different types of arts in the country. During the Maoist period, initially under Soviet influence, China's film industry turned to socialist themes with the intention of internationalizing national arts that sought to make the revolution worldwide. Through the slogan *gu wei jin yong yang wei zhong yong* (古为今用, 洋为中用), which means using the ancient for the present, and foreign things for China, the cultural guidelines of the Communist Party relied on the popular appeal of diverse Chinese and foreign arts to build the heroic narratives of a people forged under socialism. They were easily absorbed not only by the local population, but also by people from other countries. The films in question are examples of the aforementioned motto and combine western aesthetic resources, such as classical ballet, with eastern elements such as Chinese operatic theater, resulting in an original aesthetic for cinema.

Keywords: Chinese cinema, intermediality, classical ballet, Maoist period, political art.

Introduction

Cinema became the fundamental artistic form aimed at educating the people and consolidating socialist ideas in China from 1949 onwards, after the victory of the communists in the civil war waged for many years against the Nationalist Party and the declaration of the People's Republic by Mao Zedong. With the nationalization of film studios in 1953 and the beginning of production of filming equipment in China in the same decade, the national film industry recovers its production, which was quite prolific in the 1930s and shortly after World War II between 1945 and 1949, and incorporates a decidedly propaganda bias, committed to building a new country.

The various film forms developed since the founding of the People's Republic served the same purpose: to educate the people of New China. In fiction cinema, there was a need to emphasize who the heroes were, and especially who were the villains who were enemies of the people. For the Communist Party, it was essential that the Chinese population identify its oppressors – foreign imperialists, landlords, bourgeois, nationalists and counterrevolutionaries, so that these could always be fought during the process of building a nation without oppression and exploitation. It was also essential to recognize the characters who fought in favor of the people and the liberation of China: the entire working class – from the fields and cities, united with the Red Army, commanded by the Communist Party.

Starting from these basic principles of depicting national heroes and villains, Chinese cinema of the Maoist era adopted the aesthetics of Soviet socialist realism, not only in cinema but also in other artistic forms. The cinematographic narrative based

on socialist realism consisted of clearly defining the beginning, middle and end of the stories told by the films, as well as demonstrating an idealism that awakened in the spectators the hope for positive social changes. In these productions, which took place in the newly nationalized film studios of Shanghai and Beijing, the villains were always portrayed in a darker way through the dark colors of the costumes, contrasting makeup, long shot framing to make them «smaller» and lighting that partially covered them with shadows. These aesthetic choices attributed negative visual aspects to the villains, causing estrangement, fear and rejection in the spectators.

To represent positive characters, the aesthetics of socialist realism used resources that were completely opposite to those mentioned above: the heroes of the people – soldiers of the Red Army and members of the Communist Party, were portrayed with light-colored costumes, makeup that highlighted their faces in a way positive, counter-plongée framings – thus revealing their grandeur and dignity, and lighting devices that made them almost holy figures, associating communism with light, liberation and a bright future. This representation of the people's heroes made the spectators create affection and inspiration for these characters, thus awakening a desire to become a people's hero in real life.

With the aesthetic choice of socialist realism established – used little by little by directors in the early 1950s, the cinema of the People's Republic began to narrate the historical episodes of struggle that the country had recently gone through. It was also an intention of the narratives of the period to emphasize that the revolution was in the process of being built and should go forward, not only in China, but also worldwide.

The Red Detachment of Women (*hongse niangzi jun* 红色娘子军), released in 1961 and directed by Xie Jin, was the director's second feature film produced during the 17 Years Period (1949–1966). Xie Jin is one of the main directors in the history of Chinese cinema, described by Costa (1987) as «an author whose universe is truly cinema and who, on the side of exception, clearly testifies to the very diverse potentialities of the intersection between this world (this culture, this civilization) and cinema» [1, p. 64]. *The Red Detachment* was one of the films commissioned by the Communist Party to commemorate its 40th anniversary. The feature portrays, through the trajectory of the protagonist Wu Qionghua, an episode of the liberation process of Hainan island between 1930 and 1932.

The protagonist is Wu Qionghua, a young peasant woman who lived under exploitative conditions in the lands of the rich and cruel Nan Batian. Her family had been murdered by the landlord, who took them as property, forcing the young woman to do all kinds of hard work, and torturing her as punishment for her attempts to escape. Everything changes when two Communist Party members – Hong Changqing and Xiao Pang, arrive on the island disguised as wealthy merchants. They infiltrate Nan's property, observe how men and women were subjected to all kinds of humiliation there, and witness the physical punishment that Qionghua suffered in the cellars of the house.

Feigning interest in trading with Nan Batian, Hong Changqing buys Wu Qionghua, takes her out of the property and after freeing her directs her to look for the Red Army camp on the island and join the female detachment. This act marks the beginning of the character's liberation trajectory, which can be directly associated with the liberation of the island and of China itself. On the way to the camp Qionghua meets another girl named Hong Lian, oppressed and imprisoned by family traditions. The two young women decide to flee in order to meet the Red Army, developing a sisterly relationship. After accepted by the female detachment, the characters go through a process of political education and military strategies, also learning to direct their personal desires for revenge to the collective struggle for the liberation of the Chinese people.

Wu Qionghua, through her striking facial expression and the determination of her youth, represents female strength, the achievement of liberation and the revolution that was also still young and should go ahead. Xie Jin's film had several awards¹

¹ As Chan (2019) points out, the film received four Hundred Awards Flowers at the first edition of the Chinese festival Golden Rooster Film Festival in 1962 in the categories of Best Film, Best Director, Best Actress for the lead Zhu Xijuan (Wu Qionghua), and Best Supporting Actor for Chen Qiang (Nan batian). *The Red Detachment of Women* also received the Bandung award at the third edition of Afro-Asian Film Festival in Jakarta, April 1964.

and marked generations of Chinese people, from the 1960s to the present day [2]. The film is part of a long list of works in different media about Hainan's liberation history under the title *The Red Detachment of Women*. According to researcher Kristine Harris [3], the first known production with this title is a report published between the years 1957/1958, in which characters would already be represented a few years later in Xie's feature film [3]. In this same period, *The Red Detachment of Women* had its first adaptation for the stage, in the form of a local Hainan opera, called *Qionghua*, sung in the island's dialect. This first opera version was performed only in Hainan as the dialect was only understood by the local people.

Xie Jin's feature film released in 1961, *The Red Detachment of Women* would again be adapted for the stage in the same decade. Between 1963 and 1964, the Beijing Dance Academy and the Beijing Opera Academy adapted the film's script into a repertoire classical ballet version, and a Peking Opera version². In 1966, a comic book version was released, attributed to Liang Xin, screenwriter of Xie's feature film. Between 1971 and 1972, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, a period in which artistic productions were under the meticulous command of Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's fourth wife, *The Red Detachment of Women* was again adapted for ballet and opera, this time once in studio-filmed versions. The ballet was widely screened in movie theaters in cities, and in traveling cinemas³ across the country, and, like Xie Jin's feature film, it was a great success with the public, and ended up enshrining the title *The Red Detachment of Women*.

The filmed version of the opera, however, did not obtain the same prestige as the ballet, and at the time was considered only a complement to it. In her article *Re-makes / Re-models: The Red Detachment of Women between stage and Screen* Harris points out some factors that justify the failure of the filmed opera among the public. Opera version is twenty minutes longer than the ballet, making it tiring to watch, and lacks the appeal of the action and incredible bodily technique of the dancers in their acrobatics and ensemble entrances. Furthermore, the filming and cutting techniques employed in the opera did not suit the filmic language as well as the ballet did, with great success.

Relations between Chinese cinema and other arts have been very close since the first film shot in the country in 1905. In *Conquering the Jun Mountain* (*ding junshan* 定军山, Ren Jingfeng), famous

² According to Harris, the Peking Opera version produced between 1963 and 1964 was «swept under the rug» because the playwrights of this version – A Jia and Tian Han, were heavily persecuted and criticized during the Cultural Revolution.

³ The traveling cinemas were a result of the Chinese autonomy in producing their own cinematographic equipment: with the consolidation of this industry, and the production of 16 mm and 8 mm cameras and portable projectors, it was possible to take cinematographic art to the rural interior of the country.

opera actor Tan Xinpei – the favorite of Empress Cixi⁴, plays the role of an opera, a typically Chinese theatrical style distinct from Western theater. With the development of the Chinese film industry during the 1920s and 30s, relations with other artistic forms evidenced through the aesthetics, language and genres of films: theater, martial arts, opera, and comedies, among others. After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, and the years that comprise the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), relations between Chinese cinema and other media became even more intense, and with the purpose of meeting the demands arts established by the Chinese Communist Party⁵.

In the films in question, we are especially interested in the intermedial relations between cinema and dance – specifically the classical ballet developed in China during the Maoist period. Taking the theories of intermediality developed by Agnes Pethó and Irina Rajewski about intermediality in cinema, we will approach the films from a historical perspective, which could make the political dimension of this intermediality emerge.

Literature review

Literary references that use the theme 'intermediality' in Film Studies were selected according to their suitability to the political context of Chinese cinema in the Maoist period (1949–1976). Through the theories elaborated by Agnes Pethó (2011), Irina Rajewsky (2012), Claus Clüver (2011) and Regina Schober (2011), it is possible to highlight the political character of the films *The Red Detachment of Women*, and to comprehend the importance of the relationships between cinema and dance media in the cinematographic productions of the period cited in this article.

Claus Clüver (2011) establishes that intermediality already occurred among many forms of arts and at other times before established as a term of academic study in the 2000s.

Agnes Pethó (2011) and Lucia Nagib (2014) consider intermediality as an important historical method of analysis in Film Studies. Irina Rajewsky (2012) and Regina Schober (2011) use terms such as «umbrella concept» to expand the possibilities of the intermedia approach in the relations of cinematographic works with other arts.

For the historical context of the films listed here, the article by Christine Harris (2010) and the book by Jessica Ka Yee Chan (2019) stand out. The authors

insert the arts produced in the Maoist period in accordance with internal and external political requirements, which used cinema as an important propaganda tool for the construction of Chinese socialism.

Authors listed in numbers 9 to 14 were read and analyzed for the elaboration of the text of this article. Pethó (2010, 2014), Schober (2011), and Aguiar (2017) already mentioned, have theories about intermediality in cinema that converge with Clüver and Rajewsky. Berry and Faquhar (2006) and Clark (2011) present interesting historical panoramas that relate the main political events in China with changes in artistic production. Numbers 15 and 16 are references to the two films entitled *The Red Detachment of Women*.

Research methods

The theoretical and methodological basis for the elaboration of this article is the use of the intermediality theory to analyze the relations between cinema and dance – classical ballet, inserted in the political context of artistic production established during the Maoist Period.

To develop this methodology, it was necessary to read the bibliography about the theme, and film analysis in which the intermedial theory was inserted.

Results and discussion

1. Intermediality in the cinema of the Maoist period

Intermediality, according to Claus Clüver «is a relatively recent term for a phenomenon that can be found in all cultures and eras, both in everyday life and in all cultural activities that we call 'art'» [4, p. 9]. Agnes Pethó (2011) and Lucia Nagib (2014) point to intermediality as an important historical method of analysis in *Film Studies*, and Irina Rajewsky (2010, 2012) borrows from Regina Schober (2012) the term «umbrella concept» to emphasize the numerous possibilities of the intermedial approach for a more comprehensive look at the relationships of cinematographic works with other arts.

Rajewsky defines the «umbrella concept» as a procedure with three categories of phenomena, namely: 1) media transposition, 2) combination of media, and 3) media references. According to the author, these approaches can range from the method of film adaptation, musicalization of literature, among others, to broader approaches, which result in subcategories of intermedialities. In this way, Rajewsky defines intermediality as follows:

a generic term for all those phenomena that (as the prefix *inter* indicates) somehow happen *across* media. «Intermediatic», therefore, designates those configurations that have to do with a crossing of borders between media and that, for this reason, can be differentiated from *intra mediatic phenomena* as well as from *transmediatic phenomena*, for example, the appearance of a certain motif, aesthetics or discourse in a variety of different media [5, p. 18].

⁴ Known as the «Dowager Empress», belonging to the Qing Dynasty, the last Chinese imperial dynasty, overthrown in 1911 by the Xinhai Revolution, led by Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-sen), one of the founders of the Nationalist Party (Guomindang / Kuomintang-KMT), and «father» of the republic. The Chinese Republic was declared on January 1, 1912.

⁵ It is important to emphasize that the guidelines for the artistic productions of the People's Republic were discussed even before its foundation. The known *talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature* carried out in 1942 under the leadership of Mao Zedong, already pointed out the functions of national arts for the construction of socialism in China.

Faced with a brief presentation of the concept of intermediality, and of the work that was built around the title *The Red Detachment of Women*, in which cinema played a central role in its diffusion, we can justify the application of intermedial analysis. As mentioned in the introduction, Chinese cinema from its inception to its full development has very intensely and closely related filmic art to other types of art. The Maoist regime, with the political purpose of educating the population about socialist ideas, and with the greater objective of making the world revolution, used the artistic means as the great vehicles for the propagation of such ideas. The fusion of Western artistic techniques such as classical ballet, with typically Chinese arts – and using cinema as the great transmitter of the final result of these mixtures, seemed the perfect strategy for the Communist Party committees, which commanded the artistic productions of the period.

In the specific case of the analyzed films, it is appropriate to evoke the notion of «media combination», applied in its variation called «plurimodality», and media transposition (Rajewsky, 2010). The combination of media is characterized by the combination of at least two different media (which can be opera, cinema, theater, performance, installations, comics, among others), which will contribute to the construction and to the final meaning of the product resulting from such a combination, which can occur in two modalities: plurimodality and multimodality. Plurimodality consists of the presence of more than one type of media within a single medium (such as cinema, opera, and dance), and it serves us for the analysis of the films in question [6, p. 55].

Media transposition is a process that refers to a text in a given medium, produced from another medium. In this process, the source media is used as the source of the resulting media product, thus configuring intermediality. Media transposition, according to Brazilian researcher Thais Diniz, is very recurrent in cinema «(...) because, from the beginning, this medium has shown its ability to report, with its own resources, a previously narrated story» [7, p. 51].

2. Cinema and Ballet in *The Red Detachment of Women*: an intermedial look

The title *The Red Detachment of Women*, as already presented in the introduction, has become a work widely represented in various media formats and enshrined in cinematographic form, based on a real story of the period of liberation of the Chinese territory. Narrating China's liberation episodes is one of the characteristics of the national arts modernization process⁶, which became more intense and comprehensive during the Maoist regime [8].

Cinema played a central role in the socialist education that began in 1949, being the main media form of diffusion of modernized Chinese arts. As proof of this, we have the ballets and operas that gained filmic forms during the Cultural Revolution, and were widely shown in movie theaters and in traveling cinemas in China.

The intermediary relationship in *The Red Detachment of Women* is already evident in the 1950s, when a report was published between the years 1957–58. The narrative of historical facts and the presentation of characters shaped the script for the first stage adaptation – the Hainan opera; and it is from this report that the script for Xie Jin's feature film was prepared. The screenplay for Xie Jin's feature film, in turn, served as the basis for new adaptations for the ballet and Peking Opera produced between 1963 and 1964. The filmed versions produced and released during the Cultural Revolution (the ballet in 1971 and the opera in 1972), were also based on the feature film script, however, with occasional modifications demanded by Jiang Qing.

The ballet version of *The Red Detachment of Women* was carefully crafted. Its main technical and artistic basis was classical ballet imported from the Soviet Union. To classical Soviet ballet they added Hainan folk dances, acrobatic movements from opera and martial arts, and the *liang xiang* pose. Also taken from Chinese opera, the *liang xiang* pose consists of freezing movements to give emotional emphasis to the character. There is an important and peculiar aspect of the cinematographic productions of *The Red Detachment of Women*: when filming Xie Jin's feature film and during the preparation and filming of the ballet, the whole team – directors, technicians and cast/body, traveled to Hainan to learn about the daily life and body language of peasants and soldiers on the island.

As Harris points out, among the main changes in the script for *The Red Detachment of Women* made collectively by the ballet's editing team in 1970, we can highlight: the ideological message and the revolutionary traits of the heroic characters were emphasized and placed in the foreground. There was a character named Honglian in Xie Jin's film, who was written out of the ballet's script. The name of the protagonist Qionghua changed to Qinghua (which means «pure, clean China», until then the names of the characters in Xie's film referred to the color red). Changqing, male protagonist of notable position in the Communist Party, has his character evidenced as a revolutionary martyr. This modified script served as the basis for filmed ballet and opera released in 1971 and 1972 respectively.

⁶ Author Christine Dabat, in her book *Women in the Chinese Revolutionary Movement* (2006), considers the 1919 May Fourth Movement to be the «first cultural revolution» of the republican period. The movement was a reaction to the Treaty of Versailles, which humiliated China by handing over the province of Shandong (until

then a German concession) to Japan. Among the forms of protest elaborated by these young people, there was the replacement of traditional themes in the arts by current, urgent and revolutionary themes; among them the fight against imperialism, women's liberation, and the fight against exploitation under which the Chinese population was subjected.

The intermediary relationship between dance and cinema present in the two films *The Red Detachment of Women* is perceptible not only by the use of the combination of media (here present cinema, dance, and opera), plurimodality and mediatic transposition, but also how evident are the fusion and mixing of these artistic forms that result in cinematographic art as the main medium. Media transposition is evident here if we take cinema as the central source for the final result of the combination of media. Linked to transposition, plurimodality is noticed when we, establishing the film form as a fundamental base and source, note the insertion of other media forms present in *The Red Detachment*, such as dance, opera and music, to result in the film format as a medium diffusion of the combination of media.

Conclusion

The intermedial approach inserted in the analysis of the feature film and the filmed ballet entitled *The Red Detachment of Women* shows, in the first place, the importance of the historical method, since the political factors that involved cinematographic production in the periods studied (17 Years Period – 1949–1966, and Cultural Revolution – 1966–1976) are fundamental for understanding the transformations of national arts in Maoist China.

Secondly, when we analyze Chinese cinema through the intermedial approach, we can notice that this cinema – born almost simultaneously with the creation of cinema in the West – maintains a very intimate relationship with other types of art. From the first Chinese films made at the beginning of the 20th century, to the development of the Chinese film industry during the republican period (1912–1949), and the emergence of a typically revolutionary and socialist cinema during the Maoist regime (1949–1976), the history of Chinese cinema is marked by the relationship between cinematographic art and dance, literature, theater, opera, music, martial arts, among others; feature that continues to this day.

Finally, we make use of the concepts developed by Rajewsky about the relationships between different media and different arts, defined as intermediality, plurimodality and media transposition, to analyze two key films from the Maoist period, which demonstrate how Chinese cinema participated in the effort to use the old for the present, and things foreign for China, and in this way contribute to the construction of socialism in the new country. In *The Red Detachment of Women* one can see how the barriers between the media are confused, with an intense interaction of media forms that results in a complex aesthetic for the cinema of the new China.

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16. The Red Detachment of Women [hongse

niangzi jun 红色娘子军], 1971, Pan Wenzhen /Fu Jie, color, 105 min, Beijing Film Studios, Beijing, China.

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КИТАЙСКАЯ РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ В ИСКУССТВЕ: ИНТЕРМЕДИАЛЬНЫЕ СВЯЗИ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОГО ЯЗЫКА КИНО И КЛАССИЧЕСКОГО БАЛЕТА В ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОМ ФИЛЬМЕ «КРАСНЫЙ ЖЕНСКИЙ ОТРЯД»

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В статье ставится задача проанализировать интермедийные связи художественного языка кино и классического балета в художественном фильме «Красный женский отряд» (1961, Се Цзинь) и в одноименном экранизованном балете (1971, Пань Вэньчань и Фу Цзе). Фильмы относятся, соответственно, к так называемому периоду 17 лет (1949–1966) и культурной революции (1966–1976), годам правления Мао Цзэдуна. Анализ учитывает своеобразное развитие китайского кино с момента его зарождения и его эстетическую оригинальность, основанную на различных видах искусства в стране. В маоистский период, первоначально находившийся под советским влиянием, китайская киноиндустрия обратилась к социалистическим темам с намерением интернационализировать национальное искусство, отражающее стремление совершить мировую революцию. Благодаря лозунгу «гу вэй цзинь юн ян вэй чжун юн» (古为今用, 洋为中用), который означает использование старого в настоящем и иностранных достижений в Китае, культурные принципы Коммунистической партии пользовались популярностью у многих китайцев и иностранных граждан. Искусство, основанное на героических нарративах народа, закаленного при социализме, легко усваивалось не только местным населением, но и выходцами из других стран. Рассматриваемые фильмы являются примерами этого девиза и сочетают в себе западные эстетические ресурсы, такие как классический балет, с восточными элементами, такими как китайский лирический театр, что приводит к оригинальной эстетике кино.

Ключевые слова: китайское кино, интермедийность, классический балет, маоистский период, политическое искусство.

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