



Cinematic Ekphrasis of Lost Films in Fiction: From Representation to Transmediation

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Abstract. The paper studies cinematic ekphrasis, the representation of film in another medium, and the practice of media transformation. It analyses how lost films are represented and their media characteristics are transmediated in fiction. The article starts with building the connection between ekphrasis and two types of media transformation, media representation and transmediation of media characteristics. It presents an overview of lost films as a subcategory of the film medium drawing on their uncanny characteristics. The argumentation proceeds with the analysis of Jonathan Coe's novel *The House of Sleep* (2014), focusing on the ways the cinematic ekphrasis of lost films operates. The paper draws a conclusion on the uncanny effect of cinematic ekphrasis of lost films and the interrelatedness of media representation and transmediation of media characteristics in its practices.

Keywords: cinematic ekphrasis, lost film, representation, transmediation, media characteristics.

Introduction: Lost Films in Fiction

There are plenty of novels about films, novels that tell stories about characters watching films, starring in films, shooting films, aspiring to make films.¹ There are, however, much fewer novels about films that go missing, that is, lost films. Unlike the plethora of film-related topics that novels about films engage with,

1 These are some of the plenitude of topics that American and British novelists have been engaging with in their works since approximately the 1960s. The most prominent examples include David Lodge's *The Picturegoers* (1960), William Boyd's *Trio* (2020) and *The New Confessions* (1987), Jonathan Coe's *Mr Wilder and Me* (2020) and *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Adam Thorpe's *Still* (1995), Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2005), Theodore Roszak's *Flicker* (1991), Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (2002), Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2015), and many others.

novels about lost films seem to turn to one particular theme in its various manifestations, namely, the search for lost films. Farran Smith Nehme's novel *The Missing Reels* (2014), for example, narrates almost a detective story about tracking down a lost German silent film. One of Jonathan Coe's characters in his novel *Number 11* (2015) obsesses over a lost film that he saw as a kid once and starts frantically looking for it. Similarly, Ramsey Campbell's protagonist of *The Grin of the Dark* (2007) searches for lost silent films starring one specific comedian in order to restore the comedian's reputation in the history of cinema.

However, the need to be found is not the only characteristic that distinguishes lost films from existing films, nor is it the only aspect represented in novels.² Lost films, for instance, often create a sense of mystery, as their visual content is never fully known, or stir a feeling of uncertainty, as retellings of lost films' plots cannot be proved due to missing film reels. In this article, I will show that lost films have distinct characteristics, which are not limited to "the need to be found." I will then examine how a novel can represent a lost film, that is, how the lost film creates figurative meaning in a fictional narrative, using the 1997 novel by Jonathan Coe, *The House of Sleep*, as a case study.

In order to approach lost films and their representation in novels, I turn to cinematic ekphrasis, a phenomenon which I understand as the representation of the film medium in another type of medium. In the first section of this article, I introduce cinematic ekphrasis as an example of media transformation. I present two types of media transformation – media representation (the key term in ekphrasis) and transmediation – and demonstrate that in ekphrasis, representation cannot be practically separated from transmediation. I also define another important notion for cinematic ekphrasis, namely media characteristics or distinct features of media, and clarify why they are crucial for understanding media transformation and, hence, ekphrasis. The second section argues that lost films should be viewed as a subcategory of or a subordinate medium (submedium) to the medium of film. It outlines distinct features of lost films and points out the connection of media characteristics of lost films with the uncanny – an eerie, unsettling feeling of strange familiarity (Royle 2003). In the third part, I examine

2 Here and below, I refer to films that are not considered lost as existing films to emphasize their immediate availability and physical presence. It does not mean, however, that films that are considered lost cannot still exist (there are numerous rediscovered films, i.e. films that were considered lost and then were found: for examples, see Pierce [2013]). Films are called lost to signify the current physical absence of their reels in studio and public archives as well as in known private collections. So, in this paper, the attributive "existing" is used as an antonym to "lost" to demonstrate the ongoing doubtful existence of films that went missing.

how lost films are represented and transmediated in Jonathan Coe's novel *The House of Sleep*. The paper concludes that the practices of cinematic ekphrasis in representing and transmediating lost films in novels result in the creation of an uncanny effect – the core feature of all media characteristics of lost films – by means of various narrative techniques of style, theme, and plot.

Cinematic Ekphrasis as an Example of Media Transformation

Coming from ancient Greek rhetoric, where it was understood as a “vivid form of narration” (Webb 1999, 13), then being defined as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” seventy years ago (Spitzer 1955, 207), and having developed into “the verbal representation of visual representation” by the end of the last century (Heffernan 1993, 3), ekphrasis has conventionally been linked to visual practices and art forms.³ So, it was not surprising when a new kind of ekphrasis – cinematic ekphrasis – was introduced to scholarship by James Heffernan to denote “all verbal accounts of films” in literature, let them be descriptions of films, re-narration of film plots, etc. (2015b, 5). Heffernan convincingly argued that films, as a visual art form, faced no obstacles to fit ekphrasis's subject matter, i.e., visual representation. However, by the time Heffernan's *Notes toward a Theory of Cinematic Ekphrasis* was published (2015b), ekphrasis had already left behind its exclusive relationship with visual art forms⁴ and, most significantly, started spreading its roots in intermediality – a complex set of relations between, among, and within media.

Ekphrasis, now firmly rooted in the studies of intermediality, the studies of “relations between media, medial interactions and interferences” (Rajewsky 2010, 51), is viewed as the practice of representing one medium in another medium (cf. Carriboni Killander et al. 2014), or one channel of communicating information in a channel of a different kind.⁵ Among many definitions of ekphrasis – for example, “the representation of a source medium in a target medium” (Carriboni Killander et al. 2014, 10), a kind of remediation, “the representation of one

3 For further details on the evolution of the phenomenon, see Heffernan (2015a) and Rippl (2019).

4 Such phenomena as, for instance, musical ekphrasis denoting the representation of music in literary works, were already actively used (e.g., Goehr 2010).

5 By referring to a medium as a channel of communicating information that Elleström uses as a starting point in his exploration of “what is a medium” (2010, 13–17), I do not intend to neglect its complexity. However, such a brief outline of the term is enough for my purposes in this article. For a detailed introduction of the term “medium,” see Elleström (2010).

medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 45), or a kind of transformation of media (Elleström 2010, 3) – one finds a certain pattern of ekphrasis being a sort of interaction of two media, which are of different kinds. When one refers to ekphrasis as “cinematic,” it signifies that one of the two media of interaction in ekphrasis is of cinematic nature.⁶ As I am interested in the representation of lost films in fiction, in this paper, film is regarded as the source medium in cinematic ekphrasis, the medium which is represented.

Since the two media in ekphrasis are never of the same kind, it is necessary to speak of media transformation when ekphrasis is in action. In his work on media transformation (2014), Lars Elleström, one of the founders of the academic discipline of intermediality, proposed two types of media transformation. The first type is called media representation, which “occurs whenever a medium presents another signifying unit to the mind” (Elleström 2014, 27).⁷ This is how ekphrasis usually operates: the target medium represents – presents to the mind of the perceiver – the source medium. And this is how cinematic ekphrasis is perceived in this article: the target medium (a literary one in this study, a novel) represents – presents to the mind of a reader – the source medium, a film. However, according to Elleström, modern ekphrasis is not to be understood exclusively as representation (2014, 33) – an observation that tends to be omitted in theoretical discussions of ekphrasis (e.g. Heffernan 2015a, 2015b; Clüver 2019).⁸ While representation has been the prevalent notion in ekphrasis, transmediation, the second type of media transformation, tends to be left out.

In this article, I follow the analytical practice of including not only media representation but also transmediation in cinematic ekphrasis.⁹ Transmediation,

6 I argued elsewhere that the film medium can be either a represented or a representing medium in such an interaction, and in both cases, the phenomenon would be referred to as cinematic ekphrasis. Moreover, not only the film medium can represent or be represented, as other media of cinematic nature, such as a film script and a lost film (what this article showcases), can be a source or target medium in cinematic ekphrasis (Klishevich 2023).

7 There is no ranking of the types of media transformation. My reference to representation as “the first type of media transformation” indicates only the representation’s closer connection to ekphrasis in comparison to the second type of media transformation which is introduced below.

8 Interestingly enough, Claus Clüver, who mentions transmediation when he writes about ekphrasis, does not understand transmediation the way Elleström does. Clüver equates it with the notion of *Medienwechsel*, or an intermedial transposition, but does not tie representation to transmediation or recognize their intertwined nature (2019, 247). There are, however, researchers of intermediality, like Jørgen Bruhn, Anna Gutowska, Emma Tornborg and Martin Knust, who seem to focus on the connection between ekphrasis and transmediation, leaving out the notion of representation from the definition of the ekphrasis (Bruhn et al. 2022, 148).

9 Although only the notion of representation appears in my definition of cinematic ekphrasis, transmediation is practically not excluded from it. The reason I do not include it in the definition is that, although it is a valid question, it is not my goal here to theoretically debate whether the

as a second type of media transformation, means repeated mediation by another type of medium (Elleström 2014, 20). In other words, transmediation is a process of realizing characteristics of a source medium for a second time in a target medium. This process is typically exemplified by adaptation: for instance, when a novel is adapted into a film, transmediation is put into action, as the representations from the novel are prompted in the film once again. Thus, various adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, be it a film or a theatre play, are examples of transmediation, as they represent the characteristics of the novel by Jane Austen with medium-specific solutions: the historical context with costumes, décor, and contemporary interiors creating a specific atmosphere, tableau shots of natural and societal settings, contemporary music, etc. For example, the 2005 film adaptation by Joe Wright transmediates the majority of the novel's characteristics, such as the representation of the same historical context and its specific societal norms, or the representation of the relationship between the Bennet sisters, without bringing many changes to the transformation process.

Transmediation is at hand any time when “equivalent sensory configurations are mediated for a second (or third or fourth) time by another type of medium” (Elleström 2014, 20). This practice can serve as a link between transmediation and media representation. Media representation contains transmediation, if it includes repeated mediation of equivalent sensory configurations – sensory configurations that can activate representations in mind analogous to the source medium (Elleström 2014, 14, 17). The requirement for such a “blend” is a more or less detailed representation, or in Elleström's words, “if a source medium is represented in some detail, the represented media characteristics of the source medium become transmediated by the target medium” (2014, 17). An example could be one of the chapters in Jonathan Coe's novel *Mr Wilder and Me* (2020). Narrated in the form of a filmscript, the chapter is a) the representation of the medium of filmscript in the novel and b) includes a repeated mediation of visual sensory configurations equivalent to a filmscript, that is, the visual perception of the chapter is very similar to the one of a filmscript.¹⁰

To sum up, in the case of transmediation, not the source medium itself, but its media characteristics are transferred, so that a source medium can be recognized

definition of ekphrasis should be reconsidered and changed from “representation” only to both “representation” and “transmediation” or simply “transformation” In a nutshell, ekphrasis is believed to always contain a certain amount of transmediation, although its definition does not explicitly signify it.

10 For detailed analysis of the representation of the filmscript in different media, including Jonathan Coe's novel *Mr Wilder and Me*, see Klishevich (2023).

again or mediated for a second time in another type of medium. In the case of representation, on the other hand, the source medium itself is represented, i.e., transferred, and its media characteristics get transferred with it.¹¹ Thus, in the case of transmediation (or adaptation) of *Pride and Prejudice*, films and theatre plays stimulate similar representations that the novel conveys without directly referencing or mentioning the source medium, transferring only its content.¹² In the case of representations in *Mr Wilder and Me*, the novel represents the last film that Billy Wilder directs in his career, transferring the source medium itself (i.e. the form) and, consequently, the film's characteristics. For example, characteristics such as being an adaptation of a short story, having a strong nostalgic aspect to its plot, serving as the "closing" film of Billy Wilder's career, among others are conveyed through description, narration, references and allusions to the film.

Media characteristics, thus, play a crucial role in both types of media transformation. They are "features of media products that are apprehended and formed when a structuring and interpreting mind makes sense of the mediated sensory configurations" (Elleström 2014, 40). Any media product has specific features that can be ascribed only to it. Nevertheless, there are also media characteristics that are not media-exclusive but common for several media products at the same time. Since media are groupings of media products, "certain media characteristics tend to be associated with certain media" (Elleström 2014, 40). Therefore, I will attempt to outline which media characteristics tend to be associated with lost films in order to analyse (in section four) how lost films are represented and transmediated in fiction.

Media Characteristics of Lost Films

In the current era of digitalization, films barely go missing. However, this was not the case for the film industry of the past century. Owing to David Pierce's (2013) research and archival work, one can understand how big the numbers of lost films were between 1912 and 1929 in the USA only: for instance, 70 percent of American silent-era feature films were completely lost, while only 30 percent survived, though not all of them are complete (Pierce 2013, 1). The reason for such significant losses in the 20th century usually lay in the film companies' lack of interest in preserving films, which meant spending money on cataloguing them, keeping reels in a safe

11 For a schematic visual explanation of the two processes, see Elleström (2014, 16).

12 On the discussion of form and content in media and media characteristics, see Elleström (2014, 39–45).

space, etc. With such neglect from film companies, it was not a rare phenomenon that reels would get destroyed, typically from chemical decay or in fires, as the nitrate film – which was used for making moving pictures then – was extremely flammable and prone to early deterioration (Pierce 2013, 6, 21).¹³

One of the most well-known examples of lost films from that period is *London After Midnight*, a 1927 silent mystery horror film directed by Tod Browning. I use *London After Midnight* as a starting point for several purposes here. First, to demonstrate why lost films can be considered a subcategory of the film medium;¹⁴ secondly, to construct an adequate overview of the media characteristics of lost films. Since media are groupings of media products and, to quote Elleström again, “certain media characteristics [of media products] tend to be associated with certain media” (2014, 40), I find it reasonable to turn to a media product in order to better understand lost films as a medium and their media characteristics.¹⁵

Today, almost sixty years after the last copies of the film were destroyed in a fire at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio in 1967, *London After Midnight* is considered to be the Holy Grail of lost films (Macdonald n. y.).¹⁶ But a lot of information about the film is, in fact, still available nowadays: three film posters, numerous library cards, 19 stills, and the full film script can be freely accessed on the Internet by anyone (Browning and Young 1927).¹⁷ Nevertheless, people keep searching for the film, trying to visualize its content and imagine the affective impact of the film.¹⁸

13 The biggest fires took place in such film companies as Warner Bros. and Twentieth Century Fox in the 1930s, destroying nearly all silent and early sound negatives (Pierce 2013, 22).

14 I do not use *Latrine Duty* – the lost film from the novel *The House of Sleep* that will be analysed below – as an example here because *Latrine Duty* is an imaginary film by a fictional director, Salvatore Ortese. Instead, I am using a non-fiction media product to outline media characteristics of the subcategory of lost films. *London After Midnight* is chosen to match the description (i.e., silent, black-and-white film) of the fictional lost film created by Jonathan Coe in his novel.

15 Clearly, I am not in the capacity to analyse all films that have ever gone missing to create a complete overview of media characteristics of lost films; this remains a possible future trajectory for research on lost films.

16 The film is considered to be one of the most sought-after lost films as it was released as a silent film just a couple of months before the release of the first talkie feature film. *London After Midnight* can also be thought of as a very early example of the vampire-themed films, as Tod Browning remade *London After Midnight* as *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), a talkie picture, and a predecessor of the famous *Dracula* (1931), which initiated the modern horror genre.

17 For all kinds of preserved visual materials from the film and the film’s shooting, see IMDb. n. y. *The Hypnotist*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018097/>. Last accessed 03. 03. 2024.

18 Numerous attempts to reconstruct the film can be found online. For instance, there is an AI reconstruction of the first five minutes of the film (Hunt, John. n. y. *London After Midnight* (AI reconstruction). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tekbo_1by28. Last accessed 04. 03. 2024.) and the recreation of the full 46-minute film made of film stills and screen graphics (*London After Midnight 1927* (reconstruction) n. y. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfTuZb_A-H8.

Thus, when trying to grasp lost films in media terms, one needs to point out that lost films do not have the same material manifestation as existing films.¹⁹ What Elleström calls the material modality of media – “the latent corporeal interface of the medium; where the senses meet the material impact” (Elleström 2010, 36) – is completely different for lost films. While the material modality of existing films is a flat surface of changing images combined with sound waves, the corporeal interface of lost films consists of photographs, stills, or filmscripts, if they are preserved. If they are not available, however, lost films exist purely as retellings of plots, in an oral or written form.²⁰

Consequently, lost films tend to shift the primary purpose of the film medium: instead of being made “to be watched,” they are meant “to be found” first in order “to be watched.” What Elleström calls contextual qualifying aspect – “delimitation and use of media in specific historical, cultural and social circumstances” (2010, 24) – is metaphorically one step behind for lost films. The main use of the film medium in any historical period was to be watched. However, for (now considered) lost films, an “extra step” has been added in order to fulfil this function.

According to these “deviations,” i.e., the modified material modality and altered contextual qualifying aspect, I classify lost films as a subcategory of the film medium. Lost films are still films and undoubtedly belonged to the film medium some seventy years ago. Therefore, I do not find it productive to claim them to be a separate medium. Nevertheless, due to the changes that films underwent to result in being considered lost, the prefix “sub” indicates lost films’ falling nearly into the category of films but not being identical to them. As a subcategory, lost films have certain distinct media characteristics which are not identical to the characteristics of existing films. Below, I propose three distinct characteristics of lost films that are, in one way or another, of dual nature.

First, lost films can be characterized by a paradoxical state between the known and the unknown. Lost films position themselves between familiarity and unfamiliarity as one does know what a lost film is about (through often openly accessible information, research, etc. on lost films), but has not seen – and

Last accessed 04. 03. 2024.). Additionally, several books on the film have been published; one of the most recent research projects is Daniel Titley’s *London After Midnight: The Lost Film* (2022).
 19 For a detailed description of modalities and modes of the film medium, see Jensen and Salmose (2022).

20 In some cases, lost films exist as recreated versions of original films, e.g. *London After Midnight* (see examples of the reconstruction in footnote 18). Such media products are examples of transmediation, as they mediate the characteristics of *London After Midnight* for a second, third, etc. time.

cannot see – it. Secondly, lost films make themselves present, as there are stills, filmstrips, and other artifacts and forms of evidence of prior existence. But, on the other hand, lost films do not exist because their physical manifestation – the film reels or moving images – is absent.²¹ Thirdly, closely connected to this is the duality of life and death that can also characterize lost films. Despite the fact that most lost films were lost due to the destruction of their reels (for example, in a fire, as it was the case with *London After Midnight*), they nevertheless stay “alive” through various narratives built around them, be it people’s speculation on what could have happened to a last existing copy, or an academic research project on the matter.

Of course, lost films can possess additional media characteristics beyond those concisely summarized above.²² What groups these three media characteristics of lost films is not only the dualism of their nature but also the uncanny effect they produce. To be exact, this is not a dualism of a complementary kind, where two elements coexist and complement each other; rather, it is a paradoxical dualism which results in a self-contradictory effect leading to the creation of the uncanny experience. How is it possible that a film is present and absent at the same time, that we know about it but do not know about it?

The uncanny is understood here as a compound notion. I use Nicholas Royle’s extensive work on the uncanny to refer to the phenomenon as “a feeling of something not simply weird or mysterious but, more specifically, as something strangely familiar” (2003, vii). The uncanny is, however, much more. It is a strange feeling of things falling into place, of curious coincidences, uncertainty, déjà vu, and so on (Royle 2003, vii). As the analysis will show, one finds the uncanny in various manifestations in the examples of cinematic ekphrasis of lost films in *The House of Sleep*.

21 This illusion of presence is probably the closest connection that one finds between lost films and ekphrasis, as the latter is traditionally aimed at showing or creating an image of something that is absent.

22 Or, they could be different in two aspects: the number of artifacts preserved and the amount of attention coming from interested people, hence, the number of narratives built. For lost films which do not have any preserved artifacts (but not necessarily lack of interest), the characteristic of being neither absent nor present might not be applicable. For lost films which do not cause any speculation or academic interest, the characteristic of being between “life” and “death” seems less prominent.

Cinematic Ekphrasis of Lost Films in *The House of Sleep*

In his novels, contemporary British novelist Jonathan Coe writes about films and film industry in general: for example, *What a Carve Up!* (1991) tells the story of an obsession over a black-and-white film of the same title (*What a Carve Up!* [1962]); *Mr Wilder and Me* (2021) is a novel about a Hollywood film director Billy Wilder and the shooting of his last film *Fedora* (1978). Some other Coe novels specifically deal with lost films: the 1997 novel *The House of Sleep* (2014), which serves as a case study in this paper, and one of the chapters of his 2015 novel *Number 11*, called *The Crystal Garden*.

In both instances of Coe's works which engage with lost films, his characters are obsessed with finding them, but the search for lost relics never ends with success. Due to the length limit of this paper, I will only focus on one of Coe's novels about lost films: *The House of Sleep* is preferred as it offers a greater variety of the examples of cinematic ekphrasis of lost films simply because it is a longer text than *The Crystal Garden*. After a brief introduction of the novel below, I analyse instances of both representation of lost films and transmediation of their media characteristics – the dualities of familiarity and unfamiliarity, presence and absence, life and death – in order to show how cinematic ekphrasis triggers the experience of the uncanny in Jonathan Coe's novel.

The House of Sleep is a novel about three university friends, Terry, Robert, and Sarah, who take different directions in life after they finish the university but manage to reconnect with each other years after their studies. Since his university years, Terry has been obsessed over *Latrine Duty*, a lost film from 1972 by Salvatore Ortese. He starts searching for the film but finds only a still from it in an archive. The still depicts the same scene that Robert saw in a dream when he was a child. Robert interprets the dream as a guideline to change his sex in order to be with Sarah (who, Robert thinks, is homosexual). He becomes a woman under the name Cleo and after doing so tries to find Sarah, the woman he has been in love with since the university. The filmstill magically instructs Robert – now Cleo – how and where to find Sarah.

Representation of *Latrine Duty*

The first means of representation of *Latrine Duty* is the narration of the events happening to people who had the chance to watch the now lost film. Before

having gone missing, *Latrine Duty*, a fictitious film directed by a fictitious director Salvatore Ortese, had only be seen by a few people. Since no physical proof of the film's existence is available, *Latrine Duty* is represented only through the narratives built around the lost film.

Terry composes an article about *Latrine Duty* where he gathers all available pieces of those narratives together. By placing ironic stories of curious accidents happening to those who watched *Latrine Duty* one after another, Coe manages to create not merely a humorous effect but a rather absurd reality. In this reality, watching *Latrine Duty* makes a film reviewer commit suicide: although "there was an alternative explanation for the suicide (the reviewer had recently been abandoned by his wife and children), there seemed little doubt that exposure to Ortese's nihilistic *tour de force* had been a major contributing factor" (Coe 2014, 195, emphasis in the original). The absurd implication regarding what caused the suicide makes readers doubt the truthfulness of this story: would one commit suicide because of a film?

The unreliability of the narratives around *Latrine Duty* is further emphasized through irony in the following excerpt: "Equally mysterious was an eight-year-old article from a Canadian academic journal called *The Quarterly Review of Urinary Medicine*. This presented the case history of a representative (since retired) of an Italian distribution company who had seen the film and, while he adamantly refused to disclose its contents, had forever afterwards suffered from a bizarre bladder complaint which made him unable to urinate in the company of other men" (Coe 2014, 195–196).

The idea of a film causing a bladder problem indicates the ridiculousness of the case. The irony is at the centre of demonstrating such absurdity: the essence of the "problem," being "unable to urinate in the company of other men," is not a medical issue for an academic journal of medicine to deal with, neither is it a condition that a film's viewing can cause (Coe 2014, 195).

The final part of the representation of speculative narratives around the lost film reaches the climax of absurdity. First, *Latrine Duty's* existence is put in doubt: "[the film's] editor steadfastly maintained that it didn't exist" (Coe 2014, 195). Other perspectives only deepen the uncertainty of who the readers should trust, as, for example, "[the film's] costume designer [...] believed that every print had been destroyed but remembered it as 'essentially a tender and romantic film'" (Coe 2014, 195). Who should the readers believe, when all the narratives around *Latrine Duty* are unreliable? Did the film even exist? Did they, in fact, see it?

Thus, the lost film is represented by means of unreliable narration, irony, and paradox, and the lost film's uncanny quality becomes one of the characteristics of the novel itself. Through such detailed, multifaceted representations, cinematic ekphrasis manages to mediate the sensory configurations, namely, the feelings of uncertainty and, to a certain degree, weirdness which are inherent in lost films, as one plunges into the disturbing reality of Coe's narrative around *Latrine Duty*.

The second means of representation of the lost film is the description of one of its film stills. When Terry was searching for *Latrine Duty* through archives, he could find nothing but a single photograph from the film – one of a thousand film stills of *Latrine Duty*. What makes the representation uncanny in this case is the context, as the description of the film still – an ekphrasis – is identical to the description of Robert's dream.

The connection between the still and the dream is never commented on explicitly. First, readers find Robert's dream at the beginning of the novel: "I had a dream about a hospital once,' Robert said, in the meantime. 'In fact it's about the only dream I can remember. I must have been about nine or ten... I'm in this very arid landscape, very hilly and dusty. And there's this woman, a middle-aged woman, in a nurse's uniform, and she's standing by the side of the road, pointing: pointing off into the distance. There's a big building somewhere ahead of us on the road – that's what she's pointing at. I can see it faintly, and I know it's a hospital. Some sort of military hospital, actually. And just behind her there's a notice. She's standing in front of it so I can't read it all'" (Coe 2014, 86).

Two hundred pages after that, one finds an almost identical description: "A single black and white photograph, showing a road, a dusty, arid landscape, and a woman, a woman in nurse's uniform, pointing off into the distance as she stands in front of a sign which consists of one word, written in a foreign language" (Coe 2014, 296). But this time the passage describes a film still from *Latrine Duty*, a photograph from the lost film that was found in an archive. First, the description creates a strangely familiar feeling, making readers have doubts whether they have already read the same description before. In this case, the feeling of *déjà vu* is justified: when it is confirmed that the same passage was already used to describe a dream, one cannot help but wonder how a dream can contain the same visual content as a scene from a film that went missing.²³ Since the *déjà vu* passes quite briefly, the uncanny effect of the representation here lies, in fact, in what Nicholas Royle calls "the crisis of the proper" as the representation "entails

23 On the connection of films and dreams, see Curry (1974) and Sharot (2015).

a critical disturbance of what is proper” (2003, 1). Should readers believe that the woman in nurse’s uniform was in a dream or in a film?

Instead of answers to this and similar questions, readers only find reasons for the crisis to develop, as the word written in a foreign language (“she stands in front of a sign which consists of one word, written in a foreign language” [Coe 2014, 296]) gets revealed in the narrative: “It seemed to consist of one word: *fermer*” (Coe 2014, 315). When Terry and Robert (now Cleo) discuss the photograph from the film, they cover various possibilities of what the foreign word could mean but do not come to any conclusion.²⁴ The conversation ends with an ambiguous remark from Robert/Cleo’s side – “I’m not saying it’s the *only* meaning” (Coe 2014, 317, emphasis in the original) – then nothing else about the foreign word comes up till the end of the novel.

However, curious readers who open the appendix find the foreign word once again: “not lost not lost yet nothing lost yet not if you find her go now she is waiting London easy to find empty house cold house she lives alone North London quiet streets you turn in turn in from station first house first you see don’t wait hurry go now find the road remember remember the name Fermer Road Fermer she does want you find her please go to her now” (Coe 2014, Appendix 3).

The excerpt is the transcript of one of Robert/Cleo’s patients who mentions *fermer* while talking in her sleep. But now it refers to the Fermer road – the place where Sarah lives and where Robert/Cleo should find her. Everything seems to be falling into place, and fate seems to be the only explanation. The strange feeling is, nevertheless, still there, in the back of reader’s minds: how is it possible that the film still can depict an actual street in London, where Robert reunites with his love? Nothing makes sense, but the uncanny never does, especially when things seem to be fated or are “meant to happen” – the very core of the uncanny effect that cinematic ekphrasis in *The House of Sleep* keeps turning to.

The examples of representation discussed above already involve a certain degree of transmediation since they remediate the characteristics of lost films, namely, what we perceive as mystery, strangeness, absurdity, and suspense, or a compound noun for these sensory configurations – the uncanny. I will now turn to examples of transmediation and show how media characteristics of lost films get transferred to the novel’s narrative, giving rise to the representations of the uncanny traits of lost films.

24 In this conversation, the readers find out that *fermer* stands for “to close” in French or could be a part of the word *infermeria* which stand for “a hospital” in Italian (Coe 2014, 315–317).

Transmediation of Lost Films

While the representation of lost films in *The House of Sleep* is focused on a particular media product – the fictional lost film *Latrine Duty* – the process of transmediation is centred around media characteristics of lost films as a submedium. In other words, the novel *The House of Sleep* triggers representations of media characteristics which are equivalent to the ones of lost films, and not *Latrine Duty* specifically (Elleström 2014, 22). The media characteristics that I listed above – the dualities of familiarity and unfamiliarity, absence and presence, life and death – appear on different levels of the narrative. Although these characteristics might be attributed to some other media products as well²⁵ (after all, it is difficult to think of media characteristics that are truly media-exclusive), it is hard to imagine them being ascribed to a specific medium. For example, although certain films, theatre plays, or poems can be ascribed these characteristics, the media of film, theatre, poetry themselves cannot be characterized by the dualities of familiarity and unfamiliarity, absence and presence, life and death. Yet, both lost films as a subcategory of film and lost films as media products can be characterized by these dualities, as they are expected to be inherent in every lost film (albeit to different degrees of prominence) due to the very nature of their – or some of their parts’ – unavailability, as discussed above.

Thus, the first example of transmediation lies in the novel’s non-chronological narration, as each chapter narrating the events of the past is followed by a chapter relating the present events, and vice versa. As Coe explains before the beginning of the novel, “the odd-numbered chapters of this novel are set mainly in the years 1983-4. The even-numbered chapters are set in the last two weeks of 1996” (2014, Author’s note). Since the same characters are at the centre of the events in both timeframes, the two timespans blend together as the reader progresses through the novel’s plot. This type of narration continuously fills in the gaps in the understanding of the plot, while new questions continue to arise, leaving readers torn between familiar and unfamiliar details from each time period.

The positioning of the non-chronological chapters is complicated by another detail: neither part of the novel finishes with a full stop, but rather ends in the middle of a sentence. The part which comes next always begins with the same word as if continuing with the same sentence [Fig. 1]. As the narrative of one

25 Media products such as Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), or to be exact, its plot, the storyline of reconstructing Sebastian Knight’s life by his brother, can be characterized by all three dualities that I list above.

chapter flows into that of the next chapter, the familiar commingles with the unfamiliar, creating a sense of unsettlement. In this way, the familiar–unfamiliar duality, as a characteristic of lost films, is remediated at the level of the plot construction, leaving the readers disoriented, since such a fragmented kind of narration makes it uneasy to connect already familiar details of the story with yet unknown bits of information (but usually essential to the plot). This is the same feeling of disorientation and confusion between the known and the unknown that lost films evoke.

The duality of life and death is most clearly transmuted at the level of characters' storylines. As I have mentioned earlier, Robert undergoes the sex reassignment surgery and uses the name Cleo in his new life as a woman. He is neither dead nor alive: as a man Robert is dead, but he lives further as a woman, Cleo. Another example of transmutation of the duality of life and death can be found in the story line of Terry's character. At the end of the novel, when Terry leaves a train station, an accident of some sort happens to him (Coe 2014, 322). But only in the appendix do the readers find out from his mother's letter that he actually went into a coma (Coe 2014, Appendix 2), the state between life and death, neither of which and, at the same time, both of which prevail. Once again, the characteristic of lost films is remediated in the novel at the level of plot and indirect characterization.

The transmutation of presence and absence can be found in the theme of sleep that runs throughout the novel like a red thread. Presence and absence are repeatedly mediated in the stages of wakefulness and sleep, as reflected in the titles of the novel's chapters, which are referred to not as chapters but as stages [Fig. 2]. Starting with stage 1, when one passes from wakefulness to drowsiness, and ending with stage 4, the most restful part of sleep, the novel finishes with REM sleep, described as "paradoxical sleep," which resembles wakefulness rather than sleep. Thus, starting with the state of being present – or awake – *The House of Sleep* proceeds through four stages to the core sleep – where the mind is no longer present but unconscious. However, in the next stage – the REM sleep – one seems to be awake again, and the presence seems to be brought back.²⁶ In this way, the novel keeps "moving" from presence to absence, from absence once again back to presence and so on, triggering the representation of the key media feature of lost films – the absence-presence duality. The encounter with the chapter titles activates the same sensory configurations as any lost film would,

26 This is due to the fact that in REM sleep (or "paradoxical sleep" as it "resembles wakefulness more than sleep"), one's eyelids move rapidly as a result of "frantic brain activity" (Coe 2014).

arousing an uncanny feeling of uncertainty regarding what is proper, namely, which kind of fictional narrative it is exactly that we engage here with: a dream or a novel?

Conclusion

By representing the fictitious lost film *Latrine Duty* (through speculative narratives around the lost film, description of the filmstill/dream, and references to the film's content), cinematic ekphrasis evokes the uncanny feeling, which is, however, not identical to the media characteristics of lost films. Although the uncanny effect produced by the representation is related to the familiar–unfamiliar duality of lost films, it mainly concerns other characteristics of the uncanny, such as mystery, suspense, uncertainty, strangeness, irony, fate, etc. By representing *Latrine Duty*, the novel transfers the media product, and its media characteristics get transferred with it, as they are reconstructed in readers' minds. Such a reconstruction is caused by the representations of the lost film, the narratives around it, the description of the filmstill, etc.

By transmediating the media characteristics of lost films, the dualities “familiar–unfamiliar,” “absence–presence,” and “life–death,” *The House of Sleep* mediates the uncanny for the second time. Such transmediation is found in the narrated time, the characters' storylines, and the general theme of the novel. These elements of the novel trigger the same sensory configurations as the encounter with a lost film would: the uncanny feeling of the story of Cleo/Robert, Sarah, and Terry seems more familiar as we go through the text and get more and more acquainted with the plot. At the same time, it remains foreign, regardless of how far we progress through the pages, because certain details of the plot appear questionable, some actions paradoxical, and the interaction between time periods puzzling. Especially in the case of the theme of sleep that dominates the whole novel, the transmediation of the characteristic “absence–presence” is most effective, as transmediated in the chapter's titles. It makes the readers doubt whether the whole story is, in fact, a dream, as every chapter referred to as a certain stage of sleep, creating an effect of falling into deeper sleep with every chapter. Such an interpretation (yet again) brings more confusion than clarity, as the readers cannot know whose dream it is, whether he/she wakes up eventually, etc.

When one tries to draw an example of representation or transmediation exclusively, one ends up failing, as both types of media transformation are

intertwined extremely closely. Although I tried to separate the representation and transmediation of lost films in my analysis above by naming the sections of it accordingly (i.e., 4.1. and 4.2.), in practice, one cannot speak of one kind of media transformation without mentioning the other. Hence, ekphrasis needs to be understood as a kind of representation that always includes – or, to put it even more precisely, causes – a certain amount of transmediation. While the representation of *Latrine Duty* repeatedly mediates sensory configurations analogous to lost films, transmediation of this subcategory of film (the examples from section 4.2) can be perceived as such only because of the representational practice, i.e. as a result of detailed representation.²⁷ If *Latrine Duty* had not been so intrinsic to *The House of Sleep* on so many levels, one could have interpreted the narrative traits of the novel, which I analysed in section 4.2., as merely distinctive features of Coe's novel without connecting them to the media characteristics of lost films. However, as the representations of the lost film are so detailed, numerous, and multifaceted throughout the novel, they influence the perception of other aspects of Coe's work.

Overall, representation in cinematic ekphrasis extends its operation to the repeated mediation of sensory configurations equivalent to those of its source medium on two levels. First, on the level of single examples of detailed representations of the lost film (as I mentioned in section 2, following Elleström [2014]), and second, on the level of the broader narrative, where representation appears sporadically. Owing to the large number of examples of the representation of *Latrine Duty*, their distribution throughout the novel, and their importance to the storyline, the sensory configurations equivalent to lost films – i.e., the many sides of the experience of the uncanny effect – are more likely to be triggered in readers' minds.

As for the uncanny, it seems to be a truly transmedial characteristic. Although media characteristics are stated to never be fully transmedial in Elleström's work (2014, 40), the modal differences between the novel and the submedium of lost film do not seem to be a limitation for transmediation, but rather a fruitful means of artistic expression for novels engaging with the media characteristics of lost films.

The paper opens up further research possibilities in intermedial and ekphrastic studies. First and foremost, the presented analysis can be extended to the comparative analysis of another novel by Jonathan Coe – *Number 11* – in which a chapter called *The Crystal Garden* is dedicated to a lost film of the same name,

27 This is also the reason why the analysis of the lost film's representation was presented first, followed by the examples of transmediation, and not vice versa.

or any other novel featuring cinematic ekphrasis of lost films. Lost films, as a subordinate medium to film, could also be a productive subject of research by itself for scholars of intermediality.

Furthermore, what both novels about lost films by Jonathan Coe invite one to explore, but could not be included in this paper, is the transmediation of fictitious media. Elleström describes the transmediation of fictitious media products as a marginal phenomenon in comparison to that of real media products (2014, 23). When applied to lost films, the situation may seem – yet again – paradoxical, as lost films could be considered to be half-fictitious media since they do not exist (are not available or accessible) at a certain point in time.

For those interested in literary studies, the connection between lost films and the horror and mystery genre could be further explored. Additionally, the subject invites an examination of *The House of Sleep* through the lens of intermedial narratology and gender studies.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Transmediation of the familiar–unfamiliar duality in the construction of the chapters (my screenshot of the eBook *The House of Sleep*, 2008).

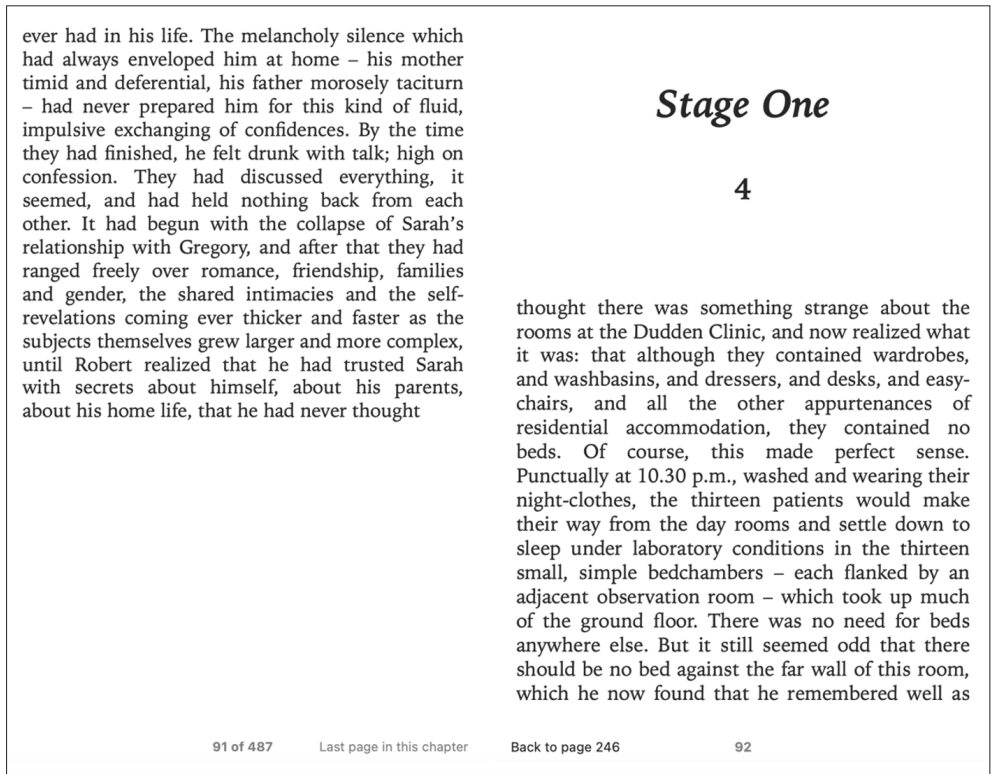


Figure 2. The stages of wakefulness and sleep reflected in the names of the novel's chapters (my scan of the printed book: Coe 2014, Contents).

<i>Contents</i>	
Awake	I
Stage One	57
Stage Two	115
Stage Three	167
Stage Four	223
REM Sleep	277
APPENDIX 1: Poem	331
APPENDIX 2: Letter	335
APPENDIX 3: Transcript	339