

Entanglements of intermediality: Polanski, Pinter, Steptoe and Son

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Entanglements of Intermediality

Polanski, Pinter, *Steptoe and Son*

Jonathan Bignell

This chapter traces intermedial connections between examples drawn from film culture, the stage, and broadcasting: work by the émigré film director Roman Polanski; the theatre playwright, actor, and screenwriter Harold Pinter; and the TV, radio, and film characters Albert and Harold Steptoe, who were created for BBC television comedy in the mid-1960s. The chapter emerged from and reflects back on the research process for an intermedial research project, “Pinter Histories and Legacies,” that documented and analysed Pinter’s work for the stage, on radio, on television, and in cinema. The emphasis of the project was on documenting and evaluating a large and diverse body of data relating to people, texts, institutions, and media across a long span of time, and how these entities and agents affected and were affected by wider historical contexts and cultural networks. Methodologically, this meant tracing historiographic connections between media, across chronologies, between Pinter’s life and his work, and identifying intertextual relationships between works either by Pinter or by numerous other creative figures. It was a challenging project of comparative intermedial historiography of a kind that this chapter suggests is best approached from an *histoire croisée* perspective (Werner and Zimmermann 2006), involving the identification and analysis of interchange, simultaneity and convergence, invention and reinvention, thus problematising the activity of constructing relationships and flows. The methodological advantage of *histoire croisée* is the capacity to link different types of knowledge and sources to produce a complex understanding. One of the usual English translations of the term is “entangled history,” which draws attention to the attractions and also the problems of intermedial research that are discussed and tested in this chapter. Working from a historical and comparative perspective entails reflecting on interconnectedness and the

directions of flow between objects of study. Intermediality is too often seen as a one-way process, in which an inherited discourse or form is passed on or a contemporary medium or media text is understood as a remediation of an antecedent (Bolter and Grusin 1999). In contrast, this chapter argues for co-dependency and cross-fertilisation in which the linked elements reconfigure each other.

Tracing this intermedial story, however, prompted debate about the limits and purchase of intermedial methodologies. Although the centrality of the author to the research also potentially constrained the mapping of connections, it positioned “Pinter” productively as a textual entity shaped relationally by the other parts of a textual field. In this chapter, other elements of the textual field include a film by the Hollywood director William Wyler, Samuel Beckett’s (1956) play *Waiting for Godot*, and the screening programme at the 1965 Berlin Film Festival. There are many, perhaps too many, illuminating and relevant connections. It is tempting to see Pinter as a node in an infinite intertextual field in which everything becomes connected to everything else. But if everything is connected, repetition becomes stasis, and unlimited semiosis (Barthes 1975) becomes an entrapping entanglement. Theoretically and methodologically, intermediality raises the question of what influence and impact mean, and it is that issue of connection and affect that I explore here.

This chapter thematises dramas about entanglement at a textual level, focusing on stories about entrapment. Moreover, at an interwoven metacritical level the chapter debates the limits of intermedial methodologies and the extent to which they may entrap the unwary (Werner and Zimmermann 2006). I want to reflect on what the activity of connecting means, to avoid the twin traps of reference-hunting and unlimited semiosis. My own work on Pinter’s histories and legacies has mainly been in the field of television historiography, using written and audiovisual archival sources to analyse British screen drama of the 1960–1980 period. But doing analyses of Pinter’s TV plays and films seems to me less interesting than the opportunity that the Pinter project offered to trace connections across and between media, and how ideas, people, and aesthetic forms are incorporated, shared, transformed, or repudiated. This chapter is a brief account of some of those entangled histories, and it concludes by arguing for a deconstructive understanding of medium specificity that opens up analysis via attention to intermediality. It also argues for respect to be paid to the contingent specificity of the historical event and the specificity of the moment of making research connections, for these two factors limit the potentially unbounded and entangling connectedness that intermediality implies.

Two Mysterious Men

Pinter was already a relatively well-known public figure at the beginning of the 1960s. He was originally a stage actor, became famous as a playwright, and added work as a director, poet, and political activist to his repertoire until his death in 2008. In 1960 the *Oxford English Dictionary* first included the word “Pinteresque,” meaning “pertaining to the work of Harold Pinter.” His first full-length play, *The Birthday Party* (1963) was premiered in 1958 and is set in a seaside boardinghouse where two unexpected visitors, Goldberg and McCann, arrive and terrorise a long-term resident, Stanley (Figure 16.1). An impromptu birthday party is held for Stanley; a young woman, Lulu, is assaulted when the lights go out; and, at the end of the play, for reasons that remain obscure, Goldberg and McCann take the cowed Stanley away. As the *Sunday Times* reviewer Harold Hobson (1958) summarised in a review of the play’s London premiere, it “consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap.” The play’s dialogue appears demotic and desultory but hints at the powerful emotions and psychological and physical violence that break through its



Figure 16.1 Goldberg and McCann terrorise Stanley in Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, 1958.

banal surface. It is that combination of banality and menace that constitutes the Pinteresque.

At least since the late 1950s, Pinter's plays were recognised as socially engaged drama. The New Left writers of the theatre magazine *Encore*, such as Irving Wardle (1958), drew attention to the entrapment of his characters spatially and existentially, seeing this as a recognition of contemporary material circumstances and the passive frustration that they produced. Pinter's language was seen as degraded and constraining, thus equally reflective of modernity, yet his idiomatic turns of phrase were capable of revealing flashes of comic resistance. His work was thought to be relevant, challenging, and intellectually complex. So the implicit model of influence here is that Pinter absorbed existential features of contemporary culture and replayed them back to his audiences via his drama. This familiar trope was also used by other playwrights of the time (Rebellato 1999), especially Samuel Beckett, with whom Pinter was often compared (Esslin 1961). A strand of British theatre culture was strongly influenced by continental European writing, alternative to the apparently more staid British tradition embodied by Terence Rattigan's or John Whiting's plays, and the major London productions just preceding *The Birthday Party* included Beckett's (1956) *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 and Eugene Ionesco's (1958) *The Lesson* and *The Bald Prima Donna* in 1956, each written by authors based in Paris. The other key comparator is John Osborne's (1957) *Look Back in Anger*, first performed in 1956, which became the paradigm for gritty, "kitchen-sink" drama that featured young, frustrated, and entrapped characters in down-at-heel domestic settings. Pinter and the other Angry Young Men of the New Wave benefitted from a transnational context enlivened by an expectation of experiment and challenge.

The Pinteresque has intermedial connections based on textual form and personal networks. The film director Roman Polanski, born in Paris, grew up in Poland, where he made his first full-length film, and then migrated to the United Kingdom. He was a glamorous, international figure associated with art cinema and based himself in Swinging London in 1963, throwing uproarious parties, promenading along the King's Road, and dating fashion models (Sandford 2007: 110–120). He gained financial backing from Compton Films, a British production company that owned a small chain of cinemas in London's Soho and distributed foreign films, to make *Repulsion*, released in 1965. *Repulsion* was the first major success for Compton and its entrepreneurial owner, Michael Klinger, whose career as an executive producer had begun with the nudist exploitation film *Naked as Nature Intended* (George Marks, 1961). He saw Polanski as a creative genius who would enable the

small and rather disreputable Compton Films to enter the big time. Polanski was an admirer of Pinter's work, and the 1965 Berlin Film Festival, where *Repulsion* won the Silver Bear award, happened also to include a screening of *The Caretaker* (a.k.a. *The Guest*, Clive Donner, 1963) that Pinter (1960) had adapted from his eponymous stage play. Klinger and his colleague Tony Tenser allocated a budget of £120,000 to Polanski's next project, the script *If Katelbach Comes* that Polanski had co-written with his friend Gerard Brach, about a man and his wife in an isolated mansion who are threatened by mysterious visitors. *The Caretaker* featured Donald Pleasence, and Polanski chose Pleasence to play the main male character in the new film project, partly because he admired Pleasence's performance as Davies in *The Caretaker* (Wine 2001). Tracing this history starts to reveal connections and networks.

If Katelbach Comes had been retitled *Cul de Sac* by the time shooting began in July 1965. Together with the designer Voytek, another London-based Polish émigré, Polanski had toured Brittany looking for a desolate location but chose Lindisfarne in northern England instead. Its isolated castle by the sea separates the film from the contemporary moment and from verisimilitude, and it functions as a home but also as an abstract nonplace, similar to the bare stagings in both Pinter's and Beckett's plays. A causeway flooded twice daily by the sea cuts off the castle from the mainland (hence the film's title), leaving George (Donald Pleasence) with the much younger woman (Françoise Dorléac) he has left his wife for. Her emasculation of him, through her affair with their neighbour and her dressing George in her flimsy nightdress, for example, escalates when two escaping criminals arrive (Figure 16.2). One of them, Dickie (Lionel Stander), physically assaults George, asserting control and exploiting George's submissiveness. Jack MacGowran, cast as the second robber, Albie, was one of Beckett's favourite actors, and Beckett had tried unsuccessfully to cast him (Knowlson 1996: 522) in his only film project, *Film* (Beckett 1965) which was made the year before and was touring the festival circuit in 1965 at the same time as Polanski's *Repulsion*. In Polanski's film the characters wait for the mysterious Mr. Katelbach to arrive, but he never comes, and the motif of fruitless waiting suggests the two tramps of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the terrorisation of a household by the two guests, Goldberg and McCann, in *The Birthday Party*. Investigating these conjunctions and parallels uncovers further intermedial relationships.

Cul de Sac won awards at the 1966 Berlin and Edinburgh film festivals. But the film was hard to market and was never a popular success, largely because of its subject matter of sexualized domination, which Brendan Gill (1966), for example, reviewing the film for *The New Yorker*, called an "odious freak show." These comments closely resemble press reactions to Pinter's *Birthday*



Figure 16.2 A gangster invades the couple's domestic space in Roman Polanski's *Cul de Sac* (1966).

Party, which Derek Granger (1958) reviewed for the *Financial Times*: “Pinter’s first play comes in the school of random dottiness deriving from Beckett and Ionesco and before the flourishing continuance of which one quails in slack-jawed dismay.” The influences and impacts of these dramas on each other derive from shared dramatic forms and structures, namely the enclosed domestic space, the menacing visitors, and the eruption of suppressed violence and sexual desire. In cinema, the history of the home invasion motif goes back to *The Desperate Hours* (William Wyler, 1955) with Humphrey Bogart, now regarded as a film noir because of its claustrophobic, existential bleakness, the motif of entrapment, and the violence enacted in a familiar suburban home. Bogart played a gangster and drew on the star image he had established in earlier thrillers with home invasion motifs, *The Petrified Forest* (Archie Mayo, 1936) and *Key Largo* (John Huston, 1948) (Weedman 2005). However, the home invasion trope alone is too common to be very useful for comparative intermedial studies because there are so many texts, in cinema alone, that adopt it; Wikipedia (“List of Films Featuring Home Invasions” 2022) lists about 190 films beginning with D. W. Griffith’s short *The Lonely Villa* (1909). Intermedial conjunctions between texts, people, and events need to be channelled and disciplined if they are not to become unruly. One way of doing that is to address them historiographically, as I have done here through the networks of a specific mid-1960s milieu mixing British with American and continental European arts and popular culture.

A Laugh in the Trap: Situation Comedy

Thus far this exploration has mainly concerned high culture, but of course entangled histories can also question the hierarchies and separations between “serious” and “popular” culture, such as between dramatic forms in theatre, television drama, and situation comedy. The restricted spatiality that characterises sitcom is a development of theatre Naturalism, and Pinter’s spatial pressurisation of Naturalism fed back into sitcom. Dramas set in enclosed domestic rooms (Williams 1974: 56) were adapted from the dominant form of 1950s British theatre to become the main formal convention of television drama’s *mise-en-scène*, across genres from sitcom and the soap opera to the prestigious single TV play. Tom Sloan, head of Light Entertainment at BBC in 1961, reacted to news that the comedian Tony Hancock wanted to concentrate on cinema projects and decline another television series of *Hancock’s Half Hour* (1956–1961) by offering Hancock’s writers Ray Galton and Alan Simpson the chance to write an anthology of ten half-hour comedy dramas (Kilborn 2016). These one-off plays, collectively titled *Comedy Playhouse* (1961–1975), would fill the empty Hancock slots in the BBC’s evening schedule. In 1962 Galton and Simpson’s drama *The Offer for Comedy Playhouse* introduced rag-and-bone men Albert Steptoe (Wilfred Brambell) and his son, Harold (Harry H. Corbett), in which the ageing Albert’s dependency on his son frustrates Harold’s vain dreams of escaping to make his own way in the world. The biography of Corbett recounts that Ray Galton said, “I think we have written a little piece of Pinter here” (Corbett 2012: 332). The sitcom attracted huge audiences and eventually extended over nine seasons, in 1962–1965 and then 1970–1974. The Pinteresque had become enormously popular in another medium and genre.

The connection between television situation comedy and Pinter’s dramatic work is made possible by an intermedial comparison, but its significance is much greater than simply the noticing of similarities of form, mood, and language. The metropolitan, high-cultural position of Pinter’s theatre in the early 1960s overlapped with its visibility in the ascendant popular medium of the time, as television replaced radio in Britain after the launch of the Independent commercial channel (ITV) in 1955. In 1964, *Steptoe and Son* was the most popular programme of the year, with a regular audience of up to 9.7 million viewers. Its success ran alongside Pinter’s television heyday. Pinter’s single TV plays appeared regularly in the 1960s, but it was ITV, rather than BBC, which screened his work and built his national profile. The ITV output was provided by separate, regionally based franchise owners, and one of them, Associated-Rediffusion, commissioned a television version of Pinter’s 1958 theatre play

The Birthday Party in 1960 for the ITV network's anthology series *Play of the Week* (1956–1966), where it was watched by an audience of 11 million (Billington 2007: 110). Another ITV company, Granada, produced Pinter's play *The Room* for ITV's *Television Playhouse* (1955–1967) series in 1961; Pinter's *The Collection* was made by Associated-Rediffusion in 1961, and *The Dumb Waiter* by Granada in the same year. Associated-Rediffusion's production of Pinter's *The Lover* in 1963 won the Prix Italia international prize for television drama, and his *A Night Out* was made by yet another ITV contractor, ABC, for the *Armchair Theatre* (1956–1974) series in 1964. Audiences for each of these dramas probably saw some of the other, thematically similar dramas being broadcast at the same time (Smart 2019). Popular audiences for theatre, although always smaller than for broadcast drama, were also becoming familiar with Pinter's work in regional, amateur, and student productions of his plays and as published texts. Several of his plays had been published in accessible paperback editions, and his media profile was enhanced by newspaper reviews, appearances in television interviews, and talk shows like *Late Night Line Up* (BBC, 1964–1972). Pinter's dramas and Galton and Simpson's sitcom formed part of a shared intermedial supertext.

The interchange between theatre and television broke the boundaries between high and popular culture as well as between media of production. The Pinteresque may not have been “popular” in the sense that it was universally approved, since Pinter himself was regarded as a controversial figure and his plays were considered “difficult.” However, there was widespread recognition of Pinter and his distinctive “brand,” and his representation of ordinary people and everyday speech was, despite the artifice with which Pinter turned these domestic stories into “menace,” an aspect of a cultural current that sought to connect with mass audiences and engage with contemporary experience. Many of the playwrights coming to prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s in London explored versions of social realism (Lacey 1995) associated with productions at the Royal Court Theatre and the experiments by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. The gritty “kitchen-sink” realism of working-class domestic settings, colloquial speech, exploration of contemporary issues of social class, sexual repression, and gender inequality in this theatre work shared some its foci, creative personnel, and sometimes dramatic texts with radio, television, and cinema. The BBC's *Wednesday Play* (1964–1970) series of original dramas and ITV's *Armchair Theatre*, for example, became associated with the realist project. The British cinema industry adapted dramas from the stage (including Pinter's *The Caretaker* in 1963 and *The Birthday Party* in 1968), and from recent novels by northern working-class writers (such as *Saturday Night and Sunday*

Morning [Karel Reisz, 1960] from Alan Sillitoe's 1958 novel). Social entrapment within manual labour, marriage, regional provincialism, or domination by bourgeois authority was an intermedial framework for dramas about rebellious male (and occasionally female) protagonists on the page, stage, and screen (Hill 1986).

The ensemble working methods and openness to actors from working-class backgrounds that were associated with the Royal Court's and Theatre Workshop's realism contributed to the interchange of actors between London theatre and television comedy, and one of Galton and Simpson's *Steptoe* episodes in particular, "The Desperate Hours" (BBC1, 1972), takes us back to *Cul de Sac*. Leonard Rossiter and J. G. Devlin play a pair of escaped convicts from nearby Wormwood Scrubs prison in West London who come to the Steptoes' ramshackle house in the hope of hiding out. They take Harold and Albert hostage to demand food and a fast car, and parallels between the two pairs' relationships are explored. Each character is trapped with his companion and with the other pair. There is no food, the Steptoes cannot afford to own a car, and, like the Steptoes, the convicts cannot escape their situation, nor the enclosing space of the room in which the episode takes place (Figure 16.3). The episode ends as the convicts decide to go voluntarily back to prison, another enclosure or trap and a more comfortable one than the



Figure 16.3 The convicts with Harold Steptoe (left) and his father (third left) in "The Desperate Hours" episode of *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1, 1972).

Steptoes' shabby home. That same year, Rossiter played the tramp Davies in a revival of Pinter's *The Caretaker*, a role he had first played in 1961. The play's setting is a derelict household into which Davies brings his pretensions to a better life. But Davies never leaves the room in the play, remaining trapped with his dreams of leaving, just as the Steptoes and the two convicts do in "The Desperate Hours." The dramatic trope persists across an intermedial web of texts and people.

Domestic, interior, studio-shot television drama and sitcom each developed from theatre and fed back into it. In 1970, in a review of *Steptoe and Son*, television critic and theorist Raymond Williams (1989: 125) placed the sitcom in "a very old pattern in the drama of the last 100 years. This is the pattern of men trapped in rooms, working out the general experience of being cheated and frustrated, on the most immediately available target: the others inside the cage." Beginning as tragedy with the work of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, then becoming ambivalent in plays by Anton Chekhov, this form becomes comedy in dramas by Ionesco, Osborne, and Pinter that are "at once absurd and sinister" (125). Williams's complaint about this form is that the enclosed world, peopled by a frustrated dreamer paired with a conservative yet vicious figure, allows no possibility of genuine engagement with the lived social world outside the room, and therefore no prospect of material change for the characters. The repetition inherent in the sitcom format and the anachronistic (even in 1962) setting of *Steptoe and Son* in the rundown London docklands meant that while he might represent (comparative) youth and aspiration, Harold's dreams could be ridiculed. The audience's laughter, Williams concludes, is evidence of submission to circumstance, a "rueful laugh in the trap" (127). Entrapment has a politics, and Williams wanted to critique cultural forms that implicitly justified stasis and existential resignation.

Methodological Conclusions

Intertextual and intermedial webs, allusions, and references might also be traps, despite their pleasures (Rolinson 2016), unless their patterns of adaptation and reworking can escape being the endless return of the same. An *histoire croisée* approach such as is used in this chapter makes a feature of intermediality by using different kinds of evidence from primary archival documents; analysis of plays, programmes, and films' mise-en-scène; and interviews with creative figures such as writers and performers. Tracing impacts and influences is a huge task, because they cross media, create chronologies, and link geographies. In the "Pinter Histories and Legacies" project

to which this chapter contributes, intermedial research was facilitated by an electronic database, in which hypertext links created and enabled multiple connections. But the aspects of the Pinteresque that I have noted show the tensions at stake, which I argue are as interesting as the links that such work discovers. As Roland Barthes (1972: 112) concluded, “a little Formalism turns one away from History, but a lot . . . brings one back to it.” Tracing influences raises the spectre of a boundless territory and the trap of infinite repetition, which need to be countered by looking for difference and historical specificity as much as for correlation and formal resemblance.

Some of the historiographic methodologies that are helpful were devised largely to critique national histories by stressing transnational exchanges (Hilmes 2011: 11–12), and in the examples discussed in this chapter there are intermedial links between Berlin and London and between Parisian theatres and BBC’s London studios, for example. The related concept of *transferts culturels* (cultural transfers) focuses on how cultural goods have been appropriated from their place of origin and repurposed to signify in new ways through the networks of globalisation (Barker 1999), a process involving inequalities of power and access. Similarly, work on “entangled histories” has been interested in relationships between colonisers and the colonised, and how identities (in Europe) are established through relationships with otherness (Hall 1995). Each of these approaches to comparative work assumes the necessary instability of such categories as nation, language, institution, and ideology, and looks to the transcultural, transnational, and intermedial nature of modernity. In this chapter, some of the methodological issues identified by Werner and Zimmermann (2006) as key to an *histoire croisée* approach have arisen, and prompt intermedial analysis has noted the fluid, relational nature of the links between texts, people, networks, institutions, media, and technologies that the analysis uncovers. The intermedial way of working needs to continually question the “scales, categories of analysis, the relationship between diachrony and synchrony, and regimes of historicity and reflexivity” that are adopted (32). Pinter was established at the outset as a primary node who would sit at the centre of a web of connected individuals, networks, organisations, texts, and historical events because of my role in leading a research team with a specific remit. This framed the scale and scope of the intermedial entanglements to be accounted for, and the dramatic tropes, moods, and formal choices associated with the Pinteresque. Temporally, there is a tension between a synchronic analysis, here focused around the “long 1960s,” and the diachronic lineage identified by Williams’s analysis of Naturalism and its movement across theatre and literature and into mass-media forms such as television sitcom. The different axes of intermedial

analysis each imply different questions and different results and propose intermedial relationships that would otherwise not come to light.

The reflexivity proposed by Werner and Zimmermann (2006) draws attention to the contingent quality of the divisions and categories that customarily separate media from one another and separate media textualities from the agents that create them. Moreover, the objects of study are themselves constructions whose apparent self-identity can occlude the ways that they are formed, and are best understood not only in relation to one another but *through* one another. This intertextual and intermedial process, moving and changing over time, is also a process of adaptation, inasmuch as adaptation can be thought of as an action of return to and recapitulation of an antecedent (Bignell 2019). The medial identities of film or television, at a particular historical moment, work by taking up a position relative to their comparators rather than by the expression of a self-sufficient essence. Thus, medial identity can be understood as performative, following conceptual approaches deriving from performativity in linguistic theory (Austin 1971), philosophy (Lyotard 1988), or gender studies (Butler 1990), as well as the field of performance studies itself (Parker and Sedgwick 1995). Performance, in somewhat different but related ways in these fields of study, is the social action of articulating identity in a process of continual becoming and remaking. Intermedial analysis offers ways of studying complex processes of interaction, circulation, and appropriation. Media forms, dramatic tropes, and modes of discourse are dynamic and active, as this chapter's brief adventure through work by Pinter and Polanski and the entrapments of television situation comedy has shown. While the focus of this chapter has been on a short chronological period around the 1960s, and in Western Europe and the USA, the focus on processes of interconnection between networks of people, texts, institutions, and technologies has obvious longitudinal and spatial extension (Bignell and Fickers 2008: 11). The *histoire croisée* approach to intermediality suits the study of broadcast media and the circulation of entertainment commodities by the cultural industries particularly well because it is routine for them to operate through processes of adaptation, resistance, inertia, and modification as they work to generate new texts, products, and experiences.

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