



Intermedial Practices as Reflections on Media and the Arts. What Do Kinema-Sketches Teach Us about Screenlife Movies?

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Abstract. The article redefines intermediality not as a mere artistic or expressive tool but as a set of practices shaping our conceptualization of technology, media, and art. In this context, intermedial practices are crucial in the continuous process through which technologies can evolve into mediums and art forms. These practices facilitate the socially negotiated meanings and uses that elevate new technologies into recognized mediums and confer cultural prestige to art forms. Drawing on examples from mass cultural practices, the article explores the role of intermedial practices in media debates. The kinema-sketch, a pivotal moment in the history of moving images in Hungary, illustrates the transition from early cinema to feature films. By integrating cinematic scenes into theatrical performances, the kinema-sketch contrasted the perception of moving images with the live performance alternating between screen and stage. A contemporary parallel is the screenlife (computer or desktop) film, which integrates digital media into the storytelling of traditional film genres, equating the cinematic space with the digital interface. Both examples highlight how intermedial practices challenge conventional notions of presence and reality in older media, foregrounding the mediated character of identities and agencies.

Keywords: intermediality, early cinema, live performance, kinema-sketch, screenlife.

Preliminary Remarks

In this article, I understand intermediality not as a potential artistic or expressive tool, but rather as a set of practices that shape how we think about technology, media, and art. Intermedial practices play an important role in the continuous process whereby different technologies take on socially agreed meanings and uses, and are elevated into mediums or artforms as a result. The implicit medial

reflections that can be extracted from these intermedial practices contribute to drawing or breaking down the media boundaries, crystallize social uses, or confer cultural prestige. My premise, then, is that media and arts gain and lose identity through intermedial practices, or as Schröter (2011, 6) put it: “the intermedial field (including the intermedial processes on writing about intermediality) produces definitions of media.” In this article, I focus on a seminal moment in the history of moving images, the transition from early cinema to feature film, which I illuminate through the example of the kinema-sketch, a stage and screen hybrid. By embedding cinematic scenes in the theatrical performance, kinema-sketches performed two medial operations simultaneously: they attached a new type of space, temporality, and agency to theatrical conventions, while making the new moving image medium legible from the conventions of (bourgeois) theatrical plays.

I call intermedial practices all those practices that, by juxtaposing two or more mediums, formulate explicit or implicit reflections on their meanings, uses, and social roles. In my historical example, the combination and hybridization of cinema and theatre confronted the viewer with their similarities and differences, their existing and possible uses by the pregnant juxtaposition of their respective modes of perception. Intermedial practices often formulate implicit reflections on what counts as art by conferring cultural prestige on certain uses.

It is well known that within the high modernist paradigm, the definition of art is closely related to media reflexivity: the medium as a resistant materiality gives the power of artistic creativity, and artistic creation is also a reflection on the possibilities and limitations of the medium, making visible its technological base. For high modernist artists and theorists (e.g. Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss), however, engagement with the medium also meant a detachment from mass media that transformed everyday life and defined mass cultural products.¹ Yet, this kind of implicit or explicit medial reflexivity is not exclusive to the monomedially narrowed high modernist artworks, but is also present in mass culture, in the intermedial practices that thus become an integral part of the debate on the role, uses, and meanings of media. Intermediality, thus defined, can counteract the colonialist efforts of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000), whereby new media appropriate and mold the representational power of older media in their own image. Intermedial practices emphasize the elaboration and

1 Jens Schröter (2010, 2023) links the notion of intermediality to modernist ideas of media reflexivity and medial purity. Continuing the German tradition of media philosophy (Friedrich Kittler, Ludwig Pfeiffer), he is one of the most prominent media theorists today interested in articulating the relationship between media and arts.

confrontation of conventions associated with different mediums, which implies reciprocity and feedback.

Today, with the rise of digital media, moving image technology (i.e. producing, circulating, and using moving images) is again undergoing major rearrangements, becoming a tool for everyday communication and mediatized interactions. One of the intermedial practices translating the significance and interpretation of this change is represented by screenlife movies, a new filmmaking technique and a new form of visual storytelling, where the story unfolds on one or more computer screens as characters carry out various digital operations. In screenlife movies, the cinematic space is limited to the diegetic screen; different functions of the electronic screen, such as the built-in web camera, text messaging, navigation and search in digital spaces, create the cinematic narrative. The screenlife movie (also called desktop film, computer screen film) incorporates digital media use into the storytelling of familiar film genres, challenging us to rethink the possibilities of the fiction film, and interpreting digital operations in narrative terms. While high-modernist works challenged media boundaries based on artistic skills and expertise, mass-cultural intermedial practices such as the kinema-sketch and the screenlife film, on the other hand, can be used to reflect on everyday media practices, perceptual habits, and automatisms.

However, intermedial practices are not merely formal experiments, but competing forms for economic advantage in a particular media ecosystem. Media rivalry is primarily about gaining representational power (to determine what is real or authentic), including which media determine the dominant cultural and media techniques responsible for creating subjectivity. Intermedial practices are both forms of technical imagination (that eventually become obsolete) and reflections on the contemporary media environment. Whether they become established or not depends on their interrelationships within the given institutional frameworks and media spaces, and their positioning in the cultural economy. Examining intermedial relations in a historical perspective can demonstrate that medium identity is not ontologically but historically determined by the historical variables of negotiating technology, and the social meanings attached to these variables which position the medium in the cultural economy of the respective era.

Kinema-sketches appeared and became popular in Hungary at a time when feature films had not yet taken over as the dominant use of moving image technology. Their popularity in both the 1910s and the early 1920s may have been motivated primarily by economic factors: in both periods, Hungarian film

companies made up for their lack of capital, expertise, and human resources by embedding the new medium, moving images, in the familiar theatrical environment and using its established codes. Between 1912 and 1930, more than one and a half hundred screen and stage hybrid plays were shown in Hungary. Their significance lay not only in their experimentation with the interaction of the two media technologies, but also in the fact that they triggered an extremely rich and varied discourse in the columns of newspapers and magazines, in which the relationship between technology, medium, and art was articulated in many ways, and the medium-specific features of the fiction film were crystallized. I will first examine the economic and institutional background, and then turn to the analysis of this discourse around the kinema-sketch by highlighting the main problems and questions raised by this practice. I punctuate this historical analysis with the contemporary example of the screenlife film to foreground the continuity of intermedial practices in which debates about the use of technology continue to shape thinking about media and their division of labour today.

Media Rivalry and Cultural Economy

Around 1912, the over-proliferation of Hungarian cinemas led to a fierce competition for audiences. The program, which consisted of mixed moving image genres, was expanded to three hours, or, even more popular with the audience, feature films were shown. However, full-length films were much more expensive to produce and to rent than shorter films. In order to overcome this financial obstacle, Hungarian cinemas introduced a new genre that combined the stage and the screen to tell a feature story. Kinema-sketches borrowed genres and story types from the bourgeois theatre, but each scene was presented in a different medium. By alternating cinematic and theatrical scenes, the play was alternately performed by actors on stage and projected on the screen. Moving image projections had by then often been used as part of theatrical performances;² however, the novelty of the kinema-sketch was that the moving image was no longer a mere spectacular attraction, an insert or decoration (as a background projection, for example), but a narrative device, a vehicle for narrative information. As one of the contemporary journals observed: “The moving images carried the action forward, that is, what happened between the acts [in the theatre] was played out before the audience’s

2 For an early example of moving images inserted into theatrical performances, see Füzi (2023). The play entitled *Mozgó fényképek* [*Moving Photographs*], staged by the Vígszínház in Budapest in 1898, incorporated the screening of a cinema programme, including a hitherto unknown (Lumière?) film commissioned by the theatre.

eyes. The theatre and the moving image appeared to the audience as equal parties, complementing each other” (N. A. 1911, 4–5).

The kinema-sketch marked another stage in the decade-long rivalry between theatre and cinema. Then, as now, some Hungarian theatres received state subsidies as bastions of national culture, art, and decent entertainment. The city council, which issued theatre licenses to itinerant theatre companies, was completely baffled as to whether or not a kinema-sketch could be considered a theatrical performance, and could not decide what was more important: what happened on stage or on screen. Theatre directors requested to ban the sketches in order to maintain their cultural monopoly, especially in smaller towns. These bans were eventually lifted, as the press sided with the cinema, arguing that the cultural mission of the theatre was no more important than that of the cinema.³

The introduction of moving images into the theatre gave cinema a new cultural prestige; the employment of playwrights and actors, the incorporation of comic conventions of the stage, promised to attract new audiences. At the same time, the kinema-sketch performances changed cinema-going habits by encouraging audiences to be on time for the start of the performance, unlike the looped screenings of variety shows, where they could arrive and leave at any time. The administrative question of the classification of the performance, which was ultimately decided in favour of the sketch, the cultural prestige of the moving image by its inclusion in the theatrical context, the changing composition of the audience, the regulation of cinema-going habits, the commercial demand for feature films, the economic competition, all increased the value of the new product type, the kinema-sketch.

Like today’s screenlife films, the kinema-sketch was situated at the intersection of old and new media, mixing different modes of representation and communication to create a hybrid space-time structure and a dual identity of the characters represented in two different mediums. This hybrid nature of character identity and representation is often thematized in the stories themselves. There is a long list of examples of kinema-sketches reflecting on cinema or the movie theatre, or screenlife movies dealing with the risks of the new digital media in thriller and horror plots, which illustrate the dangers of mediatized, i.e. technologically mediated identity. Sketches often borrow role reversals and role-playing from the theatrical comedy to problematize the creation of identity, the difference between

3 In 1913–14, the city council of Szeged, for example, did not grant permission to perform for several sketches. The press closely followed the disputes between the parties, frequently taking the side of the cinema. (See: N. A. 1914a, 1914b.)

theatrical and cinematic versions of identity. In *The Killer* (*A gyilkos*, 1912), for example, the title character of the story is a country man arriving in the capital, whose ignorance is exploited to cast him as the perpetrator of a murder staged for the film camera. The cinematographic section shows vividly how the victim's ghost haunts the tormented "murderer," while the end of the story reveals the murder being staged for the camera. *My Wife Is Being Leered at* (*Fikszírozzák a feleségem*, 1914) is the tale of an eccentric husband driven mad by jealousy who, in his quest to find proof of his wife's infidelity, actually drives her into cheating, improvising situations borrowed from theatre plays and casting himself and others into theatrical roles. He chases the seducers through the streets of Budapest, and in his dream he fights as the Don Quixote of betrayed husbands, presented in comic film scenes. *Robinson Krausz* (1913) is the story of a petit bourgeois from Budapest shipwrecked on a Danube island, achieving fame and celebrity thanks to the publicity generated by the press and modern media. *The Calvary of the Depraved Dance of Death* (*A lezüllött haláltánc kálváriája*, 1913) parodies the stylized and overheated acting and roles of the well-known Danish film stars Asta Nielsen and Valdemar Psylander. The protagonist of the *Movies' Madman* (*Mozibolond*, 1922) is mad about detective stories, and imagines himself as a detective in a thrilling movie, mixing story elements borrowed from the movies into gibberish.

Similarly, almost all early screenlife films build their stories on the benefits and dangers of mediatized interactions, especially the video chat. In addition to users creating false identities or exploiting anonymity, and characters pretending to be someone else, we also find strange digital beings in the form of vengeful ghosts, characters thought to be dead but active on digital platforms (*Unfriended*, Levan Gabriadze, 2014; *Host*, Rob Savage, 2020). The screen in these films is an exciting but dangerous window, not only when the characters lose control of their own computers (becoming victims of hacker attacks), but also when they perform everyday digital operations. Screenlife movies usually tell two dominant story types. The first is the horror story, in which the characters fall victim to their naivety in trusting too much the communication technology they use and lose their agency by becoming objects of surveillance and physical violence (*The Den*, Zachary Donahue, 2013; *Unfriended: The Dark Web*, Stephen Susco, 2018). The second is the thriller story, in which the dangers inherent to the use of communication technologies are counterbalanced by the agency and empowerment of the characters, also provided by digital technology, when through digital operations characters face identity questions and carry out their investigations (*Searching*, Aneesh Chaganty, 2018; *Profile*, Timur Bekmambetov, 2018).

Let us look at a concrete example of the challenges kinema-sketches have faced in combining two different perceptual modes related to different media technologies. The *Rich Man's Coat* (*Gazdag ember kabátja*, 1912)⁴ is a play in three parts written by Ferenc Molnár, already a famous playwright at the time. A contemporary review sums up the story of the sketch in this way: “The rich man goes into the coffeehouse, and we quickly find out that he is attracted to the cashier. However, the waiter is also in love with her. The conflict unfolds between the two men out of jealousy. Now the rich man puts his coat on the chair. The waiter wants to hang it, but the rich man won’t let him: ‘My coat is just as much a guest as I am. He needs a separate chair. Get Mr. Coat a black piccolo.’ [Further altercations between the two men follow until] the rich man gets drunk and falls asleep. His dream is projected onto the screen in the form of moving images. He dreams that the coat is actually coming to life, walking down the street, spends his money, introduces himself to celebrities, and finally even steals the cashier from under his nose [for which he punishes the coat...] The end of the play is, of course, that the rich man wakes up, having learned the lessons of his dream, he stops being rude to the waiter, and renounces his love for the cashier in favour of the waiter” (N. A. 1912, 1–2).⁵

In the first stage part, the story unfolds through the usual verbal confrontations characteristic of Molnár’s plays, between the rich suitor and the lovelorn but penniless waiter. The conflict culminates in mutual insults and mockery. The millionaire landowner from the countryside fears that his coat will be stolen if he hangs it on the rack, but chairs are reserved for paying customers. In order to keep the coat next to him, he starts ordering and drinking in the name of the coat with a pocket full of money. The waiter frustrated by the rich rival takes every opportunity to get back at him. The very first stage scene also lays the foundation for the symbolic personification of the coat. The waiter trumpets the rich man’s “cavalier” behaviour by constantly talking to the coat (addressing it as “your honour”), while the rich man is being called the coat’s secretary. By the end of the scene, they are all part of the game, by which each of them hopes to teach the other

4 Almost all the screenplays and films shot for the kinema-sketches have been lost, and relatively few of the written and photographic sources documenting the performances have survived. *Rich Man's Coat* is the most complete surviving piece of this corpus: the script, including the description of the moving image sequences by Molnár, stills from the shooting and the theatrical performance, a few seconds from the film, writings and reviews of the sketch are all available. For an intermedial analysis of writing, theatre, and cinema in *Rich Man's Coat*, see my 9th chapter in Füzi (2022).

5 N. A.: Molnár Ferenc az Apollóban. *Színházi Hét*, March 10, 1912, 1–2. (All the translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine. I. F.)

a lesson. The shared personification of the coat then culminates in a joint singing, where they restate their motivations, acknowledging the power of wealth and also putting their cards on the table, sharing their private feelings with the audience.

Before falling asleep, the rich man explains what is to follow in the cinematic part: “If I were some kind of eccentric man, I would try to take this cavalier coat out into the so-called society. What a career it would make in a few days! How people would run after it! How they would respect it! No one would notice that he has no head, no legs, no one would notice that he has nothing, just a bunch of banknotes in his pockets” (Molnár 2005, 276).

The following five cinematic scenes present the adventures and growing popularity of Mr. Coat projected on the screen. [Fig. 1.] As in the early cinema genres, the scenes are action-driven with frequent changes of scenery and external shots. The surviving photographs taken at the shooting reveal a crowded *mise-en-scène* framed in long shots, privileging the visual attraction of movements, places, and people.

The third, stage part is a didactic ending compared to the previous ones: the conflict is resolved and is used to draw a lesson. From the narrative point of view, the moving image must validate the resolution of the story, which is when the rich man gives up on the cashier. He is doing the right thing because he has learned the “lesson” that the coat has given him and “dear Budapest.” [Fig. 2.]

Kinema-sketches, in general, perform and stage the division of labour between theatre and cinema. In *Rich Man’s Coat*, for example, the second cinematic part both continues and interrupts the story. The transition between the stage and the screen is linked to a change of dimension at the level of the story: the special task of the cinematic scenes is to stage the dream and fulfil the desire expressed by the rich man (“to take this cavalier coat out into the so-called society”) earlier in the play. In this way, the screen creates a sense of inner, mental space, which serves to deepen the psychological dimension of the characters and to enhance the viewer’s immersion. At the same time, the cinematic part has a semi-autonomy in the narrative by giving a resolution to the events taking place on the screen. At the beginning of the dream, the rich man and the other characters are enjoying the public respectability bought with money by the coat. The dream quickly becomes a nightmare when the doppelganger turns against the rich man, so that the poetic ending (the rich man executes the coat) recalls the arbitrary punch line (the beating) of early slapstick.

By bringing the story events outside the theatrical space, by including actual and familiar people and places of the capital city, moving images contribute to the

cinematic construction of the social gaze, when glorifying Mr. Coat as a respected gentleman, but also when characters turn away in horror by his emptiness. Moving images fulfil desires related to social power and respectability, but also tell a parable, which brings to the fore the power of the social gaze, the power to create but also debunk social hierarchy. *Rich Man's Coat*, however, does not only negotiate between the “cinematic” dream and the “theatrical” reality, but also unpacks the two mediums’ possibilities and effects in terms of presence, identity, and spatio-temporal construction.

Negotiating Liveness through Media Agency

In the discourse of the time, kinema-sketches raised not only administrative, institutional and economic issues, but also aesthetic, medial, and artistic ones. First of all, they provided a space for comparing the two mediums according to different criteria. Complying with Pfeiffer’s (1999) definition – media are ways of channeling and organizing “vital functions” of experience (sensory stimuli, intensities) – the object of media rivalry is the definition of vitality, its characteristics and distribution among the mediums. At the emergence of moving image technology, for example, the distinction between still and moving images was perceived as cinema’s “complete vividness instead of lifeless and stiff pictures” (Kj [Klupáthy Jenő] 1901, 120). A decade later, however, the emphasis in the perception of liveness shifts to the relationship between cinema and theatre. In 1913, the emergent feature fiction film was defined in this way: a film is a theatrical play since it “presents a fictional story taken from life in a stage-like setting, in a theatre-like space. It is true that there is a great difference between a suspended sheet and the real stage: the images projected on the sheet are something other than a live troupe of actors, and the moving picture, for all its moving power, is more of a picture than a stage performance with many more elements of reality – in short, it is not quite a play, but something quite specific” (Sz. Z. 1913, 12). This “something quite specific,” the definition of which the unknown author seeks, is nothing other than a specificity resulting from the technical reproduction carried out by moving images. At the time, however, the reproductive nature of moving images was already interpreted in many different ways and with different valuations.

For us, the distinction between cinema and theatre is often traced back to the distinction between technological reproduction and live performance, but, as Auslander (2008, 56) has pointed out, this distinction between the live and the

mediatized originates from a retrospective projection. No one calls ancient Greek theatre performances live because at that time there was simply no possibility of reproducing or recording them. More precisely, reproduction extended only to dialogue, and so Aristotle defined tragedy as the mimesis of human actions through speech. The possibility of audiovisual recording – through an internal split or a territorial redistribution – gives way to a distinction between live performance as ephemeral and unrepeatable, and the reproduced as recorded and repeatable. Auslander has two important interventions in his analysis of the archeology of liveness. 1. He deconstructs the binary opposition of the live vs. the mediatized by demonstrating, through a Derridean operation, that the live is always already determined by the reproduced through the logic of the supplement. There is no liveness without the possibility of reproduction. The live and the mediatized are not binary oppositions, but oscillating categories referring back to each other.⁶ 2. These categories are based on aesthetic demarcations that are not innocent operations, but actively involved in determining what is real, authentic, and meaningful in a given period, that is, in the mapping out and assigning of beliefs and values to different media. In a word, these are not only aesthetic distinctions, but also operations pertaining to cultural economy and the media's struggle for position.

Nowadays, liveness is no longer actualized as the opposite of the recorded, but in the online/offline relation, and as a constant need to connect, to be online: we are present when we follow live mediatized interactions, the updating of our mailbox, the stream of content on social media news feed, etc. The offline world lacks the connective power that is characteristic of networked subjectivity in the digital sphere. In a networked environment, digital interactions foster a sense of instant, fluid connection across geographical and temporal boundaries. In screenlife films, characters are often both literally and figuratively kept alive by their digital interactions. Their survival in a narrative sense often depends on their ability to navigate digital systems, making their online interactions a key element of both the plot and their personal agency. They are essentially prisoners of the screen: the moment they disconnect from the digital network, they become invisible to the audience as well. This concept makes their existence tethered to their online presence. Occasionally, the narrative resorts to somewhat forced explanations to justify why characters continue to maintain their digital presence, even when doing so endangers their physical survival. This can create tension

6 “Whereas mediatized performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or the real, the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized, which derives its authority from its reference to the live, etc.” (Auslander 2008, 43).

in the storytelling, where the digital world becomes both a space of action and a potential threat, adding layers to the characters' motivations and choices. These choices can feel contrived, as characters are compelled to stay online to sustain the plot's tension, despite the logical decision to disconnect in moments of danger.

Screenlife redefines liveness in the conflict between the characters' cinematic and digital identity and agency. Moving image technology evolved into one of the dominant mediums of the 20th century under the assumption that there exists a perceptible, visible world – a phenomenal reality – waiting to be captured by the camera. Cinema has been not only a tool for recording this reality, but also for making statements about it, largely through narrative forms. In the 21st century, the defining order is no longer visibility but rather data. In this new context, the ways we understand, and interact with, the world are increasingly mediated by data-driven processes and technologies, which cannot be captured optically by the camera, as they are not physical but virtual. Screenlife film makes not only spatial co-presence indispensable in the definition of liveness, but also temporal co-presence, for example, by blurring the boundaries between simultaneous and delayed communication (e.g. *Open Windows* by Nacho Vigalondo, 2014). As Auslander (2008, 62) notes, “It may be that we are at a point at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living human beings before each other or physical and temporal relationships.”

Let us return to the kinema-sketch and the discourse around it, and see how new articulations and divisions are introduced into the analysis of the live vs. reproduced. According to Auslander (2008, 58), the earliest use of the expression “live” (performance) occurred in the 1930s and was clearly linked to radio, since in radio (as later in television) it is not possible to separate the live from the recorded at the level of perception. The distinction between live and recorded broadcasting is created in order to resolve this media crisis. In fact, there are many arguments to suggest that this medial distinction was considered fundamental long before, for example, in the discourse of kinema-sketches, even if it was interpreted in different terms than in the case of broadcasting media.

In his article comparing the possibilities of stage and cinema, Sándor Hevesi, director of the National Theatre at the time, concludes that cinema is a reproduction of theatre, allowing to use actors' performance more effectively, to select the best acting performances and to bring them to a global audience. But he is also quick to point out that a performance captured and reproduced in this way is no longer theatre, because photographic reproduction is incapable of creating the illusion of theatre. “Cinema imitates, theatre stylizes,” Hevesi sums

up; that is, cinema is bound to “lifelikeness” on account of its reproducibility, while theatre’s “vitality, its artistic significance is that it can create illusion with a painted canvas” (1911, 8). In this account, the temporal experience of the theatre, which is transforming the non-real, the artificial into the real by masterful stagecraft, resembles the logic of the cinema of attractions as described by Gunning, as “sudden bursts of presence,” “alternation of presence/absence that is embodied in the act of display” (2004, 44–45). Cinema, on the other hand, should refrain from stylization, according to Hevesi, since its lifelike character surrenders it to a past moment “that-has-been” (Barthes 1981). Hevesi’s radical distinction between the transformational live moment of the theatre and cinema’s reproductive character can obviously be questioned: the films of Georges Méliès, for example, aspire to the same kind of overwhelming and astonishing effect that Hevesi attributes to the theatrical realm.⁷ What is important in Hevesi’s insights is not the ontologically theorized specificity that he assigns to cinema and theatre, but the process of differentiation that transforms theatre with the emergence of moving images: while cinematic reproduction derives its liveness from the past moment of the photographic inscription, the illusionistic power of the theatre can transform the artificiality of the present moment into reality.

György Lukács, in an essay published in the same year, sums up Hevesi’s position on the reproduction of theatre by cinema in this way: “The theatre loses all that is merely momentary, and becomes a great museum of all truly perfected [theatrical] achievements” (2001, 13). In comparing cinema and theatre and refuting Hevesi, Lukács argues that the ephemerality of the theatrical performance is “not a deplorable weakness [to be remediated and corrected], but rather a productive limit” (2001, 13). In theatre, the great moment comes into being by the encounter between the actor and audience, where “a living will of a living person [...] streams forth onto an equally living mass or multitude” (2001, 13). While liveness and vividness were understood by Hevesi as the moment of magical transformation carried out on stage, Lukács defines liveness as the exceptional encounter of “stripped souls and fates,” made possible by the temporal co-presence of actors and audience. Whereas the stage is “the absolute present,” where being and action coincide, where the dramatic fate of events can be witnessed, for cinema people are only figures, movements, “without fate,

7 But, as André Gaudreault has pointed out in a conference lecture (*Rethinking the Attractions-Narrative Dialectics: New Approaches to Early Cinema*, Ghent, 9–10 November 2018), Méliès’s creative use of moving image technology has had a reproductive function, as he wanted to reproduce his earlier stage tricks, which makes his films both theatrical and cinematic in the sense Hevesi uses these terms.

without reasons, without motives” (Lukács 2001, 14). According to Lukács, cinema lacks the present, because it alters the viewer’s perception and connects it to an elsewhere and a different temporality – this makes every cinematic action and event weightless and at the same time variable as in a fairy tale or a dream. In Lukács, the pairs of oppositions assigned by Hevesi are reversed, since it is cinema, not theatre, that is endowed with the power to create illusion (by redefining “illusion” itself). The transient liveness of the theatre is in contrast with the “boundless possibility” of cinema, fate and destiny experienced as presence with the free malleability, the “fantastic” character of cinematic reproduction. Although Lukács does not mention kinema sketches (his examples come from early cinema), the sketch brings to the fore the different construction of identity and agency, where (character) identity is posited as both a living presence of the actor and an image that can be recorded, owned, manipulated, and transported.

While for Lukács cinema belongs to the realm of the instrumentalizing and alienating modern consciousness, in Kálmán Oláh’s writing cinema is a means of global connection, which can be placed in the line of civilizational inventions such as the “train, telephone, telegraph.” Like the telephone and telegraph cables laid on land and under the sea, like the railway tracks, cinema itself becomes a network with the potential to connect “all of humanity into a strong unity” (1912, 6). Cinema’s liveness is guaranteed by its speed, a sensorial experience generated by the alternating moving images, similar to that of modern communications and transport; like communication media and transportation, cinema also constitutes the fabric of society, the link that binds together civilized humanity. At the same time, Oláh argues that, precisely because of its technical reproduction, cinema can also become a hindrance to everyday action and agency. Modern technical devices (“the telephone, the telegraph, the public sitting in the stands, the newspaper and the moving image”) constantly mediatize events, transforming everything into images. In a world that becomes a mirror, real action is no longer possible – only posing. As a result, “people are increasingly leaving the stage of history and action and becoming spectators” (Oláh 1912, 6). The world of images flashing before the eyes of the spectators also serves as a tool for reflexivity, allowing viewers to step back and consider the representations they encounter.

So how can the media create liveness, the effect of presence? For Hevesi, this is the power of the theatrical medium to authenticate and make real by stylization (to produce reality), as opposed to the photographic reproduction of events. For Lukács, the power of the theatre to create presence lies in the revelation of fate, as opposed to the malleability and plasticity of the moving image, which is

oriented towards the fantastic. Does cinema alienate us from the world, whose every visible event is recorded and held up as a mirror, or does it connect people globally (which is Kálmán Oláh's dilemma)? At first glance, it might seem that the discourse on the meanings of liveness, presence and agency sketched above is merely a confusion of contrasting assumptions and speculations, in which the authors, arbitrarily and refuting each other, assign the specificities and the consequent tasks of each medium.

Instead of taking their valuations for granted, I would like to present this debate as a historical account on the development of the relationship between media and arts, a work in progress that creates new divisions and distinctions along the lines of the appropriation of meanings and values, value preferences and hierarchies, as well as beliefs. The discourse on kinema-sketches is an accurate reflection of the fact that not only the interpretation of sketches, but also their basic spectatorial experience has made it necessary to become aware of and functionalize the intermedial situation, and thus the differences between mediums, and the (assumed) essential medial properties. In this process, the question of how to reconcile the "live" and the "reproduced" needed to be answered, given the different effects of presence produced in cinema and theatre. The novelty of kinema-sketches, compared to the earlier stage and screen hybrids, was that theatre and cinema alternated in narrating the story, and this split had to be taken into account already when writing the plays. Scriptwriters who separated the theatrical and cinematic parts in the screenplay were unwittingly creating a kind of division of labour between the two mediums. A common use of the cinematic parts was to move the story to external locations that were inaccessible or difficult to realize on stage. The cinematic parts presented the attractions and physical movements of early cinema, sometimes culminating in hair-raising action sequences, or projected characters' dreams, fears, hallucinations, and visions. The latter was already recognized as a "new dramatic technique," where cinema helped theatre by giving psychological motivation to events, "by projecting in a completely precise form to the spectator all that drives the events as a psychological engine" (Bócz 1914, 8).

This division of labour, however, was often perceived by viewers and critics as an irreconcilable, or at least confusing, contradiction. They have identified media differences that are difficult to bring together in the contrast between stage and screen space, between the living body and its fixed image, in differences in size, in changes of scene, in the alternation of speech and silence, and music. The perceptual confusion was described at the time as being due to "the sharp

contrasts between the two modes of performance,” which prevented the viewer from constructing a continuous diegetic world and ultimately “tire the nervous system” (Causeur 1912, 1). Likewise, the “liveliness” of the characters was a source of confusion: “at one moment the characters are chatting on stage, writing and reading, at another they are chasing each other in cars or aeroplanes; one minute they are laughing, rejoicing or crying before our eyes, the next they are cooling off in the Tatras or bathing in the waves of Lake Balaton (t.l. 1914, 1). To reconcile the two existences of the characters, the living bodies on stage and the recorded moving images means to make the mediums’ different presence and reality effects subject of perception, interpretation, and reflection: “It is the variety, the distancing of space and time, the representation of the living man and the shadow man, which cinema has solved and with which it has increased cinema’s chances in the struggle against the theatre” (t.l. 1914, 1).

Kinema-sketches not only revealed differences between the two mediums, but suggested strategies through which these could be negotiated and mediated, most notably through narrative. These works can also be seen as ways of dealing with and “fixing” cinema’s deficiencies in relation to the theatre: the photographic reproduction oriented towards the past and lacking presence (Hevesi), characters “without soul” (Lukács) and identities transformed into an image (Oláh). Nothing testifies to this better than the fiction of Mr. Coat, perhaps the first Hungarian film character par excellence. The coat is a mere prop in the theatrical episodes, even when the actors speak to “him” or speak on “his” behalf when mockingly impersonating “him.” But in the film part of *Rich Man’s Dream*, the coat comes to life, it is animated, it is transformed from a theatrical prop into a film character. The dream belongs to a different ontological dimension, but the stage presence of the dreamer links him to the “here and now” of the spectators and makes recorded images of the past come alive for the audience. Just as in the dream, the inanimate can be brought to life, and it turns out that the coat, far from being a mere “image” (which we all become, according to Oláh, thanks to modern imaging devices), it has its own agency, power and authority. The coat neither speaks nor thinks, it has no inner life; it is the gaze of the characters and the spectators, the interiorized social gaze that gives it existence. When the animating, personifying power of the moving images produces authority, fame, public esteem from a prop, and consequently from the empty surface of the canvas, that is also a proud demonstration of the creative power of cinema. The coat takes its place alongside the star actors of the rival medium (by actually meeting them in the film part), and no longer needs the support of stage representation. [Figs. 3–4.]

The allegorical story contextualizes and explains the mechanisms and effects of the moving images, teaching the audience to recognize its new functions, instructing them to animate and transform the “shadow people” into film characters. Eventually, however, the coat is punished and executed, and in the third, stage part, it becomes a mere theatrical prop again. The *Rich Man’s Coat* is thus also a story about the medial construction of identity. The passage between the coat as a theatrical prop and Mr. Coat, building and losing prestige and recognition, are all created and revealed as effects of the media.

The fact that media can endow subjects with specific agency and provide different patterns of medial identity becomes highly relevant in screenlife movies. We have mostly only auditory information about the body placed in a three-dimensional world (through the diegetic noises of breathing and mouse clicks), while the visual information is linked to the character’s networked and informational identity defined by digital traces and data. Cinematic narration is built upon decoding signs and operations related to virtual presence, telecommunication, and teleaction. [Fig. 5.] In this case, fiction film abandons its own visual code (shots, continuity editing, etc.) in order to convey the story through the architecture of the digital platform. Similarly to the kinema-sketch, which connects the actor’s living body to the reproduced image, the screenlife film attaches the perceiving and living body – invisible by the fiction film codes –, to the screen he or she uses. However, whereas the kinema-sketch alternates between the stage and the filmic space, in the screenlife film the audiovisual sequence can be interpreted as both a fiction film and a record of the actions that can be performed on the electronic screen. In both cases, however, the narrative provides the cohesive force by which the two media are seen in relation to each other.

Conclusion

By the 1920s, the kinema-sketch had become exhausted and obsolete, mainly because feature-length fiction films had made the cinematic effects explained by it accepted and natural. In his film aesthetics published in 1925, Iván Hevesy (2018) drew the lessons precisely from the media comparisons learned from the discourse on the kinema-sketch. In it, the place of the fiction film is marked out by a monomedially defined, modernist aesthetic: film becomes a specific and unique art by successfully combining and integrating qualities borrowed from the theatre and the novel. As a historical example, the kinema-sketch points to the changing medial conditions of moving images, and we learn the historical lesson offered

by it only if we do not simplify it as a discourse of medium-specific qualities that is now outdated and obsolete. The negotiation of medial characteristics continues today, and placing intermediality in a historical framework can add specific questions and perspectives to this process.

Reflecting on the recontextualization of moving images in the new media environment, the screenlife film can be particularly relevant in a contemporary context. Already the various terms chosen by new media analyses (e.g. interactivity, networking, surveillance, exploitation, phishing, communality, narcissism, virality) capture the medium's agency differently and price it differently in the cultural economy. An analysis of the discourse on screenlife movies can reveal the beliefs, values, and preferences that distinguish the new medium from the old. This discourse no longer takes place in the columns of articles and essays in newspapers and magazines, as in the case of the kinema-sketch, but unfolds through professional and amateur uses of screenlife film.

Schröter (2023, 1) calls “Laocoon moments” the periods when “borders between the arts and their media are drawn or withdrawn and thereby problematized.” Both the kinema-sketch and the screenlife film are relevant examples of Laocoon moments, in that they point to the constant reconfiguration of moving image uses, the discussion and evaluation of media effects, and the fact that we ourselves are ultimately living in an intermedial space as intermedial characters.

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Figure 1. Photo probably taken at the end of the first stage part (source: *Színházi Hét* 10 March, 1912).



Figure 2. Stills taken by Gyula Jelfy on the set (source: *Vasárnapi Újság* 10 March, 1912).



1. A gazdag ember elalszik a kávéházban. — 2. A szerző kioktatja a szereplőket. — 3. Ujházi Edő és Fedák Sári a Wampetice előtt. — 4. A gazdag ember kabátja bemutatkozik a művészeknek. — 5. A margitszigeti víze-ésnél. — 6. Fogadtatás az Apolló előtt.

MOLNÁR FERENCZ «GAZDAG EMBER KABÁTJA» CZÍMŰ KINEMA-SZKECSE AZ APOLLÓ MOZGÓSZÍNHÁZBAN.

Jelfy Gyula felvételei.

Figures 3–4. Stills from the surviving print of *Rich Man's Coat*: the Coat meets the theatrical stars of the era.



Figure 5. Still from the *Profile* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2018) (source: <https://moviebabble.com/2021/07/03/timur-bekmambetovs-profile-needs-an-update/>. Last accessed 05. 11. 2024.)

