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# Appearance, Presence and Movement in Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way* (2007)

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**Abstract.** In this article the author analyses Benedek Fiegauf's latest feature film, the *Milky Way* (*Tejút,* 2007) in view of Abbas Kiarostami's *Five* (2003) and the works of the Canadian artist, Mark Lewis. Fliegauf's aforementioned feature film is also a contemporary work of art, which was first exhibited in Hungary, in the Ludwig Museum in Budapest. The work is thus on the more and more fading and weakening border between film and contemporary art. The images of the Milky Way, evoking the recordings made in the late nineteenth century by the Lumière brothers, reside in the original essence of cinema, bypassing the two paths of showing reality and of creating fiction, that is to say, they are inherent in the presentation of bodies in motion and of objects in movement. Re-thinking the movement in cinema, through the exhibition of films in the illuminated museum halls, has become interesting again. Bazin's question, "What is Cinema?" and Chris Dercon's question "Where is the Cinema?" also seem relevant in reference to Fliegauf's work. The author tries to show in this article that the purely passive creational approach, as described by Jacques Rancière, which brushes aside the presentation of actions in linear order to present stories, assists in the birth of pure movement. We encounter this pure movement, observed without interference, in the works of Benedek Fliegauf, Abbas Kiarostami and Mark Lewis. Beyond shedding light on theoretical questions, the author treats Milky Way in view of the artist's other feature films, which further illuminate the path leading to Fliegauf's third feature film.

Reality or fiction? For a long time, the classification of cinematic products was only imaginable along these two segments, but these two roads have been insufficient for quite some time to systematize motion pictures. Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way* (*Tejút*, 2007), in comparison with Abbas Kiarostami's

and Mark Lewis's similar works, seems like a perfect example to illustrate a third road, which perhaps we could, in advance, call the essence of cinema. A cinematic product's essence is above all representation, the possibility of representing images. Other means of expression (music, sounds, or dialogues) are only optional, and their use is up to the director, these elements do not contribute primarily and unavoidably to the primary role of cinema. The richness of the world in front of us, or rather, the lively, unsettling life unfolding in front of the camera was shown to the contemporary audience by the "Lumière brothers, whose names are not simply useful for retrospectively marking an artistic branch, but whose work permitted the conservation and the application of movement in the disposition of cinema" (Vancheri 2008, 9). These contemporaneous shots therefore do not comport with the possibility of documenting the events in the world around us, through which they could be shown to be in symbiosis with. Cinema is showing a magical world, the reconstruction of pure movement on the screen. It is therefore not out of pure coincidence that the contemporary viewers, used to the admiration of still pictures, were startled by the train approaching the railway station, and similarly, the gentle vibration of the leaves above the dining baby's head didn't enchant the audience because of their desire to document life. Instead, the public of the late 19$^{th}$ century were amazed by the vivification of objects and persons appearing on screen. It seems that in the heart of the phenomenon that has been around in galleries and art centres for the past decades, called *effet-cinéma* by Philippe Dubois (2006), pure movement has yet again raised its head as the conceiving, creating and propellant principle, moreover, a number of artists have put forward works resembling those of the Lumière brothers. According to Youssef Ishaghpour's indisputable elucidation, the images, taken by the scientific apparatus considered future-less by its inventors, in other words, the "Lumière brothers' still and frontal takes arrived a hundred years later at an infinite orderliness, through ten minute-long takes, becoming art in *Five*, at the border of two visual arts" (Ishaghpour 2007, 129).[1] Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way* and some of Mark Lewis's creations attest to the same elevation of the inventor brothers' takes to the height of art. Although the subject, the questions raised by cinematic products in the setting of museums, warrants an in-depth study of different movement types, in this paper I will only concentrate on the movements internal to the image, movements that are strictly part of the work itself. Therefore, I will not treat the theoretical background of questions raised by other kinds of movements of cinematic works

[1] All the quotations taken from French and Hungarian texts are the author's translations.

shown inside museums, neither will I treat the work in motion due to the recipient institute's circumstances and the exhibition's concept, nor do I take as the subject of my research the concept of *flâneur*,[2] a notion thought to be controversial by many, as dissected by Walter Benjamin and later re-examined by Dominique Païni. I will be searching for the answer to the question of how, and moved by what artistic impulse, movement becomes the principal part, which thereby once again gives the occasion to redefine the notion of cinema in the work of Benedek Fliegauf (prized at the Locarno Film Festival in 2007), and in several works by Mark Lewis and in Kiarosami's *Five* (2003). Naturally, not all cinematographic works shown in museums aim at visualizing the movement inside the images or between the exhibited works. These works could dispose of very different starting points or goals. The endlessly repeated example, Douglas Gordon's *24 Hours Psycho* (1993), tries for instance to bring to the surface the subliminal substance of the movie, its goal is therefore to unveil the additional, excess content present in the images. While some investigate the relation of the feminine body with the image (Pipilotti Rist's *Be Nice To Me*, 2004) thereby giving place to multiple feminist readings, many other artists' creations bear visual artistic allusions by invoking particular paintings or genres. It is enough to think of Bill Viola's *The Greeting* (1995),evoking Jacopo da Pontormo's work, or of *Catherine's Room* (2003),evoking the work of the Renaissance painter Andrea di Bartolo, while Sam Taylor-Wood's work, *Still life,* made in 2001 as well, treats a well-known fine art genre. The confluence of diverse fine art genres is the motivation for the creation of films made of still photos (primarily, we could think of Gusztáv Hámos's *Rien ne vas plus*, 2004; and *Fremdkörper*, 2001). Apart from these, we could encounter a number of works while traipsing the rooms of museums, illuminated or shrouded in the dark, that re-use archive takes (for example Péter Forgács's *El Perro Negro*, made in 2005) or the images of already existing movies, reemploying their scenes and re-cutting them, transforming them into new, original works (e.g. Pierre Huyghe's *L'Ellipse*, made using the 1998 movie *The American Friend* by Wim Wenders). Therefore, the presentation of movement as the work's sole or most important begetter, cannot be considered as the foundation of all cinematic works that are not confined to the movie theatre. The works in discussion of Kiarostami, Fliegauf and Lewis are only a segment of the realm of moving and gleaming pictures, though this segment does seem to be overly significant insofar as we search for the goal and function of the cinema in the

[2]More on the subject: Benjamin (1974), Paďni (2000), Turvey, Foster, Baker, Iles and McCall (2003), Rancičre (2000), Russell (2000), Groys (2003) and Zabunyan (2008).

presentation of original movement, as incited by the exhibition *Le mouvement des images* (2006) by Philippe-Alain Michaud in the Pompidou Centre.

Mark Lewis, as his multiple statements attest to, is moved by the objective of creating a work that unfolds through calm and passive contemplation. When talking about his films, the Canadian artist expresses that his goal is to paint everyday life through the representation of objects, natural phenomena and bare appearance of people, leaving behind the desire of putting on film exciting adventures and plots (Le Maître 2008, 20). In his 1998 film, *The Pitch*, he declares that according to him, the biggest invention of cinema are the extras, who cannot be present in such a way in any other storytelling genre as on the screen: with their own bodies. In this film, Lewis expresses his wish to shoot films without protagonists, dialogue, or plot, leaving no other than extras that he wishes to put in the spotlight. Let us now see how this call appears in the films of the artist. The discovery of tiny movements in the beginning of the 2000s becomes without doubt the leading element of Lewis's work. In *Smithfield*, made in 2000, the slow travelling of the camera left and then right discloses the evening world of the ground-floor of an empty building. In the halls, separated from the outside world by windows, a cleaning lady is working, whose work, carried out in a daily routine can be observed either directly through a window, or through a reflection. The very wide shot of *Tenement Yard*, made three years later, shows youngsters playing football in front of pre-fabricated social housing, whose apparent passivity reflects on the activity of the football field, which is only broken by the movement on the first and the third floor; the residents' movements up and down the balcony, and the gentle rocking of the colourful sheets by the slight wind. [Fig. 1.] These two works, the movement-less work made in 2007, the *Roundabout*, and the *122 Leadenhall Street*, affirm the declarations made in favour of extras by Mark Lewis in *The Pitch* manifesto. The worker, appearing near the housebreaking in the background of the *Roundabout*, and the strolling housewives and businessmen hurrying to a meeting in *122 Leadenhall Street* form the essence of these works, therefore they are the people who in fiction films, in report films and in newsreels serve solely as the background, as a part of the set. The films *North Circular* (2000), *Windfarm*, *Algonquin Park*, and *September* by Lewis attest to the intent of painting everyday life's movements on the celluloid. In *North Circular*, through one of the artist's most favoured techniques, the zoom, we discover the originally deemed unidentifiable, unknown movement, which we notice at the second floor of the industrial building in the background of the scene [Fig. 2]. Thus the three boys in play only reveal themselves slowly to the spectator. In the 2001 film, the *Windfarm*, the appearance of the wind turbines

is direct, and the unrelenting, rhythmic work of the turbines is shown by the still camera for four minutes [Fig. 3]. What might not be readily apparent to the human eye, but which could enchant the viewer is the shadow of the wind turbines in the foreground, and the swaying and gentle vibration of the plants near the camera. A particularly interesting part of the work is that the dance of the shadows seems faster on these moving plants and thirsty ground, than the turning of the turbines themselves. *Algonquin Park, September*, also made in 2001, brings forth the phenomenon of appearance through the variation and metamorphosis of a natural phenomenon. The slowly dissolving fog, looming over the river, reveals not only the dense forest in the back and the slow and subtle movement of the water, but also gives place to the appearance of the slowly moving boat on the right of the screen. Thus, in this film, the appearance/emergence of things does not come about through the use of a cinematic apparatus (e.g. travelling, zoom), instead, Mark Lewis literally lets the world reveal itself on its own, in its inherent rhythm.

With *Five*, shot in 2003 and exhibited separately (divided into parts, the work comprises five pieces) in the New York Museum of Modern Art, Kiarostami probably had intentions similar to what Mark Lewis professes of his work. The Iranian director himself demarcates his works from fiction and the narrative schemes found therein, and invites us to observe the otherwise insignificant objects and events unfolding in front of our eyes (Barbera and Resegotti, 2003). The log, brushed then caught by the wave, its undulation on and with the water, the people strolling up and down in front of the rail facing the sea, the dogs panting beside the water, and the ducks passing in an almost soldierly line, recorded on celluloid without any intent to narrate can be considered a directorial approach which impels the author to stop and concentrate as much as it impels the viewer [Fig. 4.] Kiarostami expresses himself similarly and his words no doubt parallel those penned by Mark Lewis, and prove to be true for his films as well: "The question of camera movement is always a problem for me [...] The reality sometimes tells us not to cut the film. [...] We must give time to ourselves and wait to see things right and discover them" (Laurent 1997, 30).

This desire to discover, followed by a passive attitude of mind both from the creator and the observers, is perceptible in Benedek Fliegauf's work, prized in Locarno in 2007. Insofar as the scene in *Five*, where people stroll in front of a seaside harbour, can be matched to the scene filmed near a floating-stage on the bank in *Milky Way* [Fig. 5.], and furthermore, insofar as Mark Lewis's *Tenement Yard*, *Roundabout*, *122 Leadenhall Street* and *Algonquin Park, September* all show remarkable similarity to the way Fliegauf's work

relates to movement, then the Hungarian author's movies can be studied in light of the previously mentioned viewpoints. Most probably Fliegauf was also driven by the desire to let the world in front of the camera unfold by itself, a suspicion which is reinforced by one of his statements during an interview, according to which we can think about *Milky Way* as a nature film, since "the film does not take humans as its principal part. Here, humans are equal to landscape and nature around them. And this is not a typical point of view of feature films. This is more the viewpoint of an alien" (Dercsényi). Even if not only an alien can perceive the world around him from this point of view, it is true that the human eye, used to the deluge of moving pictures, expects a new action from every new flash, ergo the expectations of the viewers are action-orientated, the audience does not tolerate any waiting and must learn to enjoy the pleasure of discovery through patience. Although *Five* and the works of Mark Lewis mentioned until now stand closer from the point of view of *mise en scène* to the presentation of the untouched landscape without intervention from the director, and while *Milky Way* approaches the artistic level of organization, it still does not create a fictional world. The work of Fliegauf likewise does not try to address the position between reality and fiction; instead, it revolves around the question of the origin, the goal of the author's intent, and the birth of genuine movement.

This artistic desire is theorized by Jacques Rancière in his book, *La fable cinématographique* (2001). The French philosopher starts off from the thoughts laid down by Jean Epstein in his work, *Bonjour cinéma* (1921). In the theoretical work of one of the greatest director of the twenties, the author questions the ruling logic in film that allows for telling tales through arranging actions in linear order, and states that this does not correspond to real life, because the latter does not know of actions oriented towards goals, that is to say, it does not know tales. From the point of view of Rancière, since cinema "does not reproduce things the way they appear to the eye," but "records them the way they cannot be seen by the human eye, the way they are, in the form of waves and vibrations, before any kind of narrative classification" (Rancière 2001, 8), hence cinema can turn over the well-known Aristotelian logic, which favours mythos?, the rationality of junctures over *opsis*. This is the reason why he deems cinema the instigator of anti-representative art, which, after all, during the 20$^{th}$ century, revitalized the canon of representative art (Rancière 2000, 50). The opposing of dramatic action and real tragedy was first perceived by Epstein and appeared first in theatre, in the works of Gordon Craig, Appia, Meyerhold and Maeterlinck. Rancière opposes the connected actions and the model of representation of well-known subjects, the art which was originally

divided between the two extremes, thereby naming the genuine passive as well as the genuine active creative attitude (Rancière 2001, 15). The latter, which is more interesting to us given the works in examination, is engraved into objects and persons independently of any tale-telling intent, and it tires to tear down the fictional arrangements and "incites the splendor of goal-less existence behind the drama- or novel-like conflicts to shine" (Rancière 2001, 15). This creational approach facilitates ordinary things to come to the surface. This is the point which Flaubert also reached during his literary career. The French writer dreamed of an oeuvre which leaves out subject and substance, to give way to the style of writing. However, his dream could only come about in a contrasting matter, as for there to be neither succession of actions nor subject, the writer's identity must also have stepped back, thus the text written was completely stripped of writer's voice. All its trace was lost, and so a passive, invisible style of writing emerged (Rancière 2001, 16), which also rhymes with Kiarostami's statements. When the Iranian filmmaker says that, after shooting multiple films, he became convinced that the director must be taken away (Laurent 1997, 34), he talked in the name of the same artistic approach that Rancière described and that appears in the book about Kiarostami by Youssef Ishaghpour. Ishaghpour formulates that in order to show the true face of nature "self-restraint, distance and silence" (Ishaghpour 2007, 11) is of essence, and another aspect is needed, the abolishment of self, which creates the state of "présence non présente" (Ishaghpour 2007, 19). And the same creational attitude implies the use of long takes in the films of Kiarostami, which brings about the appearance of the free viewer: "I had to do away with some close-ups, and instead I favored the long take, in order for the viewer to get in direct touch with the fullness of the subject. In a close-up we take away all elements of reality, while to get the viewer into the state to be able to step into the situation and to judge it, it is of essence for all elements to be present. An accurate approach, the respect for the viewer, allows for the viewer himself to be able to choose what to focus on the screen. In a long take the viewer selects the close-up himself in function of how he feels." (Laurent 1997, 31.) The deficiencies of the above mentioned passive curatorial attitude, which opposes those of fiction films, the lack of, or circumvention of tale-telling and plot, is a phenomenon not unheard of in the universe of films shown within the walls of museums. These films, leaving behind narrative goals, turning their backs on them, accentuate the plasticity of images, for example the already mentioned work of Gordon. Furthermore, the present of tale-telling, fiction film, would also be problematic in the world of museums, since in the halls of museums the strolling visitor's often entirely erratic roaming excludes the building up of a

fictional world, since the visitor does not spend enough time on a given work to discern its full story. Additionally, the viewer, released from the disposition of cinema, can step into a room at any moment, and can join in the world of the film being projected at any time, therefore if it wanted to show a chronologically built fictional film, it would be destined to failure. Some people would only see the end of the story, some would only catch some moment from its middle, thus the work, seen only in parts, would be indigestible.

Moving pictures, shown in museums and born from Rancière's genuinely passive creational attitude therefore strip from themselves the intention of tale-telling, and therewith we can observe in them a certain process of slow-down, which often goes together with a fix camera and a shot-sequence. This process of slow-down is not independent of the process conceptualized by Serge Daney in 1989. The inversion, as described by Daney, brings about the mobilization of viewers relative to the images, while from the part of the images an immobilization can be observed. To illustrate this, Daney takes the examples of Godard's *Ici et allieurs* (1976) and Fellini's *Ginger and Fred* (1986), where the passing in front of images becomes more accentuated than the reel unrolling in the cine-projector (cf. Daney 1989). To create the concept of *cinema d'exposition* (exhibited cinema), Jean-Christophe Royoux himself also goes back to the thoughts of Daney, and in his article writes about the birth of Mallarmé's cinema, where immobility becomes substantial (cf. Royoux 2000). Works that have underwent this process of slow-down are not, however, completely deprived of movement, as even perfectly immobile objects and pictures put next to each other for a certain reason bring about a certain movement. This movement, which, after the aforementioned process, remains in the work, constitutes an influential, if not the principal, part of theoretical thinking of these works. Moreover, this also starts to show up in the movie theatre, thus in the classical disposition of cinema thanks to some contemporary films. This pure movement is the primary actor of Gus Van Saint's *Gerry* (2002) and the same director's film, the *Elephant* (2003), as well as Kiarostami's *And Life Goes on...* (1991), but also in Takeshi Kitano's *Dolls* (2002) and Tibor Szemző's *A Guest of Life – Alexander Csoma de Kőrös* (2006) movement takes a similarly important role, which lives on in a different atmosphere, freed from the dark halls of movie theatres. In the case of films shown within the walls of museums, movement is similarly present, or present with even more importance, even if we are talking about a disjointed, slowed down movement (e.g. Douglas Gordon's well known *24 Hours Psycho*) or a movement that is inherently slow (e.g. Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way* or Bill Viola's *The Greeting).* In case of the films shown in the setting of museums, the

vivification of forms in the images, their rhythmic or irregular, disconnected movements attract the visitors' view, the same movement that magnetized the audience of the first movies through the bursting out of dormant objects or people on the screen. We are not talking about a movement whose direction is of importance, which we are observing in order to understand its intent, instead, these works are possessed by a kind of movement that is interesting in and by itself. The almost imperceptible gestures and sometimes abrupt and outstanding movements in this perpetual change enchant the viewers of such works, it is through the quality of movement that motion becomes interesting, and not through the goal or function accomplished by it. This type of movement is the one that Ishaghpour calls the primary movement, which realizes in the movement of nature in Kiarostami's *Five*, "which entails in itself the movement of animals and humans. The most original motion, which never ends, with its endless patience and permanence, changing, but nevertheless identical form, the movement of the sea, those of the waves" (Ishaghpour 2007, 130). This "original movement" realizes itself in the motion of plants in the foreground of Mark Lewis's *Windfarm*, in the twinkling of water in *Algonquin Park, September*, and in the rocking of colourful sheets, hanged outside the balconies in *Tenement Yard*. In the film of Fliegauf, this same concept realizes itself through the slow movement of the windmill gradually emerging from the darkness [Fig. 6.], through the fisherman's and the young woman's strolling with the baby carriage on the floating-stage, or through the vivification of the tent by the morning wind.

Let us now have a look at how movement becomes the principal part in Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way*, how can Rancière's purely passive artist's attitude be shown to be more and more apparent in view of Fliegauf's past works. Fielgauf's first feature film consists of pictures taken solely from very close, and the close-ups, only showing very few details, they are filmed in isolated environments (the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom) [Figs. 7-8.]. But the characters of the scenes are isolated, torn out from their environments, even when they are in the outside as well, there is no space for their movements neither on the level of the story nor on a physical level. None of the characters of the *Forest* (2003) get to evolve, talk over, or solve the problem embittering their life; all discussions come to a standstill, all stalls at the point where it started. This lock-in is further exacerbated by the isolation subtly suggested by the tight images, which thereby restrict the characters' movements even in the physical space. Nevertheless, the form of movement that embraces the whole film, that which interlinks the different scenes, already appears in this movie. We are talking about the slow movement of an unidentifiable, mud-coated man,

which can be associated with the also scene-vowing movement of Fliegauf's next feature film, that of the displacement of the protagonist on a bicycle. In the *Dealer* (2004), the viewer encounters much wider camera shots, which leaves more space to the characters of the film. Additionally, in this film, the movement of the camera becomes noteworthy, but the circular motion dominating the entire film still gives the depressing feeling of lock-in, as each performed round quasi encloses the characters in a cage. The wider shots are therefore of no avail, the camera running on larger arcs, the far more scenes in the outside, the protagonist and all his entourage, after all, can only revolve around themselves. And even though the conclusion concerning the advancement and development of the characters is similar to the previous two films, the *Dealer* nevertheless signals the road towards the creative impulses realized in *Milky Way*. The *Milky Way*, from the point of view of the director's older films, encompasses the expansion of potential movements. The shots dominating in the film are even wider than in the *Dealer* and even though the fixed camera never follows the movement of the moving forms in the picture, this does not cause a feeling of lock-in, and the figures inside the image dispose of more space, can fill in more room with their movements. Therefore, on the road from the *Forest* to the *Milky Way*, we can witness a continuous expansion, an opening to the outside world. The figures of Fliegauf arrive from the cramped, locked-in internal spaces to the open outside, giving them more space to move. Their problems no longer form part of the work, their identity is of no account, the situations behind them and those waiting for them in the future are of no importance, be them tiresome or full of joy. These figures' bare presence fills up the work; the spectacle of their never-ending movements is the essence of *Milky Way*. The progress of breaking down the Rancièrian intention of story-telling can also be shown on a different level in analyzing Fliegauf's all previous works. While the *Forest* is an over-talked film building on dialogue, *Milky Way* is free of any uttered word, and dialogues are present rarely even in the *Dealer*. Also, in the second film, the dominating long takes become complete scenes, thus no scenes are fragmented by cutting, the directorial hand does not alter the material. The process of slow-down, the Rancièrian genuinely passive creational attitude determines the journey taken by Fliegauf. While in the first film the director invited the movie-goers into feverish, tense situations, spicing it with the feeling of anxiety created by the use of shaky handy-cam, in the *Milky Way*, Fliegauf arrived at a state where the very wide shots, making up the movie, only reinforce what Ishaghpour characterizes with the words low-keyed, distance, and calm. This pure contemplation, without the desire to interfere, can thus be taken as the

essence of *Milky Way*. In contrast to the nerve-straining feeling brought about by arrhythmic camera movements and close-ups in the *Forest*, which produces the feeling that the camera is a third character attending the discussions, the photographic equipment is a camera that is not present, which does not form part of the events and developments unfolding in front of it. The Rancièrian attitude, embodying the passive observation, through the use of long takes and very wide shots aids in the appearance of pure movements, as it does not break its continuity.

The road from the Aristotelian necessity of storytelling to its absence, as well as the road from the disposition of cinema to the bright museum halls, holds in itself the movement that encompasses the change of cinematographic art, of which Fliegauf, with his *Milky Way*, took part of. Movement within the picture, movement on the walls, or perhaps on the ceiling (e.g. in the *Milky Way* as shown in Ludwig Museum), movement in front, below or around the image: the quintessence is the perpetual variation of forms, the changing of the work from exhibition to exhibition and thereby its transformation, which could consequently underlie the appropriateness of re-thinking the concept of cinema.

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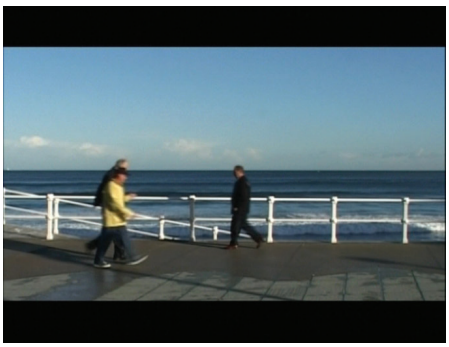

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