



# Cinema, DVD, and Video Installation. The Medial Forms of Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way*

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**Abstract.** The article deals with Benedek Fliegauf's *Milky Way* (*Tejút*, 2007), trying to establish the kinds of narrative structures and levels of this visual material, how far they determine its medial form, and what kinds of perceptive-receptive mechanisms its cinema and installation medial form offer, namely, how it can function as a movie and as an installation. While the article focuses on the movie medial form, it does not want to undervalue the installation medial form; however, it remains an open question, what kind of aesthetic experience it brings.

Owing to the media theory-oriented views livening up in the eighties and the nineties, the concept of intermediality got naturalised quite a decade ago in the diverse contexts of cultural, literary, film and theatrical theory, as it is stated in the opening phrase – since then having become a near adage – of a 1998 Paech study: “Intermedialität ist ‘in’” (Paech 1998, 14). The convergence, intertwining, and interaction of individual media or fields of art have not only existed – i.e. it's not a novel phenomenon we are facing! –, academic interest has not neglected it completely, either. Literary theory has always discussed the musicality and pictorial nature of literature, and in turn, art history has not disregarded the narratologic aspects of works of art. Therefore, Rajewsky distinguishes two approaches of research that seem to be drawing near one another. One is the field of *interart studies* or *comparative art studies* aiming at shedding some light on the interactive influence of traditional arts, dating well back to ancient times. The second is developing from the reflections prompted by the media of photography and film since the forties. This latter treated only the relationship between film and literature for quite a time and started to discover the wider universe of audiovisual media only from the seventies and the eighties. The views

of Rajewsky are fundamentally rooted in the second approach since in the age of electronic and digital media and new media the research area of intermediality cannot halt at the limits of traditional art, on the other hand, she states that the outcome of comparative studies cannot be neglected (Rajewsky 2002, 6–11). Paech refers to the change of views in the traditional disciplines and to their necessity: the history of literature has since long acknowledged that its texts are issued not only as books but as CD-ROMs and audio books, and they even get adapted for screen. Though much later, art history considered re-constituting its reference area bearing in sight screens, monitors, and the virtual net (Paech 1998, 14).

Despite being naturalised, intermediality has quite an immense confusion around it, which is rightly manifested in the study volume edited by Jörg Helbig (Helbig 1998). The authors of the book elicit diverse aspects and concepts of intermediality. Rajewsky's work from 2002 compiled with a systematising intent lends extremely useful help in the differentiated view of the heterogeneous and rich world of intermedial phenomena. Her taxonomy has since become a basis for several researches while the diverse views of intermediality still exist to some extent. Rajewsky herself alludes to the fact that her own view is in lots of ways different from that of scholars like Paech for whom intermediality is most of all a process of transformation. He conceives it figuratively, sharply distinguishing it from phenomenal content and from the aesthetic programmes of the authors. Nonetheless, in the discussion of intermediality these diverse concepts should not be disregarded (Rajewsky 2002, 24–25).

In what follows, examining Benedek Fliegau's *Milky Way (Tejút, 2007)* I am primarily intrigued to find out how the reception through manifold medial forms gets varied and what aesthetic experiences they offer. Conceiving of *Milky Way* as an intermedial phenomenon, it is especially interesting because it has not only been screened as a feature film but also as an installation, i.e. we are facing a visual material that has diverse medial forms. Following the screening at Locarno in 2007 and on the Hungarian Film Week in 2008, it was presented as a video installation in the Ludwig Museum<sup>1</sup> – the individual scenes were projected on nine screens in three halls. Fliegau's work seems to be trespassing the Rajewsky limits of intermedial phenomena.

Rajewsky distinguishes between intermedial and intramedial phenomena where the latter do not trespass media boundaries. She also differentiates intermedial from transmedial phenomena which encompasses non-media specific

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1 Ludwig Museum *All's cinema! [Minden mozi!]*, 8 February – 30 March, 2008] exhibition of film and video collection.

phenomena that cannot be assigned fundamentally and primarily to any special media since they can be manifested through several different media where none of them are privileged. Here one finds myths, tales, and biblical stories that literature, art, music, film etc. have treated, therefore we do not relate them to any one specific medium. Though Fliegau's *Milky Way* can be regarded as a transmedial phenomenon, it is different because it has only two medial forms – disregarding differences of reception through cinema, television, video or notebook – i.e. it is anchored in the media of a film screened in a museum or in a cinema. On the basis of Rajewsky's distinction, three further categories can be discerned within intermedial phenomena. First is media combination, the combination and co-existence of different media, such as the opera and film itself. Second, media change, stands for transforming from one medium to another, such as the various cases of adaptation. Finally, it distinguishes intermedial references where one medium refers to another – either by presenting its characteristics or even quoting a work from another medial form.<sup>2</sup> Fliegau's work can most of all be categorised as media combination, while it is near to media change as well. It is yet distinct from other examples of media change inasmuch as taking *Milky Way* it is not clear if the medial form of feature film is to be considered as original since it was almost simultaneously screened as a feature film and an installation. However, in the case of media change there has to be an original medial form starting from which transformation takes place.

It is worth diverting to the phenomenon well-known as moving the film from the cinema to the exhibition room. From this angle *Milky Way* is not a unique piece at all. Andrea Tóth in her study *And-effect, or cinema at exhibition rooms* (Tóth 2009b) discusses in detail how certain French theorists argue that films have recently much rather moved to exhibition rooms and how others refute this view. Considering the references of the study, there are several differences compared to *Milky Way*. A group of the installations referred to in the study are adaptations of films originally screened in cinema – in a different space, rhythm and pace and in completely different circumstances.<sup>3</sup> They are evidently cases of media change, unless there is a doubt that the link between film and installation loosened so much that we are rather talking about intermedial reference. In the rest of the examples referred to, the visual material was already designed for an exhibition room, nothing prompted cinema screening, and

2 GINETTE VERSTRAETE (2010, 7–14) follows this taxonomy, her terms of multimediality, transmediality and intermediality identify with Rajewsky's media combination, media change and intermedial references.

3 Cf. Douglas Gordon's *24 Hours Psycho*.

furthermore, it might even be inconceivable. Based on the above, one cannot draw a parallel between films swarming in exhibition rooms and the recently rumoured death of the cinema. Moreover, it is becoming evident that Fliegeauf's piece is a peculiar phenomenon.

Henceforth, I would like to examine what narrative forms of experience the different medial forms of *Milky Way* might carry. From this angle, *Milky Way* is much more appropriate for a presentation through the media of installation. The ten scenes do not actually add up to one single story; they rather seem to be a bunch of ten loosely connecting exhibition "objects." Without having the cinema and the exhibition systematically distinguished from each other, and simultaneously pointing at the accessibility between the two in the manner of a "deconstructive logic," one might risk stating that the cinema as an institution is expected to present a story a lot more than an exhibition or an installation.<sup>4</sup> Let us connect to the argument of Earl Miner in order to see why one does not (or does only with doubt) consider the scenes of *Milky Way* as a story in the cinema, either.

Miner rightly points out in his *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (discussed by Szili 1997, 102–114) that the Western approach to the epic genre has tightly been connected to dramatic art since Aristotle. Following the footsteps of Aristotle, the Western concept of criticism has been based on dramatic art – in contrast to Eastern thought, which is connected to the poetic genre – thus epic genres are closed in the Western approach (i.e. they are constructed around a single unified and complete plot) with a certain number of episodes, a central character and an intrigue. As Aristotle prescribes the typicalities of dramatic composition to the heroic poem, so will these typicalities apply to epic genres and storytelling in Western thought. The far-reaching consequences of Aristotelian conception can still be sensed in the fundamentals of approaches of narratology: "A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (Bal 1997, 6). Whereas Miner points out that the actual organising principle is the radical sequentiality or – as Szili puts it – cataloguing principle. Having the dramatic components removed from the narrative, one is left with the mere chronological succession of episodes. Annals and chronicles manifest this pure sequentiality, Szili holds that even such tremendous works as the Bible, of encyclopaedic nature and with

4 This view does not preclude a film without a story, or that there might be an exhibition reciting a story. Naturally, there are several examples for both issues. The statement is only to manifest the tendency of expectations affecting these two institutions.

values of cultural history, present sequentiality where story and catalogue, and drama and commentary are inseparable. Szili reckons this cataloguing principle reaches beyond the epic genre: it is equally present in the dramatic, poetic and discursive genres since it is deeply connected to the linear sequentiality of verbal display. It might be the overall reason why Western culture does not conceive of sequential forms as inner forms. The problematics of conceiving a story is not by long solved, though, several narrative forms of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature do not allow the construction of a closed story where events ensue in a chronological or causal order. And from the nineties episodic films have spectacularly come to the front (Lommel 2005). Several of them have the above characteristics.

Returning to the narrative structure of *Milky Way*, Miner's and Szili's critique seems to be supportable. Viewers not only lack weaving the scenes ensuing one another into a story; they do not even bother to inquire about their connections since no poetic necessity can be sensed. Thus, considering its narrative structure, *Milky Way* seems to be just as much – if not more – adapted for the exhibition room as for the cinema. What is more, the audience has the privilege to decide in what order they prefer to watch the scenes.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the scenes seemingly hardly connected are bound to one another with several threads; they subtly follow one another's finest vibrations: they repeat and reflect one another or even stand in contrast – as if innumerable invisible bonds would bind them together on the levels of composition and appearance. For example, the spaciousness of scenes 3 and 4 [Figs. 5, 6 and 3.] are contrasted with the closed depth of scenes 7 and 8 [Figs. 1 and 2.], while the perfect symmetry of the cyclists resting in scene 4 is reflected in the touching line of father, child and snowman in scene 9 [Figs. 3 and 4.] Also on the level of events: the mysteriousness of scene 4 is followed by the subtle humour of scene 5, which in turn is in contrast with the dramatic nature of scenes 7 and 8 followed by the melancholy of scene 9. In contrast to scene 4 arousing several questions and incorporating uncertainty, the events of scene 5 are more evident where the events have happened, the starting image returns (as if nothing had happened). It is in contrast to scene 8 where we might have witnessed irreversible events. And finally, beyond several motifs of content and form linking the scenes one might dimly draft a poetic principle stretching over the whole film. Inasmuch as we take the actions taking place between the dawn of the first scene and the

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5 One cannot disregard the fact that beholders do not have absolute freedom in the exhibition room, either, since the space, the arrangement of the scenes does designate, orient and influence to a certain extent the direction of wandering. Still, compared to a cinema, some freedom is present in the exhibition room.

last scene reaching into the night as events of a single day happening at different locations, the film can possess relative closedness.<sup>6</sup>

So far I have only treated the connections of the scenes. On the other hand, experiencing the individual scenes is just as much problematic from the aspect of aesthetic experience. And so it seems that the individual scenes themselves arouse the same questions as the film as a whole does. As the bond between the scenes is problematic from the angle of *Milky Way* as a whole, within one scene one wonders how its events and actions are connected. However, while the whole of *Milky Way* is sequentially divided into sections (i.e. it is built of separate scenes), the individual scenes themselves are constructed of one single setting, one single indivisible unit. Therefore – and owing to the unity of the location – they more easily evoke the sense of continuity and of the relation between actions. Thus it follows that while the apparent lack of relation between the scenes is less problematic for the viewer on the level of the film as a whole, the quest for the context of events and actions within a single scene becomes a central problem of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

In this respect individual scenes possess an especially exciting game. Fundamentally, they do not delineate a single story, i.e. the link between events and actions is not obvious, still, they do not defy the construction of a story. What is more, they explicitly tempt the viewer to construct! And while from the aspect of cognitive approach, story construction is a coincident of the reception process of each film; it goes without saying that in this particular case the circumstances and the stake of story construction are completely different. Compared to a classical film, the causal connection of events and the relationship between them is essentially more enigmatic in Fliegau's scenes, and at certain points one even wonders what is happening at all.

In scene 3 a pier can be seen in the water where a young girl arrives with a pink pram. She soon exits leaving the pram behind in the middle of the pier. Then a boat hits land with a man going ashore, he steps over to the pram and takes it. Shortly, it is the young girl who pushes it across the scene. Who is the girl? Why does she leave the pram? Is she the mother? And who is the man? Why does he take the pram? How does it get back to the young girl? What on earth has happened?

6 It is relative, should the film still keep its cataloguing nature despite the two extreme points of beginning and end. Since the number of the scenes could be enlarged without having to fit the new ones tightly to the preceding and ensuing scenes.

7 It is clearly obvious from discussions of audience meetings how much more significant it is for the audience to connect the events of a scene than to find a bond between scenes.

In setting 7, containers fill up the whole of the screen and some dim bangs can be heard from them. Soon, a man comes and walks up and down until a harbour worker arrives and opens one of the containers. He pulls a box from the back of the container and a shattered and physically totally run down girl is retrieved from it. The man hands over an envelope to the worker and leaves with the girl. The worker locks the container and leaves. There is still banging on the empty scene. Is it kidnap? Is it an escape? Returning home? Is it a political case or felony? Father and daughter? Lovers? How many and who are left in the container?

Story construction is not at all independent of the imagery of the film. The individual settings do not simply portray the locations of the events, they are pictorial compositions that might in themselves carry potential events and actions – in the above mentioned scene 3, for example, via the balance of the picture.

The long pier reaching into the water and cutting through the horizontal picture balances the events along the scene with the precision of pharmacy scales. The imbalanced state of the opening scene [Fig. 5.] – along classical expectations – suggests some shortly coming events on the right side of the picture. And so it happens: in a few seconds the young girl arrives with the pram from the right and stops exactly at the spot through which the picture is perfectly balanced [Fig. 6.] Shortly, the young girl leaves the picture on the left; the pram still guarantees the balance of the picture, at least for a while. Soon it turns out that the balance supported by the pink pram left behind is very fragile. While the balance of the picture turns over, the order of things – as it seems – is recovered: finally, at the end of the scene the young girl leaves with the pram. Horizontal movements from left to right and from right to left are similarly balanced – almost including the birds flying across. Is it composition then that designates upcoming events? Was the pink pram left behind lonely and exposed to danger simply for the sake of pictorial balance?

The composition of scene 8 manifests peculiar tension. The windows of the block of flats closing the horizon are, as numerous eyes or observation posts, staring at the playground [Fig. 2.] Extending in mind the limits of the picture upwards, the number of potential gazes tuned for focusing on the foreground is rising. The horizon is perfectly closed, the apartment building is completely impenetrable for the gaze of the person sitting on the bench, while at the same time he is exposed to an endless number of observers. There is already somebody standing in one of the windows – observing, spying, inspecting. And how many more are above it? The distressful atmosphere not only alludes to the dramatic events, it also suggests that the tension of these events is about to unfold from the play between foreground and background. An old lady enters the scene tired and hard to move. She takes

some rest for a while on the bench to pull her strength together for getting on with her journey; but she cannot make it, she faints. Does anybody see her from any of the windows? Can she expect help from above? Soon a door opens and a man hurries to the old lady. He looks around and thinks for a moment. His hesitation lasts only as long as to allow the viewer to have the suspicion that he might not have arrived with a helping hand. Then he gently lifts the lady and takes her into the house. How the story ends, if it is not the end, is up to the viewer.

Thus, composition and visibility have a decisive role; it is already alluded to by the opening picture: in the scene slowly brightening light plays the lead role, the element without which sight, and what is more, the birth of photography and cinema would be inconceivable. Further scenes of the film play with various elements and dimensions of picture composition: colours, lights and shades, picture depth, picture division, picture symmetry or cut. The second scene might evoke the illusory spectacle of the Ames room (as the girl coming from a tent walks to the right side she turns twice as tall as she was on the left side) [Figs. 7 and 8.] While scene 6 surprises us through having a deserted, empty and bare landscape filled with a colourful inflatable rubber castle.

From the elements of picture composition, frame is worth examining! Unless the construction of the story is restricted to the events within the frame, one can get further variations of story. Bearing this in mind, if one returns to scene 3, it is by no means certain that the pram is thrown about lonely on the pier. The girl might be near, only outside the frame and the man getting out from the boat is less likely to be a stranger wanting to snatch the pram. He is rather about to push it to the girl. A simple everyday story is formed from a dramatic narrative full of tensions and questions. It might affect the interpretation of further scenes, since after a dramatic scene we would have the tendency to move the events to the dramatic in the next scene.

Thus *Milky Way* recalls the memory of bygone visual puzzles and riddles where there is a picture and its secret can be unveiled only if one examines it seriously and thoroughly; but it also holds some reminiscences of the worlds of video and computer games. Fliegauf himself mentions it in several interviews that he was – from several aspects – inspired by the online game *Samorost*. Actually, the game of the Czech Amanita Design<sup>8</sup> does need thorough observation in order to have its hero reach the goal through several trials. However, it does not mean that *Milky Way* should work as a video or PC game even if it does contain such potentials in its operational mechanism, as events do unfold from visibility, but the viewer

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8 <http://amanita-design.net/> The game mentioned can be found at the site.



has no part in it. Though the story can be diversely constructed, the viewer under no circumstances has any power to initiate the events happening, unfolding or ensuing. The active part the film allows to its audience is in no way the same as the interactivity one experiences with video and PC games. Finally, the game offered by *Milky Way* leads to no end, there is nowhere to get through *Milky Way* – if not only to ourselves.

The constructive activity of the audience does not manifest in the search for an exclusive meaning. Arranging and piecing together the events does not aim at unveiling the only true story, the audience does not investigate truth. Neither is it about decrypting enigmatic metaphors or symbols – as opposed to other works, the secret of *Milky Way* does not lie in interpretation or in seeking meaning.

The scenes of *Milky Way* much rather wait for working: the events and the composition induce the audience to construct stories. Yet, the imagination of the audience is inevitable in the process of gap filling between events. Story construction can only be carried out through the various associations of the viewer while he constantly has presumptions and constructs potential stories, keeping in mind even several variations in parallel and at the same time. On having novel events take place, the viewer from time to time reconsiders, adjusts, deconstructs and reconstructs his presumptions. He ties and unties, weaves and undoes; but whatever story he creates it will always be his own.

While all criticisms on *Milky Way* almost unanimously agree that the reception of the film requires a passive, contemplative viewer's attitude, where the audience gives itself up to the beauty of the world displayed in front of the camera (Tóth 2009a), I have intended to argue for the contrary. In this way, the reception of *Milky Way* equals an analysis. The given visual or picture surface proves to be a projection surface. Through the displayed events, the picture surface inspires story reconstruction and at the same time it is apt for holding the stories and projections constructed by the viewer. The film expands along the screen as a mute, speechless therapist. It does not correct, does not rectify, does not verify and nor does it refute: it allows the viewer to let his associations free and to get closer to himself.

This reception of *Milky Way* – as it seems – is only possible in the medial form of film. Even if the visitor of the exhibition prompted by the medial form of video installation can partly disregard simultaneous reception – where simultaneity is either the result of the events running at the same time or of audio montage<sup>9</sup>

9 It is to be noted here that on the audible level – which can significantly influence story construction (especially in scene 6 or even 5) should one watch the film in a cinema – the video installation had an audio montage assembling in one the sounds of individual scenes.

– and not only passes in front of the scenes; but watches them patiently, he has very little chance to have the scenes start when he enters the room. However, it is likely to be inevitable to see the scenes from the beginning to the end in a linear way in order to have the experience described above. Though, in the case of certain scenes, entering an exhibition room and plunging in the scene already at its middle there might occur an almost similarly exciting game to find out how the scene might have started, what actions might have taken place. However, in most cases – exactly because of the story unfolding from visuality – it is more important to have a previous view of the visual composition, which is fundamentally possible in the beginning of the scene. It does not intend to say that the beginning of the story is insignificant from the angle of the events at the end of the scene because as the openness of the events does not outline one single potential story, with every rerunning a new story can be constructed. Reception from the beginning to the end of a scene, i.e. the previous examination of visual composition is more significant for elaborating our associations and running our associative thinking temporally.

Beside the two above treated medial forms a third one has to be mentioned: reception through DVD. Watching a DVD makes the two processes possible at the same time: the viewer can watch the scenes in an order at will, i.e. he can decide over the sequence of scenes just like in the form of a video installation, or he can watch each scene from the beginning, which allows the narrative experience described above to be attainable within the scenes.

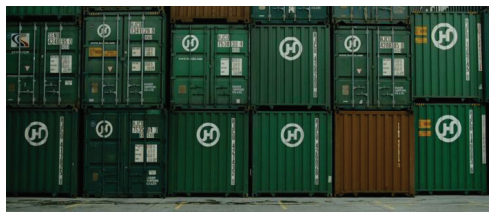
I had no intention to argue that the “real” or “more valuable” medial form of *Milky Way* is the cinema or DVD screening; I have simply drafted the possible mechanism of reception of these medial forms. It is still problematic what forms of aesthetic experience the medial form of installation *Milky Way* offers.

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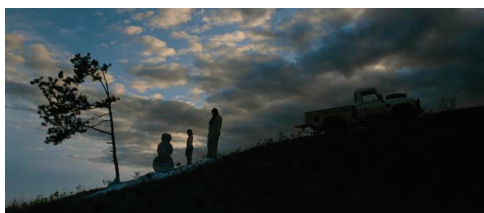
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## List of Figures

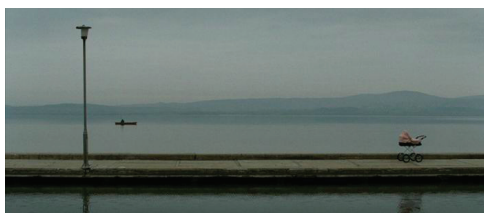
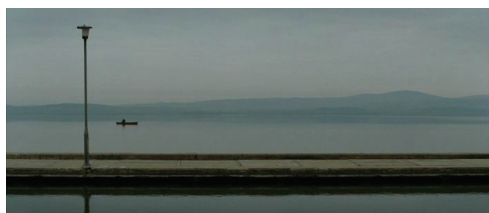
Figures 1–2. Benedek Fliegauß's *Milky Way* (*Tejút*, 2007)



Figures 3–4.



Figures 5–6.



Figures 7–8.

