

## The *MA (Today)* and Tomorrow. Film Theory and Practice in the Classical Neo-avant-garde

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**Abstract:** *MA* ('Today') published only a few articles and documents about films, but these were the most important ones in the period of silent cinema. These articles concentrated around 1921, the starting point of international avant-garde cinema (German Expressionism, French Surrealism, the Soviet montage film). The most important ones are Victor Eggeling's fundamental essay on moving picture (published first in Hungarian in Kassák's periodical 1921 No. 8) and László Moholy-Nagy's illustrated film plan (written in 1921/22, published in an extra issue of 1924). The paper examines the theoretical and historical context of the two texts and their influences to the next avant-garde period in Hungarian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. It seeks to find connections between the classical and neo-avant-garde period, among others, in the fields of intermediality and political sensibility, which are the most particular attributes of the two periods, except the fundamental difference, namely that the classical period produced only theoretical works and plans, and no (Hungarian) films, while the neo-avant-garde period had both theoretical and practical outcomes, as it can be seen in the life work of Gábor Bódy.

In this paper I examine the film theory of Lajos Kassák's journal entitled *MA* [Today] in the context of the classical avant-garde movement of the 1920s and the neo-avant-garde movement of the 1960/70s. I first place the texts on film published in the journal in the context of the film theory and film history of the 1920s, then I seek their influence on later periods. Thus, on the one hand, we can have an insight into the results of the classical avant-garde represented by *MA* at that time, on the other hand, we can trace its im-

pact within the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, evolving half a century later. In my view the classical avant-garde and its historical impact is well illustrated in light of these artworks and ideas on film art.

First of all, let us see the facts. Three texts on film art were published in the journal *MA*, all of them in the first half of the 1920s, already in the issues of the journal published in Vienna. The first one is Pál Acél's short theoretical writing entitled *Collective Motion (Kino-Mechanics)* in issue 1921/5. The second one is Victor Eggeling's article entitled *Theoretical Arguments on Motion Picture Art* as well as his drawings created for his planned film, the 1924 *Symphonie Diagonale* in issue 1921/8. Finally, the third one is László Moholy-Nagy's script entitled *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis* in the special issue 1924/8–9. All this does not seem like much in the journal's history of nine volumes and a series of special issues between 1916 and 1925, however, the theoretical coherence and historical context of the three writings deserve special attention. The fact that the articles are from the beginning of the 1920s is equally important (Moholy-Nagy's script was also written around 1921–1922). This era gave rise to the first avant-garde period of silent film, among them German Expressionism, which greatly influenced these writers. And finally, it is worth mentioning that all the three articles were published in Vienna, in the issues of the international status of *MA*, appearing in the scene of the European avant-garde. Furthermore, just like the journal itself and its editor-in-chief, the two Hungarian authors of the film texts also lived in emigration from 1919–1920.

Let us take a closer look at the theories and historical context of the three articles.

The film director Pál Acél (1885–1949) had been making feature films in his country since 1914. His most important work was a film made from the narrative poem *The Apostle* by the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Sándor Petőfi; this film was lost, just like the majority of the Hungarian silent film heritage. In 1920 he emigrated to Austria. From his short, one-page writing entitled *Collective Motion (Kino-Mechanics)*, which can be regarded as a definitive manifesto in the spirit of the art theory of the age, rather than a discursive argumentation, it is worth highlighting the ideas referring to the relationship between Expressionism and motion pictures. His passion is visible in the language he uses: “expressive tool”, “expressive mechanics”, “monumental expressivity”. Further on, the notion of “collectivity”, also appearing in the title with political connotations, is a deciding element of the argumentation. The thesis of Pál Acél’s writing is formulated around the genre of the “Metropolis film” which first appeared in the avant-garde film movement of the 1920s, and within that genre, of several filmmakers. For the avant-garde filmmakers of the age, the Metropolis film represented the possibility that the cinematographic idea of motion and the political thought of the mass can appear simultaneously. The metropolis is the place where the film medium is most at home, and respectively, film is the new medium which can most effectively express the new experience of metropolises (motion/speed, crowd). Although the word metropolis does not appear in Pál Acél’s text, several expressions of his (“kino-mechanics”, “collective motion”, “force exerted on the mass, massified culture”) point towards the notion of the metropolis. Thus it is not unfounded to assume that at the time of publishing Acél’s article, Moholy-Nagy, working on the *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis* at the time of appearance of Acél’s writing, is influenced by his compatriot’s ideas; his short script, as Éva Forgács

writes in her essay, is just “indulging in the freedom of motion”.<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of Viking Eggeling’s (1880–1925) article among the discussed materials deserves special explanation, as he was not a Hungarian artist (he was born in Sweden and carried out his artistic activity in Germany). However, Eggeling’s fundamental article, considered as a classic in early film theory, was first published in *MA* in Hungarian (without mentioning the translator), and later translations were made based on this text. This mere fact indicates the significance of *MA* in the avant-garde scene of the time. The other important aspect is the publication of the drawings accompanying the author’s writing, among others, on the front cover of the issue. Eggeling’s drawings are preliminary studies for his later abstract film, *Symphonie Diagonale* (1924), also a classic. These drawings can also be associated with Moholy-Nagy’s film plan, created at the time of publication of Eggeling’s studies and drawings. It is worth supplementing all this with another illustration of the issue containing Eggeling’s article, namely with the drawings of Eggeling’s disciple, Hans Richter (1888–1976). *MA* published “themes” from Richter’s *Fugue* series on four pages. These drawings can be regarded as the preliminary study for the artist’s abstract etudes entitled *Rhythm* (1921, 1923, 1925). Besides Eggeling, Richter was another prominent artist of the German avant-garde film art of the 1920s, and within that, of the trend of abstract film (they signed together the 1920 manifesto entitled *Universal Language*). Even if he did not publish an article, his drawings appeared in *MA*. In the 1920s in Berlin, Richter worked together with Moholy-Nagy: they were both members of the Vienna Constructivist Group, they jointly selected films for the 1929 Stuttgart review of avant-garde film and photography, the FiFo, which would play an

<sup>1</sup> FORGÁCS Éva, „A megmozdított kép: Moholy-Nagy László”, *Filmvilág* 38, 4. sz. (1995): 44–46, 46.

important role in shaping Moholy-Nagy's thinking about film and in the films that he started to make at that time.

Thus we arrive at the other determining figure, besides Kassák, of classical avant-garde, László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). Moholy-Nagy was the “Berlin representative” of *MA*, the journal regularly published his artistic works; in 1921 a special issue was dedicated to his artistic activity. His only textual material published in *MA* is the *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis*. The importance of this work in the author's oeuvre is indicated by the fact that he republished its revised version in German (*Dynamik Der Gross-Stadt: Skizze zu einem filmmanuskript* [Dynamic of the Metropolis: Sketch of a manuscript for a film]) in his 1925 volume entitled *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Painting, Photography, Film), appearing in the Bauhaus books series.<sup>2</sup> In the version published in *MA*, the text is accompanied by drawings, graphic as well as typographical signs, while in the second version, published in the volume, drawings are replaced by photos. All this proves, on the one hand, Moholy-Nagy's *gesamkunstwerk* artistic endeavour; on the other hand, it illustrates the artistic path of his attachment to film, namely his process of approaching film through fine arts, then photography. Krisztina Passuth writes in her monograph on Moholy-Nagy: “The medium of film would have not only been an explosive expansion of artistic training, but an artistic self-realization for him.”<sup>3</sup> Would have been..., as Moholy-Nagy could not make a film out of this plan and as he unfortunately never fully immersed himself in film. This was perhaps the decisive moment when Moholy-Nagy's career remained primarily in the domains of photography and fine arts. His reception also focuses on this aspect of his

<sup>2</sup> MOHOLY-NAGY László, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet SELIGMAN (London: Publisher Lund Humphries, 1969), 124–137.

<sup>3</sup> Krisztina PASSUTH, *László Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 113.

activity as well as on its connection with the Bauhaus, though recently more and more attention has been paid to his films.

From the perspective of the filmic materials related to *MA* it is of major importance that Moholy-Nagy's first film, *Marseille Vieux Port* (Alter Hafen in Marseille, 1929/32), and his further silent films related to the years in Germany, *Berliner Stilleben* (Berlin Still Life, 1931/32) and *Großstadt Zigeuner* (Gypsies, 1932/33), start from the conception of *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis* and belong to the avant-garde Metropolis films of the 1920s. Only the abstract material of *Ein Lichtspiel schwarz-weiss-grau* (Light-Play Black-White-Gray, 1930/32) is different; it was inspired by his own Light-Space Modulator (Lichtrequisit).

Thus Moholy-Nagy's film plan published in *MA*, then in the volume, could not be completed, however, his later Metropolis films can obviously be related to *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis*. It is also worth mentioning that *Light-Play Black-White-Gray* can be related to the constructivist works of Eggeling and Richter, publishing in *MA*. In the chapter entitled *Static and kinetic optical composition* of the introduction of *Painting, Photography, Film*, Moholy-Nagy devoted special attention to the activity of Eggeling and Richter and included the *Symphonie Diagonale* in the visual material of the volume as the example of “animated cartoon”,<sup>4</sup> which he could watch at Eggeling's home projection in a friendly circle in 1924.<sup>5</sup> However, Moholy-Nagy had already published parts of Eggeling's and Richter's films in the album entitled *Book of New Artists*, jointly edited with Kassák and published in Hungarian and German in Vienna in 1922.

<sup>4</sup> MOHOLY-NAGY, *Painting...*, 119.

<sup>5</sup> PETERNÁK Miklós, „A magyar avant-garde film”, in *F.I.L.M.: A magyar avant-garde film története és dokumentumai*, szerk. PETERNÁK Miklós, 5–51 (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1991), 9.

We can see that the filmic materials appearing in *MA* are coherent as long as they belong to the sphere of a) the Metropolis films of the 1920s; b) the theory and practice of abstract film. Moholy-Nagy represents the connection between the two: *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis*, published in *MA*, is one of the forerunners of the genre of the Metropolis film, however, the drawings and typographical signs render the text closer to abstract signification. The above-mentioned fact that the later publication of the *Film Sketch* in the volume contains photos instead of drawings, brings Moholy-Nagy's plan much closer to the classical avant-garde Metropolis films created after 1925 (!), thus to his later films on Marseille, Berlin and the Berlin Gypsies.

*MA*'s place in the context of film history also deserves special attention. The illustrations of Eggeling and Richter, the drawings and typographic signs of *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis* as well as Moholy-Nagy's film entitled *Light-Play Black-White-Gray* are essential examples of the theory and practice of abstract film. Pál Acél's manifesto and Moholy-Nagy's film plan lay the groundwork for the representative avant-garde film genre of the 1920s; it will be completed through Moholy-Nagy, though only a few years later, when the classical pieces of Metropolis film, such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphonie of a Metropolis* (1927) and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), have already been made. He knew both films and both filmmakers at the shooting of his own films. In the second, 1927 edition of *Painting, Photography, Film*, Moholy-Nagy inserted a footnote into the introductory text of *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis*:

As I was reading the corrections for the second edition, I heard reports of two new films which seek to realize the same aspirations as those proposed in this chapter and the one on Simultaneous Cinema (p. 41). Ruttmann's film

*Symphonie of the Metropolis* shows the rhythm of the movement of a town and dispenses with normal "action".<sup>6</sup>

Besides, at the 1929 Stuttgart avant-garde film forum organized with Richter (FiFo) he had the occasion to listen to Dziga Vertov's lecture and watch his films.

As a closing thought of this argumentation, let me complete the film historical context of Metropolis films with yet another aspect related to *MA*. The editor-in-chief of the journal, Lajos Kassák, could no longer write about Ruttmann's Berlin film in *MA*, which ceased publication in 1925, before his return home from emigration. Therefore, his writing entitled *The Absolute Film* appeared instead in 1927 in the most significant journal in Hungary of that time, *Nyugat*. Kassák's analysis goes deep into Ruttmann's film and celebrates the "true", "absolute" film, which gets separated from literature and in which "[T]he clearest reality of life is present".<sup>7</sup> From among possibly related films, he highlights Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and from among the relevant artists he mentions, among others, the earlier authors of the *MA*, Eggeling, Richter and, of course, Moholy-Nagy. Kassák's main idea about *Berlin, Symphonie of a Metropolis*, that "It happens rather than narrates",<sup>8</sup> also applies to Moholy-Nagy's film plan and his Metropolis films. This is how the far-reaching intellectual sphere *MA* and its ideas become one.

In the second part of my paper I examine the impact of the writings on film appearing in *MA* and the film-related activity of their authors on Hungarian film history. The presentation of the contemporaneous impact is very simple, as there was virtually none. As mentioned above, thoughts and films formulating the idea of avant-garde art and within that, avant-garde film art, could

<sup>6</sup> MOHOLY-NAGY, *Painting...*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> KASSÁK Lajos, „Az abszolút film”, in PETERNÁK, *F.I.L.M...*, 98–107, 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

only be born in emigration. The journal published in Vienna, Kassák and Pál Acél living in emigration in Vienna, Moholy-Nagy as the Berlin representative of the journal and his films made in Germany—all these signal that avant-garde filmmaking could not receive necessary institutional and spiritual support in Hungary in the 1920s. It has to be added that by the end of the 1920s, traditional feature filmmaking also fell into crisis in Hungary. While in 1918, mostly due to the war conditions, more than 100 films were made (and the country occupied the fifth position among the filmmaking great powers); ten years later, in 1928, only one feature film was completed. It is severely traumatic to Hungarian film that the most important period of silent film era, the 1920s, is almost left out from its history. And this particularly applies to avant-garde endeavours. This is also the reason for the unilaterally market-oriented, popular character of the period between 1931 and 1945 of early Hungarian sound film, as well as for the recurrent fate of artists with innovative views, such as Paul Fejos. He made a successful avant-garde film with the title *The Last Moment* in Hollywood in 1927, and as a result, he signed an agreement with the Universal Pictures, but after the failure of his films made in Hungary he left the country again, and this time once and for all. Thus, in the age of classical avant-garde the Hungarian authors could implement their ideas mainly in emigration.

The years following World War II, the age of socialist realism, did not favour avant-garde (film) art either. Kassák, who was living in Hungary again from 1926, and whose personality linked the classical and neo-avant-garde periods, was an isolated and prosecuted cultural figure in the political regime both before and after 1945. After the 1956 revolution he was a “tolerated” artist of the Kádár regime, whose reception would be possible again abroad, in the contemporary emigration; Kassák himself was actually forced into internal emigration. The Kádarian consolidation and one of its important

measures, namely the foundation of the Béla Balázs Studio in 1959, gradually made possible the continuation of the avant-garde view and its connection to recent international developments.<sup>9</sup> After sporadic antecedents, starting from the 1970s, several avant-garde experimental films were made in the BBS in various groups and series. It is no exaggeration to say that the Béla Balázs Studio became the most important workshop of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960/70s, in which artists working in several other fields also carried out their activity, making one or even more films in the spirit of the Moholy-Nagy and Kassák type *gesamkunstwerk*. The most important artist, organizer and also theorist of this period was Gábor Bódy (1946–1985), who dedicated a short, unrealized (!) film plan of his (*Light and Sound*) to László Moholy-Nagy. Among his articles we can find a survey of the history of Hungarian experimental film, in which he writes the following:

If we accept the division according to which the following great, influential generations developed in experimentalism: 20s–30s: French, Russian, German experimenters; 50s: American experimentalism on the East and West Coast; 60s–70s: international movement of independent cooperative filmmakers, then Hungary has the intellectual connections in the first and third generations. We took part in the first one with German intervention through Béla Balázs, László Moholy-Nagy, Dénes Mihály, Sándor László and through the unknown György Gerő who was regarded by Kassák and Imre Pán as early as the late 50s as the author of the »first, and so far, only Hungarian avant-garde film«. We can only talk

<sup>9</sup> KOVÁCS András Bálint, “The Experimental Cinema of the State: The Balázs Béla Studio”, in *Experimental Film: The Missing Frames*, ed. Benjamin MEADE, 65–88 (Kansas City: Avila University Press, 2010).



about the late effects of the second one, and perhaps the Hungarian underground of the 50s could be reconstructed from private libraries. However, a relatively strong and undoubtedly significant, peculiarly Hungarian cooperative experimentalism joined the third one which was made possible by the activities of the Béla Balázs Studio.<sup>10</sup>

If we examine the connection between the ideas on film of the classical avant-garde movement represented by MA, with Moholy-Nagy's filmic works in its centre, and the films of the neo-avant-garde period, then it is worth mentioning the partly distinctive character of Moholy-Nagy's Metropolis films as compared to the avant-garde Metropolis films of the time. What has not yet been emphasized is the author's social sensitivity, and as a result, the documentary style of his Metropolis films. We can read the following statement in the article of the Hungarian researcher Andrea Pócsik: "He draws his themes not simply from the bustle of the city, as it happened in the case of his early film plan entitled *Dynamic of the Metropolis*, but from the of reality mosaics of periphery existence, of being outcast."<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Pócsik's argumentation is based on the recent results of the research on Moholy-Nagy, among others, in the 2006 volume entitled *Filmische Sinneserweiterung: László Moholy-Nagys Filmwerk und Theorie* by the German Jan Sahli. Sahli writes about Moholy-Nagy's Metropolis films as follows: "However, besides the shared aesthetic starting point of the

new filmic view, in the course of the cinematic approach to reality, certain poetic-documentarist ideas take shape in Moholy-Nagy's Metropolis films, which also contain political perspectives."<sup>12</sup>

This is most characteristic of the two Berlin films: the topic of *Gypsies* already makes clear Moholy-Nagy's social interest. The majority of the shots of *Berlin Still Life* are about workers, beggars and children playing in and around Meyer's Hof barracks. As a leftist, progressive, and also an emigrant artist forced out of fascist Germany, Moholy-Nagy could easily identify with these social outcasts. Therefore, it is not surprising that his films were banned from the German public of the time due to their socio-critical attitude.

The two versions of the *Film Sketch—Dynamic of the Metropolis*, first published in MA, and then in a later volume, as well as his Metropolis films, clearly shows his shift from Constructivism to documentarism. Following the film plan, Andreas Haus, together with his disciples, shot a constructivist film, faithful to the spirit of the original work, at the University of Art in Vienna in 2006. In *Berlin Still Life* only the high angles, the reflecting surfaces and the graphic patterns of the asphalt and paving stone evoke this style; in the *Gypsies* a few canted angles at most. In his Metropolis films Moholy-Nagy is interested in the issue of social freedom rather than in the abstract freedom of motion—just as to the neo-avant-garde art of the 1960–70s would be.

The most important connection between classical avant-garde (rooted in MA and Moholy-Nagy's works) and the experimental films of the neo-avant-garde period is the social awareness of abstract forms and Constructivism. Of course, in neo-avant-garde films, we can still find examples of the abstract style, continuing the tradition of Constructivism. But it is very clear how even the

<sup>10</sup> BÓDY Gábor, "Creative thinking device: »Experimental film« in Hungary", in *Gábor Bódy 1946–1985: A Presentation of his Work*, eds. László BEKE and Miklós PETERNÁK, 265–270 (Budapest: Palace of Exhibitions–Central Board of the Hungarian Cinematography, Ministry of Culture, 1987), 267.

<sup>11</sup> PÓCSIK Andrea, *Átkelések: A romaképkészítés (an)archeológiája* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó–Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem, 2017), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Jan SAHLI, *Filmische Sinneserweiterung: László Moholy-Nagys Filmwerk und Theorie* (Marburg: Schüren, 2006), 158.

most radical experimental films are related to political, historical, social and ideological issues. Let me bring just a few examples.

The closest to Moholy-Nagy's works was János Tóth's *Arena* (1970), which depicts the common man in both a documentary and an abstract style. Tibor Hajas has pedestrians pose as models in a city square in his *Self-Fashion-Show* (1976), and in doing so, he uses the documentary method while also criticizing it. Another example is Tamás Szentjóby's film *Centaur* (1975), which intentionally desynchronizes image and sound.

The most important artist of the neo-avant-garde scene is Miklós Erdély, who created several films in the Béla Balázs Studio. The most significant one of them is *Version*, shot in 1979, which almost piled up radical political meanings, juxtaposing the narratives of antisemitism and public persecution—that is, the two dictatorships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: fascism and communism. The common feature of the two eras is reinforced by the circumstance, not unusual at that time either, that *Centaur* and *Version* were banned, and Tamás Szentjóby emigrated from Hungary in 1975.

And finally, let's also mention one of Gábor Bódy's films, *American Torso* (1975), made in the Béla Balázs Studio, which follows the fate of the Hungarian soldiers forced to emigration after the 1848–49 War of Independence, fighting in the American Civil War. Bódy's film depicts the fate of emigration, recurring again and again in Hungarian history. The fate which is also shared by the Hungarian classical avant-garde movement; the journal *MA*; its editor-in-chief, Lajos Kassák; and its Berlin representative, László Moholy-Nagy. Again, an intellectual circle comes to a close—together with my paper as well.

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