

Canlı Kaydedilmiş Tiyatro Prodüksiyonları: Film ve Tiyatro Arasında Yeni Bir Hibrit Sanat Formu Live-Capture Filmed Theatre Productions: A New Hybrid Art Form Between Film and Theatre

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Özet

Bu makale, film teorisi ve tür çalışmaları merceğinden, spesifik olarak National Theatre Live örneklerini referans alarak, canlı kaydedilmiş tiyatronun görsel-işitsel medya türleri arasındaki benzersiz konumunu araştırıyor. Canlı kaydedilmiş tiyatro oyunları, özellikle tiyatronun çevrimiçi platformlara geçişini hızlandıran COVID-19 salgını sırasında önemli bir ilgi gördü. Bu çalışma, bu hibrit formun çağdaş film teorisi ve tür çerçeveleri içinde nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığını inceliyor. D.N. Rodowick'in sinemanın akışkan ve gelişen doğasına dair içgörülerinden ve Siegfried Kracauer'ın ilk filme alınan tiyatroya dair eleştirisinden yararlanan makale, canlı kayda alınmış tiyatronun geleneksel sinema normlarına nasıl hem bağlı kaldığını hem de onlardan nasıl ayrıldığını değerlendiriyor. Ek olarak, Rick Altman'ın anlamsal/sözdizimsel/pragmatik tür teorisi, canlı kayda alınmış tiyatronun hibrit özelliklerini değerlendirmek için bir çerçeve sağlıyor. Bu analiz, canlı kayda alınmış tiyatronun ne geleneksel film türlerine uyduğunu ne de teatral deneyimleri tam olarak yansıttığını ancak her iki medyanın unsurlarını harmanlayan ayrı bir hibrit mekânda işlediğini ortaya koyuyor. En nihayetinde, canlı kayda alınmış tiyatro, geleneksel film ve tiyatro tanımlarına meydan okuyan yeni bir hibrit sanat formu olarak konumlanıyor. Yeni endüstriyel fırsatlar sunarak ve tiyatro oyunlarına erişebilirliği artırarak, görsel-işitsel medyaya ilişkin süregelen tartışmalara katkıda bulunuyor. Bu çalışma, hibrit sanat formlarının devamlı olarak araştırılmasının gerekliliğinin ve bunların film ve tiyatro çalışmalarının geleceği üzerindeki etkisinin altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Film, Tiyatro, Hibrit Sanat, Canlı Kaydedilmiş Tiyatro, Film Teorisi, Tür Çalışmaları*

Abstract

This paper explores the unique positioning of live-capture filmed theatre, specifically referring to National Theatre Live examples, through the lenses of film theory and genre studies. Live-capture filmed theatre has gained substantial traction, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the transition of theatre into online platforms. This study examines how this hybrid form is conceptualized within contemporary film theory and genre frameworks. Drawing on D.N.

Rodowick's insights into the fluid and evolving nature of cinema and Siegfried Kracauer's critique of early filmed theatre's "canning," the paper evaluates how live-capture filmed theatre both sticks to and differs from traditional cinematic norms. Additionally, Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic genre theory provides a framework for assessing the hybrid characteristics of live-capture filmed theatre. The analysis reveals that while live-capture theatre fits neither conventional film genres nor fully reflects theatrical experiences, it operates within a distinct hybrid space that blends elements of both media. Ultimately, live-capture filmed theatre is positioned as a new hybrid art form that challenges conventional definitions of film and theatre. It contributes to the evolving discourse on audiovisual media by offering new industrial opportunities and enhancing global accessibility to theatrical performances. This study highlights the need for continuous exploration of hybrid art forms and their impact on the future of film and theatre studies.

Keywords: *Film, Theatre, Hybrid Art, Live-capture Filmed Theatre, Film Theory, Genre Studies*

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Introduction

“The best of British theatre. On a cinema screen near you.” When one visits the website of National Theatre Live, these are the two sentences that greet them to the experience of live-capture filmed theatre productions of National Theatre Live. Several audiences can now watch outstanding productions by the Royal National Theatre in London, from the nearest movie theatres in their cities. Rachael Castell (2014) wrote an article for *The Guardian*, titled “Filmed theatre: a new artform in itself?”. For the article’s deck, she wrote: “The stage is a precious space, both magic and real, but plays are written to be performed again and again – why not digitally?” As she continued with the article, she attempted to explore this new experience that is stuck in terms of classifications and definitions. Was this a new art form? Or a new genre? Terms such as “event cinema,” “cinecasting,” and “alternative content” were some open-to-debate definition offerings followed by several counterarguments for each option. It has been ten years since that article was published, and much has changed. Thus, more research has been done, and naturally, more debates have arisen. The debate this study aims to raise starts with answering this question: How do film theory and genre studies characterize the unique position of live-capture filmed theatre within the broader audiovisual landscape? Before starting to delve into this question, it is important to highlight that this article does not offer a theatre/performance studies perspective, and rather aims to approach the issue from a film studies discipline. The particular viewpoint of the study only covers one end of this necessarily bilateral discourse, and it is indeed an intentional choice.

With the arrival of COVID-19 into our lives in 2020, one of the things that has significantly changed in our daily lives is how we consume audiovisual content for entertainment purposes. Our understanding of cinema spectatorship has shapeshifted during this transition period from the movie theatre seats into the comfortable sofas in our living rooms. With the growing popularity of online streaming, theatre found its way to adapt to the new understanding of spectatorship, and the solution was the idea of live-capture filmed theatre, most popularly the National Theatre Live productions. The concept did not appear out of nowhere during the pandemic, as it dates back to 2009, but its popularity has grown so much compared to where the live-capture filmed theatre plays of National Theatre Live were ten years before. Now that people have grown comfortable with the idea of watching films at movie theatres after the pandemic, they were introduced to live-capture filmed theatre productions, which they could experience at the movie theatres instead of actual theatre stages. Susan Sontag (1966) once wrote: “...a painting can be ‘literary’ or sculptural, a poem can be prose, theatre can emulate and incorporate cinema, cinema can be theatrical. We need a new idea. It will probably be a very simple one. Will we be able to recognize it?” (p. 37). This is precisely the new and simple idea she talks about, and we are now finally able to recognize it.

Regarding the primary lenses of this study, film theory and genre studies, I find it essential to briefly explain these perspectives and why it is important to evaluate these new “media products” through these approaches. The main purpose of film theory, as it can be understood by the wording used, is to understand what film is, its limitations, the challenges it faces throughout the time, and so on. There is, of course, not a single, specific answer to the question “What is film?” but the debates surrounding it always remain exciting, especially since we are currently experiencing the digital age, its evolving nature, and the hardships it could possibly offer for the future of cinema. Film theory is thus quite significant in understanding where cinema stands today, what it stands for, and the inevitability of its surrender to the ever-changing world. Film theory can always offer new approaches and lively discussions, and it certainly opens many different doors for us to understand what cinema is and can be. These doors help us to make

appropriate and constructive criticism regarding the filmic productions, and in this study's case, the theatrical productions on-screen.

Genre studies, one of the other approaches in this study, is essential in terms of adding a new layer to what we have learned from film theory. Like film theory, genre studies is instrumental in establishing a framework for making meaning of films. It paves the way for the critics to understand different conventions in film productions and the importance of audience reception. Rick Altman's (1999) nuanced genre theory, "A semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre," will serve as a crucial guide to this study in terms of how we categorize live-capture filmed theatre in the world of cinema and to what extent it can be defined as a new film genre. As film struggles to set its own boundaries as an art form, it gets more of a predicament every day to define what film is and what film is not. This blurry line of boundaries makes it possible for us to call "live-capture filmed theatre" a filmic production. However, as the form does not entirely leave its primary form, which is theatre, live-capture filmed theatre is a new hybrid art form that encapsulates the dynamics of film and theatre.

Film Theory Standpoint

D. N. Rodowick, one of the most well-known film theorists, talks about how "cinema studies has continually evolved as a field in search of its object" (Rodowick, 2007, p.13). While this statement of his dates back to 2007, it is even more relevant in today's understanding of cinema studies. As technological opportunities become more eligible and advanced, it gets more complex every day to find the object of cinema studies, as it gets progressively more challenging to define what film is. As Rodowick (2007) attempts to make comparisons between the analog and the digital forms of film and understand what changes are significant for the future of film, he states: "So, cinema studies can stake no permanent claims on its disciplinary territories; its borders are in fact continually shifting. (...) there is no medium-based ontology that grounds film as an aesthetic medium" (Rodowick, 2007, p. 23). According to Rodowick and supported by what we can observe in today's circumstances, cinema does not have the power to determine its boundaries. It has a fluid identity as an aesthetic medium, since it is bound to develop in a constant and dynamic manner due to its nature's ability to evolve through technological advancements. Finding the answer to the question of what film is has always been a struggle since film theory has become an actual field in the 60s, but the blurriness of its boundaries has significantly increased since the technology has started to take an active role in the film industry. Starting from the first use of sound and color, followed by the new idea of "the 'complete' film as an alternative to the stage" (Arnheim, 1957, p. 159), the transition to digital filmmaking, and the use of CGIs, the traditional idea of what film is has collapsed repeatedly over time. In 2024, "film" stands nowhere near its earlier connotations. Although some scholars and critics thought of these abrupt changes as the signifiers of the "death of cinema," they did not necessarily connote a certain death, but new opportunities and possibilities in the world of cinema. According to Rodowick, "through the narrative inscription of technology as the antithesis of art, (...) cinema reclaims for itself the grounds of "humanistic" expression" (2007, pp. 5-6). Even though the use of the word "technology" in this context refers to something else that challenges the "humanistic" way of the art of cinema, it can easily be applied to the idea of live-capture filmed theatre. The humanistic side of the film remains even when it is in the form of filmed theatre, as it continues to serve as a storytelling medium, regardless of these humanistic stories being recorded on-stage or on a film set.

There is of course a completely opposite view of this standpoint, the idea of how film and theatre are completely different types of art forms in many ways, and how it can result in a catastrophe when these two dynamics mix. Indeed, there are some valid points that scholars offer regarding

the different dynamics of a stage-play and a film. Hugo Münsterberg (1970/2004) attempts to investigate the distinctions between a theatrical play and a fictional film, through analyzing both art forms' dynamics very delicately. It has been 50 years since this work was published, and the understanding of film, or "photoplay" as he calls it, has changed drastically since then. As Münsterberg (1970/2004) comments on the experiments of his time, regarding the trials of turning a stage-play experience into a photoplay experience and highlights one of the main differences between these two art forms: editing. Editing is indeed a crucial factor in terms of the liveness of the performance. In terms of the effectiveness of the performance, editing plays an important role for the actors. With the use of more basic techniques, such as commonly used fades and dissolves, it is possible for the performance to look more traditional in the eyes of the audience. However, through the use of more smooth and straight techniques, such as long takes, or handheld camera work, the performance could seem sincere and real to the audiences. The liveness of the performance in films is highly dependent on the editing and technical choices of the filmmaker. Either way, in filmmaking, the fact that the performance is a recorded one is clearly an enormous distinction between the dynamics of film and theatre. The chances are low that a performance in a film will ever be as "raw" as a stage performance, as the experience is a raw, unedited, live experience itself. Münsterberg believes that editing is a crucial part of filmmaking, which is an impression that stage-plays cannot ever achieve. How our minds can go back and forth in time, and how the events we witness can get interrupted with completely different scenes are what makes cinema different from the theatre. He states: "The theater would not have even the technical means to give us such impressions, but if it had, it would have no right to make use of them, as it would destroy the basis on which the drama is built" (Münsterberg, 1970/2004, p. 79). While this is an outdated point of view considering the time it was written in, it is understandable that he respects the foundations of these art forms, and why he would not support such a mix between the two disciplines. However, for the downfall that Münsterberg is worried about to actually occur, it would mean for the stage-plays to only be performed for the sake of being recorded, and never occur live in front of audiences in real time again. The basis he talks about is largely based on the experience of liveness and physical space. Thus, for it to be destroyed, the complete art of theatre would have to disappear to never be performed live again, but the idea of its practice moving around different forms of media will not cause its basis to be destroyed. It will only help it discover its more evolved and altered forms of expression, and possibly create new boundaries for itself.

Siegfried Kracauer (1960/1999), one of the recognized film scholars of the time, thinks that film, being a reproductive medium, can record and reflect stage arts (p. 172). However, he adds: "Yet even assuming that such reproductions try to do justice to the specific requirements of the screen, they basically amount to little more than 'canning,' and are of no interest to us here" (1960/1999, p.172). This is a valid point of view, considering that he wrote these lines for the recorded plays of his time which offered no camera movements or editing techniques for the audiences in front of the screen, but only promised a simple viewing experience. Today, however, the conditions of the live capture filmed theatre productions are nowhere near the old "cans." Speaking specifically for the case of National Theatre Live productions, this has turned into actual business for the film distribution companies now. Thus, the main goal of these productions are, besides the so far non-reachable ideal of making these plays available to watch all around the world, is to make a play on-stage look like an actual film as much as possible. As the audience reception is an enormous factor in such a drastic shift between these two different forms of media, the producers have to make sure that the audiences' viewing experience goes as smoothly as it can be, as it can be a pretty strange –and not necessarily in a good way—experience for the people who watch a theatre stage for 2 hours. Taking these possibilities into consideration, they organize proper film crews to record these plays with multiple cameras from several different angles, and the post-production

teams are made as well. The results actually do work in a magical way for the audiences as this is now a popular and enjoyable “concept” among the film/theatre goers. The recorded versions show us close-ups and different angles depending on the constantly changing dynamics in these plays, so that it actually feels like we are watching a film. Also, it is possible for the movie theatre audiences to feel as if they are in fact special, because they get to see the actors from such different angles and shots that the actual spectators who are witnessing the actual play that we watch the recording of, cannot ever get to see. As it is a successful marketing strategy, it also carries the characteristics of being a revolutionary new form of transmedia product.

Genre Standpoint

In genre studies, Rick Altman’s work has been crucial to every scholar who studies this field. In 1984, he introduced the world a new genre approach, being the semantic/syntactic approach. Years later, in 1999, he developed and extended the framework of this former approach and introduced the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to film and genre. “Each genre is simultaneously defined by multiple codes, corresponding to the multiple groups who, by helping to define the genre, may be said to ‘speak’ the genre” (Altman, 1999, p. 208). While the semantic/syntactic approach has reached a certain success, the pragmatic approach added a new layer to the former idea, highlighting the importance of other crucial factors such as the audiences, the industry, and the filmmakers. The term “semantics” stood for the conventions of a particular genre, in today’s wording, the “stereotypes” of a genre. The semantics of the horror genre can be dark settings, haunted houses, jump scares, and eerie sounds. The semantics are more interested in the tone of the story, the themes, settings, and so on. Syntactics is interested in how these elements come together and create a narrative flow within the story. In the romantic comedy genre, a couple’s happy ending after overcoming several obstacles and misunderstandings can be counted as conventional syntactics. The pragmatics dimension aims to understand how a certain genre operates beyond the visual and narrative elements and is interested in understanding the genre’s impact on the audiences and the industry. It delves into the cultural and sociopolitical aspects of genres from different perspectives. “Whether we are discussing literature or cinema (or any other meaning-making system), the base language(s) surpass their own structure and meaning as they are integrated into textual uses” (Altman, 1999, pp. 209-210). What role does the audience and the industry play in shaping and interpreting different genres? This is the main question pragmatics is interested in. If one can locate all the three approaches in a consistent way of film production, it is possible for that way to be called a genre. So, how do these approaches apply to live-capture filmed theatre, if they do at all?

National Theatre Live plays have now secured their positions in the database of IMDb, which means that they officially qualify as fitting into one of these audiovisual material categories: “films, television series, podcasts, home videos, video games, and streaming content online” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2024). When one clicks onto a National Theatre Live production’s IMDb page, the genre categorization of the production appears as one of the already-established film genres, such as drama, comedy, thriller, and so on. However, it is not very convenient for these productions to fit into the already-existing film genres, as these genres were established by considering the filmic criteria and the expectation of a different kind of audience (pragmatics approach). A comedy play and a comedy film, despite having several similarities, stand for completely different things, as the criteria for the categorization of these two different art forms are inherently unique due to both of their distinctive nature. The conventions of each film genre highly depends on different kinds of settings, the abundance of technical opportunities, and the controlled environment. This is not the case for theatre genres, as the created realities in these two art forms are very much unlike. A jump-scare, for instance, cannot be a genre convention for a horror theatre play. As there are limited opportunities on the stage, and the captivating ability of

the play highly depends on the live performance rather than the setting, theme and/or the narrative elements of the story, there is a different method of measurement for theatrical genre conventions. During the viewing experience of a National Theatre Live play on-screen, no matter how captivating the performances are, and how successful the use of filmic techniques such as close-ups, pan/tilt shots, and cuts are, the movie-theatre audiences are always aware of the actual audience that exists in the same room as the actors. There is an ambiguity area during the viewing of a live-capture filmed theatre, which gives the movie-theatre audiences a feeling of being inexplicably stuck in between two contrasting manifestations due to the hybrid nature of these productions.

If we were to attempt to define live-capture filmed theatre as a new film genre, we would need to start with the semantics. The most basic and apparent element to put forth would be undoubtedly the existence of a stage. No other setting is possible for the semantics of live-capture filmed theatre. As much as this is a very safe choice to start with, the themes and the general content are also crucial for the semantics approach, and there is almost nothing that we could agree on, as there is no recurrent theme in these stories on-stage. As for syntactics, there is no conventional way for these stories on-stage to unfold, and there are no specific elements that come together and make it possible for live-capture filmed theatre to qualify as a new film genre. However, when it comes to pragmatics, there are various elements that live-capture filmed theatre, if it were a genre, could function within industrial and audience reception related contexts. From the audience-related perspective of pragmatics, live-capture filmed theatre allows the theatre enthusiast audiences from different parts of the world to experience these productions in movie theatres. The concept enables access to high-quality theatre performances, and fills the geographical gap, enabling the audiences to engage with different cultural narratives they do not have the chance to encounter live in real life. Besides, live-capture filmed theatre makes theatre more accessible for those who may not have the financial means to attend live theatrical performances, and thereby promotes another way of inclusivity, a class-related one, for the audience perspective. Industry-wise, there are numerous factors to discuss, as the theatre industry, with its shift to the digital world, has become part of the entertainment industry. As Dyer (2002) explains, “Because entertainment is produced by professional entertainers, it is also largely defined by them. (...) how it is defined, what it is assumed to be, is basically decided by those people responsible (paid) for providing it in concrete form” (p. 19). Some of the most well-known examples of National Theatre Live plays introduced to international audiences were *Vanya* (2024), *Prima Facie* (2022), *Frankenstein* (2011), *Fleabag* (2019), *King Lear* (2018), and *Hamlet* (2010). All these plays featured leading roles performed by acclaimed stars of our generation, such as Andrew Scott, Jodie Comer, Benedict Cumberbatch, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, and Ian McKellen, which was an effective marketing strategy to grab the attention of the audiences and encourage them to experience these stories on-stage in movie theatres. These productions’ distribution to movie theatres also mean a new income stream for the theatre companies, movie distribution companies, the production companies, crews, and actors. It enables theatre actors to appear on-screen around the world and get known by more global audiences, rather than being limited to the audiences who watch them on-stage. Streaming services can have new content to offer to their subscribers, expanding their libraries with high-quality theatre productions, which means attracting a wider audience interested in arts and culture to these online streaming platforms. Moreover, the increasing visibility and the revenue potential of this new concept can lead to more investments in the theatre industry, encouraging these productions’ abundance and online accessibility. Nonetheless, despite the abundance of pragmatics elements of live-capture filmed theatre, it still does not have enough components for it to qualify as a film genre.

The Future of Film and Theatre

Cinema, being a constantly evolving and shapeshifting type of art, makes it challenging in the 21st century to come up with a definitive sentence regarding it. Its boundaries get blurrier as the technological opportunities and new filmic techniques start to be more available and accessible than ever. If the definition of a “movie theatre” is simply “an isolated, dark room where people sit down together and watch films on a big screen,” then what does it mean for us to be able to watch these productions in the movie theatres? It probably means that these productions, in today’s understanding of art industry at least, qualify as “movies.” Would it make more sense to create new unique spaces for the presentation of only these live-capture filmed theatre productions, and design these spaces based on the viewing dynamics of both of these art forms? Probably, yes. But for now, we will be watching what is next to come in the collaboration of film and theatre.

With all the analysis we have so far, where do we place live-capture filmed theatre in the audiovisual landscape? What do we do with content that can be qualified as “film,” but does not belong to, or by itself is not, a genre? Where does this new form belong in the world of cinema, or theatre? Is there a possibility for it to qualify for both art forms, and yet, being stuck in a limbo? At this point, what seems the most logical is to consider live capture filmed theatre as a hybrid art form. It is not that these productions do not qualify neither as film nor theatre, but they are both film and theatre at the same time. We have been introduced to a new hybrid art form, but what does this new art form has to say about the future of film and theatre? Well, it does have several impacts on it, starting with the fact that this form enables the preservation of performances and ends up creating an archive that will reach future generations. The industrial opportunities to arise have already been discussed in the pragmatics part of the genre chapter. Culturally, the accessibility of these productions will certainly have an impact across different cultures around the world for the actors, directors, theatre crews, and so on. They will also add a new layer to cinema scholars’ discussions and enrich the area of film, theatre, and media studies. Additionally, as audiences and creators continue to engage with live-capture filmed theatre, it will certainly encourage innovation in both art forms, leading to even more creative and boundary-challenging works to come to life.

Conclusion

This article has explored the unique place of live-capture filmed theatre within the context of film theory and genre studies, with an emphasis on its development and the challenges it presents for an accurate classification. Numerous points and findings have come to light through the lenses of this article. The boundaries between several media forms are becoming blurrier in the digital age we are witnessing to, and the uncertainty of these boundaries have been demonstrated by the live-capture filmed theatre example. As technology advances and transforms the audiovisual landscape, the lines that once separated theatre from film are becoming increasingly indistinct. This new hybrid art form embodies the characteristics of both art forms, it challenges the conventional definitions, and it opens a new door to the already existing discussions about what film is and what constitutes it.

Live-capture filmed theatre, from the film theory standpoint, highlights the fluidity and the dynamism of cinema. It gets increasingly harder to define film and its boundaries as the artistic and technological opportunities change the criteria and certain parameters constantly. This hybrid art form establishes the idea that cinema is not a static medium and that it is a dynamic medium that always adapts and transforms with the new opportunities and advancements accordingly.

Based on the genre standpoint, using Rick Altman's approach to genre, it became clear that this new form does not fit into any of the already established film genre categories, as the way genres are defined for theatre and film are based on different criteria, due to their indistinct nature. For live-capture filmed theatre to be qualified as a new genre, it is discovered that the form suffers from a serious lack of semantics and syntactics, though its pragmatics highlight important opportunities regarding the industry and audience perspectives.

Ultimately, live-capture filmed theatre can be classified as a new hybrid art form, carrying elements of both film and theatre. It has a unique and constantly evolving space within the audiovisual landscape. The form challenges conventional definitions, presents new industrial opportunities, and enhances accessibility to many cultures and future generations. Because of its hybrid nature, live-capture filmed theatre productions can be preserved and archived, and thus, the performances can become more accessible to a broader audience, through film distribution. The concept offers new opportunities for the people who work and study in these fields, and it enhances the cultural scene by reaching out to so many people around the world. As this form continues to gain more popularity, it will encourage further exploration and discussion within film and theatre studies, pushing the limits of both fields.

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