

HERE FIRST!: YOUNG JENŐ JANOVICS AND THE *MOVING PICTURES*

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Abstract

As architect of the Transylvanian silent cinema industry, the name of Jenő Janovics is associated as director, screenwriter, or both to more than half of the 67 known films¹ he produced. From the worldwide successful 1913 drama *The Yellow Foad* (*Sárga Csikó*) to the rather abrupt ending in 1920 with *Menace* (*Világrém*), his foray into film has attracted growing academic interest in recent years. However, a particular project Janovics developed as a young theatre director has remained largely unknown. The *Moving Pictures* performance dates back to 1899 and offers valuable insight into both his creative vision on the possibilities of film projection in theatre and the cultural scene of Kolozsvár/Cluj/Cluj-Napoca² at the advent of early cinema.

Keywords: early cinema, theatre, kine-attractography, monstration, film lecturer, audience reception

“From the very first moment, I felt that, of my own free will, I will never part with this city”,³ are Janovics’ words while arriving in Kolozsvár, in the fall of 1896. The promising twenty-four-year-old acting graduate had played on various stages in the Austro-Hungarian province of Transylvania before deciding to settle in this city of great theatre tradition. Historians date⁴ the first performance as that of 1614 staged by the pupils belonging to a Jesuit centre, while the first local professional theatre company was formed in 1792. By 1821 Kolozsvár hosted the first stone theatre building in Hungary, the famous theatre located on Wolf Street. It was the place where Janovics would be appointed director only six months later after his arrival. It was also the stage on which, during the last months of 1898, he started preparing

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¹ Gyöngyi Balogh, Zágoni Bálint, *A kolozsvári filmgyártás képes története 1913-tól 1920-ig*, Filmtett Egyesület/Magyar Nemzeti Filmarchívum, Kolozsvár, 2009, p. 104–116.

² The current Romanian name of Cluj-Napoca was established through a decree signed by Nicolae Ceauşescu in 1974. In order to simplify the reference to this city, the name Kolozsvár will be used for further mentions in this paper as the name it officially held under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time of the analyzed events.

³ Jenő Janovics, *A Farkas-utcai színház*, Singer és Wolfner Irodalmi Intézet Rt. kiadása, Budapest, 1941, p. 230.

⁴ Justin Ceuca et al., *Teatrul Național Cluj-Napoca 1919–1994. Teatrul românesc din Transilvania: 240 de ani. Studiu monografic*, Teatrul Național, Cluj-Napoca, 1994, p. 9.

Moving Pictures, a controversial performance encompassing film projection as part of the theatrical narrative.

Moving Pictures on Wolf Street

The year 1896 marked the Budapest celebration of the millennium, the one thousand years since King Árpád established the Hungarian nation into its historic homeland. Thus, the kinoscope was included among other inventions in the extravagant exhibition organised on this occasion. However, by the first half of that year, the projector had already been displayed in various places of the capital like the Café of the Royal Hotel that hosted a projection⁵ organised by an employee of the Lumière brothers on 10 May. Similar events were becoming common throughout Europe. In Bucharest, the journalist Mihail (Mișu) Văcărescu, signing under the pen name Claymoor, wrote an enthusiastic review of the first Romanian moving pictures projection⁶ held at the headquarters of *L'Indépendance Roumaine* newspaper on 27 May.

An irony in the history of the future silent film production centre the very first film projection organised in Kolozsvár was postponed for the last day of 1896. The *Ellenzék* (*The Opposition*) newspaper announced⁷ some “interesting moving pictures” to be shown in the ballroom of the Reduta building.⁸ The schedule of three consecutive projections was announced for the afternoon, while information regarding the following days seemed to have depended on their success. A review published two days after the premiere urged locals not to miss “the most surprising” of Edison’s inventions (*sic!*):

These are not blurred images, but faithful recordings of nature that are projected on the wall in actual size, faithful to delusion. Hundreds and hundreds of persons appear and move at the same time as if they were fully live silhouettes and not as obscure as in blurred-foggy images, but completely pictorial.⁹

While not documented, the possibility of Janovics being among the audience members is highly probable. He had already enrolled in a doctoral program at the Franz Jozsef University that he would complement with trips to Berlin, London and Paris, enthusiastically researching the European theatrical landscape. On the other hand, his collaboration with the enigmatic character of M. Benkő (Stein) is proved to have taken place during the preparations of the *Moving Pictures* performance. Throughout 1898, Benkő was a constant presence¹⁰ in Transylvania, personally demonstrating the *cinématographe*, the *taumatographe*, or *Edison theatre* in cities such as Alba Iulia, Blaj and Dumbrăveni. By October of the same year, Janovics had obtained the rights from the Comedy Theatre of Budapest to stage in Kolozsvár a version of the highly successful farce *Moving Pictures* (*Mozgó fényképek*).

Based on the play *Hans Hucklebein* written by Oscar Blumenthal and Gustav Kadelburg in 1897, its plot revolved around the bad luck of the protagonist, who invited both his wife and

⁵ John Cunningham, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffee House to Multiplex*, Wallflower Press, London, 2004, p. 5–6.

⁶ Ion Cantacuzino, *Momente din trecutul filmului românesc*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1965, p. 6.

⁷ *Ellenzék*, 31 December 1896.

⁸ The Reduta building is nowadays located at 21 Memorandumului Street. Under this name, similar edifices were built in all province capitals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were meant to function as centres for politics, public administrations and arts.

⁹ *Ellenzék*, 2 January 1897.

¹⁰ Ludovic Jordáky, “Introducerea cinematografului în Transilvania pînă în 1918”, in *Contribuții la istoria cinematografului în România, 1896-1948* (coord: Ion Cantacuzino), Editura Academiei R.S.R., Bucharest, 1971, p. 197.

mother-in-law to the cinema, unaware that the projected footage recorded his meeting with another woman. In the 1897/98 theatre season, it was the most played work¹¹ on German stages, counting a staggering total of 724 performances. The Budapest premiere on 29 April 1898 has been considered the first merge¹² between film and the Hungarian theatre scene, due to the innovative concept of inserting into the performance the projection of twelve short films, each about one minute long. The series was called *Siófok Adventure (Siófoki kaland)* and was produced in the Lumière brothers' Lyon studio.

Janovics would undertake¹³ to direct and play the leading role, but an inconvenient intervened in his plans to stage *Moving Pictures*. He only received one of the films belonging to the series, namely *Scene from Siófok (Siófoki jelenet)*. The source of the other eleven films he used was identified by researcher Lajos Jordáky. However, there is one minor aspect that needs disambiguation. In his paper dedicated to the Transylvanian film industry, Jordáky accurately linked the films used by Janovics to Benkő's film catalogue based on their titles appearing on a poster dated prior¹⁴ to the Kolozsvár premiere of the *Moving Pictures* from 3 January 1899. More precisely, that Benkő had introduced the kinematograph to the locals using some of the same films, on 2 January. Analyzing the archived poster¹⁵ Jordáky referenced, the author notes that it was dated 22 January, in other words, after the premiere.

The four performances of the *Moving Pictures* included various versions of the film segment. As mentioned above, the first was scheduled for 3 January 1899. Advertised as an event worth of attending as it was to be seen "Here first!", it contained the same inserted films as in the second performance on the next evening: *The Indian Fakirs' Dance (Az indiai fakirok táncza)*, *A Woman on the Trapeze (Egy nő a trapézon)*, *The Bicyclists (A biciklisták)*, *Excentric Female Dancers (Excentrikus tánczos nők)*, *Fast Painter (Gyors-festő)*, *A Garden Scene (Egy kerti jelenet)*, *The Arrival of the Train (A vonat megérkezése)*, in addition to the *Scene from Siófok (Siófoki jelenet)*, scheduled last. The third performance, on 9 January, replaced them with *Scottish Traditional Dance (Skót nemzeti táncz)*, *Scene at the Dentist (Jelenet a fogorvosnál)*, *A Scene from Trilby (Trilby-ből egy jelenet)*, *Princess Fife's Target Shooting Demonstration (Fife hercegnő czéllövészete)*, *Street Scene in Winter (Utcái jelenet télen)*, *River-Bathing Black Men (Négerék fürdése)* and *Berlin Train (Berlini vonat)*. Three days later, the program combined films from all the previous evenings, all segments ending with *Scene from Siófok*.

The films inserted into the *Moving Pictures* performance draw attention onto aspects regarding the narrative system resulting from the hybridisation between stage play and film projection, the active role that Janovics assumed in constructing the projection segment, and the divergent audience response.

Early Film as Narrative Agent

If we are to consider the concept of cinema of attractions from the standpoint of the dialectic between the exhibitionist confrontation and the diegetic absorption,¹⁶ the selection of

¹¹ Andrew Bonnell, *The People's Stage in Imperial Germany: Social Democracy and Culture 1890–1914*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2005, p. 188.

¹² Magyar Bálint, *A Magyar némafilm története. Némafilmgyártás 1896-1931*, Palatinus, Budapest, 2003, p. 87.

¹³ In Jenő Heltai's Hungarian translation of the play, the name of the protagonist became Kálmán Kapor.

¹⁴ Jordáky Lajos, *Az erdélyi némafilmgyártás története (1903-1930)*, Kriterion Könyvkiadó, Bukarest, 1980, p. 15–16.

¹⁵ To be found in the special collections of the "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library, Cluj-Napoca, along with the four posters of the *Moving Pictures* performance.

¹⁶ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde", in *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (eds: Robert Stam and Toby Miller), Blackwell Publishers, MA, [1985] 2000, p. 232.

early films inserted in *Moving Pictures* imposes a double interpretation. Constrained by the technical limitations of the time, they were all non-narrative single shots of short duration emphasizing an attractational quality of the subject: the impressive movements of human figures (while dancing, performing circus acts or proving incredible dexterity) or of machines (in the form of a train arriving in the station), in addition to the very common in the era urban street scenes and exotic subjects. If we were to use Georges Méliès' terminology of the silent era regarding the types of cinematographic views,¹⁷ they most likely fell into two categories: natural views and artificially-arranged scenes. Except for *Scene from Siófok*, none of them conveyed narrative meaning within the theatrical performance. The stimulus they exerted on the audience was generated by the demonstration of a technology being able to record and project movement on a motionless surface.

By 1899, the attraction exerted by film also included enabling the audience to travel to various corners of the world, whether near or far, within the frame delineated by the projector. In the Hungarian translation of *Moving Pictures*, the Berlin cinema from the original version became a Budapest cinema, kept as such for the Kolozsvár staging. Analyzing the director's notebook¹⁸ belonging to Janovics, it becomes clear that the cinema stood for a café, the most common location for film projections at the end of the nineteenth century. In the case of the Hungarian capital, it simultaneously reflected the cultural ebullience that the coffeehouses supported. By 1900 there were reportedly six hundred of them.¹⁹ Gathering people of various backgrounds and aspirations in debating their artistic or political endeavors, they gave rise to an authentic coffeehouse culture. Such aspects of familiarity and proximity related to the diegetic locations of Budapest and the summer resort of Siófok contributed to the particular decoding on the part of the audience regarding the possible functions of early cinema.

Scene from Siófok was programmed at the end of the projected film segment on the basis of the attractational quality of proximity, completed with the bearing of narrative content. Through the agency of this particular short film, the protagonist temporarily dualized into the spectator from the coffeehouse, and a coincidental passerby caught on camera. In other words, for the duration of the film, he extended the diegetic time frame of the play into the indefinite time setting of the film on display. Impersonal attraction was invested with personal history. The cause-effect equation of the plot in *Moving Pictures* depended on this dual perspective cast on the protagonist present on stage and in the projected film projected, consequently structuring the reception framework in the theatre hall of Kolozsvár.

During the probably one minute long projection of *Scene from Siófok*, the characters of the play and the audience members acted as a single unit of reception, enjoying the selection of projected films. The proof of infidelity was the element unifying the only three characters aware of its meaning and the audience. This operation was enabled by the play-building narrative context around an otherwise non-narrative film by undertaking the role traditionally held by the early film lecturer. This master of ceremony was initially responsible for building tension around the first film projections by emphasizing the miracle of still photographs gradually being put into motion. He later became an external narrative agent in its own right, verbalizing complex narratives to support the projected images. In the case of *Moving Pictures*, the narrative context he would have uttered was being built as the performance unfolded, the play supporting an explanatory visual insert of the inciting incident. By the time of the projection of

¹⁷ Georges Méliès, "Kinematographic Views", in André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, [1907] 2011, p. 138–140.

¹⁸ To be found in the archives of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj.

¹⁹ John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900. A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture*, Grove Press, New York, 1988, p. 148.

the film segment, the audience was prepared to accept the convention of film altering the relationship between the main characters.

The public of the era was accustomed to quasi-personal filmic narratives in the limited form of newsreels dedicated to public figures in the centre of events such as crowning ceremonies. With this type of filmed personal histories present in *Moving Pictures*, even if of a fictional character, film became susceptible to surpass the borders of attractional entertainment and activate narrative agency. The revelation it implied for the spectators, in this case in a humorous note, was that image recording technology could no longer be regarded only as a thrilling curiosity. Its increasing presence outside organised settings, such as coffeehouses, and into familiar environments, such as the streets of the popular holiday destination of Siófok, could hold the ability to collide with the mundane existence transforming anonymous figures into (real-life) characters.

On a final note regarding the film segment projected in *Moving Pictures*, it is relevant that the emphasis put on *Scene from Siófok* did not overshadow the preceding films, as demonstrated by the diversity of the selected subjects and the interest in reorganizing the projected segment with each additional performance. Instead, it narratively completed a longer non-narrative segment with its distinct attractional resolution. All the versions of the projected segment culminated with *The Arrival of the Train* or *Berlin Train*. This deliberate choice placed Janovics in the intriguing category of projectionist-producer, carefully organizing the film titles in accordance with an audience he was familiar with. He was addressing a population of about 50,000 locals, out of which 41,000 were Hungarians, a little over 6,000 were Romanians, and less than 2,000 were Germans. While 90 percent of all the population spoke Hungarian,²⁰ both films revolving around the subject of a train in motion appealed to a type of reception unconstrained by the language barrier, namely to the train effect. Described²¹ as an effect authored by the viewer rather than being constructed by the filmmaker, it consisted of the panic reaction resulting from witnessing an approaching train during early film projections. As demonstrated,²² most reports of such incidents were later proven false, advertising strategies rather than exacerbated emotional and physical reactions on the part of the spectators. There are no reports of such reactions in the case of the Kolozsvár audience. Instead, its appeal for projected trains in motion portrayed these spectators not as naive, but as still being intrigued by the possibilities of film technology in 1899, attracted to its ability to capture and project fast motion.

The Intermedial Paradigm of *Moving Pictures*

The critical response received by *Moving Pictures* differed dramatically from the enthusiasm of the Kolozsvár audience. Based on the various versions of the film segments, commercial success determined two additional performances within a few days distance from the premiere and its next-day reprise, an aspect even more significant for a light comedy that premiered on a Tuesday. But it did so in a nationwide-respected theatre institution, under the guidance of a promising artist. One critic²³ condemned Janovics' decision to play a questionable leading role only for the sake of variation. It must be noted that British critics shared similar

²⁰ Traian Rotariu (coord.), Maria Semeniuc, Mezei Elemer, *Recensământul din 1900: Transilvania*, Editura Staff, București, 1999, p. 254–257.

²¹ Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 144.

²² See Stephen Bottomore, “The Panicking Audience?: early cinema and the ‘train effect’”, in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, nr. 2 (19), 1999, p. 177–216.

²³ Zombori Andor, “Mozgó fényképek”, *Kolozsvári Lapok*, nr. 2, 1899.

opinions regarding an 1899 staging in London under the title *The Lady of Ostend*. They found the play rather stale, acridly arguing that “stale situations and stale characters are just what the public likes, whether in farce or in any other kind of drama”.²⁴

An explanation of this rift in reception derives from the status of the films projected in *Moving Pictures*. The field of early film studies revolves around the consensus that, up until we can identify standardized modes of production and exhibition that ultimately defined institutional cinema, the term cinema is non-operating for moving images demonstrated with various devices at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first decade of the twentieth. Instead, André Gaudreault proposed the term kine-attractography²⁵, reseating the practice of demonstrating the basic apparatus of recording and projecting image within the broad cultural paradigm of late-nineteenth-century stage entertainment. In other words, early film ended a cycle in a sophisticated manner rather than inaugurating the one of cinema by primitive experiment. To explore the precise ways in which it did so, the cultural paradigm is seen as encompassing various cultural series, such as optical toys, the magic lantern, shadow plays, etc. In this context, the question of who invented cinema becomes obsolete, with numerous valid answers²⁶ to the dilemma of who perfected various devices within various cultural series, such as the Lumière brothers perfecting photography with their projector called cinématographe.

In this analytical frame, the general audience in Kolozsvár witnessed a perfect expression of the cultural series of photography. What critics bemoaned was a fairground amusement intruding into a narrative medium of millenary tradition. Both parties were right. Early film was rooted in the fairground type of entertainment, seeking to provoke wonder and amusement by means of a technological achievement in an equal position to magic tricks or circus acts. The term attraction it later became associated with originates in the agit-attraction theatre aesthetics as envisioned by Russian director Sergei Eisenstein. In 1923, he would describe attraction as “any aggressive aspect of the theatre (...) that subjects the spectators to a sensual or psychological impact”.²⁷ Thus, the disruptive nature of theatre’s attractional dimension was decades away from being conceptualized and even further away from becoming an instrument useful to explain early film reception. The Kolozsvár members of the audience recognized a pattern of entertainment they had already experienced being intriguingly integrated into theatre. It was the same aspect that made the critics disapprove of it. The transitional path film would later follow in its quest to develop into a narrative medium that didn’t exist. Furthermore, as it would prove, when silent “cinema strove to be theatrical”,²⁸ it would not necessarily be from a narrative point of view, but rather from the standpoint of the dominance of pictorialism in the visual composition.

More than a century later, the three paradigms of the Kinematograph, as proposed by André Gaudreault, are key instruments to understand the intermedial experiment merging theatre and kine-attractography in *Moving Pictures* as an oscillation between the paradigm of capturing and restoring and the one of monstration.²⁹ We can assume that films such as *A Scene*

²⁴ Quoted in J.P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1890-1899: A Calendar of Productions, Performance, and Personnel*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, USA, 2013, p. 420.

²⁵ André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, 2011, p. 64–65.

²⁶ André Gaudreault, “The Culture Broth and the Froth of Cultures of So-called Early Cinema”, in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, (eds. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, Santiago Hidalgo), Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, UK, 2012, p. 17.

²⁷ Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions: For ‘Enough Stupidity in Every Wiseman’”, in *The Drama Review*, nr. 1 (18), [1923] 1974, p. 78.

²⁸ Ben Brewster, Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 214.

²⁹ André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, 2011, p. 56–61.

from *Trilby* or *Street Scene in Winter* fell under the first paradigm of early film production, which required minimal intervention from the person filming, simply supervising the events they recorded. The paradigm of monstration implied manipulation of certain elements from the person filming, most often of the *mise en scène*, which was requisite to link the couple pictured in *Scene from Siófok* to the narrative of the play. Gaudreault notes the fact that under this paradigm, film “puts its singular ability to tell a story to the test”,³⁰ while not perfecting it.

Interestingly, in the Budapest staging, the films included in the projected segment formed a thematic sequence that placed it into the third paradigm of narration. But the connection among them should still be understood in a limited perspective, in terms of still enhancing the dominance of the visual regime. In the case of the Kolozsvár performance, only one film was connected to the narrative of the play, in this respect being visually separated from the others. In the evaluation of the film segment as a whole, this indicates an emphasis put on monstrative attraction, despite the element of narrative integration it contained in the form of the protagonist of the play being captured on film.

In discussing the aesthetic of astonishment specific to the cinema of attractions, Tom Gunning emphasized how early film sometimes “categorized the visible world as a series of discrete attractions” on the background of “an almost unquenchable desire to consume the world through images”.³¹ Extracting the attractional factor from under the rule of an aggressive confrontation of the spectators contributes to understanding *Moving Pictures* as a play written to narratively accommodate a perfected sample of visual nineteenth-century entertainment in a mild form of manifestation. Familiarized by 1899 with the recording and projecting devices, the audience could explore the possibilities of framing everyday life through projectors. Trains in motion or exotic landscapes still maintained their attractional quality, but it was the curiosity of the recording camera ceasing to be a curiosity that became the intriguing factor, in this case capable of supporting a theatrical narrative around it.

While the intermedial concept of *Moving Pictures* did not belong to Janovics, the staging in the Theatre from Wolf Street stands as his remarkable project in the field of early cinema, even more so if we consider that “from the early 1900s through the 1950s, inclusion of film recording and projection saw only minor use in theatre”.³² The experience of staging it prompted Janovics to further open the theatre on Wolf Street to film projections. In 1900, a certain A. Marton included in his program one of the favourite subjects of the time, *The Life of Christ*, while H. Heltmann and son, recommending themselves as physicists and photo technicians from Hamburg, presented the show *Cosmos*, including *The Wonder of the Microscope* in the program.³³ It would eventually take Jenő Janovics thirteen years to decide to venture into the emerging field of cinema and contribute significantly to its European history.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³¹ Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In]Credulous Spectator”, in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (ed.: Linda Williams), Rutgers, New Brunswick, [1989] 1995, p. 125.

³² Alex Oliszewski, Daniel Fine, Daniel Roth, *Digital Media, Projection Design, and Technology for Theatre*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2018, p. 10.

³³ Jordáky Lajos, *Az erdélyi némafilmgyártás története (1903-1930)*, Kriterion, Bucharest, 1980, p. 15–16.

