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## An Alternative History of the Transylvanian Silent Cinema

**Abstract:**

The Transylvanian silent cinema industry revolved around Jenő Janovics whose expertise in theatre directing and management translated into about seventy films produced in the city of Cluj-Napoca between 1913-1920. The present paper proposes its alternative history as told through the experiences shared by various artists whom Janovics, as cultural entrepreneur, introduced to the moving images.

**Keywords:** Transylvanian silent cinema, cultural entrepreneurship, multiculturalism, Jenő Janovics, Nicolae Bretan / Miklós Bretán.

Multiculturalism has been a distinctive feature of Transylvania throughout its modern history. In 1868, the status of the minorities living in the, at the time, Austro-Hungarian province was brought under regulation through the Hungarian Minority Act. It was issued one year after the ratification of the Compromise (“Ausgleich”) had established an administrative formula in which the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary shared, as a Dual Monarchy, one single head of state, namely Franz Joseph I, but were governed by distinct prime-ministers and parliaments. While this Nationality Law did not resolve completely the linguistic issues of the Eastern partner of the newly established monarchy, it did try to address the pressures of the national identity that emerged within the minorities living in Transylvania, primarily represented

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by Romanians, Slovaks, Croats and Serbs. They were granted the individual use of their language in education and administration, although they were not exempted from learning Hungarian.

However, during the following decades, the use of minority languages in the Kingdom of Hungary suffered severely from the assimilation process of "Magyarization" which imposed, more or less coercively, the Hungarian culture and the use of the language to all of its non-Hungarian citizens. The end of World War I reversed the linguistic balance in Transylvania as Austria-Hungary collapsed and the signing, in 1920, of the Treaty of Trianon granted Transylvania to the Kingdom of Romania. Thus, Romanian became the new national language in the province and the Hungarians became the dominant minority.

As a consequence of this turbulent half-century of linguistic changes in Transylvania, the research of any professional or personal trajectory that overlaps this period encounters two main difficulties. The first one consists in the recovery of archival sources related to various topics that may be equally distributed on the present territories of Romania and Hungary. This is often the reason behind the oblivion or unilateral perspective casted upon some exceptional artistic careers bound to this province along its political changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The second difficulty derives from the first and deals with the misleading translations of Romanian names into Hungarian and vice versa, in mirrored accounts of one and the same subject. Both issues are present in the case of Jenő Janovics, as well as of most of the artists who wrote the history of the Transylvanian silent cinema industry.

### **The forgotten cultural entrepreneur**

A widely recognized Hungarian theatre artist, Jenő Janovics follows in his biography the multicultural pattern of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Born in 1872, in Ungvár, known today as Uzhorod, a city located today in Western Ukraine, he was educated in Budapest. By the end of his acting studies at the Academy of Drama and Film he chose to leave the Hungarian capital and to fulfill, and eventually end, his career in the Central Transylvanian city of Kolozsvár/Cluj/Klausenburg<sup>1</sup> (today Cluj-Napoca, in Romania). His choice was by no means a step back from capital to province, but a step forward towards a city of great cultural tradition. It was the home of a Hungarian theatre company since as early as 1792 and of the first Hungarian theatre building, inaugurated in 1821. Located on the old Alley of the Wolves (today Mihail Kogalniceanu Street), this cultural institution welcomed Janovics as a promising young actor, but he quickly turned into a director and (its last) manager (Janovics 1941, 185-239). Closed and demolished in 1906, due to deterioration and fire safety regulations, it imposed the relocation of the theatre and opera companies into an impressive building<sup>2</sup> in the Hunyadi Square (today Avram Iancu Square).

It was here that Janovics reached the highlights of his theatre career, as manager, director and actor. As an advocate of the educational dimension of theatre, he envi-

sioned and staged three thematic theatre seasons delivered to the audience as complex practical courses on the history of Hungarian drama, ancient Greek and Latin drama and the work of Shakespeare. The critics identified in his projects novelty as a constant element, whether it consisted in absolute first stagings of old Hungarian plays, new translations of ancient drama or innovative approaches to works of the Bard of Avon. As an admirer of modern theatre, Janovics embraced the aesthetics of realism and brought onto the Hungarian stages, often as national premieres, plays by Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Maurice Maeterlinck, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson or Maxim Gorki and followed closely the realistic vision of the first period in the career of Austrian born director, and friend, Max Reinhardt.

Simultaneously Jenő Janovics also became interested in the emerging art of silent cinema having experimented insertion of video projections in theatre shows as early as 1898 (Magyar 2003, 87). But for the first film production he got involved in, *The Yellow Foa*<sup>3</sup> (1913), he limited himself to adapting a Hungarian short story by Ferenc Csepreghy, seeking technical support and expertise from French production company Pathé. Later, when the outbreak of War World I altered the distribution practices of movies in the belligerent countries, he found the needed circumstances to transform the local film production into a relevant regional film industry. Between 1913 and 1920, Janovics would venture into directing, screenwriting or supervising approximately seventy silent films. While the vast majority of them are nowadays lost, the city of Cluj-Napoca stands as a landmark in silent film history for being the background to a dynamic, although relatively short-lived, silent cinema industry that attracted and contributed to the launch of the careers of internationally acclaimed artists.

It is precisely this last aspect of Janovics' career that seems to escape the categories that resume the five decades it spreads on. On one hand, within the Hungarian cultural medium, he is rightfully regarded first and foremost as an outstanding theatre manager, although the distinction between the artistic management and the administrative one he conducted is not clarified. On the other hand, although the shift of authority over Transylvania didn't affect his devotion to the city of Cluj-Napoca, where he chose to stay long after 1920, his name remains quasi-unknown to the Romanian cultural medium. When his name does come up in various accounts it is not unusual to be found in a translated version, such as Eugen Ianovici (Mărcuș 1945, 478), and to be linked to the intercultural collaborations he initiated in theatre or film which he saw as an educational instrument (Peris Chereji [1977] 2000; Janovics 1935).

In between these two perspectives on the multiple facets of Jenő Janovics' career stands the least discussed and probably the most important one, that of cultural entrepreneur. The notion is used here according to its late nineteenth century definition which implies resorting to a "nonprofit form to bring performers under (...) direct employment, protecting art from government intervention and from the whims of the masses" (Kotler and Scheff, 4). It was the role that fit Janovics best as proven by the careers of Michael Curtiz (Mihály Kertész) or Sir Alexander Korda (Sándor

László Kellner) whom he helped launch by first attracting them to Cluj-Napoca. But at the same time, it is also proven by various less-known artists who left Budapest and Bucharest in favor of this Transylvanian city where under Janovics' guidance assumed novel ways to express their talent.

### **An unexpected silent cinema collaboration**

According to his biographer, musicologist Hartmut Gagelmann, the composer's manuscripts are signed in a variety of forms, ranging from the equivalents of his first name in Romanian, Hungarian and German, Nicolae/Miklós/Nikolaus/Nicolaus, to the Romanian and Hungarian orthography of his last name, Bretan/Bretán. It was the echo of an identity insecurity that silently accompanied his life, from the moment his birth in Năsăud was registered as the one of Nicolae Brătianu and from the years of secondary school when he was known as Nicolaie Brătianu or Bratean (Gagelmann 2000, 12).

For the Romanian born opera artist, educated in all of the three languages mentioned above, home would become his music, a home firmly grounded on at least two landmarks: the composition of *The Evening Star* (*Luceafărul*), the first Romanian opera written in Transylvania, and of *Horia*, the first great Romanian national opera. Although the commitment to his fellow Romanians determined him to eventually end a beneficial contract with the Hungarian Opera from Cluj-Napoca, his honest efforts dedicated to the development of the Romanian Opera as an institution tangled constantly with the destructive envy of his colleagues, affecting his career. It eventually faded away into decades of forbidden recognition of his talent as a consequence of his later refusal to collaborate with the Communist regime.

Without question, the collaboration between Janovics and Bretan revolved around opera. Following an incident-filled sinuous journey of music studies, that had lead him to Budapest, Cluj and Vienna, young Bretan found himself at the beginning of a promising career as an opera singer. Unfortunately, in a similar manner to the unpleasant surprises of the abrupt end of his scholarship at the Music Academy in Vienna and of no job offer from the Budapest Opera after graduating with honors the National Hungarian Royal Academy of Music, he embarked in a series of poorly paid and artistically unrewarding artistic commitments.

The long awaited audience success and rave reviews came along with a contract he signed, in the fall of 1913, with the theatre from Bratislava (Poszony). It would turn out to be a short lived accomplishment as the outbreak of World War I annulled his contract. The manager, Károly Polgár, later reconsidered this decision and, by means of his influence at the Ministry of Culture, forced Bretan to return. But, the reiteration of his previous success on this stage was shadowed by the operetta repertoire he had to sing. Given this uncomfortable situation, the news of an available position of first baritone at the Hungarian National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca seemed the perfect opportunity to reorganize the path of his career (Gagelmann 2000, 29-34).

Bretan's transition from Bratislava to Cluj-Napoca turned into an open conflict between the two opera managers, filled with Polgár's threat to annul the opera singer's

release from military duty and Janovics' interventions at the Ministry of Culture. But Bretan was determined to sign a contract with the Hungarian Opera, as it did not represent a mere provincial destination. Judging by the names of the international opera artists that graced the posters of the performances, such as Klothilde Wenger, Mária Basilides, Armand Pardy, Valborg Svårdström and Ivonne de Treville, Janovics spared no efforts in order to challenge the cultural level of the Hungarian capital with the programs of the theatre and opera he managed.

As far as the exact moment when Bretan accompanied by his wife Nora and a newborn son moved to Cluj-Napoca, Gagelmann vaguely suggests the early fall of 1917, as on the 7 September the baritone made his debut on the opera stage of the Transylvanian city, with practically no time for rehearsals (34). Interestingly enough, details of a Janovics film production bring forward evidence demonstrating that the beginning of his collaboration with Bretan preceded their opera contract and took place not on stage, but in front of the motion picture camera.

The year 1917 was a turning point in the film career of Jenő Janovics. Following a few years of commercial success, both nationally and internationally, he had just parted ways with ambitious director Alexander Korda to whom he also sold his second production company, Corvin.<sup>4</sup> Janovics decided to continue production under a new company named Transsylvania and to get more involved in the creative process. For the next two years, he would direct no less than fourteen movies. One of them was his adaptation of Georges Ohnet's novel *Serge Panine*, starring Mihály Várkonyi in the leading role, Flóra Fáy as Madame Desvarenes, Janovics' wife actress Lili Poór as Micheline and also Bretán Miklós (sic) as Marechal. While it was only a supporting role, preserved film stills captured a distinguished looking Bretan, fitting perfectly in the elegant atmosphere of the castles belonging to the local aristocratic families Teleki and Bánffy, in the surroundings of which the open air filming took place, sometimes during the summer of 1917 (Balogh and Zágoni 2009, 71, 113).

The question of why Bretan decided to get involved in a silent film project, knowing that the offer he got from the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca clarified the fact that he would not be forced to play theatre or operetta roles, remains unanswered. Given the fact that it took place during the ongoing and uncertain negotiations between Janovics and Polgár concerning Bretan's contractual details that started in May 1917 (Gagelmann 2000, 33), one can only speculate about the opera singer's motivation behind his choice. Whether it was the determination to come to perform on the Transylvanian cultural scene regardless of the artistic circumstances or whether it was a validation of Janovics' reputation as a filmmaker, the experience must have pleased Bretan as it did not remain a singular one.

The other two other silent films that included Nicolae Bretan in their cast shared an incidental similarity at the level of subject. One was the silent drama *The Blight (A métely)*, dating back to 1918, directed by Mihály Fekete, a veteran actor, turned director. It was an adaptation of the famous play *Damaged Lives (Les avariés)* written in 1901 by

Eugène Brieux. At the time of the publication the delicate subject chosen by the French dramatist, namely the epidemics of syphilis, triggered heavy censorship and the text reached the stage only by being privately read by the author. But only two decades later, it turned into a recognized source for several silent screen adaptations, so that the Transylvanian version stands along the 1914 American one directed by Tom Ricketts and Richard Bennet and the 1919 British one directed by Alexander Butler.

The other (and last) Transylvanian film in which Bretan starred was *Menace* (*Világrém*) directed by none other than Jenő Janovics, in late 1920. The story follows Pierre Sylvain (in an interesting twist played by the same Mihály Fekete who directed *The Blight*), husband of opera singer Doria (Lili Poór), who despite an apparently happy marriage has an affair with young actress Shiva (Erzsi Baróti). He gets infected with syphilis and being haunted by the thought of having the shameful details of his intimate life going public he does not seek treatment and transmits the disease to his wife.

The thematic recurrence of Briex' play in film has been linked to the social hygiene movement. It was just a few years after cinema had left the experimental territory of the attraction, in the words of Tom Gunning governed by an "exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption" (232), and entered into a narrative stage struggling to detach itself from theatrical aesthetics, when the outbreak of World War I stimulated its potential to efficiently distribute significant social messages to a large group of people. With an ever growing number of soldiers getting infected and spreading the viruses after returning to their home countries, the conventions of cinematic melodrama proved to match the efforts of the authorities to demonstrate the dramatic consequences of venereal diseases.

Thus, *Menace* marked a triumphal ending to the Transylvanian silent industry by illustrating the story with innovative microscopic stills of the virus and images of patients treated for syphilis originating from the research conducted by renowned scholars Constantin Levaditi, pioneer of modern inframicrobiology, and Dominic Stanca. Consequently, this film also ended the film collaboration between Janovics and Bretan, continued solely on the opera stage for two more years. After leaving Cluj-Napoca in May 1922 (Gagelmann 2000, 43) in favor of the Romanian Opera in Bucharest, Bretan felt the need to write a touching tribute to the cultural entrepreneur who credited his talent with more resources he himself was aware of:

...While I was still engaged at his theater I always had the feeling that not just one city, but rather a whole country was following very attentively everything that I did, said, and sang on the stage. And when Janovics himself appeared at the dress rehearsal of an opera, I seemed to see behind him the Hungarian parliament, the universities and music academies, the entire press of the capital; the entire Hungarian culture class was gathered there, even though only one single man was sitting there in the dark auditorium, and that one man was Jenő Janovics... (*Remembering Jenő Janovics* [1924], qtd. in Gagelmann 2000, 44)

### Role-playing games

The names Michael Curtiz and Alexander Korda are linked to the Transylvanian silent industry in regard to the incipient stages of their careers. The first was considered at the time he came to Cluj-Napoca, in 1914, the director of the widely regarded first<sup>5</sup> Hungarian film, *Today and Tomorrow* (*Ma és holnap*), while the latter was, when arriving in the city in 1916, the first<sup>6</sup> Hungarian film critic. But not all artists attracted by Jenő Janovics in Transylvania had been previously linked to the field of cinema. Some of them were veterans of the theatre or literature and were introduced to silent films by him.

Such was the case of great tragedian Mari Jászai who accepted Janovics' offer and played her only two parts in front of the camera, that of Queen Gertrudis which she had mastered for years on stage in the Hungarian national play *Bank Ban* and that of the elderly mother of the protagonist of *The Undesirable* (*A tolonc*), both films being directed by Michael Curtiz. It was also the case of Lujza Blaha, the singer who rose to fame in Hungary as "the nation's nightingale" and who found herself cast in the leading role of the silent film *The Grandmother* (*A nagymama*) under the directorial guidance of young Alexander Korda. At the age of 66, the traditionalist artist whose career revolved around her outstanding voice couldn't hide her emotional state of mind as well as her amusement while confronting this odd new medium:

Before starting this film, I couldn't sleep at night. I couldn't imagine: how would it be like, what would it be like. (...) We had been always told: this scene is ten minutes long, this act is one hour, this play lasts for three hours; but now it's: ten meters, one hundred meters, one thousand meters! The fact that what I am playing they measure in number of meters, just like canvas, that always make me smile...<sup>7</sup> (qtd. in Balogh and Zágoni 2009, 61)

However, the vast majority of the artists Janovics directed towards film belonged to the local theatre he managed, as it can be concluded by analyzing the production details of the Transylvanian silent films as they were put together by Gyöngyi Balogh and Bálint Zágoni (2009, 104-116).

After Curtiz and Korda left Cluj-Napoca, the place was open for the directorial debut of the already mentioned actor Mihály Fekete took place in the summer of 1916 with *Siberia* (*Szibéria*), a film based on his own script. Five more films were to follow, besides *The Blight* and *Menace*. In 1917, he directed the screen adaptations of the Ferenc Herczeg novel *Gyurkovics Daughters* (*A Gyurkovics lányok*) and the József Szigeti play *The Old Foot-soldier and His Son, the Hussar* (*A vén bakancsos és fia, a huszár*), both texts being prepared for screen by Janovics. One year later, Fekete added to his portfolio three more films written by screenwriter Jenő Gyalui, two original scripts, *The Land of Whips* (*A kancsuka hazájában*), *Tragedy of the Doctors* (*Doctorok tragédiája - Orvosok*) and a literary adaptation of *The Masquerader* by Katherine Cecile Thurston under the title *The Men Who Exchange Their Lives* (*Akik életet cseréltek*).

But Mihály Fekete was not the first actor to direct silent films in Cluj-Napoca. In March 1913, a few months before the making of *The Yellow Foal*, Elemér Hetényi got involved into the filming of his own cinematic sketch *Apache Woman's Love* (*Az apacsnő szerelme*). The fact that he shared the direction and distribution with an impressive number of members of the local aristocracy and that that filming took places in the landmarks of the city indicates the fact that the film represented nothing more than a caprice generated by the spell and extravaganza of the cinema. But Hetényi was by no means an amateur artist, but an actor with whom Janovics had collaborated during his brief stay in Szeged and who would later continue his career in Oradea, where he would establish a prestigious acting school. But before leaving Cluj, he returned to directing in 1918 with *Little Paul* (*Palika*) after a play by Andor Gábor and in 1919 with *The Elf of Cinema* (*A mozitünder*), based on the operetta by W.S. Gilbert (Cunningham 2008).

Even less known than this incursion of actors into silent film directing is the heterogeneousness of the artists involved in screenwriting. Naturally, writers are among the first to be mentioned in this respect and in order not to overlook an important name it should be underlined that novelist, short story writer and poet originating from Cluj-Napoca Ernő Ligeti joined the list opened by Sándor Incze and Samu Sebesi, with the adaptation of *The Poacher* (*A vadorzó*) directed in 1918 by Jenő Janovics.

Although it seems that Mihály Fekete preferred to direct scripts written by Gyulai and Janovics, he himself prepared for the latter adaptations of literary texts for the films *The Schoolmistress* (*A tanítónő*, 1917) and *Difficult Role* (*Nehéz szerep*, 1917). A similar case is that of director Adolf Mérei who, besides writing original scripts for his own movies *The Housemaid* (*A szobalány*, 1916), *Nevermore... Forever!* (*Soha többé... mindörökké!*, 1916) and *Commander of the Army Corps* (*A hadtestparancsnok*, 1916), adapted for Janovics to direct Honoré de Balzac's short story *I Am Innocent* (*Ártatlan vagyok*, 1916). At his turn, he accepted to direct *The Sleep-walker* (*Alvajáró*, 1916) based on a script by Ferenc Vendrey, the actor known for the leading role in the comedy *Good Night Muki!* (*Jó éjt, Muki!*, 1915).

Last but not least, the name of the leading lady Lili Berky next to that of Ferenc Vendrey as actors who wrote scripts for the silent films made in Cluj-Napoca brings into discussion the involvement of women in the process of production. Because of the lack of relevant studies regarding this aspect within the Hungarian silent cinema industry, no comparisons between the local and the national situation can be made. The only certainty is that the year 1917 marked the appearance and the disappearance of female screenwriters in Cluj-Napoca. Lili Berky chose a short story by Soma Guthy to adapt for Janovics to direct as *The Stigmatized* (*A megbélyegzett*). Just as little known is the fact that the short story on which his film *Hotel Stadt Lemberg* (*Hotel Imperial*) was based on was adapted for screen by publicist and painter Margit Vészi. Also known for her short marriage to writer Ferenc Molnár, she would later emigrate to Rome and then to Hollywood where in between the two world wars she worked for the great film studios.

Thus, the relatively short lived Transylvanian silent cinema industry wrote its history against the multicultural background of the city that hosted it and opened its gates to legendary or aspiring artists willing to experiment under the guidance of cultural entrepreneur Jenő Janovics who recognized in silent films an art form simultaneously tributary and striving for independence from the hegemony of theatre.

### Notes:

- 1 Hereafter I will refer to the city by its current name of Cluj-Napoca. It was established through a decree signed in 1974 by dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu.
- 2 Hereafter I will refer to the city by its current name of Cluj-Napoca. It was established through a decree signed in 1974 by dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu.
- 3 In Hungarian *Sárga csikó*, it was marketed abroad under the titles *Secret of the Blind Man* or *Hungarian Tragedy* (Balogh and Zágoni 2009, 112) and distributed in an impressive total of 137 copies in almost 40 countries (Cunningham 2004, 11).
- 4 Jenő Janovics started producing silent films in 1914 under his first company, Proja, a name indicating the collaboration between Budapest based production company Projectograph (Pro) and himself (Ja).
- 5 Although it seems that a month earlier the same year 1912 Ödön Uher had directed *The Sisters* (*Nővérek*) (Nemeskürty 1974, 19).
- 6 Earning this title after writing a film review of *The Sisters* in newspaper *The World* (*Világ*).
- 7 The translation into English belongs to the author of this paper.

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