

**„BABEŞ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF THEATRE AND FILM
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEATRE AND FILM**

**THEATRICAL ACTING CONVENTIONS IN SILENT
FILM ACTING**

– SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION –

Doctoral supervisor:

PROF. UNIV. DR. HABIL. HATHÁZI ANDRÁS

Doctoral student:

PÁL EMŐKE

2020

Cluj-Napoca

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Keywords: silent film acting, theatrical conventions, silent film, theatre pedagogy, acting methods

The initial objective of the present doctoral research was to make a comparison between stage acting and film acting, articulating their similarities and differences, exploring the specific conventions, work methods, and techniques found in film and theatre. To avoid discussing film and stage acting in general terms, it was crucial to narrow the scope of the research, and to focus, in the early phase of the research, on the historical aspects of film acting. The frames of the present dissertation were limited to include the transition from stage acting to silent film acting, that is, to the period concerning the dawn of film acting, primarily focusing on the identification of stage acting conventions in silent film acting. The further narrowing of the research resulted in the decision to examine Hungarian film acting, making the silent film productions of the Cluj film studio the main topic of research. Presently, there is no (published) book or study in Hungarian language that focuses exclusively on the acting in silent films. Although countless researchers and film historians have written about Hungarian silent film production, also touching upon the activity of the most relevant provincial film studio, the one in Cluj, in most of the cases the books and studies put their focus on silent film production in general and not on the analysis of silent film acting. Between 1913-1920 in the Cluj silent film factories founded by Jenő Janovics (Janovics Studio, Proja, Corvin, Transsylvania) up to seventy films were created. Although the director had recognised the importance of preserving and archiving the works, and tried to arrange his inheritance into a film archive, most of these nonetheless perished or disappeared. Aside from a few fragments of scenes only four films survived (almost) intactly for posterity: *The Undesirable* (1914), directed by Michael Curtiz, *The Last Night* (1917), directed by Jenő Janovics, *The Old Foot-Soldier and His Son, the Hussar* (1917), directed by Mihály Fekete, and the last of the silent films produced in Cluj, *Menace* (1920), directed by Janovics. Between the shooting of the first and the last surviving silent films (1914-1920) a significant and impressive shift could be observed with regards to silent film acting styles: while in the first surviving film, *The Undesirable*, what prevailed was the histrionic acting style based on contemporary stage acting conventions, the acting in *Menace* fell much closer to the acting that, from today's perspective, would be considered film-like (meaning a more natural, low-key style). To put it another way, the use of Romantic acting conventions was more pronounced in *The Undesirable*, whereas in the case of *Menace* a shift towards a mostly Naturalistic/Realistic

acting convention could be observed. Consequently, as the earliest silent films proved more relevant for the objective of the present research, the decision was made to examine the silent film *The Undesirable* from 1914, or rather—in order to further narrow the scope of the dissertation—the performance of the lead actress, Lili Berky. Since she was also the lead in the 1917 film *The Last Night* and the most sought after actress, essentially the first female star, of the silent film productions in Cluj, the acting analysis of *The Last Night* was also included in the research. In the case of both of these films the aim was to draw examples from Berky's acting, however, for certain aspects of the analysis the performance of other actors from the cast was also considered. The final goal was, then, to discover in broad terms the acting styles prevalent in the two afore-mentioned silent films from Cluj, with the main question being: what acting conventions rooted in theatre can be identified in silent film acting?

For the acting analysis of silent films, it was indispensable to expand on the influential theatre and film theories, trends, practices, and traditions of the time; as a result, the first chapter of the dissertation focused on these issues. The second half of the study aimed to analyse the acting in two surviving silent films from Cluj, *The Undesirable* and *The Last Night*. In the chiefly analytical chapters of the dissertation the perspective advanced from delineating the more general frameworks of conventions towards dissecting distinctive gestures, hence following a deductive methodology.

The investigation of the theatre historical background included Gábor Egressy's study entitled *Színészeti stúdiók* (Studies in Acting, 1841), Ede Paulay's *A színészet könyve* (The Book of Acting, 1871), and Sándor Hevesi's *A színjátszás művészete* (The Art of Stage Acting, 1908). The decision to explore these works was made based on the research of current authoritative figures in theatre history (Bécsy 2008) who viewed these authors as the most deliberate and informed artists in the context of the era's theatrical practices, with experiences in foreign theatrical cultures and knowledge of European trends. The analysis of their works led to the conclusion that their relevance in the current research could be determined primarily in their devising of a Realistic/Naturalistic acting style that came after the gradual move away from Romantic acting traditions. Furthermore, the analysis of their works helped define what representative theatrical agents of the time could have identified as the fundamental pursuits, aims, and systems of device in acting.

With regards to Romantic acting it can be stated that the goal of the actor was to provoke emotions, which determined the acting devices used to achieve this. Accordingly, this acting was characterised by exaggerated gestures, pathos formulas, the use of poses, and operating with intense emotional expressions. This acting can furthermore be defined by the need to produce a specific Romantic human ideal, meaning that the actor wanted to represent not the actual but the ideal person.

Contrarily, the primary goal of the Naturalistic and Realistic acting style was to create a Realistic effect, as characters were modelled based on the behaviour, gestures, and body languages of everyday people. With regards to how the text was delivered as well as the use of body, the effort to produce informality, uniqueness, and habitualness was key. On the other hand, changed technical conditions allowed for the utilisation of the entire stage area, the appearance of the fourth wall required actors to break away from the auditorium, while the strengthening function of the director made teamwork essential. With regards to the Realistic and Naturalistic categories of style in acting, the distinction between the two did not seem justified.

Finally, regarding the style analyses, it can be said that when used as broad, orientating notions, they proved useful in the more general approach of the prevailing tendencies of the era, but the more detailed analyses produced various subproblems which could not be explored through the afore-mentioned style categories. The decision to still use these was then taken because it made possible the systematisation of the various forms of expression that could be observed in the works. Furthermore, these style characteristics proved useful not so much as objective properties of the films but rather as points of views for the investigation.

Both Bécsy and Kerényi confirm the strong influence of Romantic acting styles in the beginning of the 20th century, but research into the acting styles in Cluj (See Kötő 1992; Kötő 2001; Jordáky 1971; Welser-Vitéz 1963) prove otherwise; namely, that here the turn against the Romantic acting style and the interest in Realistic/Naturalistic tools and modes of representation was more dominant. The reviews on the acting approach of Jenő Janovics—an emblematic figure of the Cluj theatrical scene—suggest that, especially in the second phase of his career, he consciously turned against Romantic acting styles and devoted himself to Realistic representation, a fact also highlighted by the adjustment of character to the actor's personality (Welser-Vitéz 1963). Much in the same way as press materials regarding Lili Berky's acting corroborate that the actress had a strong interest in the Realistic/Naturalistic acting style.

The examination of the film historical context demonstrated the influence of two powerful directorial concepts: (1) the directing method of Michael Curtiz was distinctively authoritarian, the actor being fully subject to the will of the director, while his field study in Copenhagen meant that the influence of the Danish acting school was also noticeable in the first stage of his career (plasticity, pantomime style of movements and gestures, exaggerated face expressions, poses, and generally a more stylised effect). (2) Jenő Janovics, on the other hand, left more room and artistic freedom for his actors, he did not interfere in the elaboration of details, although his charismatic and suggestive personality probably meant that he could have easily enforced his will as a director. Contemporary sources reveal that during work with the actors he often acted out scenes to instruct them. With regards to international influences, thanks to his French education, the impact of the French Film d'art movement and the collaboration with the French Pathé film company also proved noteworthy. As for silent film acting, Janovics stood for performing without theatricality and had an interest in Naturalistic acting.

The literature of silent film production had researchers continuously reiterating how critical the differing views of these two directors were with regards to their actors, sorting them into two different schools altogether. As the case studies focus on one surviving film by Kertész and another one by Janovics, the dissertation aimed to reflect on this supposed division of the two silent film acting schools, without ever forgetting that the style differences of the two films could also have been affected by other factors, such as the circumstances of shooting.

For the purpose of a thorough overview of the Cluj silent film production and the analysis of international influences, a short detour was taken to discuss Márton Garas's and Alexander Korda's approach to acting. In the case of Garas, thanks to his work as an assistant, actor, and director at the German company Litteraria, a German influence had to be reckoned with, while Alexander Korda's notions of directing had French and Danish influences. Based on the international field studies of the directors that Janovics had hired for his Cluj studio, the French, Danish, and, to some extent, German influence could be observed, while bearing in mind the programme of contemporary cinemas, the influence of English, American, and Russian films also seemed noteworthy.

The research into the silent film acting of Lili Berky presented with an aggravating circumstance, namely that contemporary sources and press materials regarding the actress gave insight more into the evolution of the star culture of the early 20th century and not so much into

the practices of acting. To mention just two examples: (1) in 1916, following an international model, the Corvin film factory launched a so-called Berky Series, which meant that the actress performed in eleven of the eighteen silent films made in that year. (2) Next to advertisements and film reports that praised the talent, beauty, and importance of the actress, articles with an offensive tone of voice were also published: in the context of the personality cult surrounding Berky, Cluj journalists resented the exaggerated and undue employment of the actress (and her family) in film productions. The chapter in question followed how Berky, a widely popular operetta actress became the first Hungarian silent film star.

The second unit of the dissertation focused on the identification of theatrical acting conventions in the silent films *The Undesirable* and *The Last Night*. Firstly, this issue was approached from the perspective of the distinct technical circumstances and conditions of stage acting and film acting, by examining the theatrical conventions that dominated the relationship of the actor with the camera. The conclusion was made that the most spectacular and evident theatrical convention was to be found in the presentational relationship of the actor and spectator, namely the conscious yet pseudo-direct connection with the spectator, which could also be associated with the Romantic style. This connection was highlighted by the frequent frontal positioning towards the camera, the intention of filling up an imagined big stage, the radiation of energy, the pseudo-direct relationship with the spectator, the convention of backing out facing the audience, and the asides. Conventions associated with Realistic/Naturalistic theatre, such as the fourth wall, non-frontal space arrangements, and the overall intention of creating a make-believe prevailed only in outdoor scenes.

Examination of the Cluj silent film production led to the observation that it was commonplace to adapt literary or dramatic works. *The Undesirable*, an adaptation of a Volksstück, written by Ede Tóth in 1876, and produced by the Cluj National Theatre most probably between 1905-1908 (Zakariás 2015) also fell in this category. In the case of *The Last Night* opinions of film historians varied, with some sources stating that the script was written by Jenő Janovics based on a play by Ede Sas, while others asserting that the film was based on an original script by Sas. Film makers borrowed from theatre not only the terms for the silent film genres (melodrama, Volksstück) but also the recurring narrative patterns and stock characters of the given genres, which is why the conventional representation of stock characters could also be observed in the silent films in question.

The Last Night, according to the genre requirements of the melodrama, followed a non-traditional narrative structure, and the plot dispensed with causal relations, psychological motivations, which resulted in unrealistic and unexpected turns of events, surprising occurrences and, finally, a moral compensation in the dénouement. The main theme of this melodrama, also called a “female film” in the literature surrounding it, was the question of the role of women, but the film also reflected on a contemporary social issue by exploring the fate of the vengerka. The moral polarisation of the characters, the representation of good and evil forces, the stock characters of the melodrama (heroine/damsel in distress, villain, hero) could also be identified in the film. Therefore, the melodramatic acting conventions were to be discovered through the usage of certain signs, forms of expressions, and gestures that made the stock characters easily recognisable for the audience. For example, Gitta, an actress who had been exposed to a cumulation of blows, and who had found herself in constant crisis and suffering could easily be identified as the damsel in distress. In Lili Berky’s performance of Gitta the exaggerations of the suffering body, the pathos formulas, and the ceremonial acting methods were prevalent.

In the case of *The Undesirable* the elements of melodrama and commedia dell’arte seemed most pronounced from the eclectic genre characteristics of the Volksstück. As the characteristics of the melodrama had previously been expanded on in the case of *The Last Night*, the analysis of *The Undesirable* focused primarily on the traditions of commedia dell’arte. The main motive of the commedia dell’arte narrative, similarly to the case of *The Undesirable*, is young lovers founding each other (the young couple are in love, the elderly try to impede the fulfilment of their love, but after surmounting various obstacles the lovers are finally reunited). Relations, stock characters (innamorati, padrone), and associated acting conventions could be traced mainly in the love storyline of *The Undesirable*. For example, in the case of Miklós (Mihály Várkonyi), who embodied the innamorato of the commedia dell’arte, the following aspects could be observed: a centre-point located around the chest/heart area, the usage of graceful, wide gestures, the lack of a solid relation with the ground, and some pronounced diagonal positions implying a search for balance.

While in the analysis of genre conventions the focus was on the entirety of the actor’s performance and on the conventional representation of the given stock characters, in discussing the acting styles the objective was to go into details, by making use of the aspects developed in the chapter *Theatre Historical Context*. The style characteristics associated with Romantic acting

conventions were analysed on multiple levels, introducing details regarding pose, pathos formulas, sublimeness, affects, and acting techniques for embodying pathos. In conclusion it can be noted that what could typically be considered as a Romantic convention were forms of expressions that encompassed all of the above. As a next step, the above-mentioned forms of expression were interpreted as archetypal gestures, and the ways in which these affected not the audience but the actor were examined. The analysis of the archetypal gestures prevalent in Romantic acting conventions and their effect on the actor was based on the psychological gestures of Chekhov. This theory served as a convincing explanation with regards to the analysis of the interference of archetypal gestures and the psychophysics of the actor. This approach helped expose the functioning of the Romantic acting conventions not only from the perspective of the viewer or of the researcher but also from the point of view of the actor's practice and subjectivity.

The examination of Romantic acting conventions led to the detailed analysis and application of François Delsarte's system of performing arts and pedagogy. Although the epoch-making system of Delsarte had its roots in Romanticism, which is why the dissertation, too, dealt with it in the respective chapter, its relevance and influence transcended the Romantic era. One of the most important findings of the dissertation was, as a matter of fact, the presumed, indirect influence of the Desartean system on silent film acting at the turn of the century. The influence of the applied aesthetics created by François Delsarte on the films in question, an influence also supported by international literature, was reflected in the usage of conventional gestures. The approach of János Bódy's textbooks on silent film acting, too, could be traced back to Delsarte's system. This system had three crucial laws with regards to the semiotic analysis of acting: the Law of Trinity, the Nine Laws of Motion, and the Law of Correspondence. To better understand this system, the dissertation expanded on these laws, and asserted that the influence of Delsarte could be followed through both in the international and in the Hungarian context. To verify this assertion, references from Hungarian press were collected and his influence on stage acting textbooks was analysed. Finally, the system of conventional gestures transcribed and illustrated in the Delsarte books from the late 19th century and in the Hungarian textbooks of acting of the early 20th century were set against the acting in the two reviewed silent films.

The resulting conclusions regarding the previously mentioned two Cluj "schools" of silent film acting were further nuanced. It was asserted that *The Undesirable* was influenced

more and made better use of the Delsartean system, alongside and in close relation to the also present Romantic tradition. Thanks to Michael Curtiz's approach to directing, the emphatic plasticity and pantomimic principles of the Danish silent film school were dominant. On the whole, demonstrating the influence of this system and the analysis of the acting conventions on this basis helped to more precisely reconstruct the way in which acting could have been perceived at the time.

Evidently, Romantic ideas regarding style and acting conventions had a heavy influence in the examined era, but did not stand the test of time when viewed in retrospect. The analysis based on Realistic/Naturalistic style characteristics demonstrated that it was not the Romantic but rather the Realistic/Naturalistic style that has been most influential in film acting. The Realistic/Naturalistic acting conventions in the films in question became evident mostly in outdoor scenes, in the concrete representation of daily actions, and in the detailed acting work. The outdoor scenes, photographed in nature, made possible to break away from the theatrical space, which in turn was much more apparent in scenes shot in the studio. The more Realistic acting was also due to the fact that the camera was not positioned off stage, hence the feeling of recorded theatre diminished, and the whole picture became more realistic. Face expressions typical of Realistic acting, as in the case of closeups of Lili Berky, made possible the portrayal of Naturalistic looking sentiments and thoughts devoid of exaggeration and sensationalism.

The dissertation made use of three types of material:

1. Primary research materials, such as the discussed films, which were accessed from the digital library of the Hungarian National Film Institute's Film Archive.
2. The notions of genre, categories of style, and acting conventions used in the research were clarified with the help of secondary research materials, more precisely the relevant Hungarian and international literature, with the aim to mix the findings of the newest theoretical works with the judgements of studies of the era. Naturally, the topic of each chapter determined the scale in which these materials were incorporated, for example, the chapter discussing the historical context made use predominantly of Hungarian literature, as Hungarian theatre and film history has mostly Hungarian language literature written about it. Contrarily, the second main chapter of the dissertation was supported in greater proportion by current international literature, as relevant literature regarding silent film

acting has only been infinitesimal in Hungarian language, and there is little analysis to be found about the chosen films.

3. The most voluminous of sources for the dissertation consisted of contemporary press materials, professional literature, theoretical and practical books on acting, interviews, recollections, documentaries and manuscripts, all related to the films and the actors.

Regarding the methodology, the dissertation was built on summaries and reflections of existing research on the one hand, and proposed to conduct self-standing examinations and comparative analyses with an outlook on the inception of the discussed works, on the other hand. With regards to the examination of contemporary contexts, source analysis and the reconstruction of contemporary professional practices based on original sources were key. Furthermore, the analysis of the film acting was conducted according to the above-mentioned style analysis.