

**(Film) Experiments
Brought to Life**

**The First Cinema
of the Avant-Garde**

(Film) Experiments

Hungarian National Gallery

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Film strip from the first Hungarian avant-garde movie directed by György Gerő, 1926

I. FILM AS FANTASY – SURREALISM AND MOTION PICTURE

An emblematic example of Surrealist filmmaking operating with shocking, dream-like associations is the famous sequence in *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*), made in 1929 by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí: a human eye being cut with a razor. When Dalí invited Buñuel to work on the film together, the Spanish director is said to have told him about his recent “dream in which a tapering cloud sliced the moon in half, like a razor blade slicing through an eye.”¹ Dalí was so fascinated by this scene that they directed their film starting out from this visual association. Although the dissection of an eye was regarded as a popular iconographic motif among surrealists, it became the most well-known emblem of surrealism thanks to *An Andalusian Dog*. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that when the film was re-cut on order by the French minister of culture, André Malraux, in the 1960s, the infamous scene was omitted, as the provocation and brutality represented by an eye being dissected was irreconcilable with the intentions of his cultural policy to educate the people. Buñuel and Dalí’s film has no specific theme, its visual riddles can be freely associated with any meaning and their appropriate interpretation can at most be achieved through psychoanalysis.

II. AVANT-GARDE ANIMATION AND ABSOLUTE FILM

Abstraction manifest in animated cartoons and puppet films, which, albeit indirectly, drew on formal-stylistic repertoire characteristic of Dadaist and Surrealist art, appeared in Hungary from the late 1920s. István Kató-Kiszly, who made the animated cartoon *Ödön Zsír* in 1914, which was later lost, was the first in Hungary to experiment with animation (primarily silhouette films). The first examples of this medium that survived in Hungary can be linked to the leading figures of the first generation of Hungarian avant-garde (Sándor Bortnyik, Róbert Berény) and the idiom inherited from them was also manifest in the works of their students (Gyula Macskássy, the father of state animated cartoon production and John Halas, who brought British full-length animation films into being with his *Animal Farm*).

Absolute film (*cinéma pur*, or integrated cinema) was the name given to motion pictures whose shared characteristic was their makers’ belief that auditive experiences can be expressed through the rhythms of form, colour and light. Thus, in a sense, pure cinema, which merely followed the internal rules of the medium of film and strove for pure abstraction, can be regarded as the forerunner of visual music. The period’s six most important avant-garde films were first screened together as a matinee performance organised by the Berliner Novembergruppe under the title *Der absolute Film* in 1925 in the Kurfürstendamm UFA (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft) film theatre. Walter Ruttmann was the first who presented his film movements, titled *Opus*, in 1921, in which he simultaneously used organic and constructive forms and which he coloured by hand frame by frame. The artists of German Dadaism, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter, both began making their scroll pictures at the same time as Ruttmann, which they constructed from horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines as well as various geometrical figures. The question of synaesthesia captured the interest of the Hungarian-American Alexander Laszlo, who built his colour-light piano in 1925 and not only used absolute films as background for his highly successful concerts but directed significant films himself. The Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, who lived in Berlin, patented his Optofone in 1922 and first published it in Hungarian in the periodical *MA* [Today] in the same year. The device detected the wavelengths of light photoelectrically and made them audible with the help of a telephone receiver. The now lost film titled *The Sound ABC* made by László Moholy-Nagy in 1933 had abstract symbols and images including letters, fingerprints, stylised human profiles) scratched on the film strip’s sound-track which produced synthetic music during projection, called *Tönende Handschrift*, or “sounding handwriting”, by Rudolf Pfenninger. The experiments on the synthetic sound-on-film technique were also joined by Béla Balázs, who regarded animated cartoons made in Moscow Mosfilm (est. 1934) as absolute film.

III. DADAISM AND THE HUNGARIAN FILM-AVANTGARDE

Abstraction present in pure cinema manifested differently in the case of figurative films. Cubism was the key element in the composition of French Dadaist motion pictures and more “destructive” tendencies could be observed in their rendition too. In contrast, Dadaist films in Germany followed a logic deducible from constructivism and used dynamic imaging, good examples being Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia* (1926) and Hans Richter’s *Ghosts before Breakfast* (*Vormittagsspuk*, 1928), in which abstraction from the real

world are often depicted through the same symbols (e.g. a flying collar following the body). At the same time, the makers of these films also strove to achieve the dream-like, irrational visual narration of Surrealist works.

A particular film needs to be discussed in detail to enable us to understand the Hungarian context for the idiom of dadaism and surrealism adapted to motion pictures. In the book titled *Az izmusok története* [The History of Isms], co-authored by Lajos Kassák and Imre Pán, we can read that “the first and thus far only Hungarian avant-gardist film was made upon the initiative of and under the direction of György Gerő.”² The screenplay written by nineteen-year-old György Gerő (1905–?) and titled *Béla*, was published in the first, 1924 issue of the short-lived but impactful Dadaist periodical *IS* (as in “this *too* is an avant-garde periodical” the Hungarian word *IS* means “too”; and the abbreviation used for “Imago Science” = “fine arts graphics”, or rather “science of images”³). Gerő’s flyer – “a tough philosophical text”, in front of which “scenes were often made ... in the streets”⁴ – was influenced by the German dadaists, among them Hans Arp. For some time during the 1920s Gerő lived in Berlin, where he pursued philosophical studies, and where he met his friend Ernst Block, who exerted a significant influence on his intellectual development. His poems and essays were regularly published in several periodicals (*Panoráma*, *Tűz* [Fire], *MA*, *Bécsi Magyar Újság* [Viennese Hungarian Daily], *Korunk* [Our Age], *Dokumentum* [Document]), and he wrote the first Hungarian critical review on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

The “film score” provided an alternative to the traditional motion picture for the very first time in Hungary, and introduced “a new type of film that”, as Gerő argued, “did not create the illusion of reality ... but was a film in the sense of movement proper.”⁵ Gerő’s film script containing ninety-seven scenes is outstanding not only because it specifies the camera’s position but also the place occupied by the actors and objects in each picture frame, i.e. the planes to be used. The novel quality of the screenplay spread beyond Hungary’s borders. The essay titled “The Screenplay of the Future”,⁶ published in the contemporaneous German film journal, *Film-Kurier*, mentioned Gerő’s launching a lawsuit against one of his colleagues, Ágoston Karly, accusing him of plagiarism and went on to say that a French film company wanted to make a film from Gerő’s script, while Karly’s version would be filmed by the prestigious German UFA. The French company referred to was obviously Pathé, and its director in Hungary must have been Kornél Melléky, who was experimenting with shooting an absolute film around that time, but “whose ambitions could not be realised because of the indifference and lack of understanding from professional circles.”⁷

Gerő’s goal was to create “an art form that emphasises the unity of visual expression”, a film without actors and a director. In January 1927 ten frames of his by then completed film were published as an illustration for his writing titled “Film. Film. Film.” in Lajos Kassák’s periodical *Dokumentum*;⁸ however, these frames bore no connection to his film script titled *Béla*. The premier of Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (*Mechanical Ballet*) at the *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* in Vienna at the time when Gerő’s earlier film score was published in *IS*, i.e. in autumn 1924, might have played a part in why he decided to rewrite the first version. The trick shots that survived in the details of Gerő’s work and the use of “superimposed” or “deep” montages envisioned as a kind of metamorphosis ensuring the transition between the scenes are clearly reminiscent of Léger’s work. Gerő experimented with all the techniques that existed in avant-garde filmmaking at the time. In his work he used dissolves, montages made with multiple layers of action in a single frame, repetition and continuation of the changing picture-planes, view-analysing close-ups, episodes divided into short cuts, as well as point-of-view shots and schematic characters enabling the viewer’s emotional and intellectual involvement. The film even had some hand drawn inserts, in the making of which he was probably aided by Sándor Bortnyik. Gerő’s first experiment was an object animation – a trick shot recording the stages of a cactus blooming.⁹ Gerő might have heard about *Ballet Mécanique* from the Hungarian émigré artists in Vienna, such as Lajos Kassák. He was familiar with László Moholy-Nagy’s new plans linked to motion pictures and it might have been under his influence that his concept not only contained the absurd solutions of Dadaism but also the Constructivist tendency to dynamic abstraction adapted to film by Viking Eggeling.

“I saw Gerő’s film, which is absolutely promising. ... His film approximately relates to the first Constructivist pictures, which were absolutely puritan with their two cube forms for example, but in their own right were not yet mature, or enriched”;¹⁰ wrote Jolán Simon, Kassák’s wife, at the end of summer 1926 about the film, before its completion. The woman referred to as “the first Hungarian Dadaist performer” was also given a role in Gerő’s film. “Gerő and I arranged to meet on Sunday to shoot my head and some movements of my hands”;¹¹ wrote Jolán Simon about the one second long scene in which communication with the outer world is pursued through abstract manual sign language. Four frames of this scene were published in *Dokumentum*. The artist might have borrowed the solution of a dummy-like actress sending messages to the audience through body language from Léger’s film. In *Ballet Mécanique* the

film’s dramaturgical centre was created by the sculptresque head of Man Ray’s lover, Kiki, while the main character in Gerő’s work was a young girl shown in close-up and making hand movements similarly to Jolán Simon. Close to the completion of his film, which he called a “kinetic vision”, Gerő wrote the following about his work: “content directly opposed to the entire psychology of physiognomic expression [...] and the associative system of forms are combined in it ... and it irrefutably confirmed my old conviction that the only modern form of expression for me is: film.”¹² The 35 mm silent film was completed in late 1926 (to music composed by György Kovács) and altogether fourteen and a half frames have survived.

It remains to be seen why György Gerő gave his manuscript, which antedated his film, the title *Béla*. It could be assumed that Gerő’s artist name or penname is behind the Christian name, since the avant-garde periodical *Új kultúra* [New Culture], published between 1922 and 1924, was edited by a certain Béla Gerő whose colleagues were the same as those of György Gerő, the founder of *IS*. If that is the case, however, a dilemma arises: György Gerő, the father of Hungarian Dadaism, and his periodical, *IS*, openly accepted Dadaism yet did not wish to fully embrace its pure form. Béla Gerő’s article, titled “A dadaizmus” [Dadaism], criticised the art movement forming in the Zurich Cabaret Voltaire. “It is the bolshevism of art, the spasmodic rattle of shattered nerves, and the revolutionary race of rushing younglings”, it said about the dadaists, and about the word dada that “it can be found in every language and expresses nothing more than the internationality of movement”.¹³

Just as nothing is known about what became of Gerő’s film, the director’s life after this point is also shrouded in mystery. Gerő was found guilty in a staged trial launched against him because of his connection to a cell with leftist political views. Through his father’s mediation he was declared insane by the court and incarcerated in a madhouse, from where he disappeared without a trace.¹⁴ At the request of his relatives Gerő was eventually announced dead as late as in 1961.

It must be mentioned in connection with the history of research on Gerő that when Gyula Száva began to explore his oeuvre in the 1980s, all of the artist’s personal data was isolated and made classified; moreover, film director Gábor Bódy was not able to continue the study he was conducting in Germany on Gerő. Several attempts – among them that of artist Ágnes Háy – were made in the past two decades to reconstruct Gerő’s manuscript on film. What lends special topicality to this is that in 2010, based on the film score and using a camera from Gerő’s time, American media artist Bruce Checefsky – the director of the Cleveland Institute of Art Reinberger Galleries – produced a paraphrase of *Béla*, regarded as the first unmade Hungarian avant-garde motion picture.

IV. SURREALIST PHOTOGRAM FILM

The possibility of capturing images on the fringes of motion picture and photography was first explored by the Italian futurists. The 1916 manifesto titled *Futurist Cinema* sought to re-compose the universe with the help of film, seen as the medium best able to express the complex sensitivity of Futurism. This is when two Futurist artists, Arnaldo Ginna (Arnaldo Ginanni Corradini) and Bruno Corra (Bruno Ginanni Corradini) made their *Futurist Life* (*Vita Futurista*), regarded by scholarly research as the first avant-garde film. A few years before that they had also experimented with the technique of directly painting on film-stock, and named their colour sonatas combining musical scores with chromatic scales *cinepittura*. In the history of film X-ray cinematography, which emerged in the 1910s, and abstraction in scientific photography, whose development ensued in the late 19th century, provided models for avant-garde artists who were trying to sequence their camera-less photographs. At the end of 1922 László Moholy-Nagy was unable to complete his experiment titled “synopsis for an abstract film”, which he wanted to be sequencing photographs “with the use a camera obscura”, because in the meantime he was appointed professor in the Bauhaus. During this time May Ray, who later became one of the main proponents of the surrealists, made *Return to Reason* (*Le Retour à la Raison*), a film in which the artist animated his “rayograms”, the name he used for his photograms. In the late 1920s the Polish couple who created Polish avant-garde film – painter Franciszka Themerson and her husband, writer Stefan Themerson – experimented with making a motion picture by moving light sources and using the photogram technique. Their early works, which perished in the war, are only known from reconstructions. Similarly, only fragments have survived from the attempts made in 1930 by Bauhaus-trained painter, Heinrich Brocksieper, at animating camera-less photographs. For a long time Tihámér Gyarmathy’s surrealist *Experimental Film*, which is composed from photograms of plant animal preparations, was also unknown. This will be the first time to be ever screened.

SELECTED LIST OF WORKS

Stills from Adalberto Kemény and Rodolfo Lustig's *São Paulo, a Symphony of a Metropolis* (1929)

São Paulo, Cinemateca Brasileira

This film made by Adalberto Kemény and Rodolfo Lustig, who founded the Rex Film studio of the Vera Cruz film company in Brazil, is based on Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Metropolis*, produced two years earlier. Both films present the bustling life of a metropolis and its pulsating rhythm through poetic images, using the associative potential of montage technique and with a strong documentary tone. Their composition is inspired by the same approach as manifest in Soviet-Russian avant-garde films, such as in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, in which visuality overrides the theme.

Róbert Berény (?): *Stick Valiant*, 1929

7 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

Stick Valiant is a "moral tale" and the earliest surviving Hungarian animated cartoon with a recognisable narrative line. In this modern adaptation of the ancient Pygmalion story, it is not the artist who falls in love with the alter ego of the extremely stylised figure he created that steps out of a painting but the buyer who hangs the picture on his wall. The maker of the film is unknown, but we do know of a letter from the year of its making in which painter Róbert Berény is requested to work for the trick film studio Pantofilm. It is possible that the success of *Stick Valiant* brought further commissions to Berény from the studio well known for films on similar themes.

Sándor Bortnyik: *Mr. Pipe's Dreadful Night*, 1930–1933

3 mins, b&w, sound added subsequently, digital copy of a 35 mm Budapest, Magyar Televízió Archivum (Hungarian Television Archives) – Lewes, Halas & Batchelor Collection – London, Educational Film Centre

The earliest Hungarian animation film linked to a specific author, Sándor Bortnyik's *Mr Pipe's Dreadful Night*, has only recently been found and will be shown to the general public for the first time at this exhibition. Bortnyik made this work together with János Halász (John Halas) in his private school, called Műhely (Workshop), also referred to as the "Hungarian Bauhaus". Made up of unfinished episodes which, based on their themes, styles and techniques, can be treated as autonomous pieces, in its present form this film most resembles a Surrealist montage. As Bortnyik recalls, he drew the key drawings, while Halász did the inbetweening and colouring of the figures. The background to the scenes were painted by Bortnyik's wife, Klára Zoltán. The first story merely consisted of "drawing little chicks toddling in front of eggs", and one of the closing scenes in the adaptation of the folk tale *The Prince and the Swan Fairy* showed exactly this –



Sándor Bortnyik: *Mr. Pipe's Dreadful Night*, 1930–1933

at the wedding of the two figures of the tale "the little chicks also danced the csárdás [the traditional Hungarian folk dance]". The only copy (the master copy) that survived of *Mr Pipe's Terrible Night* (now in private collection) suggests that their makers' imagination



Endre Lénárd: *Death of the Earth*, 1933

was captured by any real or fictitious story (for example the "folk tale" made up by Bortnyik and given the title *The Story of a Soul*) that they felt could be used for their experiments on the accurate visualisation of movement. They wanted to ask Zoltán Kodály for writing the music score for the film.

István Szegedi-Szűts: *Aerial Titans. Collective Bird Rhapsody*, 1933

(Musical score: György Reiss [Ránki]) 9 mins, b&w, digital copy of a 35 mm London, BFI

István Szegedi-Szűts, a graphic artist starting out from Lajos Kassák's circle, began to make animation around 1930, as a member of the New Association of Artists (Képzőművészek Új Társasága). His started working on his *Légi titánok (Aerial Titans)*, in which he combined the paper cut-out technique with drawing, in 1931 in Berlin, then continued it in the Hungarian Film Office (Magyar Film Iroda) and completed the superhuman effort of making fourteen thousand drawings in London with support from The Film Society Britain. Thanks to the positive reception of his work, which balances on the borderline between figurativity and abstraction, he was able to move

to England and become a noted graphic artist. Eighty years after its making, the film is now being screened in the artist's motherland for the first time, at this exhibition.

Endre Lénárd: *Death of the Earth*, 1933 (reconstruction: 2010)

17 mins (originally: 32 mins), b&w, silent, digital copy of a 9.5 mm (Written, photographed and edited by Lénárd Endre; set designed by László Dudás, Lipót Zsellér; post-production by Richárd Deutsch, Endre Lénárd. The trick shots were made with a Pathé copy machine.) Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

This "romantic-fiction drama", which can be regarded as the first Hungarian sci-fi film takes place in the future, seventeen years after its making, in 1950. The story is built around a love triangle involving Grace Rainey, a chemist; William North, an engineer, and his fiancée; and Philippe, an astronomer. Philippe realises that the orbit of the comet he newly discovered will coalesce with that of the Earth, thus planet Earth is doomed to destruction. The group escape to the Moon, where the astronomer is forced to accept that he has made a miscalculation and commits suicide. Those of the group that survived return to Earth after a highly adventurous journey in space. The original 9.5 mm film, of which only one copy existed, were destroyed at a screening in Poland during World War II. The spoilt scenes that were cut out of the film have been recently found in the legacy of Richárd Deutsch, one of the makers of the film, and a Holocaust victim, enabling the reconstruction of the story.

Alexander Ivanov, Panteleimon Sazonov, and Béla Balázs: *The Thief*, 1934

Giclée print made from a 35 mm film still Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

Moscow, Moskinokombinat; cinematographer and sound engineer: Nikolai Voinov, music: Leonid Shvarts, the music score was made with a so-called paper sound process, with an instrument called Nivotone, in Ivvos Moscow; 10 mins, b&w, sound, 35 mm

The two cartoon characters created by Béla Balázs – Vasya, who interferes in the plot with his huge fountain pen weapon to safeguard public property, and his companion, the dog Buddie – are a comment on a contemporaneous political declaration attributed to Stalin: "We will not let a fascist pig's snout poke around in our Soviet gardens." With *The Thief* the Hungarian aesthete created the type for the stock hero of Soviet animation, the "happy chap" coming out triumphantly from every adventure, who became the vehicle for communist ideology.

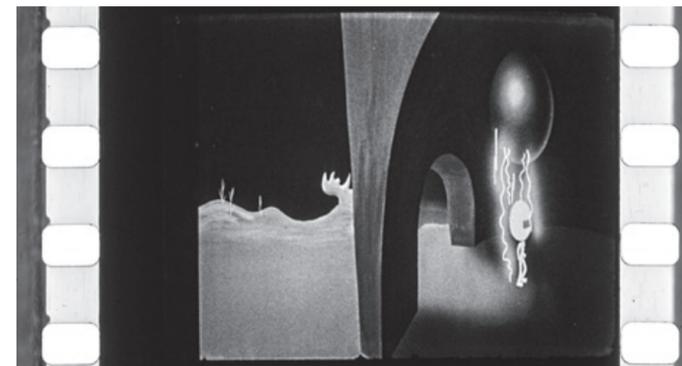
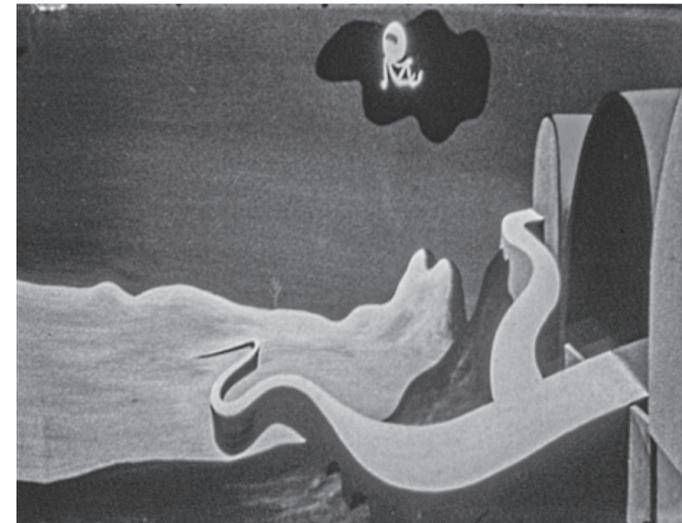


István Szegedi-Szűts: *Aerial Titans*, 1933

Unknown author (with the cooperation of Béla Gáspár's colour film lab): *Radio Prohaska Propheesied*, 1937

2 mins, colour, sound, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

The theme of this advertisement for the radios of the Berlin-based Alex von Prohaska company is developed from the technical development of civilisation. The plot line starts in what was then the present (1937)



Wilma de Quiche (Wilma Kiss) and Paul Grimault: *Electronic Phenomena*, 1937

and unfolds into the future, all the way up to the year 2000, when robots are doing everything instead of people and everybody does what they feel like. The colour film process developed at that time and discovered by avant-garde film artists (Oskar Fischinger, Alexandre Alexeieff, Len Lye, George Pal, Wolfgang Kaskeline, etc.) is perfectly suited to the utopian atmosphere of the film. Gasparcolor, developed in Berlin by

the Hungarian chemist and pharmacist Béla Gáspár was the era's most advanced colour film technology rendering colours the greatest intensity. Gasparcolor became the most important tool for avant-garde film art in the years preceding the war and its durable quality was guaranteed by the company's trademark, its production logo featuring a parrot either perching upon the letter "O" or climbing out from it.

Wilma de Quiche (Wilma Kiss) and Paul Grimault: *Electronic Phenomena*, 1937

Giclée prints produced from stills of a colour 35 mm Technicolour reels Bois D'Arcy, CNC

The film projected onto the facade of the Pavilion of Light, painted for the Paris Exposition of 1937 by Raoul Dufy, with two projectors is the work of Wilma Kiss, a Hungarian painter who mastered animated cartoon making in New York and who taught animation in Berlin in the early 1930s before being employed by the Les Géméaux studio in Paris. The film presents abstract phenomena related to light and known from physics (lightning, sparking electric wires, fireworks, electrostatic discharge) through a plotless series of absurd situations showing the adventures of two anthropomorphic protagonists, Mr Positive Charge and Mrs Negative Charge. The film has a unique style, although the nondescript, oppressive locations and nightmarish backdrops of some scenes are reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical and Yves Tanguy's or Salvador Dalí's Surrealist paintings.

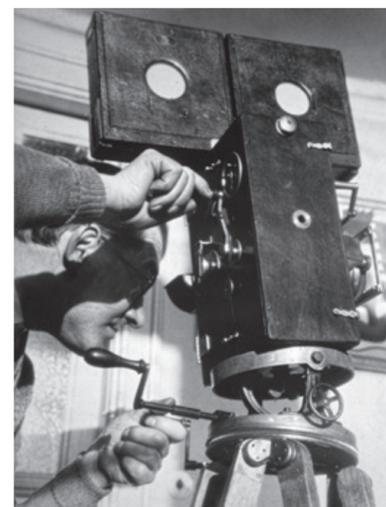
István Vásárhelyi: *Aqua Vitae*, 1940

(Shot by: István Vásárhelyi, stage design: Nándor Németh, puppets: Tibor Bérczy) 6 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 16 mm Private collection

This amateur film from the beginning of the war is the first surviving auteur puppet animation made in Hungary. It was originally shot on colour film stock. The story of this philosophical tale is based on the topos of the scientist who has found the recipe for the water of life, and who, by succeeding in bringing a dead man to life, tempts fate, whereupon Death prevents him from continuing in his endeavour. The powerful stage sets and the lighting emphasising the plasticity of the virtuosically modelled figures is somewhat reminiscent of the atmosphere



István Vásárhelyi: *Aqua Vitae*, 1940 Δ



Bruce Checefsky: *Béla* (based on György Gerő's film script), 1926/2010 ▽



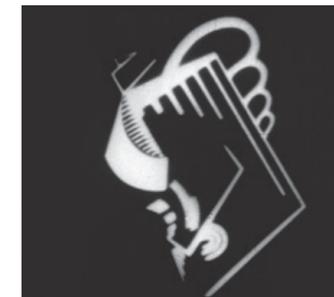
Sándor Bortnyik with a 35 mm film camera, ca. 1930

evoked by German Expressionist films between the world wars, such as Wegener's *The Golem*, Dreyer's *Vampire* and Murnau's *Nosferatu*.

Ernő Metzner: Accident, 1928

(In cooperation with Grace Chiang, cinematography: Eduard von Borsody) 21 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

Metzner, who was preparing to become a painter, pursued his studies at the Hungarian College of Fine Arts during World War I. For some time he worked in Budapest for Sándor Korda's periodical *Mozi* [Cinema], and in 1920 he settled in Berlin, where he first received commissions as a stage designer. In the early 1930s Metzner moved to France, where he participated in making the Expressionist film director Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *High and Low* and *Atlantis*, and travelling through England



Viking Eggeling: *Symphonie Diagonale*, 1924

he went to Hollywood. Metzner's short film resembles Béla Balázs's 1926 screenplay, titled *Die Abenteuer eines Zehmarkscheines* [The Adventures of a Ten-Mark Note] in that it also has a moralising tone and includes social criticism through the story of a note found, picked up and gambled away. The symbolism manifest in Metzner's short film as well as its formal range enhanced by the camera angles, the lighting and the

editing are all used to aid the psychological portrayal of the characters. The technical solutions facilitating the film's dramaturgy (or example optical distortions with an anamorphic lens creating a strongly surreal effect) elevate the short film of this director of Hungarian origin into a pioneering work of avant-garde film, which was banned at the time because of what contemporaneous censorship saw as "brutal and demoralising" scenes.

Viking Eggeling:

***Symphonie Diagonale*, 1924**

7 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

Symphonie Diagonale, regarded as the first important abstract film and the seminal work of absolute film, was completed by the Swedish Viking Eggeling in 1924, in Berlin. Prior to that, in 1917, Eggeling had already used the term *Generalbass der Malerei* ("Bass Motif of Painting") to refer to his optical system in which temporality could be visualised graphically, in two dimensions. He introduced his view of motion picture as being the synthesis of all the arts in his manifesto published in the periodical *MA* [Today], in Hungarian. The temporal rhythm of the *Symphonie Diagonale* is created by the infinitely variable interplay of contrasting abstract forms arranged along vertical and horizontal axes. Eggeling never saw the success of his film since he died of blood poisoning in 1925, a few days after its first public screening.

Mihály Polányi, who started out from the Galilei Circle, worked as a physicist and chemist in the 1920s in Berlin. After the Nazis came into power in 1933 he settled in England and got a teaching post at Manchester University as an economist. In 1940 he completed his "diagrammatic animation" *Unemployment and Money*, which was the first infographic piece made with motion picture tools. Influenced by British economist John Maynard Keynes' principle of macroeconomics, Polányi wanted to model supply and demand in the mid-1930s in a laboratory. He believed that money and monetary systems can be best represented visually with motion pictures. The model he used for the visual representation of what he himself called "statisopic" animation was Otto Neurath's picture statistics sys-



Gyula Macskássy, Félix Kassovitz, and György Szénásy: *Schmoll Symphonia*, 1939

tem, called Isotype, developed in 1926 with the intention of creating a universal optical language and is comparable to the German Dadaist pictogrammatic system, called *Zeichensprache* (sign language).

Gyula Macskássy, Félix Kassovitz, and György Szénásy:

***Schmoll Symphonia*, 1939**

(Musical score: Gusztáv Ilosvay) 1 min, colour, sound, digital copy of a 35 mm Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

In 1932 Bortnyik Sándor's students – Gyula Macskássy, János Halász and Félix Kassovitz

– founded Coloriton Filmstudio, which was regarded as the first Hungarian animation studio and operated right until the end of the war. When Halász left the studio in 1937, György Szénásy came in his place. Between the two world wars dozens of animated advertisements came out of their studio at Astoria, some of them hand-drawn and others stop motion advertising films. This advertisement film was commissioned by the Schmoll company to promote their shoe polishes. In *Schmoll Symphonia* the connection between the scenes placed in an ethereal environment and composed from the interplay of liquid and crystal-like elements was created by the metamorphosis of

Stills from György Gerő's film published in Lajos Kassák's journal *Dokumentum*, 1927



colours and abstract forms alluding to shoe polish and moving to the rhythm of jazz music composed by Gusztáv Ilosvay.

Jalu Kurek: OR (Rhythmic Calculation), 1934

3.5 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

Jalu Kurek, who befriended the Futurist Marinetti, among others, was one of the best known poets of the Kraków avant-garde. His 1934 *Rhythmic Calculation* has no plot as the consecutive scenes are arranged fol-

lowing the logic of free association. The film has a Surrealist effect but is lent a Dadaist character by the cuts and the order of the scenes. The highly suggestive inscriptions, animated diagrams and the negative live-action shots are exclusively subordinated to the temporality of the motion picture. Marcin Giżycki and Ignacy Szczepański reconstructed the film in 1985 based on the uncut fragments that have survived.

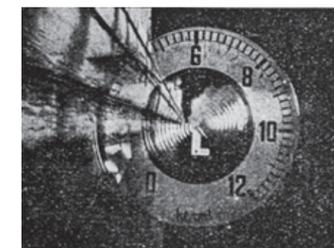
Alexander Laszlo (Sándor László): Hungarian Triangulum, 1937

(Cinematography: Rezső Icsesy, István Somkúti, sound: Károly Pulvári, sets: József Pán) 17 mins, b&w, sound, digital copy of a 35 mm Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)



Still photograph from the making of Miklós Bándy's film *Hands*, 1927

Alexander Laszlo earned his degree at the Budapest Music Academy and settled in Munich. In 1925, utilising the principle of synaesthesia between sounds and colours, he developed a device called *Farblichtklavier* (colour-light piano), in which a piano was connected to moving dazzle lights. This instrument differed from similar inventions (those invented by Wallace Rimington and Vladimir Baranov-Rossine) in that it was fitted with modulated colour filters through which abstract geometric painted patterns could be projected onto a screen set up in one end of a room. Laszlo also sought a way to express abstraction with movement and music when he composed an absolute film in 1927 to Honegger's orchestral work titled *Pacific 231*. Following the musical score Laszlo created light poetry glorifying the rolling of an engine at the



Alexander Laszlo: *Pacific 231*, 1927

then mind-blowing speed of 120 km/h. For a short period preceding his emigration to the United States Laszlo worked again in Hungary as a film score composer. In 1937 he made the experimental *Hungarian Triangulum* combining the Kotányi sisters' three piano pieces of varying styles; this work can be regarded as the forerunner of modern day musical video clips.

László Dudás: Jazz, 1936

1 min, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 9.5 mm Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

Ninety-five percent of the works made in the first, "silent film" period of Hungarian film history are either lost or have perished. This particularly makes invaluable those amateur films that can help us form a vague picture of the quality of works – that can no longer be reconstructed – which were produced thanks to the investment made by Alexander Korda, Michael Curtiz and Bela Lugosi during the one and a half decade hiatus in domestic filmmaking in Hungary. UNICA, the international organisation of amateur filmmakers, was established in 1937 upon a Hungarian initiative. The Hungarian amateur film association, AME, was founded in 1931, and its members mostly used the then most affordable, 9.5 mm French film format. The unconventional sequences of *Jazz* rolling to the throbbing rhythm of music are akin to the optical symphonies of German avant-garde films.

Miklós Bándy (Nicolas Baudy): Hands. The Life and Love of the Gentler Sex, 1927

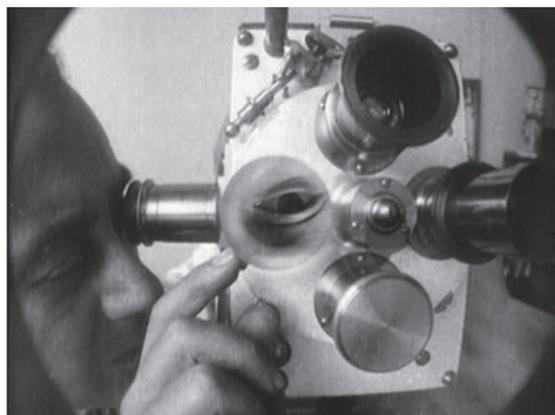
(Musical score: Marc Blitzstein, cinematography: Leopold Kutzleb, producer: Stella F. Simon) 13 mins, b&w, sound, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

Viking Eggeling met the Hungarian Miklós Bándy, shortly before his death. Bándy, a journalist and photographer, pursued studies at several universities in Europe, studying philosophy and sociology. His essay in French published in *Schémas* in 1927 was the first film review ever written on Eggeling's art. In the same year Bándy shot *Hands* in Berlin. In this abstract film made as an optical study of movement acting is replaced by the rhythmic movement of the hands of anonymous players. The abstraction and sign-like quality expressed by the human body's movement seemed to hold the promise of creating a form of optical communication which would have enabled the development of a medium-specific language only governed by the rules of film-thinking.



Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí: *An Andalusian Dog*, 1929 Δ

Man Ray: *Emak Bakia*, 1926 ▽



János Manninger: *Scream* (back side of Manninger's postcard sent to Imre Pán, 1929)





Jenő Janovics: *World's Monster*, 1920

János Manninger: *Hands and Feet (Eine beinliche Angelegenheit)*, 1928

16 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

The film shot in 1928 by János Manninger, who worked as a photographer in the Budapest Hunnia Film Studio, provides a parallel to Miklós Bányó's piece also filmed in Berlin a year before. In Manninger's work players are substituted by anatomic fragments, i.e. hands and feet, and show the relationship between a man and a woman. The film shot from unusual angles is rich in light and shade effects, and the optical interplay of the montages, used instead of cuts, clearly shows that Manninger had mastered the logic applied to spatial and temporal associations in Soviet-Russian Constructivist photography and Eisenstein's dialectic approach to film. The original film's "picturesque" music score for violin was composed by Paul Dessau.

Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy: *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924

(Musical score: George Antheil) 19 mins, b&w, sound, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

This film bearing the stylistic elements of Dadaism and cubism alike is one of the emblematic masterpieces of avant-garde motion picture. Léger, a French Cubist painter, was driven by the ambition to evoke the same aesthetics of industrial civilization through the rhythm of his film's images as those manifest in the themes of his paintings. The objects and persons appearing in the film respond

with their static or robotic movements to sequences composed to the rhythm of the music (arrangement of sounds created by player pianos, typewriters and airplane propellers) as montages or as prism-like transitions dissolving into each other.

Julius Pinschewer and Guido Seeber: *Du mußt zur Kiphol (KIPHO)*, 1925

5 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Martin Loiperdinger's collection, Germany

The makers of this advertisement made for a film and photography exhibition in Berlin took *Ballet Mécanique*, made in the previous year, as their model. Their film's innovation is manifest not only in the technological implementation of the kaleidoscopic flow of scenes guaranteed by special effects, but also in its introducing the audience to the process of film production, besides presenting the history of motion picture making. The work has the formal-stylistic elements of Cubism, while in its narration it verges on the post-modern as it makes a reference to itself but also borrowed some scenes from *Dr Caligari*, considered the peak of German Expressionist film.

Stills from Jenő Janovics's film drama *World's Monster*, a Hungarian–Romanian co-production made in Cluj in 1920

Budapest, Hungarian National Film Archive (MaNDA)

This drama based on Jenő Gyalui's script and made with physician-bacteriologist Constantin Levaditi's contribution draws attention to the dangers of syphilis, a disease that held the world in fear at the time. The instruments used during the shooting were provided by bacteriologist and university professor Dr Hugó Preisz's microbiology laboratory set up in Budapest in 1919, during the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The inclination to abstraction which could be unfolded from the same subject was present in the Hungarian art in the coming years too. A good example to it is Vilmos Aba-Novák's film project of 1935 titled *Death Germ*.

Documentary illustrating the operation of Nathan Lerner's *Light-machine*, 1941

(Shot by Edward Rinker, László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes) 3 mins, colour, silent, digital copy of a 16 mm Ann Arbor, Moholy-Nagy Foundation

This film was made in the Chicago School of Design, which can be regarded as the successor of the New Bauhaus, with the participation of László Moholy-Nagy, the school's director, and György Kepes, the head of the light department. This motion picture shows the operation of Lerner's "Light-machine" – which modulates the environment by mechanically mixing colour light – in a poetic way while respecting the film camera's descriptive documentarism. Lerner's invention was used as a model during an experiment he conducted during World War II and it was originally supposed to divert the pilots of the German enemy bomber planes approaching Chicago. This abstract piece projected onto a wall and resembling

a moving photogram can be regarded as the improvement of Moholy's first film recorded on colour film stock, titled *Light Play – Black-White-Grey*, 1930–1932).

Man Ray: *Emak Bakia*, 1926

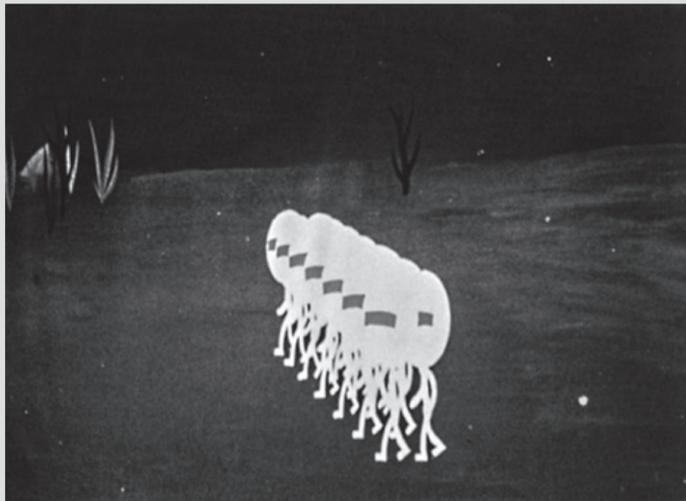
7 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

Man Ray's film created a kind of film poetry that has all the attributes of a Surrealist motion picture (irrationality, automatism, the psychological portrayal of characters and narration that goes against all conventions and logic). Nevertheless, the film can be regarded more as a Dadaist piece in that it radically juxtaposes the act of vision (while awake and in dreams) with the aim of making the audience believe that it is not showing an illusion but rather the fictive reality created by the camera. A reference to this is made by the opening scene with Man Ray's self-portrait appearing in a mirror as he is recording himself with the camera.

Heinrich Brocksieper: *Seamstress*, 1930

2 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

The greatest influence on the art of Heinrich Brocksieper, who studied painting in the Bauhaus school in Weimar from 1919, was exerted by Lyonel Feininger, and Johannes Itten, who led the school's preparatory course. Brocksieper's attention turned to photography and experimental filmmaking in 1927. During World War II almost all his works were destroyed, with only some fragments, among them this photogram film, having survived. The eerie and abstract effect of the film composed from animated scissors, buttons, safety pins and yarns is in contrast with what the artist himself thought about the scene. In his view the sewing tools are directed by a mature



Wilma de Quiche (Wilma Kiss) and Paul Grimault: *Electronic Phenomena*, 1937

Bruce Checefsky: *Béla* (based of György Gerő's film script), 1926/2010



dramaturgy – they fight each other, and when they fall apart they regroup themselves in new formations.

Man Ray: *Le Retour à la Raison (Return to Reason)*, 1923

3 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Private collection

This work was projected at the last gathering of the Parisian dadaists, the happening titled *Soirée du Cœur à barbe* (Evening of the Bearded Heart). Man Ray's camera-less photographs, the artist himself called rayograms, are animated in the film: object placed on light-sensitive paper and lit up move around the picture field in front of the motionless camera, and it is not the camera that follows them. Man Ray used shadows to create a three-dimensional, sculptural effect of objects transferred into a two-dimensional plane and arranged like a bricolage. The connection between the spontaneously improvised sequences of witty photogram collages overriding all logic is peculiarly ensured by the random arrangement of the consecutive shots. The film's title is based on a satirical writing written by Dadaist painter Francis Picabia in his own periodical, titled 391.

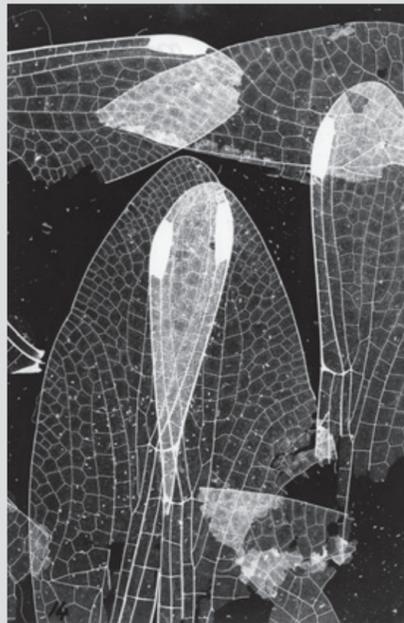
Franciszka and Stefan Themerson: *Pharmacy*, 1930, reconstructed by Bruce Checefsky, 2001

4.5 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 35 mm Collection of Bruce Checefsky

Franciszka and Stefan Themerson: *Moment Musical* (1933), reconstructed by Bruce Checefsky, 2006

6 mins, b&w, sound, digital copy of a 16 mm Collection of Bruce Checefsky

Besides Jerzy Zarzycki and Tadeusz Kowalski, the most important representatives of the Polish film avant-garde were Franciszka



Tihamér Gyarmathy: *Photogram (Wings of Dragonflies)*, 1949

and Stefan Themerson, a Warsaw-based married couple who established a film-making workshop called SAF in 1935, and published a film periodical titled *f.a.* They made the motion picture by putting objects not on light-sensitive paper, as it was usually done at the time, but on transparent foil placed over glass panes. Then they filmed these objects with the camera set up under the trick table and the lamps being moved frame by frame, which resulted in the movement of shadows and their deformations. In the late 1930s the Themersons first fled to Paris, then London but their films all perished during World War II. Nevertheless, they provided a significant model in the 1980s for the Polish Neo-avant-garde. In 1988 Piotr Zarebski reconstructed the couple's film titled *Europa*. Their earliest work, *Pharmacy*, showing the chaotic assemblage of the various objects of a chemical labo-

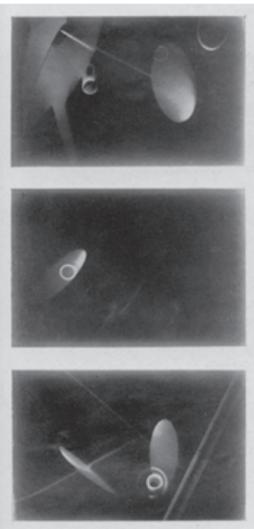
ratory, was reconstructed on the Themersons' original trick table by the same Bruce Checefsky who did the remake of György Gerő's film. Checefsky also breathed life into the Themersons' first sound film, *Moment Musical*, animated to music by Ravel. Originally made as a perfume advertisement the composition is born out of the abstract interplay of light created by pieces of jewellery, porcelain and glass objects.

Tihamér Gyarmathy: *Experimental Film*, 1953

(Cinematography: Attila Szilágyi) 4 mins, b&w, silent, digital copy of a 16 mm master containing negative and positive sequences Private collection

This film is composed of photograms Gyarmathy made between 1947 and 1953 of various plant and animal preparations as well as finely structured material samples

and liquid drops. First the artist copied the objects onto light-sensitive photo paper, then photographed these abstract compositions on positive and negative film stock, thus ending up with slide photograms, which he then framed and placed into a projector fitted with a condenser lens. By varying levels of brightness and utilising the transparency of superimposed forms (multiple layers of slides, often refracted by prisms, and tulle pieces placed in front of the lens) the organic and at the same time constructive structures (for example the exquisitely fine fibres of a butterfly) produced a virtual space in which the illusion of movement was created by the alternating and changing elements of the "sandwich" of overlaid images. *Experimental Film* was made by filming the "show" during which the film frames were manipulated with a slide projector in real time.



László Moholy-Nagy: *Synopsis of an Abstract Film (Series of photograms)*, 1922



Tihamér Gyarmathy: *Experimental Film*, 1953

- 1 Luis Buñuel, *My Last Breath* (Glasgow : Fontana, 1985), 103.
- 2 Lajos Kassák and Imre Pán, *Az izmusok története* (Budapest : Magvető, 1972), 285.
- 3 Andor Tiszay's recollection on György Gerő (born György Glück) from 1972, in the property of Gyula Száva
- 4 Kassák and Pán, *Az izmusok*, note 2.
- 5 György Gerő, "Film. Film. Film.", *Dokumentum* (January 1927), 17.
- 6 "Das Filmanuskript der Zukunft", *Film-Kurier* (12 March 1925), n. p.
- 7 László Gara, "Az 'abszolút' film", *Magyar Írás* no. 1 (1926), 8.
- 8 *op. cit.*, note 5., 19 (The film notes confiscated by the authorities at Gerő's flat during a search warrant as proof for the lawsuit against him in 1928, are also exhibiting a different set of ideas. See BFL [Budapest City Archives] VII. 5. c. Minutes of the Budapest Royal Criminal Court Proceedings, inv. no. 9026/1928, B/138).
- 9 "Filmfelvétel", *Dokumentum* (April 1927), 27.
- 10 Jolán Simon's letter to Lajos Kassák, Budapest, 8 August 1926, Museum of Literature – Kassák Museum, Budapest; inv. no. 2063/151.
- 11 Jolán Simon's letter to Lajos Kassák, Budapest, 1926 September, *ibid.*, inv. no. 2063/161.
- 12 György Gerő's letter to Imre Pán, Berlin, 19 August 1927, in the collection of Ferenc Kiss.
- 13 Béla Gerő, "A dadaizmus", *Új kultúra* (October 1922), 180.
- 14 BFL, inv. no. 9026/1928, B/138, and PIM, Collection of Oral History, József M. Pásztor's and Ferenc Csaplár's interview with Magda Hauswirth, Budapest, 10 February 1976, inv. no. K/83.



István Kató-Kiszly : *Let's Learn the Baby-Language*, 1932

(Film) Experiments Brought To Life. The First Cinema of the Avant-Garde

Hungarian National Gallery, 8 July – 5 October 2014
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