

**SZÍNHÁZ- ÉS FILMMŰVÉSZETI EGYETEM**  
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ABSTRACT

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My thesis is that there are connecting points between the popular culture of Austria-Hungary and Hollywood. Central Europe did influence the American film, especially at the time of its conception, during the first decades of the 20th century.

This paper is an essay and examines its theme from **historical, cultural historical, theater and film historical** aspects, its approach is therefore interdisciplinary – and personal in the same time. In my opinion the history of the region shaped the cultural ambiance and the resulting unique and typical way of storytelling of the region influenced Hollywood. This theme has never been examined from all historical, cultural historical, theater and film historical contexts in a single study. Furthermore, not only does this study differ from all others to date in regards of the simultaneous consideration of scientific disciplines and art forms but perhaps it is also unique in its **supranational** stance. The Czech, Austrian or Hungarian publications have written solely from the Czech, Austrian or Hungarian viewpoints respectively and only about those immigrants who arrived from Prague, Vienna or Budapest. For example, some Austrian publications repeatedly emphasize the role of “Altösterreich”, the old Austria – and even when they analyze the films of Mihály Kertész (Michael Curtiz) or Sándor Korda (Alexander Korda), portraying them as par excellence *Austrian* filmmakers and they fail to mention that these directors were not Austrians but Hungarians, while the Hungarian publications trumpet the cliché of “In Hollywood anyone who’s somebody is a Hungarian”.

**I think it does not matter if a significant filmmaker happened to be a Czech, an Austrian or a Hungarian. What matters is that these artists had come from a heterogeneous and multicultural region.** That they had an ”Austro-Hungarian” identity.

Because

- a.) they arrived to America from a **multinational** empire,

- b.) in this multinational empire they had learned a **metalanguage**,
- c.) this knowledge was **crystallized by their historical experiences**: the disintegration of the empire, revolutions, wars and persecution,
- d.) finding themselves in an similarly **multinational** country with a **dissimilar mentality**: the United States, their professional skills and historical experiences enabled them to communicate to and touch almost anyone.

In other words, immigrants having arrived from the cultural hubs of Austria-Hungary were able to benefit from their such knowledge in America – at the other end of the world.

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In the British and American film literature most studies and books that describe the life or career of filmmakers with Austro-Hungarian origins usually don't say much about their subject's origin or early career. This is rather strange because for a long time the predominant physiological school of thought emphasized the important influence of childhood experiences, especially in the American scientific literature. I have studied a number of English language artist's biographies and found that most authors had contented themselves with stating that their subject and their family had arrived from far away, somewhere in turbulent Central and Eastern Europe but their real life begun in the United States. This reveals the old pattern of escape stories in which **Central and Eastern Europe is dark and chaotic and America is the land of light and opportunities**, as well as the **myth of tabula rasa**. This evidently is also an oversimplifying point of view. Henceforth, I aim to **shade this mythic approach**.

For most of the American and Western European authors beyond Vienna lies the obscure Eastern Europe. For instance, Neal Gabler's classic book *An Empire of Their Own – How The Jews Invented Hollywood* analyzes how an Eastern European (and thus distinctly not 'European': not Western European) Jewish milieu and way of thinking left its imprint on the American film. Jonathan Rosenbaum, the great film critic and historian, when asked about the secret of the 'Lubitsch touch' he **also mentioned Eastern Europe** as the source of his inspiration. And these are but two (eminent) examples. In other words, because the authors

know little or nothing about the history or culture of Central and Eastern Europe, they **schematize** it.

In my essay, dissimilar to the Czech, Austrian, Hungarian and Anglo-Saxon approaches, I attempt to **analyze** the Central European region and the local historical-cultural ambience (emphasis on both aspects are equally important) **from an unified – not a national – perspective**, therefore taking this multinational milieu as the starting point when trying to connect the dots that link Hollywood to Central Europe. Additionally, I will try to draw attention to the fact that these émigrés came to America not from isolated provincial townships but from **cosmopolitan, vibrant and colorful cultural centers** like Berlin, Budapest, Prague and Vienna.

In my paper I touch on what kind of an impression prevails in Hollywood about the middle of Europe. Using as the basis Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* – a classic in Britain but a lesser known novel in Central Europe, which has been adopted to the screen three times in the United States –, I will analyze in a separate chapter the American and Western European view of 'Ruritania', the imaginary Central European country, and the evolution of this notion. To my knowledge no Hungarian language study or essay have chosen the filmic interpretation of 'Ruritania' for its topic.

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As far as the structure of this essay is concerned, first we will analyze in broad strokes the history of Austria and Austria-Hungary, then the unique ambience of civilization that evolved in the empire. Based on the **heritage** of **baroque** and universal **world theater** a popular mass culture had formed during the 18-19th century in Vienna and other centers of the empire (above all in Prague and from the second half of the 19th century in Budapest), with **idiosyncratic clichés, strong and unambiguous characters, quotations, in an easy to understand language**. Most of their creators were from the 'borderland' – these artists had mediated between countries, nations and cities and they had been capable of speaking in a

common language. They had influenced the manifold of peoples of the region using a common metalanguage.

The most effective art form between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century had been the operetta which **originated from the centuries long tradition of the baroque world theater and the Volksstück**. The popularity of their creators and performers rivaled that of today's film stars. Their melodies (for example the clichés from the polonaise, mazurka and csardas, their role and plot schemes offered patterns for millions in the theaters of the European country with the largest territory – and **also touched millions in the multinational empire, regardless of their nationality**. One of the most performed operetta, *The Merry Widow*, had become perhaps the most successful cultural export item of Austria-Hungary. Ferenc Lehár's work has been adapted twice to film in Hollywood: in 1925 by the Viennese-born Erich von Stroheim, and in 1934 by the also Central European-born Ernst Lubitsch.

Both of them, together with numerous writers, directors, actors, composers, left the boiling and dangerous Central Europe that was sinking into the chaos of revolutions and wars – and took with them the secret of the common cultural metalanguage: the **human touch**. That which they had learned in Austria-Hungary.

To a degree, this had become the language of Hollywood. The immigrants had found themselves in an also multinational country. However, there was one fundamental difference between Central Europe and the United States: in the latter **people wanted to cooperate not to segregate**. This called for a common language. The common language of film became that – the simple stories and strong characters behind the images – the grammar and vocabulary of which, in my opinion, were **partly** created by those émigrés from Austria-Hungary.

Erich von Stroheim's Lehár adaptation is an immersed, sensitive depiction of characters and situations. Lubitsch's version on the other hand is according to the taste of **mainstream Hollywood**, a film made with larger audiences in mind. In my opinion Lubitsch was able to transform the **theatrical clichés and dramatic elements** that he learned (mostly from Max

Reinhardt, the most influential theater artist of the first half of the 20th century) into filmic expressions. Generations have been learning, even today, from him, the magician of the film.

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The two film adaptations of *The Merry Widow* are examples of the two major trends of the Hollywood cinema: Stroheim, one of the greatest American directors of all time, may be likened to Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick. His **self-destructing characters** are not the typical American heroes, their stories hardly fit into the Hollywood model. Much more so are Lubitsch's **strong and unambiguous characters**.

In the last part of the essay I will consider some other filmmakers originating from Austria-Hungary – on the one hand, for drawing attention to some other points of connection. Because there is much more to it than merely our pride of some artists' Czech, Austrian or Hungarian roots. On the other hand, we will briefly outline in what ways Stroheim and Lubitsch influenced subsequent generations. At the same time – by short intermezzos in between chapters – we will also seek to find what notion of Central Europe lived and does live today in American filmmakers' thinking.

Tragically but understandably, that peculiar metalanguage capable of touching the human soul has sagged in its birthplace, the very Central and Eastern European occupied and isolated nation-states (with the notable exception of Austria, its center, partially escaping this for historical reasons). Understandably, for the wars, changes of system and social landslides have destroyed much more important things than that during the 20th century. At the beginning of the 21st century some Eastern European directors started to make American style films, unwittingly copying the watered down versions of the very clichés that generations earlier his predecessors brought to Hollywood. Alas, the common language has been lost: these films are only able touch the audiences of their own small country, at best.

