

opposite sex.”¹²⁸ Clearly, in the case of my university, students widely reported that both males and female students were valued differently and treated differently from each other based on their sex.¹²⁹ I hope that in some small way, the very presence of my survey provoked thoughts in and conversations among my students. Awareness, indeed, often catalyzes greater change.

Still, changing gender bias in Hungarian higher education will ultimately be most effective if and when taken up by scholars and activists who study these problems in the Hungarian language. Perhaps future scholarship in Magyar will not only validate these equality issues and gendered experiences, but will start a wider public conversation about the need for greater gender equality both inside and outside the Hungarian classroom. Truly, “acknowledging the reality of sexism can be deeply troubling, as it requires reframing one’s worldview.”¹³⁰ In Hungary, as in every country around the globe, wide re-negotiation and re-framing of sexist worldviews is required to realize a more gender-equal society. Perhaps with further scholarship, public conversation, and time, my students, the future leaders of Hungary, can help re-shape those worldviews.

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Marcell Jankovics and Ferenc Rofusz: The Grand Master and the Enfant Terrible of Hungarian Animation

Paul Morton

Columbia University
 2960 Broadway New York, NY 10027-6902
www.columbia.edu
pwmorton1980@yahoo.com

Eötvös Loránd University
 H-1088 Budapest Rákóczi út. 5
www.elte.hu
 Advisor: Tibor Frank

This paper draws biographical sketches of two major figures of Hungarian animation. Marcell Jankovics began working at Pannonia Studio in Budapest in the early 1960s and established himself as a multi-faceted talent. He has been a naïve slapstick artist (in his Gustav shorts), an eerie interpreter of Hungarian myths (in his adaptations of Johnny Corncob and Son of the White Mare) and an angry anti-communist jester (in “Inauguration.”) Ferenc Rofusz had a comparatively unprolific career, making only three major shorts at Pannonia in the early 1980s: “The Fly,” “Gravity,” and “Deadlock.” The three short films are, in their way, the work of a dissident. Each tells the story of a doomed bid for freedom and individuality within three very different Kafkaesque landscapes. This paper examines both artists’ changing concerns through the communist and post-communist eras up to their most recent projects.. Jankovics’ The Tragedy of Man is an indictment of Hungary’s current political troubles. Rofusz’s “Ticket” is his first major non-political art film.

Marcell Jankovics

During the 2008 Super Bowl, GMC aired an ad for its new hybrid SUV featuring, as incongruously as any car commercial, a black-and-white ink drawing of a pulsating muscular Sisyphus pushing a giant boulder up a mountain. At the beginning of the clip the faceless Sisyphus is a well-defined Michelangelo muscleman, containing more weight than any real human being could possibly possess and he moves a small boulder. Gradually, as the boulder gets too large to remain on the screen, the Sisyphus becomes less defined, his muscles disappear, he becomes a skinny figure made up of little more than a few black lines, more like a being of us than above us. The ink lines of his form alternately become thicker and thinner with each step, giving the impression of an entire body consumed in a struggle. At one point, for the length of two seconds, the entire figure dissolves into a single line – one can almost see the hand of the artist making a quick dash across the page – as the figure musters his strength. The camera which at first shoots Sisyphus and the bottom part of the boulder from a medium shot, subtly zooms back to reveal the full weight of the rock and to, by the end of the commercial, reduce Sisyphus to a tiny black figure on the mountain.

With the comforting backdrop of a New Age piano a radio-quality voice intones, “Why push? Why change? Why grow? Why dream? Questions you don’t have to ask yourself if you never say, ‘It’s good enough.’ If you never say, ‘It can’t be done.’” To those who have

seen the original incarnation of this cartoon, Marcell Jankovics’ 1974 short “Sisyphus,” that narration and that music is a terrible bastardization, as awful as any of Microsoft’s co-optations of rock standards. The original soundtrack of “Sisyphus” was spare, nothing more than the sound of heavy breathing that grew increasingly more desperate and more primal; in the last few seconds before Sisyphus rests the boulder atop the mountain and the sound goes quiet, his desperate breathing almost reaches into an infantile scream. “Sisyphus” is the work of someone who sees himself, in the words of GMC, pushing, changing, growing and dreaming. It’s also the work of someone who is constantly aware of himself fighting, aging and dying. Jankovics provided those sounds himself. “I wanted people to feel hard work,”¹ he says.

There are two other films with which, “Sisyphus” forms a trilogy: “Deep Water / Mélyviz”² (1970) and “Fight / Küzdök” (1977). He’s not resistant to political interpretations of any of them. But they are more personal than political. The stories are more about man in conflict with himself than with society.

“Deep Water” depicts a drowning man who makes at least several dozen grotesque facial expressions in the course of one minute. His face becomes huge and then small. Large eyes, then no eyes, devilish teeth, and then nothing at all. And all we hear are the screams, which, as with the heavy breathing in “Sisyphus,”

1 All quotes are taken from an interview with Marcell Jankovics conducted in Budapest on February 5, 2008.

2 The film was originally released in English with the title “SOS.”

Jankovics also provided himself. The film ends with a long shot of the cave in which the drowning man is fighting for his life. In “Fight,” for the first time in his career, Jankovics depicts heavily detailed and subtle facial expressions. The two-minute short is about a sculptor at war with the sculpture of a beautiful youth he is trying to carve out of a block of stone with a chisel. As the statue starts to take form, it also takes on a life of its own and fights back, using its own chisel. The statue chips wrinkles into the sculptor’s face, grinds off his hair, and then systematically knocks out each of his teeth. The soundtrack is spare, unmusical, nothing more than the sound of chipping rock. Jankovics shoots the scene intimately. The film was made three years before *Raging Bull*, but it has a weirdly similar approach to depicting two bodies entangled in conflict. It’s as if Jankovics were resting a camera right over the shoulder of one fighter while staring at his opponent’s face. In a departure from his previous work, the facial expressions are organic, the wrinkles on the statue’s forehead are focused and his mouth is pursed into a state of frustration and rage. The sculptor’s eyes look bewildered, and then old and defeated. “Fight” ends with a long-shot of the sculptor, now a defeated old man sitting down before his masterwork – a clean white, serene statue, that looks like a David – that has aged him in a short two minutes. He falls off his stool and dies. It was an odd film for a 36-year-old man to make.³

3 A fourth film, “Prometheus” was made in 1992. It completes the series, making what was originally planned as a trilogy into a tetral-

ogy. It depicts a Prometheus bringing the flame of knowledge from the top of a mountain and running downhill. As the flame slowly dies out and the scenery goes darker, Prometheus appears older and more decrepit. “‘Sisyphus’ was about going up the mountain,” Jankovics says. “‘Prometheus’ was about coming down.”

“The realistic style helped the idea in this film,” he says. “There was a colleague who asked me why I didn’t make it in a humorous cartoon style. I wanted to cry at the end of the film.” Of the three films in the trilogy, though, it is the one most likely to engender laughter. The image of an artwork at war with the artist is inherently humorous. The moment the statue makes his first chip into the sculptor’s forehead carries the firm beat of a surprise joke. Jankovics doesn’t take the reaction very well. “Of course it’s funny if I have no teeth,” he says. “People can laugh at me. It’s a real drama, but always, [every time it’s played] they laugh at me.”

The Dissident Jester

Marcell Jankovics was born in Budapest in 1941. As a child, his family was sent to the countryside after his father, an official in the Hungarian National Bank was sent to prison by the communist government. “There was one cinema in town and every week I could go there to see Russian films, Eisenstein for instance, and Italian opera films.” The first cartoon he remembers seeing is Ivan Ivanov-Vano’s *The Hunchbacked Horse* (1947)⁴, a major example of Walt Disney-inspired Russian animation. But cartoons were not a big part of his youth. He poured through

4 The original Russian title is *Konyok-gorbunok*.

his aunt's large collection of art books and read his great-uncle's translations of Russian literature, learning French so he could read the parts of Tolstoy his great-uncle failed to translate. His uncle worked in the applied arts and his aunt was a teacher in an industrial arts high school. His family's background meant that he would be denied any further formal schooling after graduating from the Benedictine high school which he loved, and this made his dream career as an architect "I couldn't imagine myself as an artist. I wanted to be useful." - unlikely. He was a constant drawer and a friend suggested that he take an exam for a job at Pannonia. He did, starting working there in the early 1960s.

Given his background, it's not surprising that in so many of his films he takes on the persona of an angry anti-communist jester. One of his shorts in the *Gustavus / Gusztáv* series, "Gustavus and alienation / Gusztáv elidegenedik" (1976)⁵ depicts a hilariously depressed Gustavus, a low-level bureaucrat, bumbling his way through a failed suicide attempt and then seeking refuge from the ant farm of a mundane society inside an iron tube at a construction site. "Inauguration / Hídatavás" (1969) was an even stranger, sadder and funnier film.

Using what was then a relatively-new technology that allowed animation cameras to ape the movements of live-action cameras, "Inauguration" opens with a majestic, loving depiction of a suspension bridge similar to the new Elizabeth Bridge that had been completed

just five years before in 1964. For the first few minutes of the 9-minute piece, Jankovics' camera lovingly runs along the lines of the bridge's suspension and the soundtrack is consumed by the blowing of an empty wind. We see a crowd of stationary spectators form, first from a bird's-eye long shot as dots, then, closer to the ground as immobile figures making the indistinct white noise of a crowd. A band plays and an official appears to cut the ribbon for the new bridge. Cutting the ribbon proves to be a difficult task, and the official becomes trapped in a slapstick routine trying everything possible to cut the ribbon, going so far as to use a blow torch and then a jackhammer. There's no smooth transition to mark the changes in his expression. For a couple of frames the official appears as an angry berserk devil and then, for another couple of frames, he's a pleading pathetic man with a big nose. It is an effect Jankovics would use again and again even in his more serious films. "In films you need to have actors act for you. In cartoons, you don't need that."

Accordingly, Jankovics' characters are rarely natural actors. "Fellini wrote that he wanted to be an animator originally, because [animators] could imagine everything and could draw everything and that he was tied down to reality," he says. "It's not true because [Fellini] could change reality. All the directors I love the most - Eisenstein, Fellini, Ken Russell - they are fantastic people. I didn't like Antonioni and Bergman because [in their films] only the actors are important, nothing else."

The crowd erupts in laughter and eventually the official sets up a pile of

dynamite by the ribbon, presses down on the lever to make it explode, and ends up with a fitting accomplishment: the destruction of the bridge. Jankovics ends the film with a long shot of the bridge now cut in two, leaving an enormous valley impassable, again with nothing more on the soundtrack than the empty sound of wind. "Inauguration" is essentially a Looney Tunes routine stuck between two near-religious architecture studies, first of a bridge in a construction phase and then in its tragic, destroyed state. It's not quite clear where the comedy ends and the tragedy begins.

"The message was that ideologies were more important than the forms and content and the real aim of...the bridge," Jankovics says. He was thinking about the difficulty of connecting with the West, in particular of his visit to his sister, who had found her way to the US awhile back and was working in the American embassy in Switzerland. Jankovics got a visa to visit her in 1964 for what was his first time outside of Hungary and had ended up traveling Italy.

The head of Pannonia studios, George Matolcsy, he said, helped mediate between the animators and the powers that funded the studio. "I was on the edge." But about half of his ideas were rejected. Jankovics wanted to do another 13-episode season of *Gusztáv* in which his low-level bureaucrat would be promoted to a chief. "I was fed up with the stories of the small man." That was turned down. "They said they were too depressive, that there was no humor in them." His favorite film that was never made was

about a statue that "could look into all the windows in a town. The story was that the statue was built up from the bricks of the houses of the town and in the end there were no houses, only the statue." The statue then falls and ruins everything.

Reinterpreting Hungarian Myths

Yellow Submarine (1968), George Dunning's psychedelic Beatles musical was released in Hungary in 1970. Its influence is obvious in Jankovics' *Johnny Corncob / János Vitéz* (1973)⁶, an adaptation of Sándor Petöfi's epic poem and Hungary's first animated feature film. Jankovics' depiction of several of his film's villains - a cruel landlord, a gang of bandits, Turkish soldiers - are modeled closely on *Yellow Submarine's* Blue Meanies.

"*Yellow Submarine* had a great affect on me," he says. "The style of *Yellow Submarine* was based on popular [British] style of the end of the 19th century, the same time as when Hungarians were coming up in the great arts." (It had a significant effect on some of his colleagues as well, most notably Sándor Reisenbüchler in his film "Capturing the Sun and Moon / A Nap és a Hold elrablása." (1968)) It's something of a strange and fun coincidence that in order for Jankovics to recreate one of Hungary's

⁶ The literal translation of *János Vitéz* is "John the Valiant." But it has appeared in English translation as "Johnny Corncob," a reference to the hero's nickname in the story, which may be better translated as "Johnny Grain O'Corn."

⁵ Co-directed with Ildikó Sz. Szilágyi

great national myths, he employed a style that had been built around the Beatles' music.

But there was one major difference between Dunning's approach and Jankovics'. Both films depict figures with illogical proportions painted in solid colors. But Dunning, Jankovics says, did not consider how those leaps into illogic would inform his narrative. "[Dunning] had no idea why he gave a big foot to any of his characters. I knew why I wanted to give a great foot to János Vitez," – he's the only human character in the film to be so depicted, "because of the folk perspective. He was a great hero." By shaping the figure with big feet, at every moment of the film we are forced to view him from below. Dunning apparently made no similar considerations. (One could, of course, argue that that very lack of explanation for *Yellow Submarine's* disproportions was the very point of its aesthetic, the psychedelic and child-like embrace of complete illogic.) Jankovics is not as enamored of *Yellow Submarine* as he was in his youth. "Watch it without the music, you won't like it. The Beatles music is better than the film." And he never quite returned to the style in his own work partly because so many people told him he was only making a "copy." That's not entirely true.

Stanza by stanza, Jankovics' film is remarkably faithful to the original poem. It opens with a relatively chaste sex scene – "[H]e kissed her mouth: one time? a hundred? / Only He-Who-Knows-All-Things could get them numbered"⁷ – for

which Jankovics artfully fades out into a series of cutouts of doves kissing amid sprouting flowers. The poem exists in a funky world where one must travel from Hungary through Italy, India and Poland to get to France which is suffering under the occupation of Turkish soldiers. Jankovics, like Petöfi, employs childish stereotypes of world cultures such as the French king, who is short, fat, and foppish, and is constantly followed by two angels holding a crown above his head.

Petöfi either never visited Italy or was making a fun joke when he wrote, "Since Italy's always in winter's harsh vise; / Our soldiers were marching on sheer snow and ice," and "when it got a bit colder, / Each dismounted and carried his horse on his shoulder."⁸ Jankovics accordingly imagines a Venice filled with buildings leaning at odd angles whose canals have been completely frozen over. His soldiers carry their horses on their backs in an astonishingly orderly fashion and skate around the frozen canals for the beginning of a travel montage that uses some early '70s Hungarian folk-rock. During his soldiers' march through India's mountains, Petöfi writes, "And their drink was peculiar, it must be allowed, / When thirsty, they squeezed water out of cloud."⁹ Jankovics' soldiers reach out and grab long purple clouds with a cane, which they then wrap around their heads. Like the best comedies, the humor of both the poem and the film *Johnny*

his introduction for his faithfulness to the original text with his verse translation. He also acknowledges his translation's inferiority to the original.

7 Sándor Petöfi, *John the Valiant: A Bilingual Edition*. Tr. John Ridland. (Corvina: Budapest, 1999), 35. Ridland makes a good case in

8 Ibid, 81.

9 Ibid, 81.

Corncob masks a grim, tragic sense of life. Jankovics and Petöfi are disturbingly light-hearted and easy-going in depicting cruelty. János Vitez cuts Turkish soldiers in half – their entrails are red and flat – with the same ease one would use in slicing salami. He burns bandits alive in their den, watching the flames reach out into the outer reaches of the forest. It's a brutal film. The Blue Meanies in *Yellow Submarine* get their comeuppance by turning into flowers.

Son of the White Mare / Fehérlófia (1982), Jankovics' other great adaptation of a Hungarian myth is a grim, nightmarish film. If János Vitez, dressed in bright red and yellow like John Lennon's band leader in *Yellow Submarine*, seems to exist in a world of perpetual daytime. Fehérlófia, a sun-child built of simple geometric shapes suffers through a perpetual night. The dove's kissing that formed such a lovable motif in *Johnny Corncob* is repeated here in a much grimmer landscape.

Like János Vitez, Fehérlófia is also on a great quest, but his journey takes him into more brutal obstacles, of which Jankovics refrains from any sense of comedy. He fights dragons, one of which appears like a giant strange beast created out of parts of lines one would see in a digital clock. It's the kind of demon that would have been created in an early '80s science-fiction movie about a nefarious computer. "There is the same problem in every civilization... In the original folk tale the biggest dragon is urban civilization. He has a big smile, and false teeth, dangerous and green." The first version of his adaptation was turned down by the communist censor because he couldn't provide a positive image of modernity. The computerized

dragon was a compromise. In the end credits of *Son of the White Mare*, which Jankovics calls the most important part of the film, the hero walks amid the skyline of a city at twilight as Liszt plays on the soundtrack. "America was somehow associated with smog...America is the vanguard of human civilization and the vanguard of smog too."

One important side note: Jankovics does not endow his János Vitez with any real expression in his film, an approach he would maintain in depicting Fehérlófia in *Son of the White Mare*. Essentially, his characters wear masks. "I have something in common with the primitive arts. If a Maori wants to express something on his face he does so with a tattoo, which is important because a tattoo is relatively constant. It couldn't change. The heroes of these films are constant heroes. They have no real development. A child knows that this person cannot change in this story. They will be constant always." There is no classic narrative development in these films, no real character development, anymore than there is one in a 90-minute dream.

(There's another reason for his decision to opt away from depicting detailed expressions except in his films "Fight" and "Prometheus." "In Pannonia, my colleagues were good drawers, but the in-betweeners, the lower level animators couldn't draw." When making features that required the presence of more assistants, Jankovics did everything he could to make his plans idiot-proof.)

The Tragedy of Man after 1989

Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man / Az ember tragédiája* is a tragicomic epic that condenses the history of mankind into a single evening, without once directly mentioning Hungary or Hungarian culture. It is divided into 15 scenes stretching from the dawn of creation through the great epochs (the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Crusades, the Prague of Kepler, the French Revolution, Dickensian London), all the way to future dystopic and post-apocalyptic scenarios. There are three heroes of the play, Adam, Eve and Lucifer, and each scene provides a moment for Adam – a stand-in for mankind – to realize a great success. In Ancient Greece, mankind's goal is defined as democracy. In Ancient Rome mankind makes earthly pleasure sacred. By the end of each scene, man suffers a great disillusion. Democracy in Ancient Greece is destroyed by demagoguery. Earthly pleasure proves incapable of sustaining a civilization in Ancient Rome and is replaced by Christianity. Madách was not a historian but a poet. And his conflicted views of British capitalism ("The flattery of mean things, pettiness; / The burned-out rake-hell cursing tenderness,"¹⁰) or the vanities of Egyptian pharaohs ("What is the point of glory / If it can only be achieved through torture?"¹¹) were based more on the collective unconscious of the mid-19th century world intellectual.

10 Imre Madách in *The Tragedy of Man* (Budapest: Corvina, 1988) Tr. George Szirtes, 175.

11 Ibid, 60.

The play, with its long complicated monologues and quick transitions between dreamy landscapes, defies staging, though it has been produced several times since 1883.¹² Most recently, Jankovics has been adapting it for a planned animated feature, which has been appearing in pieces, out of sequence, on Hungarian television since 1993. To retell the story, he relies on the symbols and visual cues of our own millennial sense of human history. This means children's history books, but also, in our video culture, movies and, fittingly enough for Jankovics, cartoons. Both he and his moment are perfectly suited to the material.

Madách wrote his play a decade after the 1848 Revolution, and the play is a partly a Burkean exercise in reconsidering the definition of progress after a failed uprising. Jankovics started planning his adaptation of the play in 1983. His first completed scene aired four years after the 1989 revolution, the fruits of which he still remains skeptical:

At the end of the century I was very optimistic. But in my heart I never believed in any positive change. The people [have a] very bad conscience, psychologically, mentally and physically. Then came this version of democracy. Democracy. Not real democracy. [We had] the KGB in the background... Because I am Hungarian I can't be that optimistic, [though, the problems

12 George F. Cushing. "Introduction." *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách (Budapest: Corvina, 1988). 18. Cushing notes that the play is still part of the Hungarian theater's repertoire and that it has been performed throughout the German-speaking world as well as Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, Estonia and the former Soviet Union.

of democracy are] generally a human problem. In different parts of the world it is expressed in a more spectacular way. In Eastern Europe it can be expressed better. [Eastern Europe] is a more dramatic part of the world now, at least in Europe.

Accordingly, there's nothing particularly Hungarian about the atmosphere of *The Tragedy of Man*, - it is *The Tragedy of Man* not *The Tragedy of Hungary* - though many of Jankovics' contemporaries, in contrast, have employed Hungarian folk art in adapting both Hungarian and non-Hungarian literature for the screen. All but one scene ends with Mozart's *Requiem*, which Jankovics was inspired to use after watching an All Saints' Day television broadcast 20 years ago and with that music the uncompleted film constantly demands your mourning. He does not believe in art for the sake of art. As with "Sisyphus," "I want people to cry at the end of my film. I am pessimistic because I want them to change something about themselves."

Any visitor of a major Western museum would be comfortable with his Ancient Egypt scene, in which two-dimensional hieroglyphics representing the masses come alive, moving in the stilted semi-disabled fashion one would expect from crude drawings. Giant three-dimensional statues – representing the powerful pharaohs – lord over them. At one point Jankovics balances the pharaoh as a statue on a scale against masses of small paper cut-outs of his slaves. The pharaoh weighs them down. At the end of the scene, Lucifer forces Adam as pharaoh to imagine his position

in another few millennia, when "your body stays intact / And perfectly preserved for curious schoolboys / To puzzle at your twisted face."¹³ And Jankovics sets his camera from Adam's point-of-view as he stares through the eyeholes of an Egyptian coffin into the sterile confines of a museum's empty exhibit hall. For Jankovics' audience, Ancient Egypt only exists in museums. The average visitor to any of these museums rarely comes away with any more specific information as to the nature of gods in Ancient Egypt, or the differences between statues in different dynasties. And, taking Madách as his cue, the scene is a witty, semi-juvenile joke on this very fact. The emperors may be great and have earned the right to be seen as three-dimensional. The slaves may be cursed to nameless two-dimensionality. Both are today collecting dust in our national museums.

For his scene on Ancient Rome, Jankovics pays direct homage to his hero Fellini. He depicts a series of frozen statues out of Pompeii trapped in a spirited dialogue without moving their lips as the mosaics below them and paintings around them come alive in terribly beautiful episodes of sex and violence, most of which don't last longer than a few seconds. The scene feels very similar to the transitory poly-erotic grotesqueries of *Fellini Satyricon* (1969). Jankovics' camera jumps from one face to the next as they struggle to break out of their shell to experience the pleasures of the flesh. It's a way of saying what most of us already know: that whatever pleasure these beings once experienced is

13 Madách, 64.

now meaningless and won't survive their death. At the end of the scene, St. Peter breaks through the walls, and exposes a light that destroys the paintings, a direct reference to *Fellini's Roma* (1972)¹⁴ in which construction workers on the Roman subway inadvertently destroy Roman masterpieces they find in a cave by exposing them to sunlight. If Jankovics shares anything with Fellini it may be a Jungian sense of the human past, where our collective memory creates a vision that can be at once celebrated and enjoyed but also maligned. *Fellini Satyricon* has nothing to do with any Ancient Rome that ever existed, but to our dream of an Ancient Rome. Likewise, Jankovics and Madách live in an idea of the past not the past itself.

At the moment, Jankovics is working on the longest and most expensive scene of *The Tragedy of Man* which retells a history of 150 years' worth of British capitalism, from the glorious Victorian era to the present, through the changing styles of newspaper illustrations and graphics. The scene will complete the film, giving Jankovics more relief than elation. For with *The Tragedy of Man* Jankovics has gone from being an old man trapped in a young man's body, to being a great ancient, at least 120 years old, filled with wild visions of the apocalypse trapped in the body of a happy bearded, professorial 66-year-old man. "My façade is very joyful. But my soul is very serious, depressive." In one of the stranger scenes of the play, Madách imagines a futuristic phalanstery founded on the ideals of the socialist Charles

Fourier. Jankovics' phalanstery is a sparse, thin-lined black-and-white vision of an empty emotionless world, a style he calls "East German Comics." When asked if his own personal experiences under communism informed his decision to make the phalanstery grimmer than in Madách's original, Jankovics says that he actually thinks things will get much worse for Hungary and the world in the future, worse than anything seen in the 20th century. "I am sure we are before 1984."

Ferenc Rofusz

Ferenc Rofusz's "The Fly / A Légy," which made him the first Hungarian to win an Academy Award, tells the story of an insect's final three minutes of life from its own distorted perspective. As the film opens the fly of the film's title is breaking through a backyard garden, as enormous and strange as a jungle, stopping only for a few seconds to study its shadow on a tree. It passes through a path and some tall grass and is then attracted by a light reflection on a window of a nice turn-of-the-century house. It enters inside and wins the unamused attention of a human being who chases it through a living room and a den, then up the stairs. The fly's world is depicted through a widened eye, which elongates and rounds every object it sees, making the clock and piano upon which it stops to rest just that much more menacing and Brobdingnagian. In the final seconds of the film, we see the world through the eye of the now-dead fly as it is pinned and mounted in an insect box collection, right next to a fat wasp.

"The Fly" was an example of so-called "background animation," meaning that the animator aped the movement of a camera by drawing and slightly changing the entire background from one frame to the next. (In most cartoons, the background is set and static, like a stage. The only parts that are animated are the main figures.) In preparation for the film, Rofusz shot some 50 photographs of his mother's and his friend's houses with a fish-eye lens. There was no particular science to the way he managed to copy the perspective when he made the drawings for the film. After a month of making some drawings he just started naturally drawing his pictures accordingly.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the film is the fact that it is sepia-tinted in the style of old photographs. Such photographs, as we know them – through portraits of old families, firm Victorian houses, or strong Midwestern homesteads, are set, staged and unchaotic. Introducing the fly's half-insane perspective into such old-fashioned scenery disrupts our sense of order. Still, the film has its own sense of realism. There is no music on the soundtrack. All we hear is the eerily incessant buzz of a fly (provided by a friend of Rofusz's after Pannonia Studio refused to try to secure the rights to a fly buzz sound effect that appears on the Pink Floyd album *Ummagumma*) and the sparse sounds of the unseen giant human being's steps and swats. In the final seconds before it is caught, the fly frantically beats against the window at a paranoid frantic pace, which Rofusz's "camera" captures with

a few quick terrifying jolts. The political message of the film is and was obvious. With its drunken shifts in perspective and a massive unseen adversary, it's a study in perfectly justified paranoia while living in an oppressive state. When the film was shown at the Ottawa Film Festival, Rofusz says, everyone understood the point: "An annoying fucking fly buzzing around refusing to shut up, getting shut down by the big guy."¹⁵

Rofusz and his two assistants spent two years sketching 3,500 drawings to make those three minutes. Even by the slow-moving standards of high-art animation in the pre-computer age that is a strikingly high proportion of man-hours per minute of film. "They were very good assistants," he says. "They never made another animated movie again. One became a painter. I asked one of them to work on [a later film] and she said no. 'It's a terrible job for you.'" His original idea to make "The Fly" in water colors was even more difficult; he settled on using black-and-white pencils which allowed him to be far more exacting.

The three of them actually drew a total of 4,000 pictures, for, about a year-and-a-half after gaining approval for the film from Pannonia, Rofusz decided to change the ending from the insect collection scene he originally presented. In his new version, the human swatting at the fly would slip and fall. The fly would turn around and stare for a few seconds at the

¹⁵ Unless otherwise stated, quotes from Ferenc Rofusz are taken from two interviews conducted in Budapest on March 13 and 28, 2008. All the information in this article was taken from these two sittings.

¹⁴ The film was originally released in Italy as *Roma*.

human, a man in a communist bureaucrat outfit, with ugly Russian shoes and a black suit, a kind of János Kádár, “the ugly fucker who has died.” It would then turn around and fly out of the house and into the sky. He didn’t talk to the studio president, George Matolscy to get approval for the new ending. During his first presentation with a storyboard to gain approval for the film, he remembers, “seven or eight people sitting together, looking at [my] idea, storyboard, design and script. This is seven or eight critics, abusing you. ‘Who’s that character?’” Still he thought that “two years is a long time and not everyone remembers my original idea.”

After the presentation of his final product at Pannonia, he says Matolscy very quickly stood up and walked out of the room and closed the door behind him as his colleagues sat and said nothing. “And 10 minutes later I’m in his office. ‘Ferenc,’ he says. ‘This is not correct, this final section. Go back to the original idea.’” Within the next two hours, the final seconds of his new ending were cut from the film and destroyed, as were the 500 drawings that he and his assistants had spent about four months sketching. The only evidence of the alternative ending that remains are three small pictures from an old storyboard he managed to hold onto.

Over the years, friends have suggested that he go back and re-sketch the other ending and then re-release the film. But he doesn’t see the point. In the long history of great works of art being destroyed in totalitarian societies, the loss of the final seconds of “The Fly” is not quite as tragic as the burning of Sergei

Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible Part III*. And 27 years later, Rofusz is not bitter about Matolscy’s decision. “I understand this position. Maybe his job is gone. It’s not a good position [to be in].” Also: “I go to festival, go to Oscars and be winner. I don’t know what would have happened with the [other ending]. Maybe I would have won. Maybe not.”

On Not Picking Up an Oscar

Ferenc Rofusz was born in Budapest in 1946, the third of four brothers, the son of a businessman, “a very very rich guy,” who didn’t quite approve of his son’s chosen vocation (he died in 1978 three years before his son won an Oscar) and a history and art teacher who indulged his pursuits. One of his brothers became a diplomat. Another ended up as a chemical engineer. The family lost its house when the communists came to power, and his parents supported their four children on his mother’s meager teacher’s salary. In 1956, during the three-month window before the Russians put down the uprising, when the family could emigrate to Canada, his father forewent the opportunity. “He was a very strong Hungarian guy,” Rofusz says.

In 1968, at the age of 22, he passed a drawing examination and started working at Pannonia Studio. He worked his way slowly up through the ranks, first as a cel painter. Then he became a camera assistant. He was a key position assistant on Marcell Jankovics’ *János Vitez*. But like everyone, he wanted to direct. József

Nepp let him choose from five scripts he had written and in 1973 he made his first film, “The Stone/A Kö.” Like every film written by Nepp, it contains his trademark black humor contained in a vaguely childish setting. It’s artful, but shows little of the style that would inform Rofusz’s major work.

Rofusz admired his famous colleagues at the studio, particularly Jankovics, who, his senior by about six years, served as something of a mentor. But unlike his colleagues, he didn’t feel as a great a need to stay and work in Hungary. When he was nominated for an Academy Award for “The Fly,” the Hungarian government denied him a visa to allow him to attend the ceremony, sending Istvan Dosai, the head at the time of Hungarofilm instead. Dosai didn’t speak a word of English and at the ceremony, accepted the award on Rofusz’s behalf, leaving everyone present to assume he was Rofusz himself. The Academy Awards has a policy that demands that only the actual winners can accept their trophies at the ceremony. No proxies are allowed. And the Oscar, initially handed from Alan Arkin to Dosai was retrieved.

Rofusz was furious and managed to make the Hungarian government as angry at him as possible by complaining to newspapers in Western Europe. “I’m a young guy. I’m stupid. I’m telling them all that [the Hungarian government] are fuckers.” After a few months, he was allowed to travel to Los Angeles to get his award. And while he was there he met Ralph Bakshi, the American animation icon of the ‘70s, who had then just made

his acidic history of rock n’ roll, *American Pop*. Rofusz keeps a picture of the two of them posing in front of Bakshi’s studio, two long-haired bearded *enfants terrible* at the height of their powers. Bakshi offered Rofusz a job, but due to some bureaucratic problems in the US, he couldn’t accept the offer. He returned to Hungary and Pannonia where he would make two more short films.

The Unseen Oppressor

“Gravity / Gravitáció” (1984) opens with a long-shot of a melancholic blue-and-white landscape of a tree standing in a backyard. Rofusz’s camera pans from one side to the next and then speeds up with an extreme zoom into the branches of a tree, where we see one apple with the face of a discontented young man. He looks at the apples which surround him, all of them with faces of old men and women with frozen grotesque expressions, the kind of gallery of suspects one might find in a Fellini movie. He grows more frustrated with his situation, begins to jump up and down, pulling down on the branch, until he falls and splits apart on the ground, the gore of his yellow insides splayed apart. It’s the only bit of color in the film apart from the bluish background. “Gravity” is a humorous mini-nightmare without laughs

There are some vague similarities of style between “Gravity” and “The Fly.” Both films employ a sparse soundtrack. In “Gravity” we hear the grunts and moans of the one frustrated apple and the

striking break when it hits the ground. But other than that the techniques were very different. Rofusz set up a standard 30 cm square cel on which to stage his cartoon, but in order to get the various camera effects, and the rapid panning, he used an actual camera, which he rigged on a poll above his cel to zoom in and out accordingly. He drew "Gravity" with a blue Faber Castel grease pencil. His colleagues at Pannonia served as models for the faces in the film.

He had to change a great deal of his original plan for "Gravity," in order to gain the approval of the board at Pannonia. He initially planned that in the opening shot when we saw the landscape with the tree, we would also see in the foreground, the folded legs of a Russian soldier with Russian military pants and "ugly Russian boots." The figure would essentially be studying the tree as its own private universe of which he "was the absolute boss." If we were to watch "The Fly" from the perspective of a victim of an oppressive regime, in "Gravity" he wanted us to see an oppressive regime from the eyes of the oppressor. It almost makes the viewer complicit in the tragedy of the film. The board was not happy with this aspect of the script. "[They said], 'No Ferenc, it's not a good message.' So I changed it to Levi's pants and Chinese tennis shoes." They were still displeased. The legs were cut entirely.

He wanted the apples to have different colors. The young rebellious apple would be red, the older apples, a rotting yellow and green. Again the board refused. He tried to compromise by maybe making the rebellious apple yellow, which led to the

odd question of whether it represented the Chinese. And so all the apples became blue and white like everything else in the film, except for the insides of the dead apple. The original title of the film was "Apples" and again the board was wary with what that might represent, and so he changed the title to "Gravity," to make the censors believe the film was really about Isaac Newton.

"Deadlock / Holtpont," (1984) which tells the story of the final three minutes of a man's life before he faces a firing squad in a prison fortress through his own completely sober undistorted perspective, was his final film at Pannonia. It opens with the man's blurred vision slowly focusing on a dripping water fountain in what looks to be a prison yard. He glances at his ugly, deteriorated surroundings, the floodlights atop a fortress wall, the cracks in the stones, when a bureaucrat stands in front of his vision and places a blindfold over his eyes. Most of the screen goes black except for the small slits of vision left to the protagonist. And he concentrates on a fly that has come to rest on his shoe. The firing squad enters. (For the sound of the firing squad, Rofusz used the famous sound effect from The Doors' song "The Unknown Soldier." He thought the squad leader in that small piece sounded black, and he didn't think he could get any white Hungarian actors to mimic the voice so well.) The soldiers shoot the man and he falls seeing, through his two slits, only the vague outlines of his twisted legs before the screen goes black.

For the film, Rofusz set up a large screen, approximately 1.8 square meters, on which he drew the basic set of the

prison yard. He then utilized a live-action camera to pan and track his protagonist's line of vision through his surroundings. For the individual parts of the set that are animated – if you watch closely you see that there are remarkably few such parts, such as the dripping water fountain and the fly cleaning itself on the shoe, in an otherwise heavily dramatic film – he set up small cel animation pieces.

It was "Deadlock" that earned Rofusz the greatest disapproval from the authorities in Hungarofilm. They sent the film to only three festivals, a strikingly small number for an Oscar-winning filmmaker. This was only one part of his frustration with Pannonia. He had been working on a feature length film about a heroic Jewish cat modeled on Woody Allen. But he was denied funding for the film, he thinks partly due to his behavior during the Academy Award incident. He got an offer to go work for an animation studio in Cologne, West Germany and in 1984 he moved there with his wife and two young sons.

Selling Out

"I was not too happy with the German animation business at the time." He found the quality of the films he was working on wanting and four years later he moved to Toronto, where he got a job in Nelvana Studio. In 1990, he finally set up his own independent company, Superfly, with 50 employees.

Rofusz spent about a decade in Canada making commercials. One colorful ad promoting bike safety used the same

kind of background animation he utilized in "The Fly," except his pictures were much simpler and used color pencils. For an Esso ad, he repeated the same look he developed in "Gravity." But he also experimented in oil paints for the first time. He wasn't making festival films anymore, movies about individual struggles, but the work made him happy. "In every job I work a different style. Different training. I love it, the commercial business." He spent a maximum of six weeks working on any given ad, and would find himself racing to produce, say 480 drawings for the 30 seconds that went into his bike safety ad, "Road Warrior."

Both of his sons entered the animation business and both of them opted for computer animation, which upset their father. In an interview he gave in 1984 he said of the new computer animated films, "They are all fine, they are all pleasant to watch, but they lack dynamism, and none of them has a world of its own."¹⁶ His sons have converted him. When he made his first festival film in almost two decades, "Ceasefire," he used his sons' advice to make three-dimensional balloons float over a war-torn landscape. If he were to make "The Fly" or "Deadlock" today, he believes he would have an easier time. In order to get the effect of light reflection in "The Fly" and the floodlights" in "Deadlock" he cut small holes in the paper he was filming, shot at a half-exposure for several hundred frames

16 Ferenc Rofusz, "An Interview with Ferenc Rofusz," *Interpressgrafik* (International Organization of Journalists, Budapest: 1984).

while shining a light bulb underneath through photocopied paper. “You would go in and shoot this, then you would wait three days for the film to process and it would come back and you wouldn’t know if it was right or not.” Today, he says the computer makes things easier.

Almost all of his colleagues from that era disagree. Béla Ternovszky used computer animation for *Cat City II Macskafogó II* that came out last year and admits that he missed the old hand-drawn techniques. István Orosz doesn’t even own a computer. And there is a frightening realism to those lights in “The Fly” and “Deadlock” that, despite Rofusz’s objections, would be very hard to recreate on the computer.

Ticket to Life

Rofusz is back in Budapest at the moment, where he keeps a small clean private studio. He’s working on a new short black-and-white film he calls “Ticket,” his most ambitious project to date. The film will tell the story of one man’s life from his birth when he comes face to face with a doctor and then his mother, through his childhood at a birthday party, his adolescence playing basketball at a high school, his reckless youth gambling, his love affair that leads to a wedding, his kids, his mundane mid-life as a commuter on a subway, his crippled old age, his death and then his burial. A 26-year-old Hungarian musician who goes by the name of Yonderboi composed an insistent high-tempo piece that will provide the protagonist and the film with a heartbeat.

Like “The Fly,” “Ticket” will be a work of background animation in which the tale is told entirely from the point of view of the protagonist, whom we never see. But at six minutes, it will be twice as long, requiring a full 7,000 drawings. And it will be even more technically difficult. In “The Fly,” Rofusz did not bother to give any movement to the objects in his fly’s path. In “Ticket,” as his protagonist’s camera-eye moves, so will the things he sees. The protagonist’s mother will spoon feed his infant self. His naked fiancé will throw a towel in his face as she walks in front of his bed. An undertaker will throw dirt in his face as he lies in his burial plot. One of Rofusz’s sons had encouraged him to re-explore and go beyond his style from “The Fly,” and part of him regrets that he allowed himself to be talked into making a film like “Ticket.” “I’m stupid,” he says. “It’s double work.”

He says he needs about 7 million forints to get “Ticket” made, but, despite his status as one of Hungary’s two Oscar winners and its only Oscar-winning animator, he’s having a hard time raising funds in his homeland. The Motion Picture Foundation of Hungary, he believes, may be wary of giving a grant to an artist who spent almost 20 years of his professional life abroad in Germany and Canada. Still, he’s showing a DVD of his storyboard to high school students and anyone else he can find to get their take on the film.

Some complained that his original ending - in which after his protagonist is buried we see the beginning of another birth

- was too pat, an obvious sentimental statement on reincarnation. Instead, he’s thinking of ending with the protagonist’s wife throwing yellow rose – a kind of striking use of color in a black-and-white setting similar to the little red girl in *Schindler’s List* – into his grave. Some complained that the protagonist’s wife has too small a presence in the film. He’s thinking of placing her as an old woman near the end of the film, tending her husband, spoon feeding him in the hospital, which would serve as a bookend to the protagonist’s own mother’s spoon feeding at the beginning of the film.

“Ticket,” as it now appears, clearly takes place in Budapest, particularly one subway station that looks strikingly similar to Moszkva Ter. Some of his viewers suggested that he make a few changes. “Maybe I’ll change the subway. A fireplug, a US fireplug. A mailbox, a US mailbox. I’ll make it something of all the world.” That bid for universality is not just the fruit of a professional life half-lived outside his homeland. It also reflects an earned maturity. “The Fly,” “Gravity,” and “Deadlock” were all films that took place at the very end of a life-cycle. With just a few more minutes of film, Rofusz wants to tell the entire story of human existence. He’s not a dissident anymore. He can focus on other things than miserable politics.

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