

FOUR EARLY CONTRIBUTIONS OF ROMANIAN FILMMAKERS TO MODERNITY

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In the novel *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker, the main character, Jonathan Harker, writes in his journal: “I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool; if so my stay may be very interesting.”¹ Five years earlier Jules Verne, in the novel *The Castle in the Carpathians* (1892), offered an explanation of what these outbursts of superstitions might have caused. A Romanian landlord had bought for himself the invention of cinema in order to keep seeing his beloved deceased opera singer. Simple Romanian peasants have been terrified by the magic moving pictures. Clearly, Jules Verne had a great intuition again because Romanians have been fascinated by the beginnings of the magic of cinema and even contributed to it early.

Photo 1, 2

Romanian neurologist Gheorghe Marinescu (1863–1938), together with his assistant Constantin M. Popescu and with the help of the first camera that took moving pictures in Romania in 1898, shot one year later the first scientific film in the world *Walking Difficulties in Organic Hemiplegia/Tulburările de mers în hemiplegia organică*. In fact, they were analysing the way their patients moved at Saint Panteleimon Hospital. Auguste Lumière did not understand the potential of cinema to become an art but he acknowledged Dr Marinescu’s priority in a letter of July 29, 1924: “Your papers on the use of cinematography in the study of nervous diseases really passed me by the hand when I was receiving the review *La semaine médicale*, but then I had other concerns of industrial order, which did not allow me to devote myself to biological research. I confess that I have forgotten these works and

I am grateful to you for have reminding me about them. Unfortunately, few scholars followed the path open by you.”² The six films made by Dr Marinescu were used in the study of bone diseases—on October 25, 1899 Alexandru Bolintineanu defended his PhD on bone tuberculosis and mentioned them. On the other hand, the films, considered lost for a long time were found in 1975 in a closet at St. Panteleimon Hospital.

Photo 3, 4

Sigmund Weinberg (1868–1954), a Jew with a Romanian passport, opened the first movie theatre in Turkey in the Comedy Section of Darülbedayi (City Theater) of Istanbul. In 1914, he was appointed head of the new military studio of the Turkish Army (MOSD) and, together with the Fuat Uzkınay (1888–1956), made the first documentary, *The Fall of the Russian Monument in Saint Stephen/Ayastefanos’taki Rus Abidesinin Yıkılışı* (1914).

In 1914, Turkish Defense Minister Enver Pasha, impressed by the moving images of the German army, commissioned him to lead the Army’s Central Cinematographic Office (MOSD), so that in 1915 Weinberg (appointed department head and chief operator), with the help of Fuat Uzkınay and Austrian and German technicians, he made the first documentaries dedicated to the Turkish army and frontline operations in WWI. Weinberg, together with Uzkınay, also began filming the first feature film *Leblebici Horhor Aga* (an adaptation of the comedy of the same name by Dikran Cuhacyan and Tekfor Nalyan) in 1916, but failed to finish the film due to the death of one of the main actors. His next plan is to adapt a theatre comedy *Himmat Aga’s Marriage/Himmat aganın izdivaci* (a local version of Molière’s 1664 comedy *Le Mariage forcé*) but had to stop filming again because his performers were recruited.

1 Stoker, *Dracula*, The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2013, p. 1.

2 ȚuȚui, *A Short History*, p.12–13.

There is evidence that the film was completed after the war by cinematographer Fuad Uskinay and director Resad Ridvan Bey, and then presented to the public. Unfortunately, both films are lost.

Photo 5, 6, 7

The Vlach (Aromanian)³ brothers Ienache and Miltiade Manakia represent the most eloquent example of filmmakers in Balkan cultural heritage as the attempt to establish their affiliation to one or another national cinema is foredoomed to failure. They are considered the first Balkan filmmakers as they shot several important films for no less than six Balkan nations. For the impressive number of their photos and mainly for their importance, they remain the most important photographers in the Balkans. Ienache's photographic experience spans at least 41 years, and Milton worked for 65 years, quite impossible to match with. They also shot films in 1907-1912 and owned an open cinema and a cinema theatre in Bitola in 1921-1939.

The first Balkan filmmakers are considered the Vlach (Aromanian) brothers Ienache (1878, Avdella-1954, Thessaloniki) and Miltiade Manakia (1882, Avdella-1964, Bitolia) because they made about 40 films in the course of several years (1907-1913). The two participated successfully with photos at the Romanian General Exhibition in 1906, where they received two golden and one silver medal for their craftsmanship and had the chance to see images set in motion by a Bioscope camera for the first time. With a grant from Romanian King Carol I, Ienache managed to travel to Europe, including Paris and London, where he purchased camera no.300 Bioscope from Charles Urban & Co. In the spring of 1907, they made their first film, *Household Customs with the Vlach Women in the Pindus* (*Obiceiuri casnice la aromânele din Pind*). In this film they immortalized their 106-year-old grandmother Despina surrounded by her daughters and granddaughters and spinning wool together. The old lady looks boldly into the camera as though mocking filming as a whim of her grandsons. It was followed by other films about the migration of herds, religious customs, funerals, and weddings of the Vlachs, which can be considered among the world's first ethnographic films. At the

same time, they left to posterity unique cinematographic documents of that time, such as a scene of retaliation by hanging during the Balkan wars or the first filmed reports, *Sultan Mehmed Reshad V Visits Thessaloniki* (*Vizita sultanului Mehmed Reshad al V-lea la Salonic*) and *Sultan Mehmed Reshad V Visits Bitolia* (*Vizita sultanului Mehmed Reshad al V-lea la Bitolia*) (1911) or *A Trip to Turkish Macedonia* (*Excursie în Macedonia turcească*) (1911), about the visit of a Romanian delegation led by ex-Minister of Public Instruction, Dr Constantin Istrati, after the Vlach minority received rights in the Ottoman Empire.

Not only their artistic career but also their life was deeply influenced by the stormy changes in the Balkan Peninsula. During WWI, their studio was destroyed and the occupant Bulgarian authorities sent Ienache to a prison camp in Plovdiv. The reason was that they had found some photos with military objectives and weapons in his house. Ienache fitted out a new studio in Plovdiv and continued to work there in 1917-1918. In 1921, after the activity of the Romanian gymnasium in Bitola was suspended, the two brothers opened an open cinema and, in 1923, they built their own cinema theatre with 574 seats but they could not enjoy it too much as recession could be felt and they had to mortgage it and finally lost it after a fire in 1939. For this reason, they had to part in 1939 or 1943. Milton stayed in Bitola and kept the studio while Ienache moved to Thessaloniki, Greece to teach at the local Romanian commercial high-school. The two brothers could not see each other anymore as WWII followed, the civil war in Greece, as well as the cold war. Milton became a citizen of communist Yugoslavia while Ienache received Greek citizenship. Milton continued to make photos until 1963 (one year before his death he photographed the effects of the earthquake!) and enjoyed limited belated recognition. He received an award and a film was dedicated to him during his life (*Camera 300*, 1958, directed by Branko Ranitović), as well as a stamp immediately after his death. Ienache closed his eyes forever after a brain hemorrhage, feeling useless because of his forced retirement after the Romanian schools were closed and after the death of his only son.

³ Vlachs, also Wallachians (and many other variants), is a historical term from the Middle Ages that designates an exonym, mostly for the Romanians who lived north and south of the Danube. Aromanians designates the Vlachs south of the Danube. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlachs>.

For a long time, due to their nationality Manakia brothers' films have been ignored and even their authors had to suffer. But today their objective perception of a minority group should be cherished at its real value without nationalistic exaggerations or omissions. At least their entire work must be considered as a whole as it is done in the case of Auguste and Louis Lumière, Vittorio and Paolo Taviani or Luc and Jean- Pierre Dardenne, without omitting one's merits in favor of the other—because one became an Yugoslav citizen and the other a Greek citizen. During the last years, several filmmakers among whom some famous ones like Theo Angelopoulos or Milcho Manchevski paid homage to the pioneering work of Manakia brothers even in fiction films. Theo Angelopoulos, in *Ulysses' Gaze/To vlemma tou Odyssea* (1995), imagines a Greek filmmaker (featured by Harvey Keitel) who travels from Athens to Albania, Northern Macedonia (from here together with a woman played by Maia Morgenstern), Bulgaria, Bucharest, Constanta, Belgrade, and finally to Sarajevo, risking his life during the siege of the town to watch an old film by Manakia brothers. Critics considered the film a journey in search of a lost vision and innocence, hinting at a lost film by Manakia brothers.

Today, Greece, Northern Macedonia, Turkey, Romania, and even Albania claim the Manakia brothers. They were Turkish subjects up to 1913, later subjects to Yugoslavia, and Greece after 1939 in the case of Lenache. On the other hand, although the two brothers never lived in Romania, they considered themselves Romanians and most of their films had Romanian titles and inserts.

The last century is nearer to us not only chronologically but also due to moving images, including the ones left by Manakia brothers. Wars have been waged, borders have been changed and history has been written according to transient rulers but some photos and moving pictures on silver nitrate have preserved with fidelity images of our grandparents and, in fact, of our past. Maybe, on the scale of millennia one may consider that Manakia brothers have left to posterity an image of the 20th century as important as the one left by Strabo and Herodotus before Christ....

Photo 8

Several Hungarian directors had a consistent activity in Transylvania's main town, Cluj (Kolozsvár), during Austrian- Hungarian rule, especially during WWI. Michael Jon Stoil offers an explanation of the cinema flourishing in Austro-Hungary and its export of expertise and technicians: "In Kolozsvár (now Cluj), Prague, Vienna and Agram (now Zagreb), motion picture began its existence as a primarily middle-class artform. As a result, early film-making in Danubian Europe reflected the tastes and values of the bourgeoisie. Censorship that had already appeared in Tsarist Russia was absent under the Habsburgs.... The First World War brought new life to the failing motion picture industries of Eastern Europe. The Allied blockade prevented new American and French films, formerly the main programs of Eastern European theatres, from reaching the Austro-Hungarian Empire.... Alexander Korda shifted his operations from Budapest to Kolozsvár in Transylvania in 1916. For the next two years, the former film critic produced a record of seven features per year for the <Transylvanian Film Company>.... Writers, actors, and businessmen; people who had never set foot on a studio lot before the war, suddenly enlisted in the cause of national cinema- and made small fortunes almost overnight... The war-time boom collapsed in 1919, almost as suddenly as it had grown. Intellectuals such as Alexander Korda in Hungary and Miroslav Urban in Czechoslovakia desperately tried to stem the second collapse of their national film industries through continued production and the organization of film-makers' unions."⁴

While Alexander Korda⁵ and Michael Curtiz⁶ moved after the war to Great Britain and the US, respectively, where the latter, in 1944, received an Oscar for best director with *Casablanca* (1942), Eugen (Jenő) Janovics (1872- 1945) continued his work in Cluj (Kolozsvár) in Transylvania after it became part of Romania in 1918. In 1920, he made the film *The Nightmare/ Din grozăviile lumii/A világrém* (Romania- Hungary). In this moralizing melodramatic story about how syphilis destroys a family, the director used microscope filming, in which he was assisted by Romanian biologist Constantin Levaditti (1874–1953) credited as a screenwriter. Their educational

⁴ Stoil, Michael Jon, op.cit., p. 40-43.

⁵ Known previously in Hungary as Sándor László Kellner.

⁶ Known previously to his arrival to USA as Manó Kaminer.

film received a grant from the Romanian Ministry Health. The film premiered after a conference given by Levaditti on December 29, 1920 at the National Theatre in Cluj and later on was released in cinema theatres. In fact, in 1909 Levaditti, together with French physician Jean Commandon, shot scientific films like *Phagocytosis/Fagocitoza* and *Movement with Amoeba and Infusoria/Mișcarea la amoeba și infuzori*.

I have offered you four examples of Romanians who had the intuition to be modern in approaching cinema, art in its infancy, whose possibilities could hardly be anticipated. Even the Romanians do not know much about these pioneers and their achievements. It is a shame that not many people know these things, though it is clear that Romanian cinema did not appear in 2000 with the New Romanian Wave, but has a rather old tradition.

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