



**Doctoral School
of Social
Communication**

THESIS SUMMARY

to the Ph.D. dissertation of

Janka Barkóczy

titled

Visual propaganda in Hungary between 1931 and 1944

***The Hungarian World News* in the context of ritual communication theory**

Supervisor:

András Murai, Ph.D.

associate professor

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Institute for Behavioural Sciences and Communication Theory

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1. Research background

The aim of the dissertation is to process the history of Hungarian newsreel film in the early period of sound film between the two world wars, and in connection to that, the thorough examination of the concept of newsreel film as well as the mapping of issues and discourses relevant to the medium of newsreel, with special regard to the link between newsreels and the formation of national identity.

The novelty of this paper is that it discusses a topic scarcely researched in a Hungarian context, which, even in its special contexts, has only appeared in few publications containing mostly partial analyses. The history of Hungarian newsreel making is a missing chapter of Hungarian media history, despite the huge impact these films had on the world view of the population for decades. The dissertation explores the conditions of newsreel film making in Hungary between 1931 and 1944, and its results are primarily interpreted within the context of communication theory, which is also not typical of the literature, which focuses on the historical approach.

The research is closely related to the global phenomenon that, with the spread of digital culture, has caused a turning point in the management of the materials of audiovisual archives (Fossati [2018]). As a result of the “change in archiving”, institutions having various backgrounds and archive bases are making ever increasing amounts of digitised content available fully, or with certain conditions, on various online platforms. Thanks to that, materials that lay forgotten in an archive for decades are now becoming accessible on the world wide web and other data carriers in increasing quantities. Through this accessibility, films become public knowledge, points of reference and cultural platforms, and together they tangibly increase the interest in their topic and the era they are a product of even among lay audiences. Feedback from the users has an impact on the archives as well; it can drive research and lead to the rediscovery of certain subjects and materials. This process has been prominent in Western Europe and the United States since the 1990s, and there are an increasing number of archives’ publishing select collections in the digital space in the Eastern European region.

The most important collection of audiovisual culture in Hungary is the Film Archive of the National Film Institute (‘Nemzeti Filmintézet – Filmarchívum’), which has only published one substantial and continuously expanding corpus out of the non-fiction materials managed by it: its corpus of newsreels. The restoration and digitisation of newsreels is carried out as part of the Archive’s film preservation programme; the site of online publishing of the

materials is a free public platform designed for this very purpose, called *Film newsreels online* (*Filmhíradók Online*). Beyond the examination of the hypotheses listed below, the main goal of the present dissertation is to create a scientifically developed context for the interpretation of moving pictures available on online platforms, making them better known and facilitating the development of a relevant discourse.

The following hypotheses were used during the research:

1. *Between the world wars, the medium of newsreels were characterised by special technologies and production structure, which defined the content of films as well. The close relationship of the industrial background and political leadership made these films a tool of influence beyond being means of conveying information, and so they were primarily used to communicate the messages of ritual propaganda efficiently.*

2. *Newsreels' function in social communication was primarily ritual, focusing on strengthening social structures rather than informing. The efficiency of that was simultaneously supported by the physical and virtual scenes connected to the medium, in particular the way the film venues and the sites of social community were depicted.*

3. *An important purpose of newsreels from the Horthy era was the emotional mobilisation in connection with the Treaty of Trianon. The newsreel representation of the reannexation of territories had a significant role in the process of ritual renewal of narrative national identity.*

The primary context of processing the newsreels was provided by the paradigm of ritual communication theory (Couldry [2003], Carey [2009], Császi [2002], Andok [2013], [2017]), which sees the essence of news communication in the formation of personal and group identity, rather than the dissemination of information.

2. Methods: The medium of newsreel in Hungary and the revisionist newsreel film (1938-1941)

The dissertation is a basic research in the subject of Hungarian newsreel film making, creating a context for the exploration of further subtopics. The basis for the research are mostly film news published between 1931 and 1944, contemporary resources and parallel media, especially print press, interpreted through historical knowledge of the period and approaches in communicational theory. The research is built on two pillars, each calling for a different investigation method.

2.1. Historical overview

The first larger section defines newsreel as a medium, also providing a detailed, *descriptive historical overview* of the history of newsreel film making between the world wars, its institutional background, the process of producing and showing the films, with mentions of international trends and relations relevant to the Hungarian scene. The bigger issues of the description focus on the production process, the operation of the Hungarian Film Office ('Magyar Film Iroda'), the company's international connections and the control of its operation. The discussion of the topic includes sections dedicated to the role of newsreel in war, the conditions of the birth of war correspondence. The investigation is based on memoirs, the corpus of the press collection of the National Archives of Hungary, contemporary press articles, and historiographical works on the period. The second half of the analysis discusses the operation of venues connected to newsreel film using the participation theory of communication, with special regard to two particular types of theatres: news cinemas and cinema palaces. After the physical space of the venues, the scope of the scene's interpretation expands to the representation of the Hungarian territory, looking at the changes in the maps incorporated in newsreel main titles in the context of ritual communication theory. This subchapter uses the method of content analysis, as it examines the imagery of titles providing the introduction and frame to news blocks.

2.2. Content analysis

The second pillar of the research is the direct examination of newsreel materials through *content analysis*. As the analysis of the entire collection is beyond the means of this research, a sample, which can be handled as a smaller, nonetheless representative unit of the whole, was chosen for the purpose of content analysis. The sample sequence contains publications of the *Hungarian World News* ('*Magyar Világhíradó*') between 1938 and 1941 comprising 208 newsreels and 1847 pieces of news, and it is part of the series of events in Hungarian history documenting the revision, i.e. the reannexation of some of the territories lost due to the Treaty of Trianon. The choice of subject is justified because the material is typical, still it can serve as an effective means to illustrate the national significance of newsreel film, as it documents the revision process both from a historical and a symbolic aspect. This corpus can be appropriately translated into data, it contains significant historical events, and it is also critical in terms of political propaganda.

The method of content analysis is the manual annotation of newsreels. The annotation of news material can be done on several levels (on the level of genre, imagery, text, etc.), but due to the large quantity of news, mostly the definition of the news' subgenres served as the basis for it. Newsreels were sorted into subject categories, and these subject categories were then compiled into a subject map. During the analysis, it was taken into account that the method of annotation is somewhat subjective and it reflects the personal interpretation of the researcher. Nonetheless, the analysis strives to maintain the set criteria consistently. The relevance of the researcher's decisions were reviewed by two fellow coders, who also tagged the news, and then discussed their findings with the researcher.

The structure and length of newsreels is fairly consistent in the examined material, so it seemed to make sense to build the system on the categorisation of these newsreel units. Categories were mostly defined using the archiving tags of *Film newsreels online* and the classification system of Mónika Andok (Andok [2013]), with slight adjustments. Newsreels were categorised individually—news covering multiple topics were assigned multiple, but a maximum of three tags. There were a total of 20 categories set for the research, which were assigned to each piece of news based on an accurate definition. The categories defined, in alphabetical order: 1. *Crime*; 2. *Fashion*; 3. *Church, religion*; 4. *Armed forces and law enforcement*; 5. *Economy*; 6. *Traditions, folklore*; 7. *Disasters, accidents*; 8. *Hungarian domestic politics*; 9. *Hungarian foreign politics*; 10. *Media, press*; 11. *Arts, culture*; 12. *International politics*; 13. *Education*; 14. *Sports*; 15. *Social measures, social organisations*; 16. *Entertainment*; 17. *Social news*; 18. *Nature*; 19. *Science, technology*; 20. *Celebration*.

Besides thematic categories, other tags were also used for the analysis. Actual content elements were highlighted in certain cases, and identifiable persons, institutions and geographical locations appearing on the screen were listed for every piece of news. The various techniques applied in newsreel film making (e.g. announcement, war report, interview, dramatised scene) were marked using *technical tags*, which also helped noting damaged, flawed, missing materials, as the account of missing and damaged data can also be valuable information. It is noted that the investigation could be further nuanced with other research tags, which could serve as a basis for future analyses—for instance, noting recurring topics or issues of certain academic disciplines, or the repeated appearance of particular symbols and ideas (e.g. eucharistic congress, women's history, sports history, politics of memory, self-reflection, national socialism).

3. Findings of the dissertation

3.1. Historical overview

The history of the *Hungarian World News* is closely tied to the history of a professional film news agency, the Hungarian Film Office. The section makes special mention of Miklós Kozma, the head of the company, who had a prominent role in its organisation and in laying the foundations of newsreel film making. Among other sources, the personal notes of Kozma draw a clear picture of the contemporary theoretical background of newsreel film making, the practical implementation of which is apparent in the surviving films. Altogether, it can be concluded that from its launch in 1931 until 1938, the *Hungarian World News* usually kept the national principle in mind, scarcely swayed into extremes, but it definitely moved from being simply informative towards communicating propaganda ever more dynamically. This trend got stronger after 1938, becoming increasingly more apparent, until this well-functioning industry clearly became a channel for propaganda.

The investigation of the medium's historical background shed light to the similarities and differences between newsreels and other types of news categorised according to their communication scene. Print press, radio and television existed simultaneously with newsreels, but comparing the latter with the other three media reveals significant differences in terms of actuality and accessibility. Due to difficulties in distribution, newsreels showed at various locations had different degrees of actuality—and as a result of that, they fell far behind other news outlets in this regard. The comparison explains why newsreels were suitable channels of disseminating ritual propaganda, and why they were less effective in passing on information relevant to news events.

	Print press	Radio	Television	Film
News	recent	current, even real-time	current, even real-time	actuality based on geographical location, which rapidly decreases the further it is from the centre
News title	yes	yes	no	no, or introductory title card
Form	narrative (written)	narrative (verbal)	narrative and visual	narrative and visual
Explicit/stylised representation	explicit, stylised	less explicit, its style is more verbal	less explicit, its style is more verbal	strongly lacking, its narrative is strongly stylised both in writing and in speech
Consumption	individually	individually or socially	individually or socially	socially
Venue	flexible	typically private	typically private	public

Table 1: Comparison of medium-specific news types with additions to the system of Mónika Andok (Andok [2013])

The historical research includes the presentation of communication scenes relevant to newsreels. Of these, two special physical venues are discussed in detail: news cinemas and cinema palaces. News cinemas are special communication scenes that were born in the period investigated by the study. Films shown there were included in the programmes of other venues as well, but not in the same concentration. Visitors of news cinemas bought their tickets with the specific purpose of viewing newsreel films, hence ritualised news consumption was realised in its purest form in these venues. The programme was running in a constant loop, ensuring the continuity of the symbolic reality, which spectators could enter at any moment in time. The success of the business model is proof of the sizeable demand for these cinemas and for the intense experience provided by them to the audience. Budapest news film theatres were operated by the Hungarian Film Office, whose employees designed their programmes to comply with central policies. So the symbolic reality shown in these places was strongly controlled, the quality of which was defined by the proportion of informational and propaganda elements present in them. The other subject of the analysis, Uránia film theatre, also functioned as an intensive ritualisation space, where visitors could have experiences as concentrated as in news cinemas; however, it was not a result of the programmes designed with strict consistency in genre there, but the representative design of the environment. This environment made the film experience credible, along with the symbolic world to which the film connected the audience. The structure of the programme and the characteristics of the environment had an impact on the realisation of the ritualisation not only in the case of the two types of venues discussed, but for every film venue. The analysis shows how the ritual communication theory originally developed by Carey for the media systems of well-functioning democracies is transformed in the setting of authoritarian political regimes.

3.2. Content analysis

The dissertation significantly builds on the content analysis of newsreels, including the use of video and audio motives. The content analysis was first carried out in the form of analysing the changes in the main titles introducing the news by placing a previous investigation by Zoltán Krasznai (Krasznai [2012]) into a ritual context. That examination showed how the process of territory reannexation is represented in newsreels through graphic elements, and how newsreels react to the actual and the desired changes in territory. The function of graphic representation is the orientation of newsreel viewers, ushering them into a community, and as an opening to the newsreel as a whole, it provides context for the upcoming content as a unit, i.e. the 8–10 pieces of news making up the film.

After the main titles, the analysis proceeded to process the period of revision thematically through looking at newsreels published between 1938 and 1941. The maps drawn by using the 20 categories set show how the examined newsreels regularly inform the audience of important events, although they focus primarily on large-scale international politics rather than domestic political news. However, the news events are still not communicated explicitly enough; they often lack fundamental data indicating the degree of actuality. Among the topics, a striking number of motives depicting celebrations appear, strong visual symbols are used frequently, symbols of national identity in particular, which strengthen the ritual features of the materials.

Year	Number of news reports	Number of newsreels
1938	52	506
1939	52	476
1940	52	450
1941	52	415
Total	208	1847

Table 2: Number of *Hungarian World News* and its newsreels published between 1938 and 1941

Category	Quantity of news	%
celebration	184	21,64
armed forces and law enforcement	98	11,52
sports	95	11,17
international politics	94	11,05
Hungarian foreign politics	65	7,64
entertainment, curiosities	52	6,11
science, technology	44	5,17
economy	41	4,82
arts, culture	29	3,41
church, religion	28	3,29
nature	27	3,17
social measures, social organisations	26	3,05
Hungarian domestic politics	16	1,88
social news	17	2
disasters, accidents	12	1,41
traditions, folklore	12	1,41
education	6	0,70
fashion	3	0,35
media, press	1	0,11
Összesen	850	~100

Table 3: Thematic map of 1938

Category	Quantity of news	%
international politics	140	17.17
armed forces and law enforcement	139	17.05

celebration	132	16.19
sports	87	10.67
science, technology	50	6.13
economy	44	5.39
Hungarian foreign politics	40	4.90
nature	31	3.80
social measures, social organisations	30	3.68
arts, culture	27	3.31
church, religion	20	2.45
Hungarian domestic politics	19	2.33
entertainment, curiosities	13	1.59
disasters, accidents	13	1.59
education	11	1.34
traditions, folklore	9	1.10
fashion	4	0.49
media, press	4	0.49
social news	2	0,24
Total	815	~100

Table 4: Thematic map of 1939

Category	Quantity of news	%
armed forces and law enforcement	154	19.61
celebration	135	17.19
international politics	127	16.17
sports	59	7.51
economy	45	5.73
science, technology	38	4.84
social measures, social organisations	36	4.58
Hungarian foreign politics	32	4.07
nature	30	3.82
arts, culture	29	3.69
entertainment	20	2.54
disasters, accidents	17	2.16
social news	15	1.91
church, religion	14	1.78
education	11	1.40
traditions, folklore	9	1.14
Hungarian domestic politics	8	1.01
media, press	5	0.63
fashion	1	0.12
Total	785	~100

Table 5: Thematic map of 1940

Category	Quantity of news	%
armed forces and law enforcement	129	19.90
celebration	96	14.81
sports	63	9.72
international politics	53	8.17

Hungarian foreign politics	39	6.01
social measures, social organisations	35	5.40
science, technology	34	5.24
economy	32	4.93
arts, culture	28	4.32
entertainment, curiosities	28	4.32
church, religion	21	3.24
social news	21	3.24
disasters, accidents	16	2.46
nature	16	2.46
Hungarian domestic politics	14	2.16
education	9	1.38
traditions, folklore	9	1.38
fashion	3	0.46
media, press	1	0.15
crime	1	0.15
Total	648	~100

Table 6: Thematic map of 1941

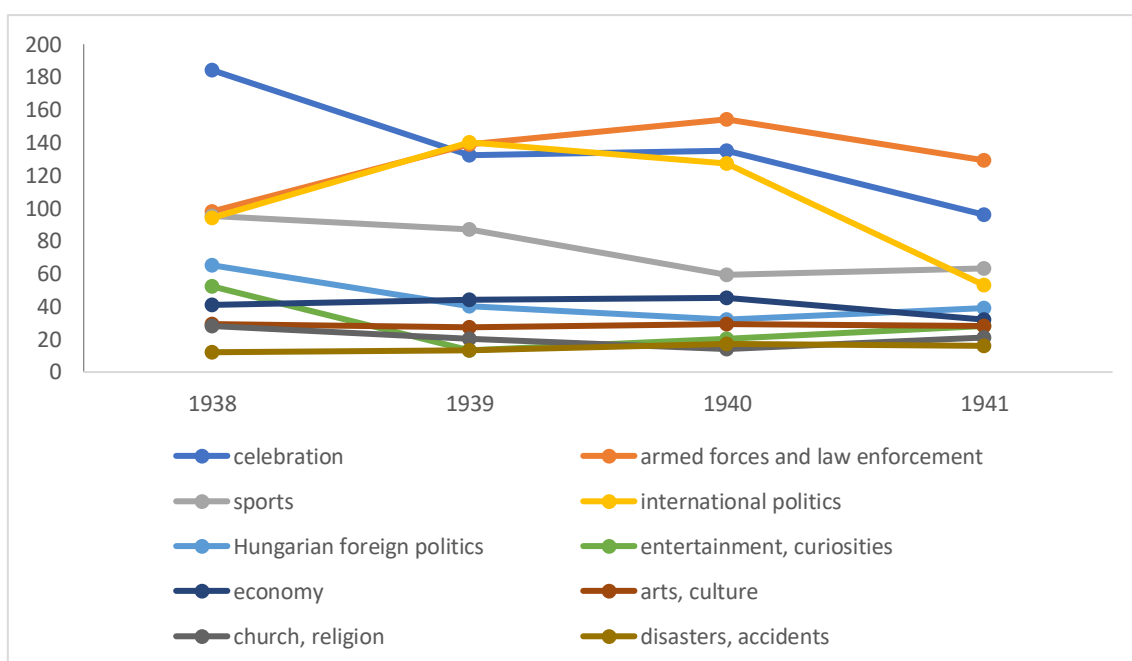


Figure 1: Incidence of news types 1938-1941

The programme of the revision and the actual events of its realisation are prominent motives in the investigated years, which were not only documented by newsreels but also motivated by its rousing, inspirational messages. News did not report the exact conditions of the presented news so much as they recorded the emotional footprint of the era, which in turn they used to engage viewers in identifying with it. While the history of Upper Hungary's revision is presented in a kind of sacral context, the invasion of Subcarpathia was referred to as a success of military history, and the seizure of the Transylvanian territory following the Second Vienna Award was depicted as a cultural necessity. The way the 1941 invasion of the Southern parts of the former Hungarian Kingdom was conveyed is a prelude to war, highlighting the heroism of the soldiers and showing armed operations. As Hungary entered

the war in the second half of the year, the main focus shifted to molding society's approach to war, to which end films started to use the influencing techniques available in film making ever more openly. The ritual function of newsreels becomes apparent through content analysis. The materials are mostly suitable for forming the attitude of viewers rather than actually informing them, as the presented data is often insufficient and sometimes misleading. Frequently recurring motives and heightened emotions affect the experience of taking in the news in a fundamental way, facilitating their internalisation. News and news reports are often edited for dramatic effect, simultaneously reinforced by the video and audio layer. Reels often incorporate strong symbols; a striking proportion of the depicted strings of actions are characteristically celebratory, ceremonial, ritual, and even sacral or religious at times. Rites viewed in newsreels could actually serve as models for the ceremonies, commemorations carried out in the smaller communities of audience members. Sacral concepts are often linked to political standpoints and non-religious subjects, adding a kind of spiritual dimension to the events recorded in these films. News reports of the examined years frequently brought up the issue of national history and historical fate, relevant to which the tragic tone of previous years was gradually replaced by a heroic voice singing of success. Current events often got directly linked to a long gone, heroic past by some symbolic gesture, which also served as motivation to make a difference in the current events actively, and thus newsreel film became the means to document and formulate the narrative historical identity (László [2012]).

4. Conclusion

Since the large size of the subject did not allow for including every detail in the analysis, the aim of the research was to present the main trends in the medium's operation and the relevant more important issues contextually, in a complex but exciting system. The historical investigation and the content analysis showed that newsreels formed the narratives of national identity as a result of conscious editorial decisions. These narratives were harmonised on the micro and macro levels, strengthening the same, coherent world view. The content and technical characteristics of newsreels and the relatively fixed form of news consumption calls for using the paradigm of ritual communication theory for the analysis (Carey [2009]) rather than the transmission model of communication. Thus the connection between newsreels and propaganda can be interpreted in the context of ritual propaganda.

4. 1. Recommendations for the future application of the research

The interdisciplinary nature of the dissertation may serve as the basis for further research in a number of relevant fields. Newsreels constitute a rich source for history and

cultural research, where a more detailed exploration of particular subtopics could provide valuable findings. The material reviewed by the present study can be especially useful for academics active in the fields of social history, sports history, history of technology, military history and urban history, but several other dimensions could be explored too. The comparative examination of Hungarian news programmes and simultaneously published foreign materials, export research exploring the international presence of Hungarian materials, and various interdisciplinary analyses may contribute exciting new findings, adding new shades to the full picture. With all that said, it must be noted that the focus of the dissertation is a rather short period of time relative to the many decades to which the tradition of Hungarian newsreel film goes back; several chapters of the whole story are still missing, and so the propaganda news of the Rákosi era and the incredibly rich corpus of the Kádár era must be paid more attention in the future. The paper does not discuss the possible application of newsreels in history education, but its results will hopefully serve as pointers for that as well, inspiring professionals of teaching methodology.

Thanks to the trend of digitising archives having reached Hungary, the research looks at the corpus of an online database built from archive films. In this regard, it is closely connected to one of the great challenges of the 21st century: the issue of the digitisation of cultural heritage. An overt purpose of the present dissertation exploring the historical context of newsreels is to bring attention to the importance of digitisation and publication of our film heritage through a practical example, using materials from the database of the National Film Institute's Film Archive.

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6. The author’s own and co-authored publications relevant to the subject

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6.2. Journals, chapters

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6.4. Lectures held on the subject

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Tavaszi Szél Konferencia. Eszterházy Károly Főiskola, Eger. Szervező: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége. 2015.04.10–12. – Aligátor a fürdőben. Az 1944-es év reprezentációja a Magyar Világhíradóban.

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6.5. Other

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7. Appendix

The dissertation has an appendix of 23 pages. It gives a short introduction to the most important European newsreel databases available online, and includes 39 images chosen from newsreels published between the world wars found in the *Newsreels Online* database, from the *Fortepan* photo collection, and from the press corpus of the *Arcanum* database.