

KORNÉLIA DERES

POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT AND NEW IMAGES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY THEATRE¹

In the following essay, I am going to examine how early nineteenth-century popular performative practices intertwined with novel visual experience and technology, especially in Central Europe. Firstly, I will provide an overview of the role of visual technologies during the era, and how they functioned as mediators between elite and popular art forms. In addition, I will present a short case study on Leopold Ludwig Döbler's visit to Pest-Buda. Döbler was a stage magician and celebrity of Central Europe in the 1830s and 1840s, performing at both German and Hungarian theatres of Pest-Buda. Döbler's performances powerfully showed how technological innovation and popular entertainment were often two sides of the same coin. I am going to focus on his productions which involved a new image technology of the time, calling attention to the spatial experience of urbanizing cities as well as to the new modes of visual representation.

1. Visual Experience and Optical Media

The era of the long nineteenth century² marked a dynamic rise in new visual experiences, allowing European audiences to interact with various optical media both in public and private spaces.³ In a more and more visual culture, the immense creation and circulation of novel technologies, ranging from railways and steamships to dioramas, stereoscopes, and phantasmagorias, affected the way people experienced their environments, their positions in these environments, as well as themselves as subjects.⁴ The interaction with optical devices and outdoor spectacles can be also productively examined as training modes for world perception, which calls for re-evaluating their sensual as well as social functions.⁵ Although the century has often been seen as a mere predecessor of future relevant changes, many of them including mobilization, urbanization, technologization, globalization, and

¹ My research was supported by the CEU IAS Core Fellowship and János Bolyai Research Fellowship.

² The long nineteenth century usually marks the period between the French Revolution (1789) and the first World War (1914), but other categorizations appeared as well, criticizing the earlier periodization's mere focus on Europe and the West, for instance, by Edmund Burke, proposing a period between 1750 and 1950. BURKE, 2000.

³ See FAULSTICH 2004.

⁴ See LEONHARDT 2007; NIELD 2017, 203–226.; MARX 2017, 1–32.

⁵ BOENISCH 2003, 34–45.; DE KERCKHOVE 2001, 501–525.

cosmopolitanism started to become dominant parts of everyday life already in the 1800s.⁶

The key role of visibility, image production and reception, visual objects, and new media experiences in the era all contributed to the emergence of the scopic regime.⁷ Moreover, extending the phenomenological-sensual categories of seeing and being seen, the spread of image technologies also “had an immediate impact on the *Lebenswelt* [the world as experienced]”.⁸ The rising new spaces and modes of seeing became crucial regarding the social and political processes throughout Europe as well that seemed to be located at the crossroads of empires and nation states.⁹ This dialectic situation especially became a major issue in Central Europe where different ethnic groups of the Austrian Empire (Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Romanians, etc.) were searching for their own national acknowledgement, whereas the Habsburgs tried to maintain a centralized state.¹⁰ Theatres and other public displays, including museums and scientific institutions often served national or monarchical, imperial agendas by creating visual representations of various identities in this era.

Furthermore, with the rise of zoos, department stores, fairs, exhibitions, and panoramas, for instance, a new type of spectatorship was introduced, where the presentation of various – scientific, practical, entertaining, and glamorous – objects and images allowed audiences to form public-based identities in growing urban spaces.¹¹ As theatre historian Peter W. Marx pointed out: “theatrical activities and scenic displays equally added to the image of the new metropolis and turned the social landscape of the new metropolis into a palpable social scene.”¹² The urban dynamics and the various visual displays of these spaces offered a new visual relation of nature and art, and especially scientific or magical performances of visual technologies raised questions about whether images could be trusted at all.

Technologies of vision in nineteenth-century public performances contributed to the structures of cities as well as life in these urban environments, affecting the scenes and modes of spectatorship. As theatre historian Sophie Nield summarized the effects of new image technologies on nineteenth century Western social realities: “The organization of visual culture extended itself into consumption, shopping, and urban spectatorship; new forms of entertainment and education emerged, such as the public museum, scientific exhibitions, waxworks, domestic photography and the

⁶ SCHIVELBUSCH 2004, 92–99.; GITELMAN–PINGREE 2003.

⁷ SCHWARTZ–PRYSBLYSKI 2004, 7.; JAY 1993.

⁸ MARX 2017, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4–12.; MCCONACHIE 2010.

¹⁰ See FEICHTINGER–UHL, 2010.

¹¹ ARMSTRONG 2008.

¹² MARX 2017, 22.

illustrated newspaper [...].”¹³ The new types of visions, in close relation to the rise of adjustable lighting, allowing a new dynamic of artificial dark and light, changed the limits of performative imagination, including scenes and materials of distant geographic or historical locations, optical illusions, or even stage scenography.

Within this context, popular performances often served as the most effective and successful means of knowledge transmission, especially regarding new visual knowledge, offering interconnections of image technologies, theatricality, wonders, and scientific findings.¹⁴ The history of the vivid linkage between magic and science goes back to centuries, including examples such as *The Book of Secrets* by thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian, Albertus Magnus describing properties of the natural world that is or is to be used for making magic, or seventeenth-century mathematician, physicist Isaac Newton’s attraction to the occult and alchemy, or the fact that the nineteenth-century father of modern magic, Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin was an skilled scientist conducting early experiments in electromagnetism, inventing various devices, and building mechanical figures.¹⁵ What popular visual entertainments and demonstrations during the first half of the 1800s added to this story was wide audiences’ encounter with a new experience of vision, namely subjective vision, which changed the relation between external nature and observer by emphasizing that sensory and perceptive experiences depend more on the human sensory functions than external stimulus.¹⁶ This way, vision itself became questionable, moreover, as art historian Jonathan Crary put it, “faulty, unreliable, and, it was sometimes argued, arbitrary”.¹⁷ The altered relation of images, spectators, and sensory experience relocated the body into the act of watching, seeing, and observing.¹⁸

In addition, the hierarchical status of vision as a superior sensual mode interconnected with the growing importance of theatres as iconic public spaces in European societies, where educational and political issues, social questions, entertainments, fashions, and technical innovations were diversely staged.¹⁹ Consequently, theatres were able to offer a space for lively interconnections between popular and high culture through the experience of the spectacle. Furthermore, the representational codes of theatre and science shared some relevant structural interrelations such, as the location of the ideal observer, or the spatial and temporal organization of seeing and acting, as theatre historian Helmar Schramm pointed out.²⁰

¹³ NIELD 2017, 204.

¹⁴ REILLY 2013; FYFE–LIGHTMAN 2007; ROBINSON 2014, 135–148.

¹⁵ SEE COLLINS 2010, 1–44.; NEWMAN 2019; STONE 2012, 264–66.

¹⁶ CRARY 1999, 11–12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ See also SCHOENMAKERS–BLÄSKE–KIRCHMANN–RUCHATZ 2008.

¹⁹ MARX 2017, 25.

²⁰ SCHRAMM 1995, 114–118.

I would also argue that these fields were interconnected through the performativity of technological innovations. New visual technologies were often presented first in the context of science, and then in the context of popular entertainment, and sometimes in the context of popular education, so they were different and variable sides of the same coin. On the one hand, nineteenth-century theatres often hosted stage magicians and experimental physicists or integrated new visual technologies in the scenography, presenting scenes of wonders and spectacles. On the other hand, most popular performers including science popularisers or magicians used various techniques of theatre staging and representation and established theatrical touring routes, and modes of advertisements; furthermore, these productions played a relevant part in the economic success of theatres. It is essential to acknowledge the circulations among theatre, science, magic, visibility and performativity in order to comprehend why the century was often called “a theatrical age”²¹.

Therefore, analysing the circulations of various popular performances and their role in introducing new types of image technologies and spectatorships, consequently allowing the modern subject to be formed, can reveal a cultural history of Central Europe in the early nineteenth century, which is a history of performative spectatorships. Under this term I am referring to spectatorship as an active, formative, and embodied mode of perceiving and organizing reality and the human self within this reality, and as a consequence, having an impact on performing the self on- and off-stage. One of the best known popular performers who successfully promoted a new type of vision in nineteenth-century Central Europe and accordingly created new relations among images and spectators was stage magician and illusionist Leopold Ludwig Döbler (1801-64).

2. Magic and Knowledge Circulation

Even Döbler’s nickname, the *Zauberprofessor*, situated his work at the border of science and magic. Presenting optical shows to contemporary audiences, Döbler became one of the most influential popular performers in Central Europe during the first half of the nineteenth century. Döbler started his career as a magician in 1826, putting on shows in the Leopoldstadt Theater in Vienna, and in nearly thirteen years, he not only earned the nomination “artist of the Prussian court” with his optical shows, but also accumulated a considerable fortune. Döbler was based in Vienna and left a mark not only on contemporary stage magic, but also on local material culture since postcards, stamps, Biedermeier bouquets, chocolates, pretzels, “hats,

²¹ MARX 2017, 1.

gloves and neckwares à la Döbler”²² were sold in shops of the city, and later, a street in Vienna was also named after the performer.

Besides, he was touring all over Europe in the 1830s and 1840s with premieres in several cities and countries including German, Russian, Swedish, English, French, Belgian, and Dutch territories.²³ Döbler presented not only magic tricks, but also phantasmagorias, automatons, dissolving views, and moving image projections on various stages of Europe, attracting diverse audiences ranging from middle class spectators to members of the elite and even monarchs. Famous supporters of Döbler’s scientific magic were Goethe, Chancellor Metternich, and Emperor Franz II, among others.²⁴ However, Döbler was not only a skilled showman, but also someone who had a former education in physics, and he actively used his scientific knowledge in developing the shows, including the use of hydro-oxygen microscope or limelight in image projections.

Döbler represented an eminent example of touring stage performers in nineteenth-century Central Europe, the role of whom carried a double effect: one was fulfilling the imagination of a globalising Europe, whereas the other was encouraging the emancipation processes of various nations through; for example, performing in newly established national theatres or creating repertoires with national content. The case of the Austrian Empire seems especially interesting in this respect since in the given era, it embraced a multicultural territory, where processes of exclusion and inclusion, nationalistic as well as imperial interests, trans- and intercultural exchanges formed social reality. Often described as a contrastive area, under the Habsburg reign “no single province was inhabited only by members of one cultural or ethnic group or one religious denomination, speaking only one language”.²⁵ Within this context, identifying the practices and routes of popular performers can help to understand and acknowledge the Habsburg Monarchy as culturally diverse, dynamic and interactive. Therefore, a specific focus should be placed on how national and global agendas were added to contextualizing the productions, connecting the spread of visual wonders to identity formation as well as to the authorship and location of staging new images.

The circulation of not only routines and performers but also technologies and visual devices offered a chance for local performers in Central Europe to learn techniques from established colleagues, and it also served as a method of introducing new scientific findings and technologies into emerging national communities. Popular performance culture enabled the circulation of knowledge formation regarding per-

²² CHRISTOPHER 1991, 69.

²³ GRUBER 2016, 28.; WURZBACH 1865, 426.

²⁴ KOLTA 2003, 83.

²⁵ FEICHTINGER-COHEN 2014, 5.

ceptual conventions, new visual apparatus, and connected scientific findings among transcultural and early globalizing audiences of Central Europe.

Döbler visited Pest-Buda in 1840 and 1843, as part of his European tour including locations such as Vienna, Győr, Bratislava, Leipzig, London, for instance. At that time, Pest-Buda was not the political capital of Hungary, since the Hungarian parliament assemblies were held mostly in Bratislava. However, Pest-Buda as a city had already started to gain importance in the second half of the 18th century under Maria Theresa's reign, and it gradually became an administrative, legislative, and cultural centre. Consequently, the city served as a model in fashioning a modern way of life with its urban designs and cultural goods, while trying to maintain new Hungarian national institutions such as the National Library (1802), the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1825), or the Hungarian National Theatre (1837). The city eventually became the co-capital of the empire in the last third of the century.

Pest-Buda was an important Central European touring location and offered an important opportunity for local audiences to get familiar with various optical illusions, technologies, scientific findings, perceptual conventions, and modern vision, which also gave rise to local performers trying to follow the paths of mainstream circulation. In this respect, Döbler's tours across Central Europe functioned as medium for knowledge formation, allowing national communities to adopt the new visual devices or technologies and advertise their own performers who would integrate so called national topics into similar optical shows. Apart from that, Döbler's premieres in Pest-Buda were accompanied by active political discourses where both German and Hungarian communities of the city tried to use the performer and his productions for their own political agendas. As other renowned performers, Döbler was invited to perform both at public theatres and at private venues of the elite societies in the city. Therefore, he performed both at the German theatres and at the newly founded Hungarian National Theatre. As I mentioned before, national theatres in Central Europe as public spaces were used to strengthen cultural identities, and, consequently, the venues where Döbler's new images were shown became a central issue in the reception process.

Regarding Döbler's tour in Pest-Buda between 26 October and 22 November 1843, contemporary reviews show that the artist's presence and productions were situated on the one hand in a technology-focused discourse in connection with the newness of the presented visual experience and on the other hand, in a nationalistic discourse with a main question of whether Döbler should only perform in the German theatres of the city. In addition, most articles and reviews praised Döbler's optical productions in both German and Hungarian journals and newspapers. During Döbler's tours it was not exceptional when members of the audience with valid tickets were forced to go home because of the intolerable crowds gathered before the

productions.²⁶ On the other hand, there were some negative reviews in Hungarian journals such as *Regélő Pesti Divatlap* [Regélő Fashion Magazine of Pest], *Honderű* [Serene Homeland], which criticised Döbler's productions because it stole the stage from national dramatic quality content.²⁷

3. Travelling Technology and Transformative Images

A review on Döbler's production at the Hungarian National Theatre in the journal *Világ* [World] gave a close and vivid description of the visual and bodily experience including elements like total darkness, silence, the transformation of colours, the sharpness of the images, and a blue sky turning into a city landscape: "Before the magic tricks begin, spirit lamps go off, leaving the audience in an annoying total darkness. After the curtain is raised, we see the purest azure blue sky with wreath-like clouds flying around, and we are watching the coming wonders silently. In the middle of the azure blue sky, spots are appearing, turning into questionable objects – similar to *fata morgana* or mirage; the nice blue is blurring, and the clouds are melting into stone walls and buildings everything is clearing, becoming alive, coming closer, and getting a natural colour – until we see a magnificent image of an Italian castle and its city Ilri".²⁸

The account strengthens that Döbler became most popular in 1843 through presenting a new image technology of the time to Central European audiences, namely, the dissolving views. Dissolving views, as popular forms of nineteenth-century visual entertainments, were mainly associated with inventor and showman Henry Langdon Childe. The technique was based on projecting with double or triple magic lanterns, while performing a transition from one projected image to another different one, allowing to present spatial jumps. This meant that one picture faded out as the new one faded in, while the light remained constant intensity, creating a gradual transition. The origins of dissolving views date back to the 1820s; however, some suggest that they go further back in time, to the first years of the 1800s.²⁹

Magic lantern, the apparatus behind the projection of dissolving views, illustrates how devices of science could easily turn into tools of magic and then back into instruments of popular education. Created in the seventeenth century as an element in the emerging scientific field of optics and light theory, the magic lantern provided the first opportunity for projected visual storytelling, but apart from scien-

²⁶ [N. a.] "Helybeli újdonságok" [Local News]..., 1843, 308.

²⁷ KUTHY 1843, 798.

²⁸ [N. a.] "Fővárosi hírek 's események" [News and Events in the Capital]..., 1843, 706.

²⁹ HEARD 2006, 197.

tific demonstration, it soon became a device for causing deception and fear.³⁰ The protagonists in the history of *laterna magica* from the seventeenth century included Huygens, Walgensten, Griendel, Musschenbroek, Schröpfer, Robertson, and Philidor.³¹ During the early nineteenth century, theatres (and also museums) in London, Berlin, Vienna, Madrid, Paris, New York or Mexico City hosted the new genres that emerged around the magic lantern such as phantasmagorias or ghost projections, popular education, and illusion shows, offering adventures and mysticism through visual journeys to distant, exotic territories or presenting deceased famous individuals.³² It is important though that these shows were usually situated as multimedia sensory experience with various acoustic ingredients, such as noises, and sound effects of thunder, rain and bell,³³ and one should not forget about the kinaesthetic effects of the spectators' bodies either.

Within this context, the technique of the dissolving views was inspired by both the diorama and the phantasmagoria; however, while the diorama usually allowed the presentation of various phases of the same image (such as sunlight turns into moonlight, ships before and during fire), the dissolving views could show the transformation of various images. Furthermore, during phantasmagoria presentations, the performer and the magic lantern itself as the tool behind the wonder were both consciously hidden in order to create a high efficiency of showing horror images, usually ghosts, during seance, for example. In contrast to these techniques, dissolving views allowed visual story telling with multiple locations presented, and usually the transformation itself, when one image dissolved into another was associated with fantasy, dreams, and imagination because of its visual characteristics. As suggested by media archaeologist, Erkki Huhtamo:

Dissolving views [...] shifted from topic to topic, and between levels of reality, gliding into fantasy and back again. Their transformations followed the logic of dreams rather than rivers, trails, or marching armies. [...] The moving panorama represented linear continuity, whereas dissolving views were associated with non-linearity, transformations, and fuzzy edges.³⁴

Döbler played a significant role in introducing and circulating the dissolving views technology among Central European audiences. While magic lantern projections were initially associated with the family business model,³⁵ from the 1830s, artist

³⁰ ROSSELL 2006, 134–37.

³¹ Ibid.

³² KOLTA 2003, 76–77.

³³ BARBER 1989, 4–75.

³⁴ HUHTAMO 2013, 271–72.

³⁵ KOLTA 2003, 76.

entrepreneurs started to demonstrate an economically viable model of image projections. In the 1840s, the already mentioned showman, Henry Langdon Childe, was one of the best known popularisers of the dissolving views technology at the Royal Polytechnic Institution in London. The institution was opened in 1838 to provide the public with “a practical knowledge of the various arts and branches of science”,³⁶ and soon became one of the most important venues for popular science demonstrations within Europe. Döbler visited London in 1842, when he performed his magic tricks and optical illusions under the title “Natural Magic” for three months at the St. James Theatre,³⁷ attracting spectators such as the royal family. He performed “numerous new experiments” and old one such as “The Miraculous Washing, and Flora’s Gifts”.³⁸ It was during this tour, when Döbler could see one or more of Childe’s dissolving views presentations at the above-mentioned institution. In addition, he also got a chance at the dawn of mass production to purchase double magic lanterns which were used for the projection of dissolving views. The fact that Döbler might use devices bought in London was reflected in an 1844 newspaper article as well: “The whole Europe is paying for Mister Döbler, giving him the opportunity of buying his impeccable tools on English land.”³⁹ Döbler first presented his own dissolving views in 1843, a year after his London tour, at the Theatre in der Josefstadt in Vienna, which was followed by the European tour in the same year, including the city of Pest-Buda.

Characterized also as a “chaotic confusion of colours”,⁴⁰ contemporary audiences of Pest-Buda welcomed the new modes of image presentation, and most German and Hungarian journals of the time portrayed Döbler as an artist celebrity who would create full house performances in national theatres, so it was also handled as a considerable economic gain. It is essential to notice that these productions were embedded in contemporary theatre culture; therefore examining early visual technologies is not only relevant as pre-histories of film,⁴¹ but rather in the horizon of nineteenth-century theatre and theatregoers, which provided the basic context for understanding how new visual experiences were situated as perceptual conventions. When performing in theatre institutions, Döbler’s shows were preceded by other productions, usually comedies or music shows, so even though the optical illusions represented the highlight of the evening as suggested by the playbills’ typography, they were never situated as solo shows.

³⁶ [N. a.] *Prospectus*, 1837.

³⁷ CHRISTOPHER 1991, 71.

³⁸ [N. a.] St James’s Theatre, King Street... 1842.

³⁹ [N. a.] ”Sajtó-őr” [Press Guardian]..., 1844, 47.

⁴⁰ [N. a.] ”Nemz. szinh.” [National Theatre]..., 1843, 1343.

⁴¹ Döbler’s dissolving views practices have already been examined as part of movie history: SCHLAGER-GRUBER, 2001.

Döbler's dissolving views confronted Central European audiences with a new transformation of images which could be connected to both outer and inner mobilization: on the one hand, the urbanizing environment with faster vehicles could be grasped in the experience, and on the other hand, the fantastic contents of the mobile human mind also reached its visual representation. As a consequence, the transformative images represented a novel visual experience for both the German and Hungarian communities in Pest-Buda. As summarized in one of the reviews:

The last image was especially surprizing: a country image in winter colours, the house was covered by snow, icicles were hanging from the rooftop, children were standing on slippery ice, trees were covered by frost, while in the background mountains could be seen – and the same land suddenly turns into the most beautiful summer image, the snow disappears, the trees are green, the land is a green velvet carpet, the foggy air turns into the purest azure blue, and the ice melts into a clean creek, and all of this was presented in such a strange way as if we could look into nature's transformation itself. [...] Döbler's images were not panorama, not diorama, not cosmorama images – but something brand new and peculiar.⁴²

⁴² [N. a.] "Fővárosi hírek 's események" [News and Events in the Capital]..., 1843, 706.