



## "Predictable Unpredictability": Dynamic Embodied Patterns in Miklós Jancsó's Film Style

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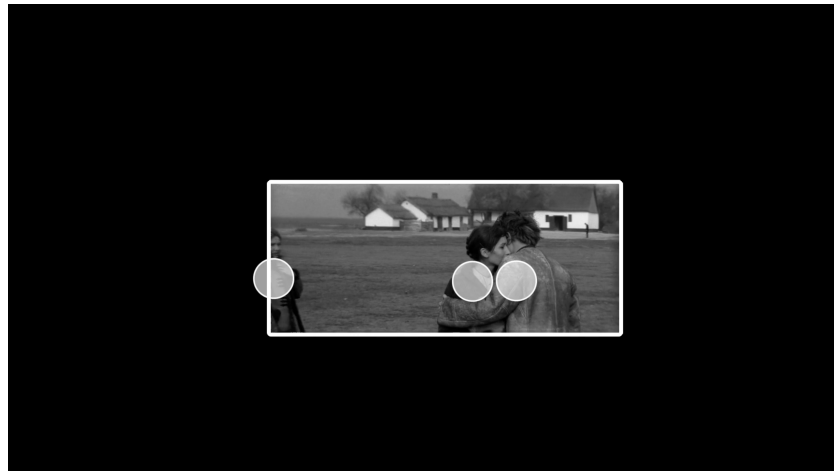
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This video essay explores the complexity of Miklós Jancsó's idiosyncratic film style. Drawing on theories of embodied cognition and perceptual psychology, and by utilizing videographic tools, it aims to offer a novel approach to understanding Jancsó's early formalist films.

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### Creators' Statement

This video essay explores the analytical and cognitive complexity of Miklós Jancsó's idiosyncratic film style through the means of videographic features. Jancsó's style has been applauded for its technically complicated long takes that involve patterned sequences of frame and figure mobility.

Our goal is to gain a cognitively informed “analytical grip” on the elusive experience of the director's early ‘formalist films’ (Iordanova 2003: 187), including *The Round-Up* (1966), *The Red and the White* (1967) *Silence and Cry* (1968), and *The Confrontation* (1969). There are different categorizations, distinguishing between smaller and bigger units in Jancsó's oeuvre (spanning between 1950 and 2012). We sympathize with Tibor Hirsch's assertion, who identifies a more or less discrete period between 1964 and 1987, between *My Way Home* and *Season of Monsters*. He claims that what is happening during this period is a consolidation, and what is changing is “only” an intensification of Jancsó's already established symbolical and stylistic idiosyncrasies (Hirsch 2002: 46).

While we are not seeking to offer any specific interpretation that could only be discerned from a closer examination of these examples' specific historical—cultural and political—contexts, our audiovisual t(h)inking does aim to point out some fundamental dynamics that underlie all these interpretations. We contend that even a hard-to-get-a-grip-on filmmaker's style, which has been (almost) exclusively studied as political acts in historical contexts, can be broken down into and explained in terms of underlying embodied patterns (on which the political builds and capitalizes). Thus, a broader aim of our approach is to show that even films driven by ideology (such as those of Jancsó) can be meaningfully analyzed through a non-ideological lens.

Finding a way to capture the dynamic nature of Jancsó's style in written form remains a challenging endeavor, despite notable descriptive attempts from film scholars like David Bordwell (1985) or András Bálint Kovács (2002, 2007). In recent years, the format of the video essay has found its way into the academic community and stirred advancement in film scholarship and education. In this essay we show how its tools may serve the benefits of cognitive film studies by revealing how abstract animations can be used to explain the graphic visual logic of Jancsó's style and to evaluate its formal prevalence in film history.

As a theoretical framework we draw upon both extant classical cognitive resources such as Heider and Simmel's (1944) study on perceptual animacy, Michotte's (1963) famous experiments on perceptual causality, as well as some theoretical findings from the more recent research programs of embodied cognition (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Mandler 2004; Tversky 2019) and predictive processing in visual aesthetics (e.g., Kesner 2014). These strands of research emphasize the importance of 'conceptual primitives' (Mandler 1992) and 'dynamic patterns of containment' (Dewell 2005) in the structure of cognitive abilities and thinking dispositions. A key concept in this regard is Lakoff and Johnson's notion of an image schema, which is a recurring and dynamic pre-conceptual structure or Gestalt that has its basis in embodied experience. More recently, film scholars (e.g., Coëgnarts and Kravanja 2012; Coëgnarts 2019) have adopted this concept to describe the embodied underpinnings of meaning-making in film. Since these patterns are typically defined at a pre-cognitive non-verbal level, we believe that the visual format of the video essay is particularly useful to help diagram the dynamic spatial patterning of Jancsó's film style as well as its conceptual entailments.

As such, our essay also follows and applies to film studies a current trend in the cognitive sciences of developing diagrammatic representations of image schemas. Only recently, scholars such as Hedblom et al. have introduced the Diagrammatic Image Schema Language (DISL)—a visual language for the representation of image schemas and their components: "This language defines a set of symbols for the representation of an initial set of *conceptual primitives*, the recurring building blocks of image schemas, and further defines principles on how to compose image schemas and conceptual narratives from these components" (2024:139). Inevitably, DISL remains static in the traditional written form. Our essay augments this literature by providing an animated form to such a language.

The essay is a follow-up to a video essay entitled "Embodied Visual Meaning [in] Motion" that was published earlier in this journal (Coëgnarts 2023). There, Coëgnarts explored the possibilities of schematic diagrams in revealing the hidden

meaning-making processes of cinema; however, the dynamic patterns in animated form (X) and the concrete film excerpts (Y) were limited to combination either by assembling them in temporal sequence (X before Y or Y after X or vice versa), or by displaying them simultaneously side by side. A third possibility of merging X and Y into one hybrid image (overlay) was only explored to a limited extent. This essay attempts to bring this latter—and arguably most enlightening—option to synchronized perfection. The outcome is a more seamless integration of both abstract patterns and moving images that seems particularly conducive to substantiating our understanding of Jancsó's complex visual dramaturgy.

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## Biographies

Miklós Kiss is an Associate Professor of Audiovisual Arts and Cognition at the Department of Arts, Culture, and Media of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His research focuses on contemporary audiovisual media through intersecting narrative and cognitive approaches. He is co-author of the books *Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video* (with Thomas van den Berg, [Scalar e-publication](#), 2016) and *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (with Steven Willemsen, Edinburgh University Press, 2017), and co-editor of the volume *Puzzling Stories: The Aesthetic Appeal of Cognitive Challenge in Film, Television and Literature* (with Steven Willemsen, Berghahn, 2022).

Maarten Coëgnarts is Assistant Professor in Film Studies at the University of Antwerp, Researchers in the Arts at LUCA School of Arts and Research Fellow at the University of the Free State. His research on embodied cognition, metaphor, and cinema has been published in journals such as *Art & Perception*, *Metaphor and Symbol*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* and *Projections*. He co-edited *Embodied Cognition and Cinema* (Leuven University Press, 2015) and authored *Film as Embodied Art: Bodily Meaning in the Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (Academic Studies Press, 2019). He is also co-editor of *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*.

## Reviewed by Zoran Samardzija, Columbia College Chicago

Miklós Jancsó was arguably the first Eastern European director to transform post-Antonioni aesthetics of landscapes, long takes, and mobile framing into a political

formalism aimed at critiquing the historical logics of Stalinism and authoritarianism. His international recognition during the late 1960s made him one of the key directors in critical debates about political aesthetics and film form. In their thoughtful video essay, “Predictable Unpredictability: Dynamic Embodied Patterns in Miklós Jancsó’s Film Style,” Miklós Kiss and Maarten Coëgnarts offer a compelling cognitivist analysis of the elemental aspects of Jancsó’s formalism in four of his most renowned films from this period, *The Round-Up* (1966), *The Red and the White* (1967) *Silence and Cry* (1968), and *The Confrontation* (1969).

As Kiss and Coëgnarts convincingly demonstrate, Jancsó’s style can be, as they say, “broken down into and explained in terms of underlying embodied patterns.” Their video essay shows that these patterns are highly geometric and establish shifting trajectories of movement with characters persistently entering and exiting the frame. Moreover, Kiss and Coëgnarts emphasize that this approach does not depoliticize the impetus of Jancsó’s ideological critiques through film form. Rather, they illustrate how these visual patterns are used to build political critique. In other words, they offer a unique analysis of how we, as spectators, make political meaning from the most elemental aspects of cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Ultimately, this approach offers new possibilities for thinking through the complex relationships between spectatorship, film form, and ideology.

#### **Reviewed by Jordan Schonig, Texas Christian University**

More than anything, Kiss and Coëgnarts’s video essay offers a compelling way of seeing Jancsó’s long takes. To be sure, I imagine that the authors have more to say (as others have) about the complex choreography of these long takes than what is presented here—how these shots illustrate or reflect the themes of the film, its sociopolitical contexts, and the power relations between characters. But part of the strength of the video essay is its interpretive restraint, which clearly follows the authors’ stated aim to present Jancsó’s long takes in terms of their “conceptual primitives”: as interactions between objects, containers, and trajectories

What should not be overlooked as an achievement of this project, then, is the subtle sophistication of the diagram, and how it makes us see bodies and cameras in terms of objects and containers. Consider, for example, how the rectangular frame’s movement across the screen is synchronized with the movement of the camera, such that if the camera is laterally tracking to the right, the reproduced frame is moving rightward on the screen. It is this movement of the film’s frame across the container of the larger videographic frame that, I think, is the authors’ greatest technical innovation beyond

what was achieved in Coëgnarts's previous video, "Embodied Visual Meaning [in] Motion." The result of the frame's movement is an enhanced impression that the film frame is a moving window upon the world of the film—or more precisely, a container. This impression is complemented by the use of circles to represent the placement of human figures both within and (more importantly) beyond the frame. The technique is of course a simple one, but it is executed so seamlessly, and with such an organic connection to the rhetorical aims of the video—that is, fostering a way of seeing cinema in terms of its conceptual primitives—that it took me a while to appreciate the labor required for its precise manipulation.

Beyond the authors' stated aim that the diagram helps elucidate the "dynamic embodied patterns" at work in Jancsó's complex long takes—from the predictable patterns of containment like "entry" and "inclusion" to the unpredictable combinations of complex human dynamics—the diagram also offers a way of seeing long takes that, to my eyes at least, emphasizes the unceasing continuity of aesthetic choice. With the off-screen characters made virtually present to our eyes through their diagrammed circles, we are always made aware of the inclusion and exclusion of human bodies as active choices. This is of course one of the central lessons of Noël Burch's writing about off-screen space in *Theory on Film Practice* (1981), which Coëgnarts (2023) references explicitly in his previous video. But the authors here manifest the felt presence of such an aesthetic choice purely through videographic ingenuity, which is a considerable feat.

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