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Show, science or discursive register(s) of alterity? How to interpret Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* in Hungary?

The present essay explains how the topic of ethnographic shows (*Völkerschauen* in German) may be presented from a historiographical – and thus “reflective” – angle.¹ The topic acquired an increasingly broader and deeper meaning following a series of analyses carried out in Hungary between the second half of the 1980s and today. Nevertheless, the interpretation of such performances has never followed a linear course of development. I will return to the question of how and why this happened in the second part of this essay.

A certain non-linearity could also be detected in my own approach to the topic – particularly to Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Shows*. Even the process of gathering material for the present essay followed a forward-moving yet slightly winding trajectory. I surveyed the existing secondary sources about the shows one after another, but also returned to a particular kind of interpretation that I could recall from my own memories. Ethnographic shows have become the subject of historical and anthropological analysis in the 1990s, when I had just begun my career as a scholar. I frequently return to the kind of interpretation that evolved in that period, as it still seems appealing.

¹ Written in 2018, this paper is based on a presentation I gave at the conference “Staged otherness, c. 1850–1939. East-Central European responses and contexts”, organised in 2019 by Dagnosław Demski, Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, Dominika Czarnecka, Ágnes Fülemile, László Kontler and myself at the Central European University and the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest (https://easaonline.org/downloads/networks/hoan/HOAN_Newsletter_07f_Conference_Budapest-201911.pdf). It was intended as a theoretical introduction to our joint research project exploring the forms of ethnographic shows in our region in the late nineteenth – early twentieth century. For reasons beyond my control, it could not be published at the time; I am pleased that it can finally be issued in this form.

Part 1: The performances

What were Buffalo Bill's performances like? Let us approach them first in general terms, independently of the actual local and individual performances.

The *Wild West Show* (Fig. 1) was a specific form of open-air entertainment, one of the foundations of the culture of “the Western”, or – more precisely – a reenactment thereof predating the cinematic genre bearing the same name. The advertisements depicted the “Rough Riders” of North-America in colourful pictures. “Western” scenes were frozen in time, painted “snapshots” of dynamic movements were distributed as placards in street corners and/or as engravings or drawings in newspapers. The “cowboys and Indians” depicted in those images provided a rather juicy, romanticised view of the Wild West.

The *Show of “Buffalo Bill”* (William Frederick Cody [1846–1917]) performed not only on the American continent but also made eight trips to Europe between 1887 and 1906. The troupe visited not only Western but also Central and Eastern European countries, and held performances featuring Native Americans (Wilson 1999, 24–25).



Fig. 1. Poster for Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show*. G.M. Wilson. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. Exhibition catalogue. Royal Armouries, 1999.

Arriving from Austria, in June and July 1906 Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* performed in various places in Hungary – which was a part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy between 1867–1918. It showed up in big cities like Budapest or Szeged, but also in smaller towns like Szentes or Békéscsaba. The map (Fig. 2) shows the route which the company took from Vienna to Budapest. Having completed their round of performances in Hungary, they turned south, travelling to Serbia and Belgrade/Beograd, and then to Kolozsvár/Cluj in the east. They moved between localities that were situated along the railway lines; this constituted one of the strengths, but also one of the weaknesses or limitations of the company's progress. Finally, in August 1906 the *Wild West Show* left Hungary heading for Galicia (present-day Poland).²

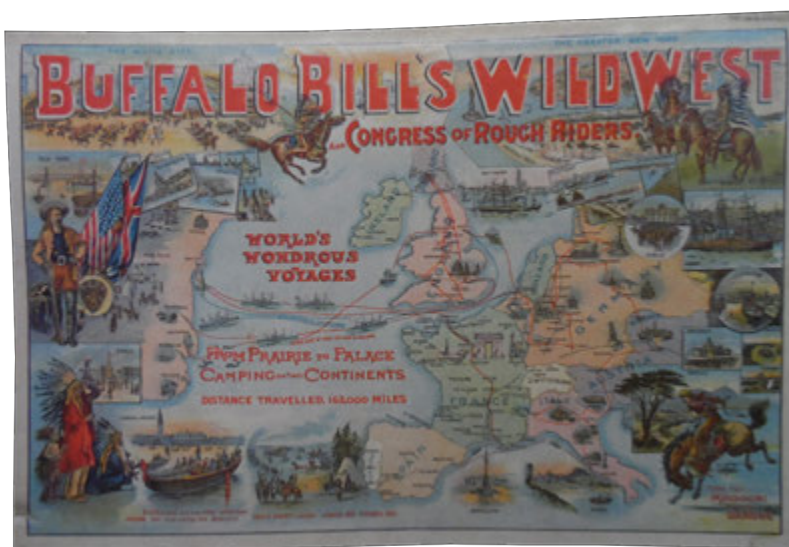


Fig. 2. Poster showing the routes of the *Wild West Show* in Europe. G.M. Wilson. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. Exhibition catalogue. Royal Armouries, 1999.

The *Wild West Show* was a huge company, consisting of ca. 150 actors (“cowboys and Indians”) plus the staff, assistants, workers and administrators: some 480 people in total. The Native American actors came from various indigenous tribes, the majority of them being Prairie Indians, particularly Sioux (Wilson 1999). This is

2 Dr. hab. Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska (the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland) kindly let me know that she had found manuscript notes made by the police of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, according to which Buffalo Bill's company had left Budapest on June 6 exactly, and then the monarchy in August.

an important feature from *their* point of view, and I will return to it in the final part of this chapter. (The present work does not focus on the Euro-American or, for that matter, Asian actors who “played” Indians in the company).

Let us now approach Buffalo Bill’s performances according to certain methodological considerations that appeared in anthropology in general – and in Hungary in particular – during the 1980s and 1990s.

In the last three decades, a number of Hungarian anthropologists, historians, archivists and other scholars specialising in social sciences have started to explore the circumstances of ethnographic shows held in Hungary. Moreover, we now have a series of local archival analyses concerning Buffalo Bill’s performances. Although no systematic investigations have yet been conducted in the latter field, there is a number of smaller studies concerning Budapest, Szentes, Debrecen, or Nagybecskerek/Veliki Bečkerek or Zrenjanin (present-day Serbia), and so on. Archivists and local historians have unearthed written, printed and visual documents (contracts, invitations, advertisements, newspaper coverage, and even photography relating to the *Wild West Show*). The advertisement in Figure 3 refers, for example, to the performance in the small town of Szentes (Csongrád county) in 1906.

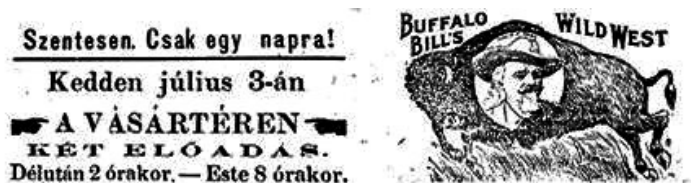


Fig. 3. Advertisement of the performance of the *Wild West Show* in the town of Szentes, July 3, 1906. <http://www.szenteskincsei.gportal.hu/gindex.php?pg=35309849&-nid=6473350>, accessed September 7, 2019.

While there is a large amount of (rather fragmented) information explored by various scholars, a deeper, socio-cultural analysis of the *Show* – as well as other *Völkerschauen* as such – seems to have been in demand in Hungary in a particular disciplinary context and a particular period of time. This demand emerged rather late, and coincided with the rise of the so-called “interpretive” (or, “reflective”) anthropology, the reception of post-colonialism and the postmodern concept of “popular culture” in Hungary.

Part 2: The interpretation

The following section of this essay discusses some of the latter approaches. I will focus on their methodological stance and discursive orientation. I consider these approaches to be important, valid and legitimate possibilities of interpreting ethnographic shows. They can provide inviting ways and useful concepts to scholars to consider Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* as a multi-medial construction of a highly "exoticised American frontier world", and the Native American participants – the indigenous people of North America – as rather admirable "spectacle Indians"³ embedded in it. Finally, in the third part of the chapter, I will pinpoint certain local (socio-cultural, popular and scientific) contexts in which the exoticising message of the *Show* was received and appropriated/domesticated in late-nineteenth-century East-Central Europe/Hungary.

In order to approach what the colourful advertisements (placards, engravings, drawings etc.) relating to Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* intend to tell us, and in what contexts they could have been embedded, I suggest we go back to what came to be called the "interpretive turn" or "hermeneutic turn" in socio-cultural anthropology. It is the set of approaches that enabled, in my view, the deepest analysis of nineteenth-century ethnographic shows, *Völkerschau* performances and the like. It is the set of approaches that enriched the study of travel, travelogues, and the construction of the (distant) Other in the 1970s–1980s.⁴ These approaches appeared in Hungary as well, albeit slightly later. It is these that I drew upon constantly (using not only books but also the memories of my days as an anthropology and history major at the ELTE university, Budapest) while working on this essay.

The term "interpretive turn" or "hermeneutic turn" refers to the self-reflexive, (self)critically oriented, post-modern approaches that emerged in American anthropology from the 1970s onwards. It produced the now classic works of James Clifford, George Marcus (Clifford, Marcus 1986), Renato Rosaldo (1989), Paul Rabinow (Rabinow, Sullivan 1987) – and, in their background, the "father" of interpretive anthropology, the most cited author at the period, Clifford Geertz (1973).

These anthropologists were all pioneers in investigating the two related spheres of the production of (ethnographic and other) data: the so-called "poetics" and "politics" of cultural constructions. By "poetics", they understood especially the narrative structure and the rhetoric of cultural products. Relating it to Buffalo

3 "Spectacle Indians" is my own term paraphrasing that of "celluloid Indians", coined by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999).

4 For the early examples see Greenblatt (1991), Mignolo (1995), and Elsner, Rubiés (1999).

Bill's *Show*, one could ask for example, *how* and *why* "the Western" i.e. a multimedial "tale" of a nomadic – and romantic – savagery was narrated in a primarily urban /bourgeois context all over Euro-American countries and continents? What was its appeal, how was its desirability constructed? By "politics", the abovementioned anthropologists understood either the implicit political meanings/messages to be found in cultural products, or the (intended/virtual or, for that matter actual/manifest) political uses of them. Returning to the case of Buffalo Bill's *Show*, one could ask for example, whether it praised or, perhaps, mocked Euro-American "civilisation", whether it contributed to its enhancement or, rather, criticism by providing an alternative (?) to it? What social groups were targeted by those messages, who used them or, for that matter, abused them, who profitted from them in the end? The term "politics" was applied by the mentioned anthropologists in the broadest possible sense, relating to the situated place/position of the messages and the messengers in the given social structure, in everyday hierarchies and power relations, colonial dependencies, race and/or gender contexts, etc. (Clifford, Marcus 1986).

As for Hungary, the post-modern approaches of "poetics" and "politics" appeared ten or so years later, mostly in the late 1980s – early 1990s, i.e. around the time of the great political changes in the country. They exerted considerable influence upon Hungarian cultural anthropology and other social sciences. Groups of researchers and even institutions (university departments, museums, etc.) became reinvigorated by the new ways of thinking and research methodology in the social and cultural sciences. The categories of "poetics" and "politics" worked well not only for the so-called "ethnographic texts" (this was the original topic of Geertz, or rather his "way of reading" i.e. interpreting things) (Geertz 1973), but with "ethnographic representations" as well. And it is exactly here, in this particular context, that the topic of ethnographic shows appeared in Hungary (although it must be restated that it appeared somewhat late compared to Western European /American anthropologies). The transfer of a deep, reflective analysis of *Völker-schauen* coincided with the emergence of interpretive anthropology (the kind that focuses on "poetics" and "politics"), and the reception of post-colonialism in Hungary (see *A posztkoloniális művelődéstudomány* [Post-colonial cultural theory] [Odorics, Szamosi 1996]).

The present article mentions only two scholars and two major events from that period that were closely connected to later developments: first of all, Zoltán Fejős, who was the director of the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest at the time, and Tímea N. Kovács, a junior anthropologist who pursued her studies in Germany. Fejős is retired now, whereas Kovács is currently working at the János Kodolányi

High School in Székesfehérvár/Budapest. Apart from the numerous individual studies of these two scholars relating to the construction of exoticism in the context of ethnographic objects and musealisation, long distance travel and ethnographic shows (especially the Hagenbeck shows in/arriving from Germany) in the second half of the nineteenth century (Fejős 2008; N. Kovács 2003; 2008), two major interdisciplinary enterprises should also be emphasised. Both focused on fundamental aspects of the new research of the representation of cultural otherness/alterity in Hungary. One was a conference entitled “Anthropology and literature. The emergence of a new paradigm” and held at the Department of Visual Anthropology of the University of Miskolc in 2002 (Biczó, Kiss 2003); the other was a similar scholarly meeting entitled “Towards the exotic – approaches, perspectives”, held in the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest in 2007 (Fejős, Pusztai 2008).

It was German and American scholars of the period from whom Hungarian researchers borrowed the most while studying the various aspects of staging, othering and exoticising: Regina Bendix, Roland Girtler, Jürgen Osterhammel, Werner Röcke, Joachim Schultz, Andreas Wenderoth, as well as Marshall Sahlins, Stephen Greenblatt, Hayden White, and others. Another group which deserves a mention are thinkers who were somewhat “ubiquitous” at that time: apart from the above-mentioned proponents of the “poetics” and “politics” approach, these included Hans Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Arjun Appadurai, Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva, and others. Equally noteworthy is the reception of the work of certain Scandinavian scholars studying the phenomenon of ethnographic shows, and the production of indigeneity and authenticity, focusing on similar aspects and approaches. These included Bjarne Stocklund, Helena Ruotsala, and others (Stocklund 2003; see also Bendix 1997).

Why were the “interpretive” – and post-colonial – approaches so innovative at the time, and how can they still be used for studying Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show*? They gave us a number of working concepts to apply and to ponder on: they helped – and, in my view, could still help – investigate the “representational strategies” and the “forms of othering” that were/are implied in cultural products – such as the late-nineteenth-century romantic image of the American Wild West. These working concepts help(ed) us realise how those representational strategies and forms of othering may “change through time”. For example, the American “Indians” were depicted quite differently in the demonising discourses of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century than in Buffalo Bill’s performances (Sz. Kristóf 2012). However, representational strategies and forms of othering may also change “across discourses”, a point to which I will return in the third part of my essay. Finally, those concepts and approaches can throw light on a number of “surviv-

ing stereotypes” in representations, like the image of the “spectacle Indian” to be seen in Figure 4, which was central not only to Buffalo Bill’s *Show*, but also to the popular youth books of Karl May (1842–1912) and subsequently the “Indian movies”, not only in the Euro-American West, but also in Central and Eastern Europe, including Hungary (Sz. Kristóf 2017). Such visual stereotypes of “Indians” seem to have been deeply embedded in the common stock of European culture, relating to cultural otherness. Therefore, I am convinced that those interpretive/reflective approaches can help us understand our own “processes of visual/textual canon-formation”, in the register of both popular culture and science.



Fig. 4. Poster of a “Spectacle Indian” in the *Wild West Show*. G.M. Wilson. *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*. Exhibition catalogue. Royal Armouries, 1999.

To recapitulate, this is what I believe classical interpretive anthropology can teach us these days, and what I consider absolutely relevant and necessary in any attempt of approaching ethnographic shows like those of Buffalo Bill’s. Such performances do not just “imply” or “reflect” ethnographical – or any kind of – knowledge: they “select” things and “construct” something specific by their means. I emphasise this fact, since not only the spectators of the performances and the journalists writing about them, but also some researchers studying them do not

always seem sensitive enough to look “behind the scenes” (Bárány 2015; MTI 2017; Perczel 2016). They are inclined to take the Show for Reality. I will return to this aspect at the end of this essay.

Part 3: Domestication

And with this, I have come to the third part of my chapter. Let us now see what should be problematised in the historical analysis of ethnographic shows, and how researchers could (or at least, should try to) avoid the traps that such an investigation implies. Lastly, I would like to focus on certain local contexts of Buffalo Bill’s performances.

Beside relying on a more or less stable, structured programme (e.g. glass ball shootings, Indian attacks against post coaches, cowboy’s racings with rodeo-like elements, etc.), Buffalo Bill attempted to “adjust” his show to the local audiences and to include certain “local elements” in the performance.

Extant material includes a diary written by members of the company (most likely administrators thereof). It offers a clearer insight on how the troupe attempted to tailor their performances according to the specific local cultures, in this case those of Central and Eastern Europe. Let me cite a couple of paragraphs from the diary, describing the events of July 1906, when the company was travelling through Hungary, towards the South and then the East.

At Nagy-Kikinda, [July] 5, we were only two hours from G[B]elgrade, Serbia [sic!], and a big percentage of our audience was Servians [sic!]. The side-show opening was made *in four languages – German, Hungarian, Servian [sic!] and Roumanian*.

Nagy-Becserek, 6, turned out good at night. At Pancova the following night we were just across the river from Belgrade and our house was full of *fashionables from the Servian [sic!] capital*.

Versecz, 8, and Tamas-var, 9, were only fair. The following days we stopped at Arad.

[...]

On the 13th we played Nagy-L [correctly: Sz. – I.Sz.K.] ben (Hermanstadt), a big garrison town where only German is spoken. We

arrived late, but opened in time and did big business both afternoon and night.

At Schamberg-Sege(s)var, 10, openings were made in two tongues as the city people speak German.⁵

At the end, Kolozsvár/Cluj is mentioned with its big cattle marketplace that the staff liked very much. On the spacious marketplace of Kolozsvár, as seen on Figure 5, the tents of the company were set up.



Fig. 5. The tents of of Buffalo Bill's company in Kolozsvár/Cluj (present-day Romania), July 1906. <https://velikibeckerek.wordpress.com/tag/buffalo-bill-velika-kikinda-veliki-beckerek-pancevo-vrsac-banat-nagybecskerek-nagy-kikinda-vidacs-robert/> accessed September 7, 2019.

As for the specificities of the Budapest performances, Olivér Perczel, archivist at the Budapest City Archives (*Fővárosi Levéltár*) has discovered that a popular piece of music (*Rákóczi Marsch*) that was inserted into Buffalo Bill's repertoire. This was a well-known piece of military march in the Austrian and also Hungarian part of the monarchy. It may also be added that a Hungarian "master shepherd" (*csikós*) was employed in order to bring the show closer to the actual Hungarian audience (Perczel 2013, 157, 162).

The content/programme of the *Wild West Show* consisted primarily of certain elements of late-nineteenth-century popular culture; its director and chief showman, Buffalo Bill "played" with these ingredients in very interesting ways.

5 The part of the diary cited above and other details about the *Wild West Show* tour around Nagybecskerek/Veliki Bečkerek/Zrenjanin, Serbia and other southern and eastern towns in 1906 may be found at <https://velikibeckerek.wordpress.com/tag/buffalo-bill-velika-kikinda-veliki-beckerek-pancevo-vrsac-banat-nagybecskerek-nagy-kikinda-vidacs-robert/> (in Serbian), accessed September 7, 2019.

In my interpretation, the actual performance of the *Show* was like a “cultural patchwork” – in many respects similar to a postcard or a souvenir (such as the one depicted in Figure 6). The collage is composed of three individual pieces of imagery: two buildings and a procession of Buffalo Bill’s company in front of them. In its lower section, there is a printed formula left blank to be filled in by the members of the “actual local audience”. The postcard thus seems to rely on a patterned visual structure, a printed visual formula, while its actual, filled-in copy serves as a souvenir from an individual performance, held in “Beckskerek” – i.e. Veliki Beckerek or Zrenjanin, Serbia – in July 1906. The postcard is from the very period when Buffalo Bill’s company travelled through Hungary, Serbia and Romania.

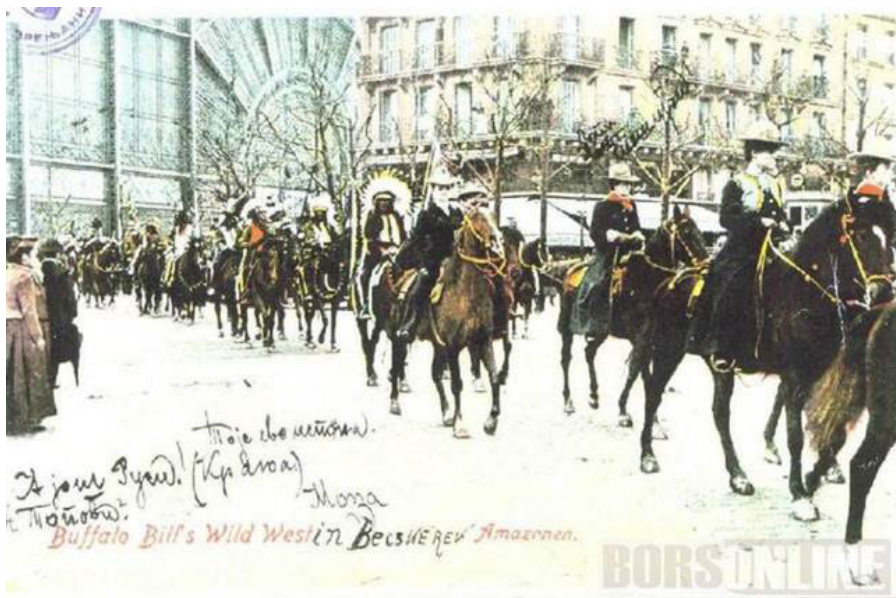


Fig. 6. Souvenir postcard of the performance of the *Wild West Show* in Beckskerek/Veliki Beckerek/Zrenjanin (today Serbia), July 6, 1906. <http://old-zrenjanin.blogspot.com/2011/08/nagybecskerek-1906-buffalo-bill-wild>, accessed September 7, 2019 (no longer available).

Finally, let us turn to the question of the reception of the *Show* and that of its Native American participants. How much do we know about the reception of Buffalo Bill’s performances in Hungary?

The correct answer seems to be: quite a lot – but at the same time, very little. Olivér Perczel has done much for unearthing the related material, and has published articles about the contemporary newspaper coverage of the performances. However, similarly to some other contemporary authors and journalists, he some-

times appears to agree with the interpretation of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century journalists claiming that the *Wild West Show* seemed “unique”, “sensational” and “mystical” for the Hungarian urban audiences in the summer of 1906 (Perczel 2015; 2016; Bárány 2015; MTI 2017). Taking into consideration the methodology of “poetics” and “politics” discussed above and my own research results in the history of anthropology in Hungary, I would argue that the *Show* was not that different from anything that could be seen in urban contexts in that period. It may have been sensational in its (intended) appearance (outfit, rhetoric and music) and described as such by contemporary journalists, but it could hardly be that in itself. It was neither unique nor mystical. And there are reasons for that. By the year 1906 the inhabitants of Budapest had already seen several groups of non-European indigenous peoples, on various occasions. Ethnographic shows were held in the Budapest Zoo since (at least) 1873. Non-European aboriginal people featured in them during various individual tours: Nubian (1878), Samoyed (1882), Sinhalese (1884), Sudanese Arab (1885), Sioux Indian (1886, 1891), Sami (1873/74, 1888, 1894, 1913), Ashanti (1888), Bedouin (1890/91) and Suaheli (1891) groups featured in the Hungarian capital, together with the female royal guards (the so-called Amazons) from Dahomey (1892), other African groups from Ghana (1896), Chinese/Vietnamese (?) from Tonkin (1896) and, others still, such as Samoans (1901).⁶

Since the 1870s, university lectures about non-European indigenous cultures were given in Budapest, most notably by the brilliant geographer János Hunfalvy (1820–1888) (Hunfalvy 1995 [1876/77]). The Budapest Zoo itself, in which Buffalo Bill performed, had already existed since 1866. The first collection of “exotic” objects and artifacts, brought home from the Indonesian island of Borneo by another geographer and surgeon, János Xántus (1825–1894), who established the Budapest Zoo, found its way to the Department of Ethnography of the Hungarian National Museum in 1870.⁷ Thus, the inhabitants of Budapest seem to have had many opportunities to see non-European indigenous peoples before the arrival of Buffalo Bill’s *Show*. One must also add that the reception of Buffalo Bill’s Sioux Indians in

6 I have compiled this list of the (mostly) Hagenbeckian tours in the Budapest Zoo on the basis of the recent research by Olivér Perczel (2016). The information about the Samoans was kindly provided by Dr. Hilke Thode-Arora (Museum Fünf Kontinente, München, Germany). On the performance of 40 Sinhalese in the Budapest Zoo in 1884 see also *Budapest főváros Állat- és Növénykertje* [Budapest zoo and botanical garden] (n.d., 37). There is still, however, much to discover in this field.

7 A reliable biography of János Xántus is available at [https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/X%C3%A0ntus_J%C3%A0nos_\(etnol%C3%B3gus\)](https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/X%C3%A0ntus_J%C3%A0nos_(etnol%C3%B3gus)) (in Hungarian), accessed September 7, 2019.

Budapest in the summer of 1906 was not entirely friendly. According to a newspaper report (*Pesti Hírlap* [Pest News] 1906, 5), a skirmish broke out in a local pub, and the Sioux participants got a very bad, even dishonest depiction in the newspapers the next day, being labelled as “bloodthirsty savages” (see also Perczel 2015).

I am therefore convinced that there is still much to be done to get a better understanding of the reception of the *Wild West Show* in the “popular” register of the culture of Budapest and in smaller country towns. In the latter case, the adjectives of “unique”, “sensational” and “mystical” may have been a more accurate description of how the *Show* was received. Another register to be studied would be the discourse of contemporary world ethnography/anthropology, cultivated as a “science” in Hungary and taught at the University of Budapest since the 1870s, by the abovementioned geographer, Hunfalvy. Some of Hunfalvy’s lectures referred to the indigenous peoples of North America, but contained and distributed information about a much greater number of indigenous societies than just the Prairie Indians, or the Sioux. They conveyed a much broader and more systematised knowledge about the life of the Native American peoples known at the time, and the language of the presentation was different from the sensational, bombastic discourse of Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show* and the contemporary newspapers reporting about it (see Hunfalvy 1995 [1876/77]).

Part 4: The native point of view

Finally, let us turn to the case of the Native Americans themselves. The existing Hungarian literature on the *Wild West Show* in Budapest and other towns in Hungary tends to neglect the discussion of the reason why it was the Sioux Indians in particular that were employed in Buffalo Bill’s company. The explanation is related primarily to the last phase of the so-called Indian wars in the United States, during which hundreds of Lakota warriors (but also women and children) were massacred – e.g. during the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890 – and the remainder were forced to move into reservations. After the Battle of Wounded Knee and the so-called Ghost Dance movement (a spiritual awakening movement of the Sioux), the US army put dozens of Lakota men in custody under the supervision of Buffalo Bill himself, in an attempt to remove them from the reservations and to keep them away from the spiritual movement. The latter was judged too dangerous by contemporary army officials and politicians. The Prairie Indians, like the Sioux and their smaller group, the Lakota, were excellent riders, buffalo hunters and warriors. It was especially *them* that had been chosen by Euro-American novelists, impressarios and film-makers to stand for the indigenous people of North

America. Based upon their cultural characteristics, the Prairie Indians/the Sioux have become “The Indian” in European and Anglo-American popular culture and imagination (Sz. Kristóf 2017). Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show* in 1906 merely reinforced an already existing cultural stereotype and was embedded in it itself.

The “native point of view” – the particular reasons of the Sioux *themselves* to take part in performances like those of Buffalo Bill’s – is rarely considered. Figure 7 presents a scene from the movie *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson*.



Fig. 7. Scene from the movie *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson*, directed by Robert Altman, 1976. <https://theseventhart.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/buffalo-bill-and-the-indians-81.jpg>, accessed September 7, 2019.

The film, directed by Robert Altman (1976), tells the story of the meeting between Buffalo Bill (played by Paul Newman [1925–2008]) and the enigmatic Sitting Bull, the great Lakota chief (played by Frank “Sitting Wind” Kaquitts from the Nakoda (Stoney) First Nation [1925–2002]). Sitting Bull himself featured briefly in the *Wild West Show* in the United States after the Battle of Wounded Knee. He himself did not come to Europe with Buffalo Bill, but other members of his band did. The Lakota/Sioux people’s motivation to take part in the *Wild West Show* included a desire to gain deeper knowledge about the *Wasi’chu* (i.e. the Whites); to earn some money to send back to their people starving in the reservations (e.g. Pine Ridge, South Dakota); and also to gain respect from those who had defeated them in the Indian wars. There was also a kind of “intercultural twisting” of the performances on the part of the Native Americans, i.e. the show played for a non-Indian audience doubled with an indigenous “re-interpretation” of it, a “critique” of the whole genre in the words and actions of the indigenous participants themselves (Wilson 1999, 15; Bellin 2009, 241–243). The narrative of the Sioux underlying their particular motivation is a story *not* to be found either

in contemporary newspapers, or in the ethnographical profiles. And, sadly, it is not to be found in the historical accounts that have been written about their stay and performance in Hungary in the summer of 1906.

I would thus conclude that there seems to be too much sensationalism and too little social/socio-cultural history in the reception of Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* in Hungary so far. One might argue that a distinction should be made between the "sensational discourse" discernible in the performances themselves and echoed and distributed by the newspapers and other (visual) advertisements, and the rather evolutionary "scholarly/geographic/ethnographic discourse" of the day. Although the latter inherited a lot from the sense of attraction and interest in "wonders" and cultural curiosities, observable in earlier times (Daston, Park 2001 [1998]; Sz. Kristóf 2014), as well as from a certain kind of exoticism generated by non-European cultures, in my view it constitutes a more complex entity/form of knowledge at the turn of the nineteenth century in Hungary, and perhaps also elsewhere. It is the task of the historian – Hungarian or otherwise – to catch that particular complexity and to detect its various aspects, as well as the ways in which it is embedded in the given social contexts. It is my intention to conduct a closer analysis of the scholarly/ethnographic discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the nearest future. It is planned to be the sequel to this methodological approach to Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* in Hungary.⁸

I am convinced that the historian's own narrative – my own narrative – should be distinct from both the sensational and the evolutionary/primitivising "scholarly" narratives implied in or concerning ethnographic shows, such as that of Buffalo Bill's. It never should identify with them entirely.

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8 Since 2018, when this article was first written, I have published several studies in the field of ethnographic shows in Hungary. Two of the most important are Sz. Kristóf (2022) and, especially Sz. Kristóf (2025).

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