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### Film, Medicine and Freemasonry: Jenő Janovics and the Transylvanian “Hollywood”

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# Film, Medicine and Freemasonry: Jenő Janovics and the Transylvanian “Hollywood”

*The Freemasonry of Cluj – the perfect connection between medicine and society*

Attila Varga<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Lili Poór (in the middle) (1886-1962), the wife of Jenő Janovics, famous actress starring in a silent film made in the Central Park of Cluj. Source: The Archive of the Transylvanian Museum – Cluj, *Personal Archive of Jordáky Lajos. Manuscripts of Jenő Janovics.*

## Abstract

This study highlights the life and work of Jenő Janovics, a renowned Hungarian theater director in Cluj, the capital of Transylvania. Janovics was a multi-talented figure, excelling as a film director and actor, and was also a freemason. Often hailed as the creator of Transylvanian “Hollywood”, he directed a total of 66 films. One of them, “The Horror of the World” (Hu: “Világrém”, 1920), focuses on medicine and its preventive role in safeguarding societal health. Using cinematography, Janovics expressed the concerns of both the physicians and the freemasons of Cluj regarding the detrimental impact of immorality and venereal diseases on the individual and the nation. At a time of profound political, territorial and social changes, this silent movie highlights the importance of medicine in society.

**Key Words:** *Medicine, freemasonry, Jenő Janovics, Transylvanian “Hollywood”, interwar Romania.*

<sup>1</sup>Romanian Academy of Science.



**Figure 2.** Jenő Janovics (1872-1945), the creator of Transylvanian “Hollywood”. Source: The Archive of the Transylvanian Museum – Cluj, *Personal Archive of Jordáky Lajos. Manuscripts of Jenő Janovics*

The legend of Transylvanian “Hollywood” was born more than one hundred years ago, all due to the remarkable activity of Jenő Janovics.<sup>a</sup>(Fig. 2)

He was the director of the Hungarian National Theater (Hu: Nemzeti Színház) in Kolozsvár (Ro: Cluj), a city to which he brought international notoriety, and one of the best producers of silent films in Central Europe during the fin-de-siècle.

Born on 8 December 1872 in Ungvár, today Ujhorod, a small town in Ukraine, Janovics was the fifth child of a Jewish family of modest means. In 1877, his family relocated to Budapest, seeking improved living conditions and better educational opportunities for their children. Fourteen years later, having successfully completed the Baccalaureate and achieved outstanding academic results, young Jenő’s parents encouraged him to pursue a career in engineering. However, driven by his passion for acting, he instead chose to enroll in the courses offered by the Budapest Academy of Drama

and Film (Hu: Színház- és Fimművészeti Egyetem). He was an excellent student and a quick learner, graduating in 1894 with “Magna Cum Laudae”.

He then began his career as a traveling actor, playing on the stages of various theaters across the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In 1896, Janovics arrived in Kolozsvár (Ro: Cluj), having made a name for himself in the world of Hungarian theatre. He enrolled at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Cluj, from where, in 1900, he gained a doctoral degree in Dramaturgy with a study dedicated to the life and work of the prominent playwright Gergely Csiky (1842-1891).

In 1905, Janovics became the youngest director of the Hungarian Theater in Cluj, at the age of only 24. At the same time, he turned his attention to another field that fascinated him and the general public alike: silent films. By then he was recognised as one of the prominent members of the “Unio” Masonic Lodge, having been initiated on 19 January 1901<sup>b</sup>. The Lodge offered consistent support for his ambitious projects.

In 1908, Janovics was offered the possibility of using the newly renovated Summer Theater space for film screenings with Géza Szvácsina, the Mayor of Cluj and member of the “Unio” Lodge. Film screenings had already gained popularity during that period. The proposal quickly materialised, allowing the inhabitants of the Transylvanian city to enjoy silent movies. Following this transformation, the large hall of the Summer Theater became known as the “Summer Theater Cinema”<sup>c</sup>.

Recognising the tremendous potential of cinematography, Janovics expressed his desire to produce silent films in Transylvania. He reached out to Pathé Film Company in Paris, one of the world’s most renowned film production studios. Pathé responded enthusiastically to the proposals by Janovics, who was often accompanied by his partner, the well-known film producer Jenő Goldweiser. He recognised the demand for original films that would highlight Hungarian national uniqueness and directly engage the local audience.

Before his negotiations with Pathé, Janovics completed a film script entitled: “The Yellow Foal” (Hu: Sárga csikó). The film was to be made in Cluj, using actors from the Hungarian Theatre, with produc-

a For more information about Jenő Janovics’ career see: Zakariás Erzsébet: *Janovics. The Creator of Transylvanian Hollywood*, Bucharest, Tracus Arte, 2014. Idem, ed. *Janovics Jenő (1872-1945)*, Kolozsvár, Kolozsvári Operabarátok Köre, 2015 and Imre Sándor: *Dr. Janovics Jenő és a színház*, Cluj-Kolozsvár, Az Erdélyi és Bánáti Színhézegetület kiadványa, 1924.

b See National Archives of Hungary – Budapest, *Archive of Freemasons Order. “Unio” Masonry Lodge. The register of the lodge members*, 100 cs. XL. (1886-1918).

c Zakariás Erzsébet, *Janovics. The Creator of Transylvanian Hollywood*, p. 23-35.

tion costs covered by Janovics himself. The Pathé Film Company undertook to provide equipment and technical specialists. For this mission, the renowned director Felix Vanyl was seconded to Cluj accompanied by two professional cameramen: Robert Montgobert and Paulique Dezsó, in partnership with Pathé and using actors from the Hungarian Theatre. Pathé also agreed to distribute distributing the film worldwide<sup>d</sup>. The premiere of the “Yellow Foal” took place in Budapest on 21 January 1914, and it was a success: the new Transylvanian “Hollywood” began to gain recognition worldwide. Between 1914 and 1920, Cluj produced a total of 66 silent films<sup>e</sup>, establishing three distinct film studios under Janovics’ supervision.

The future world-class Hollywood film director Michael Curtiz, who was born in Budapest in 1888, worked in Cluj with Janovics. As known, in 1943, Curtiz was rewarded an Oscar for his famous film “Casablanca”, starring Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart. Another celebrated director who worked with Janovics was Sir Alexander Korda (1893-1956), considered one of the founders of the British Film Industry.

In 1915, Janovics released his second studio film, titled “Proja”. Out of the 66 films produced in and around Cluj, Janovics was involved as a screenwriter for 31, directed 33, and acted in 5<sup>f</sup>. Only four silent films made by Janovics have survived to this day: “The old infantryman and his hussar son”, “The Escort”, “The last night” and “The Terror of the World”.

In 1934, Janovics submitted a proposal to the Romanian Ministry of Education, suggesting the use of his documentary films, shot in various regions of Romania, as educational materials. Simultaneously, the Hungarian Minister of Culture requested Janovics to capture on camera notable locations, monuments and specific ethnographic elements of Transylvania. Together with his wife, the talented actress Lili Poór, Janovics founded the “Association of Actors from Transylvania and Banat” as a branch of the “National Association of Actors from Budapest”.

However, fate did not always smile upon him. On 2nd March 1944, as German troops occupied Cluj, Janovics, due to his Jewish heritage, found himself on the Gestapo’s watchlist. In order to evade deportation to a concentration camp, Lili Poór orchestrated their escape from Cluj, allowed him to flee Transylvania



**Figure 3.** The actress Lili Poór starring in a silent film made in down town Cluj. (Source: The Archive of the Transylvanian Museum – Cluj, Personal Archive of Jordáky Lajos (1913-1974). Manuscripts of Jenő Janovics).

and seek sanctuary in Budapest. They later returned to Cluj in 1945, but by then, Janovics was advanced in years. He reclaimed his role as Director of the Hungarian Theater in Cluj; however, regrettably, he could no longer pursue his beloved passion for silent film. The world had changed after 1945, and the advent of sound film required substantial investments in specialised technology.

The war’s aftermath hindered Janovics from acquiring the resources needed for new films. Prolonged fatigue and heart issues deepened his isolation. On 16th November 1945, he passed away in Cluj and found his final resting place in the city’s Central Cemetery, known as the “Pantheon of Transylvania”. His life story and the Transylvanian “Hollywood” he created with the support of the “Unio” Freemasonry Lodge from Cluj secured him a place in the Golden Book of World Silent Film.

### “The Terror of the World” – A silent film with a subtle freemasonry message

In 1920, when “The Terror of the World” premiered in Cluj, Janovics was already an internationally recognised film director. This silent movie is one of the most interesting cinematographic productions of his career as a film director. The film starred the famous actors of the Hungarian Theater in Cluj: Fekete Mihály and Lili Poór, his wife. A true masterpiece, it conveys a dual message: an external, a medical one, which is profound and unsettling, and a freemasonry one, which is expressed very subtly<sup>g</sup>.

<sup>d</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77-120.

<sup>e</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>f</sup> The Archive of the Transylvanian Museum – Cluj, *Personal Archive of Jordáky Lajos. Manuscripts of Jenő Janovics. Documents concerning films and film production.*

<sup>g</sup> The Archive of the Transylvanian Museum – Cluj, *Personal Archive*

The film was shot in Cluj in several symbolic places of the city: the First Medical Clinic, the Central Park, the Clinics Street, the Hungarian Theater and also the Central Cemetery<sup>h</sup> (Fig 2).

The script was written in two languages, Romanian and Hungarian, to ensure universal comprehension of its message. Targeting the upper echelons of Cluj's society and the broader Hungarian elite, the story warns against the perils of degeneration caused by promiscuity. Medicine assumes a pivotal role, as the film highlights the degradation of the "Hungarian race" due to the spread of venereal diseases such as syphilis.

The film centers around Sylvain, a member of Cluj's high society, who was married to a renowned and talented opera actress. Despite living a prosperous life in a grand residence with his wife and charming daughter, Sylvain appeared discontented. He embarks on an extramarital affair with another opera employee, resulting in him contracting syphilis and enduring a nightmarish existence with the disease. Georges Pradel, his doctor and friend, repeatedly elucidates the dire consequences caused by this dreadful disease.

Sylvain's inner turmoil saps his strength. He desires to heed the doctor's advice and commence treatment, which entails isolating himself from his loved ones. However, acknowledging his illness implies confessing to his adultery, potentially leading to divorce and the dissolution of his marriage. Sylvain finds himself trapped, unsure of what to choose, particularly since he is bound to lose his family either way.

For a while, he chooses not to say anything, but the knowledge of his mistress's death from the illness infuriates him. The terrifying presence of his personal doctor, who escorts him to the Medical Clinic to exhibit the physical deterioration caused by the untreated disease, has a profound psychological impact on him. Consequently, the movie assumes the form of a psychological drama. Upon returning home from the Clinic, where he witnessed the horrifying consequences of the disease, Sylvain settles into the chair in front of his office, and his thoughts spiral out of control. He envisions a scenario in which he kisses his wife upon arriving home, causing her to also contract syphilis, leading to the demise of her career and, ultimately, her death. He then imagines his own demise and envisions his daughter reduced to begging on the streets as an orphan.

In a moment of resignation, however, Sylvain conjures up an image of himself residing in a grand palace as a mighty king. Despite having everything, he remains discontented and unfulfilled, with even the Queen and his little princess failing to bring him joy. Unable to endure this unhappiness any longer, he flees from the palace to the forest.

There, he sees a humble man using his saw to cut wood. Taking the tool from the man's hand, Sylvain commences cutting wood, and suddenly, a revelation dawns upon him. He discovers the concept of work! For the first time ever, he comprehends that he can find happiness and immense satisfaction in labour. At that instant, Sylvain awakens, realising that he was, in fact, dreaming. Resting his head on the desk, he had dozed off. His wife had yet to enter the room to greet him, he had not kissed his daughter, thus he had not lost them as he had dreamt earlier. A decision is reached. Accompanied by his personal doctor, Sylvain bids farewell to his family and departs for treatment. His beloved family appears to have fully comprehended and forgiven his mistake. The film concludes with his daughter, attentively listening to her nanny recount the tale of a profoundly sorrowful king who eventually discovers happiness through work.

### Freemasonry and the connection between medicine and society

When "The Terror of the World" was released, the "Unio" Freemasonry Lodge was already involved in many social projects in Cluj. It had been established on 14th November 1886, shortly after the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge was formed in Budapest. Modeled after the latter, which in turn adhered closely to the rituals of the United Grand Lodge of England, known as the "Mother of the World", the "Unio" Lodge united the prestigious members of the Transylvanian Hungarian elite.

Physicians who were members of the Lodge often lectured on medical topics, underlining the harmful role of alcoholism and venereal diseases on public health.<sup>i</sup> Their involvement was more than commendable, especially given that, in 1886, social assistance was still its infancy. For instance, Freemasonry played a significant role in prompting both communal and state authorities to address the needs of the impoverished in society and establish social and medical assistance for them.

Alongside a strong Social-Christian and socialist

<sup>h</sup> of Jordáky Lajos. *Manuscripts of Janovics Jenő. Documents concerning films and films production.* See *The Terror of the World's* script (1920).  
<sup>i</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>i</sup> *Ibidem.*

tone, the “Terror of the World” subtly propagated the freemason message of communal work. In March 1904, the Lodge released ‘Theses and Understandings’ (Hu: Tétélek és megállapodások) a programmatic document informing the public about the freemasonry symbols/paradigms. One of them is particularly relevant here: “*We must not offer mercy to our compatriots, but Work. This is the most important thing, and only the elderly, the sick who are helpless and minors can receive exemption from work!*”<sup>j</sup>

Similar to the characters in the “Terror of World”, the members of the “Unio” Lodge believed that Work was the foundation of Happiness. They believed that work provided means of subsistence; without work life itself was not desirable. This masonic principle considered that material prosperity, attained through diligent labour, lays the foundation for an improved and healthier life, ensuring happiness. Similarly, spiritual and moral values serve a purpose, enhancing happiness by cultivating virtues and promoting an upright lifestyle that prevents harm to others.

It was no coincidence that Janovics’s film, showcasing the Masonic concept of Work, had a profound impact during that time, initially in Cluj and later throughout Transylvania and beyond. This silent film served as a propaganda tool, advocating not only the principles of Freemasonry but also the Romanian eugenics movement following World War I. Dr. Dominic Stanca (1892-1979), a Transylvanian physician, emphasised the imperative of creating favourable conditions for the health and well-being of the young Romanian nation.

He considered that the strength of a nation did not depend only on the degree of economic prosperity, but also on the guarantee of its healthy development in the future<sup>k</sup>. There was a great need for a coherent national medical strategy to ensure this kind of development. This strategy entailed adhering to social hygiene principles as an integral part of the post-war reconstruction process, aimed at strengthening the nation’s unity and health.<sup>l</sup>

The eugenic programme for protecting the nation and the state was also promoted by Romanian physi-

cians after World War I. The Romanian population had not only endured material and human losses, but also suffered from the detrimental impact of epidemics that affected the nation’s well-being. Romanian eugenicists sought the best solutions for the regeneration of the nation, including the fight against venereal diseases.

From 1921 to 1927, an anti-syphilitic campaign took place in Cluj. Physician Dominic Stanca emphasised that addressing social and medical issues (1892-1979) such as syphilis, tuberculosis, alcoholism, and prostitution should be a paramount concern for the Romanian state. In his view, a society with individuals infected by syphilis would negatively impact the family, community, and overall productivity, ultimately leading to a decline in the nation’s health<sup>m</sup>.

To prevent this, it was necessary to eliminate the dysgenic factors that contributed to the weakening of the vital biological forces of the Romanian nation. Following this approach, Romanian physicians proposed a systematic general action focused on organising outpatient polyclinics, carrying out medical investigations and intensifying propaganda to combat dysgenic factors, especially syphilis, through lectures and film screenings<sup>n</sup>.

After 1919, outpatient polyclinics were created in Transylvania in cities such as Cluj, Sibiu, Braşov, Târgu-Mureş, Dej, Oradea, Timisoara, Haţeg, Zlatna, Alba-Iulia, Zalău and Bistriţa. In 1921, the outpatient polyclinic of Cluj was opened in Poiana Ampoiului, Alba-Inferioară county, and immediately started a great campaign against syphilis. The physicians’ worrying conclusions that 15% of the inhabitants had been infected with syphilis<sup>o</sup>, were also sent to the Romanian Ministry of Health.

In 1924, the Ministry of Health expanded the anti-syphilitic campaign, and thus two mobile medical teams were created in Cluj. These teams investigated 66 villages with a total of 44,154 inhabitants<sup>p</sup>. The findings of the physicians conducting the investigation were alarming, as they detected approximately 2,788 cases of syphilis during the 1924 campaign<sup>q</sup>.

j Hungarian National Archives – Budapest, *Hungarian Freemasonry Order Archive*. “Unio” Lodge. 100 cs. XL. (1886-1918). See ‘Theses and Understandings’.

k Dominic Stanca, *Organizarea igienico-socială a muncii* [Hygienic-social organization of work], Cluj, 1927, p. 4.

l Marius Turda: *The Biology of War: Eugenics in Hungary 1914-1918*, in *Austrian History Yearbook* 40 (2009): 238-264. See also Marius Turda, “Holy War of the Race”. *Eugenics and the protection of the nation in Hungary, 1900-1919*, Cluj, Romanian Academy, Center for Transylvanian Studies, 2020, p. 184-185.

m Dominic Stanca, *Campania antisifilitică în regiunea Cluj între anii 1921-1927* [The anti-syphilitic campaign in the Cluj region between 1921-1927], in “Revista de Igienă Socială” [Journal of Social Hygiene], nr. 1/1934, p. 1-4.

n *Ibidem*.

o Dominic Stanca, *Ancheta sanitară ca bază de plecare a combaterii plăgilor sociale* [Health inquiry as a starting point for combating social wounds], Sibiu, Edit. Asociaţiunii, 1926, p. 6.

p Dominic Stanca, *Campania antisifilitică în regiunea Cluj* [The anti-syphilitic campaign in the Cluj region], p. 7.

q *Ibidem*, p. 9.

Consequently, both physicians and political authorities decided to implement certain measures, including stricter quarantine measures, the cessation of prostitution, and the dissemination of propaganda against syphilis through public conferences and film screenings. In this sense, “The Terror of the World” played a very important role. Through the involvement of the physicians Dominic Stanca and Dr. Lörinczi, the film was shown at the outpatient polyclinic of Cluj, and its impact on the public was significant, with thousands of workers and young people flocking to see it<sup>r</sup>.

In 1926, the Romanian Ministry of Health donated a portable film projector for silent films. It was used extensively for propaganda in villages and communes, screening a movie about syphilis. Professor Iuliu Moldovan (1882-1966), the director of the Institute of Hygiene in Cluj, also participated in the health propaganda campaign by organising film screenings<sup>s</sup>.

Film propaganda extended beyond the Transylvanian villages to include factories, schools, prisons, and the army. Physicians aimed to emphasise the importance of both treatment and prevention in combating the disease. As a result, they proposed strict laws to the political authorities, which included punishing those who transmitted the disease, enforcing treatment for individuals who refused it, conducting regular inspections of schools, factories, and the army, regularly examining students and servants, and employing physicians in all prisons<sup>t</sup>.

In this context, socialist ideas gained ground, particularly among in the working class. The “Apostles of Socialism” eagerly proclaimed the formation of a form of state where poverty would be eradicated. They wanted a fundamental change in society through a revolution directed against capitalist economic development, which was believed to degrade the workers’ material situation.

For the economic and social recovery of the working class, the masons placed emphasis on the necessity of Work, which was mandatory for all healthy persons. This echoed the teachings of pre-Marxist socialists of the period, that the procurement of the means of living could not be done without Work. They viewed Work as a conscious and creative activity that elevated individuals, giving them a sense of purpose, motivation, fulfillment, and social utility. In essence, Work

bestowed social value upon individuals.

This is the essence of the message conveyed by “The Terror of the World”. It was presented in all workers’ cinemas in Transylvania and the Banat. Not coincidentally, through the Relief Fund, Jenő Janovics himself became protector and funder of theaters and cinemas in these areas. This film, made in close collaboration with the renowned Romanian physician Constantin Levaditi (1874-1953), Professor at University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, had a considerable impact at that time.

Levaditi’s involvement in making the “The Terror of the World” concerns two very important aspects. First of all, he was invited to participate because he was a renowned expert in the syphilis research. He was the world’s first researcher to identify the spirochete in congenital syphilis, forming the foundation for all subsequent bacteriological and physiopathological studies on the causes of the disease<sup>u</sup>. In 1905, in recognition of his professional achievements, he was invited to work at the renowned Institut Pasteur in Paris.

Then, during 1920-1921, at Moldovan’s suggestion, Levaditi was invited to teach at the Faculty of Medicine in Cluj. He taught general pathology, and participated in the sanitary inquiries made around Cluj, observing the very difficult medical situation in the region. He also engaged in the propaganda efforts of the Romanian eugenicists through the outpatient polyclinic in Cluj. For instance, on 29th and 30th December 1920, he delivered public lectures at the Romanian National Theater focusing on syphilis prevention. Following local authorities’ request and upon Moldovan and Janovics’ suggestion, he decided to contribute to the production of the silent film “Terror of the World”.

He thus collaborated with Jenő Gyalui, a friend of Janovics, and together they prepared the script for the film. Initially, it was written in French and entitled “La Misère Humaine”<sup>v</sup>. This title was then changed for “The Terror of the World”. Shortly after its release in Cluj, it was screened in Bucharest, Iasi, Sibiu, Timisoara and Chisinau, becoming a reference point for both the film industry and the medical profession. In fact it was a perfect medium to express the troubling medical reality of a community going through significant economic, social and political changes. But the film can also be seen as a social commentary whose message remains relevant more than a century later. This was a time

r *Ibidem*, p. 9.

s *Ibidem*.

t Dominic Stanca, *Ancheta sanitară ca bază de plecare a combaterii plăgilor sociale* [The health inquiry as a starting point for combating social wounds], p. 15.

u Radu Iftimovici, *Viața lui Constantin Levaditi* [The life of Constantin Levaditi], București, Edit. Academiei Române, 2017, p. 91.

v *Ibidem*, p. 204.

when the idea of “racial degeneration” preoccupied many, including the freemasons. “The Terror of the World” was meant to sensitise a world that seemed to be going through a social and economic crisis with serious long-term effects. Through this silent film, it was possible to build a bridge between medicine and

society, and Freemasonry was the perfect connection in this context.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

### Κινηματογραφικές ταινίες και Ελευθεροτεκτονισμός: Ο Jenő Janonics και το Τρανσυλβανικό «Χόλιγουντ» Ο Ελευθεροτεκτονισμός του Cluj - μιά τέλεια σύνδεση ιατρικής και κοινωνίας

Attila Varga

Η μελέτη πραγματοποιεί μία ανασκόπηση τη ζωής και της δράσης του διάσημου σκηνοθέτη του ουγγρικού θεάτρου Jenő Janonics, στο Cluj, την πρωτεύουσα της Τρανσυλβανίας. Ήταν ένας αξιόλογος άνθρωπος του πολιτισμού, σκηνοθέτης, ηθοποιός, αλλά και ελευθεροτέκτονας. Συχνά αναφέρεται ως ο δημιουργός του «Χόλιγουντ» της Τρανσυλβανίας. Σκηνοθέτησε συνολικά 66 ταινίες. Μία από αυτές, με τίτλο «Világgrém - The Horror of the World» (1920), επικεντρώνεται στην ιατρική και τον προληπτικό της ρόλο στη διασφάλιση της υγείας της κοινωνίας. Χρησιμοποιώντας την κινηματογραφία ως μέσο, ο Janonics εξέφρασε τις ανησυχίες τόσο των ιατρών όσο και των ελευθεροτεκτόνων του Cluj για τις αρνητικές επιπτώσεις της ανηθικότητας και των αφροδίσιων νοσημάτων στο άτομο και το έθνος. Σε μια εποχή βαθιών πολιτικών, εδαφικών και κοινωνικών αλλαγών, αυτή η βουβή ταινία υπογραμμίζει τη σημασία της ιατρικής στην κοινωνία.

**Λέξεις Κλειδιά:** Ιατρική, Ελευθεροτέκτονες, Jenő Janonics, Τρανσυλβανικό Χόλιγουντ, Ρουμανία του Μεσοπολέμου