

Budapest Journal: National Film Festival 1990

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At the Twenty-Second Annual Film Week in Budapest in early February, an unprecedented majority of the forty-three entries representing Hungary's 1989 studio productions were documentary films and videos. In the wake of the transformations sweeping East-Central Europe, the festival was inevitably suffused with politics, as the Hungarian film industry debated strategies for re-structuring the studio system in line with the country's move toward private-sector joint ventures.

Especially impressive to me as a Western observer, although no doubt less extraordinary for Hungarians, was the focus of nearly a half dozen films on the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and its tragic aftermath. Among the best of these were Schiffer's *Engesztelo 1956-1989* (Atonement), Janos Zsombolyai's *Halalraiteltek '56* (Condemned to Death), and *A Halalraitelt* (On Death Row), Andras Sipos' *Statarium* (Martial Law), Zsigmond Erdelyi's *Verrel es Kotellel* (With Blood and Rope), and Janos Veszi's *A Halal Villamosa* (The Tram of Death). Taken together, these titles offer a powerful indictment of the human toll exacted upon a small nation of fiercely proud traditions.

The subject of Schiffer's 75-minute color film *Atonement* is the kidnapping and subsequent murder of two National Guard leaders from the Salgotarjan Steel Works by former officers of the state secret police. An eloquent "narrative documentary," it follows the trajectory of the officers' relatives in their efforts to uncover the circumstances surrounding the torture and murder of their husbands and fathers. As the film unfolds, individuals who have lived in fear for three decades gradually find the courage to speak, accepting the struggle to come to terms with the lies, evasions and silences of the post-Stalinist past. The filmmaker becomes a participant in the families' quest for answers to questions that could not even have been asked in 1956 nor during the succeeding decades of reprisals and intimidation. It is a powerfully moving film, dignified yet unflinching. *On Death Row*, awarded the prize for best feature, takes place in 1958 when Imre Nagy, a leader of the 1956 uprising, was executed together with other anonymous martyrs; their subsequent rehabilitation and ceremonial burial in June 1988 only adds to the film's impact, and underscores the uncanny connections between historical events and cinematic representation in Eastern Europe.

As one harrowing narrative after another unfolded, I found myself riveted by the emotional honesty and the relentless solemnity of these films; several documented formal accusations against army officers and party officials by citizens who recalled in vivid detail their suffering and betrayal during those years of "organized forgetting." Consequently, I was quite surprised to hear, in a rather desultory "Open Discussion" in the Conference Center adjacent to Budapest's Novotel, speakers deploring the proliferation of "impermissibly long" documentaries, and accusing filmmakers of indulging their own obsessions at the expense of the audience. Among the documentaries shown (which constituted over two-thirds of the festival entries) was *Balladak Filmje* (Film of Ballads: A Transylvanian Sociography), a tribute by directors Gyula and Janos Gulyas to ethnographer Zoltan Kallos and the authentic Transylvanian folklore he has helped to preserve. Against the sound track of Hungarian folk music and dances from the Mezősegy and Kalotaszeg regions, its archaic rituals are documented with anthropological care in village weddings, funerals and christening rituals. The onstage appearance afterwards of the principal musicians and subjects, resplendent in traditional embroidered costume and accompanied by Kallos himself, was greeted with the most sustained applause of any screening I attended that week, and demonstrated the emotional attachment of Hungarians to their compatriots in Transylvania.

Felrevert Harangok (Tolling Church-Bells), Alajos Paulus's feature-length documentary about the lives of Hungarian and Romanian refugees from Transylvania, concludes that even the most humanitarian assistance cannot resolve the tragedy of their dislocation. Shot against the background of the Romanian revolution, the film is a powerful indictment of the human toll exacted by the interethnic conflict in that much-contested terrain. *Swab Passio* (Swabian Passion-Play), foregrounds the deportation to West Germany in 1946 of another ethnic minority, the Swabs of Budaors, a community of German origin which settled in Hungary some 250 years ago. In that village near Budapest in the 1930s, local peasants and craftsmen constructed an exquisite replica of Jerusalem and performed, with great success, a Swabian version of the Passion Play. One of my favorite documentaries was *Fenykép a Tanítványoknak* Balázs Belaról (Photo of Bela Balázs for his Followers). This two-hour black-and-white 16mm film reunited colleagues, friends and former disciples of the great theorist, including Geza Radványi, Istvan Szots, Karoly Makk and Andras Kovacs, in a visual and narrative memoir that is also a long overdue interrogation of Hungarian cinema. Another remarkable documentary, *Eros Karokkal*

Fogjatok le szepen (Restrain Me Gently With Your Strong Arms), was produced by the MOVI Helios Film Studio, for over forty years a center of award-winning popular-scientific and education films. A respectful yet dramatic inquiry into suicide (one out of thirty Hungarians takes his or her own life-- purportedly the world's highest rate), the film interviews patients and psychiatrists, allowing them to speak freely of their experiences and fears. Without attempting to theorize or explain, the film suggests that suicide has for generations in Hungary been considered a "solution to the problems of life."

The opening night feature, Judith Elek's *Tutajosok* (Memoirs of a River), a Franco-Hungarian feature co-production, concerns the disappearance and presumed ritual murder in the 1880s of a young woman from the village of Tiszaeszlar. The film is, according to the director, one she had wanted to make from the time she was a film student: "But I couldn't have done it because, up to the middle of the 1980s, it was impossible to speak openly about anti-Semitism... We must know who we are, and what we can become; and that is impossible without digging down to the roots and uncovering our past." I would be remiss in closing without at least mentioning a few of the other excellent film artists to whose work I cannot do justice here. Gyorgy Szomjas' *Konnyu Ver* (Fast and Loose), features the erotic adventures of two blond models at the Academy of Fine Arts, Ildi and Margo, who supplement their income by "curing" foreign men. Winner of the Directors' Prize, the film's popularity may also be read as an index of current reactions to decades of censorship through its open exploration of sexuality. Similarly, Gyorgy Dobray's *Ejszai Lanyok* (Ladies of the Night), and *Damak*, a colorful inquiry into the phenomenon of Cicciolina, the frequently unclothed blonde member of the Italian parliament, suggest the attraction of newfound freedoms in their display of the (mostly female) body. Szomjas' concert video film *Mulatsag* (Days of Peace and Music, subtitled "Twenty Years After Woodstock") an "homage" to the TEKA Folk Ensemble's summer dance camp at Nagykallo in eastern Hungary, conveys the pleasure-oriented spirit of 1960s rock-and-roll combined with today's culture of folk music and dance. Based on the true story of a parricide by a teenage boy from Miskolc, the screenplay for Arpad Sopsits' once-censored *Cellovolde* (Shooting Range) was awarded the Festival's Special Prize. Krisztina Deak, recipient of the Budapest Council Prize for her first feature, *Eszter Konyv* (Book of Esther), directed the story of a woman caught between the need to escape from the Gestapo with her husband and the desire to remain behind with her daughter from another marriage. Finally, first-time feature director Andras Monory's

Meteo marked a departure from the somber style of many films in the Festival and was a favorite of audiences, perhaps in large part on account of its appeal to Western tastes. Still, the film's technical skill is commendable, with its impressively suggestive apocalyptic vision of urban underground tunnels and nightclubs.

In contrast to previous National Film Festivals, this year there was a widely acknowledged sense of disappointment in the overall quality of feature productions (no prize was awarded for "best film"), and a prevailing sense of uncertainty as Hungary awaited its first free elections in forty-five years. Yet it was encouraging to learn that, despite considerable tension between "younger," "older," and "in-between" generations of film directors, most of the sixteen features represented the first directorial efforts of filmmakers born in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a turbulent moment for the film industry, marked by intense debates among filmmakers concerning its future structure, the outcome of which, like other aspects of East European culture, will be shaped increasingly by politics and foreign capital.