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The reception of Hungarian cinema in Polish film criticism 1945–1989

In the years 1945–1989, a reader interested in Hungarian cinema could learn a lot about it from the Polish press, not only film-specific, although the number of publications devoted to this subject differed across time. The most prolific period was the sixties and seventies, mainly due to the contemporary achievements of the Hungarian cinema, as well as Polish critics' enthusiasm for it. It is not difficult to notice certain recurrent phrases and motifs etc. Hungarian cinema gained acclaim several years ago, but how is it thought of today? Historical and political themes, as well as comparisons between Hungarian and Polish cinema have been noted.

Hungarian movies were frequently part of a special pool whose outlets included studio cinemas and film societies. On the one hand, it had limited access, but on the other, they reached those who were truly interested. Critics realized that not all films were intended for wide distribution¹. In such a situation, it is no wonder that Hungarian cinematography was extensively discussed by "Kultura Filmowa", and later "Film na Świecie", magazines connected with the Polish Federation of Film Societies (these were often reprints of Hungarian magazines). The role of the Hungarian Institute of Culture, which willingly provided copies of films, was also significant.² Hungarian filmmakers often visited Poland and meetings with them were very well attended.

On the other hand, it is worth remembering that Hungarian cinema was highly appreciated by both movie critics and film societies' participants, but not by general audiences.³ Krzysztof Mętrak, in admiring Hungarian cinema, notices the high acclaim it attracted amongst critics, but also notes indicates its low popularity with audiences. "European Festival successes do not appeal to the mass audience; the specific, slowed down rhythm of narration of these

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¹ A. Lipiński, *Przyjemnie jest, spokojnie jest*, "Ekran" 1981, no. 10.

² See also: "Czasem nawet plakatów nie było..." Rozmowa z Andrzejem Wernerem o recepcji kina węgierskiego w Polsce, [int. Robert Kardzis], [in:] *Złota era kina węgierskiego*, eds. R. Kardzis, J. Topolski, Kraków 2009, p. 112; A. Horoszczak, *Recepcja powojennego filmu węgierskiego w Polsce*, [in:] *Film węgierski w Polsce*, eds. A. Horoszczak, A.M. Rutkowski, Warszawa [1981], p. 4.

³ R. Cieśliński, *Ekran dla widza*, "Trybuna Ludu" 1981, no. 42.

films often seems somewhat boring; political and social problems – resulting from local circumstances – are not always clear to the casual observer”.⁴ Mętrak’s concludes that this does not change the fact that Hungarian cinema is by all means noteworthy and has acquainted Polish viewers with still more movies.

This cinema surely provided fascinating subject matter for discussion on aesthetic, viewpoint, or political subjects, conducted after showings organized by DKFs (Dyskusyjne Kluby Filmowe – Discussion Film Societies); moreover, as Andrzej Werner notices, it could simply – be just aspects like aesthetic qualities which attract viewers to these showings.⁵ Such deliberations and reflections previously had no hope of appearing in the columns of papers. Not without reason, reviews and articles devoted to Hungarian cinema were to a great extent generalized and dominated by aesthetic problems. Obviously, excellent texts concerning historiosophical, political and current issues appeared many times. They avoided precise reference to the situation in Hungary, however, putting trust in the reader’s ability to read between the lines. It must be noted that for most Polish critics of the sixties and seventies, the time when Hungarian filmmakers were most successful, the aesthetic context bore fundamental significance.

Hungarian cinema was widely written about. Not only were reviews published by specialists or social-cultural magazines, but also by the daily newspapers.⁶ Various information, topical and review articles appeared. Interviews with both creators and representatives of film industry officials were keenly published. Hungarian cinema was also discussed on the occasion of various reviews, however, the most common chance to take a look at this cinematography, not only through the prism of individual movies, were Hungarian-organized film festivals which were visited by numerous Polish critics and resulted in correspondence from Hungary which presented reviews of new work. *Film węgierski w Polsce*, a book by Adam Horoszczak, one of the greatest popularizers of Hungarian cinema, and Andrzej M. Rutkowski, which was part of a series devoted to the presence of socialist countries’ films on Polish cinemas’ screens, published by Zjednoczenie Rozpowszechniania Filmów, is also worth mentioning.⁷ It contained a short introduction concerning the reception of Hungarian cinema in Poland, its concise history and – like all books in the series – a treatment of films, as well as profiles of screenwriters, directors, cameramen and actors.

It is hard to encompass all the themes touched on by contemporary

⁴ K. Mętrak, *Filmowy Budapeszt*, “Literatura” 1981, no. 27, p. 6. Several years later Krzysztof Kreutzinger wrote about Hungarian cinematography that “It is differentiated and different from its common understanding, especially when formed in discussion film societies. »Jancsó school« is almost entirely lost, the personal impressionism of picture and strange aesthetics of sense, there are so few references to these experiences”. K. Kreutzinger, *Błysk w szarości. Korespondencja w własną z Budapesztu*, “Film” 1985, no. 14, p. 16.

⁵ “Czasem nawet plakatów nie było...”..., p. 120.

⁶ Of the latter see M. Walasek, *Film węgierski – awangarda i reszta*, “Kino” 1967, no. 4.

⁷ A. Horoszczak, A.M. Rutkowski (eds.), *Film węgierski w Polsce...*

literature, not to mention individual movies or creators. What is more, Hungarian cinema had its own admirers and critics who wrote about it willingly and frequently. It boasted the opinion of being highly artistically tasteful. It is no wonder that the names Miklós Jancsó, András Kovács, Zoltán Fábri, Pál Sandor, Istvan Szabó, Peter Bacsó, Ferenc Kós, Istvan Gaál, or Károly Makk were most often mentioned.

For Polish critics, Miklós Jancsó⁸ was no doubt the most significant Hungarian filmmaker and point of reference at the same time, although his individual movies were variously received.⁹ He was written about even when he was not making a film, as an introduction to discussions and analyses of other directors' output¹⁰, although he was considered too distinct to talk about the school of Jancsó.¹¹ Not once, of course, were the wise and in-depth analyses of *The Red and the White*¹² author's aesthetics or outlook published. He inspired ambiguous emotions,¹³ but his influence on Hungarian cinema, regardless of how it was perceived, was commonly regarded as undisputable.¹⁴

The output of Jancsó, highly regarded as an example of artistic cinema, was often a point of reference for the evaluation of Polish filmmakers as well. On the occasion of Jancsó's films review, which took place in "Kwant" DKF in 1972, Krzysztof Mętrak wrote about "the Hungarian Wajda", unfortunately, a more original cinema artist,¹⁵ although he also noticed dangers in the Hungarian director's work: multi-layered symbolism turns at times into "ambiguity and insipid metaphysics (*Agnus Dei*), or folkloristic, in the somewhat propagandist folk allegory (*Red Psalm*)". Konrad Eberhardt compared *Agnus Dei*, which he criticized for importunate stylistics and over-aesthetism, to *The*

⁸ Bogdan Zagroba wrote about the complex of Jancsó. B. Zagroba, *Kompleks Jancsó. Nowe kino węgierskie*, "Film" 1977, no. 24, p. 20–21.

⁹ An interesting example are three opinions about *Red Psalm*: a positive one by Jerzy Płażewski and two strongly negative by Czesław Dondziłło i Anna Tatarkiewicz. *Spór o Jancsó*, "Film" 1973, no. 12, p. 6–7.

¹⁰ Z. Pitera, *Sokoły i czterdziestolatki. Korespondencja własna z Budapesztu*, "Film" 1970, no. 19, p. 12–13.

¹¹ A. Helman, *Język filmowy Miklósa Jancsó*, "Kino" 1973, no. 3, p. 55.

¹² A. Werner, *Cisza i krzyk czyli historia i świat wartości w filmach Miklósa Jancsó*, "Kino" 1973, no. 3, p. 46–49. Miklós Jancsó was one of Konrad Eberhardt's greatest film loves, although he was able to be critical about his films. See K. Eberhardt, *Jancsó*, "Ekran" 1969, no. 16, p. 15. Compare P. Zwierzchowski, *Wiluzjonie Konrada Eberhardta*, [in:] *Konrad Eberhardt*, eds. B. Giza, P. Zwierzchowski, Warszawa 2013, p. 136.

¹³ Bogumił Drozdowski strongly rejected his output, writing for instance: "One thing is encouraging: in Hungarian films of the second half of 1976 I haven't recognized any more gestures borrowed from Miklós Jancsó's philosophy of history choreography", though he realized that his text could be perceived as "a lone crusade against the established values of Hungarian film". B. Drozdowski, *Kiedy zastygają fale. Korespondencja własna z Budapesztu*, "Film" 1977, no. 2, p. 14–15. The author was more than once critical, or even malicious, of the Hungarian's films (see B. Drozdowski, *Matnia. Korespondencja własna z Węgier*, "Film" 1987, no. 34, p. 16), it was a rather singular voice, however.

¹⁴ B. Zagroba, *Jancsó i inni*, "Film" 1976, no. 14, p. 17; J. Skwara, *Tradycje i poszukiwania. Korespondencja własna z Węgier*, "Film" 1976, no. 30, p. 20–21.

¹⁵ K. Mętrak, *Fascynacja*, "Kulisy" 1972, no. 49, p. 5.

Round-Up, considered by the critic to be the Hungarian director's ultimate masterpiece. In the latter, he noted the crudity of image combined with "the cruelty of human (and historic) situations". What is interesting, however, through Daniel Olbrychski's role among others, is that he noticed similarities to Wajda's *The Wedding*, noting at the same time that "Jancsó peeking at the romantic stylistics of Wajda is hardly acceptable".¹⁶ On the other hand, Zbigniew Klaczyński, a critic connected mainly with "Trybuna Ludu" in his article printed in "Kino" saw *The Round-up* as a film which was neutral from the historic perspective for viewers who were not immersed in Hungarian culture, which included the Poles.¹⁷

Polish titles and names were mentioned more than once in reviews of Hungarian author's films or output. In an interview concerning the reception of Hungarian cinema in Poland, Andrzej Werner said about the texts published in "Film" that the magazine "confronted certain cultural realities with our own cultural and social circumstances [...] The relation of Hungarian cinema to our world, to our culture was discussed...".¹⁸ Such a situation did not regard "Film" only, of course. It was one of the most frequent threads in Polish film literature devoted to Hungarian cinema – regardless of the decade, the situation both in Poland and Hungary, of the magazine and critic. In his statement declaring his faith in Hungarian cinema, Konrad Eberhardt wrote: "So what do I appreciate Hungarian film for? Mainly for what Polish cinematography has not been able to achieve, authenticity. No, not for the authenticity of problems which our films cover; the landscape which appears there; the mentality of characters and their silhouettes we watch in these movies. I appreciate it for its authenticity in a still more general, more profound sense. Should I write that Miklós Jancsó, András Kovács, Istvan Gaál and Ferenc Kosa make use of authentic, flat landscape immensely typical of this country – I would be narrowing down the issue. [...] The fact that these vast spaces and plains exposed by these films are simultaneously 'mental zones', that they legitimize, condition, or even to a certain extent create an internal climate, mentality and the characters of people who enter into the camera's field of view. [...] Hungarian cinematography is merciless, disillusioning, but at the same time, due to such frequent oscillations on the verge of definitive conclusions, it is emboldened by the climate of its own greatness. At the same time, it is a cinematography completely devoid of the complexes of the intelligentsia and nobility. I shall restate it: it is the complexes, not intelligence or certain spiritual nobility, as these are utterly different things. Hungarian directors operate in an elegant, or even sophisticated style, but this does not pose a difficulty for them to move from Budapest to the country or from a traditional drawing room to an old hovel or

¹⁶ K. Eberhardt, *Trzy razy Jancsó. Korespondencja własna z Budapesztu*, "Ekran" 1971, no. 48, p. 11. A report from the set of *The Wedding* can be found in the same no of "Ekran".

¹⁷ Z. Klaczyński, *Miklósa Jancsó opisanie świata*, "Kino" 1968, no. 2, p. 44–45, 48. However, the author stressed the importance of dramatic construction, the philosophy of human history, poeticism of his outlook on the world.

¹⁸ "Czasem nawet plakatów nie było..."..., p. 117.

cottage. [...] Contemporary Hungarian cinema stems from a deep understanding, experiencing the past [...] Of course, our cinematography also refers to the past, particularly through the national-martyrological threads. The scope of this reference is, however, narrower and more fragmented. The two cinematographies are not uniform in this respect. From Hungarian films we learn a lot about the origins of national consciousness, the present-day aspirations of the Hungarians; for them our movies constitute an almost illegible record”.¹⁹

I quote this lengthy excerpt not only because it was written by one of the greatest Polish critics who was also a great admirer of Hungarian cinema, but also because it is quite characteristic of a certain style of writing about Danubian cinematography, especially until the mid-sixties. Due to both its popularity among critics and noticeable similarities of the national experience, Hungarian cinematography often posed a point of reference for Polish cinema. It concerned individual filmmakers, movies, motifs, as well as organizational and institutional activities. One might sometimes get the impression that the Hungarians were often portrayed as a paragon, confirming that a tiny cinematography is capable of creating great films.²⁰

Comparisons between the two cinematographies may already be observed in the initial post-war lustre, however, their character was slightly different. Most often discussed, apart from Soviet cinema, of course, was Czechoslovakian cinematography. Hungarian film was virtually non-existent. It was particularly visible in “Film’s” “Foreign review” column. The first, longer text devoted to Hungarian cinema and its problems appeared in the 20 issue of 1947. It pointed to “a country, which, contrary to other governments of Eastern-European states, completely underestimates the importance of film”.²¹ The first movies of private producers were criticized,²² and not a single word about Hungarian cinema is uttered in an interview with Béla Balázs.²³ A remarkable change of tone takes place after the nationalization of Hungarian cinematography.²⁴

In the first half of the fifties, reviews were as schematic as the movies themselves. Zbigniew Pitera pronounced that *Treasured Earth* by Frigyes Bán was a giant step forward of Hungarian cinema and a piece of art realizing the goals of the new epoch.²⁵ The review was published after a conference in Wisła and

¹⁹ K. Eberhardt, *Za co cenimy film węgierski?*, “Ekran” 1971, no. 42, p. 15.

²⁰ J. Płazewski, *Nad Dunajem – dobre filmy. Korespondencja własna z Budapesztu*, “Film” 1972, no. 3, p. 12.

²¹ W. Wieromiej, *Film węgierski w impasie*, “Film” 1947, no. 20, p. 11. Witold Wieromiej, an author of numerous correspondence, was a translator and an author of books on Hungarian cuisine.

²² Idem, *Węgierska kinematografia wchodzi na rynek (Korespondencja własna “Filmu”)*, “Film” 1948, no. 5, p. 7.

²³ Béla Balázs w Warszawie. *Rozmowa z nestorem węgierskiego filmu*, interviewed by. L. B. [Leon Bukowiecki], “Film” 1948, no. 8, p. 10.

²⁴ W. Wieromiej, *Jako siódme państwo w Europie Węgry upaństwowiły kinematografię* (Korespondencja własna “Filmu”), “Film” 1948, no. 20, p. 5.

²⁵ J. Łęczycza [Zbigniew Pitera], *Pięć ziemi. Znakomity film, który czeka na ciąg dalszy*, “Film” 1950, no. 5, p. 4–5.

a noticeable change in "Film" itself. After that, all appraisals and comparisons had a political and ideological aspect to them. *Egy asszony elindul* (*A Woman Sets Out*), for instance, was described as the first film about the role of women in the new epoch in socialist democratic countries.²⁶ The review of *Forró mezők* (*Flames*) by Imre Apáthi was accompanied by a political comment on "reaction-type" organizations which "assumed the mask of 'democracy' to join the people's front and do their mole's job not worse than Mikołajczyk's PSL".²⁷ Sometimes comparisons to Polish film were straightforward. Such is the character of information about Frigyes Bán, who was not only taken away in the direction of *2x2 néha 5* (*Sometimes 2x2 is 5*), which was given to G. Révész, but also punished by being deprived of director's rights and fined.²⁸ The criticism of Ban in Hungarian press was also related to this. To finish with, the situation was compared to *Niedaleko Warszawy* – the Hungarian movie had been going to be equally bad, but there were forces, which opposed that.

In the middle of 1956, the opinions about Hungarian cinema were divided. On the one hand, rather disapproving appraisals appeared,²⁹ on the other, Hungarian cinematography was considered the most interesting among socialist democratic states,³⁰ however, this did not result in a higher number of texts. What is more, in the second half of the year, Hungarian cinema was not written about at all. In film literature, there were no mentions of the Hungarian Revolution whatsoever. An item of correspondence from Budapest appeared in January 1957. The editorial staff reminded readers that the tragic events of 1956 influenced cinematography as well. The Vice-Director of the Film Institute in Budapest, Janos Tarnok, asked for a statement, mentioned the destruction of infrastructure and negatives, as well as the plans of Hungarian cinematography.³¹ Only brief mentions and reviews would appear until the end of the year. Andrzej Werner justly notices that the awareness of the 1956 revolution influenced the interest in Hungarian cinema, although it would not have had such importance, had the films not been good.³²

Polish critics were fascinated by the way history and contemporary times were pictured in Hungarian films. In a search for the aesthetic essence of Hungarian cinema, Bolesław Michalek wrote: "It would thus be an exceptional epic: it does not nourish the contemporary with shards of a myth it affirms, but with elements of reality it uncovers".³³ Zygmunt Machwitz referred to films "talking about reality in a concise and metaphorical way, through a parable

²⁶ K. Mirski, *Kobieta wyrusza w drogę, aby z ludem węgierskim dojść do socjalizmu*, "Film" 1951, no. 5, p. 10.

²⁷ J. Jurata, *Plomienie demaskują wroga*, "Film" 1950, no. 16, p. 10.

²⁸ *Sprawa Bana*, "Przegląd Kulturalny" 1954, no. 50.

²⁹ See Z. Pitera, *Kłamstwo Judyty*, "Film" 1957, no. 24, p. 5.

³⁰ W. Leszczyński, *Karuzela miłości*, "Film" 1956, no. 33, p. 4.

³¹ J. Tarnok, *A jednak się kręci, czyli dzień dzisiejszy filmu węgierskiego (Korespondencja własna "Filmu")*, "Film" 1957, no. 3, p. 7.

³² "Czasem nawet plakatów nie było..."..., p. 112.

³³ B. Michalek, *Mit i odkrywanie rzeczywistości. Młode kino węgierskie*, "Kino" 1968, no. 3, p. 19.

or grotesque” as “specialité de la maison”.³⁴ Authenticity, merciless settlement with ordinariness, the reflection of transformations in Hungary were written about. However, mainly due to censorship reasons, the actual political context appeared relatively seldom. Only very rarely was “the tragic threshold of 1956”³⁵ mentioned. Although it was allowed to write about the Stalinist period in Hungary, the events of 1956 had to be passed over in silence. The book *Film węgierski w Polsce* (Hungarian film in Poland) the period after 1956 is referred to as a “severe creative crisis”.³⁶ Wojciech Wierzewski, then, wrote about the time of “breaking the Leninist principles of law and order”.³⁷

Year 1956 was a drastic turning point, so it is no wonder – also in the context of the state’s cultural policy – that it was seldom discussed in Polish film publications, and if it was, it was done in a very general way. Nevertheless, it also concerned broader, systemic issues. At the end of the sixties, János Kádár, having engraved his name on the nation’s memory so adversely after 1956, began to win society’s favor. Hungarian authorities undertook actions aimed at indicating a new stage in building “a socialist society”: the possibility of repatriating people who had left the country after 1956, greater opportunities for foreign travel, a vast (though selective) amnesty, or new electoral law, among others.³⁸ As the central control of the economy and collectivization of agriculture had resulted in poor economic effects in the second half of the sixties, the authorities were forced to introduce a new economic agenda, bringing about an increase in affluence in society. Changes came into view in science and culture as well, with Hungarian cinema experiencing an enormous bloom. The intelligentsia could believe that the scope of their creative freedom had been vastly widened.

We will not find a reflection of the Hungarian intelligentsia’s dilemmas in film literature, however. In 1970, Zbigniew Pitera wrote that during his visit to Budapest he asked creators about the Hungarian cinematography system. No-one had replied that it was good, but “none mentioned a single project worth-mentioning, whose realization would not come to effect; they did not indicate any film which would be “put on the shelf”³⁹ after having been produced”. The article is more informative about Polish literature, than Hungarian cinematography. It instantaneously raises the question about *The Witness* by Peter Bacsó, which had been created a year earlier and was not approved for screening, or Zoltan Fabri’s movies.

Kádár eventually succumbed to the pressure of Brezhnev and, starting from 1972, the situation began to escalate. The Hungarian economy had to

³⁴ Z. Machwitz, *Węgry '86. Kino na zakręcie*, “Literatura” 1986, no. 7/8, p. 55.

³⁵ Z. Pitera, *Węgierska koniunktura. Korespondencja własna z Budapesztu*, “Film” 1972, no. 9, p. 12.

³⁶ A. Horoszczak, *Recepcja powojennego filmu węgierskiego...*, p. 4.

³⁷ W. Wierzewski, *Węgrzy górą! Nowe kino*, “ITD. Ilustrowany Magazyn Studencki” 1967, no. 49.

³⁸ See J. Kochanowski, *Węgry. Od ugody do ugody 1867–1990*, Warszawa 1997, p. 171.

³⁹ Z. Pitera, *Sokoły i czterdziestolatki...*, p. 12.

resign from market elements and there was a return to far-fetched centralism.⁴⁰ A re-organization of Hungarian cinematography followed these changes, which were widely observed in the Polish press. Articles on this issue appeared in the columns of "Trybuna Ludu"⁴¹ and "Głos Pracy"⁴² – non-film titles, among others. They discussed institutional changes and particular solutions connected with them, while than systemic transformations were seldom paid attention to. In 1981, Jerzy Robert Nowak explained the decision to re-organize with the necessity to ensure profitability.⁴³ It was not an accidental argument, however. Already by the beginning of the seventies, low interest in Hungarian cinema had been noticed in Hungary.⁴⁴

Let us return to the frequently discussed motif of settlements with contemporary history, which is so significant for Hungarian cinema. The Stalinist period was paid attention to. The problem of the Hungarian's collaboration with Hitler was relatively rarely referred to, also in the Hungarian cinema of the time. Tadeusz Olszański wrote about the film *Eye in Eye* by Zoltán Várkonyi and the novel *Cold Days* by Tibor Cseres (a film based on the story was also made) as examples of competently settling with a difficult past.

Olszański stresses that Cseres could write about the praiseworthy events from the history of Hungarian resistance, mainly of communist origin, but "The Hungarians do not exaggerate these facts. They are proud of their tradition of combat, but remain humble and economical in its presentation. I have the impression that in their opinion fundamental settling with history, clearing the field, crossing out what was obscure in the past bears much greater significance".⁴⁵

In 1981, writing about the settlement current in Hungarian cinema, Jerzy Robert Nowak points to the crimes of Rákosi government in the years 1949–1956, but devotes only a few words to the bitter lesson of 1956. Moreover, one may form the impression that it is a consequence of the past period, not an individual event. What is more, he does it in the context of the problem of memory in the statements of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, noting that talking about the past is possible thanks to the wise cultural policy of the state. He also mentions censorship, although he does so without mentioning the word, recalling the premiere of *The Witness*, which was delayed ten years.⁴⁶

A certain paradox is evident here – essentially only at the end of the eighties was Hungarian cinema was discussed in a wider context and the untold events of recent history were openly mentioned (the gloomy aspect of not only 1956, but also the period following was remembered), and the changing cultural agenda of the authorities was indicated. Critics wrote about the aforementioned settlement motifs in Hungarian cinema numerous times later on, in

⁴⁰ J. Kochanowski, *Węgry...*, p. 174.

⁴¹ W. Urbański, *Jakość i poziom*, "Trybuna Ludu" 1972, no. 217.

⁴² *Zmiany w węgierskiej kinematografii*, "Głos Pracy" 1972, no. 127.

⁴³ J.R. Nowak, *Uparty rozrachunek*, "Kino" 1981, no. 6, p. 32.

⁴⁴ Z. Pitera, *Węgierska koniunktura...*, s. 13.

⁴⁵ T. Olszański, *Węgierska wiosna. Oko w oko*, "Sztandar Młodych" 1970, no. 97.

⁴⁶ J.R. Nowak, *Uparty rozrachunek...*, p. 31–32.

different contexts,⁴⁷ noting the more and more visible departure from political settlements.⁴⁸ The theme of breaking subsequent taboos, not only in cinema, but also in other areas of cultural life, appeared.⁴⁹ The role of documentaries concerning the recent history of Hungary, revealed its most dismal face, mainly in the Livia Gyarmathy and Géza Bőszörményi *Recsk 1950–1953, egy titkos kényszermunkatábor története*, was stressed. Especially in the context of documentaries, the political involvement of cinema in the context of changes and publicness was brought up.⁵⁰

There were still understatements, however. Adam Horoszczak wrote almost blatantly about András Kovács *The Lair*, which takes place in the middle of the 19 century, that to some Hungarians, the final scene, “where the hussars’ horses tread down the grave of an executed insurgent, Captain Batisza, conceals an allusion to the nameless 301 quarter in the Budapest Rakoskeresztur cemetery. I don’t know... Maybe?”⁵¹ For those who know Hungarian history at least superficially, an association with Imre Nagy, the Hungarian leader executed after the revolution in 1956, was obvious. The name itself does not appear in the text directly, although earlier demystification of the past, so characteristic of contemporary Hungary, is mentioned.

Looking at the whole period of Polish People’s Republic, it is noticeable that critics frequently searched for some generalization when writing about the political and historical. Of course, it did not necessarily stem from non-film reasons. Reflection on the aforementioned themes constituted a never-ending inspiration for Hungarian filmmakers. Not without a reason did Bolesław Michalek write that “the real, great theme for this cinematography are the Hungarians themselves, this ‘Hungarian way’”.⁵² Almost ten years later Adam Horoszczak, one of the greatest popularizers of this cinema, pointed to the same feature: “With all the differences regarding the genre, style, and generations, Hungarian cinema is characterized by certain self-interest, the belief in responsibility for the country, its presence, the past and a longing for

⁴⁷ One of them was for instance a reference to the characters and films of Márta Mészáros. When *Diary for My Children* was to enter Polish screens, Waldemar Forysiak noticed that the movie marks the beginning of a new stage in Mészáros’ output, simultaneously noting, that in the context of other settlement films, such as Sándor Sára’s *The Upthrown Stone*, Péter Bacsó’s *The Witness*, Pál Gábor’s *Vera Angi*, András Kovács’ *The Stud Farm*, she will find it difficult to retain originality. W. Forysiak, *Świat samotnych kobiet*, “Film” 1985, no. 32, p. 10. It is worth mentioning that the specifics of Márta Mészáros’ work disturbed Polish critics. Adam Horoszczak wrote about her “feminist belligerence”. See A. Horoszczak, *Dziewięć miesięcy*, “Film” 1977, no. 1, p. 21. Leszek Armatys also noted feminism. He indicated that the director takes to female cinema, but it cannot be the sole reason for praise. L. Armatys, *Wszystkie kobiety dzienne sprawy... (o filmach Márty Mészáros)*, “Kino” 1979, no. 2, p. 28–29.

⁴⁸ A. Horoszczak, *Kino refleksji obywatelskiej*, “Rzeczpospolita” 1986, no. 120; K. Kreutzinger, *Błysk w szarości. Korespondencja w własna z Budapesztu*, “Film” 1985, no. 14; Z. Machwitz, *Węgry ’86. Kino na zakręcie*, “Literatura” 1986, no. 7–8, p. 54.

⁴⁹ R. Nowak, *Znikające tabu*, “Przekrój” 1988, no. 10., p. 6–7.

⁵⁰ A.M. Rutkowski, *Wymiatanie spod dywanu*, “Film” 1989, no. 16, p. 17.

⁵¹ A. Horoszczak, *Nowy stan skupienia? Węgry – film i społeczeństwo*, “Odrodzenie” 1989, no. 13.

⁵² B. Michalek, *Węgierski dialog*, “Kultura” 1979, no. 10.

a wonderland stability”.⁵³ Tadeusz Sobolewski wrote in a similar manner: “In the films watched in Budapest, the presence of the ‘Hungarian complex’ is strongly felt – in this respect their films are close to literature, poetry. They express the awareness of a nation which has gone through the ordeal of history, a nation knocked senseless, but one which has enough courage and sense of security to ponder over the dimmest pages of its history”.⁵⁴

Particular pressure put on historical and political questions brought the two cinematographies closer. It is worth going back to the period between the end of the fifties and the turn of the next decade. The Polish film school and Hungarian new wave of the sixties were connected by the themes of national identity, reflection on moral choices often made in the circumstances of limited freedom, making use of the recent past to talk about contemporary times, or the desire to analyze the relationships of an individual with their actual environment, as well as the author’s perspective. Polish and Hungarian directors, Andrzej Wajda and Miklós Jancsó to name but two, frequently analyzed the specifics of Middle-European history. Among the common points of Polish and Hungarian cinematographies, I would like to concentrate on two films. *Bad Luck* by Andrzej Munk was created in 1959, and *The Witness (A tanú)* by Péter Bacsó ten years later.⁵⁵ They both portrayed, in a grotesque form, a little man attempting to adjust to circumstances he does not understand. They referred to the specifics of time and space of Middle-Eastern Europe. Each of them showed the world in a grotesque turn, referring to the history of their countries, whilst also commenting on the present.

While pondering on the space where *Bad Luck* and *The Witness* could be placed, it is worth asking whether the stories of Piszczyk and Pelikán could have happened somewhere else? The experience of absurdity present in *Bad Luck* and *The Witness* results from Middle-European reality, hence none of the films could have been created in a different space. Jerzy Stefan Stawiński, the screenwriter of *Bad Luck* realized that and, when getting down to work on the *Bad Luck* screenplay for *Bad Luck*, looked for a point of departure in the experience of a inhabitant of this part of Europe: “Were we not all slightly unlucky in Poland? Had I been born the son of a French shopkeeper before the war, I would have learnt the trade, collaborated during the occupation, not more than necessary, inherited the shop from my father and would be still be running it now, despite the war and all the transformations in the world. And

⁵³ A. Horoszczak, *Tęsknota za wunderlandem. Współczesne kino węgierskie*, “Odrodzenie” 1988, no. 15.

⁵⁴ T. Sobolewski, *Rozmowy węgierskie 1988*, “Przegląd Katolicki” 1988, no. 16. It is also worth quoting other words of Sobolewski, written five years earlier: “The dilemma: to defend honour or to defend illusions, is still being shown anew. The aim of such ‘opening old wounds’ is nothing else than receiving consolation, finding the dignity of an individual living in a nation which have not won any war or uprising for 150 years”. T. Sobolewski, *Gdzieś w Europie. Budapeszt 83*, “Kino” 1983, no. 2, p. 40. Although the statements are similar, the accents are distributed slightly differently.

⁵⁵ I make use of my own paper *The Man Towards the Absurdity of Reality: Andrzej Munk’s “Bad Luck” and Péter Bacsó’s “The Witness”*, presented at *Polish Cinema in International Context* conference in Manchester, December 2009.

here? It's funny to think. The position of a French shopkeeper seemed to me a constant, to which one should compare the amplitudes of our ill fortune".⁵⁶

With reference to the protagonist of *The Witness* it is worth quoting yet another text, though it is just a fragment from a review of another Hungarian movie, made two years earlier, but one which confirms the conviction of Stawiński and Toeplitz that life in this part of Europe is specific. "Maybe, the morality of a French or Scandinavian burgher, whose lives were not full of trials and tribulations, which did continuously force them to make the most difficult choices; maybe the moral identity of such a character is completely categorized in the present time, in one dramatic test. Meanwhile, Hungarian filmmakers seem to say that in their geographic region, where history has quickened in pace, where one change follows another, where a man has to face the most difficult choices every now and again, choices which must be made and cannot be evaded; that here, simple trials and simple terms are not adequate. If one wants to say who the protagonist really is – a contemporary living Hungarian, one must see who he was yesterday, who he was twelve and fifteen years ago".⁵⁷

This is what Konrad Eberhardt wrote about István Gaál's *Christening Party* (*Keresztelő*, 1968), but I suppose the sense of this excerpt relates to the situation described in *The Witness*. These words were published at the beginning of 1969, the year when Péter Bacsó made his movie. The task Eberhardt wrote about, the necessity to look back at the past, may be set when watching the final scene of *The Witness*. Both the excerpts quoted by the screenwriter of *Bad Luck* and the Polish critic writing about Hungarian cinema, express the conviction that life in this part of Europe is distinctive.

Of course, critics were able to find differences between the two cinematographies as well. Bolesław Michałek, writing at the end of the sixties about new Hungarian cinema, noted the difference in mentality or the state of mind, conditioned by tradition and national myths. He indicated the Polish affirmation of myths which emphasize fatalism, show a lack of belief in the effectiveness of actions, as well as the Hungarian cinema of resistance, but also of responsibility.⁵⁸ Several years later, Tadeusz Sobolewski compared the Polish mentality, stuck in the realm of romantic myths, to the Hungarian one, which orders the character to step back from great history.⁵⁹ At the end of the eighties, the same author, commenting on Hungarian documentaries which made use of favorable political circumstances to reveal the most depressing pages of post-war history, could already write openly about the difference resulting from contemporary history:

⁵⁶ J.S. Stawiński, *Notatki scenarzysty*, wyd. II uzupełnione, Warszawa 1988, p. 215.

⁵⁷ K. Eberhardt, *Węgierskie retrospekcje*, "Film" 1969, no. 1, p. 5.

⁵⁸ B. Michałek, *Mit i odkrywanie rzeczywistości...*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ T. Sobolewski, *Gdzieś w Europie...*, p. 40. Zbigniew Pitera, looking for the source of success of Hungarian films, wrote about the quest for internal balance, the motif of escape, particularly to the country, as the basis of order, but first of all about passionate struggle with national legend, about history seen through individual tragedy. Z. Pitera, *Powrót do gniazda*, "Film" 1968, no. 14, p. 12–13.

"These films make one realize the difference of our experience: on the one hand, the magnitude of terror which Hungary went through from 1944 and 1958 and on the other, a long period of stability, which allowed one to peacefully ponder and reflect on the past".⁶⁰ What is equally important, however, is that at the same time, Sobolewski claimed, that Polish cinema could envy its Hungarian counterpart the position it had in national culture, indicating that the Polish film school had used this to play a similar role.⁶¹

Polish and Hungarian cinema were frequently compared, with multiple titles and names mentioned. A debt which Hungarian directors had to the Polish film school was pointed to, as well as the influence of Hungarian cinema on Krzysztof Kieślowski.⁶² The activity of Bela Balazs Film Studio, which contributed to the successes of Hungarian cinema, was aptly mentioned, noting, that Polish filmmakers were not interested in the pattern,⁶³ but already in the eighties mentioning Karol Irzykowski Studio on this occasion.

At the end of the eighties, the popular opinion of Hungarian cinema was no longer so enthusiastic. It was perceived as biased in favor of festivals.⁶⁴ Economic reform had an impact on the situation of the cinema which was fully subsidized – expenditure cuts came to effect. Moreover, it was written that Hungarian films were not popular among the audience, did not bring profits.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, critics were able to find points of reference to Polish cinema, aimed mainly at criticizing it. Adam Horoszczak, who wrote about Hungarian cinema most often in that period stressed in 1989, that the quality "somewhat appeases the fears of local creators that the hydra of the market would deflower the purity of film art".⁶⁶ At the same time, he admired Hungarian filmmakers, who created national cinematography, with its obsessions and motifs, for having more character than ours.

The Polish reception of Hungarian cinema in the context of political and historical themes brought about numerous articles, reviews, and interviews. I am thus aware that the above text may only be considered an attempt of reconnaissance, drawing attention to several remarkable issues. What seems interesting, however, is how frequently Polish cinema was referred to on this, and other occasions, and how often, though not always, naturally, these comparisons had the qualities of an assessment.

Trans. Krzysztof Józwiak

⁶⁰ See T. Sobolewski, *Rozmowy węgierskie 1988...*

⁶¹ Idem, *Węgierskie cinéma-vérité. Budapeszt '88*, "Kino" 1988, no. 9, p. 39.

⁶² A. Horoszczak, *Recepcja powojennego filmu węgierskiego...*, p. 5.

⁶³ K. Eberhardt, "Mrowisko", "Sztafeta" i Studio B.B. (*Korespondencja własna z Budapesztu*), "Ekran" 1971, no. 49, p. 11.

⁶⁴ B. Drozdowski, *Matnia...*

⁶⁵ B. Zagroba, *Wymuszony zwrot. Korespondencja własna z Węgier*, "Film" 1986, no. 18, p. 14.

⁶⁶ A. Horoszczak, *Nowy stan skupienia? Węgry – film i społeczeństwo*, "Odrodzenie" 1989, no. 13.