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Visions of Past and Present Reflections on the New Hungarian Cinema*

Narrative Variations

Today visibility is everywhere around us, and in art and media educational field, there is a renewed interest in *aesthetics*, which brings in many ideas related to visual culture. One of the striking features of the new visual culture is the growing tendency to visualize things that are not in themselves visual. Allied to this intellectual aspect is the growing technological capacity to make all kinds of things visible. One of the first to call attention to these developments was Martin Heidegger, who called it the rise of the »world as a picture«. ¹ The ability to absorb and interpret visual information is the basis of modern society and is becoming even more important in the information age. It is relatively new and learned skill. In other words, visual culture does not depend on the images themselves but on the modern tendency to visualize existence.

The range of reproduced and multiple images in contemporary visual culture means that the concepts of authenticity, originality, and space gain new meanings. The art of the past has now been transformed into this new image world. The context of the images is now wide and open for new forms of interpretation. Nowadays images are more prone to circulation, changed contexts, and remaking. These are the central aspects of modern film and media culture.

European cinema has always been recognized as aesthetically and culturally relevant and important, although it has traditionally been defined in terms of *high art* as opposed to Hollywood narration. Usually it has been thought that European art cinema is somehow fundamentally different from the industrially based and generically coded Hollywood. European cinema is aesthetically innovative, humanist, and socially committed by nature. It is important to reflect on the questions of ideology, aesthetics, and style, when reflecting on issues related to European cinema. ²

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¹ Martin Heidegger: *The Age of the World Picture*. In: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York/London 1977, 130.

² See, for example, Jill Forbes – Sarah Street: *European Cinema: An Introduction*. London 2000.

In narrative sense there has been variations between the Hollywood and European approaches. Generally, Hollywood-narration has focused on psychologically defined human beings who struggle to be able to solve clear defined problems and/or to be able to go towards clear defined goals. The narration focuses on causality between events and people. Those principles are to be located in the Hollywood scriptwriting tutorials with a certain formula in them.³

In European art film the authorship is very important, and often the narrative is based on literary modernism, the subjectivity problems of human beings are complex, and the narrative can be very loose consisting often a journey-like wandering, and the existential problems dominate. So, we have different narrative traditions that sometimes overlap.⁴

The History of Hungarian Cinema in the last few decades can be seen as a kind of wave movement, going on from one situation to another, and also maybe from one crisis to another. Still, Hungarian cinema has its victories on national and international level, its character as a part of the national culture, and its tradition. One can say that a Hungarian cinema has a value of its own, which can also be studied and evaluated from different perspectives.

The History of Hungarian cinema, as well as history in general is always a question of problems and debate. There is some kind of consensus in the lines between silent and sound film, studio era and the so called new wave of the sixties, but from there on the visions are many sided. Anyway, the sixties were a general breakthrough in the world cinema altogether. If television had cast its spell on cinema already from the fifties on, the beginning of the eighties had already symptoms concerning the upcoming media revolution. In the eighties, film had a rival with the new phenomenon – video, which had an impact on media consumerism.⁵ For example in Finnish cinema the sort of breakthrough periods seem to follow the turning points of media industry: first sound film, then television, and video – all those in their turn have affected a crisis on film industry.

In a global scale, the collapse of East-European socialism, and the end of the cold war seem to open up a new courageous world. This time or moment could be also felt as a kind of *end of history*, a sort of happy end with a final victory by the liberal democratic consumer society.

³ David Bordwell: *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London 1985; David Bordwell [et al.]: *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. London 1985.

⁴ Edward Branigan: *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London/New York 1992; Leo Braudy: *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*. Chicago/London 1976.

⁵ Jarmo Valkola: *Interpretation of the Images. A Cognitive and Media Cultural Perspective on the Theory and Aesthetics of Audiovisual Narration*. Jyväskylä 2003, 10-12.

Artistic Choices

Hungary has had a long and deep relationship with cinema. While in other parts of the world the debate raged as to whether the cinema should even be accorded the status of an art, the medium was viewed by Hungarian cinematographers as an artistic one from its very beginnings. Influenced by the writings of the critic and theoretician Béla Balázs, Hungarian cinematography was heavily, and healthily, rooted in both documentary and early Soviet filmmaking practices. Furthermore, in the Communist era, Hungarian cinema was relatively free from bureaucratic control and film-scripts were approved on the basis of artistic, rather than ideological, merit.

The result was a national cinema that was intense, thought provoking and capable of producing genuinely groundbreaking works, many of which were also openly critical of the Communist regime. Individual directors such as Miklós Jancsó, István Szabó and Pál Gábor, among others, emerged in the 1960s and 70s and soon gained outstanding international reputations.

Cinematic Placing

These days the situation is, of course, different. Much of the trouble stems from a shift of focus in Hungarian society, and one can ask if entertainment has superseded aesthetics in that sense but not in every way. Naturally, the changes of 1989 were an important factor in this shift, but the rise of video and television, and particularly satellite television, ensured that this process was underway well before the power was relinquished.

When cinema first appeared at the end of the 19th century, there was a huge debate as to whether it could be considered as valid art form or just as a rather gimmicky form of sideshow entertainment. One of the first countries to whole-heartedly embrace the new medium as *the seventh art* was Hungary (doing so even before France came to this conclusion). Cinema's early status as a distinct art in Hungary guaranteed that it was taken seriously as a means of expression, which in turn meant it attracted the attention of artists working in other areas who recognised the new medium's potential as *Gesamtkunst* – an art form that combines all others.

A lot has changed in Hungarian cinema in the past 100 years. This has particularly been so in the 14 years since Hungary opened its border with Austria in an event that would help contribute to the fall of Communism and the conversion of the country (including its film industry) from a planned economy to free-market principles.

Cinema-going *per se* was not affected by these changes. Audiences now prefer large multiplex cinemas, which have been mushrooming all over the

country since the first one opened in Budapest in 1997. Their success both reflects and has caused the decline of smaller, art-house cinemas, which have previously been assiduous in promoting quality Hungarian films. Multiplexes thrive on high capacity blockbusters and have little concern for altruistically supporting art when they could be making money instead.

Cultural and Other Identities

The content of national cinema means that there is a certain way of storytelling and dramatic themes. Those might base themselves on narrative traditions, and they also include different ways, through which films can work in relation to other cultural practices, and also the ways, through which the cinema can obtain cultural discourse as a source material and can build up generic conventions upon them. The concept of national cinema is often more about what the national cinema should be, than what it really is.⁶

While examining the cultural identity of a particular national cinema, the areas that are to be examined are:

1) the content or subject matter of a particular body of films, the dominant narrative discourses and dramatic themes, and the narrative traditions and other source material; the ways in which cinema inserts itself alongside other cultural practices, the way it uses cultural discourses as material and builds generic conventions on them,

2) the world-of-view expressed in these films,

3) area of style, that is their formal systems of representation, and their modes of address and construction of subjectivity.⁷

So, national cinema also includes the picture of the world described by the films. There is also the question of style, the formal presentation of things, models, conventions, and the building up of subjectivity.

One of the things that have affected the status of cinema in the last decades, has been the rapid development of media technology, and industry. This might even be some kind of communication revolution, if we think of what has happened in information technology, multimedia, and digitalisation from the 1990s on. This is a world that has broke down into every possible direction – a post-modern world of computers, television screens, and mobiles.⁸ In the midst of all this, there might be an increasing desire to go back into the dark room, into a common experience, into the original home of cinema, and its *grand narratives*.

⁶ See, for example, *European Identity and Cinema*. Ed. Wendy Everett. Exeter 1996.

⁷ Andrew Higson: The Concept of National Cinema. In: *Screen* 30 (1989) 4, 38-42.

⁸ Malcolm Le Grice: *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*. London 2001.

Although somebody might count my explanation under vulgar Freudism, or under primitive social psychology, these coincidences do have a certain line and meaning, which at least tells us, that film, cinema, also Hungarian cinema in its traditional form – shot on film and distributed in a cinema theatre – is still alive, and very competitive.

To claim that a new, and profoundly different profile of Hungarian cinema has emerged since 1989 would be an exaggeration. While the industry structure continues to change, earlier thematic concerns persist and there is certain continuity in topics and style. Privately financed heritage blockbusters may have taken the place of state-financed historical productions. Films focusing on the drab daily life and moral frustration of post-Communism might have replaced the dramas focusing on depressing everyday life and moral discouragement.⁹

Transitional Periods

Over a decade into the transition, it is impossible to claim that the old film culture has been destroyed, and replaced by a ruthless commercialism. Hungarian cinema has continued to release films that still deal with issues of national history and cultural heritage. Even though the growing dependence on market forces may have damaged the art cinema, filmmakers have continued to make art films, and continued within certain thematic areas. For example, lyrical cinema, experimental cinema, avant-garde cinema, animation, surrealism, a kind of magical realism, and so on, are still permanent features in Hungarian cinema. Numerous festival awards for films from Hungary counter-balance the still popular belief that the Hungarian cinema is undergoing a big crisis.

If one looks more closely at the specific thematic, stylistic, and genre developments of the period since 1989, several ideas come forward.

1) Nowadays there is a range of new films that focuses on immediate social issues, often reflecting the daily life of this new reality, evolving around often grotesque, and gloomy images of this period.

2) Continuing the tradition of delicate psychological dramas of individuals in different circumstances, there are nowadays films that deal with individual's difficulties in social adaptation

3) The existential strand of earlier filmmaking still exists, and from time to time, it is possible to admire works of art that deal with existential explorations on enduring issues of death, destiny, distress and disorientation.

4) The tradition of historical filmmaking persists in producing a whole range of films that focuses on historical concerns and experiences, dealing

⁹ Dina *Jordanova*: *The Cinema of Other Europe*. London 2003.

with war episodes, the Stalinist period, the Holocaust, and certain glorious moments in national history.

5) The tradition of village life, folklore, and heritage films focuses also on questions of various ethnic and other minorities, and on the often patriarchal structure of small isolated communities.

6) The entertainment tradition of filmmaking focused on popular genres such as comedy, action films, crime dramas, thrillers and horror films is continuing.

7) Reflecting the ideas of the increasing awareness of changing geopolitical realities, a range of films will take a look into issues of contemporary migrations and new identities under different circumstances.

Nowadays in Hungary the production, distribution, viewing and watching films are elements built into one another. After all, for popularity one needs awareness (continuous presence) on the cinema or television screen, but if there aren't many films, and television being what it is, the circle closes. The process is hectic, because the fate of a film-project or screenplay might depend on pure chance.¹⁰ Given this, the appearance of young directors seems encouraging. There is life beyond the film academy and the big studios. However almost unnoticed, the former strong bastion, the Béla Balázs Studio has quietly signed itself out.¹¹

One can also ask, is it so that in the process of change, which Hungarian society and cinema and media undergo it is the Hungarian documentary that is searching for a new identity. Today we expect more of documentaries than mere revealing, unmasking and preserving, or archiving the truth. What we expect is the creative formation of all these features.¹² So, one can say that there are a lot of energy and creativity in the new Hungarian cinema, and, of course in the old one as well, one of the dominant traits is and has been the social responsibility, the sensibility for the essential questions of social and cultural life.

The history of art, and audiovisual media does not progress so that it wipes itself out, but goes so, that it leaves behind different kind of levels, which live and influence us as spectators all the time. When photography was invented, there was a doubt of what's going to happen with the future of painting, with the coming of film and sound film, there was a worriment related to the faith of theatre and literature. With the development of television, video, and digital media, there have been announcements on the death of cinema.

¹⁰ This after Erzsébet Bori: A Week of Promise. Film Week 2002. In: The Hungarian Quarterly 43 (2002) 165, Spring, 155-160.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Gábor Gelencsér: The End of Beginning: Approaches to the Hungarian film in the 1980s-1990s. <http://www.filmkultura.iif.hu:8080/articles> (May, 2nd 2005).

In a Digitalized Future

Anyway, these traditional art forms, and *the seventh art* cinema, have survived and stayed more or less fresh between the times. It is due to that, that cinema was already from the beginning an amalgam, a sort of conglomerate of different arts and techniques. Cinema has been able to melt into itself many different elements and techniques. If the future of cinema looks heavily digitalized, it doesn't necessarily mean a decisive change in the status and application of cinema.

So in the more and more unified Europe and global media world, what is there to be left for cinema? Is the interest in national cinema a kind of symptom that in our world with discrepancies, there is a need to return to more national origins? This is hardly the whole truth, because it is always quite hard to predict the future. Not a single film is born out of emptiness, it is in many ways, some of them visible and others invisible, tied up to society, cultural milieu, landscape, national heritage or international tradition. Hungarian cinema can of course try to deny its tradition, take distance towards it, depreciate it, or comment it any other ways, but it is still stuck with it. This tradition gives actually justification to the existence of national cinema: if the Hungarians themselves don't do the Hungarian film, their national image, then they give up the possibility to somebody else, and it isn't the same thing anymore.

Cinema prepares memories. One can continue, that the essential vocation of cinema is to produce *memories*, to be part of the history and to make history. One doesn't have to be an incurable nostalgic to think that a human being without memories and past is like a mental cripple, a man without identity (like in the Aki Kaurismäki film „The Man without a Past”, 2002). A human being without a memory can also be called a slave. Slaves become faithful when their memory is erased: a modern man or woman can become slave, if she or he forgets her or his past. Without cinema and history, without the history and memory of Hungarian cinema, Hungarians might become marionettes of outside forces.

Marcel Proust once wrote that perhaps the reality actually takes shape in memory. Over half a century in forehand of scientific research Proust could reach a deep conviction that the feeling of remembrance is born out of the delicate interaction between past and present. This is the best goal of art and cinema. Even in films we can't reach out for the *lost* time, which in its liveliest way would be more or less fraud and a disappointment, but only in cinema we can be part of that change, a fragment of the shroud of history, which tells something about someone who has been and still is.

Reflection of Talents

In this festival we have a splendid choice of material, different kind of films, which reflect the past and the present of Hungarian film. If one thinks of the past and present in the light of this excellent selection of films here in Munich, one can say that there are many kinds of reflections in that sense. Many new Hungarian films are quite successful in the international festival circuit. They get many prizes, and so on. What does this tell about the state of film, industry in Hungary, one can of course ask. The answer is not a simple one.

Many new Hungarian films are not very easy to classify. They seem to get their energy from different sources. There are many economical and social pressures in the Hungarian Film industry. Maybe one of the special talents of Hungarian filmmakers is to address quietly and often indirectly the most difficult social conflicts. The younger filmmakers have tried to focus on these questions more closely in our time. For example, György Pálfi's „Hukkle” (2002) is a splendid example of that. In one sense, it looks like a landscape film, covering up the different activities of the people living in a small village, and on the other side it is an innovative and very modern experience in the language of cinema. This brings in mind a larger theoretical question.

According to Rudolf Arnheim perception itself is cognitive, to see is to perform operations on visual materials. The cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself. It is a question of active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison and problem solving. These are the ways that the mind treats cognitive material at different levels.¹³ Each of these operations is a component of intelligence and of perception.

Take, for example, the fundamental operation of selection. If one is to select some aspect of a visual situation for attention, and for further processing, then one must select a particular shape, colour, patch, or line. The same is true of all such operations, which are thereby shown to be indisputably both cognitive and conducted from the very beginning in visual terms. That is why Arnheim called this process as *visual thinking*. I think Pálfi is in a way using this kind of approach in his film.

His approach towards the visual atmosphere is very controlled and beautiful by nature. The strongest points in the narrative are the reversals from one narrative point to another. They are very imaginative, and occasionally filled with humour. In certain points the camera finds a spot be-

¹³ Rudolf Arnheim: *Visual thinking*. Berkeley 1969.

hind the image, and starts to follow it. With close-ups Pálfi can bring in more feeling and spectator-identification towards the narrative. The feeling of environment and different landscapes is strong, and partly realised with cutting devices, strongly influenced by the interesting soundtrack.

Compelling Identities

Zoltán Kamondi's „Temptations” (*Kísértések*, 2002) is a tempting drama of identity and cultural questions in a world with alienation and struggle for survival. Marci is an intelligent young man, who studies computer programming. People think that he will have a great career ahead of him but Marci wants only to find his unknown father and his own place in the world. This journey towards self-knowledge is compelling and dramatic, and features, for example, a ten year-old gypsy girl, whose parents sold her to Marci, and who becomes curiously and intensively devoted to Marci's quest.

Kamondi's style creates a lot of energy into the picture. It has features of avant-garde poetics, because the tense of narrative devices explores associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions. This opens up possibilities for alternative forms of knowledge and cultural heritage thus complicating the straightforward transformation of information, and bringing in particular arguments or perspectives. „Temptations” has a special atmosphere with varied emotional, and other effects. The sense and variety of different moods and happenings all work towards the general feeling of the scenes. Kamondi's style stresses mood, tone, and affect, and it is a modernist way of representing changing reality in terms of a series of subjective fragments, impressions, incoherent acts, and different associations. „Temptations” has the sense of honesty in creating puzzling fragments of this new social situation where the people in the film live.

The restlessness of young people comes in through Ferenc Török's „Moscow Square” (*Moszkva tér*, 2001), a film about the stormy times of 1989 in the life of young Petya and his friends. „Moscow Square” is a dynamic and enthralling portrait of those times when, for example, in Hungary the martyr prime minister of the 1956 revolution Imre Nagy received a ceremonial burial and the Kádár-era was re-evaluated. Lots of things were happening in Europe: The fall of the Berlin Wall, the velvet revolution in Prague, the bloody events in Romania, and so on. They are all in the background of those feverish times. Török brings in first and foremost the story of the youth, celebrating their experience with a personal touch of the times.

The basic characters move around the city. Petya is brought up by his grandmother in narrow circumstances; Royal, Kiegler, and Ságodi, are sur-

rounded by nice girls and weak parents, bringing in characterisation of the times of the 1980s. The grammar school represents the reality of life with the headmistress symbolizing the deceptive regime. Authority is counter-balanced by the humanist history-teacher (Zsolt Kovács), who can see some value in things. The young ones go to the parties, which often turn into useless vandalism. Also nice things happen like bathing in the night at Gellért bath, or watching sunrise from Elisabeth Bridge, or sitting in cane chairs, and so on.

The once feared Kádár regime is losing its touch, at least the boys think so. New methods of moneymaking are also set up: Royal encourages Petya and his friends to forge international train tickets, and the business starts to flourish. After having the final examinations (with the help of some dead cert thesis acquired by the parents) and the banquet on the board of a ship, the company breaks up. Those who can, like Petya's love Zsófi, leave to Paris. Those who must stay, are planning other choices.

The film is placed in the frame of an opening and closing picture of the „Moscow Square“, and filled with the past decade's hope and misery. The spectator is supposed to decide whether the so much desired change of regime has been equal to the expectations. In „Moscow Square“ the spectator can feel the honesty and joy of the film, the story is straight and understandable, and there are glimpses of director's personal tone in the narrative. The characters are natural, and the film has documentary-like quality with some excellent acting resources.

Árpád Sopsits's „Abandoned“ (*Torzók*, 2001) is an example of a film with very controlled narrative. It is set in Hungary in the year 1960. The nine-year-old Áron Sopron is put in a home for boys, because his parents are divorces, and the father is unable to take care of the boy anymore. The mother is ill, and also unable to raise the son. So, Áron seeks protection and care in the lap of Marika, the only female member of the staff. Sopsits describes the adaptation process of Áron in the times of strict reform education in a place, where physical punishment belongs to the essential methods of the teachers.

In Sopsits's film the loss of innocence has a Dickens-like quality, which Sopsits treats with delicate compositions and especially effective use of close-ups in certain scenes. Sopsits can create a feeling of *micro-physiognomy* in the sense of Béla Balázs's theoretical perspective on the use of human face as a landscape where one can see the fleeting moments of despair and distrust and the longing for a decent home and spiritual unity. Sometimes the quality of the narrative rises upon ethereal levels, and the metaphorical nature of the narrative works in many ways in this touching and gripping portrait of youngsters trying to cope with the harsh laws of the society.

The more experimental side comes into the new Hungarian cinema with short films like Róbert and Boglárka Pölcz's „Safari“ (*Szafari*, 1999), or Ferenc Cakó's animation „Stones“ (*Kövek*, 2000). The skilfulness of Cakó's

animation brings in mind the ideas of animation-pictures to highlight representation, and to create attractive surprises and changing contexts with the power of animation. The images might function as a set of ideas, remarks about external reality as in Kornél Mundruczó's „Day After Day” (*Afta*, 2000) or Livia Gyarmathy's „Our Stork” (*A mi gólyánk*, 1999). The latter means a welcome return into the form of home movies, and the result is captivating and innovative at the same time. The animal perspective creates a perspective where the play of images and sounds creates a communication with references not so seldom seen in these kind of films.

Béla Tarr's Special Creation of Visual Structures

In Béla Tarr's films formal elements are referred to as choices, since when an artist contemplates the best way to articulate essential points, he has an array of options before him. Creating an artwork involves electing the forms that the artist believes will function optimally toward realizing the purpose of the work. Forms are formal choices because they are elected from a certain amount of options. Also, forms are selected because they are designed or intended to perform certain functions.

Béla Tarr's newest film „Werckmeister Harmonies” (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000) is a mesmerising and visually very interesting mediation on popular demagogy and mental human manipulation. Tarr is a highly acquired and original filmmaker, and has yet to acquire the broad critical following of fellow Hungarian Miklós Jancsó and Greece's Theo Angelopoulos who are often referred as his closest filmmaking relatives.¹⁴

Werckmeister Harmonies may start to change things and prompt re-discovery of his earlier works, including especially „Damnation” (*Kárhozat*, 1987). Tarr is one of the few genuinely visionary filmmakers in our times. Adapted from László Krasznahorkai's novel „The Melancholy of Resistance” (1989), „Werckmeister Harmonies” also reunites the technical team behind „Satantango” (*Sátántangó*, 1994), photographer Gábor Medvigy and composer Mihály Víg.

In a small and bleak Hungarian village

Events move forward at a relatively rapid pace related to Tarr's earlier films, to a final half-hour that brings in greater emotional dramatic. The setting of the film is usual to Tarr: a small and bleak Hungarian village, in a

¹⁴ Jarmo Valkola: Visual Thinking and Various European Cinematic Landscapes – Examples from Peter Greenaway, Theo Angelopoulos, Béla Tarr and Andrei Tarkovsky. In: *Hungarologische Beiträge* 1998/11, 211-238.

freezing winter temperature but without snow. As the camera pulls away from an image of a stove and embarks on the opening ten-minute take, the audience is plunged into a rural bar at closing time with drunken people gradually falling under the spell of a young man, local postman Valushka (Lars Rudolph), who leads them into a performance imitating the solar system.

As in „Satantango“, an outsider becomes the catalyst for an attempt to change. The world described in the narration is clearly standing on some kind of brink: jobless people hang around in the streets, and there is some kind of revolution coming in the air. A mysterious circus has come into town, and villagers are waiting a promised appearance of a figure called *The Prince*. At the moment, all that's on show is a life-size stuffed whale inside a large truck, and the people have to pay 100 forints to gaze upon it. As the locals talk about revolution and leadership, tension grows among those who have braved the cold to see the circus.

After the manger announces that the Prince can't appear, the passive mob finally rebels and marches on to the local hospital and starts trashing the place. Here Tarr develops the films most memorable moves. In a moment of transcendent cinema, powered by Víg's magical music, the mob is halted in its steps by an unexpected sight and disperses of its own accord. The military then ruthlessly hunts down and crushes the resistance.

„Werckmeister Harmonies“ has the sense of some impending crisis. There is a sense of Dostoyevski and Kafka in the air. Krasznahorkai puts this uncanny quality into words, which Tarr then transforms into an extraordinary composite of cinematic storytelling, language, music, sounds and images.¹⁵ The subject matter of Tarr's films is misery in interpersonal relationship, depicted with an unflinching intimacy; this closeness is offset by formal and structural elements that provide a distance from narratives that would otherwise seem overwhelmed by despair, and that point towards political, psychological and metaphysical interpretations of these problems that devastate the characters

Mastery of Camera Movements

Stylistically speaking one can see Tarr's style as a continuation of the Miklós Jancsó-style in some earlier Jancsó-films like „Agnus Dei“ (1969) and „Red Psalm“ (1971). These films flamboyantly flaunted the mastery of camera movement. Jancsó's technique relied heavily on camera set-ups and long, wandering, compositional scenes that compellingly use the integration of figures with the landscape. From the Soviet montage tradition came

¹⁵ Jarmo Valkola: Interpretation, 196-213.

the idea of a group protagonist, which Jancsó turned into de-dramatising ends.

„Werckmeister Harmonies“ is a classic demonstration of Tarr’s symphonic approach to filmmaking. Tarr’s images and sounds work subliminally on the spectator’s emotions over large expanses of time even when the spectator is dimly aware of what’s going on. Through Gábor Medvigy’s hypnotic camerawork the spectator is not a passive subject but an active one, contributing substantially to the final effect of the work. Though never explained in the film, the title of the film refers to the 17th-century German organist-composer Andreas Werckmeister, esteemed by his influential tones on harmony and musical construction. The film has only 39 shots in 145 minutes.

Tarr explores and extends stylistic options current in his milieu, bending them towards specific goals, which include de-dramatisation and a kind of muted emotional expressivity. At the same time Tarr creates a kind of subtle direction of the audience’s attention, a concomitant awareness of the process of film viewing. Tarr concentrates to his devices so imaginatively that they have come to be identified with his work. They give each film a theme-and-variations structure. Tarr explores throughout his imagery their visual and dramatic possibilities.

In all, Béla Tarr tries to keep the shot alive, to quicken our visual interest while also linking or developing his characteristic compositions. Moreover, since we cannot see what is off-screen, camera movement offers a chance to arouse and foil expectations. Springing such surprises is a fairly traditional use of camera movement.

More distinctive is the way in which Tarr’s camera movements participate in a larger dynamic of opening and filling space at a tempo which allows us to form anticipations about how the blocking will develop.¹⁶ Thanks to the long take and silent intervals, Tarr prolongs the very process of staging, leaving us plenty of time to recognise that we are forming expectations about where the character or camera will go next.

Tarr’s extremely slow camera movements often move away from or past the characters creating up a mood and sensation related to formal suspense. This makes it possible for Tarr the use of different perspectives during the same shot. For example, in „Satantango“ he changes perspectives from people to the landscape, and so on.

The spectators of a Béla Tarr-film are, in a way, forced to see these changes, share the immobility of happenings, waiting and the expectations of the characters, while the shot proceeds. In a way, Béla Tarr is fascinated by the continuity, because it has a special tension. The spectators are much more concentrated than when you have few shorter takes after the real long ones. Tarr is conceiving the scenes through the movements implied in

¹⁶ Ibidem.

these long shots. So, the film becomes a real psychological process.¹⁷ Béla Tarr's characters seem to have no future and probably even no past, although one can see many references related to Hungarian history in his films. With Béla Tarr one can find traces of a sort of *fin de siècle* melancholy, a tendency towards portraying psychological crises.¹⁸

Béla Tarr's films are fine examples of artistic quality and originality, because Tarr can create direct perceptual and imaginative engagement with the films themselves, and can give rise to a distinctive aesthetic mode surrounding the films. Tarr is a Hungarian filmmaker who can mould sensuous or imaginatively intended material into original symbolic form. Tarr brings the rational, sensible, and historical aspects of experience into an internal relation. All the different elements of his films are, in a way, inseparable, coherent, and mentally and physically embodied.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Jarmo Valkola: L'esthétique visuelle de Béla Tarr. In: Théorème. Cinéma hongrois: le temps et l'histoire. Sous la direction de Kristian Feigelson. Paris 2003, 181-192.