

World Cinema: Hungary

Bryan Burns



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Printed and bound in Great Britain.

To my mother

Preface

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2. The great generation

Revolutions and reformations, 1956-72

1956 is the most important date in modern Hungarian history, in the cinema as in other areas of national life. The Revolution of that year occupies the background, and often the foreground, of many of the Hungarian films that have been made since, and amounts to the great event in the lives of the marvellously talented generation of directors who in the 1960s made their national cinema a force to be reckoned with - in America and Western Europe, at home and in other Communist countries. As we may see from the example of the French Revolution, cataclysms are often productive of great and original art, and the events of 1956, which disrupted every element of Hungarian society and enforced a reconsideration of all established values, were always likely to produce a new wave in the cinema, as elsewhere (either that, or retrenchment).

In part, this was owing to the desire of the government of János Kádár to build up Hungarian culture, and encourage the forces of cohesion and stability in the country. Accordingly, from 1957 the Hunnia Film Stúdió and the Budapest Film Stúdió were made available to directors for feature film work, and a renaissance of the Hungarian cinema began. At first, older directors such as Ranódy and the dependable Keleti simply continued in their accustomed paths, although perhaps with a new bent towards investigative realism. But soon, by the early 1960s, in the cautiously progressive atmosphere which Kádár permitted (or encouraged) in Hungary, and even more after the fillip to innovation and interrogation given by the events of 1968 across Europe, the cinema began to adopt a more adventurous position with regard to its techniques and, especially, its materials.

Firstly, study was reformed and given a more practical direction at the Színház és Filmművészeti Főiskola (Academy for Theatre and Film Art), the core institution which has produced virtually all Hungary's recent major figures in the cinema, and whose values (privileging realism and professionalism) have dominated the country's film production for decades. Filmmaking too was rejuvenated and liberalized: the number of studios was increased, the arrangements for production decentralized, and a considerable degree of artistic freedom allowed to individual studios and directors. Thus, in 1963, four studios, Budapest, Dialóg, Hunnia and Objektív, were created or confirmed, each under its own director and each given funds by the state to support the production of a number of full-length films per year. The directors of these studios were themselves cinéastes such as Makk and Máriássy, figures with aesthetic as well as financial virement over their products, and sympathetic both to the invigorating international climate of the early 1960s cinema and to the bold individuality of many of the filmmakers with whom they worked. Although the industry was financed by the state and existed under its aegis,

control was light. Films were suggested to studios by their proposed directors and, if approved, were then passed on for vetting by the Művelődési és Közpoktatási Minisztérium (Ministry of Culture), which took account of the views of the studios themselves and also of those of Mafilm (which ran the *matériel* of the industry, financed to the highest technical standard), Mokép (charged with the distribution of films within Hungary) and Hungarofilm (responsible for the international diffusion of the products of the Hungarian industry).

Altogether, this system was a success. Since it was run not by faceless bureaucrats but by cinéphiles, it permitted a high degree of freedom of choice, and was sympathetic to the permissive atmosphere of the film world itself. The criterion was *quality*: the satisfying of cheap tastes for spectacle or excitement, or the making of a quick return on investment does not seem to have pressingly occurred to anyone. Directors could take a long view, nurture projects over years, and choose only those screenplays that suited their talents. They could also count on a cohort of actors and actresses of the highest quality and, even more, on the services of some of Europe's finest cinematographers. They were also able to tackle a wide range of subjects, many of them taboo in the more constrained industries of much of the rest of Eastern Europe. Very few films, once made, were not given immediate distribution, and those that issued into the cinemas maintained an enviably high level of technical expertise, responsible engagement with the dilemmas of the day and aesthetic distinction.

One significant institution, the Béla Balázs Stúdió, named after Hungary's greatest film theoretician, began as a type of club in 1958, but in 1960 developed into an independent film production unit, dedicated to allowing young directors the chance of making short experimental works outside the framework of the established studios. The Béla Balázs Stúdió has had an immense and salutary influence on the modern Hungarian cinema. For a start, it was specifically given over to the new and young, although funded by the state, as has been all Hungarian film production until quite recently. It often gave directors their first opportunity to make a film, frequently a short or a work which the major studios would not have found acceptable, and thus promoted a plurality of voices in what might otherwise have seemed a monolithic, state-sponsored arm of the Establishment. In practice, although it offered some fantasists and innovators unexpected possibilities for making films, the Béla Balázs Stúdió gave most impetus to the great task of the modern Hungarian cinema - the reinterpretation of the national bent for the politicized problem-picture, realistically presented, in the light of Italian neo-realism and even more, later, the modernist self-consciousness of the Nouvelle Vague. Most of the directors discussed in this chapter, Fábri above all, were formed by the era before the Béla Balázs Stúdió, and only István Gaál and Szabó were formally concerned with it. Nevertheless, the revisionary effort which it represented was clearly known to them all, and both affected and was affected by their own attempts to enlarge the horizons of the Hungarian cinema and to employ the techniques of modernism to enrich and update the political and social concerns they shared with their more traditionally minded colleagues.

In addition, although I shall not much be concerned with their products either here or later, there were other filmmaking bodies which contributed to the efflorescence of the Hungarian cinema in the 1960s. The first was Pannónia Stúdió, dedicated to the making of cartoons and animated films, and a centre of excellence whose work has often been successful at festivals and in international competitions. The second was the Híradó-és Dokumentumfilm Stúdió (Newsreel and Documentary Studio), which continued the long tradition of the Hungarian newsreel, begun in 1901. The third was television, a medium that later became a significant source of interesting film material, but was not at this time very highly developed.

Evidently, large numbers of interesting films may be made, but will have an effect if they are not seen. During the period considered here, cinema-going in Hungary reached its peak, so that venues came to exist all over the country in which the works of Jancsó and his peers could be shown. Cinema-going, too, was immensely popular, with admissions by the beginning of the 1960s amounting to 140 million per year. Many of the films shown were Hungarian, partly because this was what audiences wanted and partly because foreign works, except those from Communist countries, were less easily accessible than they have become. Hungarian films also began – thanks largely to Jancsó – to acquire a striking international reputation, especially in France and Italy, and to carry off more and more prizes at film festivals.

The situation so far described seems highly conducive to the growth of a national cinema dedicated to what Bacsó calls "public responsibility"¹ and to exigent artistic standards. Directors operated in a world largely freed from financial constraints, excellently resourced from a technical point of view, and not at all heavily regulated by the hand of the state: the films of Jancsó, for example, were often demanding of materials and about as far from Socialist realism as could be imagined, but they were still made, shown and proudly sported. Experiment and variety were fostered, both formally (in the modernist works of István Gaál, the debate films of Kovács, and Bacsó's mixed-mode comedies) and in subject (with relatively open-minded political enquiry reduced by everyone, and even lesbianism broached by Makk). The result is a cinema of unique vitality and excellence, all the more extraordinary since it the product of a such a small country apparently so far from the growth-points of the film world of the 1960s.

The directors discussed in this chapter range from Fábri (born in 1917) to Jancsó (born in 1938), and cover much of the significant historical experience of Hungary in this century. They are, therefore, often very unlike. But Fábri's first independent feature was made in 1952, and Szabó's only a little more than a decade later, in 1964, and there are many ways in which they and the filmmakers who come between them share a similar *thèse de société*. The Hungarian cinema has always been literary, and scriptwriters have always had greater status and power in Hungary than anywhere else that I know. But during the 1960s, and partly thanks to the work of French filmmakers such as Ruffaut, the role of the director became more pronounced. Hungarian film magazines of this period are full of discussions of the auteur theory, and

although many Hungarian directors emphasise the collaborative nature of their medium, and give due praise to their talented co-workers, the particularity of vision of figures such as Jancsó, above all, but also of Bacsó and István Gaál, seems undeniable. So, as in Western Europe, in Hungary there developed in the 1960s a cinema of a more confident individual kind than had often previously existed (and which did not exist to the same extent in other Communist countries, except perhaps in Poland).

The overriding prepossession of this cinema is with the human consequences of the processes of history, set against the background of Hungary's progress from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one. This amounts to much more than the implicit political comment that may be inferred even from Hollywood movies: modern Hungarian films are about history, about the ways in which Communism, Hungarianness and individual aspiration meet, conflict and are sometimes resolved. Yvette Bíró comments that in the Hungarian cinema "man does not fight in everyday dimensions but in the scenery of history",² and this scenery gives a larger, hortatory dimension to even the smallest, most intimate drama that may (as in Szabó's *Bizalom* [Confidence, 1979]) unroll before it. Thus, everything, while seemingly a matter of, for example, a young man growing up (in Szabó's *Apai* [Father, 1966]) or a middle-aged man coping with the loss of youth (in István Gaál's *Cserpek* [Buffer Zone, 1980]), acquires a political resonance.

Bíró also argues that "the history which appears in Hungarian movies is not a sign of the usual escape, or the result of a need for myths but rather the other way around, it is a means of destroying myths". Indeed, one cannot imagine that the country's art could give a simple or confirmatory presentation of the experience of the 20th century in Hungary. Thus, again in Bíró's words, the Hungarian cinema strives for "a finally authentic, even though painful national self-knowledge".³ This demands an examination of the social and political dilemmas of the day and also a taking account of the past – of the Second World War and, even more, of the Revolution of 1956. This taking account is more complex and far-reaching in the works of Jancsó and his generation than it was before or has been since. Although the films of this period foreground problems such as the anxious conservatism of the Hungarian Establishment in Kovács's *Néléz emberek* (*Difficult People*, 1964), or the craziness of the Party's whims in Bacsó's *A tanú* (*The Witness*, 1969), they also examine the nature of freedom in a Communist state and the means by which (if at all) the needs of the individual can be reconciled with the requirements of that state. Almost all the works discussed in this chapter are therefore interrogative: even convinced Communists such as Jancsó and Kovács are questioning, taking little on trust. They think about things and expect their viewers to do the same; they may have immediate ends in view, but they also wish above all to encourage enquiry, and exempt no area of the national life from searching analysis.

As already indicated, the inclination of the Hungarian cinema is towards authenticity and social concern. As one would expect from such an art, even in the 1960s, in films such as Jancsó's *Oldás és kötés* (*Cantata*, 1963), Hungarian directors were strongly drawn towards the documentary roughness and

passionate engagement of Italian neo-realist filmmakers such as Rossellini. Yet *antitata* is close to Antonioni as well as to Rossellini, and like many of its Hungarian peers takes account of modernism as much as of realism. The 1960s was the great decade of formal innovation in the Hungarian cinema, the period above all others when directors attempted to maintain the political and social commitment of their native tradition, but to express it via the fragmented, subversive aesthetics that the Nouvelle Vague exported throughout Europe and the United States at this time. Few of these films are formally conservative or there unequivocally to the canons of the old-style, well-told story in which a principal aim is to create an impression of unmediated truth. Some – those of *ancsó* and István Gaál above all – are far removed from the documentary and effective, and operate instead as parables or fables whose intention is to convey their themes only disturbingly and obliquely. Others, such as the early works of Szabó, have elements of realism but include symbolism as well, and deliberately disrupt the normal patterns of narrative chronology. Others, as in *acsó*, refuse to adhere to an overall tone, and tease their viewers by never settling reassuringly into a single genre. Others again, especially in Kovács, seem almost like anti-films, so far are they from giving us the pleasures we are used to enjoying in the cinema. Biró rightly sees in these experiments "the lefthroning of the story" and the elevation of "poetry".⁴ Hungarian film artists of the 1960s, assimilating the lessons of the past and looking to those of the future, are attempting to express their newly considered themes by means of newly considered techniques: to be modern and apropos, grappling with the local affairs of their own country, but also with their medium and with matters of the widest relevance both in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Zoltán Fábri

Zoltán Fábri was born in 1917, and is much the oldest of the directors considered in this chapter. However, both by his merit (he was, before Jancsó, the best-known Hungarian filmmaker in the West) and by the length and versatility of his career (extending from 1952 to 1983, and encompassing everything from Socialist Realism to something suspiciously like the Nouvelle Vague), he deserves to be considered not with his chronological, but with his artistic, peers. Fábri studied at the Képzőművészeti Főiskola (Academy of Fine Arts) and was highly successful, but after losing his vocation for painting, he transferred to the Academy for Theatre and Film Art. He graduated in 1941 and worked at the Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre) in Budapest, where he directed (Shakespeare and Giraudoux, among others), acted and designed scenery. After the end of the war, he worked as a stage manager and then as a theatre manager. His early career clearly contributes much to Fábri's films, the best of which are painterly and theatrical in the best senses: visually stylish, firmly managed and relying upon sound performances and an interesting storyline. Partly under the influence of Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), which helped convince him that "however exciting and significant the theatre and theatrical productions are...the message one can convey by means of films are [sic] even

more one's own",⁵ Fábri turned to the cinema. He was appointed artistic director of the Hunnia Film Stúdió in 1949, wrote a number of screenplays, admirably completed a film which had been started by others and in 1952 made his first independent work, an account of a farmers' cooperative, *Vihar* (*The Storm*). This was followed by *Életfel* (*Fourteen Lives Saved*, 1954). Both these films come from a period when, as Fábri has said, " clichés had their heyday",⁶ and it was not until 1955, with a potentially stereotypical but actually rich and moving story of peasant life, *Körhintia* (*Merry-Go-Round*), that the director completely found his feet in the cinema. This was followed by *Hannibál tanár úr* (*Professor Hannibal*, 1956), which justly won the Grand Prix at Karlovy Vary, establishing Fábri's reputation both at home and abroad and, with it, that of the resurgent Hungarian cinema. In part, this was because Fábri dared to challenge the crude didacticism of the filmmaking regime of the early 1950s, introducing into his works a critical realism which paved the way for the more daring experiments of those who came after him. From this point until well into the 1960s, Fábri was the director most favoured within Hungary itself and the voice of his country's filmmakers throughout Europe. His works, especially the remarkable *Húsz óra* (*Twenty Hours*, 1965), skilfully adapted themselves to the freer cultural ambience of the 1960s and continued to win prizes at festivals worldwide. One, the American co-production, *A Pál utcai fiúk* (*The Boys of Paul Street*, 1968), was nominated for an Academy Award®. Even into the 1970s and 1980s, with films such as *Magyarok* (*Hungarians*, 1977) and *Fábián Bálint találkozás a istennel* (*Fábián Bálint Meets God*, 1980), Fábri showed that he had lost neither his feel for the apposite nor his technical expertise. Nor has he simply spent his time directing; he has complemented his prestigious professional work in the cinema with positions as President of the Film és TV művészek Szövetsége (Federation of Hungarian Film and Television Artists) and as Professor at the Academy for Theatre and Film Art. Fábri died in 1994.

By any standards, Fábri has had one of the most distinguished careers of any Hungarian filmmaker. He has dealt with subjects which are acceptable to the authorities, but has presented these subjects with a human touch and in a thoughtful and questioning way. The result has been works which constantly undermine Communist orthodoxies and instead point to the real complexity of life. Fábri's stories have been various, but his thematic preoccupations run continuously from his earliest films to his last. He says that he is interested in "human dignity and the infringement of human dignity"⁷ (an exact summary of *Professor Hannibal*) and that he wishes to "protest against violence"⁸. Given the history of Hungary during Fábri's lifetime, one can see that he will not be short of material. Quite early in his career, he turned his attention to Fascism, a subject which recurs as late as *Az ötödik pecsét* (*The Fifth Seal*, 1976), and says that, after *Professor Hannibal*, he "was increasingly challenged by the problems of tyranny"⁹. Fábri is a consistently moral artist, someone whose major interest is in goodness and justice. But the subjects that he chooses – the hounding of an inoffensive schoolteacher (in *Professor Hannibal*) or the terrible events of a night in wartime (in *The Fifth Seal*) – also provide him with excellent theatrical material; his films are sometimes unsuccessful, but they are full of exciting

3 · Our contemporaries

Achievement and uncertainty, 1972-95

During the 1960s, thanks in part to the generosity and open-mindedness of the state cultural apparatus, the Hungarian cinema produced a number of directors, and many films, of the first rank. During succeeding decades, however, problems began to emerge. Figures such as Jancsó and Szabó, and even Fábri, developed their filmmaking styles, although rarely equalling their earlier, striking successes. They were joined by an extraordinary array of younger directors, most of them attracted to a documentary and film-sociographic type of cinema, and most, perhaps all, of real seriousness and competence. Several of these filmmakers, Gábor and Sándor of a slightly older generation, and Gazdag and Gothár of a slightly younger one, seem to me to be major talents worthy of attention in Europe and beyond. Yet, the Hungarian cinema no longer possesses genius: its products are often excellent, but they are not astounding (unlike Jancsó's films of the 1960s). In addition, and exacerbating this impression of anti-climax, the conditions of filmmaking in Hungary have deteriorated. Comparatively, there is less money than there was, and it does not go so far. There is competition from television and from foreign imports, especially from America: Hungarian directors continue to make films, but they are less popular than before, and generally do not attract Western European audiences as they once did. Altogether, the grand experiment of the Hungarian cinema, by which a small country achieved great things, has recently seemed more at risk than at any time since the late 1920s.

The institutional organisation which began in 1963 endured until 1972. In that year, in response to a feeling that creativity in the Hungarian cinema was waning and that some added degree of competition would be advantageous, artistic production was effectively separated from manufacturing procedures. Thus, whereas before, four studios existed with some degree of autonomy, but in fact depended upon Mafilm for *matériel*, under the new provisions "two independent production companies...freely dispose of the available funds, and handle both the script preparation and production." MAFILM provides the necessary staff and technical means, under contract".¹ These two companies, Budapest and Hunnia, were thus given many of the freedoms of their peers in the West (although with the bonus of continued state funding) and encouraged to back their hunches even more than in the past. In addition, distributors were given a role in the financing of works which they thought promising. Finally, a new body, the Filmfőigazgatóság (Hungarian Film Board) of the Művelődési és Közoktatási Minisztérium (Ministry of Education), was established to oversee the ideological complexion of Hungarian film production, while other operative functions were taken over by the companies themselves. One result was a loosening of the previous, perhaps bureaucratic, organisation of the Hungarian

09 Ibid.

10 "I'd Like to Tell a Story": 20.

11 "The Past Still Plays a Major Role", *Hungarofilm Bulletin* 1979/2: 18.

12 Ibid: 19.

13 Ibid: 20.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid: 20-21.

16 Ibid: 19.

17 Ibid: 20.

18 "I'd Like to Tell a Story": 20.

19 Quoted in John W Hughes, "Mephisto: István Szabó and 'the Gestapo of Suspicion'", *Film Quarterly* 35: 4 (summer 1982): 14.

20 Ibid: 17.

21 Pauline Kael, "A Devil Without Fire", *Taking It All In* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986): 338.

22 "I'd Like to Tell a Story": 16.

23 Ibid: 15.

24 Ibid: 19.

25 Ibid: 15.

26 Ibid.

27 "Hanussen Changes his Identity": 14.

28 Ibid: 11.

cinema. Directors were freed, and could approach either of the new companies, rather than being employed by one or other of the studios, but the security of their regular salary was maintained. The aim of the reforms, as expressed by István Nemeskürty, the head of Budapest Film Stúdió, was to encourage "a healthy rivalry",² and this breath of competition gave immediate life to the Hungarian cinema, in danger (as the country itself has been) from its addiction to a positively Habsburg degree of regulation.

During the 1970s and the early 1980s, this new system worked well, fostering the emergence of fresh talents and permitting established figures to continue their careers. In particular, that specially Hungarian hybrid, the "quasi-documentary", flourished. This is a type of film deeply and critically engaged with the social problems of the day - the housing shortage, family breakdown, the disaffection of the young - and concerned to render this engagement with a high degree of realism, but also with something of the excitement and shapeliness of the fictional feature. Almost every significant director discussed here has made works like this, or has been influenced in his or her practice by the compelling seriousness of affect that can be achieved by means which approximate to the documentary. Among the most important and influential directors in this mode are Gyarmathy, Dárday, Schiffer and Erdöss. In addition, I have been struck by the extraordinary role that the Béla Balázs Stúdió came to play in the careers of the most talented filmmakers of this period: almost every one of them has made films with the studio, and all have been marked, even more than were their predecessors, by its liberating emphasis on artistic openness and social and political commitment. In 1981, as a form of offshoot of the Béla Balázs Stúdió, the Társulás Stúdió was founded to bring together filmmakers such as Dárday and Vitézy, and workers in the social sciences; this group was largely responsible for the development of the intensively researched documentary mode employed by what has been called the "Budapesti iskola" ("Budapest School"), and endured until 1985. But there have also been more experimental, and in my view much less successful, filmmakers, such as Huszárk and Bódy, and others such as Rózsa, Szörény and Gárdos who have managed to blend idiosyncrasy with authenticity. In addition, worthwhile figures such as Ferenc Grunwalsky, György Sjomjas, director of *Könnymű teshi sérítés* (*Light Physical Injuries*, 1983) and the original-minded András Jeles all made their debuts during this period, although there has not been space to discuss their works as I would have liked.

Despite the liberating and energizing of the system, filmmaking in Hungary did not really flourish in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Generally, about twenty films a year were made and shown to the world at an annual film week. As in the past, the level of the work produced was high and a wide variety of directors were given the means to pursue their trade. Indeed, the range of subjects even expanded, to include topics such as prostitution (examined by Dobray), which had previously been taboo. But television began to make major inroads into the cinema audience for films, and when the United States was able to offer its irresistible products more freely on the Hungarian market, it became clear that the domestic industry could no longer command the attention of the

everyday pleasure-seeking public: in 1984, for example, admissions to Hungarian films amounted to fourteen million, and to foreign imports 56 million. Despite these difficulties, and of real significance for the future of the Hungarian cinema, there emerged in the 1980s a witty, daring younger generation best represented by János Xantus, director of *Észkimó asszony fázik* (*Esquimo Woman Feels Cold*, 1983), Ildikó Szabó, director of *Hótreál* (*Damn Real*, 1987) and Ildikó Enyedi, director of *Az én XX. századom* (*My 20th Century*, 1988). But the competitive pressures already described, combined with the problems which preceded and attended the fall of Communism - inflation, rising costs, economic uncertainty, the reduction in the role of the state in cultural affairs and a passion for Western European entertainment rather than Eastern European art - soon brought about the further enervation of the state-run system which for so long had ensured the consistency and stability of Hungarian film production.

The responses of the Hungarian film community were various. Some directors began to work either largely or partly in television, among them a number of major talents, and thus ensured both reliable financing and larger audiences for their works. Others, following on from the example of Jancsó, who made several co-productions in the 1960s and after, began associations with Western (often German or Italian) companies. But the ethos of the Hungarian cinema, unlike that of Hollywood, is resistant to transplantation or to interbreeding: its great virtue is its close relationship with a particular, local culture and its servicing of the needs of that culture. Thus, even the most brilliant auteurs (such as Jancsó, Szabó and Gábor) and the most adroit craftsmen (such as Makk) usually cannot achieve in their co-productions the unity and authority that mark their purely Hungarian works. Indeed, the only co-production I have seen that is a complete success is Zsombolyai's *Vámmentes házasság* (*Duty-Free Marriage*).

Beginning in 1985, however, and continuing to the present day, there have been further institutional changes to the Hungarian industry. These have attempted to maintain the principle of state funding which has sustained the Hungarian cinema since just after the Second World War, but also deal with the problems of administration and financing which were becoming pressing by the mid-1980s, and do this by increasing the autonomy of the constituent parts of the industry. Thus, as of 1985, existing studios, except for Társulás, were confirmed and rendered independent, as was the role of Mafilm as provider of the means for filmmaking. However, subventions to studios were geared to the perceived success of their products, as had not previously been the case, and studios were permitted to use materials from any source, not just from Mafilm. Independently funded productions were also allowed. Studios were thus by about 1988 able to function more or less as commercial entities, although still supported by the state and lightly supervised by the Hungarian Film Board, and still dependent on MOKÉP for the national, and Hungarofilm for the international, distribution of their products.

More recently, change has accelerated. Since 1988, Sky, Superchannel and TV5 Europe have been available and satellite television is growing rapidly. In

addition, distribution, often by means of co-ventures, has been opened up to the major American companies, so that it is now possible to see Hollywood films as quickly and freely in Budapest as it is in London or Paris. As one would expect, video too is now beginning to make inroads into Hungary's already shrunken market for the products of its national cinema (a problem compounded by the generally poor standards in, and decreased numbers of, the country's screening venues). In 1990 these difficulties came to a head in a manifesto by a group of young filmmakers who demanded more democracy and better organisation for their industry and an end to what they saw as favouritism. In response, the Magyar Mozgókép Alapítvány (Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation) was established and given the task of allocating state money to guilds representing the various divisions of the industry, which then disburse it on the basis of projects which have been submitted. Yet, nothing has been able to halt or reverse the inexorable decline in the popularity of Hungarian films in their home market. Serious, worthwhile works continue to be made, and financed by the state as before, but audiences no longer want to see them: by 1991, admissions to Hungarian films were down to a mere 869 000, and in 1992 not one of the top ten grossing films in the country was of domestic origin. In 1992 Mafilm proved unable to continue and had to be taken over and reorganised into a television and film services complex, competing alongside others on a basis of true parity. The studios now seem unlikely to be able to continue in their present form, and will probably eventually be entirely privatised. But Magyar Filmúnió, a new organisation to take charge of foreign promotion, has been founded. And, despite everything, the Hungarian state has continued to make funds available for film production, and although the sums are small, they still permit some of the freedom from commercial pressures that has long allowed the Hungarian cinema its enviable adventurousness and range. Certainly, the old system is now largely gone, and in its place stands a developed, Western-style industry maintaining only vestiges of its former state sponsorship. But reports of the 1995 Film Week suggest that interesting and out of the way work is still being produced, and that, despite the turmoil of its last decade, the distinguished history of the Hungarian cinema may not yet be over.

Pál Zolnay

Pál Zolnay was born in 1928 and began careers in economics, as a seaman and in diplomacy before joining the director's course at the Színház és Filmművészeti Főiskola (Academy for Theatre and Film Art), from which he graduated in 1957. He became assistant to Fábri, directed a well-received short, *Elvezgyés (Betrotthal, 1959)*, and in 1961 made his first feature, *Áprilisi riadó (April Alarm)*, precursor of a series of full-length fictional films of which the best is perhaps *Hogy szaládnak a fiúk (The Sack, 1966)*, but which Zolnay now finds outdated. Zolnay has made a large number of documentaries for Hungarian Television, and it is along documentary lines, although still employing dramaturgical principles, that he directed his finest early work, *Fotográfia (Photography, 1972)*, the story of two young photographers who not only take

snapshots of, but also investigate, the apparently everyday figures whom they capture on film. *Photography* uses improvisation and a largely amateur cast, but generates suspense and permits Elemér Ragályi, Zolnay's cinematographer, to give grandness and polish to the film's images. It is an effective blend of the documentary and the fictional, and provides the pattern for Zolnay's best film, *Embriók (Embryos, 1985)*. *Sámán (Shaman, 1977)*, is a work of elaborate art which has not found favour with critics; *Védőleltek - AIDS '89 (The Vulnerable Ones - AIDS '89)* is a documentary. Zolnay has said that reality is "always richer by far, more interesting and charged with more powerful suggestiveness" than anything that he can invent, and that film is "for capturing and recording those riches".³ His works do justice to these comments. They are intensive and authentic, but at the same time beautiful, and he himself seems to me to be among the most distinguished of Hungary's quasi-documentary filmmakers.

Zolnay's *Embryos* is an austere yet tender enquiry into abortion in contemporary Hungary, and a searching account of the travails of one woman as she attempts to decide whether or not she should keep the child she is expecting. This woman is Teréz, a thirtyish obstetrician-gynaecologist and divorcee, played with sympathetic authority by Erzsébet Gaál. Her lover, Tamás (Tamás Jordán), is handsome, the father of three children, and already unfaithful to his second wife. Teréz's job, which involves both assisting at live births and conducting abortions, and investigating why it is that women may wish not to bear children, provides a well-documented background to the dilemma in which she finds herself. In case after case (as in her own) we see women bearing the brunt of the problem: their men drink, or desert them, or are woundingly indifferent; they alone are forced to take responsibility for the child they may bear. Tamás is dispiritingly true to his sex: he looks sheepish, avoids involvement and exerts himself only in the maintenance of the selfish balance of his life. Teréz, sadly aware of the practicalities that must incline her towards acquiescing in an abortion, but also constantly exposed to the sight of happy mothers and their babies, is torn. She goes for advice to her old professor, who can only confirm what she already knows: "It's up to you". Then, as a beginning of the film's slight narrative, she is accosted by Tamás's wife, Kati, a woman of passion and even menace, concerned above all to keep her family together and not to lose either her husband or her young daughter. Tamás seems at one moment to prefer Teréz, at another, Kati. There are arguments, fights and pursuits. Eventually, apparently despairing of her lover and acceding to the hopelessness of her situation, Teréz makes an application to have an abortion, is accepted by a matronly panel of assessors who chide her gently for not using contraceptives and, after much anguish and indecision, makes her way to the operating theatre. But, once there, she asks for a day's grace. We then see her listening to the heartbeat of another child as yet unborn, smiling enigmatically. The film ends with the suggestion that she may after all decide to keep her own child.

Embryos is technically distinctive as well as emotionally arresting. It is shot in grainy black and white, but is cruelly irradiated with light: figures, and especially faces, appear starkly against a background of suggestive brilliance