

On Film and Freedom

A conversation with Miklós Jancsó

by Maria Bogdan

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On the future of aesthetics



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So Much for Justice, Miklós Jancsó's new film opened the 41st Hungarian Film Festival in Budapest this past February. This conversation happened before the opening, in a reflective mood that basically describes Jancsó's approach to life in all aspects.

I have known him personally for 11 years now after he became my tutor at the Academy of Drama and Film. When talking about filmmaking, we always ended up having conversations about life, society, and freedom, as we did this time too when we discussed Jancsó's new film.

In spring of this year, the 88-year-old Hungarian film director received yet another award for his life work at the Slovakian Febiofest International Film, TV and Video Festival in Bratislava. Jancsó has continuously made films since the fifties. He first made documentary newsreels and soon started to make feature films including *The Roundup* (*Szegénylegények* 1965), *The Confrontation* (*Fényes Szelek* 1969), *Red Psalm* (*Még kér a nép* 1972), *Private Vices, Public Virtues* (*Vizi Privati, Pubbliche Virtú* 1975), *The Dawn* (1986), *Blue Danube Waltz* (*Kék Duna Keringő* 1992), and *The Lord's Lantern in Budapest* (*Nekem lámást adott kezembe az Úr Pesten* 1998). Through his original style of cinematography and storytelling—using long shots and improvisation—he made a revolution in film language.

New/Old Style

Q: *Your film So Much For Justice opened the Hungarian Film Festival this year. The film represents a new style in relation to your films of the last twelve years, known as the ‘Kapa-Pepe films.’ (The films Jancsó made since 1997 are based on two characters called Kapa and Pepe played by Zoltán Mucsi and Scherer Péter Hungarian actors.)*

A: Well, I guess you know me enough to know that I usually don’t think so much in advance about my films. The so-called new style just happened. The last six films that I’ve done in the previous few years were funny, ironic films, built on two actors and their humor. This new film is basically a story, but contains a lot of irony as well.

Q: *Why did you feel like changing?*

A: It is not about a change in the style. The *Kapa-Pepe* films started to lose their original sense, the last two parts became a bit serious. In this aspect my new film can be characterized mostly with a serious attitude rather than with irony, which characterized the previous six ones. So I don’t think that it’s a change in style. Film is quite a primitive genre. It lasts usually for one and a half or two hours. This amount of time is not enough for making people think through things in a very deep way, like what you can reach with a book or by other genres. Basically we are always telling stories. Even if we don’t want to. In this aspect the *Kapa-Pepe* films contain fewer stories.

My new film is, let’s put it in this way, a historicized film. It’s rather a reflection on history. The characters are not like the ones in the *Kapa-Pepe* films. Some of my friends with whom I worked together on my old films are still alive and active as actors, and in my new film they are the basic actors. A long shot lasts for eight, ten minutes; the actor appears in the beginning, in the middle, and also in the end of this period of time in different dresses, while other things are happening too. This way of shooting can be done only if the actors you are working with are your friends at the same time.

Q: *How did you see, was it easy for your old actors, like György Cserhalmi and Lajos Balázsovits, to get back into your style of making films?*

A: They didn’t have to get back, it was evident for them. They took it so naturally. And the new actors—Gábor Nagypál, Csaba Pindroch—I was working together in this film with for the first time really got to like this style.

Q: *Why did you choose the Hungarian King Matthew (Mathias Rex) as a topic for your new film?*

A: The idea was not mine. There was a renaissance anniversary in Hungary three years ago, and I was asked if I wanted to make a film about King

Matthew, who was a big renaissance king in Hungary. This is how everything started, but it took some time for the scenario and the film to be born. At the first moment I didn't really want to make this film, because Matthew was really a great king. He was the last great Hungarian king. So the question was, "What shall I make of him as a film? Should I make an anthem of a great king?" Somehow it's not my style to do that, and in the meantime that would require a lot of money. Finally it didn't become a renaissance film. It is a reflection on history. I think so...

¹ Gyula Hernádi, 1926 – 2005, author, close friend of Jancsó.

Q: In general, each of your films reflects somehow on current events. Is that the case with this film too?

A: It's never on purpose. I never do it on purpose. If it looks like that I deal with actual topics in my films, then it's probably because these are eternal topics I deal with, topics that have always been present in society since the beginning of world. Maybe this is the reason...

Hollywood

Q: I've been thinking of what would happen if you were called to Hollywood...

A: They don't call me there. They never did that.

Q: Well, let's say they do. What do you think about your style, would it change?

A: I cannot really envision this, but presumably I could not make a film in the way that they make films in Hollywood. First of all it's because I improvise a lot, as you know very well. It has always been like this: I wrote the scenario — for about 30 years Gyula Hernadi helped me in brainstorming the stories, but basically it was always me who wrote them¹ and in the end I could never fulfill what I wrote down.

On the other hand, the expression 'Hollywood film' usually refers to something which mostly just entertains. I take a quick note here for the record that the last movie of Tarantino differs quite basically from this stereotypical meaning, and well, that film is really worth mentioning. But in general people who go to movie theaters don't want to feel sad or to think. Although once there was a time like that, when people wanted to think through what they saw while sitting in the cinema, but nowadays it cannot be considered an intention. People just simply want to have fun. This is why films mostly have a good ending. There are only a few films where the main character that is bad doesn't get punished in the end. Usually these entertaining films of nowadays are folk tales. Our folk tales usually have happy endings. So the smallest boy always wins and the green eyed prince always defeats the dragon. When it's cold outside and people are just sitting inside and they have some spare time, they prefer to

hear and see the good only.

Q: According to this your films don't follow the scenario of the folk tales. But I think that even nowadays, films that are not typical of Hollywood, films like your films, can still be entertaining for some people.

A: Well, I don't know if my films could be seen as entertainment. But yes, there are other films like mine that make you think when you sit down and watch them. So watching the film means thinking at the same time, because there is something in the film that you must think through. This means that you must exist within the film; it doesn't matter if you like the story or not.

Q: As I know there's always a long period of preparation that you go through before you start shooting a film, even if you improvise a lot. This new film of yours also provoked me to read about some of its details; for example, I didn't know that King Matthew and Vlad Tsepes lived in the same age and that they knew one another....

A: Yes, and they were probably relatives, too. This new film is a story that contains a lot of facts from hundreds of years ago, but it's not an information film. There are episodes in it from that era, but it doesn't inform you about how exactly everything happened. And it's not necessary to know all those details, because the story can be followed without them. But in the meantime, it's assigned to the audience to identify the characters while watching the film. It's not trendy; nowadays people are not used to this challenge because films in general are not like this now, not to mention television. In the past, it meant a wider scale of people who wanted to think. In the previous political system, when the world was divided basically between two political powers, the Russians made mainly propaganda films, and besides there were others who tried to make films in a different way, and used symbols. This means that nothing had its original meaning. *The Round-Up* is like that. If you watch that film you see that it's about a group of bandits who were fighting for the freedom of Hungary during the last years of 1800 and they are being captured. And in the meantime you know it, and the audience knew it in the past, that in reality the film was about something else. That it was about Hungary in 1956. It's about what happened in Hungary at that time. Everybody had that association and thought that it was a story about 1956.

Q: But you had to sign a paper at that time in which you certified that the film was not about 1956.

A: Well, in those times... Yes, I had to declare that it was not about 1956.

Q: And they all knew that it was not true.

A: I think so... But I don't know why they let me make that film, I do not know the reason...

Democracy and freedom

Q: What do you think about democracy? I've just read an interesting definition which says that there is no democratic state if people don't feel at home and don't feel that they have a future in that place.

A: A lot of things are necessary for this. It's essential not to starve. If it's a constant problem for someone just to survive through the day then he won't start thinking about how the system functions. If someone is excluded from that society then he doesn't start thinking about whether he is part of it or not. And there's another important thing called manipulation. It's a certain type of a man who has this power of manipulation. Not everyone has it. Just look at the U.S., not everyone is a millionaire there or has a successful life; it even happens there too.

Democracy means also when people are not defenseless and the lords cannot oppress them. Well, in the meantime it is true that there are situations in the world that cannot be described with words. For the children of today it is very hard to explain for example how it was when the Soviets came to this country. By declaring that everyone is equal they created a kind of democracy here in Hungary. It has just turned out later on how this democracy functions in reality; that there are some who are more equal than others—as we say this... So it's still a question of how to explain what it means that today you don't have to kiss the hands of the lords. You just cannot describe that relationship.

Q: In the time of the previous political system in Hungary when a lot of things were prohibited, how could you preserve this universal way of thinking that is constantly reflected in your films, expressing a strict critique of Hungarian society in the meantime?

A: I don't know why this is. For sure big luck is essential for life, and it was essential for me to get here, and to live in times when I was permitted to make those films. I was able to make them for several reasons. No one knows why. Those who let me make my films at that time have died already and this brought the explanation with them into the grave. Well, it was not only me who could make such films. There were others like Károly Makk and Marta Mészáros. We don't know; it's not possible to find out why they let us make them.

Faith

Q: What do you think about faith?

A: There should be heaven. If there wasn't heaven or if it wasn't good, then it's for sure that somebody would have come back already to tell it.

It's very hard to accept that we are born without wanting it and then life ends

once. It's terribly hard. Mainly when you start from a disadvantaged situation. This is why it's necessary to have something which gives a meaning to life. For example in Africa in some of the tribes in the past the leader made rain. Once he was not able to make rain, someone else took his duty and position. And how is it connected to faith? Well, in a world like ours you must believe that there's another one, too.

Q: What is it that helps, that gives you strength in hard situations?

A: It's important to take things with irony because they will pass on anyway. The other thing that helps me is what the Nazarene said: Treat others as you want to be treated. So you cannot harm others if you don't want to have a bad life also. Well, unfortunately the world is not like this in general. Hernádi always said especially at the time of the changes in Hungary that capitalism would come and there would be billionaires too who would help the poor ones. He just didn't know that it's just not like this.

Rituals

Q: Do you have a special ritual that you do when you make a film?

A: No, I don't have anything like that.

Q: Then how do you refer to the fact that you usually don't watch your films after they are done?

A: It's not a ritual. Let me tell you a story: I had just seen my film *The Round-Up* in London. It was in 2008 when some of my films were released there on DVD, and they organized screenings together with discussions. I was told that the print was very nice, so I went to check it and then I stayed and watched the film. It was funny because I have forgotten many details already, but when I watched it I still knew its mistakes... Since my films are mostly improvisations there are a lot of small mistakes in them. It's mainly because there are many things related to the story and the scene I find out on the day and at the place we are shooting. There are some mistakes in my new film too, but I'm not going to tell what they are to anyone now. Maybe in two or three or more years I will. So all in all it's not about perfection; I just know why the mistakes in the film are annoying. I already know at the time I'm making the film what those mistakes are that wouldn't be in the film if we had more money or more time for making it. Well, because of the improvisation the same mistakes might happen even if the circumstances were ideal. In my case the film is never the film that is written down in the scenario. I always tell the actors not to learn the dialogue written in the scenario because it's not certain if we will use it. We have the story and there are some parts of the dialogue that remain, mainly if there are citations. In my new film there are many citations, even from the Bible.

Q: Did you use improvisation in your first films?

A: Not really. My first two films were not improvised so much. These are *The Bells Have Gone to Rome* and *Cantata*. I haven't seen them since they were done. My third film, *My Way Home*, was already improvised to a large extent.

Q: *How did the idea of the long-shot come?*

A: I don't know exactly. I used to say that I didn't learn how to make a film. At the time when I started to deal with filmmaking, usually future film makers first worked as assistant directors in films, and like this they learned the basic details of the different parts of filmmaking, like editing. I never learned this because I was never an assistant director to a film. I learned montage while doing documentary films but there the content is different.

Q: *Your long shots always make me think of dancing...*

A: I got that opinion already, from abroad in the past that they are dance-films. They said it especially when 500 people were acting in one scene...

Family

Q: *You mentioned that friends are very important for you when making your films. Now what I can see is that it can be said about your family, too. For example your wife Zsuzsa Csákány has been your editor for a long time now.*

A: Yes, for 30 years now she has been my film editor.

Q: *How does it influence your work?*

A: Regarding filmmaking my films are not really montage films. The editor doesn't have too much work in films that are made by long shots but can come up with a solution if it's necessary. For example, in my new film there were two long shots that had to be cut for some reasons. But most of the time in the case of my films the editor has much of her work in doing the post-production. In the case of the *Kapa-Pepe* films, the editor had more work to do. And it's important to mention that the editor, personally my wife, is the first critic of the film, too, because she is the first who sees the material as a whole.

Q: *In your new movie, your youngest son David was working together with your wife in the post production. Your oldest son Nyika was the director of photography, your daughter Katalin was the costume designer, and your grandson, Jákob, plays the young Matthew. What was it like to work together with your family members?*

A: Feelings towards family members don't influence the production. I have worked together with Nyika already many times. Katalin started to work as a costume designer at one of the films of her mom, Márta Mészáros, and in my new film she made a great job of exploring the era of King Matthew. And about Jákob—I have seen him in his school play where he played Mac the Knife in

The Threepenny Opera, and he was very good in that. Then he told us that he would like to play in the film and asked for a role. It turned out that he has a real sense of playing in front of the camera. It's interesting to see that there's something in him... The actor should never play but should show itself, his/her personality, which is not empty. An actor should have character.

Q: Has art been always present in your family, among your parents and grandparents?

A: No, not at all. I'm the only one who has been doing something totally else. I have a law degree. And at the same time I always wanted to be a theater director. This came from childhood. I was a scout, which was also a great form of role playing. Then later on I participated in the dance house movement where I was designing and after that I applied to the Academy of Drama and Film. And the reason why I became a film director? ... It was absolutely by accident. It was at the end of the forties when I applied and was accepted to the Academy. By that time there was no entrance exam, they just called us for an interview. At the interview two old men were sitting and talking to me. One of them was Béla Balázs. After a while he said: Be a film director. And this was the how I became a film director. And it really happened like this!

Q: Didn't you start to protest by saying that you wanted to be a theater director?

A: No, I didn't. Well, at that time, others and I didn't really know what exactly film directing and scenario meant. I remember when once I was in Kolozsvár (Cluj) as a scout in a camp, there was a kid writing something at the table. I turned to him and asked what he was doing. He answered that he was writing a scenario. What is that? I asked. And like this he started to talk about film and that he would be a film director. Well, he really made it afterwards. And me, when I first finally saw a camera it was when I started to work in the film studio.

Q: If you were young now what occupation would you chose?

A: I cannot say. I have no idea what would I do with my life if I was young right now.

Q: You never wanted to be an actor?

A: Well, no. I am a very bad actor. I'm afraid on stage so much.

Q: I'm asking this because you appear in some of your Kapa-Pepe films.

A: Oh yes. First we found out with Hernádi, to do it once just for fun, and then later on I did it some other times, too.

Q: Many times in a way that has something to do with death.

A: Yes, I'm making fun of death...

Further Thoughts on Contemporary Film-Making

Miklós Jancsó

Introduction

by Maria Bogdan

Miklós Jancsó is one of the major reformers of film language, and of the concept of the filmmaker in general and in Central East Europe. His reflective personality not only defines him as an artist but indicates an attitude that characterizes him in the everyday life as well. He (through his films) is always actual—his interpretations of reality always refer to the perpetual nature of society. This is why his messages always find their way to the audience, at any time.

The still active Hungarian film director, who turned to 89 at the end of September, received four lifetime achievement awards this year at different international film festivals all over Europe (Bratislava's Febiofest International Film Festival, Split Film Festival, Jameson Cinefest Miskolc, and Viareggio Film Festival).

His essay is a stream of thought about his new film and about film making nowadays. The text is collected and edited by Miklós Jancsó into an essay form from his previous answers to questions in connection with his new film (So Much for Justice!). In this form, the text was given exclusively to Hyperion. It was written originally in Hungarian and then translated into English.



'...A historical film? Not really. In reality my last film is a reflection of history. Of a period in history. I have done many films like this. Those who saw them have the chance to think a little bit. And in the end they could have always realized that these films are not really historical films. But more, these films want the audience to reflect on what they saw.

And why this type of film again?

The whole world has started to forget its past. Sometimes, everyday people are not just manipulated by lies but are prevented from learning about their past. A friend of mine from France gossiped that president Sarkozy wants to abolish history teaching in schools. I hope it is just gossip because those who don't know history are sentenced to re-experience it.

The film *So Much for Justice* wasn't a low-budget film according to what we understand by "low-budget" in this country. We spent about two million dollars on it. Well, I know it may sound ridiculous in some other places of the world, but here in Hungary it is not easy at all to collect that amount. And this is what I never do alone. On this film, my producer was József Berger. He is a young man with wide networks in Europe and lots of friends. I have to attribute this film to him and his connections. ...

... There are a lot of first-time filmmakers showing up. All of them can make films. They were born with a camera already in their hands. The new generation discovers how to take a photo before learning how to write and read. Such a cultural transfer rarely happens in history – probably the invention of book printing was something like this. But it wasn't as radical as film.

So Hungarian films nowadays are interesting. And even the older generations of Hungarian film directors are significant.

But for who or what for are we making these movies? Regarding the budget, even the trendiest films are on the edge when the production is done. It's not me who states this. I heard it from a producer. Well, it's also true that there are some grandiose young filmmakers who can travel around the world with their films. There are a lot of film festivals all around the world, and we participate in many of them.

But can we impress the audience and can we convince them to spend their money on us? Films nowadays are not as interesting as the ones of the past (except the films of some geniuses). Well, yes, in the past films were messages from the darkness. They meant something like what Iranian, Korean or Romanian films mean today. Recently a well-known politician asked me why the Hungarian films weren't as famous as they had been before. I told him: The iron curtain should be brought down again. He laughed.

For those who didn't live under the past political system, it is hard to explain how it was. Thank God, they didn't feel it on their skin. Or they were lucky to leave for other countries.

Do I cry those times back? Hell, no! Was it easier to make films then? It is always a challenge to make a film; it's not scrambled eggs. Well, there are a few who burn even that too, but in that case, I suggest they not start cooking.

The great master Géza Radványi (*Somewhere in Europe/Valahol Európában*, 1947) always said that a real film director is one who can make his next film, too. And who cares if it's hard both financially and socially to make it? Behind the iron curtain we always cited repeatedly, as if we had said a mantra, the lines of Attila József (Hungarian poet): Come, oh Freedom, you bear me Order! /Jöjj el szabadság! Te szülj nekem rendet ("A breath of air!/Levegőt!" 1935)

So Freedom, the new order, has come, and it is necessary to be able to live under these circumstances, too. And I am able to.'

Miklós Jancsó 2010



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