Genders 22

Berry, Ellen E.

Published by NYU Press

Berry, Ellen E.
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Gendering Cinema in Postcommunist Hungary

Catherine Portuges

Where is that fragile line between different cultures, different religions, different national or personal identities?

— Agnieszka Holland

In the drive toward capitalism that has overtaken Hungary since the collapse of communism, its consequences for the culture of cinema are often overlooked in media discourses, with their relentless, and often exclusive, focus on the vicissitudes of the transition to a market economy. Yet it is in the realm of the visual arts — and, in particular, cinema — that the evolution of subjectivity and political consciousness is perhaps most dramatically inscribed. The annual review of film production held in Budapest and known as “Film Week” offers an unparalleled opportunity for assessing the impact of the post-1989 changes on the nation’s consciousness. While dissident intellectuals and artists may no longer be required to play their once vital role, a new generation of filmmakers is emerging to foreground and contest issues in danger of being silenced not by official censorship but by demands for commercial viability in the “new Europe” of the 1990s. Based on several years of participation in these Film Weeks since 1989, I offer here an exploration of recent trends on the horizon of this postnational and dialectical culture of cinema whose dialectics of contestation have long been its distinctive feature.

Paradoxically, in view of the region’s acceptance — indeed, its passionate embrace — of postmodern capitalism, the gendered aspects of these
transformations have remained largely untheorized in scholarly milieux, and are still virtually taboo in the rhetorics of creative expression and interpretation. Although recent theoretical and artistic works have begun to address questions of sexuality and gender, articulation of the particular experience of women, as well as that of ethnic and racial minorities, is constructed by many, particularly those of the generation born prior to 1956, as tantamount to a betrayal of a fragile new democracy, even, for that matter, a reactionary gesture harkening back to the days of what Milan Kundera, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, has called “organized forgetting.”

Suppressed under the aegis of Stalinist internationalism, these questions today invite renewed articulation. One response to Hungary’s post-communist transitional moment has been an embrace of profitability in the form of eroticized spectacles such as those of 1989–91 “transitional” films with titles such as The Dames, Sexploitation, and Fast and Loose. In these and other works by (primarily male) directors in which youthful (female) bodies are exhibitionistically fetishized, the ardently sought, yet highly elusive, free-market economy is both symptom and cause of the commodification of sexuality.

In contrast to many of their male colleagues, a number of women directors, of both “older” and “younger” generations, raise issues of class relations and gender, love and sexuality, deception and honesty in unsentimental and at times even ruthless fashion. These works have been particularly troubling for Hungarian audiences and critics discomfited by such uncompromising meditations on the double imperatives of national identity and gender inscription in post-Stalinist and postcommunist Eastern Europe. Concurrently, the film and television industries of the “un-blocked” East have been undergoing a process of radical transformation scarcely less momentous than that of the political sphere, from the privatization of formerly state-owned studios, to the redefinition of the very meaning of national cinema itself. The Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation has replaced the socialist state enterprise, while a network of theaters has been created to protect a percentage of Hungarian screens from the onslaught of foreign—primarily American—distributors. Western cultural domination—perceived by many as U.S. monopoly—in the terrain of the moving image has emerged as a growing potential threat to these vulnerable visual economies, exemplified by the proliferation of Hollywood movies whose drawing power constitutes a far greater market
share than that of any domestic product. This audiovisual assault is by no means limited to the former Eastern bloc: in France, long the strongest of European national film industries, the perception of an American "hostile takeover" has initiated aggressive legislative measures, backed by the European Parliament, to protect French-language cinema as a "national" industry.³

At the same time, cinema remains part of a larger cultural horizon, characterized by overlapping local, regional, national, and global institutions that grow increasingly deterritorialized.⁴ The globalization of media consumption, in tandem with mass migrations on a greater scale than ever since World War II, have hence irrevocably altered the terms of local and national identity not long ago taken for granted in Eastern Europe and beyond.⁵ The intensity of debate on this topic within its film industries indeed suggests the extent to which the language of cinema cuts to the very heart of national culture: for against these impressive odds, these filmmakers must contend with nothing less than a new media order in order to survive the postcommunist transition. As Newsweek has reported, "Some European Community members are terrified by the thought of a Europe without internal borders will allow millions of refugees to run wild."⁶

That Hungarian cinema in the 1990s appears to be managing,⁷ albeit with great effort and uneven results at best, to produce a consistently substantial quota of feature and documentary films is remarkable indeed.⁸ The active presence, visibility, and participation of younger (under 40) filmmakers in this phase of visual culture endows this struggle with a poignant energy, urgency, and sense of purpose.⁹ Nonetheless, under the new decentralized system, a number of women directors report themselves to be at best underrepresented: the board of the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation, for example—a panel whose responsibility it is to select film projects worthy of support each year—counts only a single female among its 73 members. While the terrain between individual authorship and the intersections of nationality and sexuality have come increasingly to occupy Western critical agenda, the status of women filmmakers who do not necessarily claim their own work to be specifically "feminist" or representative of a "women's cinema" deserves special consideration with regard to Eastern Europe. No longer constrained by the explicit claims of gender equality that constituted the socialist agenda, visual artists may be, in some sense, now better positioned to articulate
gender-specific concerns. And, as in other small, former Eastern bloc nations undergoing similar processes of transformation toward diversified market economies and away from the centralization that, for decades, regulated the production of word and image, these filmmakers are investigating from new angles of vision Hungary's — and, for that matter, East-Central Europe's — resistance to the issue of difference, be it sexual, racial, ethnic, or generational.

To Western audiences generally unfamiliar with East-Central European culture, an obsession with interconnections between historical events and their cinematic representation often seems tenuous at best. In the late 1980s Poland's distinguished director, Andrzej Wajda, offered an eloquent (and, as it turns out, uncannily prophetic) lament for this marginalization of "minor cinemas":

Films made in Eastern Europe seem of little or no interest to people in the West. The audiences in western countries find them as antediluvian as the battle for workers' rights in England in the time of Marx. Thus our efforts here in Eastern Europe have nothing to show audiences in the West who look upon the world they live in as permanent. Those of our Eastern European film colleagues who have chosen emigration can — if they are young and talented and after they have spent years in the West — come up with some works of startling beauty . . . but they will not find audiences attuned to the same concerns that we in the Eastern bloc feel are vital. And that is a pity, for I am certain that those concerns are not ours alone but apply to the world at large, or will in the very near future.10

The films and videos produced by these directors are readable as a marker of the transgressive inscription of gender within Hungarian visual culture since 1989, when the end of state support for — and control of — the arts brought into being this transition in the structure and financing of Hungarian studios, as well as the end of centralized distribution, public relations, and marketing of its (post-)national cinema. In February 1994, for example, Hungary's Twenty-fifth Film Week — an annual review of film production11 — held at the National Congress Center in Budapest, foregrounded a number of works by and about women directors, from beginning filmmakers to seasoned professionals, honoring them in categories that have traditionally been the province of their more established male colleagues, and continuing the trajectory begun in 1993 when prizes for best first feature and best director were awarded to women directors making their directorial debuts.

In a nation known for its masculinist tendencies as well as for its
intellectual elegance, other renowned documentary and feature directors such as Lyvia Gyarmathy, Judith Elek, and Marta Meszaros are continuing to produce outstanding work undeniably (and, in some cases, uncharacteristically) inflected by gender. Arguably the most internationally celebrated of Hungary’s (and Eastern Europe’s) women directors, Meszaros’s most recent film, A Magzat (Foetus, 1993; Budapest Film Studio/Magyar Televisio/Telewizja Polska production) was selected as Hungary’s feature entry to the 1994 Berlin Film Festival, the largest and most prestigious European venue for Hungarian films, apart from the Cannes Film Festival.\(^{12}\) Despite a rather contrived script, the film warrants attention because of its unrepentant foregrounding of gender and reproduction, subjects scarcely less controversial now than when the director first undertook them in her distinguished 1970s trilogy: Orokbefogadas (Adoption, 1975), Kilenc Honap (Nine Months, 1976), and Ok Kette (The Two of Them, 1977). Each of these films narrativizes maternity, parental loss, and female bonding, themes virtually absent from East European cinema of the period, as does her 1980 work, The Heiresses, whose audacious treatment of such subversive issues as infertility, class difference, and the solidarity of female friendship was met with nearly universal rejection upon release in Hungary.\(^{13}\)

In Foetus, Meszaros recapitulates and refers to her earlier work by interrogating interconnections between the female body and the post-communist nation as a young, married mother of two (Anna), confronting Hungary’s current preoccupation with an inflationary economy and unemployment, discovers that she is pregnant. Her husband has lost his job, leaving the couple at the mercy of Terez, a wealthy, married yet childless businesswoman who suggests that Anna serve as surrogate mother in exchange for a lucrative offer of support for her family and the construction of their unfinished new house. Despite intense emotional conflict between the women throughout this complicated scenario of deception and seclusion, the two women are transformed by a profound process of biological and psychic bonding, as in the end Terez returns the infant to the surrogate couple. The hostility that has long been Meszaros’s lot in her native Hungary — in contrast to the favorable reception her work has received abroad — suggests the degree to which her insistence on gender and conflictual relationships strikes a resoundingly negative chord in both a primarily male critical establishment and the general public, as evi-
enced by the unalloyed disdain for the film manifested by the opening-night audience.\textsuperscript{14}

Meszaros’s frequent use of child-centered dream sequences and shots of a fetus suspended \textit{in utero} regretfully undermine her focus on the symbiotic relationship between the two women, and in particular on Anna’s emotional ambivalence during her isolated confinement in a countryside cottage. Reminiscent as well of shower sequences in the director’s earlier films, including \textit{Szabad Lelegzet} (Riddance, 1973),\textsuperscript{15} is a scene in which, in a moment of physical and affective intimacy, the two women share a bathtub, their bodies framed in the director’s signature mode of erotic yet uninvasive appreciation. Similar, too, to Meszaros’s 1970s and 1980s work is the unadorned sexual and economic interdependency of her protagonists, a trope of Hungarian films under communism. Meszaros’s insistence on portraying such complex and discomfiting issues that, in her view, transcend class, political ideology, and cultural difference is a courageous, even extraordinary gesture in the contemporary climate of Hungarian priorities.

Equally noteworthy is Ildiko Szabo’s \textit{Gyerekgyilkossagok} (Child Murders, 1993), winner of the top prize at the 1993 Hungarian Film Week and of the award for best feature by a young director at the Cannes Film Festival the same year. The title means “murders by children” as well as the killing of a child, suggesting at the same time the notion of “soul murder,” the deadening of spirit by unfavorable early life circumstances. One of the few Hungarian films to be financed by a foreign producer, it is a strikingly composed, black-and-white portrait of a boy abandoned by his dissident mother and left to care for a bedridden, eccentric grandmother, herself once a famous prima donna and now a reclusive alcoholic in an impoverished area of Budapest. Zsolt, the 12-year-old boy, spends his time wandering hopelessly among secret places along the Danube banks, bathing and dressing his grandmother each morning. Into his isolated world comes Juli, a young, pregnant Gypsy living in an abandoned railway car; befriending her earns Zsolt rejection and abuse from other children; when Juli miscarries, the two throw the infant into the Danube, and the young Gypsy hangs herself. The director invites us ambiguously to ponder to what extent the children’s violent actions are taken out of innate immorality or society’s abandonment of another of its victims. Ildiko Szabo has crafted a precise and moving trajectory to these larger ques-
tions: scenes of Zsolt carefully bathing and singing to his grandmother, helping her put on her wig and makeup each morning, are portrayed with a kind of morbid fascination: “It’s morning,” reads a sign Zsolt leaves on the blackboard for her. “Everything is on the table.” The bleakly affecting black-and-white photography contributes to the mood of the child’s constrained, deprived inner world, tormented as he is on account of his thick eyeglasses by an immaculate neighbor girl in frilly white dresses, and who ultimately becomes the target of his most aggressive impulses. As in a number of recent films by women directors, the narrative is seen from the point of view of the child: although Szabo avoids psychologizing sentimentality, Zsolt’s feelings are discernible in the expressionless demeanor he presents as a defensive gesture against a darkly hostile, uncaring world.16 Szabo’s cinematic language embodies the new directions by younger women directors in deterritorializing national identity and theorizing subjectivity otherwise than in the Soviet-inspired realism of earlier generations of filmmakers.

A number of women directors, in fact, have produced documentary and feature narratives under the triple sign of autobiography, exile, and marginality, contesting the contours of national cinema by collectively signaling a sense of slippage threatening to established understandings of national cinema. An earlier Hungarian Film Week (1990), for example, featured Judit Elek’s Tutajosok (Memoirs of a River, 1990), the first post-1989 Hungarian feature to explicitly denounce Hungarian anti-Semitism and the first to be made from an explicitly Jewish viewpoint. The film takes as its subject the first serious outburst of anti-Semitism in Hungarian history—the Tiszaeszlar trial of 1883 (which had incidentally also formed the basis for The Trial, G. W. Pabst’s “rehabilitation” film made in Austria in 1948). The director claims to have sought to make the film for over twenty years, in fact until the lifting of censorship in the postcommunist moment made it possible, to tell this long-suppressed story of the disappearance of a young Christian girl, the accusations of ritual murder, and the subsequent trial that anticipated the Dreyfus case and positioned liberals against anti-Semites.17 As in the case of Foetus, the reception of Elek’s film, also selected to open the festival that year, was polite on the surface but viciously negative in print and conversation; still, the film has since enjoyed a limited international afterlife in Jewish festivals and series, including the 1994 Jewish Museum/Film Society of Lincoln Center film symposium, “Artists, Activists and Ordinary People:
Jews in 20th Century Europe.” Like other films from Hungary’s distinguished cinematic tradition of historical allegory, *Memoirs of a River* draws unmistakable parallels between the Tiszaeszlár case and the Stalin show trials of the late 1940s and 1950s, and thus, in some sense, utilizes the dream reconstruction strategies deployed by other filmmakers, as I have noted. Elek interrogates the Tisa River to uncover its buried memories, as does the Soviet documentary filmmaker Alexander Rodnjanski in his film on the fate of the legendary Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, only to disappear into Stalin’s prison camps.

Remarkable, too, during the 1994 Film Week was a concern with Hungarian Jewry and the Holocaust, a topic barely touched upon prior to 1989. Perhaps the most lyrical example of this genre comes from Budapest-based filmmaker Peter Forgacs, who has refashioned home movies of the 1920s–1940s made by citizens of the Hungarian capital into *Privat Magyarorszag*, a diary of elegiac portraits of the city, a poetic ethnography that provides a riveting look at a culture about to vanish. Forgacs’s *Notes of a Lady* (*Egy Urino notesza*), Part Eight of his video diary, deploys the home movies of a beautiful Jewish baronness’s life in Hungary in the 1930s and 1940s to signify and mourn the irrevocability of personal, familial, and historical loss. *Why Wasn’t He There?* (*Senkifoldje*), directed by Andras Jeles, long a contestatory force in contemporary Hungarian cinema, foregrounds gender by using as its central text the diary of a 13-year-old provincial Hungarian Jewish girl to narrate the fate of Hungarian Jews, and their ultimate deportation to the death camp of Auschwitz. Despite inevitable comparisons with *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the film nonetheless represents, empathically yet lyrically and unsentimentally, the internal world of an adolescent girl whose age-appropriate struggle with her own subjectivity is destroyed, together with her family, by the relentless machine of Nazism.

No less important is the substantial work of documentary filmmakers, with more than 70 hours, most on video, to their credit in the past year alone, much of it addressing pressing social issues. Gamma Bak’s *East, West, Home’s Best* (1992) interrogates the wave of East European emigrants’ return from exile from the point of view of her own father, pondering a return to Hungary after twenty years in Canada as a refugee of the 1956 uprising. Like many East European films of this period, it is about emigration, repatriation, identity, cultural belonging, a search for
appropriate questions about East European life stories, fantasies, and dreams. Similarly, Judit Kothy's video documentary, *Isten Hosta Magyarszagon (Welcome to Hungary, 1992)*, shot in the fall of 1992 as thousands of refugees poured into Hungary from Romania, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere, inscribes their arrival by questioning Hungary's stance in accepting refugees, immigrants, businessmen, marriage partners, and students.

The theme of the exile is also taken up by Katalin Petenyi, directing with the well-known team of Barna Kabay and Imre Gyongyossy, *Holtak szabadsaga (Freedom of Death)*, a narrative based on the true story of a deported couple's return to Lithuania with the coffin of their dead parents after 40 years in Siberia. The authors state: "Ours is the century of refugees, of exiles. Millions died in the camps of Hitler and Stalin: our film seeks to articulate the message of the displaced, the minorities, the down-trodden [people] of history." A continuation of their previous work on the homeless and the displaced, including *The Revolt of Job, Erdely* (1990), *Pusztai emberek (People of the Puszta, 1980)*, and *50 Ev hallgatas (50 Years of Silence, 1991)*, this film depicts the larger tragedy of a small nation, its past and present, its struggle for freedom and autonomy, through the fate of a particular Lithuanian family that might also be set in Latvia, the Crimea, or Kurdistan.

One of the most outstanding of Hungary's senior generation of women filmmakers, Livia Gyarmathy's recent films include the brilliant documentary *Recsk 1950–1958: Egy titkos munkatabor története (Why Did the Peacock Scream? 1988)*; *Hol zasnokasag van (Where There Is Tyranny, 1990)* and *A csalas gyonyore (The Rapture of Delight, 1991)*. The latter film is set in a contemporary Hungary undergoing drastic transformation, seen through the point of view of Julia, an electrical engineer in her thirties, who loses her job to restructuring and at the same time her husband Feri who begins an affair with the much younger daughter of his boss, an influential man in the new system. Feri is a casualty of his own honesty and integrity, one of those who opposed state socialism in his own way and who, as a result, went nowhere. Now he wants something for himself, even at the cost of his marriage. Eventually finding a job in a restaurant, Julia discovers herself in the midst of an entertainment mafia whose war degenerates into brutality. Rejecting her husband's pleas for reconciliation after he is himself rebuffed by his young lover, Julia begins a new life. In the tradition of Meszaros's films of the 1960s and 70s, Gyarmathy
poses the question and the price of freedom in postcommunist Hungary. 
Her female character is reminiscent of the young women foregrounded
by Istvan Szabo in his highly successful 1991 film *Edes Emma, Draga 
Bobe (Sweet Emma, Dear Bobe)*, a visually haunting, dramatically powerful
Indeed of former teachers of Russian teaching in a provincial town,
that culminates in the suicide of a young girl. In each case, the director's
unidealized portrayal of women's daily struggle against gender constrict-
tions inescapably links the film to reminders of her country's successes, be
they social (inadequate care for impoverished children), racial (a strong
current of anti-Gypsy sentiment), or historical (Hungary's fascist mo-
moments and its treatment of political prisoners). A younger generation of
women screenwriters, too, are now engaged in directorial endeavors
that interrogate their culture from the point of view of children, ethnic
and racial and religious minorities, Gypsies, older people and others
living on the edge of society. Sonia El Eini's two-part televideo, *Miert 
rikoltott a pava? (Why Did the Peacock Scream? 1992)* based on the works of
the British psychiatrist and poet R. D. Laing, records the interstices of
the incommunicable and unrepresentable through children's language,
while Julia Szederkenyi's feature film, *Paramicha, vagy Glonci, az emlekezo 
(Paramicha, or Glonci the Rememberer, 1993)* chronicles the life of an aged
Gypsy based on his written diary.

The post-1956 generation, no longer able to depend on support
from a centralized economy organized to protect national film culture, compelled at once by the need to attract international audiences in an increasingly globalized film culture, are, as we have seen, at the same time concerned not to abandon the specifically national concerns of a native audience nonetheless all too eager to welcome nonnative cultural products. One central aspect of these concerns is that of personal narrative, autobiography, and biography, most often rendered in experimental, avant-garde, or documentary form. Eszter Nordin's documentary video, *Apam portreja I–II (My Father's Portrait, 1993)*, for example, offers her own diasporan biography and the border crossings that have come to typify filmmaking in Eastern Europe.

My father, Geza Partos, is a theatre director, and I a Television/film director. Unfortunately, due to circumstances, our paths had parted too early in my youth: after our defection from Hungary, he finally settled in Israel, while I made my home in England. As a consequence, he could only follow my career from a distance and I lost the opportunity to learn his "tools of the trade." For me, this
portrait film about my father is not merely a piece of theatre history — a record of his importance in Hungarian culture — but a personal quest for getting to know him and understanding him better.24

The “circumstances” to which the filmmaker refers are, of course, the persecution of Jews under Nazism; this film portrait, originally nine hours of uncut interviews, was made as a gift to her father, and, according to the director, transformed her perception of him from resentment of his profession to appreciation of his own generosity to the artistic world.25

A number of the most recent works by women directors take as their subject the condition of the poor and the aged. Marta Elbert’s video documentary, Folrajzolt almok (Dream Sketches, 1993) is set in the Cserehat Mountains in Borsod-Abauj-Zemplen county, one of the most beautiful and most impoverished regions in the country. In a town composed of seven villages, unemployment has reached 80 percent, as fewer aging citizens receive unemployment benefits; at the end of 1993, according to the director, over half the adult population is living on social security provided by the central government and the municipality. Oregseg (Old Age, 1993) is Agnes Incze’s tribute to those who address their final words to the next generation, interrogating the secret links between youth and old age, challenging the young to value the humanity of those whose bodies no longer conform to the desire of the soul: “Sometimes I forget and behave as if I were twenty, but the shocked, cold expressions around me are a painful reminder that the air is cooler around me, the world more morosely resistant. . . . I must give up this struggle between aging body and youthful soul against a well-armed, cunning enemy.” On a more optimistic note, Julia Kovacs’s Odry Arpad muveszottthon (Arpad Odry House [A Home for Old Actors], 1993) honors the 50-year history of this actors’ home, a comfortable setting with a pleasant, intimate atmosphere for retired theatre and cinema actors who recall the glorious successes of their much-loved profession. That so many talented younger women directors choose to focus on the disadvantaged suggests not only an empathic cathexis toward those who suffer most, but the depth of suffering in the inequality of this postcommunist moment in which divisions between wealth and poverty are more pronounced than in decades, casting into even bolder relief the difficult life of Hungarian women as a strategy through which to interrogate a nation’s painful transitions.

Filmmakers in Hungary flourished, indeed prospered, under conditions of internal constraint and, for that matter, deprivation; some have
since expressed a sense of loss now that the struggle is over. Yet as the incongruities of the postcommunist moment emerge, new national and transnational narratives are required to address them, and women directors, together with their male colleagues, are rising to the occasion, less fettered than their more established counterparts by the hierarchies, rewards, and trade-offs of filmmaking under socialism. The reception of films and videos selected for and screened in national and international festivals, from Budapest to Cannes, from Toronto to New York, leaves little doubt that, despite the very real difficulties faced by cinemas from smaller, former Eastern bloc nations, often disparagingly referred to as “minor cinemas,” a dynamic culture of cinema is emerging in the 1990s from which the West has much to learn. Passionate and even vehemently accusatory discussions, symposia, and press conferences have taken place during Budapest Film Week, an annual — and often contentious — retrospective of Hungarian national cinema (feature and documentary) produced during the preceding year: especially since 1989, filmmakers, journalists, critics, and other cultural workers have been debating the future of their visual culture, critiquing their own and their colleagues’ practices, urgently seeking advice from visiting foreign participants.

In Budapest, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, efforts to solicit Western partners are accelerating; at the 24th Film Week nearly a year ago, Zsolt Kezdi-Kovacs, director of Magyar Filmunio, introduced the festival by calling for a new attitude toward Hungarian cinema:

Making films is not an easy business nowadays (When has it been?) The general situation is also rather difficult (When was it easy?) It is a time to appreciate those who have the courage to make films today. Who knows what sort of audience, what sort of world these films are made for? What kind of public will see those films? Who are those people, who still want to look at their own lives, pleasures and pain, instead of a far-away universe tinted in rose and glamour? I think there must be such an audience. We filmmakers are a mirror to the world, and the mirror must be honest and true.

This sense of loss and purposefulness is, to be sure, readable in a number of films produced since the changes. In the first flush of postcommunist openness, pornography of the hard- and soft-core variety was ubiquitous, from calendar pinups hung in shop windows and offices to a brisk trade in X-rated videos. Films produced in 1990, such as Gyorgy Szomjas’ Konnyu Ver (Fast and Loose) and Peter Vajda’s Itt a Szabadság (This Is Freedom) bore unmistakable traces of Western mimesis in a profu-
sion of seductive long-legged blondes hustling hard currency from Western customers, hip youth cavorting in postmodern urban settings, and Russian mafia controlling lucrative prostitution rings—the irresistible “junk food”, the glamour (and depression) of the new, so different from the serious earnestness of the ancien régime. But there is something hypocritical, it seems to me, in what may be taken to be a Western censoriousness of the new frivolity, as if Eastern Europeans were somehow meant to enact the role of the West’s nobler conscience, while foregoing its material excess. While one might well mourn the loss of the exalted status of cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, and, for that matter, literature, the proliferation of documentaries, videos, and feature films seeking to recover history and national memory was a necessary developmental stage in the process. For under state socialism, visual esthetics were based on the reality of censorship, in which coded narratives inscribed their oppositionality through the use of strikingly creative visual and allegorical language.

Yet despite these discursive inscriptions of regret for a time of paradoxically greater security—a perception of the “good old days” of the enemy that was known—important and vivid films are being produced throughout the region both by established and younger filmmakers, some willing to risk danger and even death to document this momentous era. Under pressure from nationalist and interethnic tensions, a number of filmmakers are confronting the challenges of “wild east” postcommunism by foregrounding formerly taboo subjects, and thereby serving to focus public attention on such repressed, secret, or otherwise uncomfortable topics as the existence of Stalinist labor camps; the persecution of ethnic minorities, Gypsies, and Jews; the persistence of alcohol abuse and suicide; homelessness and the suffering of individuals and families dispersed and dislocated in the wake of war, conflict, political and economic upheaval.

Finally, as the nations of the former Eastern bloc struggle with threatening expressions of national, ethnic, and religious identity, these subjects are emerging in contemporary documentary and feature films, experimental and avant-garde video, and in the critical and theoretical discourse produced by print media devoted to culture and the arts. They speak of a legacy of ideological and internal exile—that is, isolation, alienation, deprivation of means of production and communication, and exclusion from public life; of the disenfranchisement and psychic denigration of Stalinism; of the human trauma that has also given rise to ethical, politi-
cal, and artistic resistance. But they speak equally persuasively of strong national and historical traditions, of literary and artistic accomplishment, and of a new generation psychologically and intellectually prepared to make the next move. Most importantly, they attest to the centrality of women filmmakers’ role as intellectuals, as critics of existing systems, and as savvy entrepreneurs already making movies that give voice to the fears, anxieties, and desires of their compatriots, to the suffering and triumph of national selves as well as of an emergent transnational identity. Meanwhile, their persistence of vision, indeed their unflagging commitment to the need for cinema today, are more than worthy of sustained support, encouragement, and recognition.

NOTES

1. Agnieszka Holland, as quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle, 5 July 1991, in the context of the controversy over her 1991 film Europa, Europa when the Commission of German Film Functionaries declined to nominate any German film for an Academy Foreign Film Award in October of 1991. Thanks to Susan Linville, Department of English, University of Colorado at Denver, for this information from her unpublished manuscript “Europa, Europa: A Test Case for German National Cinema.”

2. See, for example, Slavenka Drakulic, How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed (London: Vintage, 1993); Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Emily Hicks, Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

3. It is worth noting that conflict within the audiovisual sphere in fact threatened to stall negotiations on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade talks in summer 1993, and did, in fact, result in exclusion of audiovisual products from the agreement.

4. Thanks to Miriam Hansen for sharing with me her manuscript “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere,” forthcoming in Screen (1993), to which I am indebted for the connection between cinema as public sphere and post-1989 transformations. The erasure of the national becomes a trope of postcolonial, postcommunist discourse in transnational economies, as witnessed by the ubiquity of such relatively new (yet rapidly institutionalized) transnational corporate networks such as CNN.

5. Among the proliferating treatments of this topic see, for instance: Hamid Naficy, “Transnational Film Genre and its Phobic Spaces,” mss. shared with me during Naficy’s appointment at Rice University’s Center for Cultural


7. The qualification is intentional, out of respect to my Hungarian filmmaker colleagues whose view, based as it must be on the material realities of the projects in which they are engaged, is considerably more pessimistic than mine.

8. The shift has entailed profound transformations in the structure of media, from a new law under deliberation by the Hungarian Parliament, to the creation of Fuggetlen gondolkozot (Federation of Independent Thinkers), a group of 400 artists, intellectuals, and writers co-founded by writer Miklos Vamos and documentary filmmaker Pal Schiffer (personal conversation with Pal Schiffer, Budapest, 2/15/94). An Independent Producers’ Association, including 13 production companies, has been formed to assist film directors from small studios to gain access to opportunities to compete with larger companies. The much-debated “media law” is intended to create closer links between television and cinema.


11. In the autumn of 1965, the first Film Week was held in the southern Hungarian city of Pécs, from which it eventually moved to Budapest. In 1986, the Hungarian Feature Film Week became the Hungarian Film Week, including all genres — 35mm feature, documentary, experimental, animation, and avant-garde film and video. The same year, the Hungarian Federation of Film Societies was constituted, providing a consistent venue for younger audiences to screen and debate films throughout the country. Over a 30-year period, about 600 films were made, one-third of all the Hungarian films ever made. (Hungarian Film Union publication, under the auspices of Ministry of Education and Culture and the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation), Budapest, 1994.

12. Meszaros continues to make new films despite conflicts with the at times capricious decisions of a “curatorium” of filmmakers and producers who now decide the fate of filmmakers’ projects in Hungary, and the perilous process of adjustment to a new production system that demands entrepreneurial skills from a generation of directors unaccustomed to privatization.

14. With regard to the resentment of one’s East-Central European countrymen in the face of celebrity abroad, the Czech writer Ivan Klíma states: “Our critics don’t like people who are too well known abroad.” This interview concerned the lack of interest evinced in Prague toward Klíma’s latest work, Waiting for Dark, Waiting for Light, following the publication of his Judge on Trial, the story of a communist judge who compromised his way through life, and the mentality of the apparatchiks who ran the Czech dictatorship (New York Times, 22 February 1994, C15). I am reminded as well of the German director Alexander Kluge’s famous line: “I love to go to the movies: the only thing that bothers me is the image on the screen.”

15. The title refers to Meszaros’s own life situation at the time of her divorce from the celebrated director Miklós Jancso, when she became more fully autonomous as a film director. The film’s narrative concerns a textile mill weaver’s denial of her working-class origins in order to be accepted by her lover, a university student. See Catherine Portuges, Screen Memories: The Hungarian Cinema of Marta Meszaros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

16. Child Murders, written and directed by Ildiko Szabo, in Hungarian; director of photography: Tamas Sas; edited by Panny Kornis; music by Janos Masik; produced by Istvan Kardos, Pal Erdoss, Gerd Haag, Istvan Darday, and Marton Ledniczky; production companies, Hetfoi Muhely and Studio Alapitvany (78 minutes). When I interviewed the director in Toronto in September 1993, she insisted upon the difficulty of making a film with such “depressing” and controversial material. As an example of the countereffects of postcommunist privatization in visual media, the director herself was responsible for preparing publicity and press documentation for screenings abroad.

17. The dreamlike inscription of history, memory, and experience in Jewish Eastern Europe has in fact become an important part of 1990s Hungarian and, for that matter, East European cinema: some 800,000 Jews survived the war in Eastern Europe, or returned afterwards, not including the millions who lived in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Under the communist regimes, the story of the Jews was largely the story of their absence, for Jews had all but vanished from the Soviet screen even before World War II, despite the presence of millions of Jewish citizens. There were few, if any, Jewish characters in films produced after the war by Hungary and Romania, the other two nations with the largest surviving Jewish minorities; in Poland, once home to three million Jews, Jewish characters occasionally played supporting roles in movies of wartime suffering. With Eastern Europe’s largest and most assimilated Jewish population, outside of Russia, Hungary produced a few films with discreetly Jewish characters before the mid-1980s; even then, Imre Gyongyossy and Barna Kabay’s The Revolt of Job (1983), the first Hungarian film to focus on the wartime deportation of the Jews (followed in 1984 by Gyula Gazdag’s
Package Tour, 1988), was only shown to foreign critics after the filmmakers themselves arranged a special screening. Most characteristic of the early 1980s was Daniel Takes a Train, directed by Pal Sandor who, as a child, had lived through the liquidation of the Budapest ghetto.

18. The national elections in May 1994 put in power, by a significant margin, a Socialist government, composed of several former Communists, to replace the Christian rightist Hungarian Democratic Forum which eventually expelled playwright and Parliament member Istvan Csurka for anti-Semitic public statements.

19. Jeles is perhaps best known for his 1979 feature, Kis Valentino, a daring film about juvenile delinquency, and his Dream Brigade, a film of the early 1980s about the plight of Hungarian workers, considered sufficiently bold to warrant shelving for a number of years.

20. Fekete served as scriptwriter on a number of films directed by Gyorgy Szomjas, himself a respected and popular filmmaker internationally whose Roncsfilm (Junkfilm, 1993) earned two prizes at the 1993 Hungarian Film Week.

21. Another first film, Haknibrigad (Making of the Tournee) by Erika Ozsda, is based on the staging of a script entitled The Tour, written by filmmaker Geza Bereményi. Ozsda follows the crew as they stage the eight actors in their chosen roles, observing the intimate composition of a theatrical piece, from rehearsals and performance to the downtime between sets, from the relationships among crew members to the minutiae of stagecraft. Actors are interviewed and express themselves with subtlety and honesty, contributing their talents to this experimental documentary financed under the aegis of Fekete Doboz, Hungary's video arts company for young filmmakers.

22. Since the changes, younger directors graduating from the Film Academy have increasingly been unable to complete a first feature before the age of 40.

23. The privatization of production and studio structure, the forging of production links between film and television, the drafting of new media laws and protective legislation for minority human rights, in tandem with the "communications superhighway" of mass-media news management, are rapidly altering the conceptualization and representation of identities and nationalities. These are, it seems to me, among the most pressing of subjects for those engaged in theorizing the new esthetics and visual practices of what was relatively recently known as the "other Europe," as recent international debate on protective legislation for European-language films attests.

24. Personal communication with the director, Budapest, February 10, 1994, following the premiere of her video.

25. Nordin adds: "Theatre is a narcissistic profession . . . I admire and forgive him for not being a good parent; he gave me the confidence to be a director, perhaps the most important thing for me as a woman in a tough profession in which I might otherwise have been unable to survive. Once you sort out these emotional issues, you can apply what you have learned to professional life . . . . I am grateful to the BBC for training as an assistant director, learned on the
job, the British way. Hungary is, in contrast, very difficult for a woman, and it's every man for himself” (personal communication, Budapest, 2/10/94).

26. It is worth mentioning that Hungary's nominee for the 1994 Academy Awards was film director Robert Koltai's Sose Halunk Meg (We'll Never Die). Koltai both directs and stars in this autobiographical story of Gyuszi bacsı (Uncle Joe), a lovable traveling salesman who frequents the racetrack, charms women of all ages, and manages to survive without worrying too much about money, all the while teaching his naive nephew the ways of the world. A low-budget, lighthearted farce, it has outsold many American productions at the Hungarian box office, making the rounds of festivals and international openings.