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The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

Gyula Gazdag

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THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE.. (A SIPOLÓ MACSKAKÖ). 1971. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Written by Gyula Gazdag and Miklós Györffy. Camera by Tamós Andor. Music by Lajos Illés. Mafilm Studio 1 (Budapest). In Hungarian, English subtitles. 96 minutes.

With: Zoltán Paulinyi (Béla Somló, the Commander of the Camp), János Atkári (Professor Dienes), Gábor Gergely (Tökés), Balázs Györe (Hasznos), András Mész (Pataki), János Borsogi (Vincze), Jean-Pierre Falloux (the Frenchman).

For a debut feature, Gyula Gazdag's THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE inspired an unusual amount of pre-release publicity. There were a number of production stories in the Hungarian press--including a diary of the film's shooting published in the literary monthly Válóság--and this interest fueled the controversy which greeted the film's somewhat belated appearance.

Made with a non-professional, mainly teenage cast, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE was the first feature produced with the help of the experimental Béla Balázs Studio. The score was by Lajos Illés, leader of a pop band some considered the local equivalent of the Beatles; while the 24-year-old director (the youngest to ever make a Hungarian feature) had already garnered considerable notoriety for his satiric documentary short, THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER. The sense of THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE as marking a new generation's coming of age was further supported by the film's being set in a Communist Youth League (KISZ) work camp.

Indeed, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE is permeated with youthful high spirits. The film's tone is blatantly outrageous. Gazdag and scriptwriter Miklós Györffy have concocted a monstrous ruling metaphor -- a group of boys are sent to a summer work camp where, as the faulty p.a. system immediately tells them, "owing to technical reasons" there is no work. In the absence of any meaningful activity or honest explanation, the camp becomes a setting for spurious ceremonies, pointless contests, and empty exercises in democracy. Somló, the camp commander (whom the boys nickname "dorlotin" after a Hungarian sedative), is a master of bureaucratic doubletalk: "For educational reasons, this is a classic situation -- if we can make the boys accept it," he tells a visitor.

Whereas Somló (superbly played by Györffy's onetime German professor) is supremely mistrustful, manipulative, and incompetent, the young teacher Dienes has his liberal illusions and democratic principles severely tested by the camp's failures. Compelled to choose between the administration and the students, he hesitates, compromises, and finally opts for the latter--stupid and cynical though he finds it. Meanwhile, the boys, who are actually more idealistic than they let on, become increasingly bored and resentful. When a local farmer offers a few of them work, three boys sneak out of camp without permission to spend the day harvesting corn. As a result, they are publically reprimanded and expelled. (In a particularly telling scene, Somló assures the three that he "understands and to a degree, agrees with them." In their position he might even have acted similarly, but he has to make an example of them for the sake of camp discipline and morale). The film ends with the trio travelling back to Budapest in a smokey railroad coach whose window is jammed shut and door broken--but, punchline notwithstanding, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE is too rich in human detail to seem schematic or allegorical.

Not simply a bit of local color, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE is very much a film about the aftermath of 1968. The KISZ camp is haunted by the spectres of Paris and Prague. At one point, the boys aimlessly cross the unguarded Czech frontier only to observe that this foreign country is exactly the same as Hungary. Later the camp is visited by a vacationing Sorbonne student whom Somló has invited to lecture on the problems of French education. Although, according to György Báron, the French student "has been considered by most (Hungarian) film-reviewers as unnecessary," he is in many respects a catalytic figure.¹ An emblem of successful--if complacent--

rebellion, the Frenchman (whose family presumably left Hungary in 1956) is a veteran of the May uprising. It is he who gives the film its title--in his car he has a rubber cobblestone, a souvenir of May, which squeaks when squeezed. To Somló's displeasure, this Frenchified Hungarian makes a perfunctory attempt to organize a protest--advising the boys to "get together, issue a manifesto, start a dialogue with the peasants." In vain: Dienes (and even the campers) tell him that, as an outsider, he is incapable of grasping the situation. "You are resignó?" he asks, driving off towards Istanbul.

According to Gazdag, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE was accepted by the Ministry for release and actually recommended as the official film for that year's KISZ congress: "But when it was screened for the KISZ leadership, they said 'What! Not for the congress, not ever!' Then I was asked to cut a third of the film--to eliminate the French guy completely, as well as all the scenes where the boys questioned the camp." Gazdag refused to make any further changes and the film was shelved for several months. When it finally did open in 1972, much critical discussion revolved around the question of the film's veracity. "Some critics thought this was an accurate picture of Hungarian youth and our school system. Others thought that it was not--they said that KISZ is not like this and asked, 'how is it possible to live such a lie for a week?' Then the film couldn't leave the country for six years."

These difficulties notwithstanding, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE is the most highly regarded of Gazdag's features. In a 1985 poll of Hungarian critics to determine the 40 best films produced since 1945, THE WHISTLING COBBLESTONE (the only Gazdag film cited) ranked 34th. Even in 1973, the film won a Hungarian Film Critics' Award. According to one of the jurists, "Although differences in opinion were not resolved at the yearly debate, a majority voted to give Gazdag an award... Between the voting and the prize-giving, however, there was another discussion in which a few critics battled some leaders of our cultural life with only partial success. Ultimately we agreed to give the prize to Gyula Gazdag for his first feature, without mentioning the title in the announcement. So it surprised even us that in the end Gazdag was awarded a prize for his documentary films. This was particularly remarkable in that, although THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER which is a documentary had already been given a Critics' Award, no documentary by Gazdag had been premiered during the past year."²

- J. Hoberman

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1. György Báron, "The Failure of Paternalism: A Portrait of the Filmmaker Gyula Gazdag," Mozgovilág (1981). Trans: Mrs. Péter Kós.
 2. László Zay, "Critics' Award, Awards' Criticism," Filmkultura (August 1986). Trans: Annamária Róna.

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