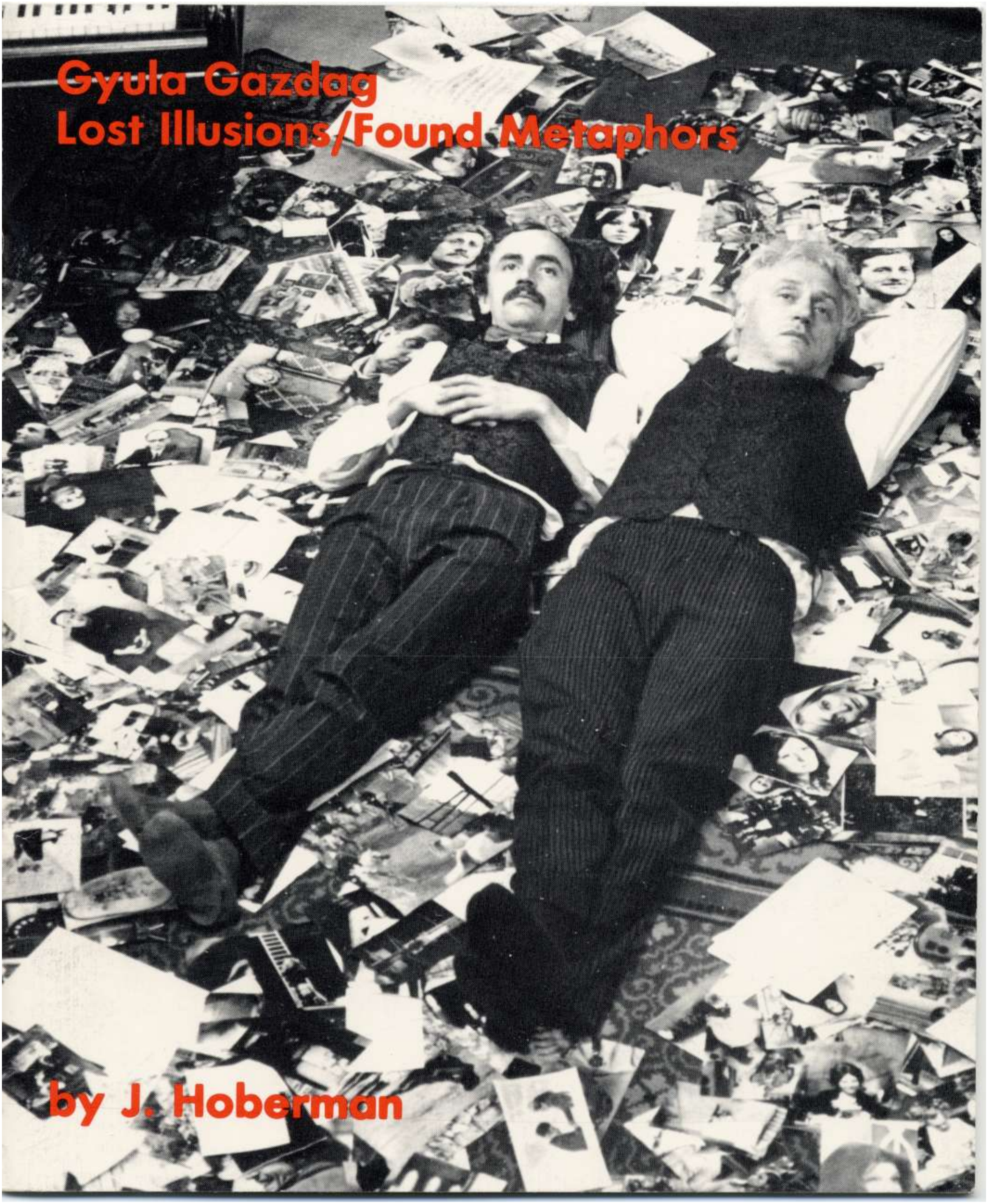
Document Citation

Title	**Gyula Gazdag. Lost illusions/found metaphors**
Author(s)	J. Hoberman
Source	*Pacific Film Archive*
Date	1987
Type	program
Language	English
Pagination	1-28
No. of Pages	27
Subjects	Gazdag, Gyula (1947), Budapest, Hungary
Film Subjects	Szilveszter (Happy new year), Ragályi, Elemér, 1974 A bankett (The banquet), Gazdag, Gyula, 1982 A sípoló macskakö (The whistling cobblestone), Gazdag, Gyula, 1971 A kétfenekü dob (Swap), Gazdag, Gyula, 1977 Bástyasétány hetvennégy (Singing on the treadmill), Gazdag, Gyula, 1974 Válogatás (Selection), Gazdag, Gyula, 1970 Társasutazás (The package tour), Gazdag, Gyula, 1984 Elveszett illuziók (Lost illusions), Gazdag, Gyula, 1982 Hosszú futásodra mindig számíthatunk (The long distance runner), Gazdag, Gyula, 1968

A hátarozat (The resolution), Gazdag, Gyula, 1972



A Tribute to Gyula Gazdag, presented at the Pacific Film Archive and The Museum of Modern Art in April 1987. Curated at the Pacific Film Archive by Edith Kramer in collaboration with J. Hoberman and with the cooperation of Adrienne Mancia, Curator in the Department of Film at The Museum of Modern Art. Made possible by the generous cooperation of Hungarofilm, The American Federation of Arts and New Yorker Films. Touring to UCLA Film and Television Archives, The Film Center of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Film in the Cities, St. Paul.

Published by
Pacific Film Archive
University Art Museum
University of California, Berkeley

cover photo: ***Singing on the Treadmill***

Gyula Gazdag
Lost Illusions/
Found Metaphors

by J. Hoberman

April 23-30, 1987
Pacific **F**ilm **A**rchive
University Art Museum
University of California, Berkeley

Gyula Gazdag: Lost Illusions/ Found Metaphors

As a director of both documentaries and feature films, Gyula Gazdag has been perhaps the most consistently innovative and iconoclastic Hungarian filmmaker born since the war. His accomplishment is a testament to the vitality of Hungarian film culture and particularly the remarkable self-managed Béla Balázs Studio (BBS) which, for over a quarter of a century, has served as a training ground for neophyte directors.

The first directors to graduate from the BBS called themselves the "generation of 1956." Gazdag belongs to the "generation of 1968," responsible for shifting the studio's emphasis from short fictions to new forms of documentary and politically engaged filmmaking. Although lacking the street drama of Paris, Prague or Warsaw, the Budapest of the late '60s had its own social ferment. The New Economic Mechanism brought greater economic and political liberalism while, having over-estimated the potential of national TV, the government educated a bumper crop of filmmakers.

Gazdag came of age during a period of radical possibilities, radical disillusionment, and radical cinephilia. "When I made my first documentary I believed that I could influence society with such a film," he has said. "I think I was very naive at that time." [1] What's striking about this statement is not its youthful idealism, but that the film in question was a satire. If for many of Gazdag's peers in the West, the key filmmakers and attitudes of the era were those of the French nouvelle vague, for Gazdag, they were those of the Czech new wave. The films of Milos Forman, Ivan Passer, Jiri Menzel, and Evald Schorm exerted a decisive influence on him; at one point he hoped to go to Prague to study. [2]

Like those of the Czech directors, Gazdag's films—documentaries no less than narrative features—are characterized by skeptical humor, critical irony, and an almost ethnographic detachment. Their subject is often the behavior of those who hold power; they operate in the gap between official rhetoric and authoritarian praxis. Gazdag's early films challenged many political pieties—and paid the price. Although he had a catalytic effect on Hungarian documentary filmmaking and produced a significant body of work by 1972, he flirted with unpersonhood.

Despite the importance of his early work, Gazdag is discussed neither in István Nemeskürty's 1974 history *Word and Image* nor Graham Petrie's 1978 one *History Must Answer to Man;* for most of the '70s, the better part of his oeuvre could not be publically screened. At the end of the decade, the filmmaker found himself in the unenviable position of having three unreleased features *(The Resolution, Singing on the Treadmill,* and *The Banquet)* as well as another *(The Whistling Cobblestone)* which was banned for export. Not until 1984 were the last of these taken off the shelf.

Born in Budapest in 1947, Gazdag virtually grew up in a film studio. His father was a chemical engineer, his mother was an editor of documentary and educational short subjects. As a child, Gazdag made his own films out of scrap footage and watched Miklós Jancsó direct. He was admitted to the film academy in 1965 and while still a student made *The Long Distance Runner* (1969), a 15-minute portrait of a prominent Hungarian athlete which exerted an influence far beyond what its length, subject matter, and origin might suggest.

The Long Distance Runner is considered Hungary's earliest example of cinema verité and, although it would serve as Gazdag's graduation film, the school declined to fund it. (Gazdag then approached the Béla Balázs Studio where the secretary, Ferenc Kardos, enabled him to organize the production on one day's notice.) "There was no script, no storyboard, nothing. I just had an idea—tomorrow evening a crazy man will run to a small village and there they will name a restaurant after him. For me, that was the funniest thing. In my childhood everything was named after Rákosi and others—I had the feeling the villagers wanted to name this bistro after somebody but they couldn't find anyone who was better or more famous than this poor guy."

As influential as *The Long Distance Runner*'s methodology was the film's deadpan, irreverent attitude. Gazdag used the occasion of György Schirilla's run to satirize the posturing and

platitudes of those in authority—or rather, to allow those in authority to unwittingly satirize themselves. This documentary strategy was further elaborated in *Selection* (1970) and *The Resolution* (1972), co-directed with Judit Ember. Where many American practitioners of cinema verité focus on institutions, Gazdag's originality lies in his observational handling of open-ended situations. *Selection* depicts the means by which a chapter of the Communist Youth Organization (KISZ) choses a rock band; *The Resolution* documents the Party's attempts to replace the popular chairman of a cooperative farm. This is also true of his later documentaries: *The Banquet* (1981) records the reunion of participants in a short-lived and controversial Soviet republic and *Package Tour* (1984) follows a group of Jewish concentration camp survivors on a return trip to Auschwitz. "I always want to film these dramas like fiction in terms of the shots and the mise-en-scène," Gazdag has said. "But I don't know what is going to happen and I don't want to influence the action." [3]

Gazdag has a genius for selecting, as well as recording, these situations. Just as his documentaries—which almost always avoid direct interviews—are filled with unexpected behavioral revelations, they invariably represent something more than what is on the screen. It is this metaphoric richness, combined with his critical stance, that places him in the Aesopian tradition of Central European filmmaking. Thus *Selection* can be read as a metaphor for the film industry, if not the state itself. Here one watches in microcosm the relationship between social engineering and leisure time. Gazdag has said that he "thought of Jancsó while shooting this film," that he was very impressed with *The Round Up* and saw in *Selection* the possibility for making a related sort of historical parable.

Like *The Round Up, Selection* seems to have been influenced by the Theater of the Absurd—although this 40-minute essay in behavioral tics, applied power, and free-floating anxiety is more a comedy of inertia than it is a dance of death. Hungarian critic György Barón has pointed out *Selection*'s exposure of the tautological reasoning by which power maintains itself:

> "Over and over, the [KISZ] leadership repeat like parrots that a rock band is absolutely indispensible for attracting the youth. 'And what will we do when we have won the youth?' a journalist asks. It becomes evident that no one knows a reasonable answer. An organization is good once it exists; consequently, if more young people can be recruited it will be even better..." [4]

Because this is socialism, there is no profit motive. Rather, every action must be justified in terms of its ultimate social value. Thus, however cynical their motivations, the selection committee must believe in their own objective altruism. (This unselfconscious hypocrisy is what makes the film a comedy.) For Barón, who has written on Gazdag at length, *Selection* exemplifies the filmmaker's overriding preoccupation with the exercise of paternalism:

> "One would think that selecting a rock band is hardly a crucial issue. But young and old, professional and honorary supervisors of the firm, officials of the party and the youth association perceive this as a task of enormous importance. One cannot neglect their expertise, because the 'kids' who will 'receive' this music cannot make the decision. The enterprise is feverishly approached and this feverish affair is almost tantamount to real work."

Crucial to Gazdag's project is his presentation of authority—its deceptions (and self-deceptions), its elaborate rationales and Machiavellian maneuvers, its superfluities and platitudes. The fine points of this manipulation can be lost on a foreign observer. Barón observes that in *Selection,* the members of KISZ committee talk in "a sort of meta-language." Their "vocabulary is limited, their syntax clumsy, convoluted, and ill-suited to Hungarian grammar."

> "The ornate phrases are meant to suggest importance and scientific superiority [but] the extremely long sentences are, in reality, only a meaningless and unconnected babbling. They only hint at the fact that somebody would like to say something. It is exactly like a monologue by Beckett. The words are relics of an Atlantis, a once-intact language. And this linguistic garbage dump represents not only a total lack of thought, but also the attempt to dissimulate this lack. Even the most primitive use of this jargon feigns an understanding of higher ideology and thus represents the most important foundation of paternalism."

Gazdag's analysis of cliché as smokescreen and the use of obfuscation as a means of social control is no less apparent in *The Resolution.* Here we are privy to both closed sessions in which Party officials map a strategy and open meetings where they attempt to persuade recalcitrant peasants to accept these ideas—for the peasants' own good. Such moments are equally

characteristic of Gazdag's first two features, *The Whistling Cobblestone* (1972) and *Singing on the Treadmill* (1974). Whereas the former uses a youth camp as the perfect site for the exercise of paternal authority, the latter employs the conventions of the operetta to make an audacious comparison between the utopia of entertainment and the utopia of social planning.

Barón has called *Singing on the Treadmill* "a unique film without equivalents in either the Hungarian or European film worlds." But, in its poetic love of rubble and camp appreciation for idiotic slogans or ridiculous cliches—most spectacularly the songs from the 1949 "operetta of optimism," *State Department Store*—the film has an affinity to the epic American underground movies of the early 1960s. Like Ken Jacobs' *Star Spangled to Death,* Jack Smith's *Normal Love,* or Ron Rice's *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man, Singing on the Treadmill* uses derelict landscapes, junkstore props, and deadpan travesty as a means to subvert official culture.

Still, the operetta is a form with a specifically Hungarian appeal—related, one suspects, to the disjunction between the nation's past imperial greatness and current provincial status—and, although he maintains that he had no interest in the form before *Singing on the Treadmill,* Gazdag seems particularly attuned to its implications.[5] In their bemused orchestration of schemes and maneuvers, *Swap* (1977), *Lost Illusions* (1983), and even *The Banquet* have comic opera undertones. Although strongly moral, these films view the social world with an irony and pessimism born of experience—and, in this, exhibit a quintessential Central European sensibility. (It hardly seems coincidental that Gazdag's longtime collaborator, Miklós Györffy, would be a translator of Kafka and Musil.)

It's suggestive that the period of Gazdag's eclipse coincides almost exactly with the temporary setback of Hungary's liberal "New Economic Mechanism." Gazdag began his career in a heady period of reform; his problems began around the same time that János Kádár and the NEM experienced opposition from hardline conservatives. (This neo-Stalinist reaction is, in fact, part of *The Resolution*'s subtext.)[6] The year 1975 marked a turning point in Gazdag's career. Not only was *Singing on the Treadmill* banned but, in an unrelated development, he was obliged to leave Béla Balázs Studio after seven years of active membership. Anticipating that he might be shut out of feature film production, Gazdag began directing at the Gergeley Csiky theater in Kaposvár. Although he was able to return to film in 1977, the emphasis in his work shifted. Whereas Gazdag's early films engage power directly, his subsequent ones are haunted by events which confound representation.

The Banquet, Package Tour, and *When I Was Born* (a never-broadcast TV portrait of the rock group Pyramid which incorporates much newsreel footage from the various eras of the 1950s) are overtly concerned with the weight of history on both the individual and the nation—evoking the past as it exists in the present. In a more oblique fashion, the same is true of Gazdag's recent features: *Lost Illusions* is a film about the aftermath of Prague Spring (literally, the *absence* of Prague Spring), while the just-completed *Hungarian Fairytale* can be seen as a dreamlike evocation of 1956 and thus, a sort of "found illusion."

The strategy of using historical reconstruction as a means to comment on the present day has a long history in Hungarian cinema. By making films that refuse to recast history, and rather suggest the impossibility of knowing it, Gazdag's mature work continues blazing a path that is both problematic and iconoclastic.

---

1. Interview with Erika and Ulrich Gregor (12/30/84). Trans: Corinne Kuenzli.
2. Czechoslovakia remains a presence in all of Gazdag's features—either through casting (as in *Singing on the Treadmill, Swap,* and *A Hungarian Fairytale)* or allusion *(The Whistling Cobblestone, Lost Illusions).* While this may be a matter of temperament—Gazdag's shares the Czech taste for irony and deadpan humor—it is scarcely without political implications. It suggests that, in part, his project has been to continue the Prague Spring (or at least perpetuate its memory) by other means.
3. Gregor interview, *op.cit.*
4. György Barón, "The Failure of Paternalism: A Portrait of the Filmmaker Gyula Gazdag," *Mozgovilág* (1981). Trans: Corinne Kuenzli. The following quotations are also from this essay.
5. Gazdag told me that at the time he decided to make *Singing on the Treadmill,* he knew nothing about operetta: "In fact, I hated it. I considered operetta to be always a sort of lie, something to hide reality."
6. Only after the NEM's 1979 resurgence were Gazdag's banned films gingerly taken off the shelf.

Singing on the Treadmill

Singing on the Treadmill (Bástyasétány 74). 1974. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Written by Gyula Gazdag and Miklós Györffy. Camera by Elemér Ragályi. Music arranged by Ferenc Gyulai Gaál. Mafilm-Hunnia Studio (Budapest). In Hungarian, English subtitles. 76 minutes.

With: Ewald Schorm (Mr. Dezsö), István Iglódi (Mr. Rezsö), Lili Monori (Anna), Róbert Koltai (Péter), Judit Pogány (Böszi), Sándor Halmágyi (Ödön), Mari Kiss (Kati), Zoltán Papp (Jóska), Eszter Csákanyi (Tini), László Helyey (Rudi), Hédi Temessy (Elvira), Lajos Öze (Patkó), Hanna Honthy (The Ageless Goddess of the Operetta).

Like Péter Bacsó's *The Witness* (1969), Gyula Gazdag's 1974 *Singing on the Treadmill* is one of the few Hungarian features to have been banned outright. Like *The Witness, Singing on the Treadmill* is a comedy—albeit a musical one. But where *The Witness* is a straightforward burlesque of a Stalin era show trial, *Singing on the Treadmill* is a show that puts the Stalin era (and more) on trial.

Singing on the Treadmill takes its premise and some of its music from the operetta *Bástyasétány 77*—the title is the address of a dilapidated Budapest house which four young couples compete to restore—that, although composed in 1957, was considered too "bourgeois" to stage until the early '60s. Calling their version *Bástyasétány 74,* Gazdag and Miklós Györffy set the original situation in an elaborate, quasi-allegorical frame. In the film, the operetta is being composed by Messrs. Dezsö and Rezsö, a pair of clownish, unmistakeably bureaucratic librettists (one played

by the Czech director Evald Schorm) for characters who have minds—or at least wills—of their own.

Dezsö and Rezsö write the script but it would be more accurate to say that they transform, rather than create, the film's other characters, who are born in ditches and carried via treadmill to the warehouse where their would-be benefactors work. Dezsö and Rezsö urge the four couples they have brought together to trust them: "We promise all dreams will come true. All we ask is patience and discipline." But, try as they do to legislate a happy ending, the authors are continually confounded by the messy recalcitrance of human nature—compelled to threaten their charges, replay the ruined scenes, bring suicide victims back to life, and reorient the couples until even their own confidence is shaken.

A film of formal invention and insolent wit, *Singing on the Treadmill* is replete with visual puns (including red filters and rosy pink fades—the movie was Gazdag's first in color) and even a cameo by octogenarian operetta star Hanna Honthy. For an outsider, it can be as dense a thicket of signifiers as Jancsó's *Red Psalm,* but there's no missing Gazdag's audacious conflation of romantic and political illusions. The film manages to burlesque everything from the housing shortage and the national suicide rate to Hapsburg nostalgia and the yearning for social utopia. Like *The Whistling Cobblestone, Singing on the Treadmill* is a merciless satire of the paternal state—in part because the couples are so blatantly childish. At the point at which their schemes, squabbles, and mutual denunciations threaten the Dezsö-Rezsö regime with chaos, the Eternal Goddess of the Operetta (Hanna Honthy) graciously appears and restores order by crooning a lullabye of the Rákosi era: "A better world is being born for you, thousands of working hands watch over your dreams...so goodnight."

Like Witold Gombrowicz's play *Operetta, Singing on the Treadmill* could be said to mix "the monumental idiocy" of its chosen genre with "the monumental pathos of history." The film climaxes in a burst of operetta madness. Clichés run amok: A chorus, dressed in a veritable wardrobe room of costumes, dances the rhumba while singing a delirious ode to a Mexican volcano—"The sky is better than the earth!" Finally, all four couples are permitted to share the house and, swaying in unison, break into the finale from the 1949 socialist realist operetta, *State Department Store:*

"Life has become so beautiful, our hearts are filled with joy
A new spring is coming and great days are calling us
The rhythm is so happy and we joyfully sing
This brave free life is ours at last."

They remain swaying for a minute or two after the music ends. Then the screen fades to pink, accompanied by a sound loop fashioned from "The Blue Danube Waltz."

Singing on the Treadmill provoked the greatest scandal of Gazdag's career although the film—which was finished in December 1974, reviewed two months later in *Variety,* and scheduled for an April release—was not immediately shelved. "I was very surprised that it was accepted without any changes," Gazdag says, "in fact, I couldn't believe it. Then someone tried to organize a screening at the Young Artists Club and told me that there must be trouble because he cannot get the print. I asked the studio to set up a screening and I drove to Kapósvar. When I arrived, there was already a telegram waiting for me: It was impossible—they couldn't get the print. Then the controversy started. It was apparent that there won't be any premiere—but it wasn't certain what would happen.

"In October the Ministry of Culture decided that the film must be banned and I was invited to a meeting of their advisory council. The members include journalists, scientists, filmmakers, not only functionaries, and each was asked to give an opinion. There was no question to discuss because everything had already been decided but there was complete confusion. Every member of the council had an explanation why it was impossible to release the film but these were all completely different. I remember the most absurd phrases. One sociologist thought the film was a mixture of structuralism and the Frankfurt school and this was a reason for banning it. Another said that it's a film which is more existentialist than Camus—Camus left you a little bit of hope but this film doesn't. Someone else told me that he heard that there are citations from Kádár's speeches in the film."

Gazdag was informed that no amount of cutting would make *Singing on the Treadmill* acceptable—a few years later he trimmed the film by 15 minutes to no avail. By the time the movie was released in 1984, its provocative use of Stalin era optimism had been somewhat blunted and absorbed by the culture. In 1976, an associate of Gazdag's staged an extremely successful camp version of *State Department Store*—although when Gazdag proposed a production of the Soviet operetta *Free Wind,* he was refused permission.

The Resolution

The Resolution (A Hátarozat). 1972. Hungary. Directed by Judit Ember and Gyula Gazdag. Camera by Péter Jankura. Béla Balázs Studio (Budapest). 105 minutes.

Made by Judit Ember and Gyula Gazdag for the experimental Béla Balázs Studio, *The Resolution* is considered by some Hungarian critics to be the most important Hungarian documentary made since World War II. Certainly, it ranks with the Polish *Workers '80* as one of the frankest representations of political power in a Communist state—even if, as Bérénice Reynaud has suggested, this power is necessarily "absent" and ultimately "unshowable." [1]

According to Gazdag, Ember—who had been the assistant director on *The Whistling Cobblestone*—conceived the idea of filming the process by which agricultural cooperatives choose their leaders: "I went with her to help and got more and more involved in the project. We learned that the way that new chairmen were elected was completely undemocratic and corrupt.

The members of the cooperative had to decide on a candidate they had never seen—perhaps someone from the other side of the country with good Party connections. We wanted to find out how it was possible to persuade people to accept an unknown leader." In their search for a chairmanless cooperative, the filmmakers met a Party secretary named Estélyi who had such a co-op in his district. Although Estélyi forbade their documenting that particular case, telling them it was under police investigation, he suggested an alternative. The Party was recommending to the membership of another cooperative that they recall their leader, one Joszef Ferenci. Estélyi offered the filmmakers his full support in documenting the procedure by which Ferenci would be voted out.

So confident was Estélyi that he made the filmmakers privy to the Party's strategy for unseating Ferenci: the atmosphere in the smoke-filled room with which *The Resolution* opens suggests nothing so much as the first scene of "Macbeth" as the county-level Party committee deliberates over the situation. Some vague issue of corruption seems to be at stake. One hitch is that, financially, the cooperative is doing quite well and is likely to be surprised by the Party's move. The other is that, strictly speaking, the co-op is not obligated to follow the Party's advice.

Sure enough when, in the documentary's second act, the sleek Party bureaucrats confront the gnarled peasants of the co-op leadership, the farmers are dumbfounded. Why haven't they heard anything before? Ferenci is the first good president they've had! Who is behind this plot? The co-op's accountant warns that banks may withdraw credit if the popular president is forced out. As if on cue, Ferenci arrives and begins protesting his innocence. Everything he did was done in the interests of the co-op. If he's guilty, then the whole co-op is. (Making reference to the film crew, Ferenci slyly goes on record with the hope that the accountant's statement will not be cut out of the final print.) "We are wasting the filmmakers' time," one apparatchik complains and it is decided to continue the discussion without Ferenci, who is sent home. The debate continues although, as Reynaud observes "from then on, one has the feeling that, even though the Party cannot stop the experiment it has started, many discussions will take place 'behind the scenes,' during private meetings to which the film crew is not invited." [2]

The Resolution reaches its climax at the co-op's general meeting, where the Party accuses Ferenci of nepotism and padding his expense account. Moreover, he appears to have hired, in some comically unspecified capacity, a Budapest con man named Fischer who managed to use his position to set up a brothel. Nevertheless, despite a rather peculiar balloting procedure, the vote is 96 to 67 against removal. (Stung, the Party lamely invokes a two-thirds rule and asks for a second ballot.) The film's postscript takes us back to the smoke-filled room where the honchos offer their postmortem, deciding to "share the blame" and take solace in their 40% of the vote. It's a fascinating coda, which secretary Estélyi cuts short by staring at the camera and, with read-my-lips emphasis, pronouncing "that's enough, it is over." The freeze frame that follows is one of the most chilling (and justified) in all of cinema.

Reynaud compares the force of Estélyi's order with the famous "cut!" uttered by Nicholas Ray in Wim Wenders' *Lightning Over Water.* But where Ray's command "severs him from the world of the living (he is dead in the next sequence)," Estélyi's establishes "the limit of the film. From now on all 'resolutions' will be taken outside the cinematic field." This became true in a literal sense—Gazdag and Ember, who were bound to finish their film by the end of 1972, received no additional funding to continue the project. Thus, we were left only with an end title revealing that Ferenci was voted out "with disciplinary action" one year later.

Yet even this is not the end of the story. *The Resolution* was screened twice by Estélyi who authorized release papers—a decision which later cost him his position. According to Gazdag, "We showed the film at BBS and it was a tremendous success. After a few months there was a festival for young filmmakers and we wanted to enter *The Resolution.* An official from the ministry told me, 'I'm sure this film would win all the prizes but it won't get to the festival because that's not the right place for it. This film will circulate in the Party apparatus and after that it will find its right place.' As you don't understand what he meant, I didn't either."

The Resolution was shelved for a decade—and even then never accorded a theatrical release. (It officially surfaced first as part of a BBS retrospective and had its "premiere" two years later as part of the 1984 Film Week.) But this does not mean the film was invisible. According to the filmmakers, the original 16mm print disappeared altogether for two years. They later discovered that it had been screened in a number of closed situations for political scientists, historians, and economists, as well as at various Party training

schools. This is entirely fitting. As Reynaud concludes, it is political power that is the film's true subject "in both senses of the term: subject matter and 'emittor' of a discourse...

"At the end of *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966), Roberto Rossellini has his hero take off the more visible signs of his power (his wig, his embroidered coat) and thoughtfully quote a line from Bossuet: 'Neither death nor sun can be looked at without blinking.' For the Sun King, this was a metaphor for the unshowable character of power. Ember and Gazdag were faced with a similar challenge: how does one show power 'without blinking' in a film? The formidable nature of the power they were confronted with was no less terrifying than the power of death in *Lightning Over Water.* The Hungarian Communist Party itself has initiated the movie, and it was upon its orders that the film was first terminated, then shelved. The nature of power as demonstrated by *The Resolution,* has thus something to do with the 'death of representation.' The actors in the menial tragedy that has been enacted by the film crew—local Party members, the chairman of a small cooperative farm, uneducated peasants—are not front-line decision makers. They do not represent power; they only bear the signs of a power that comes from above and beyond them...The entire making of the film—from its production to its shelving, from the selection of its camera angles to the constitution of its imaginary field—is determined by the invisible gaze of this absent power. If the film is successful, it is because its real subject matter is to suggest, behind the petty veil of bureaucratic dealings, [these] 'unshowable' mechanisms."

---

1. Bérénice Reynaud, "The Unshowable," *Afterimage* (November 1986). All subsequent quotations are also from this essay.
2. Of course for Hungarians, what's shown is no less revealing. As György Báron writes, *The Resolution* "renders the official use of language in its extreme form, which is exclusively based on clichés unrelated to reality. It is a language able to argue for and against the same thing without any logical contradictions...This distorted speech appears even more awful compared to the lucid, colorful vernacular of the co-op members." When *The Resolution* was shown at The Museum of Modern Art in 1986, a Hungarian-speaking member of the audience remarked that the Party secretary and his peers seemed incapable of constructing a single grammatical sentence. Gazdag replied that actually, because of the camera, he thought "they spoke a little bit better than usual."

The Whistling Cobblestone

The Whistling Cobblestone (A Sipoló Macskakö). 1971. Hungary. 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 *Válósag*—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 ever to 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 blandly outrageous. Gazdag and screenwriter 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 former—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 traveling 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 resigné?" 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,

Swap

Swap (A Kétfenekü Dob). 1977. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Written by Gyula Gazdag and Miklós Györffy. Camera by Elemér Ragalyi. Objektiv Studio (Budapest). In Hungarian, English subtitles, courtesy of Digitaly. 85 minutes.

With: Rudolph Hruskinsky (Dénes Czakó, museum director), Jenö Horváth (Béla Somló, Local Council president), Róbert Koltai (Péter Benedek, Local Council secretary), Eszter Csákányi (Anna Török, secretary), István Kiss (Dezsö Rácz, film director).

If *Swap* is Gyula Gazdag's mildest, most atmospheric film, it is because, after the scandals of *The Whistling Cobblestone* and *Singing on the Treadmill,* he had considerable difficulty finding an acceptable subject for a film: "I was told—not directly by the Ministry but through the studio heads—that I could not treat anything 'dangerous.' But they thought anything could be dangerous in my hands because *Singing on the Treadmill* had an innocent subject and I still made a dangerous film." Still, less than three years after *Singing on the Treadmill* was shelved, Gazdag was able to direct this summery comedy of bureaucratic (and behind the camera) intrigue, whose Hungarian title literally translates as "The Two-Sided Drum," an expression for a story with several meanings.

Wryly anecdotal in the manner of Milos Forman's *The Fireman's Ball* and Ivan Passer's *Intimate Lighting, Swap* further evokes the Czech new wave by featuring Rudolf Hruskinsky as the director of a village Petöfi House. When Hrusinsky discovers that a Budapest TV crew wants the courtyard of his museum as the location for the comic opera they are filming, he schemes to use their presence to bolster support for a proposed cultural center. His maneuvers are perceived as threatening by the head of the Local Council (named Béla Somló after the duplicitous camp commander in *The Whistling Cobblestone)* who, although also a supporter of the cultural center, has no intention of being eclipsed by the museum director. In short, beneath its placid surface, the film swarms with ulterior motives and mistrust is rife. Meanwhile, the TV crew has their own agenda as well and everything comes to naught.

According to Gazdag, the film's origin is partially autobiographical. In the mid '70s, he had directed a television program about the 19th century poet-revolutionary Sándor Petöfi using the Petöfi House in Szalkszentmárton as a location. "During that shoot, the same sort of things happened. The conflict between the director of the museum and the head of the council wasn't as obvious [as in *Swap]* but I could easily imagine what might happen between them and I thought, why not make a story out of it." This script was

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]

---

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," *Filmkultúra* (August 1986). Trans: Annámaria Róna.

Lost Illusions

Lost Illusions (Elveszett Illuziók). 1982. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Written by Gyula Gazdag, Miklós Györffy, and György Spiró, from the second part of *Lost Illusions* by Honoré Balzac. Camera by Miklós Jancsó, Jr. Music by István Mártha. Objektiv Studio (Budapest). English titles. 106 minutes.

With: Gábor Máté (László Sárdi), Dorottya Udvaros (Kriszta), Robert East (Lusztó), Boguslaw Linda (Dániel), Ági Margittai (Livia Bársony), Ilona Béres (Mrs. Deszkás), Juli Básti (Flóra Koves), Laszló Sinkó (Finta), Ferenc Bessenyei (Dóri), Lajos Öze (Vermes), Imre Eck (Kamuti).

Gyula Gazdag's lone foray into literary adaptation transposes the second part of Balzac's *Lost Illusions*—known in its English translation as "A Great Man in Embryo"—from the Paris of the early 1820s to the Budapest of the late 1960s. The choice of material and its transformation are fraught with implications. No less an authority than Georg Lukács termed Balzac's novel—which excoriates the popular press as the bordello of ideas—"the *Don Quixote* of bourgeois illusions." Balzac's subject is the corruption of art by commerce and the rise of the mass-media. (As Robert Stam has pointed out, *Lost Illusions* not only anticipates, but often reads like the anti-Hollywood novel of a disillusioned screenwriter.)[1] What does this mean in a Hungarian context?

Gazdag and his collaborators necessarily

accepted by Objektiv Studio. "It was important that Objektiv was a new studio. It has been formed for the first BBS generation—Szabó, Rósza, Huszárik, Sára, Kósa—and all those people wanted to create a sort of BBS for feature films. But there had to be a head of the studio and this man wanted to prove that he is not anti-democratic. I think that for that reason he wanted me to make a film."

Swap's opening (a Czech tour group being guided through the Petöfi House to come face to face with a wax effigy of the poet) suggests Gazdag's ironic documentaries and a sense of satiric verité underscores the film—particularly the outdoor set-pieces that blend historical tableaux, bits of comic opera, the frantic film crew, the blundering townspeople and, at one point, a herd of sheep. The film ends on a wistful note and is evidently lighter than Gazdag would have wished: "The day before I started to shoot, the studio head gave me a message from the Ministry that I couldn't change a line in the script—if there was any scandal with this film I would be kicked out of the studio and would lose all possibilities to make films.

"I wanted to change the script. I wanted to make it longer and more intense. For me, the adventure of this film was how to start this story in a realistic manner and move it deeper and deeper into the absurd—mixing this opera, the film director's behavior, the preparation for the non-existing feast, the whole confusion into a complete nightmare! And that was not in the script. I had to stop before the nightmare started. When I knew that I couldn't make something new for me, then there were two things which were interesting for me. The first thing was the opera and the other was to shoot the film in a Czech style."

Package Tour

Package Tour (Társasutazás). 1984. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Camera by Elemér Ragályi. Edited by Júlia Sivó. Sound by György Fék. Mafilm-Objektiv Studio (Budapest). Courtesy New Yorker Films. In Hungarian, English subtitles. 75 minutes.

Like most of Gyula Gazdag's documentaries, *Package Tour* was suggested by a chance occurrence. In late 1983, Gazdag noticed a newspaper ad for a group trip to Auschwitz. Intrigued by the apparent absurdity of such an excursion, he discovered that the 140 tourists who signed up for the trip were virtually all concentration camp survivors. For them, Auschwitz was not simply the only memorial their dead families might have, it was also a part of their youth, the setting for the central experience of their lives.

Although Gazdag set out to make a film without a clear idea what the film would be about, he was resolved to focus on the present. As a historical documentary, *Package Tour* resembles *The Banquet:* "I didn't want to deal with the past. I didn't want to show what happened in Auschwitz—I wanted to show how these people

narrow Balzac's focus. Their interest is the evocation of a particular cultural climate—one in which opportunistic journalism and personal connections can determine a career. Balzac's Lucien Chardon betrays his political ideals to further his literary ambitions, but Gazdag's László Sárdi seemingly has no political ideals to betray. In his society, the political is writ small and reduced to a matter of personal position. It is the repetition of tragedy as farce: the meteoric rise and fall of this wide-eyed writer from the sticks—"He's come from the great plain and has never seen a theater"—is intercut with overstaged operettas and even more intricately choreographed parties full of mini-skirted girls frugging to The Who.

Among other things, *Lost Illusions* was the first Hungarian film to periodize the late '60s. "They have tried to collect everything typical of that time, whether objects, habits, expressions, manifestations," wrote one critic. "We can be satisfied: nothing is missing. We see miniskirts, communes, house parties, drinking, back-scratching, sex, Playboy, even striptease—the novelty of those days—and samizdat." [2] In fact, the film is quite precisely located. It opens on August 20, 1968—the event of the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslavakia. In the very first scene, László Sárdi and Livia Bársony are startled from their embrace by a tank passing their car. When they arrive in Budapest, the sky blazes with Constitution Day fireworks. Shortly afterwards, the two attend the premiere of a new Hungarian movie (Márton Keleti's *Hasty Marriage*.) At this social event, Livia's fashionable cousin, Mrs. Deszkás, greets a writer who has just returned from Paris, inquiring as to the city's mood. "Morning afterish," the writer replies as a colleague joins the conversation.

Kántor: "You came back just in time."
Marshall: "What do you mean?"
Kántor: "They would have thrown rotten eggs at you."
Marshall: "What are you talking about?"
Kántor: "They would have asked you about what you thought about 'the events' and you..."
Marshall: "Oh! (pause) I appreciate the thought that I read my work at public gatherings but unfortunately I didn't."

The pause in the above exchange is all that is necessary to place the film in the context of a traumatic, unmentionable historical event—a loss of illusions comparable to the Hungarian revolt of 1956—and then deflect the conversation to the matter of the writer's status, or lack thereof. The careerism and self-absorption one sees in these Budapest literati are the fruits of disillusionment—or exhaustion. Like *The Whistling Cobblestone, Lost Illusions* is set against the aftermath of 1968, returning to the period of Gazdag's youth (and first success), to satirize the headlines of that time with a complex mixture of nostalgia, bitterness, and affection. Save for a group of scruffy bohemians with an unhealthy interest in French structuralism, everyone else is mainly concerned for their own pleasure or advancement.

As a representation of careerist intrigue, *Lost Illusions* is considerably less gloomy than its Polish correlatives—Andrzej Wadja's *Without Anesthesia* (1978), Krzysztof Zanussi's *Camouflage* (1976), Agnieska Holland's *Provincial Actors* (1978). Still, this is a fizzy drink with a deceptive kick: "You won't be a real journalist until an article appears under your byline that you had nothing to do with," Sárdi's mentor Lusztó cynically advises him. Sárdi seals his fate early on when he unwisely publishes contradictory reviews of the same book—the unfavorable one under his own name, the positive review (his real opinion) under a pseudonym. His actual crime is something far more private, another example of the film's displacements. Indeed, at the disciplinary hearing, it is Lusztó who bears the criticism. (Sárdi, sitting there ignored, is already an unperson.)

Lost Illusions is at once highly specific but also universal. (I can testify that the committee of journalists who selected it for the 1983 New York Film Festival found it far from exotic.) "It amused me that events in Balzac's novel corresponded to stories I knew about Hungary," says Gazdag. "I didn't want to take the story out of its period but, for financial reasons, it was of course impossible to make a Hungarian film set in early 19th century Paris. I loved finding a place for all those personalities in Budapest in the late '60s, to let them loose in Hungarian society to see if they could act the same way as in Balzac's novel. And they could. After the film opened, people asked me, who were we thinking of, who is that actor really—and sometimes they recognized people who we didn't know."

---

1. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (UMI Research Press, 1985).
2. Péter Snée, "Gyula Gazdag: Lost Illusions." *(Filmkultúra,* 1983). Trans: Mrs. Péter Kós.

think and feel today, after 40 years. It's a completely different case than *The Banquet,* but the idea was similar—to show people who live in the past and in whose life a certain historical event plays a very important part." But where *The Banquet* deals with an evocative footnote to Hungarian history, *Package Tour* addresses a crucial and still highly sensitive occurrence.

The extermination of the Jews came later and with a more terrible efficiency in Hungary than in Poland. In the spring of 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary to prevent its defection from the Axis, there were some 800,000 Jews left in the country; by early summer, more than half of them had been rounded up, packed in cattle cars, transported to Auschwitz, and gassed. Adolf Eichmann, who directed this operation, began with the countryside. Budapest Jews were temporarily reprieved when the Hungarian regent, Admiral Horthy, finally halted the deportations in July; three months later, after Horthy made a second futile attempt to surrender to the Soviets, Eichmann returned to liquidate the Budapest ghetto, driving Jews on death marches toward the Austrian border.

Like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah,* which opened in Paris several months after *Package Tour*'s Budapest premiere, Gazdag's film eschews archival footage; as with Gazdag's earlier documentaries, it abounds in suggestive metaphors and parallels. This tour (which could easily be leaving from Co-op City or Rego Park) is actually a sort of redeportation. Every passport check has a sinister resonance, as the bus retraces the earlier, fatal route. One of the film's most ineffable moments occurs when the pilgrims re-enter Auschwitz, some visibly anguished, some impassive, others with expressions that are impossible to read. Their trip immediately takes a grotesque turn when a Polish guide insists on addressing them in German; for a moment they're turned into obedient sightseers or worse.

Without indulging in cheap shots at Auschwitz as a tourist attraction, Gazdag allows for his own experience of the place as it is now, showing the survivors threading their way among groups of schoolchildren and picture-taking families, letting the camera take in one young couple sitting dazed and silent in the sun. Modest as it is, *Package Tour* is no easy ride—it's filled with sudden turns and complicated emotions. The film's most shocking incident evolves with the logic of a nightmare. An elderly woman backs out of a tourist snapshot and falls into a trench, seriously injuring herself. The sequence begins with the ensuing chaos and arrival of a medical team. (According to Gazdag, who is visible in the confusion, he asked his longtime cameraman Elemér Ragályi to stop shooting. Fortunately Ragályi ignored him; Gazdag only realized the importance of the accident during editing.)

While the anecdotes recounted in *Package Tour* reinforce one's sense of the arbitrary nature of the Auschwitz system, the film itself documents the isolation of the survivors. Even in community, they seem always orphaned. "We came here to do penance," one says. This isn't the first Hungarian film to treat the wartime suffering of the nation's Jews—33 years ago Márton Keleti's *Keep Your Chin Up!* showed Jews being rounded up by Hungarian collaborators and there have been numerous references since—but it's by far the most complex. Recent films like Imre Gyöngyössy's and Barna Kabay's 1983 *The Revolt of Job,* or their 1985 documentary, *Lest Ye Inherit (In Memory of 425,000),* mourn Hungarian Jews as an absence; *Package Tour* acknowledges the presence of the living remnant. Thus, the film's final and saddest revelation concerns the young daughter of two survivors. Although her parents brought her on the tour in the hope that she would gain perspective on their lives and not be ashamed of them, the trip has had the opposite effect. The frightened girl hides from the camera—she's afraid her schoolmates will see the film and reject her as a Jew.

According to Gazdag, *Package Tour* was released in only a few prints: "I've never been to a screening at a theater. This is the only film of mine I can't see. I couldn't even sit through the premiere. For me it was like a nightmare—the shooting, the editing, the whole process. We made it very, very quickly. Critics didn't like the film. But I had the feeling that through it they were confronted with their feelings about anti-Semitism. I think they wanted to be rid of that whole problem."

The Long Distance Runner, Happy New Year, and Selection

The Long Distance Runner

The Long Distance Runner (Hosszú Futásodra Mindig Számíthatunk). 1968. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Camera by Péter Jankura. Béla Balázs Studio (Budapest). 13 minutes.

Happy New Year (Szilveszter). 1974. Hungary. Directed by Elemér Ragályi. Camera by Elemér Ragályi. Edited by Gyula Gazdag. Béla Balázs Studio (Budapest). 14 minutes.

Selection (Válogatás). 1970. Hungary. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Camera by Péter Jankura. Béla Balázs Studio (Budapest). 41 minutes.

With his very first documentary—an ironic portrait of a somewhat ridiculous national hero—Gyula Gazdag emerged as a significant presence on the cultural scene. Albeit only a 15-minute diploma film, *The Long Distance Runner* proved among the most influential Hungarian movies of the 1960s.

György Schirilla, the film's eponymous subject, was famous for taking an annual, televised bath in the icy Danube as well as for several marathon runs—including one from Budapest to Moscow. (The film title's liberal translation is "We Can Always Count on Your Long Distance Running.") Here, Schirilla revisits the town of Kenderes where, one year earlier—en route to Moscow—he

stopped to ask for a glass of strawberry juice. To commemorate this, the town council has decided to name a restaurant after him. But, because under Hungarian law, institutions may no longer be consecrated to living persons, the "Sport Bistro" must be content to feature only Schirilla's picture. The villagers' is not the only disappointment. Afterwards Schirilla complains of the drab ceremony—he is used to being greeted by larger crowds.

Nevertheless, as the critic György Báron has observed, "for the leaders of the village this is a great occasion. Schirilla is a well-known personality, someone shown on TV, spoken about on the radio: he comes running from the 'circle' where people who make decisions sit. And from this aspect it does not really matter whether the person concerned is a famous TV commentator, humorist, pop singer or a chief executive of public standing...Swelling with pride, the local notables receive their great guest as though he were the king arriving to celebrate the nation's millennium. 'This is an exceptional event in the life of our country' are the words of the Local Council chairman. Schirilla also uses words appropriate to the occasion: he is engaged 'with the concept of overcoming great distances.'" [1]

Released during the summer of 1969 as a short with Livia Gyarmathy's Czech-style comedy *Do You Know Sunday-Monday, The Long Distance Runner* made Gazdag's precocious reputation while inspiring a new wave of "sociological" documentaries at the experimental Béla Balázs Studio. Gazdag maintains that he was nonplussed: "I didn't want to make documentaries. I was the youngest student in my class and I wasn't important at all—I felt like a young boy among all the grown-ups. I couldn't understand why this Schirilla film was such a success. For me it was natural to shoot the film this way. But among the others it started a new mood. Still, I didn't really want to make documentaries, I thought that this was an interesting event and I made a documentary but I wanted to make feature films. And then came another interesting event and I made another documentary."

That film was *Selection.* Here Gazdag turned the camera on a process rich with the material of its own contradictions—namely the means by which an oil refinery's KISZ (Communist Youth Union) chapter decided upon a rock'n'roll group to sponsor. Among other things, the film is a testament to the power of the "unofficial" culture. Although KISZ made it clear that musicians would not be paid, some 95 bands answered their radio advertisement (which also inspired the film.)

Selection has been called a film about the "terror of false ardor." [2] It soon became obvious that KISZ has no interest in rock music per se, their interest is in regulating the leisure time of young workers. Scarcely does the film open before the exuberant KISZ chairman confesses that he doesn't even like rock music and only attends dances as part of his job. (Gazdag's films typically abound in suggestive, found metaphors: the chairman, who is 35, turns out to have been a member of KISZ since the consolidation year of 1957.) But although the chapter's desire to sponsor a band is purely pragmatic, its standards are inherently self-defeating—being predicated on ideological purity, rather than on musical talent or audience appeal.

Confronting this dilemma, Communism can't help but reveal an all-too-human face. Should the rockers appeal only to the young or to all the workers? Should they be able to play Hungarian songs as well as western rock'n'roll? How can KISZ insure the band won't attract a bad element? At once indulgent and puritanical, naive and cynical, the KISZ committee warns all applicants that they will receive no money for equipment, cautions them against wearing "hippie crosses," suggests they be prepared to perform in uniform (even if only blue jeans and identically colored shirts), and inquires after their marital status ("the KISZ committee cannot tolerate groupies"). Sensing the rules by which the game is being played, several of the musicians make hilariously mealy-mouthed suggestions, offering, for example, to provide literary evenings as well as dance music.

The climactic audition, a battle of five politically correct bands, has one off-key group after another performing the same lugubrious song for the stern-faced KISZ committee and expressionless rank-and-file audience. At last KISZ makes its decision, chosing the Pumps, a group managed by the mother of one of its members (and thus insured of parental guidance). Gazdag reprises the band's "winning" performance. Incredibly, the words are a doleful lament:

> All day I waste my time, feeling sorry for myself.
> No one is with me who matters, no one is with me.
> Everyone is against me.

Despite the success of *The Long Distance Runner, Selection* had no theatrical release—it was

Happy New Year

shown only in film clubs. So too *Happy New Year,* a collaboration with Elemér Ragályi, which, according to Gazdag, was originally intended as a short subject to accompany *Singing on the Treadmill.* A film of elegant brevity and visual wit—as well as metaphoric resonance—*Happy New Year* surveys the various ways in which Budapest citizens of disparate economic strata comport themselves on New Year's Eve.

Ragályi and Gazdag juxtapose festivities at an ornate, Hapsburg-era cafe with a televised special starring Gina Lollobrigida and veteran operetta star Hanna Honthy, and an opera-house gala. There's no dialogue but the camera imposes its own choreography: performers are speeded up or slowed down and typically accompanied by inappropriate music. As midnight approaches, the blare of unruly street celebrations begins to infiltrate the more genteel festivities. Riffraff holds sway; the drunken crowd surrounds and rocks an automobile. A brief coda shows the morning after: smashed cars litter the pavement, an army of street-sweepers occupy the otherwise deserted Lenin korút. As the Hungarians say, "something has passed, something new is about to begin."

---

1. György Báron, "The Failure of Paternalism: A Portrait of the Filmmaker Gyula Gazdag." *(Mozgovilág,* 1981). Trans: Mrs. Péter Kós.
2. István Lázát, "Commuting Camera: On the Films of the Béla Balázs Studio" *(Filmkultúra,* 1971). Trans: Mrs. Péter Kós.

The Banquet

The Banquet (A Bankett). 1982. Hungary. Directed and written by Gyula Gazdag. Camera by Ferenc Zádori. Hungarian Television/Mafilm-Objektiv Studio (Budapest). 84 minutes.

In *The Banquet,* Gyula Gazdag illuminates an obscure and previously "classified" incident in Hungarian history: In 1944, the village of Vésztö (located in southeastern Békés county) declared itself as an independent Soviet republic. One Imre Rábai, whose family had been active in the shortlived Soviet Republic of 1919, became president. Under his leadership, Vésztö created borders, appointed ministers, redistributed property, and banned all the parties save for the Communists. A liberated zone was established within the Hungarian state and, even after all of Hungary was liberated in 1945, the "Vésztö Republic" refused to recognize central power for some time.

Gazdag first heard of the Vésztö Republic when commissioned by Hungarian television to film a portrait of a gypsy novelist who was born in that region. After completing the TV film, Gazdag returned to interview as many veterans of the republic as he could find. "It was obvious that the authentic history could not be reconstructed because they told such different stories, but I knew it could be very interesting to bring them together to discuss what happened." After securing a budget, Gazdag organized an outdoor lunch that would reunite various principals—many of whom had not seen each other in 35 years—and, mounting his camera on a dolly, filmed the result. (The only direction he gave them was in terms of seating: "I could figure out who will discuss what with whom.")

The banqueters recount the history of the Vésztö Republic while holding forth on subjects ranging from the inadequacy of Communist Party pensions to the World War II deportation of the Jews. Every third assertion gets disputed ("There was!" "He was!" "He wasn't"). The absent protagonist—Imre Rábai—is continually and contradictorally evoked. Participants admonish each other that "Hungarians shouldn't quarrel," address the camera in exasperation, and simply doze off. When one pointedly suggests showing the town's "other face" on TV, it's clear that *The Banquet* has become something like a metaphor for Hungarian political discourse. The camera meanwhile drifts up and down the table as waiters

whiz by, removing empty bottles of Coke or schnapps.

Like *The Resolution, The Banquet* reveals its "plot" only gradually. After one discovers almost incidentally that Rábai was reporting to a Russian major, it begins to seem as though Franz Kafka had written "The Mouse That Roared." Inevitably, Rábai is arrested and imprisoned in the same internment camp where he sent his fascist enemies. Minimal as the film is, it cannily engages the great East European tradition. If the anecdotal plot suggests an anti-*Ashes and Diamonds,* the long, fluid takes are Jancsó *povera.* Although *The Banquet* was shot in late 1979, the Ministry didn't authorize a 35mm blow-up for another two years.

First shown during the 1982 National Film Week, *The Banquet* was awarded the prize for best documentary. As one critic observed, "Gyula Gazdag's film recalls the age and the event, but actually *The Banquet* is not primarily about the 'Vésztö Republic.' The film's second level (which seems more important) suggests an analysis of the distortions in our historical consciousness, of how the mechanisms of human memory function. [The participants'] heated debate does not offer arguments against arguments, or facts against facts, but rather memories filtered through the perspective of 35 years, and it is the viewer who must decipher the truth in the whirling haze. Because *The Banquet* does not lift up the veil from the secret, we will not learn who Imre Rábai actually was, and we only get a very vague picture of what he did in Vésztö at the time. [Instead], the arguments of the Vésztö people make it clear that, although their case concerns only one person and one series of events, there is really no historical situation which can be reduced to simple black and white." [1]

Gazdag himself had an even broader critique in mind: "This was the time of rediscovering the '50s. It was very fashionable. And I wanted to say by this film that it's impossible—because if you don't have documents, or if it's impossible to see the documents from that time (and it is impossible), then all you have is what people say, and that's a different thing. It can be a drama but it doesn't have anything to do with the facts of what happened in the past. It's a drama but it's a nowadays drama. In *The Banquet,* you can see that they believe what they are telling, but that doesn't prove it's true."

---

1. Péter Vértessy, *Magyar Nemzet* (1/21/82). Trans: Annámaria Róna.

J. Hoberman, author, film critic and filmmaker, is a staff writer at the *Village Voice*, contributing editor at *American Film*, and a frequent contributor to *Artforum*, *Film Comment*, and other journals. He is the author of *Midnight Movies* (with Jonathan Rosenbaum) and teaches in the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University. A frequent visitor to Hungary, he has reported on new Hungarian cinema for American journals.

Design: David Holbrook
Typesetting: Lester Weiss
Printing: Ed Kirwan Graphic Arts

Pacific Film Archive