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'To show women naked is to show the very essence of oppression'—Jancso at the Academy.

Signs and Meanings

Jancso's 'Agnus Dei' shows at the Academy Cinema. **PFA**

'Agnus Dei' is set in 1919 near a village on the Hungarian plains. It covers the last days of the first Hungarian Soviet Republic, a short-lived revolutionary regime that was founded on the ideas of the October Revolution and that came to power shortly after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After only 133 days the regime fell victim to the forces of counter-revolution and their policies of terror. The film looks at these last moments and at the methods of fascism, particularly that strongly nationalistic expression of fascism.

A group of revolutionary soldiers stationed near a small village find themselves in a difficult position over one of their prisoners—a fanatical priest, Father Vargas, who wields a kind of power over the superstitious villagers especially the women. They can neither continue holding him or execute him for fear of driving the politically naive villagers into the arms of counter revolution. So they let him go. The priest, once free, retaliates by ordering the massacre of revolutionaries and 'collaborators', the opening of a regime of systematic terror and repression. Vargas is an epileptic, which in the terms of the film becomes emblematic for a state of mind. He follows his sudden fits by attempts at ritual cleansing making repeated rushes into the lake; his gestures and words are random, dramatic and incoherent. Before the film has ended he has 'infected' a follower, a white shirted

man who plays a violin, a new leader, who draws the people through a deeply sinister and nostalgic blend of folk ritual and nationalism that ends in slaughter, mass graves and a holocaust for them—while he mounts a train and disappears. It is a series of symbolic events that charts the spread of fanatical nationalism through Europe in the twenties and thirties.

That outline of events is all the 'story' the film has. Jancso abandons a psychologically based plot altogether in an attempt to find a filmic language in which to express the experience of the group. It's an attempt to confront history through a specifically socialist ideology. An attempt too, to avoid the escapism of storytelling. So what we watch through Jancso's circling camera is the forming and reforming of groups, and of individuals as part of the group. He is concerned to build a clearly non-propagandist mythology out of historical events through developing a precise filmic language built out of gesture, movement and form rather than the trappings of escapist individualistic storytelling.

All his films show this interest in forces and situations rather than the simple chronicling of outward appearance. 'My Way Home' took the situation of a young Hungarian returning after the war and his confrontation with several military groups on the way; 'The Round-up' was set during the 1860's when an oppressive regime was able to overpower and destroy those who attempted to call it into question; 'The Red and the White' showed the Civil War through the eyes of a young Hungarian; 'The Confrontation' set in 1947 was concerned with

a group of young people trying to free themselves from religious obscurantism. It saw the forces of political extremism held temporarily in check; and in what seems to be his most achieved film of the last few years; 'Red Psalm', he chronicles the rise and consolidation and eventual fall of the agrarian proletariat during the late 1890's early 20th century. He has said that this film explains how the naive belief in revolution, or in Marxism, is bound to fail.

Jancso's greatest strength is his ability to create images of a very precise beauty that has nothing to do with superimposed gloss. They are distillations of whole situations. Thus the sequence that opens 'Agnus Dei'—a characteristically Jancso one: a naked girl, her head bowed, leads a horse out of a smooth dead lake somewhere on a wide bare plain. She reaches the bank and begins to put her clothes on. We notice another girl nearby watching, and some soldiers and a low series of farm buildings. . . Later in the film, after the forces of reaction have taken hold, we watch as a young girl is stripped, and led into a group. She stands, head bowed, while a young woman reads from a book with clinical coldness a grotesquely detailed torture. Nakedness occurs at least one more time in the film—as the young piper violinist figure makes love to one of the peasant girls and then leads her along with numberless others into what proves to be a mass grave. Nakedness in Jancso's films is emblematic of oppression. He has said that he shows women naked because, as women are already

oppressed, to show them naked is to show the very essence of oppression.

Alternating with scenes like these which always seem to tend towards the idyllic, but always end up being crisscrossed with unease, comes wave upon wave of killing. White gloved reactionaries mow down the revolutionary sympathisers. Men are buried in haystack pyres and incinerated. Two men wander across the screen at a crucial moment with a couple of smoke torches so that the scene disappears in fog. A couple who have had an 'unlawful' child are forced to go through a ridiculous marriage ceremony before the man is killed and the child baptised.

The whole film happens in a single field, a very open place, dotted with the odd tree the odd house, maybe but certainly with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. An open place that Jancso makes incredibly claustrophobic.

Much of 'Agnus Dei' is frustratingly opaque. I hesitate to think what I would have made of it without the help of the press handouts. It is often like a kind of perfect sphere that there seems no way in to. Towards the end of the film, as the more overtly sinister elements are brought to the centre, the film does gain the kind of force you find running right through Jancso's later 'Red Psalm' for instance, but it is, for the most part, only an occasional experience in 'Agnus Dei', a film that makes difficult but also haunting and certainly questioning viewing.

Verina Glaessner