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~~The Museum of Modern Art~~

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.³

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 vérité 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 for Rákósi and others--I had the feeling the villagers wanted to name their bistro after somebody but they couldn't find anyone who was better or more famous person than this poor guy."

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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) chooses 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 indispensable 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 superfluties 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 clichés--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^{but}, in an unrelated development, he was obliged to leave the 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 ~~evident~~^{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 the both 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 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} ~~Not~~ until after the NEM's 1979 resurgence were Gazdag's banned films gingerly taken off the shelf.