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FILIP ALEXANDRESCU  
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IONUȚ EPURESCU-PASCOVICI  
ANDREI GORZO  
ALEXANDRU IONIȚĂ  
VERONICA LAZĂR  
ALEXANDRU MATEI  
IOANA MĂGUREANU

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*Lucruri care nu pot fi spuse altfel. Un mod de a gândi cinemaul,  
de la André Bazin la Cristi Puiu*

[Things That Cannot Be Said in Any Other Way: A Way of Thinking Cinema,  
from André Bazin to Cristi Puiu], Humanitas, 2012

*Bunul, răul și urâtul în cinema* [The Good, the Bad and the Ugly in Cinema],  
Polirom, 2009

# BEFORE AND AFTER THE REVOLUTION: MODERNISM, POLITICAL MODERNISM AND POST-MODERNISM IN THE FILMS OF MIKLÓS JANCsó

## Abstract

Focusing on Hungarian film director Miklós Jancsó (1921-2014) and tracing the development of his thinking, as evidenced by the formally distinctive and politically charged body of work that he built over 50 years, the essay investigates issues related to international cinematic modernism, its various national versions, its late-1960s political vanguard and the particularities of Jancsó's contribution to this vanguard from his position as a filmmaker in an officially Socialist country.

**Keywords:** Miklós Jancsó, films studies, avant-garde, modernism, political modernism, long takes, montage.

David Bordwell's influential *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) contains a note drawing attention to the author's avoidance, throughout the book, of the words "modernist" and "modernism",<sup>1</sup> although Bordwell admits that three of the "modes of narration" analyzed in his book could very well be described by those terms. The first of these modes is what Bordwell prefers to call "art-cinema narration", Bordwell inviting his readers, there and elsewhere, to see the so-called "art film" as a "distinct mode of film practice" with a "definite historical existence", possessing not only specific institutions (film festivals, art cinemas, cinephile journals), but also "a set of formal conventions" (shared by *auteurs* who are otherwise encouraged to develop highly distinctive individual styles) and "implicit viewing procedures".<sup>2</sup> A second cinematic mode of narration that the eminent historian of film style avoids calling "modernist" was developed,

according to Bordwell, by the great Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, who attempted to fuse revolutionary politics with a revolution in cinematic forms, before Stalinism broke their élan. According to Bordwell, who calls this mode of narration “historical-materialist” and differentiates it from “art-cinema narration”, some of its principles were resurrected in the late 1960s by left-wing filmmakers for whom revolutionary politics also entailed a revolution in cinematic forms. Finally, *Narration in the Fiction Film* identifies a third “mode” that it refrains from labeling “modernist”; Bordwell calls it “parametric narration” and describes it as a mode in which storytelling is paralleled by the autonomous, abstract play of formal parameters, by an intricate stylistic patterning which is not subordinated to narrative and dramatic, to expressive and thematic demands, but is completely independent of them.

Bordwell acknowledges that, insofar as it’s indebted to the line of great literary and theatrical innovators “running roughly from James, Proust, Joyce, and Kafka through Faulkner, Camus and the Theatre of the Absurd, to Cortázar and Stoppard”, art-cinema narration could be called modernist. Bordwell continues:

If we take modernism to be more closely allied with the experimental work of political artists like Grosz, Lissitzky, Heartfield, Brecht, and Tretyakov, then historical-materialist narration will be a better candidate for the label. And if we consider parametric narration as a distinct mode, its modernist pedigree can be traced back to the work of the Russian Formalists – a movement deeply involved with contemporary avant-garde poetry and fiction – and to the continental serialism and structuralism of the 1950s and 1960s. Thus parametric films might be considered modernist.

The reason given by Bordwell for his reluctance to use the term is that some of the filmmakers whose work he cites as exemplifying his third “mode” were active within cultures and/or historical periods that may seem remote from the influence of European modernism. Bordwell’s reluctance probably also owes something to the fact that “modernism” and “avant-garde” are terms that have been defined in different, sometimes conflicting ways, and that’s before they were even applied to the cinema, where their application created new contradictions.

For example, Bordwell’s 1985 study anatomizes modes of cinematic *narration*, thus leaving aside non-narrative cinema; for the most part, so does András Bálint Kovács’s *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema*,

1950-1980, which benefits from (and gratefully acknowledges) Bordwell's mapping of modes of narration, without sharing his qualms about labelling them "modernist".<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, for theorist Peter Wollen, writing in 1982, "the impact of modernism has been delayed [in cinema] till the [late 1960s] advent of [the non-narrative film genre or movement known as] «structural film»".<sup>4</sup> The particular "modernism" that Wollen has in mind in this passage is "Greenbergian modernism" – modernism as defined by influential American art critic Clement Greenberg, who, writing about painting, equated it with a movement (begun with the Impressionists and Manet, radicalized with Cubism and culminating in Abstract Expressionism) away from representationalism or mimesis, and towards the foregrounding of painting's material substrate (the materiality of paint itself, the materiality of the canvas), the turning of the materials of painting into its only "proper" subject, resulting into art about art,<sup>5</sup> or, in András Bálint Kovács's words, art as "the aesthetic self-criticism of art".<sup>6</sup> Although Wollen considers that it is only with the "structural film" movement of the 1960s (first in the US, then in the UK) that cinema starts reflecting on its own material means, he notes that, back in the 1920s, the growing tendency towards abstraction in painting was already being mirrored in the work of the cinematic avant-garde – films by Hans Richter, Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy and others. But work like that – adds Wollen – treated cinema like a mere extension of painting: painting plus movement, painting plus time, painting that uses light directly. What was new in the "structural film" of the 1960s, according to Wollen, was the effort to be true to Greenberg's dictum that each art should turn upon its "unique and irreducible" self, discovering and spotlighting it. So, no longer a simple extension of painting, but a displacement of its (Greenbergian-modernist) concerns with its own sphere of materials, "structural" cinema insisted on the ontological autonomy of film. Hence, films "about" the photo-chemical process and other processes involved in filmmaking, films foregrounding "uniquely and irreducibly" filmic facts like printing and projecting, like the graininess of celluloid, etc.<sup>7</sup>

As influential as it was, this understanding of modernism, derived from painting, was, even in its heyday, one among others – and, when radically applied to cinema by the "structural" filmmakers and by fellow-travelling critics, one whose commitment to an ontology of the medium, grounding an "anti-mimetic" or "anti-representational" stance, could appear to have simply shifted the focus of theorist André Bazin's contrary argument that it was the very ontology of the medium that committed cinema to realism.

Not easily dismissible as a theoretically naïve or retrograde defender of what a Greenbergian would disparagingly call “illusionism” in art (i.e., mimesis), Bazin championed what he took to be cinema’s inescapable realism in the irreproachably modernist terms of the medium’s duty to be faithful to itself. That “unique and irreducible self” was defined, in his view, by the mechanical process (“mechanical” meaning not necessarily influenced by human subjectivity, needing very little human intervention) by which light bounces off an object of this world and leaves an imprint of that object on the film strip. Fidelity to its unique self made painting give up representation of the world in order to concentrate on its own materials – the canvas, paint itself –, but Bazin argued that, where cinema was concerned, the same modernist imperative of fidelity to its proper self should bind the medium more tightly to its realistic calling. In answer to this, a “structural” filmmaker may very well keep the definition of the medium’s true self in terms of light, while denying that reproduction of the natural world is the aim of the photographic process. As Wollen explains it,

light is no longer seen as the means by which the pro-filmic event is registered on film, but as the pro-filmic event itself, and at the same time part of the material process of the film itself, and transmitted through the lens and indeed the strip of celluloid in the projector – so that the strip can be seen as the medium for the transmission (and absorption) of light, the basic raw material.

The result is an anti-illusionist, anti-realist film that, ironically, “ended up sharing many preoccupations in common with its worst enemies”, doubling Bazin’s ontology of film – an ontology which, “seeking the soul of cinema in the nature of the pro-filmic event” (the event taking place in front of the camera), could be called “extroverted” – with a second, “introverted” ontology, seeking the soul of cinema “in the nature of the cinematic process, the cone of light or the grain of silver”. So, film which is radically “about” film, not only attempting to rid itself of what film semiologist Christian Metz called “the non-cinematic codes<sup>8</sup> with which all representational films have to work (codes existing outside the cinema – often preceding it – and “inscribed into the discourse of film by the process of photographic reproduction<sup>9</sup>), but reducing “these codes themselves to their material – optical, photo-chemical – substrate”, to “objecthood” and “exclusive self-referentiality” (“the exclusion of any semantic dimension other than reference-back to the material of the signifier itself”, “the



suppression of any signified except a tautological signified"); film as an "investigation and demonstration of its own properties", of "its own processes and structures" – "an epistemological and didactic enterprise".<sup>10</sup> This is filmic "modernism" – if "modernism" is to be rigorously practiced and understood in the Greenbergian manner.

Of course, this was always just one way of understanding it – even if Wollen proposes that Greenberg's field of expertise, painting, "played the leading role in the development of modernism in the other arts", the discoveries of Cubism decisively affecting Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, for example, and later William Carlos Williams, Apollinaire, Marinetti, Mayakovsky, Klebnikov, and thus playing a pre-eminent role in "the shift of terrain that marked the substitution of one paradigm or problematic for another, the beginning of modernism, the work of the historic avant-garde". Wollen argues that the innovations of Picasso and Braque were seen, or intuitively felt, from very early on, "as having an implication beyond the history of painting itself", as representing "a critical semiotic shift, a changed concept and practice of sign and signification". As explained by Wollen in semiological terms, the change consisted in the opening-up of a space, a disjunction between signifier and signified and a change of emphasis from the problem of signified and reference, the classic problem of realism, to that of signifier and signified within the sign itself. In painting, this started a trend towards "the suppression of the signified altogether, an art of pure signifiers detached from meaning as much as from reference" – a trend whose leading explainer and cheerleader was to be Greenberg. But an early, crucial work like the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in no way dissolves the signified; it just dislocates it from the signifier, "asserting – as such a dislocation must – the [signifier's] primacy": "[i]t is not a portrait group or a study of nudes in the representational tradition", but neither can it be adequately described, à la Greenberg, as a pure "investigation of painterly or formal problems or possibilities". The signified "clearly remained dominant" in literature, where modernism "could be interpreted in terms of the expansion of subject-matter, new narrative techniques (stream of consciousness) or play on the paradoxes of meaning and reference (Pirandellism)". It is significant – adds Wollen – that the more radical literary experiments, "such as attempts at sound poetry, were the work of artists or writers working closely with painters" (Arp, Schwitters, Van Doesburg), just as in theatre "the most radical developments were invariably associated with changes in set design and costume" (Meyerhold's Constructivist theatre, Schlemmer's Bauhaus

theatre, Artaud). But, of course, neither Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht (both of them in the 1930s), nor Theodor Adorno (in the 1950s), all of them writing to defend literary “modernism” (including drama)<sup>11</sup> against Georg Lukács’s condemnation of it (of Kafka and Expressionism, of Brecht and Musil, of Joyce and Beckett) as “decadent”, as a disastrous straying from the great model of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novel – none of them even dreamed of asking for a literature which would “abandon the whole realm of reference outside [the novel or] the play [itself]”, which would suppress “any signified except a tautological signified”, like Greenbergian-modernist painting. (A note in passing: the aesthetically conservative stance taken by Lukács against literary Expressionism, in the name of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century model of realist novel, is in no way similar to André Bazin’s rejection of the German Expressionist school of filmmaking, in the name of the cinematic medium’s essential realism. As already noted, Bazin argues from a purist conception of cinema’s specificity as a medium – its “unique and irreducible self”. Although he champions realism, his medium-essentialism or purism brings him closer to Greenberg than to Lukács: in his view, realism is cinema’s vocation, its specificity residing in the fact that, before being an art, it is a medium for imprinting beings and things with the help of the light bouncing off them and without much need for human intervention – which makes its reproduction of the world potentially objective. On the other hand, movie Expressionism, as demonstrated by the German filmmakers, being dependent on theatrical tools – constructed sets, artificial lighting –, sins against the medium’s congenial realism.)

It is this “modernist” novel or drama, still dominated by the signifier, still committed to representationalism and meaning, that exerts the major influence on the “art film” which emerges as a “mode of film practice” (David Bordwell’s phrase) soon after World War II, with Italian Neorealism, and then with Italian directors like Fellini and Antonioni developing away from Neorealism, with the French “Nouvelle Vague” and the subsequent “new waves” appearing in various national cinemas throughout the 1960s. “Modernist” music (the art that served as a starting point for Adorno’s definition of “modernism”, just as painting was the starting point for Greenberg) may have exerted some influence on the cinematic “mode of narration” that David Bordwell calls “parametric”. While Greenbergian “art gallery modernism”, as already discussed, found its delayed filmic manifestation in the American and British “structural film” movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In his 1975 essay “The Two Avant-Gardes”, Peter Wollen doesn’t identify any aesthetic phenomenon fitting the description of Bordwell’s “parametric cinema”, and he gives short shrift to the Fellini-Antonioni-Truffaut mode of “art film”. For Wollen, writing in 1975, the two directions counting as avant-gardes are, on the one hand, the Greenbergian “modernism” of “structural” film, and, on the other hand, a direction exemplified by filmmakers such as the post-1968 Jean-Luc Godard, the French husband-and-wife team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet (working mostly in Germany and Italy), and the Hungarian Miklós Jancsó – exponents of what other critics and historians (like Jancsó’s compatriot, András Bálint Kovács<sup>12</sup>), have called “political modernism”.

As Wollen notes, the two “camps” tended to deny each other the status of avant-garde. For supporters of the Godard-Straub-Jancsó avant-garde, “modernism” à la Greenberg could look – as Wollen puts it – “hopelessly involved with the established bourgeois art world and its values”: this art which proclaimed its own autonomy, which concerned itself exclusively with its means and medium, didn’t threaten to put itself at the service of any social-political revolution; as Greenberg had written (and this was the pre-Cold War, not yet “depoliticized”, still Trotskyist Greenberg of “Towards a Newer Laocoon”,<sup>13</sup> championing abstraction and self-reflexivity in terms that still kept a politically militant ring, as an antidote to both Western-bourgeois and Stalinist kitsch), his modernism was not “an about-face towards a new society, but an emigration to a Bohemia which was to be art’s sanctuary from capitalism” – in other words, not a danger to the existing social order. András Bálint Kovács remarks that Greenberg “does not have a notion of the avant-garde distinct from modernism”<sup>14</sup> – he uses the two terms interchangeably –, although another film theorist, Gilberto Perez, notes that in earlier essays, Greenberg would more often use the term “avant-garde” (most famously in his 1939 “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”), while later, writing in a different context, “one of Cold War anti-Communism”, he would more often use the word “modernism”: a shift in vocabulary reflecting the later Greenberg’s downplaying of the politically subversive connotations (as Perez reminds us, “*avant-garde* was originally a political term”) that the earlier Greenberg used to find in the type of art that he was championing (the art he favored remained of the same type, of course).<sup>15</sup> As Kovács also notes, Greenberg “sees modernism as part of an organic development of the history of art, as something that fits in smoothly with earlier artistic traditions”, and he downplays the efforts of some of the avant-gardes to break with the past

radically: “[M]ovements conventionally considered avant-garde, like Soviet futurism and constructivism, Italian futurism, parts of German expressionism, and French surrealism, don’t easily fit within Greenberg’s notion of modernism.”<sup>16</sup> That’s why a more recently influential theorist like Peter Bürger<sup>17</sup> sees fit to draw a clear line between a “modernism” understood in Greenberg’s terms (art-for-art’s-sake aestheticism, media-specific formalism) and a “historical avant-garde” seen, in Gilberto Perez’s phrase, as a “short-lived fusillade”, an attack, from movements like dada and surrealism, on “the bourgeois institution of art and especially [on] its culmination in the heightened autonomy of modern art.”<sup>18</sup> As summarized by Kovács, where modernism “institutionalizes art qua art”, the avant-garde “attacks artistic institutions on the premise that institutionalization confines art to its pure aesthetic dimension and isolates it from its social functions”; the avant-garde claims art’s “reintegration into everyday life”, but an everyday life which it wishes to change – “art should be another intellectual practice promoting social revolution”.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that Bürger’s opposition between “the bourgeois aestheticism” of modernism and the revolutionary aspirations of the avant-garde can be made to look less severe and clear-cut than he makes it. For example, Gilberto Perez reminds us that José Ortega y Gasset, writing at the very time of Bürger’s historical avant-garde, praised it for being the very opposite of what Bürger and others would later see in it: “a reaction not against an art that was too detached from life but against an art that was too involved with it”,<sup>20</sup> against what Ortega y Gasset caricatures as the self-importance of much 19<sup>th</sup>-century art, insistently asking “to be placed in connection with dramatic social and political movements, or else with profound philosophical and religious currents”. Against this, Ortega y Gasset pitted his favorable impression that, “for the young generation, art is a thing of no consequence”.<sup>21</sup> Further challenging Bürger’s opposition between “modernism” and “avant-garde”, Perez also quotes Renato Poggioli’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962), which sees the “avant-garde” as spanning a century or more (“beginning in the aftermath of romanticism”, “continuing into the present and the foreseeable future”<sup>22</sup>) and including both what Greenberg called “modernism” and the “historical avant-garde” that Bürger and others see as breaking with complacently bourgeois modernism. Poggioli sees no complacency – for him, “as the genuine art of a bourgeois society”, modernism can only be antibourgeois<sup>23</sup> –, just as he sees no break – as Perez puts it, “modernism was always breaking

with itself, in revolt against established convention, including its own, what Harold Rosenberg called ‘the tradition of the new’.<sup>24</sup>

Still, in the very politicized atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the accusation that “structural film”, being Greenbergian-modernist – i.e., formalist, apolitical –, is not a “true” avant-garde, was not without a scorching effect.<sup>25</sup> That was the climate in which, as film theorist Noël Carroll points out, the exponents of the British variant of “structural” film, called by them “structural/materialist” film, tried to distance themselves from their American colleagues by claiming that their commitment to revealing the “materiality” of film was politically emancipatory – it made them “materialists” in the Marxist sense. But, as noticed at the time by Wollen, such slippage between the two words was inviting confusion: the “structural” filmmakers’ concern with foregrounding the “materiality” of film may have had a certain political significance (“the necessary interest of the artisan or craftsman in his materials and tools, asserted as an end in itself in the face of competition from large-scale capitalist industry, [from] the Ford model, dedicated to the mass production for profit of illusionist [realist, representational] cinema”), but this wasn’t the same as attempting to construct, with a minimum of rigor, a “Marxist-materialist” cinema. The latter effort was, in fact, characteristic of Wollen’s “other” avant-garde – the avant-garde of Godard, Straub and Huillet, or Jancsó –, which both Wollen and David Bordwell see as reviving and carrying on the Soviet-initiated 1920s tradition of what Bordwell called “historical-materialist narration”. (At the acme of his politically militant phase – the years 1968-72, when he teamed with Jean-Pierre Gorin in an attempt to construct what Wollen called “a new form of revolutionary discourse in the cinema”<sup>26</sup> –, Godard acknowledged the filiation by signing the films he made with Gorin as “The Dziga Vertov Group”, Vertov having made, in 1929, one of the most important works of the Soviet avant-garde, *Man with a Movie Camera*.)

The key link between Wollen’s “other” avant-garde and its Soviet forerunners (or between Bordwell’s two ages of “historical-materialist cinema”) is Bertolt Brecht. As pointed out by Bordwell<sup>27</sup> and others, Brecht’s theatrical practice and theory had been partly inspired by the Soviet cinema of the 1920s – a montage-based cinema whose brightest star, director Sergei Eisenstein, experimented more and more ambitiously, throughout the decade, with inserting images which clearly didn’t belong to the diegesis (i. e., the story-world): from the images of an ox being slaughtered, which he juxtaposed, in the 1925 *Strike*, with diegetic images of workers being

massacred, to images of pagan deities, which he juxtaposed, in the 1928 *October*, with a character's appeal to the Russian God. As he wrote in his journal, Brecht, too, was interested in a form of "montage" which would break the unity, the coherence asked by Aristotelian aesthetics of the world represented onstage, opposing an autonomy of the parts to the "indivisible whole" prescribed by Aristotle.<sup>28</sup> Brecht's art is anti-illusionist – it opposes the type of "realist" theatre or film that aims to give its viewer the illusion of being a witness to real-life events. But even if it entails a concern with showing the signs or the mechanisms of production, which the dominant theatre or cinema tries to efface or hide, Brechtian anti-illusionism – a defining feature of Peter Wollen's "other" cinematic avant-garde, also known as "political modernism", or, to Bordwell, as the second age of "historical-materialist" narrative cinema – is very different from the anti-illusionism of Wollen's "first" avant-garde, preoccupied "with self-definition, the irreducibility of the material support of a work, reflexive art-making". The difference is that Brechtian anti-illusionism is not anti-representational. Writing in 1938 to defend his (and other artists') avant-garde practice against Georg Lukács's accusation that it represented a straying away from realism (Lukács's models of literary realism being 19<sup>th</sup>-century models), Brecht identified himself as no less of a realist than Lukács was, adding that he understood realism as

discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.<sup>29</sup>

As Wollen summarizes it:

For Brecht, of course, the point of the *Verfremdung*-effect [alienation effect, distanciation effect] was not simply to break the spectator's involvement and empathy in order to draw attention to the artifice of art, an art-centred model, but in order to demonstrate the workings of society, a reality obscured by habitual norms of perception, by habitual modes of identification with 'human problems'. [...] There was no question then for Brecht of abandoning the whole realm of reference outside the play [...]. He did not equate anti-illusionism with suppression of any signified except a tautological signified. [...] Brecht's objection to the traditional

bourgeois theatre was that it provided a substitute for life – a simulated experience, in the realm of the imaginary, of the life of another person, or other people. In its stead, he actually wanted a representation – a picture, a diagram, a demonstration: he uses all these words – to which the spectator remained external and through which he/she acquired knowledge about (not gained experience of) the society in which he/she, himself/herself lived (not the life of another/others). [...] A representation (...) was not simply a likeness or resemblance to the appearance of its object/referent; on the contrary, it represented its essence, precisely what did not appear at first sight. Thus a gap of space had to be opened up within the realm of perception – a gap whose significance Brecht attempted to pinpoint with his concept of ‘distanciation’. [...] Brecht wanted to find a concept of ‘representation’ that would account for a passage from perception/recognition to knowledge/understanding, from the imaginary to the symbolic: a theater of representation, mimesis even, but also a theater of ideas. Moreover, one of the lessons to be learned from this didactic theater, this theater of ideas, arguments, judgements, was precisely that ideas cannot be divorced from their material substrate, that they have material determinations, that ‘social being determines thought’ as the classic formula (deriving from Marx’s *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) puts it. Brecht, of course, was a militant materialist, in the political (Leninist) sense.<sup>30</sup>

No matter how diverse were the ways in which the lessons of Brecht were assimilated – and these lessons could certainly lead filmmakers in very dissimilar stylistic directions<sup>31</sup> –, the second of Wollen’s “two avant-gardes” consisted of filmmakers contributing, one way or another, to what American critic Annette Michelson recognized in 1974 as the “post-Brechtian aesthetic of European [cinema]”.<sup>32</sup> What Wollen called the very “core” of the “political modernist” position – namely the idea that politics in art concerned the signifier as much as the signified – was indebted to Brecht.<sup>33</sup> It clearly separated “political modernism” from other specimens of militant leftist cinema being abundantly produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s – the thrillers of Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras, or the Italian westerns exhorting Mexican (“Third World”) revolution in terms loosely indebted to Frantz Fanon -, films that tried to be (or at least pretended to try to be) politically useful to the radical left, while operating strictly within the genres and formulas of dominant cinema. At the time, such movies were vehemently denounced by avant-garde filmmakers like the immediately post-’68 Godard or by theorists like those writing for the French cinephile journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, also

turned by the events of May '68 into promoters of "political modernism" and nothing else. As Godard said in a 1970 interview, "it is necessary to stop making movies on politics, to stop making political movies, and to begin making political movies *politically* [his italics]".<sup>34</sup> What he meant was – in the words of Wollen – "that being 'political' is not in itself enough, that there must be a break with bourgeois norms of diegesis, subversion and deconstruction of codes".<sup>35</sup> Writing in *Cahiers* about a Costa-Gavras film, Jean-Louis Comolli chastised the director and his collaborators for failing "to do the preliminary work *politically* [his italics] necessary to all political discourse: a questioning of its [said discourse's] conditions of existence and of its means"; instead, the filmmakers chose the "simple acceptance of the conditions and means already there, in place (...), the *reproduction* [his italics] of the means, techniques and forms of dominant production in cinema".<sup>36</sup> At best, as Godard himself acknowledged, such means, techniques and forms – the storytelling always focused on individuals, always reliant on identification mechanisms, always aiming for big emotional impact – could be of some limited use to the revolutionary cause, by stirring emotional sympathy, outrage etc.; but, as Godard added<sup>37</sup>, such stirred feelings remained of very limited use (not to mention the fact that they could be just as easily stirred, by the same means, on behalf of the most unjust causes) without a correct (Marxist) analysis of the situation ("discovering the causal complexes of society", as Brecht had put it, beyond the level of identification with "human problems"), an analysis which this type of filmmaking was ill-suited to guide. At worst, as Jean-Louis Baudry wrote in connection to the "politicized" Italian (or "spaghetti") westerns set in Mexico and calling for revolution in the "Third World", the appearance of a "revolutionary discourse" within such genre (or formula) cinema simply meant that "bourgeois discourse", no longer able to ignore or refute an oppositional discourse growing stronger and stronger, defuses it by "producing a double, a *faux-semblant* which, by 'miming' it, destroys it. The process can be described as the appropriation by one ideology of the *terms* [his italics] of a contradictory ideology".<sup>38</sup>

The "political modernist" avant-garde not only refused fraternization with filmmakers whose political orientation appeared to be correct, but whose aesthetic forms remained conservative; a 1970 *Cahiers du Cinéma* debate on Miklós Jancsó's 1969 film *The Confrontation / Fényes szelek*, with Jean-Pierre Oudart and Jean Narboni making two different cases for the "prosecution", while Comolli mounts a defense of the film, shows an amount of ambivalence and outright suspicion towards a filmmaker



who, at a first glance, seemed to evince the requisite combination of political commitment and formal radicalism. When Oudart writes about the “freshness” and “beauty” of the film, and about the aesthetic pleasure it gives, he is not actually complimenting the Hungarian director: that aesthetic pleasure is actually suspect – even worse than that, because it dissolves all possible meaning of the political analysis that the viewer is given the illusion of participating in.<sup>39</sup> Oudart’s critique belongs to the same climate as feminist critic’s Laura Mulvey’s call for “the destruction of pleasure [as] a radical weapon”<sup>40</sup> – a climate characterized, in the words of theorist Robert Stam, by “a puritanical attitude toward filmic pleasure”.<sup>41</sup> Writes Oudart:

The problem would thus be to know whether all non-discursive *écriture* does not tend above all else to give us aesthetic pleasure (precisely at the moment when we begin to question its principles), and whether all the ‘readings’ we give it do not have the sole aim of multiplying this pleasure, at the same time as allowing us a knowledge of the object, a knowledge almost always limited to an assent to the object’s aesthetic, in other words to the ideology (to whose production or reproduction we critics contribute) which makes that object acceptable as an aesthetic object (to certain social groups to which we belong).

Meanwhile, looked at from the other “camp” (the one occupied by the first of Wollen’s “two avant-gardes” – the predominantly formalist, apolitical one), not only Jancsó’s films, but also those of other “political modernists”, could appear as much too rooted in the commercial system (narrative fiction shot most of the time on 35 mm film, sometimes using film stars, produced and distributed through “aboveground” channels and networks) in order to qualify as “avant-garde”. As Kovács explains it, in the cinema, the term “avant-garde” has come to be used more or less synonymously or interchangeably with the terms “experimental” and “underground”, although each of the three terms “reveals a different aspect of the same practice”, non-narrative fictional practice in the cinema being “most often structurally determined (thus experimental)”, just as it is often “based on alternative production and distribution networks (thus underground)” and it is “sometimes political (thus avant-garde in the traditional sense)”. In other words, in the cinema, the label “avant-garde” has only *sometimes* been attached to movements which had a political component. If Peter Bürger sees the avant-garde as necessarily political,

opposing an apolitical, „purely” aesthetic modernism, in cinema the term has become inextricably associated with a non-narrative, non-commercial practice, which may or may not include a political component, but which, in any case, opposes both the Hollywood-type film and the European art-film industry for depending on narrative fiction, movie stars, aboveground funding and distribution networks etc. – an opposition which „only seldom translates into political terms”.<sup>42</sup> So even if a Godard, at the apogee of his period as a maker of politically radical „counter-cinema”, would sometimes dispense completely with narrative, 35 mm and exposure on the film-festival circuit, to the other “camp” he would still appear fundamentally different – the difference, in Wollen’s words, being ultimately one of „the film-makers’ frame of reference, the places from which they come and the culture to which they relate”.<sup>43</sup> As for Miklós Jancsó, all through his decade (1969-1979) as a maker of “political modernist” or (Bordwell’s preferred term) “historical-materialist” cinema, he would remain an “art film” director in terms of his institutional backing and of his working with narrative, while his mixture of radical leftist politics and radical aesthetic form would qualify his work as “avant-garde”.

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Born in 1921 (to a Romanian mother and a Hungarian father), Jancsó only started to come into his own as a film artist when he was past 40. He first studied folklore and law (in Cluj). He was a Soviet prisoner of war for a few months in 1945 and he joined the Hungarian Communist Party in 1946. Jancsó owed the decision of studying filmmaking to pioneer film theorist Béla Balázs, freshly returned, at the end of WWII, from a 25-year exile precipitated by his having worked, in 1919, for the short-lived Communist government of Béla Kun (in whose Commissariat of Public Education he had been colleagues with Lukács). The future director served as an assistant to Balázs, at the National Film Archive which had just been founded at the latter’s initiative, till Balázs’s death in 1948.

Jancsó spent the next ten years making a lot of newreels and documentary shorts – all of which he would later dismiss as lies.<sup>44</sup> 1949-53 was the period in which Soviet control over all aspects of Hungarian life was at its most stifling; in the arts, this meant adoption of the dictates of Stalinist “Socialist Realism”, under the supervision of Soviet “advisors” (the Soviet “advisor” to local filmmakers was Vsevolod Pudovkin – an ex-colleague of Sergei Eisenstein’s and Alexander Dovzhenko’s in the Soviet cinematic avant-garde of the 1920s, now reduced to conformity). There were signs of regeneration between 1954 and 1956 – the year of a great,

brutally crushed anti-Soviet insurrection –, but what followed was another period of repression, in which, as film historian John Cunningham has put it, “whatever talent, old or new, was around (...), it could not have flourished”. Cunningham gives the example of Jancsó himself, whose first feature film, *The Bells Have Gone to Rome / A harangok Rómába mentek* (also his fiction debut), “sunk without a trace” after its 1958 premiere.<sup>45</sup>

However, conditions would soon start relaxing under the post-1956 János Kádár regime, until they would become less repressive (for artists, among other categories of population) than anywhere else in the Soviet bloc.<sup>46</sup> For filmmakers this meant the possibility of emancipation from all vestiges of Stalinist aesthetics, and exposure to the innovations then mainly radiating from two European sources: Italian neorealist and post-neorealist cinema, and the cinema of the French New Wave. Other Eastern bloc film cultures also opened themselves to these influences, leading to a flowering of local “new waves” – consecrated in the film festivals of the West – or to what Kovács calls the birth of “modernist art cinema” in each of these cultures. Kovács adds that, of course, it was not just a matter of copying Western models:

Modernism’s power lay in its capability to ‘infiltrate’ various national traditions [cinematic, literary] and provide a common language with which to communicate with other cultures. It was the common experience of changing modernity that made the common language possible. Nevertheless, each country, each region formulated its own version of this experience, and this is what gave diversity to the modernist movement. This is why almost all of these films became international successes and were acknowledged as widening the modernist movement. But most important, they turned out to be representing just the preparation for the emergence of real original achievements in Eastern European modernism.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, as acknowledged by Jancsó in conversation with Kovács, and as remarked upon by many critics, including Guido Aristarco<sup>48</sup>, the Hungarian director’s crucial debt was to Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, whom Kovács counts among the four creators (the others being Robert Bresson, Alain Resnais and Godard), of the fundamental “modernist” aesthetic forms within “art cinema”<sup>49</sup>. Jancsó would begin by following rather closely the Antonioni model of *La notte* (1961) in his own second feature, *Cantata / Oldás és kötés* (1962) – the film with which, according to Kovács, Hungarian “modernist art cinema” is born. But,

working from that model, Jancsó would go on to create, in his fourth film, the 1966 *The Round-Up / Szegénylegények*, his very own modernist form.

For a while (in the 1960s) the most emblematic “modernist” working in the narrative “art cinema” (as opposed to the non-narrative experimental cinema), Antonioni had emerged from the margins of the neorealist movement. Modernism in the arts has often been opposed to realism – by theorists otherwise as incompatible as Georg Lukács (upholder of the brand of realist novel perfected in the 19th century, against “decadent” developments beginning with Naturalism, continuing with Expressionism and culminating in Joycean modernism) and Clement Greenberg (champion of modernism in painting). Actually, there are plenty of grounds to see modernism as growing smoothly from a realist impulse, rather than from an impulse to break with realism. In the history of painting, the Impressionists were “both optical realists and champions of pure patches of paint”<sup>50</sup>:

[t]hey endeavored to paint actual appearances as they had never been painted, to render on canvas the way things really look to the eye that perceives them; and at the same time, as part of the same impulse, they made palpable to the viewer the means of their rendering, the paint they applied on canvas and their way of applying it.<sup>51</sup>

As for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novel, it may sometimes be also called “the classic-realist novel”, but its break with classicism is actually much more serious than Naturalism’s supposed (by Lukács) break with realism:

Naturalism only intensified what [literary historian] Ian Watt has called the ‘formal realism’ of the novel, its ‘circumstantial view of life’, its attention to particulars and mistrust of generalities, its insistence on getting down to specifics rather than relying on the idealizations, the universals of classicism. [...] And the modernist novel did not turn its back on naturalism or give up the search after truth [but tried to deepen and refine it, bringing forward its own forms in the process].<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in Italian cinema, the “neorealism” which flourishes in the aftermath of WWII leads smoothly enough into the post-1960 modernism of Antonioni, Fellini etc., after breaking with a narrative-movie “classicism” epitomized by the Hollywood cinema (which by that time had already been adopted as a stylistic model by most national film industries in the

world). So neorealism may be considered – in the words of Bordwell – “a transitional phenomenon”.<sup>53</sup> As Kovács puts it, one its “main contributions to modernism was its suppression of the hierarchy between the narrative background and the narrative foreground, which thereby loosened up the narrative structure”.<sup>54</sup> Kovács is talking about the accommodation, in the films’ plots, of episodes or incidents which, judged by the principles of “classical” or “Hollywood-style” narration – principles including economy and tight cause-and-effect logic –, would have appeared as disposable (because not strictly demanded by what happens before them and not necessarily leading to what comes next), time-wasting, drama-dissipating, narrative-slowness. It was André Bazin, an advocate of realism in the cinema (and, incidentally, a co-founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, future bastion of end-of-the-sixties political modernism), who celebrated these moments for the way they freed cinematic time from the straitjacket of tight cause-and-effect plotting (every action leading to the next, no loose ends, every information handed to the viewer, every highlighted detail, serving either to advance the story or to build up the drama), for the way they made time stick out as a solid substance – the very stuff a film is constructed of – rather than disappear from the spectator’s awareness. Bazin was saluting the new ways of understanding films – film as object sculpted in time, filmmaking as the construction of space in time, emancipated from the narrative and dramatic necessities of classical plotting (what Gilles Deleuze would later see as cinema’s transition from “the movement-image” to “the time-image”) – that Italian neorealism was just hinting at, leaving modernism to explore them<sup>55</sup>. Another tendency that Bazin detected and saluted in certain neorealist films (most signally in Roberto Rossellini’s 1948 *Germany, Year Zero / Germania, anno zero*) was towards character behavior that was increasingly opaque, psychologically unfathomable.<sup>56</sup> (As Roland Barthes would comment for *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1963, “the most important criterion of an art work’s modernity is that it is not ‘psychological’ in the traditional sense.”<sup>57</sup>) This tendency will also be developed by Antonioni, and then by Miklós Jancsó.

Antonioni’s first films were documentary shorts and, as a director of feature-length fiction, he started out in 1950, when the first neorealist wave had already broken and the concept of “neorealism” was starting to broaden, no longer presupposing, on the part of the artists, an exclusive concern with the lives of the poor, but reaching to encompass other social milieus. Aesthetically, he didn’t do anything revolutionary until the early 1960s “informal trilogy” of *L’avventura* (1960), *La notte* (1961) and

*L'eclisse* (1962), although his preferred technique of shooting in long takes, moving his actors and his camera in a complex ballet ("the characters execute a leisurely ballet of foreground and background movement, as if the director has slowed down the choreography of [Jean] Renoir's *La Règle du jeu*"<sup>58</sup>), anticipates Jancsó's own tendency "to follow one character for a while [with his camera] before picking up another just as the figure crosses our path",<sup>59</sup> and so on, in ever lengthier and more richly balletic takes.

Ironically, Antonioni's own takes became shorter in the aesthetically groundbreaking films of the early 60s (including *La notte*, a model for Jancsó's *Cantata*). What was revolutionary in those films was the carrying to a new level of the neorealist tendency towards abolishing the hierarchy between narrative foreground and narrative background, between what's of big narrative significance or dramatic import and what's just "marginal" or "minor". In Antonioni's own words, what he did was eliminate "the problem with the bicycle".<sup>60</sup> The film he is alluding to is Vittorio De Sica's neorealist classic *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), where it is the protagonist's clearly formulated goal – retrieving his stolen bicycle, a tool he needs in order to go on earning his living – that justifies the filmmakers' descriptions of Rome; but Antonioni is referring metaphorically to all the neorealist films whose storylines – exactly like those characteristic of "classical" or "Hollywood-type cinema" – are tight cause-and-effect chains of events delineating the protagonists' pursuits of consistent and immediately understandable goals. What happens in Antonioni's epochal *L'avventura* is that, although such a goal emerges quite clearly – it's a detective-story type of goal, finding a missing person –, it gets mislaid in the subsequent course of events: the search for the missing girl becomes, for the amateur investigators, an occasion for romance and sightseeing. Bringing to full fruition a tendency inaugurated by the neorealist films, the distinction between what pertains to a "main" storyline and what amounts to digression disappears completely here, as the purposeful movement of characters in classical-type or Hollywood-type movies (a movement which remains purposeful, goal-driven, in the neorealist films) turns into aimless wandering and passive witnessing. In a development of another tendency that Bazin had detected as early as 1948 in the neorealism of Rossellini, the characters' lack of clear and consistently maintained goals makes them less knowable – characterizable less in terms of a solid "core" than in terms of often capricious, unobviously motivated behavior. Another crucial twist is that, while neorealist heroes fit into their physical environments (which they may experience as harsh to the

point of having become unlivable, but not as fundamentally unfamiliar), the contact between characters and physical environment has become broken in Antonioni – the characters' wandering is actually a search for this lost contact<sup>61</sup>, which can be thought of as their abstract version of the neorealist bicycle. The stylistic consequence of this thematic focus on the rupture between character and physical environment is that description of the environment becomes more independent of those imperatives of classical narration – advancing the story and characterizing its protagonists: the environment here is neither backdrop for some character's trajectory towards his or her goal, nor externalization of the character's state of mind. This means that, as characters wander in search of that lost contact with the environment, the filmmaker can conduct a parallel investigation, alternatively documentary and pictorial, anthropocentric and abstract, sticking close to the characters or reducing them to dots in the landscape.

In *Cantata*, this modernist form developed in the West by Antonioni is used by a socialist filmmaker in an early, compromised attempt at a reckoning with what it had recently become possible to acknowledge as the excesses and the errors of Mátyás Rákosi-era Stalinism and post-insurrection repression. (Aristarco has quoted Jancsó's own description of the film as "an exam of conscience for my generation of intellectuals".<sup>62</sup>) In the film, a successful big-city doctor in his mid-thirties has a crisis whose exact nature remains unspecified for a long stretch, and whose basic manifestation is antonionesque wandering – a lot of restless drifting through an all-night party, among sophisticated, artistic, Westernized friends, followed by an escape to the countryside (more exactly, to the barren Hungarian prairie – the *puszta* – which was to become the setting of most of Jancsó's pre-1980 films), in search of his roots, as it very gradually turns out. It also turns out that he had been a fanatic in the 1950s – undisturbed at the time by his girlfriend's being kicked out of medical school for being the daughter of wealthy peasants. A fanatic for the cause or just fanatically selfish (eager to get rid of a girlfriend whose "unhealthy" social origin could have hindered his professional advancement)? A man of certainty at the time, the doctor confesses not knowing anything anymore.

The borrowed antonionesque form belongs with the modernisms that leading socialist aesthetician Georg Lukács had spent a lifetime denouncing as "decadent", granting them the limited, mostly symptomatic value of being negative responses to the negative reality of Western capitalism, but, beyond that, finding them unhelpful even as Western art, let alone as possible models for socialist artists. Broadly, the modernism

condemned by Lukács – Kafka, Joyce, Musil, Beckett, a modernism to which Antonioni is certainly affiliated – was the history of the development of techniques for depicting alienation from capitalist society. But since these artists, in Lukács’s view, lacked a clear grasp of capitalist society as a “totality” to which all individual phenomena were subordinated, their depictions of alienation were stuck at a subjective, myopic level. The history of (principally) the novel in Western capitalist cultures, from the great 19th-century “critical realists” (like Balzac or Tolstoy) to the modernists writing in Lukács’s own time, was the story of how artists had gradually given up relating individual alienation to a correctly diagnosed “totality”; instead, they had complacently exacerbated and enthroned this myopic subjectivity, whose most pernicious effect was that it tended to “ontologize” loneliness – to proclaim it an eternal, immutable feature of a universal human condition, rather than the product of a historically determined socio-economic configuration.<sup>63</sup> And, if such aesthetic forms were so inadequate even in representing alienation in capitalist society, of what use could they be to Socialist artists trying to represent the contradictions of socialist development?

Still, by 1960 it had started to be admissible in post-Stalinist cultures (Lukács himself admits it in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*) that “socialist realism” (which in the lukácsian scheme of things should have proved itself the most evolved artistic form – superior not only to “decadent” modernism, but, just as naturally, to 19th-century “critical realism”, because socialist writers were automatically the beneficiaries of the correct philosophical instruments for grasping “totality”) had not been completely successful, either, in depicting the contradictions of socialist development; these had often been buried under a combination of mere “naturalism” (often identified by Lukács with a fetishism of appearances, of the external details of reality) with a compensatory “romantic” optimism, aggravated by what could now be acknowledged as political errors.<sup>64</sup> In these circumstances, borrowed Western-modernist forms could be accepted as fit to represent socialist reality, if selected and handled with care. Jancsó’s transplantation of *antoniennui* (as critics were to begin calling the Italian director’s specific mood) in a Hungarian socialist context – once an energetic participant in the construction of socialism, the doctor stops feeling at home in this new world, be it city or countryside – is handled so that alienation emerges neither as a product of this specific type of society, nor as an incurably universal human condition. It’s something that can only pass, just a breakdown due to exhaustion. The 1950s are



acknowledged as having been a rough patch, but incontestable gains are shown to have been made – the country is shown as definitely being on the right track. “He who is not against us is with us”, Party leader János Kádár declared at the time when Jancsó was making *Cantata* (what Kádár was actually doing in that declaration was turning on its head a slogan of the dreaded Rákosi era),<sup>65</sup> and, by the end, *Cantata* is in tune with this official discourse of reconciliation.

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In a celebrated interview granted in May 1968 to Yvette Bíró (then recent founder and editor-in-chief of the influential journal *Filmkultúra*, subsequently a consultant to Jancsó on the films he made between 1969 and 1972, and still later, in 1977, the author of a French-language monograph of the Hungarian director), life-long anti-modernist Lukács admiringly remarked that “[i]n Hungary, or at least in Hungarian culture, film nowadays plays the role of the avant-garde”, mentioning Jancsó’s fourth feature, *The Round-Up*, as particularly praise-worthy<sup>66</sup>. Confronted with this declaration, other critics have been quick to remark that a film like *The Round-Up* could be said to synthesize a lot of the “decadent modernism” that Lukács had repressed – not only Antonioni, but also Kafka, Beckett and Ionesco.<sup>67</sup> For it is the film in which, by introducing “the Kafkaesque experience of Central European historical existence” into “the radicalized form of Antonioni-style modernism”, Jancsó created his own modernist form, “starting a long and lasting series of all kinds of political and historical parables” in the Hungarian cinema, and, most importantly, creating “the most general and comprehensive visual and narrative model of the Kafkaesque atmosphere of Central European history”.<sup>68</sup> Then again, by the 1960s, Lukács is said to have discovered that “Kafka was a realist after all” – this after being arrested for his participation in the 1956 insurrection (as a minister in Imre Nagy’s revolutionary government), after being “taken to Romania, and shut up in a castle where he and his fellow-prisoners were treated sometimes like felons and sometimes like guests of honour”.<sup>69</sup>

Like nearly all the films made by Jancsó between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s (with the one exception of the 1970 Italian production *La pacifista*, featuring Antonioni muse Monica Vitti), *The Round-Up* is set in the past – in this case, in the late 1860s (at the time of the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), when survivors of the 1848 anti-Habsburg revolution are still being hunted down. Again, like in nearly all the films made by Jancsó between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, the action takes place in the *puszta* – in and around a fort where the

military authorities conduct an investigation among arrested peasants and bandits –, with the result that the historical setting is abstracted to a larger or smaller degree.

A crucial move of Jancsó's (and of his life-long partner in the writing of his films' screenplays – novelist Gyula Hernádi) was to have broken here with dramaturgical models (even "de-dramatized" like Antonioni's) centered on psychologically defined individuals, reestablishing contact instead with the Soviet avant-garde films of the 1920s, by reinventing their "collective protagonists". The notion of the "collective protagonist" had originally been developed in opposition to the perceived incapacity of Western-capitalist fiction and drama to imagine conflict except in terms of individual character (good, bad, flawed character), attributing to individual initiative an exaggerated role in changing history and occluding the real (at least according to Marxist-Leninist doctrine), impersonal forces and laws at work in society. The 1920s aim of filmmakers like Eisenstein or Dovzhenko – coming up with a representation of the proletariat (or the peasantry) itself as a historical force, without allowing that representation to be hijacked by individual heroics – was changed by decree, in the 1930s, into the "middle road" of Socialist Realism: a demand for heroes who would still epitomize their class, yet also be relatively individuated. By following a character only for a while, then dropping him – usually by killing him – and following another, then dropping/killing him too, and so on, and by not allowing these characters to express much beyond fear, calculation, survival instinct, Jancsó is truly reinventing the counter-dramaturgy of the collective protagonist. The big difference is that in *The Round-Up* – unlike in Dovzhenko's 1930 *Earth*, say, or in Eisenstein's 1929 *Old and New* – the peasant class is definitely not depicted as a necessarily positive force. The country people who have been rounded up in the fortress – some of them former freedom fighters, others just bandits – are made to inform on each other and kill each other. At the behest of the military, they interchangeably play the roles of victimizer and victim. And what do the authorities gain by manipulating them in this manner? How do these games advance the investigation which supposedly demanded this mass arrest? As pointed out by Kovács, recapitulation of the procedural steps undertaken by the military shows that they don't add up as investigative police work: it's not just that the viewers of the film, like the suspects rounded up in the fortress, are being kept in the dark about what exactly is being investigated; it's also that nothing is actually being investigated – the authorities just pretend wanting to find some people

and clarify some facts (objectives which seem to change constantly, as do the officers supervising the meeting of those objectives), when in reality it constantly turns out that they knew in advance who or what. As Kovács concludes, what's being practiced here is not any investigative police work; what's being practiced here is the ritual of power, "the main goal of which is the survival of the hierarchic power system itself".<sup>70</sup> (Western critics would be quick to link this vision with the young Jancsó's formative experience of Stalinism, whose destructive methods – the anathemas, the purges – he perceived at the time, like other disconcerted young communists, as completely mysterious, later coming to suspect that there was no deeper logic behind the mystery, no deeper purpose on the part of the power system, than its self-preservation and self-perpetuation.<sup>71</sup>)

As explained by Kovács, at the level of Jancsó's principles of *mise-en-scène* or staging, it is the paradigm of this ritual of power – of manipulation understood "essentially as a character's physical impact on another character's motion" – that starts to structure all character movement. At this level, too, Jancsó breaks free of the Antonioni model, in which "spaces vary from film to film, and as [the Italian director] progressed in his career, physical emptiness in a literal sense characterized them only to a limited degree", his films after *L'avventura* and before *Zabriskie Point* (1970) being set in urban environments, where character movement is structured, to some extent, by "the labyrinth of the big city". In the Jancsian *puszta* of *The Round-Up* – where "[t]here are no streets, no roads to lead the characters' movements, and there are only a few randomly dispersed built objects or trees to provide some sense of orientation in this endless and homogenous space" –, the space is "given structure almost exclusively by the movements of the camera and the characters", and the characters' movements are most often structured by orders coming from other characters. As Kovács writes, there is "very little autonomy in the characters' movements", everything they do being "visibly or invisibly enforced and manipulated by other characters' movements, whose manipulation is usually disclosed subsequently". The basic elements of the ritual of manipulation, repeated again and again, are "to set something in motion, to immobilize, to change sides and force others to change sides, to change and to force others to change clothing, to kill (...), to change and to force others to change direction or speed of motion."<sup>72</sup> Reviewers of Antonioni's films had joked about how the Italian director was turning "the talkies" into "the walkies".<sup>73</sup> With Jancsó, the walkies turn into cine-choreography, or cinematic "choreo-caligraphy"<sup>74</sup>, or "camera ballet"

(although this last term had first been used in relation to Antonioni<sup>75</sup>). Neither passively recording the spectacle, nor personified as an “invisible observer” who tries to keep up with a rapidly changing situation that he/she cannot predict, the camera participates in the construction of cinematic space for effects of surprise and suspense. What lies off-screen or beyond the frame – and either invades the frame suddenly, or is disclosed to us by the camera moving without any cuts, extending homogenous space – is unpredictable. As Kovács explains, the surprises originating in off-screen space (made possible not only by the framing, but also by the discreetly “unrealistic” suppression of noises which might have alerted us) train the viewer in a tense awareness that, at any moment, the arbitrariness of the camera movement and the camera angle might conspire to hide important information from his or her eyes.

Jancsó’s next film, the international arthouse hit *The Red and the White / Csillagosok, katonák* (1967), becomes even bolder in its choreographic conception, both ritual-like and geometric, asserting with even more clarity a measure of equivalence between power and oppression, a measure of interchangeability between victimizers and victims. Another historical picture (set in 1919), reconstructing events (the heroic participation of Hungarian volunteers in the Russian Civil War, fighting on the Bolshevik or “Red” side against the Tsarist faithful, also known as the “Whites”, during the short period when Hungary itself, led by Béla Kun, was a Communist republic) whose specificity was again abstracted by the barren-plain setting, *The Red and the White* staged armed conflict as an absurdist series of reversals – two groups forever taking each other prisoner and submitting each other to similar rituals (undressing being one of them).

At this stage in his development, Jancsó was not yet a “political modernist” or, in Bordwell’s terminology, a maker of “historical-materialist” cinema: he was operating in modes – the kafkaesque-absurdist in *The Round-Up*, the geometrical-absurdist in *The Red and the White* – that still kept him “close to the fashionable heart of international modernism” (as American critic J. Hoberman would later phrase it<sup>76</sup>). Yes, he presented himself as a post-Stalinist left-wing filmmaker (no longer a member of the Communist Party, which he had left after 1956<sup>77</sup>) working in an officially socialist country; his films presented themselves as mechanisms or (in the words of Jancsó and co-writer Gyula Hernádi<sup>78</sup>) “models” of the mechanisms of power and repression, built with the aim of investigating the rule or the law governing such mechanisms. But, as Jean Narboni accused them in the course of his 1970 debate with his

*Cahiers* colleagues, they weren't true investigations; Jancsó knew the answers in advance – what he represented choreographically in *The Round-Up* and especially in *The Red and the White* was what he imagined that rule or that law to be, what he had decided in advance the rule was. It was this *a priori* understanding of what power is, and how it turns to repression, that provided the main principles of Jancsian choreography, where the exercise of power always consists in dictating the movements of other human bodies, and the oppressed either turn to oppressing others when they get the chance (as in *The Round-Up*), or they simply change places with their oppressors (as happens in *The Red and the White*). As Narboni wrote, there were reasons to doubt that this understanding was in accordance with historical materialism. It was rather that, in films like *The Round-Up* and especially *The Red and the White*, the power-repression equivalence emerged as “an abstract, transcendental, universal Law, always and everywhere valid”. In Lukácsian terms, Jancsó was guilty of “ontologizing” the repressive character of power: it became a fatality, explainable either as a metaphysical evil or an uncorrectable flaw in an immutable human nature. The films easily lent themselves to conservative readings, as they risked, in Narboni's words, “reinforcing scepticism and eliminatory disillusionment” on the left.

It was Jancsó's 1969 film *The Confrontation* that first went beyond choreographically implying a simple equivalence between power and repression. Jancsó's first film in color, it was also his first dealing directly with the Stalinist era – it was set in the late 40s – and the first in which, besides his by now patented choreographic representation of power as repression, he also came up with a positive choreographic representation of revolutionary energy and high collectivist spirits (nudity here – unlike in *The Round-Up* or *The Red and the White* – is no longer associated with vulnerability and powerlessness, with unwanted submission to another's will; here it is featured with its full end-of-the-sixties meaning – freedom, emancipation). With its young, beautiful communists forever breaking into spontaneous, yet as if telepathically synchronized group singing (their repertoire a mixture of revolutionary and traditional folk songs, both Hungarian and international), *The Confrontation* is a quasi-musical. (Until then, the John Ford western had been Jancsó's – acknowledged – Hollywood reference:<sup>79</sup> the prairie, the isolated fort, the horses, the military uniforms.) It is Jancsó's definitive departure from “realism” – not only the group singing-chanting-dancing adds to the stylization, but also the fact that the events of the late 1940s are reenacted by people wearing clothes and hairstyles obviously belonging to

the late 1960s. Jancsó's previous reenactments of historical events had also been powerfully stylized, but with *The Confrontation* – in which fashions are deliberately anachronistic and movement is pushed further in the direction of dance – he embraces a Brechtian alternative to the aesthetic "illusionism" that simulates you-are-there immersion in history. A reenactment which foregrounds its ritual component at the expense of the dramatic simulation of past events; a reenactment which doesn't aim for immediacy, but, on the contrary, works to maintain spectators at a critical distance; a reenactment not so much dramatic as "epic" – in the sense in which Brecht called his theatre an "epic" theatre – not dramatizing past events as much as *telling* the audience about them, the actors keeping the enacted situations at arm's length instead of simulating as convincingly as possible that they are living through them.

His previous films, with their absurdist-repetitive rituals of always abusive power, conducted on the stage of Beckett-like emptiness provided by the *puszta*, had been vulnerable to charges of ahistoricity, of advancing the politically defeatist notion that the exercise of power was inherently repressive. *The Confrontation*, with its double historical referent – the late 40s and the late 1960s –, helped make his project more apparent, made it easier to see that what he had been trying to do was read the past with the questions of the post-Stalinist present – the questions that the left owed itself after the Stalinist experience, its regeneration depending upon its confronting them. Dealing with Stalinism directly, *The Confrontation* also represented power – in this case, a power that announced itself as liberating, as emancipatory – turning repressive, but it was more complex and ambiguous than the preceding films. It didn't consist only in choreography – some of its characters ordering its other characters to do this or do that, the oppressors changing sides with the oppressed; it also consisted in debate, in the verbal delineation of various positions, ramifying from a common allegiance to Communism – the hardline position, the humanistic-moderate position, the bureaucratic perspective of the Party, the man-of-action perspective of the police. What's more, because of the double time-setting of the film – its cca. '48 which looks like cca. '68 –, the (female) character who, immediately after WWII, stands for revolutionary ruthlessness, even terror, doubles as a New Left student radical of 1968, perhaps a Maoist (like those agitating at the time in capitalist France as well as in officially socialist Hungary – where they protested against Kádár's depoliticized, consumerist brand of socialism). But, even if looked at solely in its late 40s context, this character carries

different associations: she represents an enthusiastic, independent-minded Communist youth, whose autonomy, by the end of the film, is sharply curtailed by the Stalinist officials; but she's herself associated with Stalinist rhetoric – with the Rákosi-era slogan (later reversed by Kádár) “he who is not with us is against us” – and the terror she unleashes when elected leader of her group can be seen as Stalinism in miniature. In the same way, the higher-ups who finally demote her are connoted as Stalinist-era Party functionaries, but also as Kádárist officials – pragmatic above anything else, possibly depoliticized, primarily interested in keeping power. And, while taking away the power of the young hardliner, they also predict that she still has a political future – in other words, in time she'll discipline and bureaucratize herself, and become like them.

Aside from the Communists, in whose ranks all these tendencies are present, the film features another group – the priests and students of a Catholic seminary which the Communists initially invade for the sake of a debate. All these groups confront and circle each other; there are mergings and regroupings. The result is an original contribution to the unconcerted international effort – reuniting filmmakers from France (Godard) to Brazil (Glauber Rocha), with Jancsó and the Yugoslav Dušan Makavejev as the only contributors from the socialist bloc – to redefine for the 1960s the left-wing cinematic avant-garde that had been originally defined by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s. Like some of the major Soviet films from that era, Jancsó's films feature “collective protagonists”; and if Soviet films identified themselves to their audiences (through disjunctive editing, characters addressing the camera, intertitles addressing the characters, and other devices) as straightforwardly rhetorical artefacts (with the filmmakers talking *over* their characters, unlike the makers of Hollywood or Western-style dramatic narratives, who tend to talk *through* their characters), Jancsó's films also “bare the device” or “show their own wheels turning” – through those characters who, forever telling other characters how to move, are, to all intents and purposes, endowed by Jancsó with surrogate directorial powers. On the other hand, of course, Jancsó's films are not rhetorical. In Eisenstein, the direct address to the viewer, the self-identification of the film as a rhetorical machine, are not devices of emotional distancing. Distancing is not an effect pursued by those films – on the contrary, when Eisenstein is cross-cutting between those slaughtered workers and that slaughtered ox, he is both foregrounding the film's constructedness (before that scene, the ox has not been presented as being part of the story-world – that ox is a rhetorician's ploy, produced out of nowhere for the

sake of effect) and aiming at maximum emotional impact. If, in Eisenstein, the spectacle of violent death is consistently heightened (through choice of camera angle, editing etc.), in the films of Antonioni-disciple Jancsó it is systematically “de-dramatized” (through distant views or, as is the case with some of the executions in *The Red and the White*, a camera which barely bothers to glance in the direction of the killing).

Of course, the most conspicuous difference between the 1920s Soviet model of political cinema and its late-sixties Jancsian avatar has to do with the role of the editing, which in the latter case becomes minimized to the point of insignificance (there are only 31 shots in the 82-minutes long *The Confrontation*, and over the next five years, coinciding with the peak of his “political modernist” phase, Jancsó would experiment with reducing cutting to the necessary minimum of one cut every 11 or 12 minutes – the projection duration of a 300-meter or standard-length reel of celluloid film: if the 1972 *Red Psalm/ Még kér a nép*, with its less than 30 shots adding up to 87 minutes of screen time, is still far from this ideal, the 1969 *Winter Wind / Sirokkó*, lasting 80 minutes and consisting in only 12 shots, gets much closer, as does the 1974 *Electra, My Love / Szerelmem, Elektra*, also known in the English-speaking world as *For Electra*, with 10 shots and a running time of 70 minutes). The 1920s Eisenstein believed that, by making shots “collide”, he could train the viewer to think “dialectically”<sup>80</sup> or analytically.<sup>81</sup> His most ambitious experiment with “intellectual montage” is a sequence in *October*, where a reactionary character’s pious invocation of the Christian Orthodox God is answered by a montage juxtaposing images of Christian statues and churches with images of deities from many other cultures. As explained by theorist Noël Carroll, the sequence “aims to engage and direct the cognitive processes of the audience in such a way that the audience will perform a logical analysis of the concept of God”. Of course, adds Carroll, as directed by Eisenstein, the viewer’s reasoning process can only result in “the recognition that God does not exist”; this is the one “correct” conclusion. Working in a mood of exultant certainty, when the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution was still fresh, the Eisenstein of the 1920s aimed to educate “the masses” in an analytic form of reasoning, but that didn’t include finding value in doubt, in being of two minds:<sup>82</sup> there was no value in such things, Marxism-Leninism had all the answers. Whereas no fixed doctrine could serve any longer as a point of departure for the “political modernists” of the late 1960s, for whom the Soviet Communist Party’s 1956 denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet army’s suppression of the 1956



Hungarian rebellion had been formative experiences.<sup>83</sup> Their stance was more interrogative; it combined affirmation of fundamental aims (like the need for revolution in the West or – coming from Jancsó, almost alone in his capacity as a major “historical-materialist” filmmaker actually living in a socialist country – the need for the regeneration of actually existing socialism) with interrogation of means (including cinematic ones – the utility of cinema as a revolutionary weapon or tool etc.). Their didacticism was something more complex than the Eisensteinian guiding of the viewer’s reasoning towards a conclusion known in advance by the filmmaker as the correct one; now, following Brecht, it was more a matter of providing “structured possibilities for reflection on the nature of capitalist (and socialist) relations and the place of the spectator within them”.<sup>84</sup> Other filmmakers, like the Yugoslav Makavejev (the other major “political modernist”, except Jancsó, living in a socialist country), carried on the 1920s Soviet tradition of “montage cinema” (in a manner that in Makavejev’s case was particularly irreverent and questioning). Jancsó argued<sup>85</sup> instead that it was the long take, not the “collision” between shots, that better reproduced both the movement of thought and the complexity of a world that is not only full of conflict and contradiction, but also fluid, ceaselessly transforming.

Over the next few years after *The Confrontation*, Jancsó would add to his obsessive, Stalinism-inspired, series of “rituals of power” (still depicted as sinister, corrupting, repressive), with films like *The Technique and the Rite / La tecnica e il rito* (1972) and *Rome Wants Another Caesar / Roma rivuole Cesare* (1974), both of them historical pictures financed by Italian television, the first a portrait of Attila the Hun, the second set in Roman antiquity. But he would also develop, in films like *Red Psalm* and *For Electra*, the “rituals of liberation” that he had first staged in parts of *the Confrontation*. In both series of films, the ritual-like aspects would hypertrophy into pageantry, in marked contrast with the austerity of *The Round-Up* or the hard-edged geometry of *The Red and the White*. So, from one strain of modernism – preoccupied with reduction, with abstraction, with diagram-like essentialization, with works of art that are like machines or, in Jancsó’s own term, like miniature “models” –, he gravitated towards another strain: what Kovács called “modernism’s fundamental project of reaching back to the most basic and original elements of artistic expression”,<sup>86</sup> through (often half-invented or half-reinvented) religious rituals, national folklores and classical mythologies. Thus, ostensibly depicting a late-19th-century peasant uprising, but

full of miraculous occurrences and riddle-like symbolism, as well as by-now incessant collective singing, chanting and dancing, *Red Psalm* conjures – in the words of critic Raymond Durnat – an imaginary “sunlit, open-air [pagan] religion”, a “peasant sacredness” as well as an ancient, deep-rooted “village communitarism”, “propitious to socialism, though pre-dating it”.<sup>87</sup> The rituals enacted in the film were devised by former student of folklore Miklós Jancsó in collaboration with his future monographer Yvette Bíró, who would later explain that this folklore had to be a half-invented one, nationalist-sentimental folklorism, traditional religion and bourgeois ethnographic science having been put too often in the service of mystification;<sup>88</sup> what Jancsó and Bíró were doing was fighting such mystifications (“myths” in Roland Barthes’s negative sense of fictions passing themselves as self-evident common-sensical or natural truths, as “just the way things are”) with revolutionary counter-myths, or what Barthes (whom Bíró quotes) called “experimental myths” and myths of “second degree”, ostentatiously artificial<sup>89</sup>. The same with *For Electra*, described by critic Tony Rayns as “a radical re-reading of the Electra myth, in which everything individual (from revenge to incest) is systematically translated into social and ideological terms”.<sup>90</sup>

Inspired not only by national folklore or classical mythology, the film ballets made by Jancsó in this period experimentally integrate various strands of then contemporary New Left thinking (the cult of industrially and technologically underdeveloped societies, millenarist and apocalyptic aspects), as well as elements of late-1960s youth culture (the revolution as festival, the revolution as orgy). Alert to any infusions that may regenerate the revolutionary imaginary, the filmmaker is attempting to forge a universal language of liberation.

What presents itself, at the beginning of the 1970s, as a dynamic revolutionary syncretism, aware of tradition as well as alive to the emancipatory potential of diverse contemporary international phenomena, appears less dynamic in the two features made by Jancsó in 1979, after an uncustomarily long three-year pause: *Hungarian Rhapsody / Magyar rapszódia* and *Allegro barbaro*. As the prospects for world revolution and for the regeneration of socialism are dimming to the point of becoming negligible, Jancsó’s choreography of liberation comes under the threat of staleness, of the merely decorative. At the same time, the fact that, unusually for Jancsó, the narratives of these two films are focused on an individual protagonist (the same in both films), is a harbinger of a new era, after “political modernism” has come to an end. Later, writing about Greek

“political modernist” Theo Angelopoulos (who emerged in the 1970s and was possibly influenced by Jancsó), Fredric Jameson would praise, in his early films, the attempt to foreground “that unrepresentable thing, the collective”, disqualifying by the same token “categories of reception that have been formed in an overestimation of the individual, or individualism”; turning to Angelopoulos’s later films, Jameson would lament the “regression [...] to an older framework of the individual subjectivity, the individual experience, the leading protagonist”, substituting “an old-fashioned individual pathos and a familiar existential disillusionment” – in other words, back to Antonioni – “for the indeterminable vibrancy of the earlier collective representation”.<sup>91</sup> As, in the words of historian of ideas Leszek Kołakowski, human subjectivity is vindicated against “historical laws”<sup>92</sup>, what happens in the works of a former “political modernist” such as Angelopoulos is that, in the words of Jameson, “older formal and essentially bourgeois categories of individualistic narrative return to frame, and thus to displace and denature the attempt to retain an historical focus and commitment”. Angelopoulos adapts his stylistic system and thus becomes more successful on the “art film” market than he had been in the 70s. Jancsó doesn’t adapt. In the words of critic Gábor Gelencsér, “Jancsó does not change systems but demolishes them”.<sup>93</sup>

Jancsó’s break with “political modernism” takes place, very neatly, as the 1970s give way to the 1980s, and it is very noticeably a break, even a breakdown – his 1979 pictures had been announced as the first two in an epic, summarizing trilogy, whose last part he never completed for reasons including his own fatigue.<sup>94</sup> The film he made instead, *The Tyrant’s Heart / A zsarnok szíve, avagy Boccaccio Magyarországon* (1981), isn’t lacking in intricately choreographed Jancsian long takes – though staged in enclosed spaces instead of Jancsó’s habitual open air; what has truly changed is that, whereas Jancsian choreography used to mean either “liberation” or “oppression”, here it’s explicitly, even brazenly presented as meaningless. In this exemplarily postmodern historical picture, history is masquerade and there’s nothing under the masks – it’s not just that truth is unknowable (such a proposition would stay within the bounds of modernism, it would not yet be postmodern), but that there may not be any truth, only theatrical and storytelling games. The old communist universalism of the oppression-liberation dynamic that the Jancsó of the 1960s and 1970s used to stage again and again, with many variations, has clearly become unsustainable for the Jancsó of the 80s. Films like the 1987 *A Season of Monsters / Szörniek évadja* and the 1989 *Jesus Christ’s Horoscope / Jézus*

*Krisztus horoszkópja* – not historical pictures like the ones Jancsó used to make, but films set in the contemporary world – dramatize this feeling of impotence, the emptying out of the old symbols, the splintering of The One Just Belief, of the old confidence in collective meaning and purpose, into many shards of competing, mutually relativizing beliefs. If in the uncompleted late-1970s trilogy, Jancsó's use of familiar props like horses, uniforms, candles, naked bodies (predominantly, but not exclusively female) and revolutionary songs was in danger of congealing into mere decoration, such decorativism is embraced in the 1984 rock documentary *Omega, Omega, Omega*, though this film still resembles his old ones in that it celebrates youth and freedom (even if it does so in depoliticized terms), while other Jancsó films from this era veer very close to nihilism.

As his interviews attest, Jancsó himself never lost his leftist sensibility – as early as 1984, he confessed himself dismayed that

certain levels of society are now beginning [again] to accept as legitimate the idea that they should be (...) superior to other levels of society, that they should be moderately or even very well off, and other people should be poor or deprived.<sup>95</sup>

What he never found was a new cinematic form (he had already invented one in the 1960s), for a new cinema of resistance, suited to these new times. What these 1980s and 1990s films ultimately enact is the disintegration of the old Jancsian form, once it has ceased to be supported by belief in the possibility of a regenerated socialism sweeping the world in a revolution.

Beginning in 1999 and ending with the filmmaker's death in 2014, the last act in Jancsó's journey consisted in a series of comedies (featuring the same couple of popular comedians) that were really strings of loosely connected sketches, grungy, foul-mouthed and full of non sequiturs, showcasing new forms of youth culture (from heavy metal protest songs to nationalistic hip hop), strategically pactizing with the formats of commercial television (the comedy sketch, the music video, the quiz show, the talent show) as the reigning medium of post-communist entertainment, and generally testifying to the octogenarian filmmaker's impudence and openness to the more liberating aspects of youth culture. But it failed to solve the problem of whether there can be life after the "political modernism" of the late 1960s – in other words, how to construct a new, truly "oppositional" cinema of wide relevance.

## NOTES

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