

## **Auteurism in the Modern Hungarian Cinema<sup>1</sup>**

George Bisztray

After half a decade spent mostly in Rome, Miklós Jancsó, now a director of international reputation, returned to Hungary in the mid-seventies and became more accessible to cultural journalists who were eager to interview him about his artistic outlook and future plans. And Jancsó was eager to answer their questions. True enough, these recent interviews were at least ten years behind the main current of European cinema, since the auteurist director Jancsó was talking about issues which had been discussed already in the fifties and sixties, especially in André Bazin's periodical *Cahiers du Cinéma*. But again, Jancsó himself willingly admitted that his style was no longer in accord with his time. And it is also true that what he said in these belated interviews was the first extensive conceptualization of auteurist aesthetics by a Hungarian director. A review of his more significant statements will hopefully demonstrate that a distinct and valid definition of these aesthetics unfolds from these interviews.<sup>2</sup>

As most fashionable jargon terms, "auteurism," too, has a hollow ring.<sup>3</sup> From the theoretical debates of the past, it appears that we should first look for the essence of auteurism in the role which the movie director plays in the creative process. Jancsó's comments on his own artistic method grew out of this basic view of auteurism and he defines the concept accordingly.

As Jancsó spells it out, the director may be a link in a production chain, materializing a script to which he is indifferent by manipulating actors and actresses whom he does not care for but must nevertheless feature because of the contracts binding the producer. This is the American model of filmmaking, a perfect prototype of the division of labour and of alienation. Leadership is with the producer and the distributor; their criteria have nothing to do with art but with production expenses, contracts, and expected returns on the investment. If anything marks a movie and attracts people to the theatre is least likely the director's name; most likely the name of stars featured. The director has nothing to do with the thousands of feet of film shot, since he is hardly allowed to edit his own movie, unless as a very exceptional privilege. The identifying characteristic of these films is not the style but the story.

On the other hand, there is another example which Jancsó, relying on his Roman experience, calls the Italian model. This is a biased term but the way Jancsó describes it clearly indicates the contrast with Hollywood. "Film as an art form does not permit the director to degrade his fellow-artists to second-rate figures," states Jancsó, asserting also that he can make movies only with artist-friends.<sup>4</sup> Writers help the director develop a script which most adequately expresses his artistic vision. Similarly, stage and costume designers work closely together with the director. Unlike in the division of labour, a co-operation of artists unfolds before our eyes to characterize this form of filmmaking whose result is not a rootless product but, rather, a collective piece of art, comparable to the performance of a theatre or musical ensemble.

The term "auteurism" suggests a creative action analogous with "authorship." Indeed, it is the co-operation or even full identity of writer and director which forms the basis of this filmmaking practice. On the one hand, in the auteur movies it is the director claiming the one-person responsibility for the ultimate realization of a collective vision, and for giving shape to figures which appear, as Jancsó states, in an abstract, formless way in literature. On the other hand, as the Hungarian film critic István Nemeskürty emphasizes, the dialogues of the film are inalienable properties of the writer.<sup>5</sup>

On this point, we are confronted with an interesting phenomenon. Whereas virtually all great Western auteurist directors have themselves written the scripts for their movies, Jancsó is unique with his obsession of working with the same scriptwriter in a row of movies. Beginning with "My Way Home" (Így jöttem, 1964), this writer-associate has become Gyula Hernádi. Based on his scripts, Jancsó shot thirteen movies, including three produced in Italy, two of these with the literary cooperation of the Italian Giovanna Gagliardo. No other auteurist director is known for such "duplication of one function in two persons" (as Domokos called the Jancsó-Hernádi phenomenon in his interview). As Jancsó describes this process, an idea is slowly shaped to a script, then to a visual image, in a dialogue between two akin artistic minds.

In the last analysis, however, a genetic criterion (that is, authorship) alone is not sufficient to define the artistic method of auteurism. The question arises: How is it possible to tell an auteurist movie from a non-auteurist one? Jancsó describes his movies as "special films" in which the actors "express ideas and standpoints in songs, dances, and mimics." Nemeskürty emphasizes that an auteurist film is a personal statement. The result is a certain mood, an individual visual style which permeates the movies of auteurists. This mood may result from a stylized reality or

even from a venture into the surrealist, but never from an attempt to create the illusion of a reified world. It is mostly from the basis of György Lukács's aesthetic principles, and especially his view of naturalism, that Jancsó consistently attacks what he calls the mini-psychology and mini-realism (that is, the small-scale and meticulous psychological and realistic tendencies) of the nineteen-seventies. *Cinema vérité*, documentary techniques, the illusion that reality is as faithfully projected on the screen as possible are, in Jancsó's eye, manipulative ways of making people accept conditions as they are. "Realism" in its most plausible meaning appears as an enemy of socialist art, because it does not let one see beyond the surface of social phenomena, and therefore it negates both human freedom and the possibility of change, excludes alternatives, and does not open any vistas of a better future. Showing a ritual act, on the other hand, breaks the superficial illusion that things are as they are and they cannot be changed.

Creative sincerity, not to a reified world but to human essence, to artistic consciousness, is a basic principle for Jancsó. One charge this credo can easily call upon is didacticism. Incidentally, Jancsó is willing to face this charge, although with some reservations. He claims that his didacticism is never direct and obvious. He quotes the examples of András Kovács, his Hungarian fellow-director, in whose movies (as Jancsó puts it) two people tend to discuss politics at length; and Jean-Luc Godard, who makes one or another of his characters read Marx. Jancsó believes that he would be unable to cultivate this kind of didacticism (making a movie of Sacco and Vanzetti would not suit him); but that nevertheless his films are political and manifest the French concept of *cinéma engagé*. He calls his style, located between the seemingly apolitical and the blatantly, militantly political cinema, a "middle way." Yet in 1976, he also believed that he had ventured too far into the field of cinematic surrealism with "Agnus Dei" (*Égi bárány*, 1970), "Red Psalm" (*Még kér a nép*, 1971), "Elektreia" (*Szerelmem, Elektra*, 1974), and the films he shot in Italy. He saw a mixture of reality and an extreme rejection of reality in these movies of his own; admitted that it would be hard for him to invent anything novel after the notorious red helicopter in "Elektreia"; and implicitly expressed his intention to switch back to middle-of-the-road engagement before his surrealist style becomes manneristic and boring.<sup>6</sup>

It might be due to his didactic intention that Jancsó never considered his movies compatible with psychology. He believes that the psychological style means a certain way of maneuvering persons and things so that unbelievable phenomena should appear believable. Jancsó's fascination

with the improbable is not intended to make the improbable look possible. Actually, he states that his spectators are expected to be aware of a distance between themselves and what they experience. As he says: "While I am directing, I create a distance between reality and its reflection in the film. . . . It is precisely this distance which enchants the public."<sup>7</sup> As it appears from this statement, the intellectual understanding of the distance between artistic illusion and experienced reality is a central guiding principle of Jancsó's art.

One may ask: by what technique does Jancsó express his principles in his movies? As an artist rooted in a fairly unique culture, Jancsó is more than aware of the cleavage between the universal semantic code of the film and the cultural limitations imposed on it. He wants to express universal truths and situations in visual images, but constantly finds himself bound by the specific cultural connotations of these images. Referring to a frequently recurring motive of his films, we may ask: Since international moviegoers have been conditioned to react negatively to only one kind of uniform: the black or brown Nazi outfit, how can the director evoke similar dislike by showing much less familiar uniforms? Jancsó actually uses an auditory motive as an example in one of his interviews and asks: How many moviegoers around the world share the cultural connotations which some of the religious and ultra-nationalist Hungarian songs and melodies heard in his movies raise in his own generation of Hungarians?<sup>8</sup> To expand this argument, we may refer to the International, the Horst Wessel *Lied*, Rule Britannia, or God Bless America—these four songs alone trigger strong connotations, no matter whether positive or negative, in hundreds of millions of spectators. As such examples prove, even the most internationally appreciated artists of unique cultures feel the tension of an open and a closed cultural system quite acutely.

Jancsó is notorious for his long tracking shots. Some of his critics counted not more than a dozen or two shots in films like "Red Psalm" and "Elektreia." Jancsó admits his aversion to the montage which, according to such classics of film theory as Eisenstein and Béla Balázs, is the essence of the cinema. Not without affectation, Jancsó claims that his movies are "small-scale," "low-budget" films, which is especially hard to believe now when rumours are spreading about the disastrous draining of the Hungarian national film budget by the two most recent Jancsó-Hernádi movies: "Hungarian Rhapsody" and "Allegro Barbaro," parts of the planned trilogy "Vitam et Sanguinem" which may never be finished.

Repetition of basic themes as well as visual motifs is another charac-

teristic of Jancsó's art. "I hate all forms of oppression,"<sup>9</sup> he said in one of his interviews. Indeed, his whole intricate visual semiotic system is based on the leitmotifs of freedom and oppression. At the same time, Jancsó also stated that there was a range of variations in the meaning of identical visual stereotypes. For instance, "men in uniform" do not always symbolize one and the same idea. Graham Petrie pointed out how nudity in Jancsó's films initially expressed humiliation and vulnerability but later tended to become a symbol of power and defiance.<sup>10</sup> Also, with reference to Antonioni and Wajda, Jancsó says that repeated motifs quite often may express the same idea with greater sophistication. In other words, the same visual motifs may express qualitatively different ideas, or may express the same idea in a qualitatively different form.

Improvisation is a method which has a great impact on the artistic effect of the final, edited film. As it is widely known, Jancsó lets his actors formulate their own text. Nor does he go to the shooting of the film with preconceived plans concerning camera angles, duration of the shots, and other directing techniques. As a result, one can compare Jancsó's and Hernádi's scripts with the finished film in the same way as one compares the first drafts and the published texts in the study of literary creation.

This tendency to improvise, alongside with the obsessive utilization of the same philosophical ideas and visual leitmotifs, characterizes virtually all auteurs of the modern cinema. This brings us to the question of Jancsó's admitted and latent affinities with different contemporary auteurist directors. He admires mostly Antonioni, also Pasolini, Glauber Rocha, and Wajda, but dislikes Ingmar Bergman. No matter what his personal views are, his works are organic parts of the international auteurist production of the past two decades. Improvisations, repetitions, universal existential themes, shooting series of films with a limited group of actors, are methods generally shared by auteurist directors. Notwithstanding Jancsó's dislike of Bergman, both meddled with the theatre, and both expressed the wish that they could make film comedies (Bergman repeatedly tried—the results were pathetic).

Improvisation, repetition, the use of irony are not simply technical matters. They make it possible to perceive an underlying relationship between auteurism and an existential outlook of life. The sincerity of a subjectively rationalized truth, the penetration of layers of superficial "realities" covering the existential essence, infatuation with role-playing and improvisation, repetition and motifs, and a Kierkegaardian use of the irony, are all shared characteristics of existential thought, art, and

auteurism. Even the cult of the director, the idea of one-person responsibility, is familiar from the German aesthetic concept *Gesamtkunstwerk* which appeared in Schlegel's, Nietzsche's, and Wagner's philosophy of art; at least the latter two were clearly identifiable figureheads of an existentialist aesthetics. The same holds true for scriptwriters: Hernádi, Mándy, Mészöly, and other Hungarian writers who collaborated with, or provided literary material for, more or less auteurist directors, have themselves at least a few recognizable existentialist trends.

Because of the sincerity and, as any perceptive critic would assert, the general high quality of auteur movies, the more painful it is for an artist to realize that he is not being understood by the public. Jancsó has complained repeatedly about his lack of contact with the larger masses. He spoke bitterly about the conservative, unsophisticated taste of Hollywood-fed moviegoers—a characterization which is now pertinent of the Hungarian public as well. Film criticism was not exempt of his attack either: he believed that too many of his movies were misinterpreted by press reviewers. He found escape in this attitude: "I always read as much as I can about my movies, but accept neither favourable nor unfavourable criticism. I read criticism as if it were a story, a fiction."<sup>11</sup>

Yet there is something fundamentally wrong about Jancsó's complaints against the Hungarian public. In the nineteen-seventies, a new national awareness dawned on Hungary, accompanied by the widely shared desire for an objective reinterpretation of Hungarian history. Jancsó's masochistic view of the past derives from the two post-war decades when the first lines of the Hungarian Republican Anthem read: "Oppression, slavery: This was the order for a thousand years"; and when Hungary was assumed to be the first "Fascist" country and Hitler's "last ally." Hungarians of the nineteen-seventies find such views unjust and repulsive. Jancsó may insist that his films are allegorical and show Universal Oppression and Universal Liberation—however, they also show just too many Hungarian uniforms, just too many very Hungarian-looking peasants massacred. This aspect may be irrelevant for moviegoers abroad, but in the Hungarian context it raises the question: Who should draw the ultimate consequence? The auteurist Jancsó, who is undoubtedly a great artist, or fifteen million Hungarians? The same question also holds true of Gyula Hernádi and his scripts as well as "historical" dramas.

While Jancsó is the internationally best known and most celebrated Hungarian auteurist director, some of his younger colleagues, who had less opportunity to express their ideas in interviews, were equally consistent and congenial in pursuing this creative principle. István Gaál and

István Szabó, both in their forties (while Jancsó just turned sixty), are held in even greater esteem by certain connoisseurs of the cinema than Jancsó.

Of the six movies Gaál has shot since his debut with "Current" (Sodrásban, 1963), three are prototypical one-person auteur productions, whereas the script of the other three was written in consultation with other writers. However, Gaál emphasizes as much as Jancsó does that the authorship of the script does not make a director's film an auteurist work. "An auteurist movie can be the product of the fortunate cooperation between an author and a director. But if the director does not have an original artistic vision, you cannot call his film auteurist even if he wrote the script. Until now, films . . . resembled of prose; nowadays, they tend to resemble of poetry," Gaál explained in an interview with the reporter of a Hungarian magazine.<sup>12</sup>

As Jancsó and the great Western auteurs like Antonioni and Bergman, Fassbinder, Truffaut, and others, so Gaál, too, has developed his own symbols which, elusively enough, look unusually "realistic" and devoid of symbolic references. His country landscapes are hardly stylized, his shots of action free of ritual symbolism. Yet, the reoccurring symbols (the falcons in at least two movies, morning awakening as a starting shot of the film) and the existential preoccupation (with *Angst*, loneliness, and the metaphysical aspects of human relations) are recognizable auteurist traces. It seems that of all Hungarian auteurist directors, Gaál is closest to Antonioni whom, by the way, all equally admired. Also, Gaál has taken the one-person responsibility for his films one step farther than Jancsó: he always edits his own movies.

More urban and more middle-class than Jancsó and Gaál is István Szabó, the youngest of the three (born in 1939). Among this group, he has manifested the greatest interest in the human psyché, deriving existentialist themes and situations from individual experience past and present. Like in Bergman's "Persona," Alma Vogler's loss of speech is partially explained by her obsession with the picture of a Buddhist monk burning himself alive in protest against the war in Vietnam, so does the equally famous photo of Hitler talking to teenage "soldiers" occur in at least two of Szabó's movies, occupying a peculiar and identical denotation in both. Bergman's and Godard's "variations to a theme," that is, reviewing the same events in different ways in the mental cinema of the mind, appears most notably in Szabó's second (and as some critics claim, best) film, "Father" (Apa, 1966). Memory, a crucial leitmotive of "Father," becomes exclusive in "25, Fireman's Street" (Tűzoltó utca 25, 1973). A quasi-Freudian technique, the distorted perspective, achieved

chiefly by wide-angle lenses and also by extreme positioning of the camera, never appears in Jancsó and Gaál, but the more often in Szabó's films.

It is perhaps because of his psychological preoccupation that Szabó approaches the concept of auteurism by attempting a psychological definition. "If the cinema is to become an art equivalent with other arts, those who make films shall visually record their own world outlook and their own concrete experiences, but the truly significant directors are those who develop their own artistic world."<sup>13</sup> As it appears from this statement, Szabó regards auteurism as a projection of the mind—an outlook not entirely remote from expressionism.

At the end of the interview in which the above quotation appeared, Szabó voiced his hope that such artistic subjectivism would serve as basis of the future method of filmmaking. Although auteurism has left its permanent mark on Hungarian (and world) cinema, the method as it was typically practiced in the nineteen-sixties is now passé everywhere. What we experience instead is "mini-realism," to use Jancsó's critical term.<sup>14</sup> Also, this trend of the seventies could not be farther from Szabó's wish to make the film a projection of mental states or processes.

One may, naturally, find superficial similarities between auteurism and the documentary style of the Hungarian film during the 1970s. Several of the younger directors also write their scripts or co-operate with the same writers; and they let actors and actresses improvise their roles. Should we accept the fashionable cliché that the director's "personal style" is a central criterion of the auteurist cinema, we could call almost the entire new Hungarian film production auteurist. Yet it is impossible to ignore that the cinema of Péter Bacsó, István Dárday, Imre Gyöngyössi, Zsolt Kézdi Kovács, and Rezső Szörényi, also represent styles, techniques, and world outlooks different from those of auteurism. The ideology underlying *cinéma vérité* (namely, social criticism disguised as detachment but evident in the selective perception of the director) is definitely dominating the Hungarian cinema of the nineteen-seventies. This ideology entirely differs from the auteurist philosophy that filmmaking is visualized consciousness.

In addition, a recognizable, although not homogeneous aesthetic principle and stylistic sign system identify the auteurist directors and distinguish them from the documentarists of the 1970s. The existentialist allegories and absurd, seemingly incongruent symbols which characterize the proto-auteurist style of the sixties, are absent from the production of the newer generation of filmmakers. Utilizing aesthetic terms borrowed from Charles S. Peirce, we can call improvisation in auteurist



movie acting symbolic (the actor becomes a "persona" for a certain situation and verbalizes the role); in documentary moviemaking, indexical (there is no role: actor and character are identical).

In short, Jancsó was right when he called the technique of the new generation entirely different from his own. From the perspective of four years, however, he was wrong when he thought that moviegoers appreciated the new style more than his. Recent Hungarian statistics indicate that 312,728 people watched "Hungarian Rhapsody," and 298,634 "Allegro Barbaro," as of November 1, 1980. No feature film representing the documentary technique came close to these numbers.

On the other hand, the two Jancsó films together did not attract as many visitors as did "Kojak in Budapest," the Hungarian box office success of 1980, within just a few months (652,357).<sup>15</sup> Jancsó's scepticism of the changing taste of Hungarian moviegoers was warranted.

## NOTES

1. This paper is a considerably enlarged and revised version of one presented at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the American Hungarian Educators' Association in Silver Spring, 1979. The author is indebted to István Karcsai Kulcsár (Hungarian Film Institute and Archive, Budapest) for supporting his research with advice and relevant books; and to Lia Somogyi and Vera Surányi (Hungarofilm, Budapest) for printed information and the opportunity to view eighteen Hungarian films pertinent to the subject.

2. Jancsó's views on auteurism are most explicitly stated in his interviews with Marianne Gách ("27 kérdés Jancsó Miklóshoz," *Film, Színház, Muzsika*, August 14, 1976, pp. 6-7); with Mátyás Domokos ("A pályatárs szemével," *Kortárs*, 10, 1978, pp. 1647-1654); and in Italian with Giovanni Buttafava, printed in this latter's monograph *Miklós Jancsó* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1975, pp. 2-14). Since these three interviews are quite condensed and frequently referred to in this paper, page references will be provided only for quotations but not for paraphrased theses.

3. Perhaps the most noted controversy in international film criticism – a controversy which revealed the shallowness of the fashionably broad use of the term – took place between the American film critics Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael. In his essays "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" and "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1970" (pp. 38-61 in *The Primal Screen*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1973), Sarris simply reduced auteurism to a director's individual style and, no longer surprisingly, found its gems precisely in the film production of Hollywood. In her essay "Circles and Squares" (*I Lost It in the Movies*, Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1965, pp. 292-319, esp. 303-4), Pauline Kael refuted Sarris's utterly amorphous "definition" and used several factors to define auteurism. I have utilized Kael's interpretation in this paper.

4. Interview with Domokos, p. 1651.

5. Mátyás Domokos, "A pályatárs szemével. Válaszol: Nemeskürty István." *Kortárs*, 1, 1978, pp. 138-42; ref. to p. 139.

6. Jancsó in interview with Gách; Nemeskürty in loc. cit., p. 141.

7. Interview with Gách.

8. Jancsó's characterization of these songs as "fascist" is most inappropriate and irresponsible (in Buttafava, p. 3).
9. Interview with Gách.
10. G. Petrie, *History Must Answer to Man* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1979), pp. 77-79.
11. Buttafava, p. 5.
12. *Tükör*, 44, 1965.
13. In an interview from 1965, quoted by István Karcsei Kulcsár, *Szabó István* (Budapest: Magyar Filmtudományi Intézet és Filmarchivum/ Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, n.d.), p. 21; originally published in *Filmkultúra*, 1, 1965.
14. Interview with Domokos, p. 1652.
15. *Filmvilág*, 1, 1981, p. 7.