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HUNGARIAN STUDIES

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Hungarian Cinema in the 1980s*

*Árpád Bernáth-Károly Csúri: Die sozialistische Avantgarde und der Problemkomplex
„Postmoderne“*

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**“THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY”
THE REPRESENTATION OF THE 1950s IN HUNGARIAN
CINEMA IN THE 1980s**

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In Károly Makk's *Another Way* a newspaper editor insists that one of his reporters omit a certain passage from her article:

Editor: This little episode gives the impression that we are still living in the 1950's. But no, Éva, that's no longer where we are: less and less as time goes by.

Reporter: Comrade Erdöss, what guarantee is there that that's no longer where we are?

Editor: We ourselves; we who no longer want the fifties.

Reporter: But Comrade Erdöss, do you really believe that the fifties wanted the fifties?

Another Way is set in 1958, yet its characters speak of the fifties in the past tense. The fifties were epitomised by the public show trial of László Rajk, a Foreign Minister falsely accused of “Titoism” and fascist espionage; yet Rajk was tried and executed in 1949. Generally used qualitatively, to recall a perpetually topical phenomenon of national infamy (the Hungarian version of Stalinism), rather than conventionally, to register the arbitrary unity of a calendar decade, the Hungarian 1950s clearly represent an initial problem of periodization. Most discussions tend to unite in identifying their inception with the year 1948 (the so-called “Turning Point” which saw the merger of Communist and Social Democrat parties, the first five year plan, the condemnation of Tito's Yugoslavia), naming 1956, the year not only of the Hungarian uprising but also of Khrushchev's famous denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party, as a moment both of tragic culmination and qualified renewal. Inevitably, the problem with such dates is that many of the key issues associated with the *qualitative* characterization of the era they propose to delimit – the obdurate privileging of industry over agriculture, the personality cult in political leadership and the systematic elimination of opposition, the perverse spectacle of the show trial and the terror of the political police, the crude deformations of ideology and the reduction of culture to propaganda – have their own internal histo-

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ries which cross or resist any so uniform a definition of period. While Rákosi's expulsion from the party in July 1956 did indeed signify the end of the cult surrounding his figure, the more drastic fate of Imre Nagy – whose supposed travesties against socialism received far less publicity than those of Rákosi – was not sealed until his execution on a charge of treason in 1958. Such characteristically “fifties” treatment of opposition, however, was already typical of the general elections early in 1947, and from the end of 1945 onwards the crucial control of the notorious ÁVO (the political police of the State Security Department) was effectively in the hands of the Rákosi group.

In this article I should like to examine the way the 1950s were represented in Hungarian cinema during the last decade of the communist regime. For the Kádárist 1980s, problems of defining the 1950s as an historical object stemmed at least in part from a controlled absence of relevant historical documentation. If “serious and detailed historical research into the period between 1948 and 1956 has not yet been undertaken,” as was apologetically admitted by what was at the time the most extensive of histories of Hungary published in English¹ – which goes on to devote only three of its 675 pages to a characterization of these years – this was not only because of the political sensitivity still surrounding the period, but also because of the official withholding of crucial source materials. Of the six-volume collection of party resolutions (1944–82) which appeared in the early eighties, for example, only publication of the volume covering 1948–56 was detained. When this matter was raised at a joint conference of the Agitation and Propaganda Section of the party and the History Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1982, historians openly complained of the damaging effects of this silence both on historical scholarship and on a general understanding of the present. Iván T. Berend, then President of the Academy, summed up the attitude of many in the following words: “I consider it an extremely great error that we fail to confront this period face to face, because such a confrontation is an organic part, or requirement, of our own current process of reform. That is to say, it is actually a requirement of the intellectual and professional debates and struggles being carried on around the question of reform that we should deal more intensively with this period.”²

While the “fifties” could secure little representation in the guarded public discourses of history and politics, it was left to literature (fulfilling its traditional Central European function of instruction and commitment) and cinema (inheriting and to some extent even usurping that function after 1945) to act as the memory and historical conscience of the nation. Symptomatically, this inherited messianism, combined with the at once incapacitating and liberating scarcity of concrete information, produced not only a considerable mythologization of the fifties through anecdotal or “fictional” forms whose historical validity remains largely unquantifiable, but also resulted for a time in something of a “fifties

vogue" in Hungarian cinema. If mythologies – as I shall argue in more detail in discussing the films of Péter Bacsó – are of their nature susceptible to certain kinds of manipulation, fashionable mythologies actually set the terms of their own limited life. Between 1978 – the year in which Pál Gábor's *Angi Vera* was made – and 1983, twelve films appeared with themes related to the distortions of the period. While six of these had – at least by Hungarian standards – extremely successful runs in the West, their reception at home was often far less enthusiastic, and by the end of 1983 a general reaction had set in among directors against the "fifties film", and a consequent polarization of interest between the present and the more distant national past ensued.³ Five years of cinematic preoccupation with a single decade may well seem to imply that sources of interest and information had been completely exhausted, yet such a suggestion obscures the decisive complicity of fashion and manipulation, apparent criticism and expedient exculpation which actually characterized this trend in Hungary. Western applause for what was seen as courageous critical resilience was often refracted at home as an official advertisement for a putative domestic liberalism presumably at peace with the long since corrected errors of its own "regrettable" past. At least in some of the films, the naming of the fifties becomes a substitute for, or a liberation from, the demands of a more searching historical engagement. As the historian Péter Hanák argued quite lucidly in an interview with the journal *Filmkultúra*: "In the way the fifties have become so fashionable I can sense a kind of magianism or even exorcism. The more repeatedly we pronounce the devil's name the further we feel ourselves to be from his influence. The function of this magianism is to ward off haunting spirits. I don't of course believe that we can immunize ourselves in this way, after all it really comes down to a question of power. There is no institutional guarantee that *Angi Vera* won't come back to life, that the past won't return; simply that people don't want them to, and are prepared to resist the evil spirit."⁴

A critical interest in the personal and political deformations of the Rákosi era already informs a number of major individual films throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, such as István Gaál's story of student disillusion in *The Green Years* (1965), Ferenc Kósa's epic portrayal of changing conditions in peasant life *Ten Thousand Suns* (completed in 1965 but only released in 1967) and Károly Makk's *Love* (1970) a restrained but penetrating study of the relationship between the wife of a political prisoner and her bedridden mother-in-law who believes her son to be a successful film director in America. Indeed, some of these earlier films are more profoundly challenging and analytical than their more recent successors. Zoltán Fábri's internationally acclaimed account of the distortion of power relations in the antisemitism of the early Hungarian 1920s, *Professor Hannibal* (1956), for example, is itself far more articulate as a richly allegorical indictment of Stalinism than his later more picturesque treatment of

the 1950s purges in *Requiem* (1981); and as an intensely metaphorical visual objectification of the era's strained and ambiguous personal relationships (relying upon no dates, "events," slogans or uniforms to sustain an unmistakably recognisable image of historicity) Makk's *Love* remains an unparalleled classic of Hungarian cinema's early preoccupation with the period. When, therefore, the enormous success, particularly abroad, of Gábor's *Angi Vera* signalled the rise over the next five years of the "fifties film" as a popular genre in its own right, the departure was less a matter of discovering new themes than of a shift in the nature of interest. Gábor, who made his first full-length feature in 1968, was only sixteen years old in 1948, the year in which the action of *Angi Vera* begins. Before shooting the film he compiled a documentary "diary" from the cinema newsreels of 1948 under the title "Turning Point."

In this sense both his object – the past as (already) document – and his project – reconstruction – were radically different from those of many of the older directors of the previous two decades, whose immediate material had been direct experience, and whose ventures were so often inseparable from forms of personal reckoning. Although directors like Fábri (born 1917), Makk (born 1925) and Bacsó (born 1928) continued to focus on this period during the new wave of interest in the 1980s, their films are marked by a new kind of distance.

For Bacsó this distance actually becomes a formative part of a personal reconciliation with a complex and contradictory past. "I feel that I belong among those who lived this period in its entirety along with all its contradictions. As a NÉKOSZ member I myself was at once one of the period's active and passive heroes. I sat on both sides of the interrogator's table at the same time."⁵ His first fifties film *The Witness* (1969), a satirical comedy about bureaucracy, power and pretence, was considered too critical to be shown at the time of its completion (not long after the Prague spring) and had to wait nine years before it was able to meet an extremely enthusiastic reception in both Hungary and in the West. Rarely shown in Budapest cinemas today, it tells the story of József Pelikán, a simple dam-keeper and unambitious party member who, arrested for illegally slaughtering his own pig, is immediately released – presumably through the influence of Zoltán Dániel, a wartime friend who has risen to the status of government minister. In a gesture of gratitude, Pelikán goes to Budapest only to discover that his friend has mysteriously disappeared and been replaced by a certain Comrade Virág, who, equally mysteriously, takes Pelikán's subsequent destiny into his own hands. On Virág's recommendation the bewildered dam-keeper is placed in successively exalted – and increasingly absurd and impossible – positions of power, from swimming pool manager and amusement park administrator to director of a research project to cultivate the first Hungarian orange. Attempting to employ confused yet humane socialist principles in each of his successive assignments, Pelikán repeatedly meets with failure. At the

amusement park he creates a “socialist ghost train” adorned with terrifying images of the country’s leaders and graphic representations of what he conscientiously bills as “the spectres haunting Europe,” to the inevitable outrage of his high-ranking visitor, Comrade Bástyá. At the official opening inspection of the fantastic “orange grove” – after Pelikán’s son has quite innocently consumed the single orange – the same Comrade Bástyá is presented with the next best thing, a lemon. Seeing the grimace on Bástyá’s face as he takes an expectant bite at the symbolic fruit, Pelikán comments encouragingly: “The new Hungarian orange. A little yellow, a little sour, but Hungarian.” Each time Pelikán is sent to prison for his failure, only to be released to receive yet another outrageous task. Finally he is called upon to serve as the principal witness in a ridiculous show trial where Dániel is to be condemned as a Titoist agent. After his refusal to lie at the farcical trial, Pelikán again ends up in prison (this time awaiting execution) only to be released at the last minute and allowed back to the only place where he feels truly at home, the dam.

That the film’s intense parody (for as long as it remains within that convention) is directed as much at Bacsó as at his characters is quite evident from the inclusion of a grotesque paean to Stalin – song had written in earnest some fifteen years earlier: “Onward, comrade, onward, in Stalin’s name to work!” “When one can laugh at one’s mistakes,” Bacsó comments, “there is less chance of repeating them.”⁶ The laughter of the film, however, is not always the critical, corrective laughter of controlled parody. At times the comedy serves not only to exploit the absurdity of the period’s distortions of judgement and reality (the professional scripting of a far-fetched confession), but to make these distortions so grotesquely alien as to render them consolingly fictional (Pelikán is asked to confess to seeing Dániel pass state secrets to frogmen having fallen from a boat while fishing). The historical perversity of the show trial is rewritten in the “innocent” terms of dizzy fantasy; the tragedy of the absurd is rerun as the farce of the impossible, or fictional, finally liberated from the awkward history of which the film itself (in its production, withdrawal and subsequent international success) is a problematic representation. Virág and Bástyá are finally neither terrifying nor predatorial, but merely – and often quaintly and forgivably – mad. The historically accountable is reduced to the hysterically innocuous, the mere naming of which (as madness, as fiction) is already part of a precariously redemptive and apologetic “talking cure.”

In 1981 Bacsó returned to a more explicitly autobiographical rewriting of this period with *The Day Before Yesterday*, a film about the initial enthusiasm and gradual corruption of the “People’s Colleges” Movement, NÉKOSZ (see note 5). The film begins in 1947 with the expulsion of Dorottya Gönczi from a convent school on the basis of her relationship with Károly, a young communist and NÉKOSZ member. Dorottya joins Károly’s college and on their return to

Hungary from Yugoslavia (where they had spent the summer vacation helping to build a railway line) they travel the country by truck with other young activists during the national elections, duplicating their votes for the communist party in as many villages as possible. Soon after this, the group assists in a police raid to close down a decadent bourgeois night club, which before long the students turn into an orgy of their own. When Károly is designated as a scapegoat responsible for the affair, Dorottya, disgusted by the whole group's drunken abrogation of principle, also votes for his expulsion from the college. Admiring her general enthusiasm and efficiency, Ferenc, the group's leader, grows increasingly close to Dorottya, and when he is transferred to the national executive of the movement, they share the luxurious ex-bourgeois flat with which he is rewarded. When the accusations against Rajk intensify, however, Ferenc, as a former NÉKOSZ leader, himself falls under suspicion, and upon mounting pressure from a former comrade in the movement – now in a key party position – Dorottya finally breaks down and signs a false statement of incrimination leading to her lover's arrest. The earlier conscientious betrayal of Károly is now writ large in terms of a conscious and comprehensive policy of suspicion. By 1951 Dorottya – now living with a son by the man she has not seen since his “disappearance” two years before – has lost all influence and works as an unskilled labourer in the squalid conditions of an iron foundry where she finds consolation only in drink. One evening in the make-shift factory bar – where she is served by the (now fallen) nun responsible for her dismissal from school – she reencounters Károly, who has been working at the factory ever since his expulsion from the college. He tells Dorottya that he had refused to sign a statement condemning Ferenc in 1949, and the following morning she hurls herself into the flames of the furnace. The film ends with a shot of Károly carrying Dorottya's baby in his arms.

In spite of the sombre development of its basic narrative *The Day Before Yesterday* is actually a strikingly lively and colourful film. Its major characters are invariably young and energetic, and their initial enthusiasm, however tragically naive it may finally prove, is represented as sympathetically starry-eyed and philanthropic. The film is radiant with animate scenes of singing, dancing and dressing up, and political zeal throughout is hardly separable from intensely romantic, if fatefully ephemeral, adolescent love. Although we repeatedly hear of instructions and resolutions arriving at the college from the “Centre” (the decisive and presumably “adult,” interior of the party) none of its finally accountable representatives ever actually appears in the film. The decisions we see – the “spontaneous” planning of polling strategy, the expulsion of Károly, the betrayal of Ferenc – are presented as little more than the rash and voluntaristic excesses of alacritous youth; ultimately regrettable, but with hindsight forgivable, tactically “erroneous,” but with time and maturity corrigible. The decisions

we do not see, however, such as the reasoning behind the liquidation of Rajk and his so-called "circle," although represented by implication within the chronology and action of the film, lie beyond the closed and apologetic scope of its immediate tone and message. For any more active incorporation into the film of a hardened and consciously conspiratorial central party authority would have not only been awkwardly dissonant with its harmonious images of youthful spontaneity but would also have introduced a very different kind of accountability – one lacking in both the relative moral immunity of youth and the remedial prospect of immanent maturation and enlightened revision.

The Day Before Yesterday is an (often nostalgic and even celebratory) elegy to the adolescence of Hungarian post-war socialism. The film ends as soon as its protagonists grow up to recognise the folly of their optimism. When Károly reminds Dorottya at the end of the film of their old songs and belief, the memory is clearly a painful one, even though the possibilities of tragic recognition are soon undermined by a kind of pathos as Dorottya's suicide cuts into the final shot of the incorruptible Károly (the personification of some irrepressibly humane force of history) carrying the future in his robust arms. This closing sequence is itself a type of reconciliation or distantiation; the fickle flirtation with high ideals has come to an end, and we are left with an image of maturity and resolution, albeit in conditions of continuing hardship and hostility. It is an image which balances a projection into the future (the better and more prudent world Dorottya's baby will one day inherit) with a comment on its own past (the "yesterday" of naive, but nostalgically recollected belief). Precisely, however, because this "yesterday" already belongs to a misguided but long since concluded past, the film's title, setting its narrative at one further stage of historical remove, finally suggests distance rather than proximity. Our own yesterday is not identical with that of the film, but has to be sought somewhere in that temporal vacuum between a mother's death and a child's projected future, about which the film is entirely silent.

In this way, the film's only potential source of continuity is represented in the figure of Károly, who at least survives to link such a future with the troubled past of which it was born. Even his reappearance in the film, however, serves, if only structurally, to emphasize a sense of satisfying circularity, as Dorottya – after her passing romance with the exhilarating spectre of a new and youthful world – is returned to a second and final encounter with her first love, the film's single representation of simple and unchanging sincerity. If Károly is permitted to live on while the likes of Dorottya must perish in the fires of a hell they have unwittingly helped to create, it is because of his crucial absence from, rather than complicity in, the central action of the film. For he survives not as an embodiment of the period's contradictions, but as a symbol of their resolution at the more exalted, universal and depoliticized level of virtuous veracity and human

tenacity. As he walks away at the end of the film from a history that has denied him a major part in its action, the hope he cherishes in his arms, far removed from the political realities with which he must continue to struggle, is little more than a piece of timeless and clichéd wisdom: truth will out, and life will go on.

“Oh wretched life, oh crazy life! How is it that you taste as sweet as honey? Oh wretched life, ramshackle life! My God how hard it is to give you up!” These are the words of the operetta refrain which runs through Bacsó’s next “fifties” film – about the forced deportation of “class enemies” between 1950 and 1956. Once again Bacsó reworks semi-autobiographical material, this time returning to a comedy of the grotesque reminiscent of *The Witness. Oh Bloody Life* (1983) – the somewhat awkward “export” translation of “Te rongyos élet...!” (lit. “You ragged life”), the title of both the film and its theme song – is the brilliantly acted and at times hilariously funny story of Lucy Sziráky, a young actress who, deported to work in the fields because of mistaken aristocratic connections, returns triumphantly to the stage after a succession of absurd (“Pelikánésque”) experiences in the country. A disarmingly effective combination of memorable punch-line comedy, gestural criticism and implicit political apologism, the film was arguably the disturbing paradigm of Bacsó’s apparently influential oeuvre of historical misrepresentation and was frequently shown in packed cinemas in Budapest in the mid-1980s.

The film opens with Lucy driving a red tractor onto a Budapest stage singing a parody of one of the period’s bizarre agricultural agit-prop songs (with the ironically objectless refrain “Long live! Long live!”), then cuts into the fumbling advances of her director in her apartment after the performance. Their (for Lucy, indifferently “vocational”) sex is interrupted by the arrival of the secret police with a warrant for Lucy’s deportation, and early the following dawn we see her at her dressing table on the back of a lorry being driven away. In a long facial shot, initially of her own reflection in the mirror – where any sense of genuine shock or suffering is displaced by a poised aesthetic wistfulness – she begins to sing the film’s refrain, “Oh wretched life”. After her arrival at the village where she is to work, the story centres upon the way she is pursued by two local men: the belligerent police captain with secret operatic aspirations and Kiptár, the young school-teacher and fanatical secretary of the local party, who is first seen painting the houses of “kuláks” and party supporters black and red respectively. Kiptár persuades Lucy to perform in his slightly rewritten version of a popular literary classic, which they take to the fields to bring culture to the reluctant peasants, who are too preoccupied with fulfilling impossible norms to take much interest. As the teacher delivers his enthusiastic introduction from the top of a threshing machine, one of the peasants starts up the motor and the misunderstood Kiptár dies a gruesome death. Soon after this, Lucy is called back to the Budapest stage to stand in for the lead singer in a vitally important performance

of "The Csárdás Princess" – the operetta from which the title song is taken – which the highest of government representatives will attend.⁷ At the last minute Lucy suddenly decides that she will no longer allow her talent to be exploited and compromised by political power and refuses to perform. After a long chase around the wings of the theatre, she is thrown onto the stage by plain-clothed police officers. The curtain rises and Lucy begins to speak the words of "Oh wretched life" through her tears, forcing the orchestra to turn back several pages in the score. Soon, however, the star is on her feet singing the same words in full gusto to an entraptured audience. The tempo of the music quickens triumphantly as the final credits appear on the screen.

If a strategic distantiating of history and responsibility is achieved through the grotesque in *The Witness*, and through metaphors of youth in *The Day Before Yesterday*, in *Oh Bloody Life* political accountability and historical tragedy are displaced by a comprehensive emphasis on performance. In addition to Lucy's explicit retention of her role as stage star throughout the film (living her life as drama), each of the other characters are given major scenes, which relatively independently of the development of the film's schematic narrative serve primarily to celebrate a kind of autonomous theatricality. The police captain, for example, is seen at one point proudly "riding" a stuffed and stationary ex-police horse called Domino and is later forced to perform a popular song naked at gunpoint. Meanwhile Kiptár in one of the most memorable sequences of the film arrives at Lucy's door one evening – after having been attacked by the villagers with whom he is understandably unpopular – dripping from head to foot with what at first sight appears to be blood, but soon turns out to be bright red paint, and we realise that he has been the victim of a particularly apt and visually gratifying form of revenge. Or again, to offer one last example of such theatricality, on seeing the hanging corpse of one of the deportees earlier in the film, the wide-mouthed teacher tumbles backwards over a wheelbarrow, easing our initial shock into lenitive laughter at just another moment of clownery. (Kiptár repeatedly falls over throughout the film). This privileging of the spectacle of performance over the significance of the performed – we remember for example, the tottering Kiptár rather than the implications of the deportee's suicide – reduces the film's situational and potentially critical comedy to the innocuous timelessness and self-referentiality of the circus. Any accountable or developmental sense of character is displaced by a predictable logic of performative function, while historical sequence and consequence merge into incidental juxtapositions in theatrical time.

Theatricality, however, also serves as a decisive metaphor throughout the film for the degree and character of its protagonists' involvement in the events and situations in which they act. "What has all this to do with me? I'm only an actress," Lucy protests at one point during her deportation. Such a metaphor can,

of course, be employed analytically to question the various levels of possible agency in any given historical role, as is quite clearly the case in István Szabó's *Mephisto* where the proposed immunity of the actor is consciously represented as politically problematic. For Bacsó, however, the received notion of the timeless, or eternal theatre is read as ambiguously liberating and redemptive. Performance is not so much an object of his cinema, as its permanent and unqualified dynamic. When Lucy sings her final oblation to ragged and crazy "Life," the end of the performance, the fall of the curtain, is to be remedially equated with the end of a period, the triumph of the eternal human stage over a parenthetical political narrative it has already redramatized and "healed" as harmless circus.

If in *Oh Bloody Life* the power of performance may so placate the traumas of a recalcitrant past, it also forecloses any possibility of its criticism or evaluation. In the camera's erotic celebration of the face and body of Lucy, suffering is perversely (an)aesthetized; as the police captain covers his genitals to melodise at gunpoint, or as the theatre director in each of his encounters with Lucy fumbles clumsily with her clothing, politically accountable power and professionally habitual exploitation are tamed into farcical pathos or quaintly pitiable appetite. Although the film repeatedly draws upon the well-known slogans and images of the 1950s for its objects of parody and pastiche – the bald head of Rákosi, for example, painted upon one of the school's kites – its evocation of period refuses to sustain any sense of the past as a continuous and causal narrative. The fragmentation of narrative events into separable and internally coherent sequences of anecdotal comedy tends to deny any representation of causality whatsoever. Scenes are related primarily by virtue of their formal or conventional execution, homologous in terms of their theatrical effect, rather than interpretable as actions of intention and consequence. While in *The Day Before Yesterday* decisions and resolutions were at least occasionally suggested to come from some identifiable, if for the film invisible, source (the party centre), the anecdotal sequences of *Oh Bloody Life*, like the "story" of the painting of Kiptár, appear to come from nowhere, to have no locatable (narrational) origin beyond the comic intention of the director. In *The Witness* the series of bizarre sketches (at the swimming pool, the amusement park, the orange grove) are implicitly understood to represent the absurd machinations of a hidden bureaucratic power whose only visible agent is Comrade Virág; in the later film the justification for such scenes remains in the demands of pure performativity outside of the immediate exigencies of narrative. The reliance upon a collection of metonymically disjunct but structurally or performatively homologous fabulae provides a telling illustration of the historical limitations and political ambiguities of anecdote. Where history disappears as a knowable totality, an accountable narrative and an object of criticism, anecdote emerges to replace historical knowledge as critique or praxis with the compensa-

tory pleasure of ineffectual performance. Where this substitution is a matter of necessity (the political expropriation of historical fact), anecdote features as the bastion of a dispossessed national memory. Where, as is the case with Bacsó's deliberately distortive trivialization of the crimes of the 1950s, it is a matter of manipulation, anecdote degenerates into a perversely nostalgic peace with a distant and discontinuous national adolescence (those crazy, crazy fifties).

But anecdotes, like all lost or unrecorded histories, themselves have determinant sources, the reconstruction of which tends to qualify their effect and reinterpret their significance. At one point in *Oh Bloody Life*, Kiptár discovers that Lucy has been deported on mistaken grounds; although once married to an aristocrat, who has anyway now been in emigration for some years, she herself is from the soundest of working class backgrounds. Kiptár is much moved by this and as a gesture of solidarity offers her his most cherished possession: a brown and shrivelled orange he had received as a poor peasant boy in hospital from the hand of Rákosi himself. The story is actually semi-autobiographical. In an interview with the journal *Filmvilág* Bacsó relates how he was given an orange by Rákosi when commended for script-writing in 1953.⁸ Like Kiptár, Bacsó too gave his orange to his sweetheart of the day who continued to preserve it as "some wonderful souvenir of a meeting with Rákosi." While both anecdotes are narrated by Bacsó (released, that is to say, only at his own discretion), the fictional, and thus historically innocent and irreprimandible status of the former is clearly problematized by the proposed historical status of the latter. While Bacsó is quite explicit about his personal identification with Kiptár – "This figure embodies my most personal self-characterization, self-criticism." – their respective fates (being minced to death by a threshing machine during one's moment of glory, and surviving complicity with one of the darkest periods of one's national history to go on to make twenty films over the last twenty years),⁹ hardly command the same kind of compunctious laughter. When asked in the same interview whether this identification may be taken to suggest that he now sees his former naive faith as something to be no more than smiled at, Bacsó answers with a single word: "Absolutely." *Oh Bloody Life* belonged to a decade for which the true history of the role and consequences of such naivety was yet to be written, or even legally writable. For the 1980s it remained the task of anecdote and counteranecdote to resist the distortive and manipulative complacency of the Bacsó smile.

On a number of occasions Bacsó has referred to *Oh Bloody Life* as "a kind of anti-*Angi Vera*," in that its heroine wins rather than loses our sympathy as the film progresses. This comparison, however, is a suggestive one on a number of other levels, and it is instructive to consider Gábor's classic in relation to Bacsó's attitudes and methods as a whole. For in its own quite different way, *Angi Vera* is itself a film about the adolescence of socialism, the conflation of

utopian ideals and romantic love, and the political transience and irresponsibility of youthful enthusiasm.

The film begins with Vera, an eighteen year old orphan from a background of wartime poverty, speaking out against the continuing conditions of hardship and corruption at the hospital in which she works as an assistant nurse. Noticed for her outspokenness by the representatives of the Communist Party, she is sent to one of the party's ideological training centres in the provinces. There the film initially concentrates on her friendship with two elder women whose respective pasts in the pre-war and wartime movement have resulted in almost antithetical approaches towards the current building of a socialist future. Initially drawn to the warmth and humanity of the committed but non-conformist Mária Muskáth, she gradually falls increasingly under the influence of Anna Traján, an embittered hard-liner determined to see Vera realise her potential in an ascendant party career. To the concern and disapproval of both women, Vera falls in love with her young and married teacher István André, with whom she has a brief affair before renouncing him and her love at a lengthy self-criticism session – a crucial turning point in the film at which the participants' collective allegiances are put to the test in a drama of post-individualist penitence – reconfirming her suitability for a leading position in the movement. Congratulated by the director of the centre for her loyalty and diligence, Vera leaves with Traján to go on to a prestigious job in journalism.

Unlike the Lucy of *Oh Bloody Life* – with whose story Bacsó intended to illustrate “how under the weight of circumstance a flighty little floozy becomes a real human being, full of humanity and self-awareness”¹⁰ – the development of Vera represents a loss rather than a recovery of human value. Our first images of Vera – a sequence of facial close-ups in broken slow motion during the opening credits – propose her as an aesthetic object, a face of rare and distant beauty whose poised appearance before the camera is to be celebrated as an end in itself. When the action of the film begins, this beauty is pervaded with meaning as Vera's image becomes the focal point of our moral admiration. From then on, however, the film depicts essentially a movement of decline: the degeneration of this positive image into an object of criticism and disapproval. That this movement is never simply a matter of Vera's will (deliberate and unashamed careerism), but rather of a type of exploitation and distortion (the management of Vera's gratitude by an opportunistic and dehumanising authority) is suggested quite early on in the film. Soon after her arrival at the centre Vera speaks out at an assembly convened to debate the proposed expulsion of a “renegade” miner, who has been caught leaving without permission to visit his family, and offers to assist in his rehabilitation by giving him extra lessons in her free time. Immediately her spontaneous enthusiasm is distortively appropriated by Anna, her delighted mentor, who reconstructs it in perversely normative terms: “How did you

know that? How did you know that's what your're supposed to say?" A few scenes later Vera is shown gazing dreamily through a window at her teacher out in the courtyard, completely ignoring the perplexed miner who sits before her with his studies. As her association with Anna hardens, her complicity with her mentor's austerity becomes increasingly inextricable. At one point she signs her name to an official denunciation of a steelworker, a "complete enemy" in Anna's eyes, who had unsuspectingly criticised the party in front of the two women. Here Vera's initial hesitation is quickly overcome by her fear of letting Anna down.

The most decisive moment in the film's process of devaluation is represented in Vera's treatment of her lover André. In her betrayal of the teacher at the self criticism session – where the examining panel of conscientious cadres is made to resemble a chillingly vindictive prosecution bench – Vera's graduation to the position of model fifties party functionary, without history, individuality, or loyalty to any other interest, coincides with her fall before the camera. Even here, however, Vera's actions are not simply a reflection of her own self-interest, but rather the completion of an expression of self-denying gratitude and indebtedness, as Vera prefaces her decisive renunciation with a dutiful tribute to the institution which has taken her under its wing.

The fact that the party proposes itself as her guardian ("From now on we'll look after your destiny," Vera is told by the district party secretary after her interjection at the hospital), and that Vera gratefully accepts this authority, also serves to emphasize her solitude and adolescent dependency. In *Angi Vera*, however, the romantic and adolescent zeal that animates Bacsó's films is analysed and interrogated as a critical object, rather than being allowed to escape evaluation altogether as a given and inscrutable dynamic. After her somewhat circumstantial entry into the political arena, Vera's growing enthusiasm and diligence is shown to be as much a matter of infatuated admiration as of conscious commitment. She questions her teacher after class as to the difference between means and forces of production, but does not listen to his answers, and later confesses that her love for him is the most important thing in her world. Her final denunciation of this love does not mark a maturation from adolescent infatuation to communist professionalism, but rather the final stage in her subjection to a paternal authority, which, again in contradistinction to Bacsó, plays an active role in the film. For the absent "centre" of *The Day Before Yesterday*, which decisively yet invisibly perverts and finally destroys the humane optimism and energy of the young, is physically present throughout *Angi Vera* and is shown in constant opposition to the "organic" movement it is suggested to usurp – most critically in Mária's defence of the dignity of the veteran comrade. Furthermore, the film's dramatic representation of party authority – above all in the figure of Comrade Sas, the director of the centre – is itself suggestively metaphorical. While the young teacher André spends much of his free time mixing congenially

with his students, Comrade Sas is repeatedly shown hurrying secretively past crowds in the select company of other superior functionaries. His gait is almost comically brisk and his movements fitfully agitated and breathlessly mechanical, in a way reminiscent of the staccato tempo of old silent films. The effect is one of disturbing anachronism. Sas appears out of place not only “tonally” against the deliberate, serene and soft-hued photographic representation of Vera, but also temporally, as if having been imported from a different historical and generic context altogether.

To both the initially sympathetic, but increasingly morally qualified, image of eager, inconstant and impressionable youth, and the sterile, dogmatic and anachronistic austerity of Anna and Sas, *Angi Vera* offers a powerful ethical alternative in the warm and mature humanity of Mária Muskáth. Throughout the film Mária’s role is repeatedly one of visual and thematic counterpoint; it both foregrounds the hostility of Anna’s ascetic professionalism as well as Vera’s malleable romanticism and suggests a third more positive, political and behavioural category of its own. Where Anna speaks a language of “subalternity and fear,” Mária proposes “partnership and trust”; both having suffered considerable hardship in pasts dedicated to the movement, the former seeks “retribution,” the latter “liberation.”¹¹ For Mária, consistent with her faith in human potentiality and respect for historical continuity, the building of a socialist future does not depend on a rejection or tactical rewriting of the past, but on an incorporation and realisation of all its politically stifled humanity. When early in the film Anna, covering her nakedness with a bathrobe, enters the shower room where the other women (including at this point Vera) are laughing, playing and talking openly about their bodies, she immediately sublimates her own characteristically repressive secrecy into a crude ideological attack on their “bourgeois” behaviour. To this self-righteous puritanism, which Vera will later inherit, delivered as an attack upon the women’s warm and physical solidarity, Mária replies, “I suppose you think a beautiful breast is a remnant of capitalism.” Similarly, when a veteran officer of the 1919 revolution is haughtily reprimanded by a visiting “inspector” less than half his age at the self-criticism section “You have stood still comrade; and whoever stands still moves backwards and withdraws from the general development,” only Mária stands up to protest in his defence. Without ever usurping Vera’s focal role in the film, who remains the subject of the narrative even as she becomes the object of its critique, Mária’s humane stature grows in the deferent gaze of the camera as she loses in practical authority. In the final and purely visual contrast between the two women with which the film closes this is made quite clear. As Vera leaves the centre by car on the way to her promising and prestigious newspaper career, she passes Mária, who in her own words has bicycled more miles for socialism than Anna has had breakfasts. Once again Anna is setting forth on a bicycle, presumably back to the factory in

which she works. Vera raps desperately on the car window, but Mária, thickly clad up to the ears in the bitter winter cold, is quite literally in another world. It is a fitting end to the pervasive dramatic irony of the film: a series of interrelated rises and falls whose value is to be inverted as paradox by the knowing subjects the film names somewhere outside in the “neutral” darkness of the auditorium. Representing, nobly but ineffectually, the last stronghold of uncompromising humanity against a background of triumphant political arrogation and historical disjuncture, Mária’s image and message are projected beyond the frame of the screen, the unseeing and unhearing history in which they are circumscribed, to another more sympathetic addressee in another more tolerant time.

Both this projection, however, and the competent receptive community its irony assumes are more problematic than they may at first sight appear. While the opposition of a socialist humanism, with a rich and organic past embracing irrepressible moral courage and brazen erotic warmth, to the artificiality and discontinuity represented in the anachronism of Comrade Sas, or the secrecy and embittered severity of Anna Traján, performs a coherent polemical function within the film, its claims to historical veracity and its proposition of historical continuity, with a present whose own “professed” humanism may admire its reflection in figures like Mária and André, is an altogether more controversial matter. On the one hand, Anna’s unrelenting suspicion (seeing the enemies of the party everywhere) is hardly as unfounded as it is made to seem in the film and, however disturbing, represents a far more historically, credible and realistic position than any proposition, from the privilege of hindsight, of an alternative “popular humanist” face for a movement generally lacking in mass support. For the history upon which the party had to draw in 1948 – the year in which the film is set – was one characterized by decades of the forced internal suspicion and the strict partisan discipline of an underground organisation. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic many came to believe that the communists had been responsible for the tragedy of Trianon and the party was held in general distrust and lacked popularity. On the other hand, the humane competence the film interpellates actively to produce the meaning of its various ironies – precisely that deleted or repressed by the history it seeks to introduce – affords a knowing present too hasty a recovery of its own projected image in its own carefully chosen past. To suggest the possibility of rediscovering in figures like Mária and André the lost antecedents of the relative liberalism of the Kádár era was effectively to relieve the morally bankrupt communist regime of the most primary, determinant and, in terms of accountability, the most readily evaded burden of its formative history, leaving in its place little more than the uneasy claim to a consistent and continuous project of humane intention, briefly obscured in the period of “crimes and errors,” but now once again victoriously restored to a peace with its past and a contract of hope with its future.

The projection of such a continuity in *Angi Vera* may well itself reflect a discerning and guiding awareness of the cultural policy of the late seventies and early eighties, rather than a perpetuation of Bacsó's manipulative and apologetic historical "naivety." If this is the case, however, it bears significantly upon the way in which we are to understand the film; rather than presenting an uncompromisingly "authentic" document of the past, it continues to duplicate the necessary failure of the period to look that past fully in the face. This is not to belittle Gábor's major aesthetic achievement, but to suggest the inevitable boundaries of its articulacy as indices of its own limited historical moment and to forestall any overhasty interpretation of the film as either a triumphant indictment of communism or an unshaken testimony of faith in the alternative politics of a socialist humanism, which was at that time being championed as the practical reality of the present. After the almost unprecedented international success of *Angi Vera*, Gábor was neither reprimanded for his criticism, nor celebrated for his humanism in Hungary. He submitted several new film outlines to the studio (and by implication to the Ministry of Culture) but was on each occasion turned down, and didn't make another feature for three more years.

If Gábor's work subsequent to *Angi Vera* was to prove something of a disappointment, it was not long before Hungary was to produce another international cinematic success. In May of 1982 the "veteran" director Károly Makk (who made his first film in 1949) completed his seventeenth feature, *Another Way*, which after a successful visit to Cannes was already on release at a London cinema by autumn of the same year. Makk was already well known in the West for his brilliant *Love* (1970) which deservedly won major awards in Cannes and Chicago. Where *Love* had been a triumph of montage – a lucid application of the articulacy of understatement, lean in story, but memorably rich in visual metaphor – *Another Way* was in formal terms a far more conventional film: a circular retrospective narrative which traces the background to the event with which it both begins and ends. This event is the shooting of a young journalist, Éva Szalánszky, as she illegally attempts to cross the Hungarian-Yugoslav border. The film then goes on to investigate the history of Éva's attempted escape, from the day she begins to work at a newspaper (called "Truth") to the moment of her death. At the newspaper she meets and falls in love with Lívía, a woman colleague (unhappily married to an army officer), who after initial embarrassment and hesitation grows increasingly attracted to Éva until their love becomes quite open and consummate. With a third male colleague, the two women are sent on an assignment in the country to report on the establishment and development of co-operative farming.¹² When the editor of the paper demands that she alter certain explicitly critical passages in her text, Éva vehemently protests (as she does throughout the film) against any such censorship of the truth, and after a long and pointed debate over the politics and ethics of journalistic veracity she leaves

her job and returns to her native village. After a troubled pause in their relationship Lívía, having decided to break with her husband and accept totally the other woman's love, quite unexpectedly visits Éva. On their return to Budapest, Lívía's husband, unable to bear the shame and humiliation of his wife's rejection, shoots her with a pistol and leaves her crippled for life. Visited by Éva in hospital, Lívía once again refuses her in frustration and disgust. In total despair Éva makes for the frontier and after two warning shots from a border guard continues forward to her death.

Another Way, according to its director, is the story of a woman who "lives under the stress of a double 'perversion'."¹³ On the one hand her insistence upon reporting the truth brings her into direct conflict with official censorship. She shocks an editorial meeting by demanding that its tone of complacent officialdom be replaced by the outspokenness habitually reserved for private "corridor" conversation, and when after her resignation the newspaper finally carries a revised edition of her report, its editor is severely reprimanded. On the other hand, her lesbianism is an affront to conventional morality. When late one night the police "catch" her in a passionate embrace with Lívía on a Park bench, both women are firmly chastised for their behaviour. But Lívía only receives a warning that her husband will be informed if the relationship continues, while Éva, as a known lesbian, is actually taken down to the station.

Although the two levels on which the film's essential conflict of law and desire is narrated meet in the representation of Éva's perceived political and sexual "deviance," the result, quite crucially, is neither a politicization of sexuality nor a sexing of politics. While the "law" on both levels is represented throughout by male characters (the editor, Lívía's husband, the police and the borderguards), the gendering of political, as opposed to sexual, authority is according to the logic of the film contingent rather than necessary. The proposed distinction between Éva's uncompromising search for truth and the editor's, albeit unwillingly, compromised gradualism is never portrayed as an actively gendered issue. This aspect of the law is represented as impersonal. Indeed, the positively gendered struggle against sexual repression itself serves as a metaphor for a broader, impersonal and thus more immediately universal struggle against the denial of "human" liberty in general. Thus Éva's two forms of "deviant" desire are only united at the most general philosophical level as mutual instances of the individual's will to freedom. Or in Makk's own words: "I wanted to make it so that the spectator, having seen the film, would not remember primarily that he has seen a story about homosexual love. My aim was to translate the basic question – i.e. how two people manage to live together or why they are unable to do so – to the sphere of universal meaning."¹⁴

Any evaluative reading of this "translation" will inevitably be problematic. A prescriptive rejection of the film's rather naive sexual politics is on its own

incommensurable with both the history the film seeks to reconstruct and the history of which it is a product: *Another Way* never attempts to represent, nor possesses the resources fully to think, a consciously feminist project. On the other hand, to abandon evaluation altogether is to render criticism defenceless before the sexually and politically charged strategies of naturalization and universalization upon which the film relies. I do not propose in what follows to resolve this dilemma. Rather, I first want to elaborate the function of these strategies as they appear in the film and only then go on to reapproach evaluation from an angle perhaps more pertinent to the specific context of the film's own ideological and cultural intervention.

In a crucial sequence depicting the first suggestion or recognition of their potential love, Éva and Lívía are seen walking together in the serene autumnal park of Margaret Island. It is a richly lyrical and painstakingly edited scene consisting of a series of silent frames accompanied by the melancholy melodies of László Dés's saxophone, where the emphasis is shifted from narrative and dialogue to composition. As the images enjoy increasing aesthetic autonomy, the nature of our look changes from one of narrative interpretation to one of formal appreciation. This emphasis on form and composition – on aesthetic rather than narrative experience – is typical of the film as a whole and allows us to view Éva and Lívía's love ideally rather than specifically, as an instance of an archetypal category, rather than an episode within a distinct and finite narrative. On the one hand, this aspect of Makk's "translation" may be seen as a vindication of lesbian sexuality: a resistance against its received marginalization as "deviant," and a humane insistence upon its emotional, moral and aesthetic parity with heterosexual love. On the other hand, we are reminded that the role of such translation, in the terms of Makk's own statement, is also one of forgetting. For the aesthetic palliation of the love of Éva and Lívía naturalizes its illicitness and normalizes its otherness; the relationship becomes acceptable or ideal precisely as it is deprived of difference. If the particular or even factional and anomalous is to aspire to the broadly human (as opposed to specifically feminine) and universal, a sexually exclusive lesbianism must be liberally reconstructed as the open aesthetic object of an inevitably regendered look.

It is a look the film inherits from Erzsébet Galgóczi's novel *Within the Law* on which *Another Way* is based. The novel similarly begins with the shooting of Éva at the border and continues with the investigation of her relevant past. Here the investigator and primary narrator is a man, the army officer who comes to identify Éva's body and who has known her from university. The story of Éva's "double perversion" is also the story of its narrator's curiosity. In the film the role of investigator/narrator is adopted by the camera, which observes the bodies of Éva and Lívía with an inquisitiveness and relish that gradually – through the film's luxuriously self-referential or self-sustaining photography – turns into an

increasingly aesthetic appreciation. After Éva's visit to Lívía in hospital, where she has been followed by a detective, she is questioned by a police inspector who is less concerned about the shooting of Lívía than intrigued by the physical mechanisms of lesbian sexuality. The camera is not finally identifiable with this voyeuristic curiosity, because its look is more openly deliberating and celebratory: it is a look of erotic connoisseurship rather than guilty inquisition. Its object is not the sexually illicit or pornographic, but the body as art.

In a compact and highly polemical essay entitled "A Short Hungarian Film-Sexology", Ákos Szilágyi located two major representational trends in the portrayal of sexuality in the recent history of Hungarian cinema.¹⁵ The first he identifies as an "expressive – naturalist" representation in which the body serves as a "demonstrative stage for an existential drama." Here the sexual act tends to serve as a metaphor for frustrated, violent (even bestial) infringement, concentrating on male penetration as violation and replacing the "naked, free body" with its ambivalent clothed "personalization" as mask. In contrast to this, Szilágyi describes an "aestheticizing canon" in which the camera focuses primarily "on the woman, the gentle beauties of the woman's face and the lines and movement of her body." This canon "most readily exiles the man altogether from its image of intercourse" and it is not surprising if it finds its ideal vehicle "in lesbian love, where there are only women's bodies without the problem of penetration." Referring directly to a series of films including *Another Way*, Szilágyi claims that "the sexual act appears almost as if ... it were purely an act of beauty. It is not beautiful by virtue of its content, but by virtue of its form..." There is, of course, no small irony in the film's choice of the "deviant" or "marginal" area of lesbian sexuality as a paradigmatic aesthetic medium for a formal expression of a "universal" conflict; and it is an irony which forces a tension of emphasis throughout. For in spite of Makk's general philosophical intention, the film's failure to articulate the potential reciprocity of its two themes at a sexual-political level, not only leaves their relation unresolved, but actually emphasises the irreconcilability of lesbianism with the general (and gendered) alignments of its wider polemic.

But perhaps to speak of "failure" in this way is itself to propose an artificial intentional context. If the site of women's resistance – as an irreconcilable version of the universal resistance it is supposed to instance *par excellence* – may be seen in one way potentially to undermine the philosophical confidence of the film, it can, none the less, hardly be identified as a kind of deconstructive aporia, as it actually falls outside the film's own limited field of vision. If, however, a conscious recognition and articulation of conflictingly gendered interests lies beyond the scope and preoccupation of the film, its untroubled conflation of specific and universal interests as a whole may be considered a more symptomatic and imputable blindness within its own national and cultural context.

Makk has claimed that the film investigates his “long-held belief” that “one yardstick of the measure of freedom is found in just how tolerant are current customs in letting everyone live as they please, feel as they are capable of feeling, and think as they see fit. The measure of freedom [...] the individual’s freedom to live his or her life, or the way it differs from accepted rules and standards, often gets caught in the mesh of prejudices and unresolvable individual conflicts. That, among other things, is what this film is about. And this may touch some chords – on the plane of philosophy as well as politics – concerning the necessity of the freedom of human existence.”¹⁶

This privileging of an idealised notion of freedom and the almost automatic fusion of its individual and human claims need to be understood within the terms of a national history which has repeatedly reproduced the conditions of such a conjunction as a matter of survival. Time and again national resistance to centuries of military occupation and autocratic oppression have drawn upon a very real identification of particular and common interest, both as a force of political mobilization and as a defence of a perpetually threatened culture and identity. The spectre of the “death of the nation” – a key preoccupation of the national literature well before and after the first widespread use of Herder’s prophetic phrase in the early nineteenth century – whether in the form of Turkish annihilation, Habsburg assimilation, the decimation of Trianon, or Slav and German imperialism, has always been close enough at hand to repress contradictory internal interests (Magyar and national minority, territory and race, noble and peasant, peasant and proletarian) beneath the single and healing banner of Hungarian liberty and identity. In this way an unproblematic national “we,” born of this almost unbroken history of political extremity, has repeatedly served to obscure or even suppress legitimate but incompatible interests of nationality, ethnicity and class, exacerbating internal national contradictions to the point at which its own (historically understandable, but socially artificial) cohesion is itself undermined.

Clearly such a history does not in itself in any way explain Makk’s conflation of specific and universal freedoms, but may be offered, rather, to situate it in the context of an inherited cultural reflex and to suggest the limits of the challenge it proposes. For if one of the purposes of Makk’s beguilingly lyrical study of the limits of individual and human freedom was to “find out just how far one can go, in this country today, in stating truths whether supposed or actual,” the very fact that this film was released at all (after having been chosen as the Hungarian entry for Cannes) seems somewhat too easily to answer its own question. Such freedom, meanwhile, does little to resolve the specific conflicts subsumed beneath its generously liberal, and liberally endorsed, polemic of truth and sincerity. *Another Way*, however, also represents a polemical challenge on another thematic front. Placing a “traditional” fifties issue of ideological distortion in the

so-called "period of consolidation" after 1956, it actively engages the problem of periodization with which we began. The return to "order" and political "confidence" after the 1956 uprising is generally characterized in Hungary as a relatively rapid and unproblematic process culminating in the more moderate five year plan of 1961 and Kádár's famous dictum of that year that: "Whoever is not against us is with us."¹⁷ Makk's description of both the methods employed to force peasants to join collectives in 1958 and of the problems of making this issue public not only disturbs the consonance of this image of consolidation, but also refuses any notion of an unambiguous official break with dogmatic and distortive politics after 1956. That is to say, the location of the film in 1958 directly problematizes the institutional repression of 1948–56 as a period discontinuous with the triumphantly organic building of socialism since the nation's liberation in 1945. Makk has commented on the problem of continuity in the following way: "We like to speak of continuity since 1948 whenever we're talking of achievements that were the foundation upon which the accomplishments of our present-day life are built: but the notion discontinuity is brought into prominence as soon as errors made and crimes committed begin to be discussed, and we're trying to lay all the bad things at Rákosi's door."¹⁸ While the period of "errors" and "crimes" supposedly came to an end with the official dissociation from Stalinism pronounced quite unequivocally by both the Soviet and Hungarian parties in 1956, the location of *Another Way* in the year of Imre Nagy's execution suggests that such a dissociation was by no means equatable with a resolution or termination of the deformations of which the 1950s had been so characteristic. 1956, although by no means the centrepiece of the film, is its point of departure rather than its conciliatory destination.

If, however, the film's choice of period constitutes a polemical insistence upon continuity, the character and intensity of its statement is once again qualified by considerations of form. The narrative structure of *Another Way* is gratifyingly circular and complete; the return to the film's opening sequences reiterates that we have come to the end of the story and are now in full possession of a closed and seamless aesthetic whole. The desire for knowledge aroused by the opening frames of Éva's death has been fully satisfied within the visual field of the film and there is no need to look beyond or behind the screen for any further level of cause or consequence. Potential continuity is cut short by aesthetic autonomy and formal completion. Such a narrative structure is not specific to *Another Way* alone. Most of the films considered so far share a similar movement towards a more or less circular closure. The story of *Angi Vera* begins with Vera's arrival at the party training centre and ends with her departure; *The Witness* begins and ends at the dam; and *Oh Bloody Life* – the paradigm of a closed theatrical self-referentiality – both opens and closes with a triumphant performance on the stage. In each of these "solutions," the fifties appear as a sealed,

finished and invulnerable entity, which may return like a spectre to haunt the darkness of the cinema, but disappears again as soon as the lights come back on.

The last fifties film I should like to consider – which was also the last to be released in the five year period under review – is in this respect an important exception. Partly because it is offered as the first part of a series,¹ but more crucially because it actually embodies a polemic about continuity more explicit than that of its predecessors, Márta Mészáros's *Diary for My Children* is a film that refuses to end conclusively in either formal or thematic terms.¹⁹ Shot in black and white, and spanning the period 1947–53 it traces the development of the adolescent orphan Juli after her return from the Soviet Union where she was taken as a child – by parents fleeing fascism – and where her father, a sculptor, had disappeared in the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. In Budapest she is taken under the care of Magda, an unyieldingly loyal party activist with a heroic pre-liberation past, who rises, during the hardening ideological climate the film depicts, from newspaper editor to prison director. Magda fails to secure either the affection or legal adoption of Juli, who, against her guardian's rigid and unrelenting will, refuses to forget her parents or to abandon her curiosity as to the causes and implications of her father's arrest. Alienated and unhappy in her new home, Juli grows increasingly close to one of Magda's communist friends János, an engineer, who had emigrated to France in the thirties and fought in the French resistance during the war. He reminds Juli of her father (who is played by the same actor in her childhood flashbacks) and showing similar humanity takes a stand against the intensifying conditions of fear and deception upon which Magda's career seems to thrive. This leads to his estrangement from the latter's political circle and eventually to his arrest and imprisonment in the period of show trials surrounding the Rajk affair. The film ends with Juli, by now living entirely apart from Magda, visiting János in prison (accompanied by his crippled son) in a scene where the fate of all three remains open and unresolved. Asked how he and Juli spend their days, the son replies bitterly: "Does it matter? We're waiting..." The prisoner remains silent and the film closes with Juli's comment: "János you've gone completely pale." These remarks are clearly devoid of the dramatic gratification afforded by the closing scenes of *Oh Bloody Life* or *Another Way*: the audience itself is left waiting and prompted to speculate on the future of the film's characters in a duration of time awkwardly approaching its own present.

In *Diary for My Children* continuities are projected both forwards and backwards in time. If the period it considers is not represented as finished and resolved, neither is it proposed as disjunctive or unprecedented in origin. The identification of János with Juli's father, for example, serves not only to stress continuity in the film's subjective "point of view" but also to represent the engineer's arrest as a moment of repetition. This is made quite explicit by the scene's

resemblance to the earlier arrest of the girl’s father presented in flashback. Similarly, a conscientious attempt is made by two characters in the film (János and Juli’s veteran communist grandfather, who as well has returned with Juli and his wife from the Soviet Union and also lives in Magda’s manorial home) to ground and justify Magda’s present austerity in terms of her heroic past of loyalty and sacrifice.

Indeed, in its treatment of the pre-liberation communist movement the film is generally more complex and discriminating than its predecessors on the screen. Reminiscent of *Angi Vera*, it concentrates, in this respect, primarily on the past and the development of three quite different and conflicting figures: the dogmatic and triumphant Magda, the humane but increasingly alienated János, and the confused and frightened veteran of 1919, Juli’s grandfather, who, finding no place in the political machinations of Magda’s circle, is reduced to apparent silence. Rather, however, than juxtaposing these characters simply to forge an opposition between a sympathetic and currently endorsable humanism and an “erroneous” misanthropic dogmatism, Mészáros by focusing on at least one of the ways in which it appeared to the Rákosi period itself insists on articulating such a division in more specifically historicist terms. Thus János’s moderation is not presented purely as a matter of temperament, but diagnosed by Magda as symptomatic of the group who emigrated westwards in the 1920s and 1930s to escape the right-wing Horthy regime. Magda and her immediate “Muscovite” circle, meanwhile, had all gone east to the Soviet Union, thus being identified, within the terms of the film, to a greater or lesser degree with the history which destroyed not only Juli’s father but also Béla Kun, the former leader of the Hungarian Communist Party and the Hungarian Soviet Republic for which her grandfather had fought in 1919. In this way the opposition of radical backgrounds is at once more politically specific and more historically resonant than that proposed in a film like *Angi Vera*. For the incriminating attribution of János’s fateful “weakness” to his “non-Muscovite” past offers a direct allusion to the case of Rajk, the only member of the upper ruling clique of Rákosi, Gerő, Révai and Farkas²⁰ not to have spent a formative period in Moscow before 1945. Like János, of course, Rajk – who was interned in France after fighting in the Spanish Civil War – was arrested on false charges in 1949.

I suggested above that the silence of Juli’s grandfather was only apparent. On finally resolving to leave Magda’s home and influence for good, Juli, bidding farewell to her grandfather on his deathbed, is handed a sealed manuscript (presumably his life story), which she is told to preserve for “better times.” Although, significantly, the contents of this manuscript are never disclosed within the film – leaving the viewer’s curiosity once again ungratified – the act of bequest itself signifies a crucial metaphorical moment in the film’s general proposition of continuity. For, as its very title suggests, *Diary for My Children* offers

itself as a kind of inheritance; the preservation for memory of a disturbingly contradictory period of national history for its newest generation, which inevitably, if unwittingly, continues to bear its fading but still formative stamp. For Mészáros's "children" of the 1980s – who could still hear little of their parents' struggles in history lessons at school – the film surely served to recover at least part of a cautiously repressed historical link with a past which continued to weigh heavily over the pressures and possibilities of their own lives. At a still more symbolic level the terms of this repression are actually acted out in the key conflict around which the film rotates: Magda's desire that Juli should forget, and Juli's indomitable refusal to forget, the fate of her parents and the painful history it represents. Magda knows that she can only secure stability at home and begin to build a world acquiescent to her unhesitating will on both a domestic and political level by erasing any traces of counter-memory or inheritance, which fall outside her own proposed continuity of utopian project and struggle. Equally significant is the other side of the film's title: the predication of such inheritance as "Diary." Rather than simply representing the past anecdotally, the film attempts to reconstruct it as document or record. It is clearly in this sense that the implied identification of the arrest of János with the Rajk affair transcends its more local and limited narrative significance. This emphasis on history as record is most explicitly corroborated by the film's repeated use of documentary newsreel footage. In one of Juli's many visits to the cinema – where, retreating from a world whose various "examples" she refuses to follow, she escapes to encounter and imitate alternative images of glamour and fantasy – she watches, and we also see, a newsreel celebration of Stalin's seventieth birthday showing how "the beautiful facades of our factories and homes display the love of our workers for the Soviet leader... [whose] genius shows the way to a better future, the freedom of peoples and world peace." In the context of the continued withholding during the 1980s of historical documentation pertaining to the 1950s, the value and importance of such a screening should be quite obvious: it constituted perhaps the only means of access a contemporary Hungarian public would have had to a direct and authentic representation of the images and rhetoric of the Stalinist era. More problematic, however, is the direct incorporation of documentary material into the action of the film itself. With Magda, Juli is seen attending a public rally addressed by József Révai (see note 20), again with direct references to the alleged crimes of Rajk. In spite of very skilful editing and the treatment of the more modern filmstock to blend texturally and tonally with the older documentary footage, the cutting from fictional "reconstruction" to contemporary recording inevitably foregrounds a sense of directorial intention or interference. This cutting between genres, however, may be read somewhat ambivalently. Its reminder of a very difficult type of historical "quotation" may at once be seen to undermine the documentary credibility, thus stressing the fic-

tionality, of the acted sequences of the film, and at the same time to heighten our awareness of the film's polemical challenge as an insistence upon, rather than merely a demonstration of, historical and political continuity. For finally, it might be argued, after all the aesthetic elegance and formal polish of the fifties films we have so far considered – pacifying the past with closure and silencing the present with spectacle – a film like Mészáros's *Diary* no longer simply seeks to mollify or exorcise its "children" with a well-spun history, but to insist that they recognise that history as unfinished, and, still more crucially, as their own.

There is, however, one very decisive sense in which the broader reception of Mészáros's film as a representative family legacy is highly problematic. Juli's history – arriving from a tragically divergent communist past into a victoriously orthodox communist present – is very far from typical of her generation. However radically class backgrounds were uprooted and families mobilized during the first fifteen years of the post-war period, only a relatively small proportion of society suddenly found itself among the resplendent chandeliers and ornate aristocratic crockery of a spacious ex-bourgeois dwelling like Magda's in the richest residential area of Budapest. Neither are the conflicts of newspaper editors, prison directors, 1919 partisans or conscientious communist participants in the French resistance particularly representative of the experience of the majority of the population, who had no say at all in policy making during the 1950s. In spite of unanimously favourable reviews in the national press, the inevitable difficulty of most viewers in identifying with minority pre-war politics and elite post-war privilege has contributed significantly to the somewhat indifferent public reception the film has enjoyed in Hungary. In the year of *Diary's* release, twice as many people went to see *Oh Bloody Life*, and four times as many saw *István the King*, the film version of a rock opera set in the eleventh century, which generically borrows heavily from *Jesus Christ Superstar* and was generally slated in the film press; (all three films were released in the spring of 1984).

While similar problems of identification also limited the home success of *Angi Vera* and *Another Way*, all three films (along with Bacsó's *The Witness*) were received in the West with exceptional enthusiasm. Exceptional because this reception not only delimited a significantly restricted and disproportionate interest in merely one aspect of Hungarian cinema, but also because in its rehearsal of various received political prejudices, it may have impeded the potential accessibility of a far wider spectrum of Hungarian films, while symptomatically misrepresenting even those it claims to applaud. Thus one English reviewer described *Angi Vera* as a film which "quite simply ... tells you more about present moods and even politics in a Socialist Country like Hungary than all the verbiage accompanying state visits or government missions ever produces," Gábor's consciously historical statement collapsing into a timely attack on "the insidious centrepiece of communism."²¹ The same reviewer registered with some aston-

ishment: "That this Hungarian film should have been made in a Socialist country under Russian influence – and indeed still under Russian occupation is courageous and remarkable enough,"²² while a review of *Another Way* carried in *The Observer* (with the title "An Act of Courage") opened in a similar vein: "It is remarkable that a film about a lesbian love affair which mixes explicit sex scenes with trenchant social criticism should have come out of Eastern Europe."²³ Rather than thus feeling pressed to rethink certain preconceptions about the nature and mechanics of cultural policy in "Eastern Europe" such confessions of surprise appeared symptomatically content to celebrate the privilege of their own naivety. For the "Eastern Europe" of the last decade of Soviet-style state socialism – the lost and negatively mythologized other of "historical" Europe – was always a problematically ideological, rather than chartably geographical, construct. A decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall a new set of terms has emerged to construct Western Europe's "post-communist" other, and it is no longer merely the 1950s but also the 1980s which have been relegated to the realm of "The Day Before Yesterday."

Notes

1. Ervin Pamlényi ed., *A History of Hungary* (London 1975).
2. Published in Henrik Vass, ed., *Történelem és közgondolkodás* [History and Public Consciousness] (Budapest, 1982.)
3. The six films are: *Angi Vera* (1978); *The Witness* (*A tanú*, released 1979); *Time Stands Still* (*Megáll az idő*, 1981); *Daniel Takes a Train* (*Szerencsés Dániel*, 1982); *Another Way* (*Egyásra nézve*, 1982) and *A Diary for My Children* (*Napló gyermekeimnek*, 1983). Four of these films are discussed in detail here.
4. *Filmkultúra* [the monthly periodical of the Hungarian Film Institute] (1993/2), 8–9.
5. Péter Bacsó interviewed by Éva Bársony in *Filmvilág* (1983/12) 9. NÉKOSZ was the acronym of the "People's Colleges Movement" (1945–49). People's colleges were founded in 1945 to provide education for socially disadvantaged students – generally of peasant background. They offered the first major opportunity for the peasantry to receive further education on a mass scale and produced many prominent writers and intellectuals still active and influential today. They were closed down in 1949, partly as a consequence of the charges levelled against László Rajk, who had been involved in their foundation and was one of their major patrons.
6. Quoted in the "Production Notes" prepared by HUNGAROFILM for the English screening of *The Witness* in 1982.
7. Including the high-ranking official Comrade Bástyá from *The Witness* – a suggestion of Bacsó's faith in the capacity of his work to sustain a popular mythology on the screen.
8. *Filmvilág*, op. cit., 12.
9. At this time sixteen to twenty feature films were budgeted annually in Hungary with some eight professional film makers competing for permission and money to shoot. In contrast to

Bacsó, most other leading directors only got to work on a film once every two or three years. On completion of his twentieth film in 1984, Bacsó received the Kossuth prize, Hungary's highest award for achievement in the arts.

10. *Filmvilág*, op. cit., 12.
11. These oppositions are borrowed from Géza Poros's short book, *Gábor Pál* (Budapest, 1984).
12. The report concerns the second period of enforced collectivization, which began in earnest in the winter of 1958/59. Radical land reforms had been introduced in March 1945 entailing a major redistribution of property among the peasantry and affecting about one quarter of the country's population; but by the early 1950s the new smallholders came under increasing economic and political pressure to give up their land and join the collectives. By 1953 nearly one-third of all Hungary's cultivated land was farmed co-operatively, but its yield was well below that produced on private farms. In the spring of 1957, six months after the uprising, the proportion of collective farms had fallen to about ten per cent. After the reinforcement of collectivization from 1958–61, 93% of all cultivated land was either in co-operative or state hands. See among others László Gyurkó's "Introductory Biography" to *János Kádár: Selected Speeches and Interviews* (Budapest, 1985) published jointly with Pergamon Press as part of its "Leaders of the World" series and edited by Robert Maxwell.
13. Interview with Makk (in English) in *Hungarofilm Bulletin* (1982/2), 18. *Another Way* (whose Hungarian title was *Egymásra nézve*, lit. "Looking at each another") was based on Erzsébet Galgóczi's best-selling short novel *Within the Law (Törvényen belül)* 1980.
14. *Hungarofilm Bulletin*, 19. The visual metaphor with which the film both begins and can be read as a pertinent objectification of this notion of universality; during both the opening and closing credits of the film we see an eagle winging across a barbed-wire fence in broken slow motion.
15. Ákos Szilágyi "Kis magyar film-sexológia" in *Filmvilág* (1981/1), 25–30.
16. *Hungarofilm Bulletin*, p. 18.
17. See, for example, Gyurkó's "Introductory Biography" to *János Kádár: Selected Speeches and Interviews*: "The consolidation of power by the spring of '95 and economic recovery by the end of 1957 were unbelievably quick results which nobody had expected." (117); or Ervin Pamlényi, ed., *A History of Hungary*: "Within a few years the country recovered from the wounds of the counterrevolution. With the improvement in the living conditions of the people an atmosphere of calm and confidence began to prevail. Healthy debates on questions of public interest began to characterize the life of Hungarian society. A major contribution to the development of this kind of atmosphere was the strict enforcement of the role of law and an unconditional respect for civil rights." (558)
18. *Hungarofilm Bulletin*, 20.
19. The film is in fact semi-autobiographical; Mészáros herself spent a similar period of her youth in the Soviet Union, where her own father "disappeared" in the Stalinist purges. The release of *Diary for My Children* was delayed for two years because of objections from the Soviet Embassy concerning the use of original Soviet film footage from the 1930s. Certain extracts were subsequently omitted for "copyright reasons."
20. Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971) led the Hungarian Communist Party from 1941 to 1956. Returning to Hungary from the Soviet Union in 1945 he became Secretary General of the party. He ceded premiership to Imre Nagy in 1953 but remained Party Secretary until July 1956, when he emigrated to the Soviet Union, where he was to stay until his death. Held responsible for the personality cult surrounding his name in the 1950s he was expelled from the Party in

1962. Ernő Gerő (1898–1980) was member of the Hungarian Communist Party from 1918 and of the Party's Central Leadership and Political Committee from 1945–56. He held various ministerial positions in this period including: Minister of Finance (1948–56) and was largely responsible for economic/industrial policy in the early fifties. He was expelled from the Party in 1962 for "political crimes" in the Rákosi period. József Révai (1898–1959) was similarly member of Party from 1918 and of the Central Leadership and Political Committee from 1945. He served as Minister of Public Education/Culture (1949–53) and was the Party's leading spokesman on issues of culture and ideology. He became a member of Central Committee after 1956 and was best known outside of Hungary for his attacks on Lukács beginning in 1949. Mihály Farkas (1904–1965) was originally a member of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, served on the Political Committee of the Hungarian party after 1945 and was for a time Deputy Secretary General. As Minister of Defense (1948–53) he was also in charge of secret police. Dismissed from the Political Committee in 1955 because of his role in the show trials, he was expelled from the Party as a whole in 1956 and imprisoned until 1961.

21. Alexander Walker in the *Evening Standard* June 5 1980 (the first quoted phrase is from Walker's earlier review in the *Standard*, March 29 1979).
22. *Evening Standard*, June 5 1980.
23. Mike Bygrave in the *Observer*, October 3 1982.