

István Gaál is one of the leading young directors of the new wave in Hungarian cinema. He is an intensely brilliant artist whose films are not only intellectually exciting, but beautifully-wrought, highly complex works of art. Gaál is a very close friend of Miklós Jancsó's, and this friendship was partially responsible for the unique style that has characterized Hungarian films in the past few years.

István Gaál recently came to Canada for a coast-to-coast tour with five Hungarian feature films — two of his own.

The films were:

Love (Szerelem) by Károly Makk,

The Tóth Family (Isten Hozta, Ornagy Ur) by Zoltán Fábri,

The Uproven Stone (Feldobott Kö) by Sándor Sára,

The Falcons (Magasiskola) by István Gaál, and

Dead Landscape (Holt Vidék) by Gaál.

Love (Szerelem) received high acclaim at the New York Film Festival last year. The film delicately explores a woman's relationship with her dying mother-in-law, with a strong undercurrent of

political criticism woven throughout. The young woman's husband is a political prisoner, and it is this bitter truth that she desperately attempts to conceal from her beloved mother-in-law. The two lead characters are magnificently portrayed by two of Hungary's greatest actresses — Mari Töröcsik and Lili Darvas. The younger woman (Töröcsik) fights time, injustice, and her own desperate loneliness; yet maintains her enduring strength. The older woman (a relic from the grand days of the Austro-Hungarian empire) manages to hold onto her dignity and memories to shield herself from a world that has no more time for graciousness. A very finely done, understated portrait of survival, it won a Special Jury Award at Cannes.

The Tóth Family (Isten Hozta, Ornagy Ur) was made in the highest tradition of absurdist theatre. The central theme deals with tyranny and societal terror while attacking bureaucracies, politics, and war, with skillfully black humor. The film was directed by one of Hungary's eminent directors, Zoltán Fábri, who has been making films in Hungary since 1952.

The Uproven Stone (Feldobott Kö) is another film with very strong political criticism woven throughout. The classic question 'Man Against State' is explored in recent historical perspective. The story takes place in the late 1940's when Hungary was painfully emerging from feudalism to the possibility of socialism. The film strongly condemns the almost inevitable failure to institute necessary societal changes in humane ways. Thus, the methods used to change injustice ultimately become as corrupting and evil as the system being replaced. **The Uproven Stone** is classically structured, with a distinct eye for dramatic framing. It is also one of the first Hungarian films to explore the persecution of gypsies. Sándor Sára, a highly respected cameraman, directed this moving feature.

The Falcons (Magasiskola) is a disturbingly complex, highly theoretical film. It has a strong thread of uneasiness binding the characters together. The main relationship is between a young man and his teacher, Lilik — a falcon trainer. Lilik's powerful, brilliant, and extremely disciplined character dominates the film; as he dominates everything around him. The story takes place in a fishing locale where the thematic balance of falcons, fish and cranes is tensely strained because of the inherently delicate tenuousness.

The young man also accepts another teacher, Teréz, a woman who lives with Lilik and the other falconers. She is mother-lover; depending on what each man expects of her. Teréz makes no demands on any of them in return, preferring to relate only to the nature surrounding her.



Mari Töröcsik in Károly Makk's 'Love'

The film chronicles the young man's struggle to find true teachers and his attempts to differentiate the real from the false among his prophets. (**The Falcons** won a prize at Cannes.)

Dead Landscape (Holt Vidék) is one of the finest films ever made. It parallels the dying of a village with a woman's progressive descent towards insanity. Not only is the camerawork probing and sensitive; but the portrayal of the lead character, Julis, by Mari Töröcsik is masterful. The camera subtly captures all the nuances of feeling that the

magnificent actress etches on her face, while concurrently chronicling the history of the woman, the village, and an era lost forever, with an insight and understanding that is breath taking. **Dead Landscape** is the fruit of one of the finest collaborations between a director and an actress. The film is truly a masterpiece. ●

How did you personally get involved in filmmaking?

When I was 16 I used to skip school to see films. I had a lot of hassles then, because I was a little guy and for the life of me I didn't want to grow up! And the theatres didn't want to believe that I was old enough to watch those films! But I think that was when I marked myself for life with that dreaded celluloid. It was just that I told myself at 16 – this is it! This is what I feel I should be doing.

Originally, complying to my father's wishes, I obediently went to a technical high school. I needed that like I needed a hump on my back! I had absolutely no desire to go there. Later, though, I had a lot to thank for that

training. After graduating, I worked for two years. Then I applied to the Film School. This was in 1953, and in those days nobody could get accepted with a university degree. At that time, the entire development of the society demanded that this luxury not be allowed. So, we got accepted with High School diplomas, and it was precisely because of this that we had a longer study-time. (Today the system is such, that they accept only those with university degrees.) Anyway, I graduated in '58 and worked as an apprentice in a

entire country on a superficial level. You know the physical reality, and of course, through the documentaries you have already gotten to know certain locales intimately. And by going a little below that surface . . .

I firmly believe that the length of a work has absolutely no importance. You can have a brilliant short story and a full-length novel that makes you climb walls! I have never given up on making shorts. Before **The Falcons** (Magasiskola) I made a six-minute film for the 25th anniversary of Bartók's death. It's a free



Zoltan Fábri's "The Toth Family"



Village scene in "Uphrown Stone"

interpretation of his little nocturne for the piano, part of a series called **In Freedom** (Szabadban). It's a shame it wasn't brought here, because that was the prelude to **Dead Landscape** (Holt Vidék). My other films? I made **Currents** (Sodrásban) which was shown at the Montreal Film Festival in 1966; then **Green Years** (Zöldár), **The Falcons**, and **Dead Landscape**.

Have you ever been to Canada before?

I landed at Gander Airport four times on my way to Cuba. But this is the second time my films have been here. Rock Demers/Faroun Films/is the man I have to thank for being here. He is a man with an obsession for film, he's wonderful!

Did you get to see any Canadian films yet?

Only **Les Smattes**. It's a very fine film. Very good.

I'm curious about your trips to Cuba. What are the Cuban films like?

They're excellent. I've been to Cuba several times already, once with Miklós Jancsó. They have made incredible progress, especially in the case of one or two directors. I believe some of their films have been bought for Canadian television. You know, considering the number of films they produce – they are excellent in quality.

Hungary also seems to have emerged as a major film entity only in the last twenty years or so. Was there any serious film production before?

In 1942 there was a lot of film production. Forty-six features. One of methods they used, which was quite common; was to have four producers, one editor, and actors from four different



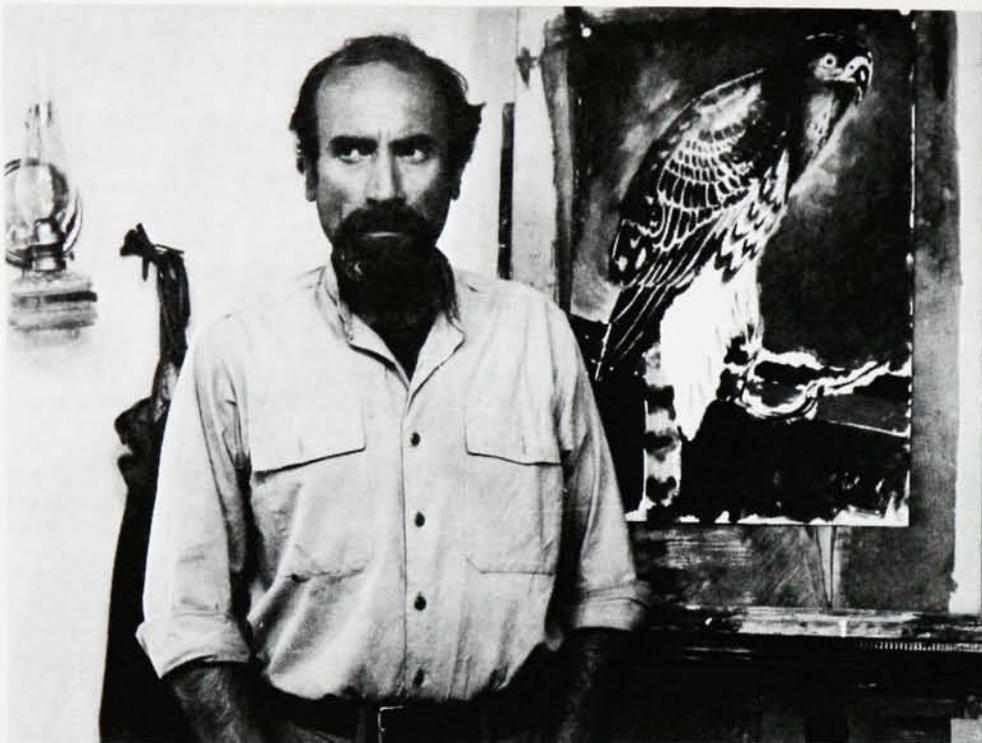
Lili Darvas in "Love"

factory for a year. Then, the Soviet Government gave me a scholarship to go to the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografo in Rome for two years. When I returned, I wanted to do documentaries so I chose not to try for a commission to make features, but to do newsreels; since basically a reporter makes documentaries. That's what he does. He puts the camera under his arm, leaves Budapest and rushes to Szombathely, next day to Pécs, third day to Debrecen. [All cities & towns are in Hungary.] In a very short time, you get to know the

István Gaál

Hungarian director

(Interviewed by Kiss/Koller. Translated and edited by A. Ibrányi-Kiss.)



Lilik (György Bánffy) in "The Falcons"



Teréz (Judit Meszléri) and the young man



The young man (Iván Andonov) with Lilik



countries. They would light a set, and one after the other they would shoot four times; four different films. Really! This is how it went: after the French left, the Hungarians spent two weeks on the set, followed by the Germans, and so on. When it was all over, the producer made four different films from the footage!

But also in '42 came the turning point in our cinema. A landmark in film, István Szot's **People on The Alps** (Emberék a Havason), which won a highly coveted award in Venice. There was also Hortobágy and Székely's **Lilacs** (Lila Akácok); but the landmark was **People on The Alps**. You know, the real strength of Hungarian cinema is that you can see ten films with ten completely different styles and ways of relating to film. There is no *one* particular style that has evolved out of the Hungarian Film School. You can find everything from *cinéma vérité* to the most abstract. Our rainbow has many colours! This is what I like most about our films. All the filmmakers are very singular artists.

So it's not like the French school which developed the nouvelle vogue?

Even in French cinema there were many different developments! Resnais, who I admire infinitely, is drifting around now. He can't get any work. Chabrol is the only one who simply made it, without stopping; but I feel that he had to make many compromises which aren't very together.

And the East European countries?

I think we can say that we were always 'open' in film in all the socialist countries. No question about it. There was no other way! Hungarian cinema had its great spurt of growth in '53 or thereabouts; and in those years it flowered and blossomed out (which even the Czechs will admit). But these flowering periods are not necessarily determined by political or social developments. What happens is that a strong individual crops up, or an especially strong generation.

What was the response in Hungary to the great surge of popularity experienced by Czech cinema in the sixties?

In the mid-sixties, we filmmakers were thinking in different concepts. Many respected the Czech style, but not *en bloc*. This is very similar to the fact that many liked Leacock, the Maysles brothers, Pennebaker, that trio; whereas many refused to recognize them or their style. Or for that matter, the Free Cinema of Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson; yet there are those who have been deeply influenced by their work. This movement touched everyone in the Czech Cinema, and that never happened in Hungary. We never made the Free Cinema ours.

With us, literature and film didn't necessarily parallel each other. Either literature was the vanguard and film

followed, or the reverse would be true. It was difficult for us to collaborate with writers because those who were the type to write scripts more than anything else, wrote only from their very personal points of view. In other words, Osborne collaborated better with contemporary filmmakers in England than our writers could with us. So we had to give up on collaboration since this was very difficult, and we became writers. We wrote our own scripts. There were those of us who conceived of film as being primarily a visual medium, and dialogue was of secondary importance. I still hold this to be true, it's one of my basic beliefs.

Hungarian filmmakers seem to have left quite a mark in other countries, too. For example, Vilmos Zsigmond who shot "McCabe and Mrs. Miller"...
Oh yes, he's a friend of mine!

And László Kovács who shot "King of Marvin Gardens", "Five Easy Pieces", "Easy Rider"...

Oh yes! I know him. I like him very much. When we were at the Hungarian Film School, I used to be his go-between. We were working on a film, I was a technician, and he was in love with this girl. He was very shy, and the girl's father was tyrannical, you know? So he never dared go in her house when the father was around. So... I would go, and if the father answered the door I'd say, "Excuse me, sir. I'm from Telephone Central. We hear you've had some trouble with your phone. May I see it?" And that's how I'd find out if she was there! (laughter)

When were you in school together?

He went to the Film School one year before me. So if I'm 39 now, he must be 41... It's a pity we haven't met in Cannes. I must find his address in Los Angeles and write to him.

Getting back to your films, how important is discipline in your life? It seemed to be one of the central themes of "The Falcons".

You know, I was very glad to see how universal the problem discussed in the film really is. Because there are Liliks everywhere. The protests against the film, and the censored screening... Well, there could have been a big scandal raised about that. But it doesn't really matter.

Lilik's character in The Falcons was quite repugnant in many ways. It was amazing how you managed to make him so sympathetic in the film.

I totally detest when the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' are very clearly delineated. This kind of oversimplification has reached such grotesque proportions that audiences are completely brainwashed. The levels it reached in Hollywood! Really! The good guys came in from the right, and the bad guys from the left. This is true! It finally became so extreme that the only positive charac-

teristic of the good guy was that he was the good guy. This simplification is totally anti-art and against creation. If I would have depicted Lilik as being purely negative, I'd have eased the audience's burden of identification. But don't forget that what Lilik could do with his falcons was the work of genius. Pure genius! The boy was enchanted and awed by the sight of it. Lilik's personal drama was that he couldn't relate to society or mankind. He couldn't accept the possibility of democracy.

Teréz was also a very disturbing character in the film. She was very attractive and yet very distant, untouchable, at the same time...

Teréz thinks she will find herself by spreading herself out in Nature, yet that's exactly how she loses her self. This was where she made her mistake. When she says that she is no longer sculpting because sculptures are not alive, it simply means that her sculptures weren't very good, that's all. You know the story about the famous sculptor from Nyiregyháza who sculpted a horse? He asked a man what he thought of it, and the man said, "Well, a horse is this and a horse is that...". And the old sculptor answered in rich dialect, "Listen here! That's no horse! It's a sculpture!" (laughter)

It was wonderful that you chose not to resolve "The Falcons", that you left it with a question mark.

I stay away from the Hollywood system of resolving everything by the end of the film... The hero walking off with the heroine, that kind of thing... Either people see something in the film, or there's no meaning to it. For example, did you notice that the boy and Lilik pass under the telephone wires three times? The lines of communication? This film isn't a pattern of symbols, it has a system of meaning. In the very first scene, the boy notices a dead fish by the tracks at the railroad station. This means something. The whole film revolves around the cranes and the falcons, but it's also a reality. It takes place in a fishing village, and where do they transport the fish? - At the station! So the fish is legitimately there, it's not a symbol. I was interested in human interactions, and the integration of the woman. Picasso said that you can only abstract from reality. If you abstract the abstract - there's no sense in it.

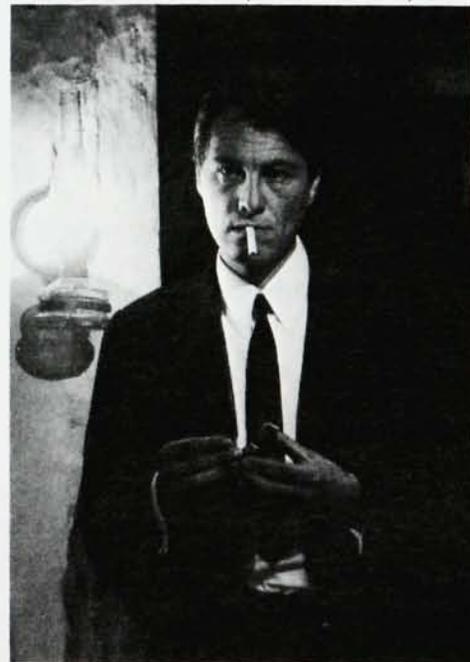
Lilik's character has found many people's sore points - even in socialist Hungary. My creative integrity was greatly offended by the assumption of many people in that audience last night that I would make a primitive political propaganda film. Those people came to the screening with Lilik-type thinking. Deeply rooted traditions do not change from one day to the next. In Hungary, the potential for democracy exists but many are simply not ready to use that poten-



Scene from "Dead Landscape"



Julis with her husband (István Ferenczi)



tial. We still have vestiges of feudalistic, bourgeois mentality. Evolution can only come about with great difficulty.

We make films with a strong, critical edge. But not against the system. We're trying to correct the system, to make it more responsive.

Many of the films were quite severe in their political criticism of the Stalin era . . . For example, "The Upthrown Stone" (Feldobott Kö) by Sándor Sára . . .

You know, I'm quite proud of the fact that I was one of the first to deal with that subject. In **Green Years** (Zöldár) in 1965. I've already worked that out for myself. So, as far as I'm concerned, that's finished and done with. But Sára's film takes place in a different era. Hungarian cinema is so tied to our history. It's rooted in that history, which is quite different from a thematical story.

What is important is not what you are allowed to say, but what you are allowed to do. And there's a great deal of difference between the two. The second freedom is far more important. If a man cannot realize his integrity in action, he is not free. I've made five films. I could never have gotten a single penny to make any of them abroad. That is for certain. (I know, because I lived in a neo-capitalist society, Italy, for two years.) The artistic freedom, I have — I've made five features and they have only cut three sequences out of all my films. All because of 'excessive' nudity. I would never get that here.

"Dead Landscape" is one of the finest films ever written about a woman. The lead character, Julis, was fantastic! How did you write such an intricate personality?

I was very lucky to have worked with Mari Töröcsik in **Dead Landscape**. This was absolutely crucial for the film. You know, it's been in us for a long time. But I was afraid of this woman. This character. We've been preparing ourselves for this meeting for 15 years. Mari would ask me every time we met, "When are we making the film?" When I was ready, I wrote the script and phoned her up and told her, "Mari, my script is ready. I wrote it for you." She read it and called me back and said, "Thanks, I know."

The camerawork was very sensitive, probing. Was the shooting difficult?

My friend, János Solymoi, was the cameraman. I've had a different cameraman for every film I've directed. (I myself am an artist in that field, you know.)

So I was looking for a location. I couldn't use Gyűrűfü because it was too far away. I was in Paris when I read in the Hungarian papers that the first Hungarian village had died out. This was Gyűrűfü. I was there the next day. I have never felt such a stab in my heart as I felt then. It was deserted . . . In a little, tiny valley . . . It was really a ghost

town! The Film Studio wanted to buy it, but the peasants refused to sell. There was also a West German production company that wanted to buy the entire village. They wanted to make a World War II movie and bomb the whole thing. They probably offered a lot more money, but the people refused their offer. I wanted to make a documentary, but a colleague of mine was planning a film for television. That's why I didn't do it then. It was incredible! Everybody had left that village, even the very old peasants.

But Gyűrűfü was too far away. I would have needed a small airplane or a helicopter to get there. It's 170 kilometres from Budapest. A three-hour drive. For Mari Töröcsik to be able to honor her engagements in the theatre, she would have had to spend all her time between the stage and film just commuting to the location. I couldn't even have brought the cameras and the lights out in all that mud! And we certainly don't have the kind of money needed to have built a village from scratch. So I started looking in a 100 kilometre radius of Budapest. I was looking for a place where the main arteries of travel and communication had stopped. Where they went no further than the village. That meant that the village was, to a certain extent, dead. We finally found one 40 kilometres away in the region of the Majorság. Half of the village was already deserted, but half still lived there. Rows of 100-year-old houses . . .

It was difficult because we had to ask people not to burn their stoves, because we couldn't have smoke coming out of the chimneys. The place was supposed to be completely deserted. We couldn't even have a stray chicken running on the loose! Nobody could be seen . . . Then we started working with the set designer. We shot in Eastmancolor. We needed exactly that quality of colour, and we have very good laboratories in Hungary, the best in Europe. We didn't want stock as brilliant as the one we

used for **The Falcons**. It had to be more subtle . . .

How did this happen so suddenly? The village dying out?

The industrial plants slowly lured the people away. Industrialization itself was the reason. These things don't happen overnight. The closest contact to Gyűrűfü was quite a few kilometres away. You have this community consisting of, maybe 23 houses; and you have change and progress. The two are totally incompatible. The impossibility of supporting life killed the village. If a woman was nearing delivery or someone got sick, they had to take them to the nearest village by ox-cart. This kind of thing happens . . . At Gyűrűfü, it just accelerated a lot more. The peasants didn't want to farm anymore, or they didn't like the collective. Many reasons. Automatically, this migration starts to take place. Gyűrűfü was a village in the Órség region. Historically, they had survived through centuries of wars and occupations because they were so completely isolated. But that was no longer an advantage in an industrial era.

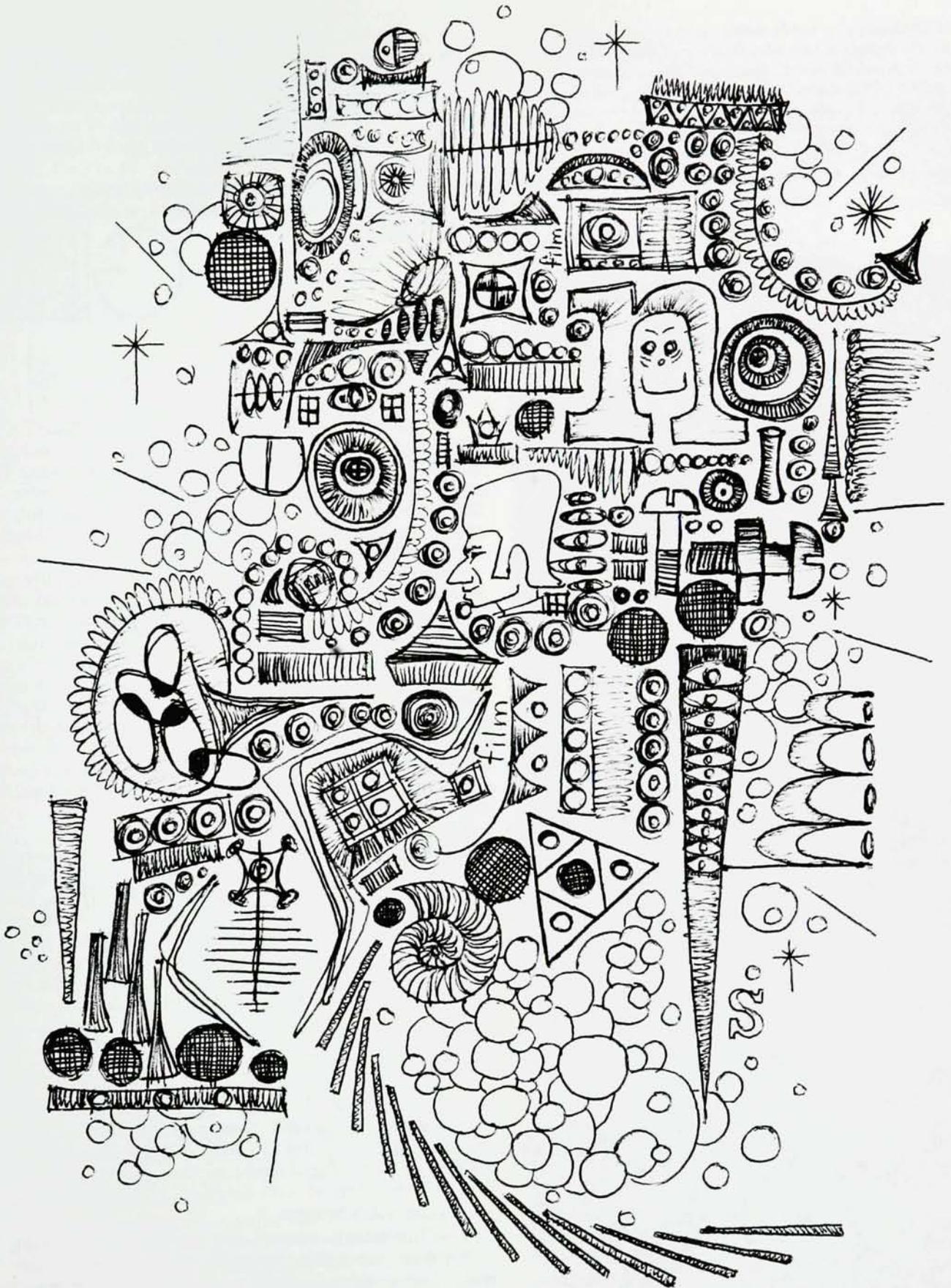
This theme of dying communities has become important in Canada, too. It seems to be happening in many places simultaneously.

There is no question about it. Those who attempt to work against the forces of change can only fail. In the history of evolution, for every single fish that dragged itself out of the swamps, how many sank back into the mire? And those are the ones who have become our oil today. For me, that transitional period is the most exciting. I often get furious with critics who ask me, "But what if?" What if the village had not died? What if the old peasant woman were still alive? What if the boy returns to Lilik? That's a different film! Not mine! That's why I've tried to portray closed-in situations. To leave no room for *What if's*. In **The Falcons**, in **Dead Landscape**. I'm not interested in actions. I'm interested in human contact and conflict.



Julis (Mari Töröcsik) in "Dead Landscape"

Artwork by Tom Urquhart



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