

# Hungarian film

## Goulash socialism on the silver screen

BY PAUL GOTTLIEB

*From time to time, Cinema Canada takes a closer look at the national cinemas of other countries. Paul Gottlieb's article on Hungarian cinema continues a series which has included the film industries of Australia and Yugoslavia.*

**W**hat do the Canadian and Hungarian film industries have in common besides Hungarians? Far more than one would expect given the obvious economic, cultural and political differences. On a recent trip to Hungary, where I interviewed a number of leading film people, I was struck by the similarities and challenges facing both industries. I was also intrigued by the different responses to those problems.

The similarities go well beyond those which exist among all filmmaking communities whether in the East or West. A number of

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parallels between the Hungarian and Canadian industries are quite remarkable.

*Traditional exports:* Talent, creativity and craft skills.

*Main import:* The finished product manufactured in other countries by that same talent.

*Population patterns:* A relatively small population who are heavy consumers of entertainment and information, but not necessarily of the home-grown variety. As a consequence, film talent rely on the combined resources of features, documentaries, television, as well as radio, theatre and commercials in order to survive.

*Government support and control:* The state and government policy play a decisive role in the economic and cultural destiny of the industry.

*Image and product:* Major "secondary" film power which is high on respect and low on bankability.

*Public vs private funding:* The trend is towards market-driven evaluation of product, called privatization in Canada and "entrepreneurial socialism" in Hungary. They both mean diminished public funding. Only the names

have been changed to protect ideological sensitivities.

*Survival strategies:* Attract foreign productions, scale features so they go down well on the tube, become identified with alternative filmmaking, invest in new technology, capitalize on kindred problems and establish stronger links between Budapest and Toronto.

There is ferment in the two cities: political, economic and cultural. The bubbles are rising. Will they burst or will they buoy up the business and art of filmmaking in two countries?

### Glasnost is old hat

Sigh observed inside a small video rental outlet in Budapest's Mayakovsky Street: *Capitalist films, 175 forints. Hungarian and Socialist films, 125 forints.*

It's not the obvious that I found so interesting here, not the clearly two-tiered value system. "Capitalist" films may cost more simply because they have to be imported for hard currency, whereas the domestic and socialist product can be paid for in non-convertible Hungarian money. It's the warts-and-all nature of the wording I found so disarming. Here you have *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (economic reform) all in one. Complete candor and market-driven pricing.

When I mentioned this sign to a Hungarian film executive, he was somewhat unimpressed by my glee. Again, not for the obvious reason. He did agree that this was indeed openness and showed good marketing sense, but in Hungary that's considered old hat.

In fact, whenever the three Russian words every Westerner now knows (*Glasnost*, *Perestroika*, and *Gorbachev*) came up in conversation, the Hungarian attitude was one of benevolent superiority. They are pleased that the Soviet Union is finally catching on, and are rooting for Gorbachev the way a professor would follow the progress of a particularly bright pupil.<sup>1</sup>

If one can judge from the current state of their film industry, the Hungarians indeed have some claims in originating both openness and economic reform behind the Iron Curtain. Neither have been accomplished overnight. Since nationalization in 1948, the film industry has run on a track laid down by successive governments which considered culture a high priority. This in a country where art has often

<sup>1</sup> After all, Hungary is already in the process of establishing a multi-party system.



Budapest stands in for Vienna during the production *Murderers Among Us*, the story of Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal

been the only genuine political outlet for both consent and dissent by the governed.

The current situation is, perhaps, best described by Karoly Kazimir, rector of the Academy of Dramatic, Film and Television Arts and a leading theatre director. "The arts are harmed by two factors: when they are important and when they are not. Right now we're not so important, but when we were, it was even worse, because it meant interference." The conflict between funding and freedom is obviously one that does not change whether the setting is Budapest or Hollywood.

In the '50s, the arts were very important in Hungary. Film production was part of a planned system designed to provide a single-minded perspective on the past, spread happiness in the present, and confidence in the future. Censorship? Not exactly. Filmmakers somehow understood "what was expected" and delivered. The state delivered money and prizes.

After 1956 things changed. According to Dr. Lazlo Bokor, managing director and editor-in-chief of the Hungarian Motion Picture and Video Studios (MOVI), the largest production facility in the country, '56 marked a phase of "cleansing and renewal". The policies of Janos Kadar in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution, expressed in the slogan "Those who are not against us are with us", translated into the three "T's" that guided the film industry: *Tamogatas, Tures, Tiltas* (Support, Tolerance and Prohibition).

This formula, in which the state acted mostly as sponsor and only rarely as controller (prohibited films were stopped at the script stage, and, apparently, there are no "imprisoned" films in Hungary), has resulted in a *modus vivendi* which Bokor describes thus:

"There was self-censorship and as all filmmakers want to shoot film, they found those self-fulfilling and autobiographically inspired stories in which they could tell in a personal context what happened here in recent years."

In addition to his position at MOVI, Bokor is a well-known documentary filmmaker with a doctorate in history. He is also a member of the Hungarian Parliament where he speaks for the film industry. These impressive credentials notwithstanding, he is an astute film executive with a strong sense of the realities of the day.

He notes that at the last Hungarian feature film festival, 75 per cent of the films shown were documentaries. "Critics have criticized filmmakers for making documentaries because they are cheaper and faster to produce. Yet, there is a natural trend for this here, a documentary renaissance. Photography, fact novels and films are in these days."

### TV and film: Unhappy marriage?

While documentaries do reasonably well in the cinemas and film clubs of Hungary, their



Jozsef Marx, director of the Hungarian Film Institute and the National Film Archive

ultimate destination is television. Bokor feels that television and film have arrived at a successful division of labour. "We co-produce films with Hungarian television. We mount joint ventures with them, combine forces when shooting remote or expensive locations and we still produce a weekly newsreel that is shown in cinemas as well as on television." MOVI, which provides production facilities, is obviously pleased with the economic interaction.

Jozsef Marx, director of the Hungarian Film Institute and the National Film Archive, essentially a cross between the NFB, the Ontario Film Institute and TVO, is less enthusiastic about the TV-cinema situation.

"Our television started in 1957-58," he said, "and it took the rejects from the film industry. So the second-class citizens have more clout and power, creating a difficult situation. The more economic problems occur, the more the TV-cinema rivalry becomes pronounced. Even if money does come to one side, it's almost impossible to cross over for it. It's stupid, because much of film production ends up on TV, and is, in fact, made for TV. There's lots of freedom but the visual cultural sectors fight for prominence. In Canada, TV must have won the battle, but here it's still going. Television is first, video second and film third. Pessimists think that visual culture is suffering; optimists say that pictures conquer the whole world via the television screen. Each needs a strategy for survival. Here we don't yet have this."

Before his appointment to the Institute, Marx produced more than 50 films, including the Oscar-winning *Mephisto* and the widely-praised *Angi Vera*, both seen in Canada. As opposed to Bokor, to whom both TV and cinema are clients, Marx has a healthy film bias. He is particularly proud of the role played by the Institute.

The way he describes it, "there's nothing like it, East or West". The institute includes the Archives, a scientific research centre, a distribution centre which supplies the extensive network of film clubs in Hungary, and runs the Film Museum, the Hungarian version of the Cinematheque française.

When I suggest to Marx that it is somewhat like our NFB, he replies with a sly grin, "Your NFB is more of a government body. The Hungarian Film Institute has been self-supporting for the past 30 years. Our only subsidized activity is the transfer of old nitrate films to new stock, undertaken by the Archives. This earns

only about 10 per cent of our annual budget."

The structure of the film industry in general shows a clear division between industry and art. On the art side are the Studios, such as the Budapest and the Bela Balazs - the latter perhaps a model for our own Centre for Advanced Film Studies.

The Balazs studio employs graduate filmmakers for the first five to six years of their careers, after which they must move on. The 20 existing studios employ about 100 directors. The studios initiate projects by buying literary properties or commissioning scripts. Decisions are made by the "creative collective" - the directors, producers and script editors who comprise the studio.

### Product placement popular

Once a script is finished, the studio shops for money. Sources of financing are a mix of government funding, foreign co-producers, as well as Hungarian corporate entities. Product placement, of all things, is an acceptable form of financing. According to Bokor, "today we don't say, like Austrian TV, that a Coke bottle can't be on the table in a scene. If the Coca Cola Company is willing to chip in, fine. And if two friends meet in the story, they can meet in front of a hotel that needs exposure and is willing to support the film for the privilege." With financing in place, the studio looks for a production facility. The choices are Bokor's MOVI and MAFILM.

Starting a project does not involve as much agony as in our country. Every director, producer, cameraperson and script editor is an employee of the state and gets an annual salary whether shooting or not. No one has been dismissed so far for lack of talent or inability to develop a good project.

Given that there are about 100 full-time directors and only 15-20 features released annually in recent years, there will be changes made under the new economic policies. "Because it can't be that those who work well turn their profits to keep the weak ones above water, we're racking our brains what to do with those directors and cameramen whose work is not in demand," says Bokor.

One solution may be the more than 500 privately owned small video production outfits that have sprung up in the country in the last few years. Directors and cameramen are now available to these "at cost". The state rents out talent to private enterprise in exchange for their pro-rated salaries.

Bokor, who had recently visited China, has seen another solution. "In China they say they make 30 films a year so they don't need 300 directors. It isn't fair to make a film just to keep someone employed, and it isn't fair to make talent wait 10 years to go before the cameras. So those without ability, even though they have a diploma, will be asked to take a job as directors of cultural centres, lead film co-ops or head up



Paul Gottlieb (centre) with MOVI's Laszlo Bokor and Ben Kingsley

regional television production."

What will drive the future of the film industry? Bokor feels that "we must make films that attract numbers and still have a message, Louis B. Mayer notwithstanding. If we manage a reasonable compromise, make the story relevant to our conditions and wrap it into a thriller or a love triangle, fine. But in the background there should be something affirming that life is worthwhile in Hungary, that it's worth shouldering the difficulties because it will be better for sure in the future." The rule of thumb that a population under 40 million is not a big enough market to ensure film profitability makes numbers important. And the numbers put Hungary and Canada in the same bracket - with a slight edge to Hungary, considering it has over 3,000 cinema screens.

#### A place for alternative films

The view from Marx's Film Institute is somewhat different. Marx, who defines alternative cinema as "a film the public won't look at but the profession highly appreciates", believes that the mandate of his institute should be to help

filmmakers who want to work on a small scale. He feels that 10 per cent of the annual film budget of the country should be reserved for alternative films, provided they keep working on a modest scale, with a crew of 15 tops.

When I described to Marx the success of our most recent and most alternative film, *A Winter Tan*, he was more than politely interested. He swapped the title *Karhozat* (Damnation) by Bela Tarr, shown at Toronto's Festival of Festivals where the film achieved near-cult status for its relentlessly depressing, aching pessimism. (*The film was also shown at the Festival du Nouveau cinéma et de la vidéo in Montréal where it won the Prix Alcan as best film of the festival - ed.*)

Mainstream, alternative or experimental - in the meantime somebody must bring home the bacon. And there's no doubt co-production is the answer. Even in highly politicized countries, co-production has become a purely economic proposition. Just as there is virtually complete freedom in making Hungarian films on practically any subject (Miklos Jancso's current film is entitled *Christ's Horoscope*), co-productions are welcome from practically any country and on any subject. The Hungarian countryside

offers everything but an ocean, and the cities provide ideal locations for every period of history from the Roman Empire to post-modern.

A recent visit to Toronto by Hungarian Prime Minister Karoly Grosz set of a flurry of activity among Canadian filmmakers of Hungarian ancestry. Joe Sefel is getting animation produced in Budapest; Bob Schulz is developing joint Hungarian-Canadian projects under the corporate name of Torbula (for Toronto, Budapest, L. A.); Toronto's Promptvision and Vancouver's Vintage Visuals are discussing video projects. There is even reciprocity. Lazlo Bokor, who believes that Hungary and Canada share a common concern with their cultural identities and an interest in multiculturalism, is looking to co-produce with Schulz a story involving Hungarian paratroops serving in the Canadian army during World War Two.

The bubbles are rising and the cameras are rolling.

As I was walking in Budapest's quaint Torok Street, I was almost hit by a red streetcar. Nothing unusual about that, except anyone who's been to Budapest knows that streetcars there are a distinctive yellow. A closer look

revealed that the tram's direction was Schonbrunn, which is, of course, the summer palace of the Hapsburg Imperial family - on the outskirts of Vienna. An eternal optimist, I cried out, "There must be a camera crew in there somewhere." And there was!

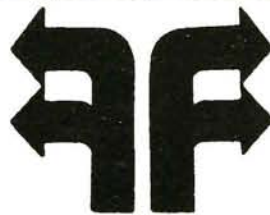
"Isn't that Ben Kingsley getting on the streetcar?" asked my wife.

Indeed it was, who was starring in the American production of *The Murderers Among Us*, a biography of Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi-hunter. Yes, Budapest was posing as Vienna. All the more remarkable since the real Vienna is only about 220 kilometres away.

A few weeks later, back in Toronto, I got stuck in a small traffic jam behind Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital. I got out of my car to investigate, and, lo and behold, I was looking into a van marked "Corrections Department, New York" driven by Michael Keaton and surrounded by a bunch of yellow cabs. *Deja video.*

Here as there, we are hewers of locations and drawers of Winnebagos.

Perhaps, in the end, what Hungary and Canada have in common is not a great deal but many little deals. ●



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