

Film / Photography

report: October 2004

The Melancholy of Resistance

On Belá Tarr, the lonely Master of Hungarian cinema and other talented young directors in Hungary.

In the 1980s it was director Istvan Szabo, who made Hungarian cinema impossible to overlook. His historical trilogy ("Mephisto", 1981, "Colonel Redl", 1985 and "Hanussen", 1988) travelled to festivals on all continents, starting with the guest appearance of "Mephisto" that attracted worldwide attention at the Hollywood propaganda machinery event known as the Oscars. His most recent international works have all been flops; the privilege of being so well-known is more of a hindrance than a help to Szabo. Too many different financial backers that all, naturally enough, have their own particular interests and too many self-appointed, well-meaning advisors could be the reason for this.

His less famous colleagues have also had to fight harder in recent years. Whereas in the 1980s twenty feature films were produced in Hungary each year, the number has dropped to nine to ten annually, in a "good" year. The major part of the public in Hungary as elsewhere does not go to the cinema to see challenging native films but to be distracted as effectively as possible from their many day-to-day problems.

This is all of precious little interest to Belá Tarr (born in 1955), the lonely master of the Hungarian cinema. He made his first film at the age of 16 on eight-millimetre film and was met initially with reactions of scepticism and distrust. "Damnation" (1988) brought him international recognition and "Satantango" (1994), based on Laszlo Krasznahorkai's first novel, gave him his final breakthrough among those who do not want to be just entertained and distracted.

Belá Tarr's work is treated today in Hungary in much the same way as that of writer Robert Musil in Austria. Every school child learns that the latter wrote a masterpiece in the history of literature that is over one thousand pages long and entitled "The Man Without Qualities" – but hardly anybody, including myself, has read it.

But on the other hand I did see "Satantango" in Budapest a number of years ago. Seven and a half hours and not a single second too long. No distracting colours. Black and white. Careful, almost gentle camera movements document a village and its inhabitants in agony. Belá Tarr is a distant relative of the Russian film poet Andrej Tarkowskij and it was not by chance that for his next film he again chose a novel by Krasznahorkai: "The Melancholy of Resistance". Under the title "Werckmeister Harmonies" (2000) this extraordinary film came to the few cinemas that dared to show work by Belá Tarr.

Tarr reacts to the prevailing lack of public interest in his work with melancholy and

contempt for the society, which many misunderstand as arrogance. He recently said in an interview. "During the communist era I thought to myself: okay, I have a problem with their politics. But up to the present almost nothing has changed for me. Officially no one likes me, secretly they do, because I am still outside the so-called system, outside of this stupid, petit-bourgeois, damned Hungarian film industry."

Today he sees it as a form of censorship that a Kodak film roll can only record eleven minutes. There are worse things, no matter. At present he is working on filming a short story by George Simenon "The Man from London". Tarr as usual will make no compromises and will fight with himself and everybody else. That the film will be finished in a number of years and will captivate me like all his other works is something I am looking forward to, even now.

There are other creative directors in Hungary. For example the young György Pálfi (born in 1974), whose film "Huckle" (Hungarian for hiccup) has created an international furore. A crime. A village. No dialogue but a visual tension rarely experienced in everyday cinema. Or Nimród Antal, born in the USA, who with "Kontroll" (2003), a crazy tour-de-force with and in the Budapest Underground has become a cinematic landmark: an atmosphere as powerful as that of post-war Vienna in "The Third Man". Therefore there is no reason to be depressed. Belá Tarr, Nimród Antal, György Pálfi: all of them Hungarian cinema hopefuls whose films will be shown wherever there are still courageous cinema operators.