

# **Film Censorship, Production History and Politics in Hungary from 1957 to 1963**

## **Theses to the Doctoral Dissertation**

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### **The subject of the paper**

The paper discusses film within the frame of the social, political and economic changes of the fifties and sixties in Hungary, as an important area and medium of social communication. The first part of the paper, divided into three chapters according to the respective period, surveys the transformation of film production and censorship from nationalization in 1948 to the first half of the sixties, that is, to the establishment of MAFILM and of creative artistic teams. The second part of the paper demonstrates the diachronic processes described in the first part relying on three case studies, and analyzes the mechanisms of producing social meaning in these works and their film historical context.

### **The Major Theses of the Paper**

#### **1. Statements Related to the Structure and Functioning of Film Production**

**1.1.** The paper discusses Hungarian films of the fifties and sixties within the frame of the function of the culture in the totalitarian regime. The importance of cinema is based on its intelligibility and legibility. The special importance attributed to film is also explained by its role of an effective medium to communicate ideology. It was due to the function of culture, and thus of the film, in the totalitarian regime, more precisely, due to the functional approach it was subject to, its being fitted into the mechanism, that the cultural politics of the first half of the fifties regarded filmmaking as an activity to be operated.

**1.2.** The gesture of going into politics, the rejection of direct party domination and the aspiration of self-government (the demand for professional autonomy) showed up, even if only indicatively, during the mid-fifties and days of the 56' revolution.

**1.3.** The precondition of the decision made in the early sixties to decentralize Hungarian feature film production was the trial-and-error type learning process of cultural politics, based on experimenting and correction.

#### **2. Statements Related to the Change of Method in Film Censorship**

**2.1.** The turn of the '50s and the '60s was a transitional phase from totalitarian control to the more lenient cultural politics of the '60s. However, the transition was not an unambiguous, smooth process of plain sailing.

**2.2.** The censorship of the early Kadar-era shifted from the preliminary control of the Revai-period towards posterior censorship. Preliminary censorship concentrates on the production process and tries to neutralize any ideological problem as early as the script is being written. Posterior censorship concentrates, beside the production, on the distribution and exhibition of the film. This method is based on the spreading and circulation of responsibility.

#### **3. Changes Related to the Filmmakers' Role and to Creative Autonomy**

**3.1.** With regard to the filmmakers' role models, there can be distinguished the film industry of the thirties and forties, the production-bound totalitarian filmmaking of the fifties, and the art film production of the sixties and seventies.

**film industry**

**thirties-forties**

**production-bound filmmaking**

**early fifties**

**art film production**

**sixties-seventies**

**producer**



**director script writer**

script writer



director prod. director

director



prod. director script writer

### ***Basic role models in Hungarian film production***

**3.2.** The importance and novelty of the structure of creative artistic teams, set up in the early sixties, allowing for a lot more scope for action and autonomy compared to the fifties, can be divided into four interdependent groups. The first one is the acceptance of the importance of competent professionalism, the second refers to creative artistic autonomy and the inner selfgovernment

of the teams, the next to the possibility of organization according to artisticcreative platforms, while the last one is the growth of diversity and the establishment of the chance of alternative options (the fact that the filmmakers were allowed to transfer a film project not winning the votes and the support of their respective team to another studio team).

### **The Major Steps, Divisions and Sources of the Paper**

The first part of the text is divided into three chapters. The first one surveys the structure and the operation of the institutional hierarchy established after the nationalization of Hungarian film production and censorship (along what political principles and values what function the respective institutions were given to). The first, longer part of this chapter analyzes the period from the nationalization to 1953, the second part the development after 1953, to end up with a summary of the events related to the film industry during the revolution. The chapter is based on monographic studies about the period. Reconstructing the history of institutions between 1948 and 1956, the analysis mainly relies on the film historical, production historical and social historical interpretations of Hungarian film production and film politics with reference to the first half of the fifties.

The next chapter, of central importance as to the whole of the paper, follows the transformation of the institutions between 1957 and 1963 from the aspect why the decentralization of Hungarian feature film production – already considered in the mid-fifties – did not take place before 1963. In order to answer the question the paper examines at what time and what plans there were made in the period to decentralize production, and also analyzes the change of method in film censorship taking place in the late fifties. This latter issue is rendered even more important by the fact that it helps us interpret the consequences of the surge of censorship after the revolution of 1956. This chapter is based on research work in the archives. The documents on which the text analyses are based belong to the archived files of the Film Headquarters, or of the Politburo of the MSZMP, or of its Department of Science and Culture. Beside the archived material, the sources of the paper are made up from the overview of the professional film press of those days (of the volumes of *Film*, *Színház*, *Muzsika*, *Filmvilág* and *Filmkultúra*) and of the manuscripts of the Library of the Hungarian National Film Archive, and partly from the already mentioned monographies.

The third chapter examines the institutional structure of the Hungarian film industry as established in the first half of the sixties. In this unit it is not the structure of production that is focused at, but the analysis of other branches of the trade. Such as the development of cinemas and audiences, the relationship of film production and television, the questions of distribution and exhibition policies, the participation of Hungarian films abroad, the situation of the professional film press, and at last the issue of the discourses in the public sphere of cinema. This chapter relies on contemporary distribution statistics and publications, on the collection of documentation in the Library of the Hungarian National Film Archive, as well as on the debates in the professional film press.

## **The Division of the Case Studies in the Paper and their Relation to the Periods of Film History**

The case studies in the second part of the paper follow the triple time division of the first part. The three periods, namely, presented as separate stages of production history and film censorship, also apply to the description of film history. The Hungarian cinema of the fifties and sixties is characterized by two significant periods, the socialist-realistic totalitarian filmmaking of the early fifties, and the modernism, the Hungarian new-wave of the sixties, as well as by the tendencies, emerging at the separating/connecting turn of decade, directed at closing the classical epoch and preparing modernism.

### **Purpose and Aspects of the Case Studies**

The three case studies aim, on one hand, at re-discussing and at the same time demonstrating the processes shown in the diachronic production and management historical description of the previous chapters by referring to concrete instances of production and censorship history, on the other hand, they interpret the respective works in a film historical context, as well as along diverse analytical aspects of political-cultural semiotization.

### **Subjects and Aspects of the Case Studies**

The first case study analyzes one of the representative socialist realist films of the totalitarian regime of the fifties, *Kiskrajcár* (*Penny*, 1953) by Marton Keleti, along the genrecreating

strategies of cultural semiotization (production-bound totalitarian cinema and socialist realism as a fundamental myth in *Penny*).

The second case study examines the issue of individual autonomy and of community authorization, the transforming, pre-modern tendencies, and their individual use of codes, emerging at the turn of the fifties and sixties, in three films of Karoly Makk made at the very beginning of the sixties (*Megszállottak / The Fanatics*, 1961, *Elveszett paradicsom / Paradise Lost*, 1962, *Utolsó előtti ember / The Last but One*, 1963).

The third case study analyzes the production history and historical-political semiotization of *Tízezer nap* (*Ten Thousand Sun*, 1965), a film directed by Ferenc Kosa, one of the young filmmaker generation making their entry in the sixties.