

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Liberal Arts

Ph.D. THESIS

BRIGITTA IVÁNYI-BITTER

**THE LIFEWORK OF GYÖRGY KOVÁSZNAI
ARTISTIC STRATEGIES DURING THE KÁDÁR ERA**

The Doctoral School of Philosophy,
Head: Prof. Dr. János Kelemen, CMHAS., professor
Film-, Media- and Cultural Studies Doctoral Program,
Head: Dr. Péter György, DSc., professor

Members of the committee and their academic degree :

Head of Committee: Dr. Péter György, DSc., egyetemi tanár
Official opponents: Dr. András Rényi PhD, habilitált egyetemi docens
Dr. József Fülöp DLA
Secretary of the Committee: Dr. Gábor Gelencsér PhD, habilitált egyetemi docens
Further members of the Committee: Dr. Horányi Attila PhD
Dr. András Müllner PhD, habilitált egyetemi docens
Dr. Balázs Varga PhD

Supervisor and his academic degree: Dr. Ferenc Hammer PhD.

Budapest
2012

Theme and Goal of the Research

My thesis aims to reconstruct the oeuvre of György Kovásznai (1934 -1983) and to explore the artistic strategies, everyday practices, private and public spaces of the so called Kádár era (1957-1989) in Hungary.

The subject of my research is the oeuvre of György Kovásznai, which is made up of 24 experimental films together with their scripts, paintings, drawings as well as philosophical and theoretical essays, paintings and drawings that were not made for films, and poems, short stories, dramas, and last but not least a three parts novel. In a wider sense my research focuses on the reconstruction of the lifework of György Kovásznai as a case study. In this framework I investigated the infrastructure of art education in the 1950s, the connections between the avant-garde artists active before the soviet type dictatorship and the young generations emerging in the 1950s. I also explored the artistic strategies of emerging artists outside of the art educational infrastructure in the end of the fifties, and their available alternatives for posts, jobs and living. I pursued the issues of Kovásznai's social milieu of young intellectuals in the sixties and also the effects of the marxist and communist ideology imposed on students in art universities during the fifties, as well as the ideological frameworks and critical discourses they could come across outside the school. It is also part of the scope of my research to show the institutional history of the Pannónia Film Studio, its outstanding directors, productions, work environment and working methods as well as the films produced parallel to Kovásznai's films.

I discuss and position the films of Kovásznai in the framework of mainly European film history and film theory. I analyzed the phenomenon that after he immersed himself in the avant-garde tradition Kovásznai switched to a kind of neoavantgarde language and towards the end of his life switched again to a more neoexpressive kind of pictorial self-expression. Finally I scrutinized the reception history of Kovásznai's lifework in the past thirty years. My topic takes up the description of the cultural, political, social, artistic and urban environment in the period from the fifties up until the end of the eighties, through the eyes of a Hungarian artist, who was considered to be an insider and an outsider the same time both in the circles of literature, filmmakers and visual artists in general.

I started researching in 2006, the back then almost unknown, hidden oeuvre, which was remembered to - by friends and colleagues - as a lifework of an animation filmmaker. Therefore one of the goals of my research is to reframe this lifework and to place it from a narrow field of animation film to the wider artistic discourse, which connects to visual art, film, literature and philosophy.

Sources and Methods of the Research:

The first stage of my research was the actual archiving and studying of the artworks and manuscripts (description of each item, documentation, inventory, placement, proper storage). The puzzle that I aimed to assemble is mainly comprised of paintings that were wasting away for decades mostly without titles and dates in mouldy garages and sheds. Starting out from the found and surely dated works, I set out to date the rest of the material on the basis of style analysis. Where the reminiscences of friends failed to evoke the titles used by the artist, I presented these pictures with titles myself, based on the fact that Kovásznai was also writing in each phase of his life, thus the narratives that were connected to the paintings, be it literary or philosophical, have nonetheless become claimable for me. I deemed it important to reveal these narratives through the oeuvre's monographic reconstruction, this is why I set out to quote and interpret Kovásznai's salient art theoretical, epistemological and other philosophical essays. However, the narratives in question have not been investigated and introduced from every possible point of view in this work, since Kovásznai's extensive literary legacy would require a book of its own: his novel, plays, short stories, and poems would be able to fill another separate bulky volume. For that one would need an extended apparatus of the theory of literature, which unfortunately is not my field of research.

I have prepared an oeuvre-catalogue to present all his work in one volume, that was published in 2010 online and as a CD supplement for my book on Kovásznai.¹

Kovácsnai's cinematic oeuvre is made up of 23 shorts and one feature length film, which were available on original celluloid copies in the Hungarian National Film-archive (MANDA), as all the copies of the shut down Pannonia Film Studio were taken there. The official folders for each film were of great help in understanding how the authorities back in those times interpreted the films and how they banned some of them. Apart from the film copies I found quite a few important studio photographs and filmstills, which were also part of the Pannonia Film Studio's archive earlier. As a further undertaking of my research project aiming to rescue the highly valuable material, Kovásznai's cinematic lifework was reconstructed. As a result of a long, devoted work, which involved the retouching of negatives that were often in a rather poor condition, all the films were digitalised and can be viewed now in HD or DVD format. All the source digital material is now at MANDA together with all the film rights. The whole cinematic lifework was published as supplements for the catalogue raisonne². Some of the films are on view online via the project's homepage. The archiving and placement of the researched material took place in a private archive called the Kovásznai Research Center.

¹ The oeuvre catalogue is to be found online (gallery menu) in the project's homepage: www.kovasznaigyorgy.hu

² Brigitta Iványi-Bitter (Author and co-editor of the): monography and catalogue raisonne, Kovásznai. Foreword by Lorand Hegyi. 336 pages. 500 illustrations. 4 DVD containing all his films and a portrait film about the artist. 1 CD for the oeuvre catalogue. Published by Vince Books Ltd. Budapest 2010. Published in Hungarian and in English versions.

The other method was to get a better understanding of Kovásznai's life through the memories of his acquaintances. I put together a video archive based on making video interviews of friends, colleagues and relatives. These interviews contributed to the cultural anthropological approach, the detailed descriptions of Kovásznai's environment.

The Historical Archive of the Hungarian State Security (ABTL) was a very important source of research as well, where I have researched together with Kovásznai's family, as we both got different selections of reports on Kovásznai. These source materials influenced my interpretation of the context of Kovásznai's social milieu, whereas they put me into the difficult position to settle the conflict between personal reminiscence and the actual content of secret service documents. I believe, that this difficulty throws light on a generational issue of the academic discourse on the given period, namely that the generations who were not part of that system as adults, are now facing with questions of authenticity, credibility throughout their researches. In this regard, the aforementioned problem was probably the most difficult in my entire research project, as it discredited some of my most credited sources of information. Taking into account that the state security reports are not objective facts themselves, they can still influence the credibility of other sources. Therefore I analyzed this situation through the interpretation of the agents' identity-constructions, and then their relation to each other. I detected different individual strategies that were actually alternatives for surviving in an environment full of distrust and forced adaptation.

I paid special attention to the importance of the principle of contextualism and of cultural anthropological description, therefore when it was possible I detailed the context of the actual artwork, especially the social, cultural practices of the Kádár era. My constructivist approach inspired me to elaborate a complex study perspective of traditional art historical classification together with film theory, cultural studies, cultural anthropology, sociography, as well as the history of cultural institutions.

Methodology and Structure of the Text:

The structure of my thesis is in fact comprised of two types of texts: chronological texts and theoretical texts. The three chapters based on chronology (chapter 1, 3, 5) are easily identifiable through their titles, which contain only dates. In these chapters, the reader is introduced to the visual works in the order of their making. Furthermore, there are four chapters that are centred around a theoretical problem so that I could reveal the system of thought and discourse behind the films, paintings and writings. In order to highlight the importance of the hybridity of the oeuvre, I investigated the interconnections between Kovásznai's different sources of inspiration.

The first chapter sums up the beginning until 1957, the period spent in the institutions of art education. I show this through Kovásznai's own essays, plays and letters to friends and university professors. The plays and other writings from the time he spent as a miner in 1954-55 reveal the tension between the official ideology stressed by the university and the actual social reality he came across in the coal mines of Hungary.

The second chapter analyses the meeting of the marxist and modernist utopias in Kovásznai's work. The chapter first clears the study perspective, then explores Kovásznai's true relation to the principle and the reality of the proletariat. The chapter closes with a study on Kovásznai's relation to modernism, since Kovásznai was concerned with the legacy of modernism throughout his life, and by exploring his approach to it, one may gain a clearer idea of his artistic position as well. On the other hand any artistic output during the socialist regime should also be interpreted according to its relation to modernism. The chapter aims to reconstruct Kovásznai's approach to art, the domain of references he employed in his contemplation about art.

The third chapter introduces his artwork and his context from 1958 to 1970. It investigates what was a 23 years old college drop out artist to do just one year after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution intending to work in the field of art, while avoiding the official path to an artistic career in an environment without the presence of an independent art market. It explores Kovásznai's relation to the so called European School (1945-48), the older underground avant-garde artists in Budapest. The chapter then discusses his films made together with Dezső Korniss in the 1960s as well as his own film initiatives, paintings, drawings and writings. This is the chapter which also contains the issues of his social milieu of young intellectuals in the 1960s, revealing the issues of secret agents present around him.

The fourth chapter contains the art theoretical and conceptual issues in the late sixties and early seventies, analyzing the epistemological problems of his essays: the problematization of the dialectical dichotomy of the concrete and the de-concretised. I investigate the ways in which Kovásznai's work echoes the progressive cinematic tendencies of the seventies, the way he connected experimental and documentary filmmaking. The end of the chapter introduces the filmic methodological solutions of his epistemological problems: Total Film and Anima Verité.

The fifth chapter describes his works made in the period of 1970 - 1979. Exploring his films from the early seventies signaling an intellectual turning point in the oeuvre. I discuss his late masterpiece, the feature length animated film, Bubble Bath, which has a perfected style of documentarism and psychedelic character-portrait.

The first part of the sixth chapter discusses Kovásznai's grand essay that sums up his lifework, titled Homeland Animation. After revealing his major issues towards the end of his life I analyze in details his last cycle of paintings as a synthesis of his artistic approach.

The last chapter aims to reconstruct the influence and reception history of György Kovásznai's oeuvre. Discussing the reception history of the artist's lifetime and later the vicissitudes of the artist's legacy and different attempts at its resuscitation. Finally I conclude with the re-evaluation of the oeuvre's genre delimitations during the 2000s.

Main Statements of the Thesis:

György Kovásznai pursued a career outside the institutional art scene, but in the meantime, his artistic strategy has become part of the visual arts canon. Owing to this, his oeuvre can now be introduced into a unified space of reception, into the domain of the visual art, both film and contemporary art, for museums. It implies that since the 1950s, Kovásznai was an active practitioner of several genres simultaneously. At that time, and especially under the Hungarian circumstances of the time, each art form and genre had its own appointed place concerning its performance, communication and audience. From the 1970s, with the spread of the post-essentialist views, artists found it increasingly challenging to work in intersecting fields of different genres in Hungary as well, but this only implies a rather small circle of artists. In the mainstream culture everybody stuck to his last, the filmmaker stuck to the cinema, the artist to the exhibition space.

The interpretation of genres as was characteristic during the Kádár era is in sharp contrast to the way genres are conceived in our time. The difference is not only manifest in whether common opinion expects the artist to decide if s/he wishes to be a painter or a filmmaker, or if s/he envisions a work to be made on film in his/her capacity as an artist or as a filmmaker. It is also perceptible in the way that a society, a culture constructs its spaces for the presentation of artworks. It is certain that Kovásznai would have no chance to make an exhibition to present his work in every genre at a time in a single space. But by the 1990s intermediality, collage, and quotations came to the fore in the Hungarian cultural scene as well. We may contend that the time is ripe for Kovásznai's interdisciplinary approach. My statement is, that while Kovásznai was excluded from the institutional framework of fine art back in his time, by today his strategy has become a general strategy of artists featured in the spaces of visual art.

My thesis can be related to two academic discourses. It mainly contributes to the Hungarian discourse on the complex description of the canon of the art of the Kádár era. In a wider sense it relates to the global discourse of theorizing experimental animation films. In relation to the aforementioned discourse, the position of animation art in the Hungarian cultural canon is still that of a step-child as nor fine art, nor film history take it seriously. Animation enjoyed a special atmosphere during the Kádár era, as a lot of creative artists would find asylum in animation studios, where they were able to work on firmly financed artistic films without strict monitoring and get a good salary. Artists who are not quite up to the expectations of the system were active in these animation studios, because animation was not among the prestigious old genres which traditionally served as cultural representation.

My thesis is based on a case study, which proves the right of several artists lifework - alike György Kovásznai's - to become part of the cultural canon. I would like to throw light on the fact that there were quite a few animation artists working with interdisciplinary strategies, whose legacy is a rich source inspiration for our contemporaries, serving as a basis for creative filmmaker's identity in Hungary. These artists deserve that the emerging generations would consider the animation art of the Kádár era as one of the most important art production of the 20th century in Hungary.

In terms of the global discourse theorizing animation film, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches are both in use, just as much as the approaches of cultural studies and cultural anthropology. One of the important authors of this international discourse, Alan Cholodenko stated that not only is animation a form of film, film - all film - is a form of animation. This means that cinema cannot be thought without thinking (its relation to) animation. It means that, insofar as animation's logics, processes, performances, etc., operate in all film, including live action, the theorizing of animation must by definition be a theorizing of all film.³ While another much acknowledged theorist Paul Wells describes three different categories: orthodox, developmental and experimental animation, stating that these tentative definitions attempt to address certain modes of expression and construction in the animated film linking these aspects to the techniques they employ.⁴ My thesis aims to position the Eastern European experimental animated film of the Soviet times somewhere on the border between fine art and cinema, by reconstructing the special cultural political context. It focuses on understanding the experimental animated films addressing social issues with approaches based on sociography and cultural anthropology, for which one of the main Hungarian representatives is György Kovásznai.

³ Cholodenko, Alan: *The Illusion of Life II*. Power Institute 2007 Sydney. p. 34-35.

⁴ Wells, Paul: *Understanding animation*, Routledge London 1998

Publications Related to my Thesis:

Books:

- Author and co-editor of the monography and catalogue raisonne, Kovásznai. Foreword by Lorand Hegyi. 336 pages. 500 illustrations. 4 DVD containing all his films and a portrait film about the artist. 1 CD for the oeuvre catalogue. Published by Vince Books Ltd. Budapest 2010. Published in Hungarian and in English versions. Designed by Gábor Gerhes.
- Author and co-editor of the book: György Kovásznai - Beyond the Meat Grinder. Published by the Kovásznai Research Center, Budapest 2008. 1 DVD supplement (110'), 70 pages, in Hungarian and English. Designed by Gábor Gerhes.

Studies in books/catalogues:

- György Kovásznai: Monologue, 1963. Study for the catalogue of the exhibition Verführung Freiheit. Kunst in Europa seit 1945. Publisher: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin. German and English. (Expected date of publishing: October 2012)
- Study on the experimental animated films from the Balázs Béla Studio Archive. In: The Balázs Béla Studio. Ed. Gábor Gelencsér. Published by Múcsarnok, BBS. (in Hungarian) 2009 p. 175-190.

Articles in periodicals:

- An overview on the contemporary Hungarian animation scene, Műértő 2008/5 p. 12-14.
- The archive of Dr. Végh (a central figure of Hungarian 60's avantgard). Mozgó Világ 2008/8 p. 23.
- György Kovásznai and the private platforms for art ran by Dr. László Végh in the 1960s in Budapest. Artmagazin 2008/1. p. 62.
- Stop motion? Thoughts on contemporary art animation addressing social issues. Műértő, May 2007. p. 4-5