

**Industry Statistics, Market Forces, Filmmaking Trends: An "Institutional Turn" in Hungarian Film Studies?<sup>12</sup>**

*Cinematic Regime Changes.* (Varga Balázs. *Filmrendszerváltások.* Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2016. ISBN 978-963-414-134-1. 209 p.)

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Comprehensive studies of national cinemas have long relied on statistical data to historically contextualise their topic and give a concrete footing to later arguments about overarching historical trajectories, the transformation of the cinematic canon and the analyses of individual films. While there is an agreement among scholars that institutional questions of film culture are essential, these are usually considered as secondary to aesthetic, textual and cultural interpretations, regarded as a dry bone in comparison to the juicy bits films (and the heated debates they inspire) represent. Dedicating a book-length study to the dry bone does not appear to be the path to general acceptance and success. *Filmrendszerváltások* [*Cinematic Regime Changes*] might just prove this assertion false.

Long in the making, Balázs Varga's monograph on the changing institutional context of post-communist Hungarian film culture fills, as already suggested, a considerable gap in scholarship dominated by textual analysis, stylistic explorations, cultural studies approaches and studies dedicated to questions of adaptation. As an organiser of film clubs and film festivals, as a member of juries and curator of film-related organizations, but also as a researcher, editor and educator, Varga's person has long stood as a link between the pragmatics of the industry and the theory-minded academic reception of cinema. His versatile experience both finds expression in and legitimises the book, which by itself has the potential to initiate a kind of "institutional turn" in Hungarian film studies.

The book presents the findings of a decade long research in two parts, with the period 1990 to 2010 in the focus of both. The historical overview is introduced by an informed outline of

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European systems of film finance and the effects of globalization in this area, reaching the conclusion that, although Hungarian cinema closely resembles other European national cinemas in its variety, its great deficit is its isolation, its lack of international visibility. The first part is a methodical overview of film finance, its institutional and legal background. The narrative begins with late state-socialist developments when the state monopoly of film culture with a centralised and hierarchically arranged institutional background spearheaded by MAFILM gave over to The Motion Picture Public Foundation of Hungary (in Hungarian Magyar Mozgókép Alapítvány – MMA). This public body managed by a board of trustees oversaw the whole of Hungarian film culture, including the finance, production and distribution of feature films, documentaries, popular-scientific films and animations, while it also distributed funding for film education, research and publishing. In Varga's assertion the two-decade long history of MMA is the key to understanding the pre- and post-millennial challenges of Hungarian cinema. Without the aim to reproduce in fine detail these challenges, as the author does, let me just point out two problem areas.

For one, MMA itself was a result of a consensus about the desperate need for the state's financial involvement in Hungarian film culture. Despite its administrative independence, MMA's financial attachment to consecutive governments foreshadowed long and painful negotiations between the industry and state bureaucrats. The other problem area regarded the distribution of the annual budget of approx. 1 billion HUF which created a generational conflict between established and upcoming film-makers. As Varga contends, "the transformation of the system benefited feature films, more specifically the interests of the state-socialist studio system, its employees and directors" (37). The predominance of the system of slate funding until the mid-1990s made it very difficult to secure finance for individual projects, more so since neither public nor commercial television participated actively in co-financing film projects.

The 2000s brought important changes for an underfunded film industry eager, on the one hand, to protect its autonomy from political influences and, on the other hand, to maintain a balance of power between the older and the younger film-makers. The passing of the cinematographic act in late-2003 was welcomed by the industry as it promised the long-awaited consolidation of film finance. Varga emphasises the comprehensiveness of the law which reinstated the central position of MMA in film culture, increased the amount of direct funding, introduced indirect

ones in the form of tax reliefs and investment incentives, promised infrastructural modernisation, established the Hungarian National Film Archive as an archival and research centre and subjected important production facilities under the supervision of MMA. At the same time, he notes that the reform measures introduced by the law already carried the seeds of crisis which later brought the whole system to its knees. Although the period between 2004 and 2011 provided an annual budget of 5 to 7 billion HUF for the industry, “there were huge differences between promised, planned and transferred state support” (49) which resulted in the MMK supporting more films than their actual budget would allow. The practice of support through the expression of intent became standard, according to which production companies were required to pre-finance film projects through expensive bank loans, and would often receive the awarded funding only in the following financial year. MMK’s worsening liquidity problems and mounting interest rates meant that by 2011 the liability of the public fund was higher than its annual budget. With the sustainability of the system seriously undermined, the newly elected Government of National Cooperation (the Second Orbán Government) terminated MMK on grounds of irresponsible management. Whether this decision was made exclusively on economic grounds or had political motives is still passionately debated. Varga’s position is that of neutral objectivity, although he does clarify that the management of MMK was falsely accused of fraud and it was the shortage of liquidity that led the public fund to adopt risky practices. As a more general conclusion Varga contends that “the 20 year long existence of MMA/MMK was founded on an enormous paradox: according to its statement of mission, it was called into being as an apolitical, professional and self-governing organization, its downfall was however the result of its inability to stay independent of politics” (56).

The new right-wing government initiated the Hungarian National Film Fund (Magyar Nemzeti Filmalap) as the central support institution of feature cinema, while documentaries, short features and animated films were supported through the Hungarian Media Patronage program. Adopting the British model, state support was generated through lottery ticket revenues which promised constant and reliable funding for 8-10 feature films and a few feature documentaries and animated features every year. Whereas Varga identified the inability to reach consensus as the main deficit of the previous system, he does not remain blind to the controversies of the present one, namely “the breakdown of film production for two years, the dismantling of the previous professional unity, the radical decline in the negotiating power of the filmmaking

profession and the disempowerment of Hungarian film culture and its representatives” (67). Although one might miss a more detailed exploration of the critical voices targeting the present system, especially the controversial figure of Andrew Vajna and his much debated appointment of Government Commissioner for cinema, there is much truth to Varga’s assertion that neither paradigms of film finance are naturally good or bad. Although *Filmrendszerváltások* analyses consecutive attempts to reform the financial support system of the film industry, it never claims that under-funding is the key reason for its problems.

Varga’s approach differentiates between the institutional-legal segments of film finance and its creative processes, including production, coproduction and service work provided for runaway productions, distribution and festival participation, but also the emergence of popular cinema and a new generation of film-makers in the early 2000s. The dynamic interaction between elements of these creative activities is historicised and addressed by the second part of the book. One might wonder if the chosen structure is efficient enough as it practically means over-viewing the period between 1990 and 2010 twice and poses the risk of self-repetition. Varga successfully avoids the pitfall of overlapping argumentation and the second part reads as an elaboration of the first with a shift in focus from the context of the film industry to that of film culture. Let me give an example. Film finance in the early 1990s – as the first part argues – was dominated by large studios and left little room for individual projects. In the second part we learn that although this situation favoured established auteurs with considerable know-how and social capital, audience turned away from art cinema and demanded fresh voices and popular films, which demand gave rise to new production companies that served as incubators for young talents and low budget filmmaking. As such, Varga identifies the most important trend of the decade as the weakening of the positions of mainstream authors in Hungarian cinema.

The formation of heterogeneous film culture, in which the mainstream auteurs (Márta Mészáros, István Szabó, Károly Makk, Lívia Gyarmathy, Sándor Sára) existed alongside the new auteurs of the post-millennial generation (Ferenc Török, György Pálfi, Szabolcs Hajdu, Kornél Mundruczó), director-turned actors (Róbert Koltai, András Kern), marginalised auteurs (Béla Tarr, András Jeles), radical auteurs (Zsombor Dyga, Benedek Fliegauf, István Szaladják), and non-professional auteurs (András Szőke, Péter Reich), is described as the most important development of the 2000s. The overrepresentation of auteurs is eye-catching in this list but not

surprising given the predominance of artist-directors in the national cinematic canon. This situation is nevertheless changing with the expansion of popular cinema. The polarization of the national film canon along the lines of either inward or outward orientation points to the lack of midcult films with international distribution. Varga identifies this as a deficit and contrasts it with the situation in Czech and – to a smaller extent – Polish cinema, two film industries Hungarian companies have to compete with for well-paying Hollywood runaway productions. While both the know-how of Hungarian professionals and the country's production infrastructure (Korda Studio, Origo Film Group, Stern Studio) have improved considerably in the past decade, the international visibility of Hungarian prestige films is an unresolved problem. The fact that pan-European coproduction has only benefited auteurs (Tarr, Mundruczó, Fliegauf) and the lack of Eastern-European production agreements are mentioned as main reasons for the weak market share of midcult cinema.

The polarization of Hungarian film culture is thoroughly discussed from the point of view of popular cinema dominated, according to the author, by comedies exploiting classic cabaret, post-communist nostalgia and retro. Apart from comedies, the generic spectrum remained narrow throughout the 2000s with historical and heritage films being the only exceptions. With its high production values and associated cultural prestige, historical cinema is able to mobilise domestic audiences who otherwise do not favour Hollywood productions. Quoting different industry figures, Varga convincingly argues that blockbusters (coming from either of the previously mentioned genres) or their lack radically alter the statistical success of Hungarian cinema. In my view, the recognition that the lack of middle-brow films is a great deficit to Hungarian cinema should be given great attention by future researchers of the field.

The contrast between the small output in the segment of popular/genre cinema and the high number of art films aiming at niche audience might be identified as the main problem with Hungarian cinema, namely that it is a state subsidised yet largely invisible elitist film culture. Varga does not suggest so, not only because his methodology is free of judgemental deductions but also because there is not enough evidence to prove that. When discussing the question of visibility (102-110), he openly admits that the lack of empirical data and research into the online spreading of Hungarian films (mainly through illegal file sharing) seriously undermines our understanding of how many people see what films. Audience study is certainly a blind spot of Hungarian film scholarship; illuminating it would certainly allow us to learn about the general

public's reception and perception of national film culture. Varga's objective criteria to study processes of canonisation – domestic popularity, opportunity to make enough films and build an oeuvre, international critical acclaim (144) – join local and global contexts and define success at their cross section. Unfortunately there are hardly any directors active in the period overviewed who qualify for these criteria. Varga mentions Jancsó, Szabó, Tarr of the elder generation and Mundruczó, Fliegauf, Hajdu and Pálfi from the post-millennial generation as prospective candidates even though none of their films are included in the list of the top 50 Hungarian box office hits. For this reason their domestic popularity is questionable. Especially members of the latter group participate regularly at international festivals, win prestigious prizes and are incited to join European pitching programmes, but their films find little appeal among general audiences. Varga's conclusive speculation claiming that “contemporary Hungarian cinema is not really at home in Hungary” (178) again points to the grave need for midcult cinema: films with local themes that local audiences identify as familiar and relevant to their everyday experience. Films that find a balance between inward-orientation and outward-orientation. Varga calls for a third way, a third space of Hungarian film culture. At present, he insightfully remarks, “the image of Hungary in popular cinema is as if the country lay a few hundred kilometres towards the west while art cinema offers an image as if the country was located a few hundred kilometres towards the east or southeast” (179-180). It might have been useful to elaborate on and develop this argument through film analyses and show how these mirages are supported by the irreconcilable dichotomy of westward aspiration and self-Orientalization in the minds of audiences and in society at large.

Varga's book is a “whistleblower” in the critical reception of Hungarian cinema, in that it raises awareness of the potentials of empirical inquiries not fully explored by film scholars. Its outspoken objective is to identify and trace trends and tendencies through the interpretation of hard data. As such, it both acknowledges the usefulness of quantitative research in the humanities and initiates a dialogue between them.

*Filmrendszerváltások* is an easily accessible resource for scholars, executives and decision-makers of the film industry, and cultural intermediaries working in this field. Researchers of post-communist Hungarian cinema and of the Eastern-European cinematic infrastructure will find it an essential reading while students of cinema with an interest in film finance, production, distribution and festival participation are likely to benefit from its highly informative and clear

logic of argumentation. Due to its scope, approach and depth, it would be vital to have the book translated into English and made available for an international readership.