

Screened Books: a Possible Hungarian Film History (Gábor Gelencsér: *Forgatott könyvek*. Kijárat Kiadó - Kosztolányi Dezső Kávéház Kulturális Alapítvány. Budapest, 2015, ISBN 978-615-5160-47-9, 564 p.)

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The product of many years of research, teaching and critical writing, prominent Hungarian film critic Gábor Gelencsér's new book strikes us with the huge film and critical material it mobilises, as well as an approach that alternates between wide overviews and meticulous detail analyses. As such, it is a curious mixture of different genres of critical writing on film, bringing together historical descriptions, socio-cultural and political reflections and reports, case studies as well as content and form analyses both contemporary with the films and from the last two decades. Most curiously, Gelencsér chooses as main focus of this "possible history" of the Hungarian cinema between 1945 and 1985 the literary adaptations of this period. Starting from the preliminary observation that during these four decades the social representative function is often taken over from literature by film and that the revolutionary changes in film (both formal and ideological) are frequently represented by literary adaptations, the author apparently represents the optimistic voice in the ongoing debate around literary adaptations. By stressing the mutually fertilising interaction between film and literature, he presents adaptations as a new dimension of the cultural-political function literature once had, reflecting, at the same time, on the changed status of the Writer as Author. Although repeatedly touching upon the concept of "author function" introduced by Foucault, describing a culturally defined role as organising principle of texts, the book almost completely avoids fashionable theoretical considerations of adaptations studies. In fact, he documents the socio-political circumstances of each adaptation, cross-examining them with the reflections of a new generation of film scholars.

The huge filmic and critical material gathered in the book – concerned in more or less detail with 100 authors, 200 literary works, 70 film directors and 200 adaptations – is organised along two main points of view: the cultural function of film and the priority of cultural signification in film (decreasing from the 1960s) and the aesthetic point of view concerned with innovative stylistic aspirations detectable in the literature-film interaction. Structurally, the first part of the book examines historical-cultural processes as reflected in the literature-film relationship, while the second part focuses on case studies organised around the names of emblematic film directors (Károly Makk, Péter Gothár, Judit Elek, Pál Sándor,

István Gaál, Béla Tarr) who reformed film language with literary adaptations from prominent authors (such as Zsigmond Móricz, Iván Mándy, Miklós Mészöly, Tibor Déry, László Krasznahorkai).

The first part consists of 7 chapters offering an overview of historical periods that seem to correspond to film historical stages marked by an intense literature-film interaction:

- 1. The coalition period (1945–48)** marked by innovative literary influences;
- 2. The era of social realism (1948–53)**, characterised by the devaluation of the role of the film director and a solid position of the writer (the “ironical” Mikszáth, the “critical” Móricz and the romantic Jókai), the movement of popular writers resulting in peasant/production films (most prominently Frigyes Bán’s *Treasured Earth/Talpalatnyi Föld*);
- 3. The period of ideological softening and formal experimentation (1954–62)**, detectable in a distancing from literature and parallel innovations, resulting in a “two-facedness,” that is, films presenting conflicts characteristic of the previous period, in a metaphoric language, a taste for parables, landscapes as state of mind, a dislocation from public to private, connecting Hungarian films to a universal film history (Károly Makk’s *Liliomfi* and *The Obsessed Ones/Megszállottak*, Zoltán Fábri’s *Merry-Go-Round/Körhinta*, László Nádasy’s *Razzia*);
- 4. The Hungarian New Wave (1963–1969)**, characterised by a decreasing formal influence of literary adaptations, while the number of films based on original screenplays increases. This is the period of social parables (Miklós Jancsó’s films), thematisation of social-ideological conflicts of generations through recurrent topics like search for the father, crisis of romantic relationships, in a figurative projection of processes of consciousness and stylistic, narrative reflexivity (represented by films like Miklós Jancsó’s *Cantata*, Zoltán Fábri’s *Twenty Hours/Húsz óra* and *Cold Days/Hideg napok* by András Kovács);
- 5. The 1970s (1970–78)** are marked by the crisis of both literature and film, their social function diminishes. Under these circumstances adaptations serve individual stylistical quests, while the overall film production characterises by a differentiation of stylistical orientations: documentarism and authorial stylisation (Huszárik’s *Szindbád* and Károly Makk’s *Love/Szerelem*), as well as generational feeling-films, complemented with a neo-avantgarde and underground line (represented by the creators of the Balázs Béla Studio, among others by Gábor Bódy’s intermedial experimentations);
- 6. The period of transition of the 1980s (1979–1986)** coincides with the so-called “prosaic turn”: filmmakers are not adapting narratives anymore, but rather transposing styles, textual worlds, linguistic performances (see the films of Bódy, Gothár and Jeles from this period);
- 7. and finally the poetical, political reflexion of the regime change (1987–95)**, which formally is a continuation of the previous period. It is the period of

historical, political de-concretisation, with allegories and parables represented by Tarr's adaptations pertaining to the so called Black series (*Damnation/Kárhozat*, *Satantango/Sátántangó*, *Werckmeister Harmonies/Werckmeister Harmóniák* and Gothár's *The Outpost/A részleg*).

The second section consisting of case-studies that were previously published in journals and essay collections, in fact reiterates titles and examples already touched upon in the previous chapters, from a new perspective establishing connections between writers and directors (Erzsébet Galgóczi-Lajos Galambos, Miklós Mészöly-Gaál István, László Krasznahorkai-Béla Tarr). This second part admittedly fills gaps in Hungarian film history by calling attention to forgotten literary works and films. Additionally, the presentation of the third chapter of the first section, entitled *The period of ideological softening and formal experimentation (1954–62)* is adding considerably to a monographic approach of this period in Hungarian film history. Besides conferring a new perspective to Hungarian literary adaptations of a historically and ideologically charged period of 40 years, the biggest strength of the book is the mapping of big cultural-political correlations reflected in a changing authorial function oscillating between literary and cinematic forms. While in the first two periods the cultural function of adaptations is more pervasive, in the following three periods they appear as formally innovative pieces marking new eras in Hungarian film history. As Gelencsér argues, while the study of adaptations until 1962 greatly contributes to a complex description of film historical processes, this is not true for the following periods, when the influence of adaptations on these processes systematically decreases.

The huge amount of information and case studies makes of Gelencsér's piece an excellent handbook for mainly academic purposes and not only. Due to the effort to establish connections, distinguish processes, establish categories, delineate periods, at times argumentation might seem repetitive. However, this doesn't affect the overall picture: it helps to follow the line of thought that balances on an admirable combination of small details and big correlations.