Recontextualizing *Son of Saul*: Masculinity in Totalitarian Spaces in Hungarian Film History

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Abstract. As a result of its radical approach to the topic of the Holocaust, as well as due to the long list of prestigious prizes it won, *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015, directed by László Nemes Jeles) has put the relation between Eastern European societies and totalitarianism in the centre of public and academic discourse. Though most reviews and articles placed the film in the history of Holocaust-representations, this is not the only context in which the film can be understood. In the present article I argue that *Son of Saul* can also be read outside (or at least at a distance from) the context of a Holocaust-film, as it also belongs to another, quite different and internationally much less known local cinematic canon. There is an unclaimed heritage behind Nemes Jeles's controversial masterpiece, a trend in Hungarian cinema that explores the crisis of masculinity in totalitarian political regimes, thereby performing an allegorical critique of modernity and modern subjectivity. My recontextualization of Nemes Jeles's work indicates the ways it is influenced by a local, Eastern European filmmaking tradition (which includes the work of his own father, the filmmaker András Jeles as well), and is supported by three interrelated conceptual focus points: a post-Foucauldian understanding of cultural and cinematic space, an awareness of the workings of modern cinematic allegory, and finally the use of male protagonists as prime sites for the inscription of social crisis and historical trauma.

Keywords: *Son of Saul*, Hungarian cinema, totalitarianism, masculinity, allegory.

Due to its radical approach to the topic of the Holocaust, as well as because of the extensive international critical recognition, László Nemes Jeles's *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015) has put the relation between Eastern European societies and totalitarianism in the centre of public and academic discourse. The film tells the story of the last day in the life of Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp during the Second World War, a man

who one day (mis)recognizes a young boy as his own son, and determines to give him a proper Jewish burial. *Son of Saul* can definitely be seen as the latest turn in the history of cinematic Holocaust-representations, a film that "reopens the debate around the Holocaust and its cinematic thinkability" (Bradshaw 2016, 1), as the latest and bravest (or most outrageous) attempt to tell yet another story about the most traumatic event of European history, to form cinematic meaning at the site of the "Ground Zero" of post-war European identity. Understandably, most reviews, articles, and round-table discussions placed the film in the history of Holocaust-representations, and called it "a devastating and terrifying film" (Bradshaw 2016, 1), pointed out its "staggering audacity" (Bradshaw 2016, 3) and "uncompromising vision" (Scott 2015, 6), as well as the innovative ways "the filmmakers invented and successfully realized a peculiar film form in order to tackle the heroic task of showing the unwatchable, representing the unthinkable" (Vincze 2016, 107).

However, the history of the development of the Holocaust-film is not the only context in which the film's radical representational strategies may become meaningful. In this paper I will argue that *Son of Saul* can also be understood outside (or at least at a distance from) the traditions of the Holocaust-film, as it also belongs to another, markedly different, yet internationally much less known local cinematic canon. In this article I will demonstrate the significance of an unclaimed local heritage behind Nemes Jeles's widely recognized masterpiece. There is a trend in Eastern European cinema that focuses on social issues within an authoritarian or repressive political regime through the (potentially allegorical) story of a (typically male) protagonist. Films that belong to this trend explore the ways people, typically men "devoid of political power […] come to terms with their diminutive position" (Mazierska 2010, 27). Regarded from the point of view of gender, such films can also be described as commenting on the crisis of masculinity in totalitarian political regimes, exploring masculinities under circumstances when men are deprived of such qualities as power, knowledge or agency. This is a well-recognizable tradition encompassing several decades, which can be associated with such well-known directors and titles as Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostre sledované vlaky*, 1966), Miloš Forman's *The Firemen's Ball* (*Horí, má panenko*, 1967), Emir Kusturica's *Underground* (1995), András Kovács's *Cold Days* (*Hideg napok*, 1966), as well as much of the oeuvre of Miklós Jancsó and Béla Tarr. Though *Son of Saul* meets the above mentioned qualities, I will further narrow the focus of my investigations and place the film in the context of Hungarian film history and the specific cinematic practice that I have defined elsewhere as the labyrinth principle (Kalmár 2017).

This tradition, as I will outline in more detail in the context of Jancsó's *The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*, 1966), tends to depict the lives of powerless, confused, agency-deprived men under authoritarian political regimes by creating labyrinthine, maze-like spaces, and (at least in crucial moments) by relying on a continuously moving, disorienting camera work (Kalmár 2017, 1–20; see also Kovács 2007, 331). The insights one may gain from such recontextualization may show the ways Nemes Jeles's work is embedded in and influenced by a local, Eastern European filmmaking tradition, and may put some of the recurrent paradoxes of Holocaust-film criticism in a new light.

The film analyses below are based on three more general, more theoretical, mutually interconnecting concepts that need to be clarified briefly before I delve into the details of this local cinematic tradition. These concepts are: (1) cinematic space as a sociocultural construct that serves as a reservoir of local historical memory, (2) modern allegory as a trope expressing the dark underside of modernity, and (3) masculinity as a key site for the inscription of social crisis and historical trauma.

In order to grasp the relevance of the use of space, the characters' bodies and the camera in this cinematic tradition, first one needs to understand that both the identities of characters and the stories told in films are inseparable from the spaces and places where they take place, in other words, that cinematic space always operates as an active meaning-forming element of film language. Contemporary conceptualizations of space, in contrast to traditional empirical geography, assume that space, whether cinematic or not, is always a social construction, the operation, structure and form of which are inseparable from the economic models, power relations, cultural functioning, values and practices of the given society (Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1995, 201; Warf and Arias 2009, 1). In order to understand these local cinematic practices and traditions, it is important to realize that within this theoretical perspective one may distinguish between historically and locally specific productions of space, which, in turn, enable identity-formations, narrative patterns or conflict types specific to them. In his formative study of cinematic space, Stephen Heath also defines the narrative space created in films as a social construct, closely tied with issues of power, knowledge and identity (Heath 1981). Remembering Heath's reconstruction of the roots of cinematic perspective in the monocular perspective established in Renaissance painting and the modern concept of control over space becomes especially significant when one encounters such films as *Son of Saul*, which seem to deliberately alter and criticize this entire cultural tradition. Indeed, *Saul,* as well as the other three films

discussed on the following pages, critically re-evaluate this notion of controlled modern space, as well as its cinematic manifestations, based on the "identification with the camera as the point of a sure and centrally embracing view" (Heath 1981, 30), together with the kinds of subject-positions this cinematic practice creates for both protagonist and spectator (Kovács 2002, 305–306; Vincze 2015). Such major film theoreticians of the post-1960s era as Christian Metz, Stephen Heath and Laura Mulvey have established a closely tied network of meaningful associations between the new sociocultural order of modernity, its emphasis on spatial and social control (epitomized by Bentham's panopticon, famously analysed by Foucault), modernity's tendency to create totalized social, political and cultural systems, the monocular perspective of Quattrocento painting, the established camera work and editing strategies of narrative cinema, active heterosexual desire, the desiring-controlling male gaze, and certain constructions of hegemonic masculinity. One of the key questions to keep in mind when evaluating the cinematic trends discussed below is how this kind of Eastern European cinema (typically made not by the victors, but by the losers of the battles of history, and made not in thriving liberal democracies but in suffocating authoritarian regimes) reshapes and implicitly criticizes the world view, identity-formations, cinematic tendencies and general assumptions about history formulated in the cinema of the victorious West. This context proves the point (that film scholars know since the time of Eisenstein's political cinema) that cinematic space is always more than pure space: it is associated (in a potentially figurative or even allegorical fashion) with a whole range of wider social and cultural issues.

The cinematic spaces created in the films that belong to the filmic traditions discussed here often allow for (or even invite) allegorical readings. Indeed, in the state-socialist period, as the reception of *The Round-Up* clearly demonstrates, such films were often read as allegorical texts commenting on sensitive social or political issues in covert ways. Interestingly enough, it was also in the context of allegory that Walter Benjamin laid out his influential account of an alternative view of history, associated with the losers of historical conflict. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin links allegory with a de-idealized view of history, where destruction and suffering do not serve any higher purpose (as in Hegel for example), with history as meaningless disaster without redemption or salvation (Benjamin 1998, 166; Xavier 2004, 333, 345; Kalmár 2017, 52). As Ismail Xavier points out, modern allegory, as opposed to didactical, totalizing, classical and neo-classicist allegories, has become "a key notion in the characterization of the crisis of culture in modernity" (2004, 333), and is "taken as the primary

expression of the temporal dimension of human experience when seen as separated from God and condemned to natural decay" (345), a trope expressing the volatile, shifting, non-natural qualities of signifying practices (and therefore of meaning as such). Benjamin's seminal study calls attention to the way modernity, throughout its history, has been haunted by a sense of crisis, by the idea of history as catastrophe and civilization as an ever growing pile of ruins (see Xavier 2004, 346). In the context of this paper, it is crucial that Benjamin associates this view (and critique of modernity) with "the point of view of the defeated" (Xavier 2004, 346). The potentially allegorical spaces of the Eastern European film discussed in this paper suggest that in the cinematic practice I define as the labyrinth principle this dark underside of modernity and this idea of history as catastrophe appear in the spatial figuration of the maze, which successfully embodies the sense of crisis, disorientation and the loss of totality (of meaning).

It is important to note that this use of allegory can in no way be regarded as a uniquely Eastern European cultural phenomenon. Fredric Jameson, for example, has famously associated it with third world cinema in general (Jameson 1986), and it seems to appear not only in third world literature and film, but also in American cinema at times of crisis (Silverman 1992), as well as in films that follow a modernist aesthetic, in which the preoccupation with social and political issues and a critical view of modern societies are regularly connected with non-illusionist representational strategies, for example with evidently artificial (and figurative) spatial settings (Vincze 2015; Kovács 2007).

In an overwhelming majority of Eastern European films that belong to this tradition we see male protagonists in hostile social or political circumstances, experiencing disorientation, entrapment, as well as the lack of power, knowledge or agency. I would argue that the gender bias of such cinematic figurations can be traced back to (at least) two factors. First, as several film scholars have noted, in the conservative sociocultural setting of Eastern European societies male characters tend to bear the burden of the representation of the community or the nation (Imre 2009, 168; Mazierska 2010, 74). This also means that these male protagonists simultaneously stand for the universally human (following the well-known patriarchal signifying traditions with their allegorical tendencies), and for the particular, that is, for men under such and such historical conditions. The second cause of this gender bias is somewhat harder to formulate and perhaps politically more contentious. It seems that there are numerous cultural traditions (the modern novel and cinema included) in which male bodies are prime sites for the inscription of social crisis or historical trauma. There seems to be some

kind of special dramatic power to the representation of men in critical times and to the spectacle of the male body suffering due to external (social or historical) circumstances: as the dead, wounded, mutilated and traumatized soldiers of post-First World War painting and novels point out, as the veterans of post-Second World War American films analysed by Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* indicate, as the lost and disenfranchised male protagonists of Eastern European cinema (both state-socialist and post-regime change) reveal, or as the male protagonists of the 21st-century "cinema of crisis" seem to show (Silverman 1992; Kalmár 2017; Kalmár 2020; Austin and Koutsourakis 2020). Though several films, including Nemes Jeles's *Sunset* (*Napszállta*, 2018), indicate that similar representational strategies and allegorical figurations may also work well with female protagonists, it does seem the case that the above mentioned closely tied links between a certain concept of hegemonic masculinity, narrative desire, control over space and victorious modernity make male characters in crisis especially potent cinematic tools for revealing the unfulfilled dreams and unaccounted-for horrors of modernity.

My examination of the specific local cinematic influence behind *Son of Saul* starts out from the recognition that Hungarian cinema during the state-socialist period, similarly to much of socially engaged European arthouse cinema on both sides of the Iron Curtain, actively participated in the social dialogue about social and political issues, including that of totalitarianism (Kovács 2002, 288–290, 302, 306, 319, 338). Apparently, several influential thinkers and filmmakers shared Hannah Arendt's view that highlights and seeks to understand the similarities of various totalitarian systems (such as fascism, communism or imperialism), rather than considering these as antagonistic forces in conflicts where one is to take sides (Arendt 1976, 470–471; Vajda 2005, 9). Though the Party attempted to repress the memory of the Holocaust almost as much as that of the 1956 uprising, this dialogue could not be entirely silenced either in academia or in film and literature (Gyáni 2016, 217). As Thomas C. Fox also notes in his *The Holocaust under Communism*, Budapest was the only place in the Soviet Bloc where a conference was organized on the 40th anniversary of the Holocaust (Fox 2004, 432), which led to numerous publications on the topic (Gyáni 2010, 336). Moreover, the related work of such outstanding Hungarian historians as György Ránki was published at major publishers and sold in numbers unimaginable today (Gyáni 2010, 336).

The trend in Hungarian cinema in which I wish to place *Son of Saul* is intimately linked to this active engagement with the past. It started in the sixties, when

János Kádár's post-1956 regime finished its cycle of retaliation and attempted to establish a new legitimacy for state-socialism by way of re-branding itself as semi-welfare "goulash-communism" or "the happiest barrack" in the Eastern Bloc with more relaxed censorship policies and more open forms of social dialogue (also about issues such as totalitarianism). Significantly, this was also the time of the beginning of the Hungarian New Wave in filmmaking, the young directors of which "felt that they were doing important social work with their films" (Benke 2015, 135). As Attila Benke argues, at this time "the regime […] even encouraged artists to create so-called 'questioning' or 'active' films dealing with the problems of the recent past or the present. Of course, the limits were clearly defined: one had to avoid such taboos as the Soviet occupation of the country or calling 1956 a revolution" (Benke 2015, 135).[1] As a result of the new cultural policy, the issues concerning various forms of totalitarianism were often brought up by literature and film, often in displaced or allegorical ways (Benke 2015, 137). Thus, coming to terms with the disturbing and traumatic memories of the past, as well as initiating a social dialogue about these was a cultural role that many filmmakers saw as their own (Murai 2008, 88–124; Czirják 2009, 66). The most important works that belong to this trend include *Twenty Hours* (*Húsz óra*, Zoltán Fábry, 1965), *Cold Days* (*Hideg Napok,* András Kovács, 1966), *Ten Thousand Days* (*Tízezer nap*, Ferenc Kósa, 1967) and of course *The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*, Miklós Jancsó, 1965). This tendency of Hungarian film to re-investigate past events and/or address critical social issues suffered several waves of disillusionment, but continued throughout the state-socialist period and after the regime change as well, when "the lid on formerly repressed social memories was finally removed" (Murai 2008, 191) and "the past became accessible in new ways" (Murai 2008, 178). As film historian Gábor Gelencsér argues, the most important films of the New Hungarian Cinema of the 2000s also focus on the ways the past influences the present (2012, 327). In the following pages I will map some of the reasons indicating that *Son of Saul* can be regarded as a film following (and reinventing) this long tradition of socially committed cinematic memory politics, relying on several well-recognizable cinematic strategies established there.

Thus, in line with the above outlined context of Hungarian film history, in the present article I will analyse the ways three earlier Hungarian films in particular can be seen as predecessors of *Son of Saul*: *The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*, Miklós Jancsó, 1965), *Little Valentino* (*A kis Valentino*, András Jeles, 1979) and *Just the Wind* (*Csak a szél*, Bence Fliegauf, 2012). All three films focus on masculinities

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1   All quotations from Hungarian sources are my translations (György Kalmár).

in crisis, in threatening, disorienting or suffocating situations, all emphasize the political-ideological context of this situation, and, as we shall see, all rely on representational strategies and cinematic solutions that clearly foreshadow the taboo-breaking strategies of Nemes Jeles's outrageously original piece.[2]

Setting the Paradigm: *The Round-Up*

Miklós Jancsó's masterpiece is a key work of the Hungarian film canon, and one of the classics of the 1960s modernist European cinema (Kovács 2002, 301; Varga 2009, 36). It tells the story of a group of suspected outlaws after the defeat of the 1848–49 Hungarian uprising against the Habsburg Empire. The men are rounded up in an army fortress in the middle of the Hungarian Great Plain. The soldiers do everything to find out which one of the men is the famous outlaw (*betyár*) Sándor Rózsa, and who his companions are, and thus apply all sorts of sadistic and cunning methods to break the men, and make at least one of them speak. Almost the entire film is set within the fortress, a maze-like, intricate space, in which the prisoners are constantly grouped, separated, lined up, regrouped, locked up, relocated, blindfolded, made walk in circles, questioned, blackmailed, and sometimes hung or shot dead.

There is a number of meaningful similarities between *The Round-Up* and *Son of Saul*. First, both focus on men in confining situations that clearly endanger their lives, and definitely both can be seen as films exploring the effects of totalitarian regimes on people (or men in particular). The protagonists of both films are deprived of their freedom, locked up in institutions guarded and run by hostile military personnel. Both films present men deprived of the qualities traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinities: control, power, sexual conquest, agency, knowledge, competence, the ability and will to act, or being a master of one's fate (O'Brien 2009, 412). In *Son of Saul* this stems from the diegetic situation, it seems like the self-explanatory state of the prisoners of the concentration camp. Similarly, the position of the captives in *The Round-Up* is explained by the historical background of the depicted events (which are summarized at the beginning of the film). Yet, I would argue that Jancsó's film clearly works as a

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2   The concept of the present article took shape in me during and after a round table discussion I participated following the screening of *Son of Saul* in Debrecen, Hungary in March 2017. I owe thanks to the other participants, Beatrix Kricsfalusi, Zsolt Győri and Teréz Vincze for their inspiration and comments. It was also the latter two film scholars who first called my attention to the way *Son of Saul*'s ending cinematically rephrases the last shot of *Little Valentino,* the 1979 film by Nemes's father, András Jeles.

modern spatial allegory: it wishes to explore a situation more general than the specific nineteenth century events, a fact that may call attention to the similarly more general (ethical, psychological, existentialist) layers of Nemes Jeles's film. The *Round-Up*, made about a decade after the 1956 Hungarian uprising against communist dictatorship, was often read as an allegory of 1956, or as a study of totalitarianism in general (Kovács 2002, 306). In other words, the 1965 study of post-1849 Habsburg oppression also served as a mirror to the communist and/ or state-socialist dictatorship. It was obviously the claustrophobic state-socialist regime that inspired the suffocating and disorienting spaces, composition and circular narrative of *The Round-Up.* The masculinities created by Jancsó's film partly find their explanation in the state-socialist 1960s, "which could not even find tragic heroes in Hungarian history, not to mention successful ones" (Kovács 2002, 303; see also Győri 2014).

Jancsó's film is often listed as a key piece among Hungarian films carrying out "historical self-analysis" (Varga 2009, 38), films that initiate a social dialogue about contested issues of the past (Czirják 2009, 66). I would argue that *Son of Saul* definitely belongs to this trend, applying Jancsó's "disillusioning," "anti-romanticising" attitude (Czirják 2009, 64–65) to the study of men oppressed by totalitarian regimes.

It is worth noticing how much *Son of Saul* owes to the compositional principle developed by Jancsó (and Antonioni before him). As András Bálint Kovács argues, "turning characters essentially into 'terrain features' within a landscape composition is usually considered to be Jancsó's innovation. According to this approach, characters are not only, or not primarily parts of a dramatic action, but are basic structural elements of the image, which can be moved around the same way as one moves a chair" (Kovács 2002, 305).

Kovács's description of Jancsó's (and Antonioni's) method could stand for the treatment of characters in *Son of Saul.* In the latter film, as the director mentioned in several interviews and talks, the placing and movement of the extras (including the dead bodies) were first arranged, and it was in front of this blurred, off-focus, ever-moving backdrop that the main action was later composed. The story of Saul in Auschwitz is told among human-beings-turned-into-terrain-features in a manner clearly echoing *The Round-Up.* The main difference in this regard is that *Son of Saul* focuses on one single character's one single pursuit (to bury the young boy), while Jancsó's film lacks any real protagonist and deprives their characters of any clear, achievable goal. Though Nemes Jeles does not go this far in the modernist dismantling of cinematic storytelling, his protagonist is also far

from being the typical active male protagonist of mainstream cinema. Saul finds himself a goal worth struggling for, but he is pushed around through the whole film by forces (and people) stronger than him.

This somewhat disorienting arrangement of cinematic space associates *Son of Saul* with what I have attempted to define as the labyrinth principle in certain trends of Hungarian cinema. This tradition tends to focus on disoriented and powerless protagonists in maze-like social and spatial settings (such as the fort in *The Round-Up* or the camp in *Son of Saul*), often employs disorienting camera work, shows a conspicuous absence of establishing shots, and investigates the relation of the confused individual with the hostile social context (Kalmár 2017, 8). The labyrinthine spaces of such films are usually not just mere motifs: they also work as an epistemological trope (expressing the impossibility of adequate knowledge), confuse and undercut narrative desire, determine the kind and shape of stories told, define character types as they undermine the protagonists' sense of knowledge and direction, and therefore critically re-examine some of the key conceptual and ideological cornerstones of victorious modernity and its hegemonic subject-positions. In the state-socialist period, this cinematic tradition often came to express the claustrophobia felt by the inmates of the "happiest barrack" trapped behind the Iron Curtain, as well as the profound moral and epistemological disorientation experienced in real-existing state-socialism.

The influence of the labyrinth principle is not only detectable in the above mentioned organization of cinematic space and the way the characters' bodies are placed in it. This disorientating and frustrating situation is enhanced in both films by the camera work: one may notice, for example, the conspicuous (and often disturbing) lack of establishing shots. The spectator never has a chance to map either the army fortress or the extermination camp, we do not know how the different locations of the film relate to each other, the spectator could never draw a map of the main sites of the events. Both films tend to use several-minute-long shots during which the camera moves with the characters, constantly reframing them in dizzying ways. This treatment of space and cinematography creates a viewing experience similar to that of the disoriented characters, moreover the spectator's spatial disorientation may also express the epistemological and moral confusion of the depicted characters. *Son of Saul* seems to apply Jancsó's strategy quite consciously and consistently: the film uses 4:3 aspect ratio, which "emphasises the claustrophobia of the story and the setting" (Scott 2015, 1), and literally narrows the visual filed to suffocating dimensions. The constant lack of depth of field also strengthens this effect (Bradshaw 2016, 6). As Teréz Vincze

notes, "the consistent use of shallow focus and the narrowing down of the field of vision by aspect ratio and shot size work against optical vision in general throughout the film" (2016, 111). Optical vision, as theorized by Laura U. Marks, would stand for the more traditional cinematic operation that allows for the spectator's control and mastery over the cinematic space (Marks 2000, 162, 184). In case of these labyrinthine films, optical vision would be the way the masters of these institutions see the events, yet that is a perspective one never gets in either of them: both Jancsó's camera work and constantly shifting frames, as well as Nemes Jeles's narrow, continuously moving, anxious images work against such mastery in order to create the feeling of uncertainty and disorientation (Scott 2015, 5–6).

The cinematic spaces of *Son of Saul,* as those of *The Round-Up*, are not only disorienting, but also "exceptionally closed" (Czirják 2009, 65) and confining. Most of the events take place within the fortress and the camp, which the characters leave only for a short while before they are killed. This conscious delimitation of the cinematic space for these institutions of power, cruelty and death may highlight their allegorical potential: both can be seen as phalansteries where fundamental human dramas are acted out and explored for the sake of the spectator. The method, again, was developed by Jancsó in the historical situation of state-socialist dictatorship, but the resulting compositional principles are easily applicable to fascism or any other totalitarian regime. Kovács's description of the handling of space in Jancsó's work can shed light on some of the key cinematic features of *Son of Saul* as well: "only in the shadow of dictatorship could someone grasp the significance of the possibility to 'absorb' action in space so as to create a film in which cinematic meaning is not carried by dialogues, psychological flutters and gestures that can be translated into words, but rather by silent movement within space and by the constant changes in the articulation of space. In situations where one cannot create radical forms with narrative storytelling and open enunciation, the importance of modes of expression devoid of words and verbalizable narrative storytelling increases" (Kovács 2002, 306).

Though cinema history has proven that the labyrinth principle, as well as the above described strategies concerning the use of space, bodies and camera work may retain their expressiveness outside the shadow of dictatorship (see Kalmár 2017), the connection between the social context of a totalitarian, inhuman dictatorship and these kinds of labyrinthine operations does seem prevalent and productive. It can be detected in several other canonical Hungarian films from the state-socialist period, such as *Cold Days* (*Hideg napok,* András Kovács, 1966) – about the 1942 racial cleansing in Subotica (Szabadka), or *The Prefab People*

(*Panelkapcsolat*, Béla Tarr, 1982) – about everyday life confined in a housing estate of the state-socialist period.

The last similarity between *The Round-Up* and *Son of Saul* to be mentioned is the mixing of traditional historical roles in both films. As a member of the Sonderkommando, the team of Jews doing all the dirty work that comes with the extermination process in the camp, Saul is simultaneously a victim, a witness, a traitor and a perpetrator. This confusion and mixing of ethically so different roles is present in *The Round-Up* (and several other films showing signs of the labyrinth principle) as well. Though Jancsó's film has no single protagonist, the captive with the most screen time is a traitor spying for the soldiers. This often abused, threatened and blackmailed man can be regarded as an allegorical character embodying the tortured and compromised subject of authoritarian regimes. Similarly to Saul, his background is never revealed, nor are his motivations, the spectator only guesses that these characters made morally untenable compromises with the regimes that torture them simply to save their lives. Both characters become servants of the oppressive systems threatening their lives, both sell their former identities and companions, and as a consequence both become "lost souls," morally destroyed in this transaction, detestable and abject for both the perpetrators and the victims, yet neither of them manage to save their lives by their treacheries.

Entrapment in the "Happiest Barrack:" *Little Valentino* (András Jeles, 1979)

Little Valentino tells the story of a day in the life of a nameless teenager (Opoczki János) living in state-socialist Hungary. At the beginning it turns out that he did not post a larger sum of money that he was supposed to (as a part of his job), and the rest of the film narrates the ways he tries to spend it before he turns himself in. The film that is considered today to be an "innovative masterpiece" (Kovács 2002, 202), received mixed reviews when it came to cinemas in 1979. Showing state-socialism from the point of view of someone who decides to steal from his workplace, live the day and enjoy the money as long as it lasts, ignoring all the usual social and moral considerations, was regarded by most critics to be immoral and scandalous. The film was only canonized after the fall of communism as one of the key pieces of Hungarian cinema of the 1970s (Kovács 2002, 202). Ironically, today it is praised mostly for some of the same qualities that it was blamed for earlier.

The similarities between *Son of Saul* and *Little Valentino* are much less obvious than the ones shared with *The Round-Up,* and the direct influence may

have gone unnoticed had not Nemes relied on the same technical solution for the resolution of his film as his father in 1979. At the end of *Son of Saul*, our protagonist notices a young boy outside the barn in the forest where he and his companions hid for a while during their escape from the camp. We see the two characters looking at each other, and a faint smile appearing on Saul's face. Then the camera cuts to the boy again, and (after faithfully following Saul through the entire film) it suddenly decides to tail the boy into the forest, where he meets the soldiers who are just about to kill the escaped men. In *Little Valentino*, Jeles applies the same technique: after following the protagonist throughout the film, recounting the futile ways in which he attempts to enjoy the money he stole, the camera follows him into a police station. At the corner of a corridor the camera stops for a while, we see him walk away, while another young man passes by him and approaches us. When this young man walks by the camera, we start following him as he leaves the building and gets on a tram. Thus, we never see what happened to the protagonist after this day.

As *The Round-Up* could recontextualize several cinematic aspects of *Son of Saul*, *Little Valentino*'s ending can also contribute to a more refined understanding of the latter film. In *Little Valentino*, the ending indicates that the protagonist could have been anybody (Kovács 2002, 203), that we could pick up any number of stories like this in the street, that the film we have seen simply "formulates the fundamental experience of the seventies" (Gelencsér 2012, 218) so as to offer a general view of how life goes on in state-socialism. Thus, for spectators who know Jeles's film, the ending of *Son of Saul* is more than a poetical ellipsis when the death of the film's protagonist is told through the sound of distant gunshots: it calls attention to its allegorical layer, Saul's role as an everyman.

However, there are several other similarities between these two, stylistically very different films. They both focus on morally ambiguous male protagonists living under oppressive political systems, who find something special one day that temporarily lifts them out of the monotony of their previous lives (the money in the first, and the young boy in the second film). State-socialist existence may lack the physical, visceral cruelty and horror of the death camp depicted in *Son of Saul*, but it also seems dreary, pointless and painful. Life is limited and meaningless here, and most characters are odd, corrupt, with mental or health issues, or all of these combined. As opposed to *Son of Saul,* in *Little Valentino* there is no physical violence on the part of the perpetrators, though the police appear several times. The suffocating, claustrophobic and disorienting nature of the political system is created without any of the constant physical and

verbal abuse characteristic of *Son of Saul*, which gives the film a distressing existentialist edge.

Though neither the space of the film, nor its camera work emphasizes entrapment the way *The Round-Up* or *Son of Saul* does, the story is repetitive and circular, and clearly suggests that there is no other, better life to be reached, no way out of the "nothingness" of the system (Gelencsér 2012, 218). Spectators get the impression that the lad turns himself in at the end of the film simply because he has realized that there is nothing he could do in that world, with or without money, nothing that would make a difference. The film's characters, similarly to those in *Son of Saul,* seem already dead, though they are still moving, which can be even more distressing as in *Little Valentino* this is not limited to a special place (the death camp) from which one could escape, but stands as a description of life as such.

The main aesthetic qualities of *Little Valentino* are not those of tragedy or horror (as in *Son of Saul*), but rather satire and bitter irony, the unnerving pointlessness, mental deprivation and existential nothingness gradually discovered behind ordinary life in the System. However, the pointlessness of life in both films is expressed partly by the creative distance between the protagonist and the minor characters in the background. As Kovács points out discussing *Little Valentino*: "the minor characters participate in this film as pieces of furniture, yet the film is virtually teeming with them. Moreover, they bear a great responsibility for creating the imagery of the film. The individual frames are built in a way that never leaves the background empty, something must always be going on, yet this is usually something that has nothing to do with the story" (Kovács 2002, 203).

This strategy may recall the structure of several scenes in *Son of Saul*, where we see Saul in close-ups, pursuing his burial-project, while in the background we see the (blurred) operations of the death camp. It emphasizes in both films the alienation of the protagonist, his distance from the world in which he is trapped, thus the spectator gets the feeling of detachment and alienation as well. This effect is further enhanced by the affectless acting: though both protagonists take part in actions that would normally evoke intense emotion both on- and off-screen (as the acting in most crime cinema and Holocaust-films shows), their faces almost never reveal any of these.

This strategy of distancing the protagonists from the other characters also turns the films into apocalyptic sight-seeing tours of their respective totalitarian landscapes. The strategy of *Son of Saul* is easily discernible: though Saul works only in one team responsible for one phase by the conveyor belt of the Auschwitz

death-machine, his "mission" makes him move to several other places. Sometimes willingly, sometimes because he is simply grabbed and thrown somewhere, he visits most parts of the camp, which allows the film to give a complete tour of horrors to the spectator. *Little Valentino*'s method is very similar to this. The stolen money makes the protagonist move to places that he would not have visited otherwise (the lakeside resort, the posh restaurant, the taxi, the casino by the theme park), which gives the film the opportunity to create a full tableau of contemporary society.

It is worth noting that in both cases there is a special motivation (the burial and the money) that initiates the journey which, on its turn, is capable of depicting the oppressive regime wherein the protagonists are imprisoned. These special events or motivations create the illusion of a more traditional goal-oriented, desire-driven cinematic narrative, however the spectator may sense that both are merely desperate attempts on the part of the protagonists to change their miserable lives, chances that they stumble upon. One may argue that it is the very futility of these "stumbled upon missions" that reveal the desperation of the characters. The protagonist of *Little Valentino* has no grand plan to follow, he just decides to spend the money by himself, regardless of the consequences. He was asked to post the money, people know that he has it, there is no way to get away with the crime. However, apparently one day of a different life is worth risking his future. Similarly, in *Son of Saul* we never learn for sure whether the young boy is really the son of Saul or not (Vincze 2015, 108), yet the way he watches the boy's death without emotion seems to suggest that he is not. In other words, Saul's encounter with his fictional son in the death camp appears to be a "chosen trauma" (so as to give Vamik Volkan's term a new twist), one willingly taken up as one's own so as to establish some sort of meaningful identity or simulation of redemption (Volkan 2001; Zembylas 2008, 39).

Furthermore, these journeys turn out to be futile and unsuccessful in both cases, failing to change anything. The burial in case of *Saul*, of course, has more metaphysical resonances: it evokes the story of Antigone, who decided to bury his brother despite the order of the tyrant Creon, thus opting for ethical choices, family ties and obeying the cosmic order instead of worldly powers and tyranny. The story of *Little Valentino* lacks such noble or metaphysical resonances. The protagonist simply tries to break out of a meaningless existence in the only ways he can imagine, by following hedonistic ideas: he buys quality cigarettes and western magazines, travels by taxi, eats in expensive restaurants. Yet, his journey is no less depressing than that of Saul: he does not get anywhere, he

does not seem to enjoy anything he takes part in. Instead, he gets gipped off, beaten, abused and injured in each and every turn. His journey only exposes the futility of his dreams and fantasies. As *Son of Saul*, *Little Valentino* suggests that there is no way out of the system: there is no victory, no happy ending, and not even a heroic, tragic resolution awaiting them. I would argue that when *Son of Saul* chooses this ending in which the protagonist does not manage to reach his goal or change anything, and his futile actions even bring more misery to others (most notably to the rabbi killed because of his intervention), the film follows a pattern not necessarily learned from Holocaust-films, but rather from a cinematic tradition characteristic of the Hungarian canon that *The Round-Up*, *Little Valentino*, *Cold Days*, *The Prefab People* and many others belong to.

The Post-Communist Maze: *Just the Wind*

Bence Fliegauf's 2012 *Just the Wind* is another example of a local cinematic tradition that aims to represent vulnerable men imprisoned and threatened by hostile political environments. While *The Round-Up* focuses on nineteenth-century history (and allegorically criticizes the communist regime's post-1956 retaliations), and *Little Valentino* shows the desperation and claustrophobia of the 1970s' "consolidated" state-socialism, *Just the Wind* explores a more contemporary topic: the life of ethnic Romany people threatened by racist hate-crime. The film is motivated by a criminal case in 2008–2009, when a group of racist men carried out a series of attacks against Roma families in rural Hungary. The perpetrators, whose sole motivation was probably racist hate, used shotguns and Molotov-cocktails. Though the events, in which several people died and some women and children were also injured, were clearly condemned by the vast majority of the Hungarian population, Fliegauf's film effectively calls attention to the heightened importance of ethnic belonging in recent Eastern-European identity politics, as well as to the ensuing decline of tolerance. *Just the Wind* tells the story of the last day of a Roma family before the fatal night when they are attacked and murdered. "Relentlessly tracked by the director's roving camera" (Mintzer 2012, 7), the characters (played by non-professional actors) take the spectator through the ordinary events of the day. Though we encounter several critical issues in the life of the Roma in Hungary (such as poverty, truancy, the racism of whites, unemployment, Roma mobsters abusing fellow Roma people), nothing truly dramatic happens through most of the film. However, due to its "consistently menacing and strikingly realistic" atmosphere (Mintzer 2012, 5) as well as the persistent threat overshadowing these

ordinary events, the film creates a heightened sense of vulnerability and anxiety gradually growing throughout the film.

As Gábor Gelencsér notes, *Just the Wind* can be seen as an important step in post-communist Hungarian cinema in the sense that with this film "one of the most characteristic trends of pre-regime-change Hungarian cinema" was re-awakened. "Since the new wave of the sixties – as a series of films attest to it from Jancsó's parables, through Szabó's historical tableaux to Tarr's apocalyptic visions – Hungarian cinema was able to move beyond local provinciality by representing specifically Eastern European issues of life in ways that can claim universal significance. The filmmakers of "young Hungarian cinema" walk the same path when they set out to explore regional and contemporary issues. Their strong stylization makes these films universal." (Gelencsér 2012, 327.)

Furthermore, Gelencsér argues that for some time "young Hungarian film" rejected the direct social engagement of the state-socialist period, and distanced the films' social commentary through strong stylization (Gelencsér 2012, 323). Nevertheless, at the time of the release of *Just the Wind* (2012) one could sense "the growing need to evoke the events of the world around us in immediate and dramatic ways, which make these experiences accessible to the spectator not only intellectually, but also emotionally" (Gelencsér 2012, 328). I would argue that this is precisely the role that both *Just the Wind* and *Son of Saul* play in the narrative of Hungarian cinema outlined by Gelencsér: to initiate social dialogue about distressing social, cultural or historical situations in more direct, emotive and sensuous cinematic languages.

This affiliation between *Just the Wind* and *Son of Saul* is recognizable in several aspects of the films. First, both focus on people belonging to threatened ethnic minorities. The Roma family lacks a protective father figure (he moved to Canada for work), which heightens the sense of vulnerability. The family members sharing the little, dilapidated house in the outskirts of a little village are all small or physically weak. The family member with the most screen time in *Just the Wind* is the son Rio (Lajos Sárkány), who is in his early teenage years. The film uses him as a distanced witness, who walks the forest, peeps into other people's lives, trespasses and steals from the house of another attacked family. The boy, not unlike Saul or the nameless protagonist of *Little Valentino*, lives on the margins of human society. His truancy and acts of stealing make him morally slightly ambiguous too, thus, to some degree, he mixes the roles of witness, victim and perhaps that of the small time crook known from *Little Valentino* as well. Rio's moral ambiguity, however, is much less pronounced or pervasive than

that of the other films' characters: after all, he is just a child, and nothing he does triggers the moral indignation of the spectator.

The fact that *Just the Wind* focuses on a young boy seems to change a key ingredient in the above seen operations of the labyrinth principle: here the sense of danger and entrapment, the allegorical potential of the spatial and social setting, as well as the critical view of dysfunctional modern societies are not accompanied by a morally compromised, adult male protagonist. This may very well be due to the clear moral message the film wishes to communicate: at a time of social polarization, post-2008 sense of global crisis, rising ethno-nationalism, and growing hostility towards ethnic minorities throughout Europe, *Just the Wind* understandably wishes to denounce destructive tendencies, distinguish perpetrators from victims, and emphasize the vulnerability of its protagonist. Unlike the key characters of the other films discussed above, Rio is not complicit, not part of the inhuman system that threatens him. This, however, does not diminish either the allegorical potentials of his character (our ability to see him as a threatened, disoriented, abandoned everyman in a disintegrating, post-crisis Europe), or the basic operations of labyrinthine figurations. After all, as the last sequence of Kubrick's *Shining* also shows, the maze with a monstrous Minotaur in it is even more frightening when seen through the eyes of a young boy.

There are significant similarities in the two films' use of space too: *Just the Wind* is also set in a very limited space, the only scenes outside the village are set at the school where the mother and the daughter go every day (to work as a cleaner and to study, respectively). This narrowness of space, similarly to *Son of Saul* and *The Round-Up*, heightens the allegorical potential of space: we understand that through this particular story unfolding in a small place much larger social issues are explored.

This by now well-recognizable cinematic situation of a vulnerable male protagonist put in a limited, suffocating, hostile space is accompanied by a much similar camera work. *Just the Wind*, as *Son of Saul*, uses hand-held camera, several-minute-long shots in which the camera moves with the character in disorientating ways, as well as shallow depth of field. Throughout most of the film, the camera simply walks with the protagonist, going wherever he goes, showing his naked upper body most of the time, creating a feeling of closeness. Rio gets less close-ups than Saul, but since the camera usually looks downwards on his small body, the film seldom allows the spectator to have an overall view of the surrounding space, thereby creating a sort of embodied, sensuous identification, and effectively strengthening the sense of vulnerability. This sense of closeness,

conspicuous lack of long shots and optical vision results in the lack of control in *Just the Wind* in a manner most similar to what we have established above about *Son of Saul.* Teréz Vincze's analysis of the haptic strategies of *Son of Saul* could well describe the visual space of *Just the Wind*, too. "The repositioning of the audience, by eliminating the all-perceiving position and the controlling knowledge, makes them more vulnerable in the perceiving situation, and makes the experience more effective. The viewer's suggested 'physical' closeness to Saul makes the perceptive identification more accentuated. All of the haptic qualities present strengthen the possibility that the viewer could be drawn not only into the subjectivity of Saul but also into his environment, perceptively. Identification can be processed on the intellectual but also on the perceptual level." (Vincze 2016, 112.)

This haptic camera work plays a major role in turning the spaces of *Just the Wind* into a maze-like place full of potential dangers, where one never knows when a lurking Minotaur may attack our protagonist.

The last two scenes of *Just the Wind*, which depict the attack against the family, and then the preparation of the dead bodies for the funeral, reveal a series of other commonalities between the two films that indicate direct influence. This is the time in *Just the Wind* when from suspense and anxiety (Gelencsér 2012, 332) the film turns to the horror of the murders, to the inferno in which the entire *Son of Saul* is set. When the family is attacked (while just about to go to bed), Rio is the first to run from the house, and the camera follows him. He turns back for a moment from the nearby bushes, but we only see the flash of shotguns in the dark. Only these shots and the terrible screams inform us about what is happening to the others. The execution of the family is narrated in precisely the same way as the death of the protagonists in *Son of Saul*: from the distance, through off-screen sounds (Vincze 2016, 119). Thus, Rio takes the camera away from the murder scene in a manner similar to the way the young boy does at the end of *Son of Saul*. Rio is followed for some time by one of the killers, we even see the sparks of a shot from the distance, but we do not learn about Rio's fate till the last scene in the morgue.

This last scene of *Just the Wind*, in which the dead bodies are being prepared for the funeral, foreshadows the death camp scenes of *Son of Saul*: there is no music, only the cold, distanced horror created by the close-ups of the bodies that used to be our characters.

Conclusion

The above thematic and formal analyses of these three films indicate a long-standing cinematic tradition in Hungarian cinema that aims at revealing the dark underside of dysfunctional modern societies (or that of modernity's general cultural logic), initiating social dialogue about key problematic or traumatic social issues, and exploring the effects of totalitarian power, abuse and terror on people. These goals are achieved in this trend by putting male characters in disorienting and claustrophobic spaces that call for allegorical interpretations, and present their stories with a recognizable set of cinematic techniques that undermine the modern idea of control over visual space (as described by Heath). The affinities between the films studied call attention to the deeper historical, social and cultural factors at play behind the country's long and tragic engagement with various totalitarian political formations. The above readings of films have hopefully highlighted the basic characteristics of this long-standing trend in Eastern European cinema that is clearly visible in *Son of Saul* as well. The way Jancsó's appropriation of Antonioni's treatment of space, bodies and camera gained a special significance in the context of Eastern Europe's troubled history, is definitely a topic worthy of further research. Regarding modern allegory, such studies as the present one may indicate the ways this trope, which usually stands for fragmentation, alienation and de-idealization characteristic of modernity, can nevertheless create recognizable trends, shared understanding and a continuous tradition in cinema history (exploring historical discontinuity and fragmentation).

The most striking and unnerving result of such analyses as the present one is probably the recognition of all the intricate and interlocking ties between totalitarian social imaginaries, various constructions of social space, formations of masculinity, narrative patterns (influential both on- and off-screen), as well as several forms of social dysfunction that keep haunting Eastern European societies. Understanding these interlocking, mutually influential factors may map out some of the reasons why the democratization of the region proves such a bumpy project. Hopefully, the above analyses have also shown why regional or national cinemas cannot be adequately comprehended without detailed knowledge of the local social, historical and cultural context. As my reading of the above films have indicated, it is this context that fills up their constructions of space, time and identity with a rich cluster of figurative meaning.

Although I have focused only on three Hungarian films and the ways they foreshadow the cinematic solutions of *Son of Saul*, similar analyses could be carried out with regard to other Hungarian or Eastern European films about the various forms of totalitarianism and their character-distorting effects. In his book about the memory-politics of Hungarian cinema, András Murai also calls attention to the boom of such Eastern European films in the 2000s: only in 2006 three such important films were made, *White Palms* (*Fehér tenyér,* Szabolcs Hajdu), *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen,* Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni şi 2 zile*, Cristian Mungiu) (Murai 2008, 172). Other prominent examples (among dozens of relevant post-communist films) would include the Polish film *Ida* (Pavel Pawlikowsi, 2013) or the works of the Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov, such as his *Russian Ark* (2002). The study of this wider canon of socially engaged, remembering, Eastern European post-communist cinema, as well as the various cultural, social and gender-related patterns operating in them is still awaiting thorough and comprehensive critical analysis.

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