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Distressed Glamour. Genres and Political-Social Context in Hungarian Cinema of the 1930s and 1940s

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Abstract. The article focuses on Hungarian films produced between 1939–1944 by examining how they tend to refrain from representing conflicts, and scrutinizing the political as well as social issues. However, directors started to revise this avoidance of conflicts by employing a so-called noir sensibility from the beginning of the Second World War in certain films, especially in "doomed love movies" such as *Deadly Spring* (*Halálos tavasz*, 1939), *Mountain Girl* (*A hegyek lánya*, 1942), and *A Woman Looks Back* (*Egy assszony visszanéz*, 1942), or melodramas, such as *At the Crossroads* (*Keresztúton*, 1942), *Lent Life* (*Kölcsönadott élet*, 1943), and *Black Dawn* (*Fekete hajnal*, 1943). The essay also offers a case study of the banned Hungarian movie *Half a Boy* (*Egy fiúnak a fele*, shot in 1943, but only shown in February 1946) by D. Ákos Hamza, which represented and protested against the stigmatization of Jewish people. *Half a Boy* is an often-cited emblematic film of its era. It is also an enigmatic one: it is a work full of social and political-historical reflections. Its humanistic point of view makes it outstanding in its era, nevertheless it is also rather ambivalent in terms of its orientation of values.[1]

Keywords: Hungarian cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, noir sensibility, melodrama, genre analysis.

Even though Hungarian films of the 1930s did not necessarily avoid showing problems, they avoided genres – especially the genre of crime stories – typically dealing with confronting problems. Although issues resonating with the feelings of larger masses, such as poverty, uncertainty of social status, class clashes or declassing do appear in the films of the 1930s, these works lack any analysis. The main reason for including contemporary social issues in films is the same as the reason for

1 This work was supported by the Hungarian National Research, Development and Innovation Office (number of Agreement: 116708).

portraying these issues as resolvable, namely, serving the popular demand. It is first and foremost due to this reason, and not due to the elimination of heavier issues that Hungarian films of the 1930s are films of peaceful noncontroversy. This approach – suggesting a lack of problems – is not due to censorship. Although the Hungarian government supported filmmaking similarly to the Russian and German governments of the time, the film culture that results from it is more similar to the American one. While the influence of politics is not to be dismissed, it is secondary to viewers' needs. It is predominantly the viewer and not the politician that dictates. At the end of the 1930s, however, this silent directive of conflict avoidance is overridden in certain pieces as well as in certain genres: prominently in the genre of "doomed love" movies (e.g. *Deadly Spring* [*Halálos tavasz*, László Kalmár, 1939], *Mountain Girl* [*A hegyek lánya*, Zoltán Farkas, 1942], *A Woman Looks Back* [*Egy asszony visszanéz*, Géza Radványi, 1942], *Éva Szováthy* [*Szováthy Éva*, Ágoston Pacséry, 1943], *Machita* [Endre Rodriguez, 1944]), or in melodramas (*At the Crossroads* [*Keresztúton*, Viktor Bánky, 1942], *Lent Life* [*Kölcsönadott élet*, Viktor Bánky, 1943], *Black Dawn* [*Fekete hajnal*, László Kalmár, 1943]) (Pápai 2018). The aim of the following train of thought is to shed light on the political-historical and socio-psychological background of the conflict-avoiding films of the 1930s and, furthermore, to explain why and how the conflict-avoiding attitude was very carefully corrected beginning from the end of the decade via noir-sensibility in some films, in the so called Hungarian film noir (Pápai 2013). Noir-sensibility can be understood – following Robert G. Porfirio (1996), Jenő Király 1989, 7–8), Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (1996) – as a certain sensibility, a typical 20th-century life experience as well as a set of solutions and techniques, both stylistic and thematic characteristics, which aimed to capture the distress culture of the period. Noir-sensibility thus can be described by notions such as estrangement, frustration, failure, unsatisfied desires, fears, alienation, loneliness, purposelessness, chaos, violence, paranoia (Király 1989, 7–8, and Porfirio 1996, 85–92). Therefore, noir-sensible films comprise a group of mainstream films whose aim "was to create a specific alienation" (Borde and Chaumeton 1996, 25). In this sense, film noir can be defined not as a genre but as some kind of distressed mood, and this is why certain domestic films made between 1939 and 1944 can be regarded as Hungarian film noir. In the words of Robert G. Porfirio, "it is the underlying mood of pessimism which undercuts any attempted happy endings and prevents the films from being the typical Hollywood escapist fare many were originally intended to be. More than lighting or photography, it is this sensibility which makes the black film black for us" (1996, 80).

Borderline-Fixations: Towards Three Quarters of the Sky

The propensity for self-deception and the cult of fake problems was more than anything present in the way the Trianon trauma[2] was lived. We need to emphasize this firstly because Trianon and its revision (Püski 2002, 226) was the background that provided legitimacy to the Horthy-regime; secondly, the slogan, "Everything back!" ("Mindent vissza!") was one of the few ideologies that united the society; thirdly, because the films of the period were fundamentally determined by the taste and the compromises of the nobility, magnates, and above all the higher (or perhaps: historical) middle class, those who made up the political base of the regime, and who played a leading role in (mis)treating the Trianon complex. The dominance of the taste of these classes was signified by the fact that the bourgeoisie and landowners were overrepresented in film while those at the lower end of the social hierarchy were underrepresented and were represented in problematic and conflicting ways (Balogh and Király 2000, 74–79). The dominance of the values of the historical middle class (the gentry) can, however, also be shown in films that happen to – seemingly – criticize it. This, among other things, will be examined in the case study in the second half of this essay.

These circumstances make it necessary to consider the Trianon complex, even though the issue is explicitly present only in extreme examples from the Horthy era, like *Hungary's Revival* [*Magyar feltámadás*, Jenő Csepreghy, 1939], a film which has been lost, and there are also only few cases where the topic is indirectly represented. Before 1939, the Trianon trauma is articulated in the form of scattered allusions in *Rakoczi March* (*Rákóczi induló*, István Székely, 1933), *Budapest Pastry Shop* (*Budai cukrászda*, Béla Gaál, 1935), *Address Unknown* (*A címzett ismeretlen*, Béla Gaál, 1935), *Bence Uz* (*Uz Bence*, Jenő Csepreghy, 1938), *Wild Flower of Gyimes* (*Gyimesi vadvirág*, Ákos Ráthonyi, 1939); and after 1939, in works such as *Transylvanian Castle* (*Erdélyi kastély*, Félix Podmaniczky, 1940), *Cadet Love* (*Kadétszerelem*, Frigyes Bán, 1941), *The Thirtieth* (*A harmincadik*, László Cserépy, 1942), *Doctor István Kovács* (*Dr. Kovács István*, Viktor Bánky, 1942), *Message From the Volga Shore* (*Üzenet a Volgapartról*, Alfréd Deésy, 1943). There was, however, no Trianon-film. It is obviously difficult to present a historical event that is a failure in almost all respects. It is also beyond doubt that the trauma was too recent, too vivid for a reckoning, but the main reason for the lack of any Trianon-

2 I.e., the trauma caused by the Trianon peace treaty of 1920, imposed by the victorious allies after the end of World War I, and which stripped Hungary of two-thirds of its territory and half its population.

film(s) was partially the belief that the *status quo* was temporary (the conviction that the political climate would soon be different and borders would be redrawn) and the lack of willingness to confront the situation. To simplify it a little: those in position did not confront the Trianon trauma for the same reason they had led the country to Trianon. The tradition of leaving real problems unarticulated was not a new development in the interwar period in Hungarian society. This tradition had been getting strong since the last third of the 19th century the latest, which is documented by the endless political arguments from the age of the dual monarchy. The arguments were feeding from the internal conflicts of the structure created in 1867, namely the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which lied to the Habsburgs that their empire remained intact and to the Hungarians that they gained independence (Bibó 1986, 585–586). The nostalgia for the structure of the Compromise, for the dual monarchy, got stronger the minute the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart or at least the moment the Treaty of Trianon was signed. Nobody in "truncated Hungary" wanted the independence gained after four centuries. A good illustration of the nostalgic feeling for the Monarchy is the film *Queen Elizabeth* (*Erzsébet királyné*, Félix Podmanicky, 1940), which is about the role of the titular character, wife of emperor Franz Joseph I and a friend of Hungary, in the creation of the Compromise, and about the turnaround of the originally completely intransigent revolutionaries of 1849 and their becoming defenders of the Habsburgs. The film portrays the change in world view and ideology not as a weakness but as a heroic and moral act.

The lack of realistic reading of the situation and the lack of open confrontation with problems was especially strongly encoded in the structure of the Compromise on the Hungarian side. The political theorist, István Bibó saw it as a specifically "Hungarian phenomenon" that "the country […] from the end of the 19th century, in crucial historical moments, above all between 1914–1920 and 1938–1944 proved fatally incapable of seeing the realistic makings of its own situation and the tasks that follow from it […] it could not find or could not get into power those leaders or such leaders who could have expressed well and found well its needs, its interests, its road ahead. […] in the Hungarian national community, again and again, questions that are crucial, that are relevant and divisive for the whole community have arisen in a way that as a consequence the community got tangled in unproductive fights not leading anywhere, and it has become blind to the real tasks and real problems" (Bibó 1986, 573–574).

The illusions of Hungarian grandeur did not disappear post-Trianon; on the contrary, they solidified and got burdened with further suppressions. Thus, it was not a consequence of the Trianon trauma that self-deception developed in Hungarian society, however, the loss of parts of the country had an important role

in the aggravation of the problems, due to the lack of confrontation. The tragically damaged self-image, the tendency to misread the situation, the dominance of complaint culture, the suicidal orientation, the belief in salvation by achieving a single goal, as well as the oscillation between lethargy and euphoria are all elements of what psychopathology describes as typical of a borderline personality disorder. On this analogy, the characteristics of the interwar borderline nation, or perhaps more precisely borderline high-middle class, can be grasped as follows: the damages to its self-image and self-identity are signified by the adherence to a dream of a superpower position; the propensity is evidenced by a series of bad decisions made in the first half of the 20th century, based on misreading the situation. The dominance of complaint culture can be illustrated by grievance politics – using Miklós Zeidler's words (Zeidler 2009, 189) –, emphasizing grievances instead of elaborating mature suggestions for solutions. Suicidal orientation is shown by receptiveness to visions of death of the nation (which had already been present before Trianon but increased after that). The belief in salvation by achieving a single goal was expressed in the slogan: "Truncated Hungary is not a country, complete Hungary is heaven!" The oscillation between extreme lethargy and euphoric false optimism was manifest in the reception of the signing of the peace agreement and the hysterical reception of the 1940 re-annexation of territories.

Beginning with 1939–1940 Hungarian politics can be characterized by bad decisions and/or indecision, and the crisis gets deeper after entering the war, the destiny of the country takes a catastrophic turn. Perhaps not coincidentally, in some Hungarian films the issue of decision-making is problematized and indecisive thus tragic protagonists appear. It may be an exaggeration to hypothesize such a direct connection between political and social history and film history, but it can be stated with certainty that the year 1939 brings a turning point both in Hungarian politics and in Hungarian films. In the war period of the '40s, the myth of problemlessness is still dominant; however, some anxieties and frustrations are articulated in films. The change can be seen in two directions: while most of the films are still problem-free, (a) doomed love movies with tormented heroes and unhappy endings appear, and (b) there are some melodramas depicting anxieties despite their happy endings. Films in these latter two groups can be considered to be noir-sensitive (these could be considered as examples of the Hungarian film noir), though it must be emphasized that the number of these films is still far below the number of glamourous and optimistic ones even in the '40s.

The changing voice of Hungarian film is made evident by the end of the reign of happy endings. Hungarian films of the interwar period were originally repulsed

by unhappy endings. In this respect Hungarian film is more Hollywood-like than Hollywood itself. During the years between 1931 and 1939 there were hardly any films that had an unhappy ending (perhaps *Spring Shower* [*Tavaszi zápor*, 1932] by Pál Fejős is an exception, although even in that case it is not obvious that the ending is unhappy; and *Henpecked Husband* [*A papucshős,* 1938] by János Vaszary can also be mentioned here). The change was brought by *Deadly Spring* at the end of 1939, and after that one or two films with unhappy endings were made each year until 1944. Such films are *Deadly Spring* (1939), *Yellow Rose* (*Sárga rózsa,* István György, 1940), *Silent Monastery* (*Néma kolostor,* Endre Rodriguez, 1941), *Today, Yesterday, Tomorrow* (*Ma, tegnap, holnap*, Viktor Bánky, 1941), *Men in the Alps* (*Emberek a havason*, István Szőts, 1941), *Mountain Girl* (1942), *Male Fidelity* (*Férfihűség*, István Daróczy, 1942), *A Woman Looks Back* (1942), *Guarding Post in the Outskirts* (*Külvárosi őrszoba*, D. Ákos Hamza, 1942), *Love Fever* (*Szerelmi láz*, István Lázár jr, 1943), *Éva Szováthy* (1943), *Machita* (1944), and *Madách* (Antal Németh, 1944).

Distressed Melodramas

Hungarian films of the Horthy era seem at first sight to be divorced of their social-historical context (where social is meant to include not only social phenomena but also history, ideology and politics) since they hardly reflect directly on contemporary events, especially in the 1930s. The Trianon complex, which was present in everyday life, was avoided or only brought up carefully. If they comment on events, they show crises to be easily manageable, as can be seen in *Man Under the Bridge* (*Ember a híd alatt*, László Vajda, 1936) about the problem of professional unemployed people, or also in the representation in many films of the loss of fortune and title, that is, declassing, a problem that was an intense experience for many, be it films showing bourgeois protagonists (*Money Talks* [*Pénz beszél,* Jenő Csepreghy, 1940], *Happy Times* [*Boldog idők,* Endre Rodriguez, 1943]), or aristocrats and the nobility (*Rózsa Nemes* [*Nemes Rózsa*, Emil Martonffy, 1943], *Tokaj Wine* [*Tokaji aszú*, Viktor Bánky, 1940]). It is not by accident that the motif of declassing is emphasized in films: the historical, social and economical cataclysms – lost revolutions, Trianon, the emigration from the newly formed states into the remnant state, and the Great Depression – all make downslide a collective experience, the audience can identify with the main characters who lose their foothold. Declassing is also a gratifying topic for genre films: there are great reserves of suspense in it (whether the protagonist will fall further or manages to climb back up), not to mention that showing the

problem to be solvable (by way of happy endings) performs a useful task for the state: it eases the accumulated tensions of the community.

The voice, value system, and to some extent the genre division of Hungarian film changes at the end of the 1930s. Even comedies are not the way they used to be: they show more absurd situations (*One Skirt, One Pants* [*Egy szoknya, egy nadrág*, D. Ákos Hamza, 1943], *The Perfect Family* [*A tökéletes család*, László Sipos, 1942]); furthermore, the charming ingénues of the '30s become hysterical (*It Begins with Marriage* [*Házassággal kezdődik*, Viktor Bánky, 1943]) or retarded (*Lucky Fellow* [*Szerencsés flótás*, István Balogh, 1943]). The most important change is the emergence of the doomed-love movie, and melodrama as a genre strengthens its position after a scattered presence earlier (*Purple Lilacs* [*Lila akác*, István Székely, 1934], *Sister Maria* [*Mária nővér*, Viktor Gertler, 1936], *Anniversary* [*Évforduló*, Béla Gaál, 1936], *Only One Night* [*Café Moszkva*, István Székely, 1936]).

At first sight, it does not seem easy to distinguish between melodrama and doomed-love movie since all characteristics of a melodrama fit doomed-love movies as well. From Thomas Elsaesser (1972), Christine Gledhill (1987) to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1991), theoreticians generally agree on the following basic features of melodrama: it shows explicit emotions, it cumulates conflicts, it builds from series of extremely dramatized scenes, and due to this, it does not refrain from the use of pathos created by gestures of characters, certain types of scenery, lighting, or montage identified as typical of Hollywood.

All of these characteristics can be found in generic melodrama (and its subgenre, the love melodrama), as well as in doomed-love movies. However, despite their similarities, love melodramas and doomed-love stories are different in several key features. They are distinct in several thematic elements, in their structure and, above all, in their ideology. Most of their differences come from the fact that – as Jenő Király writes – "love story is the genre of deadly love; melodrama is that of sacrificial love" (Király 2010, 34). The doomed-love movie, which can be taken to be one of the oldest genres of film history[3] lacks the melodramatic miracle (which is not to be taken as a fantastical element, but as a dramaturgical surprise that leads the lovers into a safe haven), and the prominent structural element of the genre is the unhappy ending. Its mood is determined by pessimism of fatalism, its main character is the protagonist who is unsuccessful in his/her pursuits and fails.

3 In Hollywood, the doomed-love movie is a significant genre already in the age of silent films, for example: *A Fool There Was* (Frank Powell, 1915), *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919), *Camille* (Ray C. Smallwood, 1921), *The Unknown* (Tod Browning, 1927).

From the end of the 1930s, there appear characters in domestic doomed-love movies and melodramas alike who do not only carry the burden of their bad decisions but also that of their indecisions. Moreover, these characters are generally foreign to Hollywood movies (even to the noir genre), which celebrate action. Inactivity is not to be understood as a lack of productive action, that is, moments of patient and suspenseful waiting (which is prevalent in Hollywood movies), but as a futureless doing-nothing and miracle-waiting, as well as the feeling of "we will survive somehow." A dramaturgical tool typical of most movies of the era is related to this latter aspect. Chance is a plot-structuring force in Hungarian films, independent of genre and topic. It can be found in romcoms (*Together* [*Kettesben*, László Cserépy, 1943], *This Happened in Budapest* [*Ez történt Budapesten*, D. Ákos Hamza, 1944], *Yes or No?* [*Igen vagy nem?*, Viktor Bánky, 1940], *The Friend of the Minister* [*A miniszter barátja*, Viktor Bánky, 1939]), doomed-love movies (*Deadly Spring, Yellow Rose, Male Fidelity*), more classical (*Marriage* [*Házasság*, János Vaszary, 1942]) or more distressed melodramas (*Strange Roads* [*Idegen utakon,* Imre Apáthi, 1944], *Half A Boy* [*Egy fiúnak a fele*, D. Ákos Hamza, 1944], *At the Crossroads*, *Lent Life*, *Black Dawn*). The motif of chance is thus characteristic of the whole body of film. Should the story go towards tragedy or should it end happily, it is as if the characters gave up on controlling their destiny. In Viktor Bánky's *Yes or No?* – which does not have a tragic ending, on the contrary, it is a film that has multiple happy endings –, in one of the scenes, the characters are discussing the role of chance in shaping destiny, and when one of them inquires about having an influence on chance, the other one rejects this hypothesis.

"– Last night I really did not think that I would actually be here for this breakfast!
– *Oh, chance is capable of many things.*
– *Only… only chance?*
– *What do you mean?*
– *Did you not help chance out a little bit?* (...) *Yes or no?*
– *What is this insinuation? I am a gentleman.*"

This dialogue reveals a lot, whether we consider its literal meaning or understand it on a more abstract level. In the increasingly dark atmosphere of that period, among the more and more frightening events, the individual is not his/her own master, is not the controller of his/her destiny, not even in fiction. The protagonist may reach a happy ending, but it is less by their own powers and will. Some external control is vital. The "big brother" of Hungarian film protagonists is chance, which always watches over them, and in this respect it is almost immaterial if the work of chance

leads them to a happy or unhappy ending. The series of chance events shows that the protagonists cannot meet the challenges on their own.

The typical representations of the protagonists with a weakness of will are two tragic characters. One of them is Iván Egry, from the paradigm-changing doomed-love movie *Deadly Spring* (1939) at the beginning of the new era in film history. His tragedy is not that he is cheated on, but that he cannot decide between "nice evil" and "pure beauty" (Király 2010, 111), and his suicide is nothing else but the admission of his indecision. The other one is the titular character of the film *Madách* (1944). Further works dealing with decisions are, among others, *Temptation* (*Kísértés*, Zoltán Farkas, 1942), in which it is the lover, *Light and Shadow* (*Fény és árnyék*, Klára Tüdős, 1943), in which it is the wife, or *Closed Court* (*Zárt tárgyalás*, Géza Radványi, 1940), in which it is the wife and the lover together who decide instead of the inert husband. Bad decisions and/or indecision are both the cause and the result of distress, therefore, these motives are the generators of noir-sensibility in the works.

Even though problems are intensified in certain films, directors rarely get to the point where they let the main character be completely destroyed. Even if they take pity on them with a happy ending, they are far away from glamorous romances. True analytic art movies are not made in the period; but the peculiarities, or even anomalies of the local variations on genres imported primarily from Hollywood often say at least as much, if not more, about the values of society as art movies do.

The appearance of the doomed-love movie among the genres in 1939 is symptomatic on its own, however, the changes in melodrama, the way it presents and handles conflicts, are even more telling than the rise of the doomed-love movie. The most exciting films represent the collective mood of society primarily by resetting genre structures. These films are the descendants of a glamorous aesthetic on the surface; however, they are related to film noir below the surface. Problems seem to be resolved in them, but in fact, they get deeper.

Although Hungarian melodrama with noir-sensibility offers happy ending to the viewer, sometimes it questions the essence and point of a happy ending with various techniques. An excellent example is the happy ending in *Black Dawn*, which narrates the meeting of the lovers, while also questioning the idyllic end by hinting at the uncertain parenting of a child. Another example is *Half a Boy*, in which all questions raised get an answer in the cathartic ending, the emotions quiet down, conflicts are smoothed out, but the harmony seems superficial, and a deeper analysis can show the difficulty of getting rid of prejudice in the small community.

This approach, that is, calling on basic principles of the genre by negating them, for example by having happy endings with multiple meanings, is present parallel

to processes going down in the international movies of the period. There are only sporadic – and artistically quite controversial – examples for this in Hollywood movies before the '40s (*Baby Face* [Alfred E. Green, 1933], *The Kiss Before the Mirror* [James Whale, 1933]), and it is a rare approach even in the '40s. It appears during WWII in films such as *Mr. Skeffington* (Vincent Sherman, 1942) or *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942).[4] Most American film historians relate the melodramatic theme of taking issue with happiness – its apparent realization and its simultaneous ironic questioning – to the so called family melodramas, especially to the works of Douglas Sirk (*All That Heaven Allows*, 1955, *Magnificent Obsession*, 1954), but they often forget about Sirk's predecessors, the makers of pre-code films, as well as the directors making melodramas during the war.

Techniques similar to those applied by LeRoy and Sherman, and in some sense by Sirk, are the ones that Viktor Bánky and László Kalmár experiment with in their distress melodramas. Moreover, the concealed, indirect social consciousness can also be paralleled to Sirk's films. John Mercer and Martin Shingler write that these "become emblematic through a particular use of the ironic mise-en-scène, which suggests a critique of bourgeois ideology that reveals wider conflicts and tensions that manifest themselves through the dominant cinema of the period" (2004, 40). The undertakings of *Black Dawn*, *At the Crossroads* or *Lent Life* are eerily similar to this. On the surface they offer a glamorous world view, moreover, they deepen the happiness theme – the son of the landowner falls in love with the adventuress (*Black Dawn*), the head of the company falls in love with the secretary (*At the Crossroads*), the bourgeois woman falls in love with a penniless soldier (*Lent Life*) –, however, below the surface, they correct the glamorous world view and criticize this portrayal in as much as they signal the price of becoming happy. This price can be the potential of being cheated on (in *Black Dawn* the lover of the main character sleeps with his blackmailer, and it is hinted at that the child believed to be shared with the protagonist is the fruit of this night), the fatal loss of true love (in the ending of *At the Crossroads* the heroine enters a better-than-nothing relationship), or even the death of a person, the unnecessary third (*Lent Life*). Just like Sirk's films, these can be interpreted as real melodramas, or as distress melodramas, questioning the basic tenet of the genre, the theme of happiness.

A special type of distress melodrama is represented by those works that mix elements of various genres. In the study of Hungarian films between 1939–1944, the category of noir-sensibility and the method of genre-analysis are useful as they help in mapping out the hidden value-structures of the films. Films such as *Closed*

4 On the subversiveness of the above-mentioned films, see: Pápai 2018, 16.

Court or *The Last Song* (*Az utolsó dal*, Frigyes Bán, 1942) and *A Heart Stops Beating* (*Egy szív megáll*, László Kalmár, 1942), which adapt pre-code logic, present a mixed perspective on values, among other reasons, because they give happiness to the protagonists undeservedly.

A Case Study: *Half a Boy* by D. Ákos Hamza

The film by D. Ákos Hamza shot in 1943, but only shown in February 1946, is an often-cited emblematic film of its era. It is also an enigmatic one: it is a work full of social and political-historical reflections, although some say that it is too careful in answering questions and is ideologically two-faced. The film is an excellent material to illustrate the problems touched upon in this paper. It demonstrates how strongly attractive the value system of the historical middle class is in contemporary Hungarian films (Hamza obviously wants to depart from this value system, but remains captive to it until the end), and it can be a great help in mapping out the working mechanisms of distress melodramas (especially through the analysis of their controversial happy ending).

In an interview made in Budapest in 1987, the director called the film "an expressedly anti-German and anti-racial discrimination film" (Balogh 1987, 38), which is, however, still vacillating and unsure at certain points. It takes a stand against stigmatizing people based on their origin and against all forms of exclusion, which were also made into law at the time when the film was made, while it passes a concealed judgment on some people of atypical fate. It argues for accepting differences, but it also makes slandering comments on the object of tolerance. With the allegorical story it tries to recalibrate the feelings of the historical middle class, while at the same time reproducing its reflexes. Not to mention the fact that the film's approach in showing problems to be solvable seems to be belittling these – at the time acute – problems.

Despite the above, the making of *Half a Boy* was a brave gesture, a fighting act in 1943. It was not only a special act but also a source of danger; even though the Catholic Church stood up for the film, it was still banned in 1944. Even its own contemporaries felt its controversial nature, so when it was finally shown to audiences, after the war, there was an insert after the main title which, while also praised it, contained critical statements related to the way it discusses issues judged to be less heroic: "This film was made in 1944 [more precisely in 1943 – Zs. P.]. At that time, it was banned due to censorship. We may now consider its voice timid, weak. Then it was a brave, risky stand against hatred and evil."

The film is based on the short story with the same title by Kálmán Mikszáth, written in 1886, and had already been adapted for several times by Hungarian directors. The first, literal adaptation was made a brief 20 years before Hamza, in 1924, by Géza Bolváry. The plot of the short story and this first adaptation is the following: Lőrinc Gáthy's wife dies in childbirth. The man promises to get a mother for his son, a mother who loves the child like her own. Gáthy carries out this plan in a less than common way. He gives the son to foster parents, looks for a new wife, and he also gives their shared son to foster parents. After several years, he brings home both children, but he does not tell his wife, even after her persistent urging, which child is hers, but promises to reveal the secret when the sons come of age. The boys grow up and are enlisted for war. One of them dies in the war. When Gáthy is about to fulfil his promise, his wife asks him to throw the birth certificates into the fire, since – as Mikszáth writes – "at least this way half of the son remains hers." Géza Bolváry follows this short story rather faithfully in his film adaptation.

However, Hamza and the scriptwriter József Kerekesházy only kept the basic idea of the short story, that of the boys being born and taken into the same family. Otherwise they turned it into a parable about the current laws against the Jews and the persecution of this people. The story was changed in the following way: The landowner Lőrinc Gáthy's wife comes close to death when she gives birth to their only son. They send for a priest but they can only find a wandering friar, who arrives with a baby on his arm. He has found the baby along the road, and he asks the head of the house to raise the child with his own son. Gáthy is hesitant but finally gives in; he promises that if his wife recovers from post-partum fever, he will raise the little newcomer beside his own son as a gratitude to God. He is helped in his decision by the fact that the two infants are accidentally put into the same bed and he cannot distinguish them, they are so similar – so he has to raise both if he wants to be sure that he keeps his own son. 25 years pass, the remaining three-fourths of the film's events follow the lives of the two boys. The newly graduated Gáthy boys are about to get married: János has chosen the daughter of a landowner, named Lujza, while István has chosen Anna, the daughter of Vida, who is a social climber, a former worker turned into a landowner. István's plans are against his father's will (he considers it morganatic), and János's plan is rejected by his prospective mother-in-law because she hears the gossip that one of the Gáthy boys is a foundling and she does not want to marry her daughter to a possible bastard. Since nobody knows which boy is the real Gáthy child and which is the found one, both of them are stigmatized for their parentage. It is not only Lujza's mother and Lujza who are preoccupied with the secret of the parentage but also the people around. Moreover,

even old Gáthy wants to be certain, no matter how his wife and the doctor who was there at the birth want to convince him about the futility of this. In the end, due to the influence of this doctor's actions and convinced by the reappearing friar, they all set aside their doubts. In the last quarter of the film they all relent – as if they are handing the torch to each other –, first the old Gáthy, then Lujza, and finally the prospective mother-in-law, who seems most persistent in her rejection. The closing scene shows a coming together in the Gáthy-house, where all the characters who had an important role earlier are present besides the Gáthys: the friar, the doctor and all prospective family members are there, cleansed of their prejudices and happily enjoying the end of the conflicts.

The plot spectacularly diverges both from Mikszáth's writing and from Géza Bolváry's adaptation. The short story and its first adaptation focus on the childhood of the main characters, Hamza focuses on the boys who have turned 25. While in the short story and the first adaptation it is the mother who is obsessed with the correct identifications of the boys, in Hamza's film the father is preoccupied with this. Naturally, the three plots were born in three different times, however, in Hamza's version the events obviously take place in the 1940s. The Hamza-film introduces several characters who are not mentioned by Mikszáth or Bolváry: the doctor, the prospective mother- and father-in-law, as well as the fiancées. Not to mention the friar, whose character is worth taking a closer look at.

This character has an especially important role in the film, even though no friar is mentioned by Mikszáth or in Bolváry's adaptation, and the Christian context is not present in either of them. Although the friar has little playtime, that is, he is only present in a small number of scenes, his significance is shown by the fact that he plays a decisive role both in the creation and in the resolution of the basic conflict.

From the changes made by Hamza and Kerekesházy to the story by Mikszáth the most importants are the introduction of the friar and the morals provided by this in sententious, succinct lines, which, however, play a rather significant role in making the film ideologically muddled, to say the least. Acceptance is placed into an exclusively Christian narrative context via the character of the friar, as well as the cross symbolism connected to him and emphasized at various points, such as the beginning and the closing image of the film. Acceptance and love are not presented simply as human values but as specifically Christian ones, which can be possessed by those who understand the friar's message. It is beyond doubt that the words of the friar had an important self-reflecting message for the contemporary Hungarian Christians, however, Hamza unwittingly polarizes acceptance and exclusion to Christian and non-Christian poles, which is problematic from the point of view of

the persecuted Jewish people. These issues are legitimate even if the narrowing of the context of acceptance can, to some extent, be explained by the contemporary political situation. Putting an emphasis on the strictly Christian acceptance could be justified by the fact that in 1943–1944 it was mostly Christians that needed to be reminded of the importance of acceptance, and it was the Christian-national wing and its representatives that had to be warned of the same, by emphasizing that Christianity is love. Nevertheless, it is not an ideological problem but an aesthetic one that follows from the previous line of thought. Hamza also slims down the horizon of interpretation by narrowing the space of acceptance, and he more or less makes the film into a thesis movie. It is a different set of issues that this parabolic, or perhaps allegoric nature of the film was considered more of a merit than a mistake at the time, even though the message had no influence since the film was left in a box at the historic moment when it should have been shown to a wider audience.

Related to the ideological issues of *Half a Boy*, it is worth considering the argument that acceptance is based on uniformity and not on accepting the other in it. The film seems to suggest that we do not have to accept the fact that we are different but the fact that we are the same (two halves of a boy: the possessive structure alludes to the Christian holy trinity). This does not only obliterate the significance of being different, but – even worse – gives it a negative shade in some contexts. The representation of the other that is picked to be accepted is sometimes negative. István tries to act like he is the found child in order to win Anna's hand, who is the daughter of the social climber Vida, despised by the aristocrats (and István thinks that if he proves this, then the old Gáthy will accept his morganatic marriage). When István tries to play that he is the found child, he thinks he can prove it by uncouth behaviour: he uses vulgar language and spits loudly. So, he learns to be primitive in order to identify with the otherness that is to be excluded – this is very controversial and can be understood as cryptically anti-Semitic if it is translated to be about Jews. By this, otherness is polarized again, and the film suggests that "clean blood" is sophisticated, even if it sometimes goes to the extremes, but "bad" parentage cannot be fully compensated even by the social climber farmer (that is, the assimilated Jew).

By this logic, the problem of exclusion – the hierarchical approach to people – is not questioned in the film at all. The farmer remains a farmer, and good blood is good blood; Christian morality just pulls a blind sheet over it. Without questioning the humanist intent of the makers, this can be interpreted from a Jewish perspective as hurtful and condescending since despite its best intentions, the film does not advertise acceptance and love but rather assimilation and the necessity to assimilate to those higher up.

This problematic aspect of the film is balanced, however, by the central conflict, from which it follows that there is no otherness; the distinction between one and other does not exist because only identical exists. That is to say, one can consider, contrary to the above, that while there are problems in the film concerning the character of the social climber farmer and the judgment about him, these problems cannot be extended to the whole plot. The dilemma of accepting or not accepting the other is not predominantly connected to the figure of the farmer, but to the characters of the two boys.

According to what certain aspects of the film suggest, it can actually be difficult to accept otherness; however, the main story claims the exact opposite, that otherness in fact does not exist. At least this is the meaning of the "other" boy being the same as the "real" one, and those who want the "real" one – may it be the mother, the father, the mother-in-law, or the wife – can only do so by accepting the "other," the "fake" one as well, which is not very difficult, since the "fake" one is the "real" one at the same time, as it is impossible to know which is which. Gáthy mom realizes this from the beginning, but Gáthy dad is incapable of this for a quarter of a century. The fact that the argument between the mother and the father does not simply comprise the pinpointing of a moral dilemma poses a difficulty, as this argument reflects the creators' immature moral statement and their opinions full of muddied values, although definitely based on good intentions.The problem of lineage, which is a recurrent element of melodramas of all times, is also exemplified by the film *Devil's Horseman* (*Ördöglovas*, 1943), created by Hamza right before *Half a Boy*. It premiered on March 15, 1944, that is, four days before the German invasion. This film, which takes place in the 19th century and is full of adventure plots, executes an impossible mission, it undertakes to resolve unresolvable conflicts as it tells the story of the fulfilment of an impossible love affair, the engagement between Móric Sándor, a man of Kossuth-like temper and looks, and the daughter of Metternich. A story like this almost belongs to the area of fantasy if we judge it based on historical facts, but it is perfectly suitable for a melodrama because it takes social prohibitions to the extreme. Such prohibitions are often the source of key conflicts in the genre, as well as conflicts between parents and children related to picking a partner. This latter could not be more extreme than one caused by a marriage between a faithful devotee to Hungarian freedom and the daughter of a main figure of the oppressive regime. The film *Devil's Horseman* shows that the question of lineage is not only a problem of contemporary politics but also a problem related to a genre in Hamza's hand: emphasizing it can intensify certain basic conflicts of a genre. Thus, when discussing the ideological issues concerning the film, it must be remembered that

Half a Boy is a melodrama. The happy ending of the film, which raises various questions, must also be approached with this in mind.

The first issue of the genre-related discussion should be the ending of the film because one of the most vulnerable points of the values transmitted by the film lies in the fact that there is a happy ending – which is actually a recurring problem with melodramas that handle contemporary social issues. Film historians and theoreticians of genre have often stated that it is very risky if a melodrama takes up discussing historical crises or acute social issues, even if this does not serve a propaganda purpose, as the genre's orientation towards a happy ending can take off the edge of a problem. The happy ending suggests that the problem is resolvable and thus there is a fair chance that it adulterates or at least belittles the issue. *Schindler's List* [Steven Spielberg, 1990] is a good illustration of this conflict, and it fits here due to its topic as well. The crucial ambivalence is that the film is about the Holocaust and still talks about the escape of Jewish people. Accusations similar to those brought against Spielberg's film can also be raised in connection with Hamza's work. The ambivalent approach so typical of melodramas, namely, the reconciliation of irreconcilable elements is present here, too, but only apparently. *Half a Boy* is actually not a real melodrama. The director adheres to the melodramatic values without belittling the problem raised: he seems to tie off the threads containing conflicts and gives the film an optimistic closing; however, he lets it be implied, using some concealed motifs, that the crucial crises have not been solved in spite of the happy ending. It is for this reason that *Half a Boy* can be regarded as a typical example of Hungarian distress melodrama.

At first sight, *Half a Boy* is an excellent example of the melodramatic narrative: the film tells the story of how the main characters – specifically the people in the close vicinity of the two boys – get rid of the prejudices and biases that shackle the fulfilment of their relatives' happiness. The parents reconsider their social interests that make it impossible for them at the beginning to support the love of their children, and get rid of the obstacles raised by their financial self-interest in their soul. Furthermore, Lujza successfully gets rid of the obstacles in her psyche that were raised by her mother's rejection of János Gáthy. To sum up: the film shows how the characters that are made sick by their bad reflexes get to the point of self-healing and reach the reconsideration of their desire for happiness. *Half a Boy*, thus, achieves brilliantly the directives of a melodrama, by which it suggests that the problems raised can be resolved, even though it may not be easy. So, on the surface, problems can be overcome. However, some characteristics of the film weaken the catharsis. Such a strong emphasis on the resolvability of the problems is suspicious. The question raised in the film is too

painful, the turnaround of the characters is too sharp, and the happy celebration in the final scene is too big for the closing to seem credible. But then, why does Hamza use it? Before we can answer this, we must take an excursion to some characteristics of melodrama that have not been discussed so far.

Half a Boy is a film full of anxiety from several points of view. First of all, mainly due to its contemporary political relevance, as it is impossible not to notice its parabolistic nature. The basic situation, the ideas in the plot and the verbal communication of certain characters make it obvious that it is about the stigmatizing and persecution of the Jewish people. D. Ákos Hamza employs verbal signals as an important part of establishing the parabolistic nature of the film from the very beginning, when the friar gives the following monologue: "what kind of a destiny is it, to be a found child? And if he grows up, if he becomes someone, even then, even then, he will be asked, perhaps in the most critical moment: who are you, where do you come from? Never will he be asked: who are you, where are you going?" There is a large number of similar comments later, very obviously about the persecution of Jews. "Everyone is the same before God" – notes the friar when he meets Gáthy, who is desperately looking for him and wants certainty about his sons. "People have gone insane. They are always looking for the differences among themselves." – concludes Gáthy the moral of the meeting with the friar. The message of the friar's closing words is similarly unambiguous. "There is a commandment: love each other! As there is nothing stronger and bigger in the sky and on earth than love. Let its dew fall on your heads. Love is awake and is not asleep even when sleeping. It flames upwards like the burning torch, and it breaks through everything like the fast flame. People, do not cause harm to each other!"

At the same time, anxiety appears in *Half a Boy* not only due to its signals that can be decoded as political statements, but also due to the way the basic characteristics of the Hollywood melodrama appear in it. The most conspicuous is the repositioning of the countryside, which is a traditionally positive melodramatic feature. The countryside is usually "a space of innocence" (to use Linda Williams's term [1998, 65–66]) in Hollywood melodramas: it is a Paradise-like territory that protects and guards, and if the protagonist gets away from it, (s)he is faced with a series of challenges. The space of innocence is not only rural, it is also characterized by being matriarchal. The countryside and the presence of the mother protect the protagonist, whose destiny is bound to turn to the worse if the connection to one or another part of this melodramatic environment is lost. Most of the time, the connection is lost with both elements, see for example Anne's descent to hell in Griffith's *Way Down East*, made in 1920, or, to give a current example, Albert's

trajectory in *War Horse,* directed by Spielberg in 2011. D. Ákos Hamza reconsiders, partially destructs and perverts the two features of the typical melodramatic environment, which is meant to ensure the protection of the protagonist(s). Although Gáthy mom is representative of the classic melodramatic mother role, Hamza also makes one of the main antagonists a mother (Lujza's mother), and he fills the countryside with toxic people depraved by gossip, and so not only does he rid it from its protective function but also represents it as an area that can bring destruction on the protagonists. This crude devaluation of traditional melodramatic values plays a role in shaping the plot.

The third factor influencing the turning of *Half a Boy* into a distress melodrama is also connected to the re-evaluation of the melodramatic principle of the countryside. Repositioning the countryside and rewriting its traditional role in the plot, as well as giving unusual characteristics to the people who represent the countryside all play a role in the creation of the ambiguity of the ending and in the relativization and dulling of the final catharsis.

The messages of the film are substantially modified by the fact that the director – by following the route of the gossip – shows the reflections and reactions in the wider environment of the protagonists, and furthermore he interprets those as being events of outstanding significance since he emphasizes their major role in the outburst of the central conflict. This motif is completely missing from the original short story. In Mikszáth's work, the people in the wider environment of the protagonists play no role in the complication of the events. Contrary to this, D. Ákos Hamza does not only indirectly signal the destructive nature of gossip, but – to be completely sure – verbalizes it, for example, in the conversation between Lujza and her mother.

"– After all this, of course there can be no talk of this marriage!

– But mother, maybe all of this is just stupid gossip!

– My dear girl, gossip is worse than reality. Because people do not always believe the truth. But everybody believes gossips.

– But perhaps it is not János but István!

– There's the rub, nobody knows which one is the found child. So both of them are said to be the one!"

The director achieves the multilayeredness of the closing by showing the problems to be – seemingly – resolvable in the close environment of the protagonists, but he stays quiet about what happens in their wider environment. While he goes through the stages of the growth of prejudice in a smaller and a wider circle, the reckoning with prejudice is only shown in a smaller circle. He accurately reports

on the behavioural changes of the protagonists and on the rollercoaster ride of their opinions, he tellingly does not say whether the people who live in the neighbourhood (who played a major role in the spreading of the prejudice earlier) have changed or not. More precisely, by leaving this question unanswered, he suggests that the everymen of the neighbourhood have not changed. For what reason should they have changed?

To signal the cleansing of the small community of prejudice, it would have been an obvious solution to step out of the closed environment of the Gáthys in the final scenes and to close the film with images of a wedding that shows not only the main characters but also the supporting ones. The conflict could have been ended with a symbolic celebration where the old and the young of the neighbourhood are happy together. This solution would have been in line with the melodramatic tradition (for example, we can see such an ending in Griffith's *Way Down East* [1920], two weddings in the presence of a lot of people; or to mention a domestic example, of the two available Hungarian feature films by Mihály Kertész, the earlier one, *The Exile* [*A tolonc*] from 1914 also closes with an assembly celebration, with a wedding that brings together a crowd), but Hamza decided not to use something like this.

If we watch carefully, we can find one more person in the closing, besides the supporting characters, who does not articulate a change of opinion, despite being present at the big resolution, unlike the supporting characters. From the parents, Gáthy mom, as well as Vida and Gáthy dad express their opinions that they are not curious about the secrets of the boys' parentage; however, Lujza's mother – who can be considered as the antagonist in the film since she plays a major role in the eruption of the conflict besides the supporting characters who spread the gossip – does not say a word, although in the sequence right before the closing scene, where she is talking to the doctor, it is obvious that she is still concerned about the parentage of her prospective son-in-law. Hamza actually emphasizes her silence with a cut where Vida says that he is not interested in which of the two boys is the found one. While Vida speaks, Lujza's mother is standing right next to him, but she does not say a word. So, Hamza omits to give unambiguous signs in the final scene that Lujza's mother has changed her opinion. The mother is smiling in the last cuts, and so it seems that she, too, has changed her opinion, but we do not learn why she would have done so. Was she affected by the arrival and the words of the friar? But if so, why does she not make it obvious using her words – like Vida and Lőrinc Gáthy do?

To sum up: the film *Half a Boy* is a definitely special one at the end of the Horthy era due to its social consciousness and its humanist standing, however, its ideology is ambivalent. Nevertheless, a genre-based examination reveals such

concealed contents and makes the controversies, which definitely exist, at least partly understandable, even if it cannot fully explain them. In Hamza's film, the solutions and resolutions required by the structure of a melodrama are embedded within a complex context. *Half a Boy* can be understood as a film over-emphasizing the melodramatic happiness concepts (since the behaviour of the main characters, who originally show rejection, takes a radical turn), but it can also be understood as an underachievement of happiness concepts (the everyman is not rid of his prejudices). Similarly to other Hungarian distress melodramas of the period, this film does not simply reproduce the classic melodramatic structure, but, on the one hand, it overstacks its features creating catharsis and effect, and on the other hand, it also questions the validity of these features and overrides their traditional meanings.

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