

## Sites of Undoing Gender Hierarchies: Women and/in Hungarian Cinema (Industry)

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### SUMMARY

*The article engages Hungarian film production between 1945 and 2005 from a twofold perspective. It surveys women's inclusion in the film-making profession and assesses the representation of women in Hungarian cinema. The study seeks answers to the questions whether state-socialist emancipation rhetoric and policies targeting women's employment and social inclusion have also affected 1) the domain of creative work; and 2) the kinds of representations of women circulating in visual culture?*

*The author argues that both women's representation and women's participation in cinema production have presented an overall more favourable picture in the decades of state-socialism than during the period following the system change. To identify assessment criteria for "a favourable picture", the insights of feminist film studies are consulted. The survey concludes that beside some pieces by engaged women filmmakers, a good proportion of complex portrayals of women came from male directors. At the same time, the author interrogates to what extent, and with what sort of qualifications, (Western) feminist film criticism may prove to be a viable tool of analysis to account for developments within an arguably different historical/social context and production environment. The starkly different production environments of mainstream Hollywood cinema (the foundational "research animal" of British-American feminist theory), its state-funded equivalent in socialist Hungary and the subsequent re-arrangement of the industry in the new market economy entail both material kind and film text-related consequences. The article proposes that the political economy of cultural production in state-socialist Hun-*

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*gary allowed for a kind of transformation of signifying practices that is appreciable from a feminist perspective.*

Key words: Hungarian cinema, socialist Hungary, women, socialism, cultural production, feminist perspective

The work of feminist semiotic theorists has combined discussions of representation with an analysis of ideology, arguing that images do not merely mirror social reality but are ideological signifiers. Through a survey of sixty years of Hungarian film production, i<sup>1</sup> look at the reciprocally constitutive relation between reality, representation and ideology. My survey spans the period of state-socialism (1945–89) and the first 15 years of the democratic transition (up to 2005). This is the first overview of this film corpus from a feminist perspective and it serves a combination of purposes. Apart from the objectives of similar inquiries – critically examining the representation of women in cinema and mapping women’s contribution to film art – i also wanted to test a hypothesis, an empirical observation: both women’s cinematic representation and women’s participation in Hungarian film production have shown a more favorable overall picture in the years of state-socialism than during the period following the system change. Not assuming, however, that there is a direct necessary link between the number of women creating representations and the nature or transformation of those representations, i tried to explore what other factors have come into play to upkeep or change representational practices. Such factors can be the ideological and material conditions of both cultural production and consumption. Thus my inquiry aimed at the exploration of the complex relationships between political agendas and ideologies, the economic dimensions of cultural production, and cultural practices and representations.

The political agenda and ideology in the state-socialist period was to “emancipate” women through involving them in the public spheres of paid work and civic engagement. In fulfilment of this agenda – and as a result of rapid industrialization mobilizing a reserve labour force – the number of working women rapidly increased, and so did their educational level as well as presence and visibility in the public sphere and public discourses. The post-socialist state had no comparable political agenda, and while it took the effects of the socialist way of emancipation for granted, it abolished many of the economic and social measures that made full-time female employment possible, and through its public discourses it has subserved a re-traditionalizing gender regime. The interrogation of the ideological and social context of cultural production prompted the following research questions:

did state-socialist policies targeting women's social inclusion also affect their participation in creative occupations on the one hand, and their portrayal in visual culture on the other? And similarly, did representational practices and the job distribution in the cinema industry reflect the social changes occurring in the transition period? Lesser-researched creative professions piqued my interest because women's entry in the labour force cannot alone successfully change sex-based discrimination or historically produced gender relations without also offering access to positions of authority, decision-making and those requiring intellectual investment (H. Sas 1984:104).

### **The applicability of feminist film theorists' insights to the Hungarian case**

As i stated above, my analysis has been clearly informed by a feminist perspective. This implies a number of things but does not imply certain others. It means first and foremost that i draw on feminist cultural critique and use the analytical tools of feminist film criticism in evaluating the "favorable" or "less favorable" nature of representations of women. From the perspective of women's participation in film production, a "favorable" situation means one in which a considerable number of women becomes involved in the conventionally male-dominated world of film-making, and they too appear in a great variety of behind-the-screen roles throughout the production process, including the key positions of director, (script)writer, cinematographer, editor, and producer. A "favorable" picture also shows sustained industry diversity, and thus indicates that women's continuous access to film-making is secured.

When evaluating the favorable/less favorable quality of cinematic representations, i meant to accommodate both major trends in feminist film criticism: the so-called "images of women" critique and film-text analysis. The "images of woman" strand took a sociological approach to cultural products and was concerned with exposing the stereotypical, sexually objectifying nature of dominant modes of representations and the flatness of women characters (see e.g., Haskell 1974/1987, Artel&Wengraf 1976/1990 + Smith 1972). This trend urged for the creation of representations in which women appear as historically and socially specific individuals, versatile and complex beings defining themselves by their own actions. Film-text analysis was more concerned with the textual codes of cinematic signification. Theorists – Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey, Theresa de Lauretis and others – explored ways cinematic mechanisms contribute to the creation of meaning in movies. They argued that camera movement, the scale and type of shot, the methods of editing and lighting as well as dialogue and narrative techniques may also

underpin a sexual imbalance in the processes of identification. In the narratives of dominant cinema, it is typically the active male hero who advances the story and controls events, while the woman stands in for erotic spectacle. Thus, film structure requires that female viewers take a “masculinized” position when wishing to identify with the protagonist and be swept up in the pleasures of the narrative (Mulvey ([1975] 1989).

My feminist perspective and reliance on the insights of feminist cultural critique does not entail, however, that i uncritically accept the whole repertoire of Anglo-Saxon feminist film theory. It is because some aspects of the existing theory turn out to be unfit conceptual tools for a research tackling the historical specificities of a film corpus – as my aspiration in the present case was. This aspiration included tracking the various thematic nodes, stylistic developments, and authorial agendas in six decades of Hungarian film production, also reckoning with very real material production structures. Much of feminist film criticism has narrowly focused on a few types of mainstream Hollywood movies, and picked a limited number of films to analyze, thus making a case for time- and spaceless theory. Within this framework, Hollywood narrative cinema is posited as an unconsciously held collective “patriarchal fantasy” (Chaudhuri 2006:8) although this movie culture was neither an overwhelming presence, nor a particularly relevant model “behind the Iron Curtain” where women experienced a different kind of gender regime under “socialist patriarchy”.

Another difference between mainstream Western film practice and the corpus i examined is a set of mutually missing genres. Certain Hollywood genres have earned the attention of feminist film theorists (e.g., the classic Hollywood “women’s film” and melodrama from the 1930-40s, and horror or slasher movies) but such genres have hardly ever been produced within the Hungarian scene. On the other hand, a cinema of moral concern, i.e., motion pictures with a keen interest in social topics and political implications, often interrogating the relation between the individual and history, could be regarded as the “mainstream” of Hungarian cinema throughout the decades of state-socialism.

I would suggest that the development of a different kind of “mainstream” film style was partly a result of the particular production environments which indicate another point of divergence between the film cultures under scrutiny. Hollywood has always been a large factory in the entertainment industry driven by the profit motive – a condition that has both material and aesthetic types of consequences. By contrast, in state-socialist Hungary, the economic context of film-making was defined by nationalized financing: all funding (as well as the 35mm celluloid film-material!) came exclusively from the state. Due to secured government subsidy, the motion picture industry was relatively immune to some kinds of drawbacks

such as commercial competition or economic fluctuations: while “box office revenues did matter [they] were never of crucial importance” (Iordanova 2003:27; see also Cunningham 2004:117). Distribution was also state monopoly but it also meant that films had got a guaranteed exposure in the state-owned cinemas of the country and beyond, in the friendly states. Furthermore, the industry gradually shifted to operate in the auteur-system in which directors propose the projects they want to work on (rather than producers commissioning directors to execute already planned film projects). I argue that production environments impact on practices of representation (the choice of subject-matters and stylistic issues) as well as consumptions (spectator expectation and response). The analytically oriented film style and film language that prevailed through the 1960-80s in Hungary (as in East-Central European cinema in general) often employed experimental techniques of filming and editing. These pieces were no easy readings subserving – real or artificially generated – audience demands, and thus transformed consumption patterns too. The images and narratives they provided were far from transparent and required active reading and interpretive strategies and an ability to read between the lines or “against the grain”.<sup>2</sup>

When taking account of the ideological conditions of cultural practices in the chosen period, the question of censorship (and self-censorship) must be mentioned, bearing in mind, however, that censorship is often paid an undue attention in writings that tend to perpetuate Cold War-era clichés when addressing cultural production under socialist rule. As an alternative to this approach, authors of recently published monographs on East-Central European film-making move away from invariably pointing out the wrongs of state-socialism and urge instead “to engage in a project that would be less ideologically loaded and simply try to explain the specific logic of the state-socialist system of cultural production as a system that had its own justifications, advantages and disadvantages” (Iordanova 2003:16). For reasons of limited space, here i can only make a barest gesture towards signaling the importance, also highlighted by Iordanova (33), of the political economy of the ownership of cultural products when addressing the issue of censorship. From this perspective, it is important to point out that while political control in Eastern Europe was identified as a freedom infringement, market considerations in the new political economy are rarely acknowledged to have the same effect. (Although ironically, due to lacking funds for distribution and marketing, more films are now “shelved” in Hungary than was ever the case before; Cunningham 2004:155).

Table 1. Number and proportion of women in selected behind-the-screen positions of Hungarian feature film production, 1945-2005 (highest numbers and percentages in bold face type)

Position Period (number of films analyzed)	Director				Script writer				Storyline editor				Editor				Costume designer				Production manager			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1945-49 (19)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	5.2	-	-	-	2	-	10.5	-	6	-	31.5	-	4	-	21	-	-
1950-55 (48)	-	-	-	-	3	6.2	10.4	2	-	4.1	-	7	-	14.5	-	15	-	31.2	-	4	-	8.3	-	-
1956-60 (111)	-	-	-	-	-	7	6.3	-	10	14	9	12.6	17	-	15.3	-	59	-	53	-	-	-	-	-
1961-65 (92)	1	-	1	-	5	9	5.4	9.7	26	-	28.2	-	16	-	17.3	-	77	-	83.6	-	-	-	-	-
1966-70 (106)	7	-	6.6	-	5	12	4.7	11.3	30	31	28.3	29.2	33	35	31.1	33	89	<b>92</b>	84	<b>86.7</b>	-	1	-	0.4
1971-75 (96)	6	-	6.2	-	6	13	6.2	13.5	34	-	35.4	-	39	40	40.6	41.6	78	-	81.2	-	-	-	-	-
1976-80 (110)	12	13	10.9	11.8	12	20	10.9	18.1	41	<b>45</b>	37.2	40.9	80	82	72.7	74.5	85	-	77.2	-	1	2	0.9	1.8
1981-85 (102)	8	9	7.8	8.8	6	18	5.8	17.6	38	43	37.2	42.1	85	<b>87</b>	83.3	85.2	72	75	70.5	73.5	8	9	7.8	8.8
1986-90 (88)	10	13	11.3	14.7	11	13	12.5	14.7	34	38	38.6	<b>43.1</b>	80	84	90.9	<b>95.4</b>	69	70	78.4	79.5	3	7	3.4	7.9
1991-95 (85)	12	<b>15</b>	14.1	<b>17.6</b>	11	<b>28</b>	12.9	<b>32.9</b>	21	-	24.7	-	72	80	84.6	94.1	51	58	60	68.2	3	7	3.5	8.2
1996-2000 (99)	7	9	7	9	8	16	8	16	10	-	10	-	58	72	58.5	72.7	44	52	44	52	14	16	14.1	16.1
2001-05 (119)	8	-	6.7	-	5	17	4.2	14.2	4	8	3.3	6.7	59	64	49.5	53.7	63	71	52.9	59.6	23	<b>29</b>	19.3	<b>24.3</b>

1 Number of films with a woman in the position

2 Number of films with a mixed-gender team in the position (when applicable)

3 Percentage of women in the position

4 Percentage of with mixed-gender teams in the position (when applicable)

Sources: for data 1945-1998: *Hungarian Feature Films 1931-1998* (Varga 1999); for data 1999-2005: annual Film Almanac (*Filmévkönyv*; publisher: Magyar Filmtézset), catalogs of the yearly Hungarian Film Week (Magyar Filmszemle), and <http://www.magyarfilmszemle.hu/>. Numbers and percentages are my own computation.

### **Women as represented in the profession and on the screen**

Although there have been extensive debates within feminist theory about whether or how a transformation in the area of representation is linked with a greater number of women cultural producers, it is generally agreed upon that any such change does turn on the interposition of women and that it is indeed hard to imagine such transformation without an increased number of women participating in production processes. Drawing on this recognition, i carried out a twofold overview of films made in Hungary between 1945 and 2005. Performing a quantitative survey of women's participation in various behind-the-screen positions of film industry, i investigated to what degree women had access to create representations. At the same time, i performed a qualitative corpus analysis assessing the cinematic representation of women in the given period.<sup>3</sup>

Sources recording women's under-representation within the arts, including feature film-making, are rare and difficult to find; the few recent records i managed to locate (Lauzen 2002 and 2006, Knudsen & Rowley 2004, Evans 2008) used just as simple a methodology to collect material as i did: counting women in film credits. The quantitative survey revealed a certain kind of configuration of gender segregation within Hungarian film industry. This shows the presence of a "celluloid ceiling" or "wall". Celluloid ceiling is a term that Martha Lauzen introduced to name the "glass ceiling" phenomenon within the film making profession: the existence of a limit to women's inroads to positions ranking high within the hierarchy of the profession. *Table 1* shows a growing industry diversity, women appearing in ever greater numbers in behind-the-screen positions – least typically, however, in posts where creative decisions are made about the range of subject-matters to be addressed and the particular ways those subject-matters are treated and the characters represented: director, (script-)writer, and cinematographer. The diversity itself did not disappear after the post-1989 restructuring of the industry, but women's proportion rapidly dropped in every positions except for the newly emerging role of the producer.

The first Hungarian female director of full-length feature films is Márta Mészáros who made her debut in 1968. Mészáros's early films interrogate female identities within a given social environment, often intersected with the consideration of other identity factors. Mészáros's film language in this period lacked glamorous imaging, dramatic climaxes, or neatly tied-up endings, and was clearly impacted by her previous documentary practice. The director's early work received a warm welcome from Western feminist film professionals. Following the appearance of Mészáros, women directors' percentage moved between 6 and 15%; after the system change, the ratio of women directors dropped to an initial low of 6.7% (see

also *Table 1*). Typically, they have not built extensive oeuvres (but this is an internationally known phenomenon with women filmmakers), and they did not operate with the female perspective nearly as self-evidently, or consistently, as Mészáros did. This finding may seem to invalidate my hypothesis about favorable tendencies in women's cinematic representation in the state-socialist period. But even while acknowledging that the emergence of women directors only had a moderate impact on women's representation in Hungarian cinema, I was intrigued by a fair number of male directors who placed women protagonists and their related problems in the focus of film narratives while creating complex and psychologically plausible female characters. Thus my corpus analysis followed up both female and male directors' output centring on movies the synopsis of which promised a focus on women or women's concerns.

I what follows, I will organize the presentation of the content analysis around a number of postulates proposed by feminist perspectives on the cinematic treatment of women. At the same time, I also attempt to relate these assertions to a general characterization of film production in the given sub-periods. I will intersperse this outline of major representational tendencies with very brief references to particular movies.

### **Coming into age/ncy**

The years between 1949-53 were characterized by the rigid implementation of Socialist Realism; the leading genre of this short term was the "production movie". A definitive expectation of cultural politics, formulated around 1949-51, ordained that films, if their narrative took place in the present, had to set their story in the environment of socialist production. The baldly ideological nature of production movies can be derived from the nature of film as a medium of mass appeal. Pointing to the relation of propaganda and the inauguration of a new set of values, a number of authors explicate that in an attempt to replace a long-standing bourgeois ideology and culture, cultural products had to advocate, and present as the naturalized *status quo*, a new social order (see Ellul 1965, Forgács 1999:52 and Schadt 2005:70). Such instrumentalization of movies was likely to introduce new ways of the instrumentalization of woman as sign too.

Within the framework of the period's social transformation, women were already symbolically linked to the state through the benefits it guaranteed when recruiting female work force (Goven 1993:21, 66). Bearing this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the outstanding examples of political re-education in the production movies are often women: a part of the population having just gained recognition as social subjects. This approach to the representation of women still operates with

“images of women”: signifiers denoting a set of fixed meanings (here, the herald of a coming era, the heroine of the new social order, etc.). The overall image, however, was markedly different from the ones in circulation in the melodramas and romance-comedies of the pre-war era, and was “certainly distinct from some of the conventional stereotypes found in the West” (Molyneux 1981:189; see also Bonnell 1997:64–135, *passim*). Women’s mental and other capabilities were not routinely devalued in these movies, and a number of female protagonists entered the plot in their own right, i.e., not on the side of a man (husband, father or fiancé). Even so, women were still generally under-represented in professional or political leadership positions in production movies (Kulcsár 2005). When approached with the strategy of “reading against the grain”, a more differentiated assessment of this moment can be inferred. Such a reading strategy unmasks that female protagonists may have entered the film narrative independent of an obligatory male partner, but their more abstract guiding figure or benefactor became the party and the state instead, bringing women to relatively authoritative positions. Because the real concern here was not with the empowerment of these social subjects but with the implementation of the new myth, the women figures had little individuality and featured as the agents of society’s project only.

Hungarian films of the 1960s explored the conflictual relationship between those in power and the individual insisting on his moral autonomy (Kovács 1988:7, Fazekas 2001), often highlighting the historical dimensions of such conflict situations. The typical genre of these deliberations was moral drama or historical parable, and the typical protagonist was the alert intellectual keen to change his circumstances (Varga 2001). The private sphere, if it was addressed at all, was not supposed to be presented “for its own sake”; it had to function as the counterpoint of public actions or political oppression, or reflect the political ambience as the director felt it (Kovács 1990:5). As my usage of the generic “he” suggests, female characters, not quite grown out yet of a sign-like and sketchy cinematic existence, had little chance to get in the centre of the thorough analyses of pressing moral decisions or historical exigencies. Against this backdrop, the debut of Márta Mészáros with films centering on working class heroines preoccupied with their private matters and identity search, as well as some male directors’ output giving substantial attention to female figures or typically female experiences, stand out (e.g., *A Cosy Cottage; A Priceless Day*).<sup>4</sup> One of the subjects whose relative frequency presents an especially high contrast when compared both with contemporaneous Western and more recent Hungarian movie production is a repeated attention paid to the lives and concerns of middle-aged or elderly women (*Mrs. Déry, Where Are You?; Sarah, my Dear*).

Historical analysis and committed political film-making was gradually replaced by the examination of micro-social processes in the films of the 1970s. Films switched the focus to the private sphere of everyday people and took to expressly ordinary settings (Kovács 1990, Fazekas 2001). Almost directly mirroring the trail-blazing rates of female employment of the time, “the protagonists of these films are always working women [...]. It is almost impossible to find films about the loneliness of the woman confined to the home [...]. The neurotic housewife is not the type of female character encountered in East Central European cinema” (Iordanova 2003:136). There is not such a marked difference between Hungarian cinema of the 1970s and 1980s as was between other consecutive decades. Throughout the 80s, tendencies that were already discernible in the 70s seem to become more firmly entrenched: the world these pieces depict is not only indifferent to the potential values of social action, political activity or historical clarification; it rather informs about a general loss of values and orientation; the “heroes” are individuals lost in their own private and workaday conflicts (Kovács 1988 and 1990, Varga 2001). Protagonists often end in self-destruction, while the general ambiance the films convey is one of despair and depression (Iordanova 2003:151, Kovács 1988). There is one noteworthy development, however, from the perspective of the present inquiry: women start appearing in situations of historical importance and in roles other than a male protagonist’s appendage (e.g., *Vera Angi*; *Oh, Bloody Life*; *The Red Countess*; *Narcissus and Psyche*). In *Vera Angi* the titular character follows a dislikable albeit carefully depicted route as she grows to be a staunch protégée of the Communist Party. The relevance of Vera’s figure does not turn on whether or not she is a lovable and “positive” character, but on the fact that she is placed in a concrete historical situation and faces ethical dilemmas; a role denied to female protagonists earlier on. In *Narcissus and Psyche* an implicit feminist critique of man-made history and politics is given through comments attributed to the female protagonist.

Dina Iordanova also noted the preoccupation of East Central European cinema, in the 1970s and 80s, with women and history or society, “most often used to deliver serious social criticism of certain adverse periods” (2003:126). Iordanova, however, has a more poignant take on this development. Indicating that women protagonists bring very little specifically woman-related concerns into the narratives, the researcher asks: why women then? Her answer relates the unstated sanctions of film under socialism and general gender conventions. “If the story was about men it could be seen as a direct indictment of the social system; as long as it was about women, it would not come across as direct social criticism or a revolt” (133).

In the period starting with 1990, the collapse of state-socialism brought a mighty change that effected every level of the industry. Although state-subsidy was not immediately discontinued, it decreased abruptly, and motion pictures had to be produced and sold in a profit-oriented market environment. The environment of the production itself shifted from the studio system to producer-driven or self-funded undertakings shot in quasi-friendly circles, a condition that seems to have re-created male-only shooting and production processes.

From around 1995 on, the number of male directors addressing women-related subjects dramatically decreases. One of the few exceptions is *Stop Mom Theresa!*, the “Hungarian version” of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. The screenplay of the “Hungarian version” is also based on a novel (Rácz 2002) about a thirty-something single woman, her romantic and friendly relations as well as career misadventures. But while the ending of Rácz’s book held out the promise of a wiser and more autonomous heroine, the film finale simply holds out the promise of a new boyfriend.

In the majority of recent movies one encounters a host of fantastic images (*The Scorpio Eats Up the Gemini for Breakfast; Natasha; Never-never Gloria; The Pizza Boy*) and is struck by the blank polarization and extremely thin characterization of women figures in general. Parallel to the decreasing number of films featuring complex and psychologically plausible female characters, the number of buddy movies has been on the increase in a wide variety of genres.<sup>5</sup> Male actors and characters overdominate the screen in all of these offerings. *The Bridgeman* was a gigantic enterprise in terms of length, lavish production and a uniquely enormous budget. The two-and-a-half hour long piece features three speaking female figures, but even the hero’s great love is a creature of a mere few words. She is often reduced to tears, sighs a lot, faints twice and looks seducing once – a performance that may serve as a graphic illustration for Kaja Silverman’s analysis of women’s voices used in the cinema. Going beyond the level of the image, Silverman examines the soundtrack and finds that the voices and sounds attributed to women in mainstream practice are usually “thick with body”. This sound quality possesses an incessant reference to the female body and thus lessens the discursive authority of the owner of that voice (Silverman 1990:309).

The representational imbalance of male and female characters translates into very material consequences: feature films whose credits roll without hardly any female names also leave little money for actresses to earn in these productions. Effacing women so vigorously both from representation and professional opportunities may respond to a situation in which masculine identity is represented, and perhaps experienced, as victimized by an increased degree of feminine autonomy (Portuges 1993:57; for a broader post-socialist context see also Ousmanova 2006).

### **Triumphant, punished, or left to her fate**

The methodology of the research team that produced one of the few studies on women in film making (Lauzen 2002) remained quantitative also when it came to the content analysis of films: the team distinguished female characters who had goals *versus* characters who had no goals over the course of a film, and counted whether characters were effective or not in achieving their goals. An underlying assumption of the sociological trend of feminist film criticism was that stereotypical representations adversely affect women, reinforce male audiences' already existing prejudices and, at the same time, damage the self-perceptions and limit the social aspirations of female spectators (Smith 1972). To ward off this process, a sort of stereotype-demolition was sought in feminist film practice and an emphasis was put on showing women as individualized people. From this perspective, having a goal, or being defined by one's own actions, is required for character formation, and a female protagonist winning her case is regarded to offer positive identification point and role model for female audiences. Feminist film analysis demonstrated that outside such consciously empowering film making practice, agentic female protagonists are often perceived as socially transgressive and posing danger to the smooth operation of a heteronormative gender order. When the *status quo* needs to be restored within the fictional world of a narrative, this is frequently achieved through punishing the woman character for her social transgression: the feisty, independent female would eventually commit suicide or be murdered, end up mad, outlawed or isolated, and thus will come across, within usually male-focused plots, as a "traumatic presence which must be negated" (Chaudhuri 2006: 28).

I have found no example of such punishing mechanism in Hungarian films of the 1950s, and hardly any flatly misogynist or sexist woman-images from this decade or the 1960s. Hostile portrayals (such as the agent that thrusts or ties men into something unwanted, be that "normal" family existence or crime) will only occur in later films (*The Kangaroo; Gangster Film*). Most typically the pieces of the 1950s render women relatively independent and strong (still with the qualification, however, that individualism and a genuine interest in the individual was not welcome at the time), and they do so without punishing them for it, even when traditional gender hierarchy is occasionally toppled over (*Walking to Heaven; 2x2 Are Sometimes 5*). In *Merry-Go-Round* the heroin wins her case as she manages to leave her paralyzingly traditional family and enters in a love relationship she chooses herself. Apparently, the romantic sub-plot still remains an indispensable ingredient for an adequate ending. Feminist critics pointed out, however, that the kind of closure that ties up the storyline with reinstating patriarchal order through

fulfilled love is another common vehicle of ideology in narrative genres. In such denouement, a woman character who broke free from her mere sign-function and gained some agency is returned to her place: she gets married, returns to her abandoned husband, or is in some other way recuperated into the normative female role centering on heterosexual courtship (Kuhn 1994:34). The turn towards the “poetry of the every-day” (Perneczky 1991) in the motion pictures of the 1970s and 80s as well as the period’s historical parables featuring women protagonists are notable as these pieces engage the life events of their heroines beyond the frame of romantic bonding.

As opposed to the above recuperative acts, undecided closures or other sorts of narrative ruptures may challenge the self-evidence and omnipotence of patriarchal order. Open endings, even if they only offer a mere escape from the delusions and grievances of domestic life without a guarantee that the heroine will find a satisfactory solution, contain a degree of courage, and project that she might have her way even if left on her own devices. Films with such undecided, open closures – when the heroine “leaves the house with a suitcase in her hand and wants to live her own life from this time on” (Varga 1999:368) – did occur but were not very frequent in the 1950s (e.g., *Tale on the 12 Points*). Márta Mészáros’s early films repeatedly relied on such open endings (*The Girl; Binding Sentiments; Nine Months*). In the gloomy cinematic milieu of later decades, or in the context of an overall shift towards mysticism and the fantastic in the 1990s, female figures could not possibly hope to come across as exemplary or triumphant or to reach some fine resolutions. The boldest possibility of “winning” for female protagonists appeared to be the kind of re-occurring open closure that holds out a modest promise of finding their own way.

### **Sexuality as violence**

Erring women can be recuperated at the level of the image as well: female figures whose actions may pose a threat are frequently photographed in a way that satisfies the male gaze and turns their body into a fetish (Kuhn 1994:89). As it is often commented upon, the propriety of “socialist moral” subdued, especially in the 1950s, any emphasis on feminine allure displayed as self-decoration (Joó 2005:50), and emphasized modesty, functionality, and cleanliness instead (Goven 1993:38). In her study on female images in the production movies, Eszter Kulcsár (2005) registers that female protagonists generally look pretty in these films but calls these figures asexual and undesirable. I would re-formulate Kulcsár’s evaluation and suggest that while these characters are not imaged as (over-)sexualized figures, within their narrative world, they apparently do not lack sex-appeal

– as the many romantic subplots found even in production movies testify. I suspect that Kulcsár equates the idea of a sexual being with an imaging practice that falls back on glamour and well-displayed sexual allure. Furthermore, the prudishness of “communist ethics” and the devaluation of sexuality may explain why actresses were not photographed in a sexually objectifying way in the given period. In their study concentrating on the 1950s, Varga & Kresalek mention one single female character, a bar singer, who moves around and sings in a “truly lecherous and frivolous” manner (1995:369).

The turn to the life events of everyday people was accompanied by a stylistic-visual development: “[t]he camera showed human faces ravaged by the decline of the 70s, the conflicts at home and in the workplace, showing what became of the potential and actual heroes of the 60s” (Fazekas 2001). This was when beauty faded off the faces of actresses too.<sup>6</sup> The period following the system change discontinued interest in ordinary people’s lives and the related style of photographing. This time was marked by the breakthrough of the few imports that were strictly off-limit during socialist times: mainstream Western mass culture boosting uninhibited violence or pornography (Jordanova, 2003:21). “Buddy movies” also came to run high among post-1989 offerings (Horton 1999). Molly Haskell (1974/1987) applied this label to films that feature the friendship between two men as the major relationship, replacing the traditional central romantic relationship between a man and a woman, and so entirely eliminate women from the narrative space. Haskell and others (Konigsberg 1997, Gates 2004) propose that this development, gaining ground in the 1970s, and a direction towards portraying women as victims of male violence are representational techniques of patriarchal order to retaliate women, on the screen at least, for the growth and influence of the women’s movement. In the corresponding period, however, one rarely finds such examples in Hungarian cinema. Sporadic cases appear in the 80s (*Cha-cha-cha*; *The Princess*)—until violence directed at women becomes the general course in films shot after 1989. True, violence escalates in movies in general in the 1990s and film narrative disintegrates: movies with no particular issues to explore and with plots unanchored in reality proliferate. The nature of the violence perpetrated against women is always sexualized, and most often excessively brutal (*Devil’s Ferry*, *After the Day Before*). Rape is treated like a fact of life or as some self-evident means to punish women if the hero is at odds with them – or with the world.<sup>7</sup> And a vast majority of female protagonists all die: in *Fast and Loose* one of the female friends is stabbed by her lover; in *Sweet Emma*, *Dear Böbe* one of the title heroines escapes into suicide; in *Je t’aime* one of the female friends thrusts the other out of the window; in *Kisses and Scratches* one (girl)friend shoots the other.

Several social scientists (Goven 1993, Acsády 1995, Burrows 1997, Gal & Kligman 2000, Joó 2005) asserted that liberalization after the years of state socialism was interpreted in many areas as a now easy access to soft-core pornography, some compensatory “catching up” after a period when open discussion of sex-related matters had been by and large absent from the public sphere. Looking at certain Hungarian movies from the post-1989 period that feature eroticized spectacle, Catherine Portuges points to a most pitiable development, the burgeoning of sexed-up caricatures replacing carefully drawn female characters (1993:13). Dina Iordanova observes the great emphasis on women’s sexual activity in the broader East Central European context: in post-communist cinema “less attention [is] paid to the social problems faced by women. [They are] rarely given more complex social roles than being preoccupied with [...] a variety of sexual adventures” (2003:140–42). An approach that would discuss the subject of sexuality either from women’s or men’s, or from any number of other perspectives, would be welcome. Instead, sexuality is taken for granted while its various possible aspects remain largely unexplored. A notable exception is *Jadviga’s Pillow*, a film based on a recent Hungarian bestseller, exploring the diverging routes of sexuality and affection.

As i already indicated, some researchers believe that the renewed erasure of women from film narrative is part of a symbolic struggle to retrieve masculinity in the new “post-emancipation” democracies, while others (Varga 2007, Báthory 2000, Iordanova 2003) express concern over emerging processes in films from Eastern Europe in general. They argue that recent films rarely take to properly examining the previous regime or new societal conflicts and scarcely offer an original cinematic approach: “values, concepts, visions, and even technical details have been affected by this acute crisis” (Sztójanova 1997:24). In the circumstance, i add, the treatment of women’s issues and women characters necessarily flattens out in these films. I also propose, however, that beyond the internal changes in film art, the overall status of women within Hungarian cinema (including the dimensions of the industry) reflects many of the changes that took place in society at large in the transition period: the re-masculinization of the public sphere, the wholesale contestation of the aspirations and attainments of state-socialism (including its agenda of women’s “emancipation”), and the re-affirmation of gendered hierarchies in both the public and private realms.

### **Some conclusions**

In this article I submitted that women and women's concerns were far from obliterated in the cinematic representations of the state-socialist era. Beside some pieces by engaged women filmmakers, a good proportion of complex portrayals of women came from male directors. I attribute the sort of improved on-screen female presence to various factors. I propose that the intense thematization of "the women's question" in state-socialist government policies and equality rhetoric as well as the augmented public visibility of women contributed to a more diversified cultural representation that also dispensed, to some degree, with oppressive and objectifying "images of women".

More important, however, than the frequent occurrence of sympathetically depicted complex women characters is the kind of film style and film language that prevailed in the 1960-80s. This form of expression was no result of any explicit feminist cultural intervention, yet it yielded modes of production and consumption that, in many respects, transformed the codes of classical mainstream cinema (also in circulation in Hungary in the pre-war and immediate post-war years) in similar ways as those suggested by feminist "counter-cinema". I argue that the political economy of cultural production in state-socialist Hungary allowed for a kind of transformation of signifying practices that is appreciable from a feminist perspective. And if it can indeed be the case that socialist policies and their externalia allowed for such a transformation of signifying practices, then it turns out that feminism as a specific set of politics defined by the Western Second Wave may not be the only site where gender hierarchies can be undone.

Since having closed my research in 2005, in ongoing personal communications acquaintances working in the film world repeatedly commented on the changing gender proportions within the youngest generation of film students: women are no longer in flagrant minority in any of the Film Academy's departments. It remains to be seen whether, upon acquiring their diploma and starting their careers, young women filmmakers will manage to build more sizeable oeuvres than most female directors before them, and which direction of Hungarian cinema the subject choice and film language of their movies will carry on with.

## Appendix

Full title, director and production year of the Hungarian films mentioned in the text; in English titles' alphabetic order. (The English titles of the individual films correspond to those in *Hungarian Feature Films* (Varga 1999) and/or follow the titles used in foreign distribution or at festival premieres.

*2x2 Are Sometimes 5 / Kétszer kettő néha öt* – 1954, György Révész  
*A Cosy Cottage / Kertes házak utcája* – 1962, Tamás Fejér  
*A Kind of America / Valami Amerika* – 2002, Péter Herendi  
*A Priceless Day / Ajándék ez a nap* – 1979, Péter Gothár  
*After the Day Before / Másnap* – 2004, Attila Janisch  
*Binding Sentiments / Holdudvar* – 1968, Márta Mészáros  
*Cha-cha-cha* – 1981, János Kovácsi  
*Devil's Ferry / Pokolrév* – 1969, Miklós Markos  
*Fast and Loose / Könnyű vér* – 1989, Ibolya Fekete  
*Fateless / Sorstalanság* – 2005, Lajos Koltai  
*Gangster Film / Gengszterfilm* – 1998, György Szomjas  
*Hungarian Vagabond / Magyar vándor* – 2003, Péter Herendi  
*Jadviga's Pillow / Jadviga párnája* – 2000, Krisztina Deák  
*Je t'aime / Zsötem* – 1991, András Salamon  
*Kisses and Scratches / Csókkal és körömmel* – 1994, György Szomjas  
*Control / Kontroll* – 2003, Nimród Antal  
*Merry-Go-Round / Körhinta* – 1955, Zoltán Fábri  
*Mrs. Déry, Where Are You? / Déryné, hol van?* – 1975, Gyula Maár  
*Narcissus and Psyche / Nárcisz és Psyché* – 1980, Gábor Bódy  
*Natasha / Natasa* – 1998, Tamás Tóth  
*\*Never-never Gloria / Sohasevolt Glória* – 2000, Zsolt Bernáth  
*Nine Months / Kilenc hónap* – Márta Mészáros, 1976  
*Oh, Bloody Life / Te rongyos élet* – 1983, Péter Bacsó  
*Sarah, My Dear / Sárka drágám* – 1971, Pál Sándor  
*Stop Mom Theresa! / Állítsátok meg Terézanyut!* – 2004, Péter Bergendy  
*Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe / Édes Emma, drága Böbe* – 1991, István Szabó  
*Tale on the 12 Points / Mese a 12 találatról* – 1956, Károly Makk  
*The Bridgeman / A hídember* – 2002, Géza Bereményi  
*The Girl / Eltávozott nap* – 1968, Márta Mészáros  
*The Kangaroo / A kenguru* – 1975, János Zsombolyai  
*\*The Pizza Boy / Pizzás* – 2001, György Balogh  
*The Princess / Adj király katonát* – 1982, Pál Erdőss

*The Red Countess / Vörös grófnő* – 1984, András Kovács

*The Scorpio Eats Up the Gemini for Breakfast/A Skorpió megeszi az Ikreket reggelire* – 1992, Péter Gárdos

*Vera Angi / Angi Vera* – 1978, Pál Gábor

*Walking to Heaven / Gyalog a mennyországba* – 1959, Imre Fehér

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The usage of the lowercase “i” pronoun signifies my reservations about a unique convention in the English language. English capitalizes and thus prioritizes the first-person singular, which comes across as a remarkably self-centred disposition conveyed by the current *lingua franca*, and as such may deserve to be denaturalized. My usage continues T.R.O.Y.’s practice in his essay, “The New World Disorder – A global network of direct democracy and community currency”, submitted for the Utopian World Championship 2001, organized by SOC, a Stockholm-based non-profit organization for artistic and social experiments. The text is available from [http://www.soc.nu/utopian/uwc2001/troy\\_text.html](http://www.soc.nu/utopian/uwc2001/troy_text.html) (accessed 11 July 2007).
  - <sup>2</sup> This approach to films helps to reveal ideological contradictions and brings to the surface conflicts between multiple discourses.
  - <sup>3</sup> A detailed presentation of my survey methodology, the data collected, and computations as well as a more extensive introduction of female directors and individual films can be found in my dissertation (Hock 2009); here i confine myself to briefly summarizing my findings.
  - <sup>4</sup> In the text i will mention films by their translated titles only, and refer readers to the *Appendix* for information about original film title, director, and production year.
  - <sup>5</sup> The strand appeared in feature films with contemporary settings (*Control*), light-hearted comedies (*A Kind of America*); dramas set in historic times (*Fateless*), heritage blockbuster-to-bes (*The Bridgeman*), or parodies of heritage epics (*Hungarian Vagabond*, 2003)
  - <sup>6</sup> A parallel development in Anglo-Saxon cinema is worth a brief mention here: in the mid-1970s when the “New Woman’s Film” emerged within dominant cinema. In these movies male directors often opted for non-gorgeous or non-conventionally attractive central women characters who were also given a nuanced and sympathetic portrayal.
  - <sup>7</sup> Retaliation, however, has not only run high on the cinema screen. Social science literature explains a number of newly emerging phenomena – from an increased rate in marital conflicts, domestic violence, and rape to the abominable media discussion of women’s issues in general – as symptoms of a vindictive misogyny elicited by “too much emancipation“ (Posadskaya et al. 1994, Goven 1993:89).
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## Mjesta urušavanja rodnih hijerarhija: Žene i mađarska kinematografija

Beata Hock

### SAŽETAK

Članak se bavi mađarskom filmskom produkcijom između 1945. i 2005. godine iz dvostruke perspektive. Ispituje žensku uključenost u filmsku profesiju i ocijenjuje prikazivanje žena u mađarskoj kinematografiji. Istraživanje nastoji odgovoriti na pitanja jesu li socijalistička retorika i politika emancipacije koja cilja na žensku zaposlenost i društvenu uključenost također utjecali na 1) domenu kreativnog rada i 2) načine prikazivanja žena prisutnih u vizualnoj kulturi?

Autorica objašnjava kako su i prikazivanje i uključenost žena u filmskoj produkciji činili sveukupno povoljniju sliku u desetljećima socijalizma nego za vrijeme promjene sistema koje je uslijedilo. Kako bi se odredili kriteriji procjene za “povoljnu sliku”, konzultira se s uvidima feminističkih filmskih studija. Istraživanje zaključuje da je izuzev nekoliko djela angažiranih filmskih redateljica, dobar dio kompleksnih prikaza žena došao od muških redatelja. U isto vrijeme, autorica ispituje u kojoj se mjeri i s kojom vrstom kvalifikacija (zapadnjačka) feministička filmska kritika može pokazati kao održivo sredstvo analize koja bi objasnila kretanja i razvoj unutar različitog povijesnog/socijalnog konteksta i produkcijskog okružja. Izrazito drugačije produkcijsko okružje *mainstream* hollywoodske kinematografije (osnovni “*research animal*” britansko-američke feminističke teorije), njen državno financirani ekvivalent u socijalističkoj Mađarskoj i kasniji prerazmještaj industrije u novoj tržišnoj ekonomiji, povlače za sobom i materijalne posljedice i posljedice vezane za film. U članku se ustvrđuje da je politička ekonomija kulturne produkcije u socijalističkoj Mađarskoj dopustila vrstu transformacije naznačenih djelovanja koja je osjetna iz feminističke perspektive.

Ključne riječi: mađarska kinematografija, socijalistička Mađarska, žene, socijalizam, kulturna produkcija, feministička perspektiva