

History as Ritual:  
Camera Movement and Narrative Structure  
in Films of Miklós Jancsó

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## INTRODUCTION

Miklós Jancsó is a truly unique figure in the panoply of modern filmmakers. If this opening sentence sounds “clichéd” and a mere ornamental stylistic figure at the beginning of a panegyric text, it is, in fact, meant here as a serious statement, a starting point in an exploration of the work of a brilliant and extremely original artist. There are several distinct aspects of Jancsó’s stature within a broader context of filmmaking community that make his ascent beyond “average” noticeable, and if each of them separately could be challenged in its uniqueness and gravity, they all together build up a solid and incomparable canvas. I will survey them briefly as a means to introduce a man and artist on the one hand, and organize some relevant issues ready to be explored in detail on the other.

Miklós Jancsó’s prolific career spans six decades of committed creative work and -at the ripe age of 82- he still doesn’t seem to be ready to give up the filmmaking profession or substantially compromise his artistic vision. By accumulating -up to this day- 27 feature films, more than a dozen TV specials and miniseries, 41 short films and documentaries as well as countless (literally, as sources differ in listing his earliest works) newsreel vignettes [1], Jancsó is in the privileged minority of directors capable of keeping a steady pace of film output and securing constant support of either state or commercial production companies to finance his work. If the sheer

numbers do not seem too impressive (cf. Ingmar Bergman or Claude Chabrol, two unusually prolific artists who made their first films in the 1940s and 1950s respectively [2]), one should take into account the historical context of Jancsó's life and work and look closely at the extremely volatile and demanding political framework that has covered the whole ideological spectrum from one extreme to another during the last sixty years. While his Western counterparts have been working for decades in an arguably stable and comfortable economic and ideological paradigm (putting aside commercial exigencies of the capitalist film industry that will be explored later), Jancsó's Hungary presented a harsh, violent and very difficult background [3]. Being a benign fascist state under dictator Miklós Horthy and a reluctant ally of the Nazi Germany, Hungary emerged from the chaos of World War II as a conquered and occupied country. Quickly transformed into a communist state by the New Order which the victorious Soviet Union imposed on the whole of Eastern Europe, Jancsó's homeland experienced a decade of brutal Stalinist rule which coincided with the young artist's studying cinema at the Film and Theatre State Academy in Budapest and his entering the industry as a newsreel and documentary producer. The death of Stalin in 1953 brought the first "thaw" in politics and culture in the following years, but the substantial and far-reaching liberal changes introduced by the democratic Nagy government met an uncompromised negative response from the Soviet Union who finally invaded Hungary in October 1956 and suffocated what is now known as the Budapest Rising in bloodshed and merciless persecution of government leaders and political activists. Imre Nagy was executed and replaced by a

lackluster communist bureaucrat Janós Kádár who stayed in power for the next three decades, during which time a relatively open economic system was heavily counterbalanced by the total political and ideological control of the Party, with the extreme censorship of press, art and cinema as one of its main working tools. That was the period of Jancsó's development into a full-fledged filmmaker of growing domestic and international acclaim, and as he became the main cultural export of Kádár's communist Hungarian state, it is still more impressive that he survived and even thrived after yet another drastic turn, this time the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Empire which changed his country into a free-market consumer capitalist republic that was all too willing to cut any ties with its "shameful" past and all its prominent political and cultural icons. Looked at from this specific angle, Miklós Jancsó is one of the two most prolific and longest active Eastern European directors whose life and career span four drastically different political systems with their corresponding cultural and intellectual paradigms. What seems important to mention now, although it will be dealt with depth later in this work, is that he succeeded in his continuum not by a flexible adaptation to the requirements of the day, some mimetic evolution in the wake of the changing times, but rather by keeping his integrity, by expressing his profound concerns with humanity, history and politics through his work and consistently progressing in his stylistic and aesthetic experimentation with no regard for the commercial exigencies of a given economic framework. Again, it may be argued that Jancsó's position is not unique within the scope of Eastern European changes, and that at least one of his peers was capable of

steadily producing film after film over decades, reaching a total number of 25 (without counting his theatre and television works): Andrzej Wajda, a leading voice in the emergence of the Polish National School in the 1950s [4].

Wajda's career bears many general resemblances to that of Jancsó's. Similarly, Poland's and Hungary's history had gone along the same tracks for centuries (sharing kings, the same powerful enemies, parallel periods of geo-political oblivion, bloodily suppressed uprisings and the main social and economic caesuras experienced by the region), and the two directors' particular take on history as demonstrated in selected early films will be analyzed later. Still, Jancsó's position differs from that of any of his peers (and Wajda's in particular) in one crucial aspect which has further important implications. Most Eastern European directors of serious stature and international acclaim tend to sever as soon as it is possible all connections with their own states' ideological propaganda and assumed implicit (and at times overt) position as critics of the corrupted and inefficient political system [5]. Some, like Roman Polanski, Milos Forman and Dusan Makavejev, emigrated to the West to pursue their respective careers, others, like Wajda himself, stayed and kept making films with local audiences in mind, at times revealing some universal existential truth (*Kanal*, *Innocent Sorcerers*, *The Promised Land*), at times engaging in social critique or political dissidence (*Man of Marble*, *Man of Iron*), most often adapting important works of national literature into poignant and beautiful pictures (*The Wedding*, *The Young of Wilko*, *Pan Tadeusz*, *Revenge*), and only rarely soaring to accomplish all (*Ashes and Diamonds*, *Landscape After the Battle*). Whatever the outcome, each film



of a national filmmaker like Wajda was watched and received within the framework of Polish historical and cultural references and was implicitly directed against the politically imposed system [6].

Miklós Jancsó's message and artistic agenda were altogether different. Since the early student days during the war, in Horthy's Hungary of fascist sympathies and affiliations, Jancsó was a committed communist youth as excited about the liberation and the possibilities that the new socio-political system could bring about as the whole revolutionary generation of artists in the young Soviet Union must have been some twenty years earlier [7]. Involved personally in the process of establishing a network of so-called People's Colleges, the goal of which was to educate the underprivileged peasant and proletarian masses, historically deprived of any access to organized learning, Jancsó was in the vanguard of the new system and deeply believed in what he was doing. He saw himself as working toward the Gramscian ideal of an organic intellectual with a mission to fulfill and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, his most vocal years, often talked in seminars and interviews about the filmmaker's political and historical duty to promote social change by making films of radical content and form (we will get to some examples of that in the first part of the thesis). Making politically engaged films while developing a uniquely personal and often difficult cinematic style, Jancsó was working in the pure tradition of Eisenstein and Brecht and seemed closer to Glauber Rocha and Pier Paolo Pasolini than to most of his colleagues from Poland, Czechoslovakia or any other East European country, who avoided glorifying the tenets of leftist ideology and embraced more

individualistic, existential or simply psychological themes. Ironically, it was exactly this uncompromising mixture of radical ideology and cold scrutiny of the mechanisms of power and exploitation building up the fabric of Miklós Jancsó's cinema that so strongly appealed to Western audiences and critics in the turbulent 1960s. By the early 1970s he found himself in a bizarre position of being the single Eastern Block director venerated (at least by intellectual and politically inclined audiences) in the West as much as in the East, and -interestingly enough- for mainly the same reason: the radical revolutionary message of the body of his films presented in a unique radically experimental style, extremely controlled but extravagant and flamboyant at the same time [8].

There is one more striking -but also disconcerting- feature of Miklós Jancsó's filmmaking career. It is the Western scholars' unanimous silence about the last two decades of his dashing career. If one takes into account Jancsó's prolific output, longevity, and critical acclaim his films earned in the 1960s, their political as well as philosophical relevance as much to individual human beings as to nations, ethnic groups and societies caught in the turmoil of historical processes, there is no satisfying explanation for the critical oblivion in which he has been resting for more than twenty years. Jancsó's unique and groundbreaking stylistic approach to cinema based on a long-take aesthetics with a restless camera counterpointed by layers of movement within the frame had been in constant development up to the late 1970s as indicated by two excellent studies made then by Graham Petrie in English and Yvette Biro in French (details in bibliography). There is no reason to doubt the director's

continuous evolution into the 1980s since sporadic but agitated reviews of Jancsó's works from that decade in European (mostly Eastern) press and Internet magazines, clearly demonstrate that he was still producing complex and controversial films which confronted new social and political themes of the Hungarian experience toward the end of the communist period and experimented with new genres and technologies in filmmaking. Unfortunately, besides Professor Petrie's own contribution to a 1983 compilation of essays on political issues concerning East European cinema that extends the analysis to a very brief tentative dig at *Magyar rapszódia (Hungarian Rhapsody, 1978)* and *Allegro Barbaro (1978)* [9], there has been no attempt made to broaden our critical knowledge of Miklós Jancsó's formal development after his long-take style apogee of *Szerelmem, Elektra (Elektraia)* in 1975.

However, there have recently surfaced some initiatives that focus on Jancsó's life-long artistic trajectory and take into account his -unexpected to many- comeback as film- and video-maker, triggered substantially by the enormous popular success of the director's most recent productions (especially the pentalogy of political vaudevilles featuring Kapa and Pepe) in his native Hungary. The two-issue special of London based Kino-Eye Internet Film Magazine consecrated exclusively to Miklós Jancsó and published in the first trimester of the past year as well as the seminar backed-up by a thorough Jancsó retrospective organized by the Cinema Conservatory in London, England, in February 2003, are a good indication of a surge in the critical interest that the Hungarian auteur has been able to gather with his last five feature films. Nevertheless, besides some rare isolated festival screenings, none of them could

be seen and none was shown or distributed in Canada or the United States, and -with Professor Petrie's notable participation in the seminar as the exception- the European activities have not triggered any similar response on the other side of the ocean.

The following work does not have the ambition of creating a profound and encompassing formal and narrative analysis of the Hungarian nestor's oeuvre. Such a task would require a much more detailed and therefore lengthy survey of Jancsó's films than the format of this thesis allows. It would also have to be partially repetitive as it would necessarily include and evaluate other academic works that covered the earlier periods in the director's career. Finally, the scarce availability of Jancsó's films in North America (for example: the joint forces of academic and commercial rental facilities in Montreal account for five titles only!) makes the very process of collecting and organizing a viewing of the films a painstaking and time-consuming task that seriously undermines the plausibility of such an attempt to be exhausting and encompassing on its present level. Instead, what is offered on the following pages is a two-part inquiry which should bring a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the Hungarian auteur, as it will explore Miklós Jancsó's approach to the historical subject and draw from the sources that have not yet been touched in the Western academic discussion of the director's personal philosophy and art.

Part One is a brief investigation of Miklós Jancsó's inner universe. However, instead of the usual intellectual extrapolation from his cinematic motifs and themes, I will employ his first-person discussion of history, art, cinema and the role of radical filmmaker in the politically volatile contemporary world. Using some rare interviews

and film seminars organized with Jancsó's participation in 1970's Poland as its unique source material, this chapter will also try to change a serious -if unavoidable- Western critical bias by illuminating some issues related to the stature and interpretation of the director's work on the other side of the Iron Curtain at the peak of his artistic career.

Part Two, the main body of the thesis, focuses on a critical comparison of the treatment and understanding of history in selected films of Miklós Jancsó and Andrzej Wajda. As has already been mentioned, there are striking parallels in the collective historical experience of Poles and Hungarians as nations, and, at the same time, some important differences in Wajda and Jancsó's political views as well as their directorial methods of dealing with their respective countries' tragic historical events. Matching these two contradictory dynamics in a figurative dialectical superimposition should shed some light on the issues of artistic sublimation (in a psychoanalytical sense of the term) of guilt, defeat, terror and betrayal experienced collectively by a geo-politically specified group into a complex work of both historically anecdotal and philosophically transcendental values. Using a 1972 Jancsó - Wajda conference on history in cinema as the main theoretical background, the pairs of *Kanal / Ashes and Diamonds* and *The Round-up / The Red and the White* will be scrutinized as Wajda and Jancsó's respective entries. This comparative part will be also an exposition of the main thesis of the paper in explaining how Miklós Jancsó's understanding of history influences and shapes his films into specific thematic and stylistic patterns. Some special treatment will be given to the issue of movement in Jancsó's films, as their complex application of the tracking camera, zooming and the use of tele-lenses

interacts with the constant multilayered movement of the characters within the frame and seems to be directly related to the director's understanding of history as ritualistic repetitive dynamics that controls individual people and whole nations within its incessantly mobile yoke.

The Conclusion, finally, is a brief summing up of the main topics discussed in this essay, but also stands as purely formal analysis, an attempt to extend *ad continuum* the study of a trajectory of Jancsó's stylistic development. As both important works dealing with Miklós Jancsó's aesthetics were written in or about 1975 (and shorter critical pieces were definitely written before 1980), the last film described in detail was *Elektreia*, the work of extreme formal construction and a rigorous, almost ascetic perfection that many critics considered the apogee and even the conclusion of director's search and experimentation. Some had already been accusing him of repetition and empty formalism, of obsessive inclusion of the same images, patterns and symbolism from one film to another, and there were voices which suggested that having his real masterpieces left far in the past, Jancsó could have as well retired from filmmaking with *Elektreia* as the 12-take jewel in the crown of his irrelevant formal quest [10]. It seems to me very unfortunate, therefore, that no substantial critical work has followed, the silence being an *ad absentio* proof of the assumption that Miklós Jancsó the artist had burnt himself out long before anybody had the chance or will to write about his films again. On the contrary, even a brief superficial look at his three next films still made in the 1970s (*Vizi privati, publiche virtù* in 1976), *Hungarian Rhapsody* and *Allegro Barbaro*, both in 1978) makes

obvious the fact that Jancsó very efficiently reinvented or at least reinvigorated his style without betraying his main aesthetic or thematic precepts, as demonstrated by Graham Petrie and William Kelly with Karen Jaehne in two separate publications [11]. Considering these films beyond the scope of the thesis, however, and taking into account a detailed survey of *Red Psalm* (1972) in Graham Petrie's recent book, a brief look at two films from Miklós Jancsó's latest period is conceived as a conclusion and at the same time an opening and invitation for others to continue research into a rich world of the Hungarian master who still surprises his audiences and critics alike as well as refuses to be relegated into retirement, content with the glory of his artistic past.

## **PART ONE**

### **What is History?**

**-a brief exposition of Miklós Jancsó's views on**

## historical subject in cinema

Chapter One:

### Jancsó and the October Crisis of 1956

As has already been indicated, the crucial years of Miklós Jancsó's artistic development and his transition from the production of regime-controlled newsreels to directing documentary and feature films of increasingly personal style and artistic value were marked by turmoil, tragedies and persecutions that ravaged the whole country. Encouraged by the death of Stalin and the following relaxation of political, cultural and economic relations between the Soviet Union and its six European acolytes, the government of Imre Nagy pushed for the profound democratic reforms that were to touch almost every aspect of Hungarian life [12]. As Lajos Kossuth and his reformers had done one century earlier, Nagy underestimated the real power of reactionary forces in the high echelons of the dominating empire as well as within Hungary herself, and misjudged the international situation in his hope for world-wide support. In October 1956, losing patience with the small rebellious republic, the Soviet government sent the troops (already stationed in bases within the country) to invade Budapest after manipulating the Suez Canal crisis to secure itself full impunity and total silence of the international community about the move. One-month-long riots and skirmishes in the streets of the Hungarian capital got to be known as the Budapest Rising of 1956, and this date is yet another milestone in the recent history



of Eastern Europe. The few years that followed constituted another parallel with post-Kossuth Hungary of the nineteenth century: persecutions, martial courts, executions, denunciations, exiles, tortures and interrogations; the history of the small nation kept repeating itself with the consistence of a ritual.

Jancsó himself was not present in the country during the revolt: he was travelling in China with his small crew gathering footage for the commissioned documentary *Palaces of Beijing*, coincidentally, one of his first shorts that indicated an emergence of an individual approach and style [13]. In a recent interview with Andrew James Horton [14], Jancsó reveals that some of his friends told him later that he had been lucky to miss the turmoil. As an ardent and well known communist, he could have been killed in the chaotic retaliations from both sides that at times looked more like a civil war than a foreign invasion: government buildings were burnt and officials and activists of both sides were lynched by the mob if caught and identified. The imminent danger notwithstanding, Jancsó came back to Hungary and adapted to a new situation along with the majority of his compatriots. It was not the first, and not the last dramatic change on the political map of Hungary that affected the whole nation: peasants, workers and bureaucrats as much as intellectuals and artists. It is still worth stressing that Jancsó survived all the fluctuations of consecutive regimes with the consistence and integrity of a mature personality with a strong political commitment. One can clearly see a continuous thread of communist but humane ideology and the praxis of a Gramscian organic intellectual in Jancsó's life-long artistic and political activities [15]. From his critical remarks on his youth under admiral

Horthy, to the active involvement in the creation of the Folk Colleges after the Liberation, to his voluntary embracement of the leading position in the government newsreel team of the early 1950s, to the main body of his radically political oeuvre of the 1960s and 70s and social-satirical representation of the Hungarian post-communist reality in his most recent films, Jancsó's consistence in theory, artistic conceptualization and practical action has always refuted any possible accusations of conformist or opportunist motivation.

There is, however, one factor that makes the aftermath of the Budapest Rising of 1956 quite different from any other historical caesurae within Jancsó's lifetime. It's a collective loss of faith in both the political system and the ideological basis of it felt by the nation at the end of the 1950's. In a symbolic act of purification as well as protest, Jancsó -among many other disillusioned communist workers and intellectuals- returned his Party card and stepped out from the organization never to rejoin it [16]. Thanks to his credits and experience in the state-controlled film industry, this courageous but perilous gesture was largely ignored by the newly formed Kádár government whose main goal was to stabilize the political and economic situation after a long period of turmoil, persecution and intra-national mistrust on every level. Jancsó continued to work and -ironically- was given more and more trust and freedom in the new socio-political context which is what ultimately led to his stepping up to direct features although he never really abandoned documentary as a medium of expression and worked frequently for television in Italy in the 1970s and Hungary in the 1980s and 1990s.

If the crisis of 1956 was an important -if unpredicted- factor in starting Miklós Jancsó's filmmaking career, the influence it had on shaping the director's worldview and philosophical premise for his future work was undeniably crucial. If the 1958 debut *A harangok Rómába mentek* (*The Bells Went to Rome*) is still a rather lackluster attempt imprisoned in the didactic and apologetic discourse at the service of the newly installed pro-Soviet government [17], his films of the early 1960s show an intense search for personal themes and style, and an ever-increasing mastery of technique as well as a maturing artistic personality. History reveals itself as Jancsó's favourite domain of intellectual exploration, and his own relationship to history as ontological or phenomenological entity as well as a medium of expressing ideas seems to have come to shape around the time of the bloody revolt. It finds its full expression in the director's fifth feature, the critically acclaimed *Szegénylegények* (*The Round-up*, 1965), widely understood by the audience and apparently conceived by Jancsó and his permanent writer-collaborator Gyula Hernádi as a direct look back at the events from ten years before through the medium of a historical picture [18].

Although history as theme and intellectual framework of Jancsó's cinematic oeuvre is present in basically all the works written about the Hungarian director, the most important of them have an interpretative nature as they reveal the underlying structures and ongoing currents through film analysis rather than through Jancsó's personal views and opinions. As interviews in English and French from the 1960s and '70s are virtually non-existent, this state of things seems reasonable and the extrapolative nature of critical investigation is valid and necessary. Jancsó's visits to

the West in the 1960s were scarce, limited to a few festivals that he was allowed to attend, and -as was the case with every emerging Eastern Block artist of that period- strictly controlled, arranged and censored, especially in the context of press conferences [19]. Personal interviews were discouraged and, even if allowed, the quotas of required propaganda statements were only enough to make artists themselves decline from any longer conversation they would have to authorize and sign with their own names. With his rising international status and something close to intellectual stardom in the next decade, Jancsó gained independence, but his foreign collaborations did not extend beyond Italy, where he lived for a while in the mid-1970s. No serious interviews in English followed before a series of conversations with Graham Petrie in the 1980s and a recent initiative by Kino-Eye's A.J.Horton to publish a special multi-issue edition of his Internet Film Magazine in tribute to Miklós Jancsó's six decades of work and achievement.

The situation was quite different in the "friendly" countries, especially Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR where parallel networks of ciné-clubs (run mostly by the communist youth or student organizations) had operated since the 1956 cultural and political "thaw", and frequently organized local film screenings, discussions and lectures, often inviting writers, actors and directors from one country to another. As an artist of critical acclaim and radical leftist ideology, Jancsó travelled around Eastern Europe almost constantly, and left a substantial record of his thoughts and opinions in the form of lectures, interviews and conferences, many of them reprinted later in Polish political, film and literary magazines [20]. The following is an attempt

to understand Miklós Jancsó's views on history and its role in his cinematic art as evidenced by his participation in selected film events organized in Poland in the 1970s.

Chapter Two:

Jancsó on History, Politics and Cinema

From many entries in Polish film and cultural reviews which transcribe Jancsó's interaction with cinephiles, critics and radical student groups during film seminars and lectures at the beginning of the 1970s, emerges a man of strong personality, a good speaker, direct, down-to-earth, honest and charismatic. There is some charming simplicity -if not naiveté- in the way he tackles even the most sophisticated questions, his answer meant to be understood by everyone, even if the question is clear only to the one who asked. A lack of any intellectual pretense clearly underlines the lucidity and poignance of his discourse, the mood which fluctuates from straight-on seriousness to a self-mocking if not coquetish humour. One of the most often asked question of that period is that about the philosophical premise of the long-take aesthetics organizing the structure of his films. A typical Miklós Jancsó answer (quoted here from a *Kino* reprint of a seminar organized by a Warsaw student club *Kwant* in November 1972) goes as follows:

Why do I practice the method of long takes? It's very simple. Because I can't do montage. I don't have a clue about how to edit a movie. And that's why I do only long takes. I don't know better. If this is a philosophical explanation - I can't tell. But it's a true one.

Jancsó repeats this or a very similar answer as if in need to downplay the importance of the formal aspect of his work. It is not very convincing if one takes into account the aesthetic sophistication of his camera movement and the editing brilliance and effectiveness of films like *Szegénylegények* or *Csillagosok, kátonak* (*The Red and the White*, 1967) which will be analyzed in detail in the next part of this work. Leaving aside some tempting speculations about the precarious position of a "formalist" artist

within the context of the Eastern Block cultural policies, this light and self-bemusing comment seems to tell more about the naturally ironic and unassuming attitude of Jancsó towards his own work. These characteristics, which seem to be constant traits of his personality, were witnessed by Gideon Bachmann on the set of *Szerelmem, Elektra* and A.J.Horton while conducting his recent interview [21]. Good-natured humour, straightforwardness, and accessibility play a big role in Jancsó's recent comeback and popularity. He is nowadays loved and respected as Miki Bácsi (Uncle Miki) by several generations of Hungarians with a special sympathy shown by the youth, quite unexpectedly the new legions of Miki's ardent supporters.

During the same seminar in Kwant the director was asked about his attitude toward the commercial aspects of filmmaking and the attention his films gather upon being released. Jancsó explained that the unfortunate quality of his character was not calculating the reaction of the public in advance. The difference between the consumer and serious filmmaking lies for him in the fact that creators of the former always calculate the reaction of the audience. 'However, -adds Jancsó with his characteristic irony- I'm always happy, when some Hollywood movie is liked by the public. Because one can not calculate in advance what will be the reaction to the film. Thank God, one cannot predict, calculate life [22].' This partially elusive answer leads us to a more serious issue that was approached by Jancsó and Gyula Hernádi more directly in their conversation with Dezső Kovács reprinted in the Polish literary magazine *Dialog* in April 1982. The director is conscious of the political-economic differences between the systems in the East and West and their respective influence

on filmmaking and the importance of commercial success. He says that it seems much easier to make films in Eastern Europe, where, because of the centralized government-planned economy, the financial gains from a particular film are -in fact- irrelevant. As opposed to a Western director, constrained in his artistic vision by the producers' need to get their investment at least returned, 'we can make even those films that are called "different".' The ideological content of a film counted much more than its commercial potential in a market-free (as opposed to free-market) economic environment, and Jancsó was fully aware of the worth and value that his critically acclaimed and award-winning films were given by communist decision makers who ran the Hungarian film industry at a time. It gave him -by the end of the 1960s- freedom to make what he called in an interview for a weekly magazine *Film* 'the elitist films, [that] don't reach mass audience. They may be relevant only to dozens or hundreds of people: it's like a conversation between us'. Then he adds:

I make films for myself, for my friends, and sometimes I have many friends, more than in some other periods. But even at times when what I do is relevant to a bigger group of people - they are usually students, young workers, some intellectuals. I have never made anything more popular. Maybe because I don't want to convince anyone? I always start a new project in a belief that people are intelligent. I think I do not have to start from "A" each time [23].

The theme of Miklós Jancsó's belief in audiences and critics' intelligence comes back relatively often during his interviews and seminars. It seems to work as a



defence mechanism of an uncompromised artist now and then accused of being an incomprehensible mannerist who keeps making films that lack basic dramatic narrative principles or traditional character development. In the already mentioned conversation with Kovács, both the writer and the director defend their right to create their unconventional narratives that force audiences to participate and develop while watching, decipher the style and engage in the story on a conscious, intellectual level, as opposed to traditional or “realistic” filmmaking that relies on close-ups and shot-reverse-shot techniques for the superficial enhancement of psychology and control over the viewer’s mind. Jancsó observes that some twenty years earlier (i.e. at the beginning of the 1960s), during the “new waves” fad, as he calls it, even wide audiences accepted alternative styles of filmmaking. By the end of the 1970s ‘people again prefer to watch simply told stories in which they follow the adventures of a principal hero and have a good time along the way rather than films requiring intellectual effort and participation. It’s not considered a real cinema anymore [24].’ He concludes with an observation that both public and critics think alike in this respect. Then adds:

In short, simple people have triumphed again. All along with their petty bourgeois likings and satisfactions. And a petty bourgeois doesn’t like it when his peace of mind is disturbed. He really does not like it.

At times, Jancsó seems to get impatient with the audience not capable of understanding his films, and calls them the public raised on -and addicted to-

Hollywood movies who are therefore always expecting entertainment. This type of audience does not want an artist to present any personal thesis on history or force them to decipher his style. 'They are like children who read a book only for action, and skip descriptions of nature.' His two early masterpieces, *Szegénylegények* and *Csillagosok, kátonak* were both initially misunderstood by the audience, because of their "discontinuous" structure (as phrased by Gyula Hernádi) [25], and while the former ultimately became a big commercial hit in Hungary (supposedly because of its alleged contemporary meaning), the latter has been for years making the festival and repertory circuit only, being -on top of everything- the only Jancsó film withheld and censored in the Soviet Union, its international co-producer [26].

Both films, on the other hand, were highly praised by Western critics, and in general, Jancsó's relationship with scholars and critics on both sides of the iron curtain seemed to be more stable and comprehensive than with the "entertainment-hungry" mass audience. Still, after a period of almost unanimous praise at the end of the 1960s more and more writers started to criticize Jancsó's style, his long takes, camera movement, aesthetic motifs and thematic obsessions as repetitive, mannerist, boring and fossilized [27]. Already in 1972, Jancsó, still riding the high tide of critical success he achieved with *Még kér a nép* (*Red Psalm*, 1972), explains to a student audience in Kwant how he feels about critics. For him, film criticism constitutes an independent literary domain, like poetry or novels, because it is only the main topic of the review that is supplied by the film in question. Watching a film is for a critic just a sparkle that triggers all that he or she already knows about the world.

Going through reviews that have appeared since the release of *Red Psalm*, I keep getting to know critics who wrote them and not my film. That is, I get to know a critic's platform, I learn in detail the worldview of a critic who writes about the film, his or her philosophical premises, level of depth, taste, style. Myself, I am just the object of a review. A critique itself is ultimately only what it is. If I said while reading it -as we used to say every Monday at confessional- that I regretted my sins and would never do them again, it would not mean anything. I don't know if critics can change me. If they were capable of changing the world, they would surely change me too, but this does not seem possible to me. I don't make films for critics, or I don't make films in the first place for critics. Films, I make them for people like you [28].

Accused of being repetitive and mannerist, Jancsó often refers to painters and composers who rework similar patterns and obsessions throughout long periods and thus develop their recognizable and personal style. On a couple of occasions, he talks about the westerns of John Ford and argues that Ford's films are so popular exactly because they repeat expected schemes, and their attractiveness lies in their structural similarity, an advantage that critics tend to see as an unpardonable error in the case of Jancsó himself [29]. Leaving aside the meritoric simplifications in the logic of the Hungarian director's example as well as the basic question of the reasons he fell off from grace in the mid-1970s, one has to admit that Jancsó has indeed never repented, and fourteen feature films he's made since *Elektraia* (its 12-sequence-shot structure seemed to many a swan song in the director's formal development) prove very well

that, although capable of a stylistic change and evolution, he was not willing to start making entertaining movies or abandon his main thematic preoccupations.

What is, therefore, Miklós Jancsó's *idée fixe*, his obsession, his recurring theme that haunts his films with incessant intensity and makes him fight for the right to pursue it?

Chapter Three:

Jancsó and the Panels on History

By and large, Jancsó is known as a historical filmmaker, or rather a director of historical pictures, as only a few recent features along with two notable exceptions from the classic period (*Oldás és kötés*, *Cantata*, 1962, and the French/Italian co-production *La pacifista*, 1970) deal with contemporary subjects. However, the adjective “historical” may evoke several preconceived generalizations not necessarily compatible with Jancsó’s complex works. Some writers prefer to narrow down the concept by using additional adjectives in order to better describe his films (or rather their own attitude toward them). Hence, a historical picture may be of a political, social, personal, allegorical and national sort or even not be historical at all, as will be demonstrated shortly. One thing seems to be sure: Jancsó’s films are not epic patriotic and/or entertainment spectacles, and often make audiences struggle with the comprehension of their content as much as with the acceptance of their form.

It shouldn’t therefore be a surprise that topics concerning history as well as historical representation in cinema play quite an important role in Jancsó’s lectures and seminars. Two of the latter seem to be especially revealing and exhaustive, as they have the form of three-men panel discussions led by a film critic, with the active participation of Jancsó and another artist: his long-time writer and collaborator Gyula Hernádi in one case; his peer, friend and mentor, Polish director Andrzej Wajda in the other.

The title of the first panel, published originally in a Hungarian monthly *Kritika* (9/1981), is indeed telling. “What does it mean - history?” suggests not a search for a definition of the concept, but rather its meaning, its semantic or phenomenological

application. In his first question, Dezső Kovács asks both artists about the reasons for their passion for historical subjects. Jancsó explains that there are many reasons and one of them is the fact that it is not easy to make a contemporary film. It could have been possible only in the time of serenity or in a society that has no worry. It is difficult for Jancsó not only because he lacks distance, the perspective needed to look more objectively at the present and his own role within it, but also because he cannot deal with the historical events that precede his potential contemporary story [30]. Another reason lies for Jancsó in the specific nature of a historical subject. 'If one wants to make something different, something personal, to express it in a well defined language or form, one should turn to history as offering the greatest possibilities.' History is, for Jancsó, simultaneously abstract and concrete.

But also, history is universal, because in its décor -especially those that we use to achieve our goals- there exist some factors that are constant. A never-ending plain, a uniform, nakedness, horses. All this helps us in the search for a homogeneous style [31].

Hernádi agrees with the possibilities for abstraction that history opens in front of an artist, but points to the difficulties of demarcation between historical and contemporary subjects. Every event from the past is historical, but depending on the influence it exercises directly upon the living people, they individually decide whether it is still "now" or already "then". Political caesurae -the passing of wars, tyrants, systems and governments- often create such a thick, although symbolic, demarcation line, but still, the presence of people who lived through the event that is about to be

dealt with inevitably troubles the artist, causes him to dilute and obscure his vision, disperse it among concrete, individual human experiences.

It is Jancsó himself who mentions a “non-historical” historical cinema. He says: ‘People who expect historical pictures from us, constantly repeat that our films are pseudo-historical at best. The reason for that seems to be our way of thinking, so different from the style generally considered historical [32].’ Audiences accustomed to a continuous storytelling that features an individual hero with clear-cut goals, obstacles and motivations set in motion in some specifically distant past seem to have serious troubles with accepting *Szegénylegények* or *Még kér a nép* as historical films, even if both depict well documented and indisputably historical events. Hernádi adds that, in fact, ‘undertaking any historical project is always a reflection on oneself. Therefore, a historical discourse is always a discourse about the present.’ The first part of the writer’s statement may be easily applied to Jancsó’s visual style. His interpretation of history inevitably reflects both his way of thinking about the issues and his way of seeing them transposed into movement during the making of a film. Hernádi concludes: ‘Certainly, the way of thinking and the way of seeing may (but do not have to) overlap perfectly. At the same time, one particular way of seeing does not require any specific style of filming.’

Jancsó seems to put this sentence the other way around. If his films are at best pseudo-historical, and his personal aesthetics strongly imprinted over their intellectual discourse, they do not need any defined way of thinking to be accepted and understood. He is known for his belief in a continuous repetition of the basic

historical situations and has been cited by Kovács as saying that if his film (*Még kér a nép*) were shown in Iran, the audience over there would accept it as if it were made for and about them in the first place. Explains Jancsó:

There are places where romantic and revolutionary films are received better than others; it's because they are the films of the "third world". A situation like that happened to me in Chile: I was there a few weeks before the fall of Allende, but the film was received like it never was in Hungary. The people felt it was their experience, a story just about them. Here, we don't feel these things in such a visceral way [33].

We will return to the issues of pan-historical, cross-cultural meaning in Jancsó's work during the discussion of the director's most recent films in the conclusion of the thesis.

The second panel entitled "History in a romantic version" appeared in an omnibus tribute seminar to Miklós Jancsó published by Wrocław University in May 1979, but was originally printed in a Polish literary monthly *Dialog* in August 1972, just after *Még kér a nép* had been released. Although almost a decade earlier than the Kovács's interview, the panel led by Konstanty Puzyna touches upon similar issues and features Andrzej Wajda as Jancsó's interlocutor. It clearly indicates some affinities as well as differences between the two directors and seems to be a proper introduction to the double analysis of their respective classic works that will follow.



In his opening address Puzyna notices that history is a common domain of interest of his two guests and discusses the concept of the romantic approach to it. Taken from a rich European literary tradition of the early nineteenth century, expressed in Central Europe mostly through poetry and drama, history investigated romantically would not be a “factography”, entertaining spectacle or a semi-documentary pretext. It is a deeply personal and individual engagement in a historical issue by an artist with a vision, agenda, his own message to the nation, an attitude that apparently endows an artist with total freedom in his creative manipulation while releasing him from any obligation to serve some objective patriotic goals or cater to some general national expectations. ‘[understood this way, history] can easily comprehend politics and revolution, contemporary neuroses, dreams, fantastic visions, everything [34].’ Wajda explains that they (both directors) are indeed obsessed with history, because it is a chronic illness, something that incessantly hurts: occupations, revolts, wars, the slow process of cultural and political rebuilding and re-formation of both Poland and Hungary. Their idealistic social structures are not yet finalized, far -in fact- from being achieved. Cinema is, for Wajda, one of the methods to accelerate the process by influencing the amplitude of its fluctuations, but any artist involved in this process is slowly destroying the *raison d’etre* of his own existence. What is emerging here is a serious philosophical paradox. ‘If thanks to us a new, ideal society is finally being brought about, a society within which every individual will be safe and free, and where all possible means to express and develop will be secured’ - says the Polish director- ‘we are gnawing at the roots of our own art.’ At the end of

this utopian road, any artistic creation that deals with the conflict of an individual versus history will cease to have any sense. 'Don't you think -Wajda is turning directly to Jancsó- that this is exactly the reason why we have gotten to love this topic so much?'

Jancsó agrees to talk only about his own experience in this matter, but claims it reflects a more serious and profound point of view.

I make only historical pictures, if I can use this expression. Because they are personal enough. But what does it mean a "personal" historical film? I know it from Andrzej [Wajda], I learned it from him. I am not the only one who'll never forget *Kanal* or *Popiół i diament*; these films lit the green light for us [...] And it's not a coincidence that it's mainly us, Poles and Hungarians, who dig deeply into historical cinema. Much more than Romanians, Yugoslavs and Czechs [...] Our two nations reach pretty far into the past. Because we've got to face our history in order to be able to continue our present path. But there is another side to it. At home, in Hungary, we got submerged into history, because we couldn't talk about the contemporary topics. We couldn't talk openly enough. Our society still holds the childhood illnesses of the '40s and '50s and, at times, we cannot look many a truth right in the eyes [35].

Jancsó continues explaining the convoluted relationship of Marxist ideals and rough reality of life in an average Eastern Block country. He seems to accept the contradiction. 'For a poor man, the promise of an impeccably just future is like a vision of Paradise for a believer. And a true believer does not criticize the faith.' Therefore, the Hungarian director accepts the fact that the ultimately bright and correct Marxist ideas must once in a while be dressed up in the 'white gowns of

propaganda' in order to influence the masses. Leaving aside their distancing modernist aesthetics, films like *Még kér a nép* and *Szerelmem, Elektra*, seem to fit this applied idealist -although far from didactic- marxist agenda. For Jancsó it is natural that the poor all around the world believe in an ultimate victory, and not in defeatist criticism. He observes the same pattern among the people living in Hungary or Poland, in any socialist society: 'we should not turn away from the hope for the better. But we also know well -Jancsó concludes his discourse- that we live within history, and we must criticize here and now! Ultimately, making films about historical topics is a form of escapism. Let's face it: films that can move people must have a contemporary subject [36].'

Self-criticism, irony, the realization of unfulfilled goals or failed methods? At another time (an interview for *Film* -19/1975) the filmmaker reveals that his biggest life mistake was to get involved in the film business. Jancsó considers himself an artist, a visionary artist, and -after a couple of decades in the industry- his disappointments and disillusionments cannot be bigger: cinema is not art, it depends too much on financing, 'organizing, preparing, convincing, disputing, arranging... Incredibly difficult. I'd rather paint, talk to the young [...] or the old. Friends, in any case.' Still, he makes films, because he cannot do anything else well, and he wants to share his ideas, he wants to contribute to render the world a little bit better. It is very easy to get lost and discouraged in the modern world of -isms and -schisms, especially within the body of the artists' own leftist philosophy.

We can just keep trusting the criteria that have always been valid within the working class movement. And I am defending these criteria. Not only me, but all my friends, who choose to defend the poor. We are not on the side of the conservatives, but on the side of the struggle to change this world into one run with justice. I think, that everyone is able to see the difference between revolutionary and reactionary movements [37].

The revolutionary fervor of these statements notwithstanding, Jancsó of the early 1970s still cannot find a better way to express his ideas than through a historical subject. He says, about his working method with Gyula Hernádi: ‘We always start with a contemporary idea, and then -while working on it- move it back into history. We have noticed that a historical project gains an incredible asset: a possibility of isolating a chosen problem from everyday reality. It can be scrutinized then against a much stronger contrast.’

I will give an example: it would be much easier to show and convey specific political thoughts as well as military and tactical ideas if we made a film about General Bem [a Polish-born hero of the Spring of Peoples and the Hungarian Independence War of 1848] rather than about Che Guevara, even if both men had a very similar worldview and philosophy. And if I was ever working on a film on Vietnam, I would be scared it had turned out more propagandistic than I would like; I’d simply lose a chance to share some more general feelings or ideas with the public [38].

At some point during the conversation, Puzyna tries to pin-point the essence of Wajda and Jancsó’s historical filmmaking. Justly enough, he suggests that the

originality of their approach lies mostly in their breaking of the stereotypes on both narrative and aesthetic levels. He reminds, however, about the dangers inherent to this type of effort: estheticising, overblown symbolics, bias on imagery that damages clarity of argument and dramatic development; traps into which both directors have apparently been falling.

Wajda refutes the accusation by explaining that themes (both historical and contemporary) are of equal but only secondary value. It is the intensity of storytelling that counts in order to get the viewer engaged. 'But historical film -he says - inevitably attracts us to the image, its plasticity. Of course, it's dangerous. A symbol...it's a banal shortcut that everybody knows already.' For Wajda, there exists a real need to create new symbols, new shortcuts as he calls them, new meanings. An original meaningful shortcut contained in an image that stands for the whole philosophical, social and political discourse is the essence of historical cinema. Wajda gives two examples of what he understands as these new shortcuts from an ideology to an image: one is the killing of Szczuka in his own *Popiół i diament*, the other an anonymous execution of a man within the undefined boundaries of the steppes, a recurring motif in Jancsó's films (Wajda cites the one from the beginning of *Csend és kiáltás*, *Silence and Cry*, 1968). Both sequences will be discussed in the next part of the thesis along with the issues of the discursive opportunities offered by a historical subject and stylistic approach that matches the filmmaker's vision of historical representation, all touched upon by Jancsó in several of the above quotes and paraphrases. Since the next part of this work focuses on the analysis of two pairs of

Jancsó's and Wajda's classic masterpieces, it seems appropriate to sum up this theoretical chapter with a quote from the Hungarian director in which he defines the essence of a small nation's historical cinema.

In the historical and political context of our nations, the films and their images must be especially intense in order to get the message across to a foreign spectator and critic. It's not only a question of a double power, but also the ideas that are not easy to develop. Those specific images, shortcuts, as Andrzej calls them, we need an abundance of them to be able to work effectively. This is the problem of small nations, but maybe also an advantage. We are forced to find new shortcuts, new ways of expression, new ideas. And we do. And while doing it we realize that our images express not only the ideas relevant to our small nations, but to the whole world as well [39].

## **PART TWO**

### **Two Men Against History:**

#### **A comparative analysis of selected historical films of**

## Miklós Jancsó and Andrzej Wajda

Chapter Four:

### History as the Parallel Tragedy of Two Nations

*“Pole, Hungarian: dear kin  
Both, to saber and to drink!”*

claims an old bilingual proverb and thus encapsulates in mere ten words whole centuries of mutual feelings and shared historical experience that have tied these two Central European nations in a symbolic but everlasting union. Indeed, one is bound to look in vain for other examples of two nations/states that have covered their respective historical trajectories on the geo-political map of the Western world in as similar way and at as similar pace as Hungary and Poland have done [40].

Both emerged from early medieval tribalism as relatively strong and centralized kingdoms around the turn of the 10th century and sealed their right to existence and international recognition by adopting Christianity as the official religion of the state, in fact, against the will and tradition of their entire populations. During late Middle Ages -as the buffer of the Holy Roman Empire against the pagan East and South European peoples- both expanded their territories with the support of German and Austrian monarchies, at times equally suffering from the violence of Mongol raids (mid-13th century) and the impending threat of the Turkish invasion (since the fall of Constantinople in 1453).

The Renaissance saw Hungary and Poland merged in a powerful political union: first a Hungarian king Ludovic I was offered the Crown of Poland after the childless death of the last of the ancient dynasty of Piast, then, Ludovic's teenage daughter was given as a bride to an important Lithuanian prince in order to seal the union of his country with Poland. The prince, now a new Polish king Ladislav II, started the great dynasty of Jagiellons who, for almost two centuries, successfully ruled the biggest kingdom of Europe, stretching from the Baltic in the north to the Black Sea in the south and comprising some dozen Slavic, Hungarian, Romanian, Moldavian, Germanic and Muslim nations that lived in political stability, relative economic affluence, and quite an advanced system of social equality and religious tolerance. The dynasty ended naturally with another childless death of a monarch, and the kingdom -controlled by more and more powerful magnates- developed a system of elective monarchy in which groups of noblemen proposed and promoted their particular candidates to the throne. Historical irony wanted that the last great Polish king was a Hungarian prince Stefan (Istvan) Bátorý who led several successful campaigns against the emerging powers of Turkey and Russia towards the end of the 16th century.

The 17th century, however, brought only chaos and destruction into this part of Europe, and both countries were counted among the most severely hurt in the turmoil. Weakened by a misguided war against Russia, repeated peasant uprisings in Ukraine, slow but consistent Turkish encroachment into the West, and ravaged by the Swedish "deluge" of 1655-56, Poland became a mere token in the political games of



her powerful neighbours and never regained any real political importance on the international level. Hungary fared even worse. Swallowed by the Ottoman Turks in their unstoppable invasion of the Balkans, the country found itself 'salvaged' by Austria, a very inconvenient ally ruled by the powerful Hapsburg dynasty who were about to create their own Central European empire. By the end of the 18th century, both countries disappeared from the political map of Europe: Hungary as a small province within the boundaries of the multi-ethnic Austrian kingdom, Poland partitioned in three consecutive thrusts among Russia, Prussia and Austria. Neither emerged as an independent state before the end of the World War I in 1918.

During the dark age of the 1800s, again, both nations trod similar paths of disillusion and despair. Napoleonic wars brought much hope and even more destruction, but no solution at all, several national uprisings were extinguished in bloodshed and cruel prosecutions terrorized the populations. Both went through a bitter experience of being 'given' a mock independence as a result of political pressures beyond their control, the Princedom of Warsaw of 1815-1831 in the case of Poland, and the creation of the dual kingdom of Austria-Hungary lasting from 1867 till 1914. The Spring of the Peoples revolts of 1848 gave another vain hope to several suppressed nations and ended in tragedy, but did create the legend of the last common Polish-Hungarian hero. General Józef Bem, a Polish patriot who found refuge in the Austrian occupation sector in the aftermath of the Warsaw November Rising of 1831 (bloodily quenched by the Czarist Russia) was to become one of the most important leaders of Lajos Kossuth's insurrection in 1848 Budapest.

The last one hundred years is just another demonstration of historic parallelism in its extreme. At the end of the Great War, the Treaty of Versailles brought Poland and Hungary back into the family of independent nations. They were both involved in the military conflict with the emerging Soviet Union, both experienced right wing coups d'état in the 1920s, World War II left them destroyed and weak again, Stalin included both in the Soviet block in 1948, year 1956 saw more bloody revolts in Poznan, Poland, and in Budapest, Hungary, followed by a relatively stable period of modest economic prosperity. In 1989 the Eastern Block ceased to exist and both countries turned to a pluralist democracy and open market capitalism, in 1998 they joined NATO, and in May this year they will be officially introduced - within a larger group of ten countries- into the European Community.

Let us not forget about some important differences. First, chronologically, was an attempt to create the Hungarian Soviet Republic led in 1919 by the communist government of Béla Kun. Hungary was the first country that followed the example of the revolutionary Russia and although the republic did not survive even one year, it gave birth to a powerful martyrology with a mythical dimension, especially that thousands of young Hungarian communists were fighting alongside the Soviets in the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921. Poland -although not directly involved during the Revolution- found herself on the other side of the battlefield. After some 150 years of the Czarist control and direct occupation, anti-Russian feelings ran deep in all echelons of Polish society (Lenin's immediate decree which announced Poland's independence notwithstanding), and tempted by the difficult

situation of the young USSR in 1921, Poland engaged in an aggressive revindicatory war that ended in a truce blessed by both sides after a brief sequence of unnecessary atrocities.

Second, World War II was for the two countries an altogether different experience. Germany's treacherous overnight (September 1, 1939) invasion of Poland started -and set the tone for- the whole intercontinental conflict to come. After a month of a hopeless defensive campaign, Poland became partitioned again (the Soviet Union taking a swift revenge by annexing the Eastern provinces), the Polish nation was announced the second -after the Jews- ethnic group to be exterminated, and the country's territory turned into a location of the most cruel atrocities committed against civilian populations in the history of humankind. Two tragic revolts marked the five-year period that followed: the 1943 rebellion in the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw, and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. The former ended in the total annihilation of the Polish Jewish population (already doomed under Nazi's 'The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem' policy), the latter in mass deportations to the death camps and a complete destruction of Warsaw by German punitive squadrons under the attentive eye of the Soviet army strategically regrouping and reinforcing for months on the other side of the Vistula river.

In the meantime, the Hungarian dictator Miklós Horthy reluctantly collaborated with the Nazis after a short period of official neutrality at the beginning of the war and abruptly switched sides when he realized the fate of his ally, thus provoking Germans to "technically" invade the country in February 1944. Hungary,

therefore, emerged from the conflict as a country occupied by the Soviets but barely scarred and quite ready for a smooth adaptation to the New World Order.

In effect, the five years of World War II were for the Poles the source of tragic national experience punctuated by romantic evocations of failed military uprisings, and as such constitute a recurring theme in modern literature, fine arts and cinema. Hungarians, on the other hand, have not developed any particular mythology concerning this period and deal with it in an understandable mixture of discomfort and opacity [41]. As will soon be demonstrated, the parallel history of Hungary and Poland, with all its basic similarities and a few striking differences is a crucial factor in personal as well as artistic development of the two countries' most important directors, Miklós Jancsó and Andrzej Wajda respectively.

The professional and personal relationship between the two filmmakers could in itself be a subject of an interesting cultural study as it reflects -being at the same time a product of- the complex, multi-layered situation of artists working within the highly restrictive and tightly controlled political system. Both directors share basic generational characteristics: born in the 1920s, coming of age during the war, entering film school in in the context of a new socio-political reality that profoundly touched every educational institution, and starting their filmmaking careers in the 1950s, about the time of Stalin's death that triggered the first "thaw" within the socio-cultural infrastructure of the Eastern Block. Jancsó and Wajda, therefore, experienced very similar pressures in their formative years, sharing, with many other young artists of that time, the doubled difficulty of not only adjusting to the new post-

war reality, but also finding their personal voices against the background of a political system that demanded total submission to the ideological principles of the ruling communist party. Their different reactions -or adaptations- to the requirements of the background reality reflect both their personal position within the situation and the historical differences of their respective nations as outlined above.

Jancsó, four years Wajda's senior, 23 at the Liberation, was a very critical observer of Hungary's political juggling during the World War II. The cynical manipulations that Admiral Horthy schemed and conducted, first as neutral dictator, then ally and finally enemy and victim of the Nazis, distanced the whole generation of young Hungarians from any war-time political cause, and made Jancsó - conscripted to the pro-fascist Hungarian army in 1943- literally desert the garrison at the risk of a courtmartial[42]. His childhood and youth were marked by the rule of the 'benign' right-wing dictator Horthy who himself had led a brutal pacification campaign against the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919 and later exercised the policy of ethnic acculturation that directly affected Jancsó's multi-national family in rural Transylvania. It was this experience that caused young Miklós to embrace the Soviet liberation as a chance for a renewal or even a total replacement of the corrupted system with new values, ideas and opportunities [43].

Wajda, on the other hand, grew up in an extremely patriotic environment. His father being a Polish career cavalry officer, Wajda often changed places of settlement following his father's military assignments, and was raised within the lore of Polish independence movements, failed risings, and the almost mythological anti-

Soviet war of 1921 [44]. Being too young to participate in the September Campaign (the doomed defence against the invading Nazi army in 1939), 13-year old Wajda made a failed attempt to run away from home in order to join the nearest Polish cavalry unit. The partition of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union (September 17, 1939), didn't help to turn anybody's loyalties, and Wajda, after joining the London-oriented underground Home Army during the Nazi occupation, emerged from the War conflict, as a typical Polish youth of his generation: distrustful -if not openly hateful- of the Soviet-imposed new People's Republic of Poland he had to learn to live in [45].

Jancsó's age put him in the university during the war; he studied law and ethnography and -immediately after the Liberation- became an active and enthusiastic participant in the Soviet-controlled process of restructuring and rebuilding of Hungary. Still in the 1940s, before entering the National School of Theatre and Cinema in Budapest, Jancsó worked on the creation and operation of the so-called People (or Folk) Universities, a system of new educational institutions that took on the impoverished and illiterate peasant and working classes, in order to endow them with an equal amount of knowledge and ideological propaganda. Around that time, Jancsó joined the Hungarian Communist Party and was a member until the profound disillusionment of the bloody Budapest Rising of October 1956 that converged with his maturing as a nascent filmmaker and prompted his venture from the government-scripted newsreel production into longer and more personal short and medium-length documentaries.

As was the case with his background and wartime experience, Wajda's own entering into the directorial profession in the first post-war decade, took quite a different trajectory. Studying painting in the elite and conservative Fine Arts Academy in Kraków (itself a city of bourgeois social ideology and a hotbed of modernist trends in Polish art) Wajda reinforced his identification with the romantic and Catholic tradition, so clearly demonstrated in the imagery of his first films. He also had the historical luck of surviving the toughest Stalinist era as a student of Łódź Film School (which he entered in 1950), and made his feature debut *Generation* in 1955, when the important political changes across Eastern Europe had already been on the rise. He would not have been able to film *Kanal* or *Ashes and Diamonds* had he tried that a couple of years earlier.

On the other hand, this particular temporal/political conditioning made Jancsó a disciple of Wajda in more than one way. While the Polish school of national cinema flourished during and after 1956, and ushered Wajda to the foreground of international attention with his second feature *Kanal* which won the Silver Palm in Cannes in 1957 as the first Eastern European film noticed and appreciated by Western critics and audience alike [46], the failed Budapest Uprising was a serious setback to Hungarian artists, as the Soviet-imposed reactionary government of Janós Kádár tightened up all means of control and reestablished severe censorship. Jancsó was given an official push as a promising and trusted newsreel and documentary filmmaker and his first feature was a product of this: *The Bells Go to Rome* is a minor film made according to the standard Socialist Realism formulas, and Jancsó himself

tends to brush it aside as the film he does not even consider worth talking about [47]. The “double” influence of his Polish peer is first, the use of epic historical subjects that generated both the interest of a mass public and the trust (superficial at least) of party censorship all too eager to reject contemporary themes as potential criticism of the new reality; and second, to exercise and develop one’s own style in order to render issues and ideas tackled by the films in a sincere and original way.

The reflection of these -quite distinct- peace and wartime experiences on the personal as well as the national level may be clearly seen not only in Jancsó’s and Wajda’s artistic chronology, but also in their respective choices of themes for the subsequent films. What is meant here is not a narrative text or a background situation chosen for a particular project by the means of more or less personal identification (although their early works like *My Way Home* or *Generation* perfectly fit even such a narrow and literal interpretation), but an overall interest in a specific type of a conflict and hero, a dialectical domain or pattern which has been consistently explored by the directors along their respective cinematic careers without ever fully overlapping or blurring the clear-cut demarcation zones. As both Jancsó and Wajda have been committed analysts of their countries’ turbulent and often violent pasts, the recurrent themes of many of their films are wars, insurrections, persecutions, or other forms of more or less overt power struggle among groups and individuals. The differences in treatment of those epic national subjects are the keys to understanding the basic difference in Wajda and Jancsó as artists and men.



Wajda seems to stress the nation with clearly defined linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations as the main vehicle for the dynamic and psychological identification on the part of the viewer as much as for expressing his own political and philosophical agenda. The heroes of many of Wajda's films (*Kanal*, *Popiól i diament*, *Niewinni czarodzieje* to name just a few) are students, young artists, intellectuals forced to make important existential choices at a particularly important moment of their life. It may be also argued that Wajda often assumes a plural first-person voice and speaks directly about and for his own "Columbus Generation" (known as such in post-war Poland after the title of Roman Bratny's novel), which was one of those born in the 1920s who lost their most beautiful years in the war, occupation, ghettos, bloody risings and concentration camps, only to be swept away by the currents of history into a new, uncharted world and forced to forget all values and principles they had believed in, fought and died for. This total preoccupation with national issues as well as a generation-related focus on the most recent war (for the Central Europe, at least), incessant adapting of the national literature classics as well as his trademark Catholic imagery, renders Wajda the "most Polish" of the Polish directors who often proudly speaks of his artistic and political duty towards his nation and was, in fact, voted to the Senate in the first democratically elected Parliament in the history of post-war Poland [48].

Although generally recognized as the committed teller of his own nation's history, Miklós Jancsó positions himself on quite a different philosophical axis. Opposed to Wajda's clear-cut national conflict and his interest in one specific

generation within the volatile historical context of Poland of war and post-war periods, is Jancsó's preoccupation with class as the key element of the power structure as well as the focus on abstracting the mechanisms of violence and oppression rather than placing them within the specific temporal or generational frame. Jancsó still explores the panopticum of Hungarian issues, of course, but he does not see his fellow countrymen unified as a nation by language, culture and religion under the threat of the outside enemy. They seem to be divided by their social and economic positions, and assume peculiar functions within the complex structure of oppression and exploitation that is, in turn, superimposed on the broader political and national issues. Although Jancsó himself mentioned on many occasions that neither Brecht nor Eisenstein were his favorite artists or any source of inspiration for his conceptualization of cinema [49], his -and Gyula Hernádi's- understanding of the purpose and method in any valid cinematic enterprise is much closer to the distantiation and conscious participation of Brecht's theatre or Soviet avant-garde than the films of Andrzej Wajda, soaked in the national epic tradition of limited ethnic and cultural dimensions.

What follows is a comparative analysis of two pairs of Wajda and Jancsó's classic films, generally considered their respective masterpieces. *Kanal* with *The Round Up* as well as *Ashes and Diamonds* with *The Red and the White* constitute a rich research material which offers both stylistic and thematic insight into the two directors' respective universes. The films' practical asset is also their relative availability for viewing and their parallel positioning within the crucial periods of

Wajda and Jancsó's artistic trajectories. Although quite often written about, the four films have never been matched and compared in a similar simultaneous dissection and I believe that the following chapters will prove a valuable exploration of both the similarities and differences of the two filmmakers' take on social and political issues concerning the history of their nations. I also intend them to be a profound look at Jancsó and Wajda's narrative and stylistic concerns.

Chapter Five:

The Centrifugal Axis of Historical Reference

What the four masterpieces constituting the topic of this discussion have in common is their specifically conceived subject matter that chooses an isolated aspect

of an already local incident within some bigger international conflict as the background, the starting point of their particular narratives. It is interesting to observe that through this conscious isolating of the minor, unimportant, anecdotal and parochial, by removing the narrative from the well known historical point of reference not by one but two levels (from international to local, and then from local to incidental), all four films achieve in the outcome an interesting synthesis of extreme realism and symbolic abstraction, as they leave the epic political event as the background referent and focus on the isolated actions of individuals who are behaviorally valid rather than historically motivated. How does this system of thematical distanciation work in the cases of particular films? Let's start with historical contextualization of the four films in question in order to verify the validity of the thesis proposed in the previous paragraph.

Andrzej Wajda started his filmmaking career as a director 'obsessed' with a mission of retelling -and rethinking- his nation's war experience. Five out of his first six films made between 1955 and 1962 are set during WWII, and collectively constitute an exhaustive coverage of the whole period through its highlights from the September Campaign of 1939 to the mid-war issues of Resistance and Jewish survival to the Warsaw Rising to the European V.E. Day of May 9, 1945. Not made in the chronological order of events nor envisioned as a stylistically unified historical chronicle [50], *Generation*, *Kanal*, *Ashes and Diamond* with their personal and investigative look at the recent past, followed by the somewhat less successful *Lotna* and *Samson*, were immediately heralded as the milestones of the Polish National

School and established a very high standard for the decades to come while securing Wajda's position as the most important Polish filmmaker of the youngest generation (27 at the time of making his feature debut).

The main historical referent in the background of *Kanal* (1956) is therefore World War II. It's the end of Summer 1944, the Soviet army have pushed the Germans back into Polish territory, liberated the Eastern part of Poland up to the right bank of the Vistula river and had already established a provisional communist government in the city of Lublin. On the Western front the allied offensive progresses East in bloody battles, liberating France and Northern Italy. The Americans are getting the upper hand in their fight with Japan over the Pacific. However, there is no mention of any of these crucial developments in *Kanal* as the film focuses entirely on the local Polish issue, the Warsaw Rising of grim consequences that -although mythologized in Polish lore and kept as taboo topic till the death of Stalin in 1953- did not change the course of events, being, in fact, a gravely miscalculated and unnecessary sacrifice. The first stage of displacement, from international to local is thus a smooth one, a simple narrowing or zoom-in on one of many individual conflicts of the war, self-explanatory for Polish audiences and easy to localize by any interested foreigner. The second stage, the move to the event's fringe, is more interesting as it chooses such a narrative angle that both Western and Polish viewers seem to be taken by surprise. Instead of recounting sixty three days of the heroic fight in an expected epic fashion (which would produce the empathetic as well as educational effect in the audience), Wajda obscures his story by deciding to show

only the end of the uprising, and follows a group of Polish fighters who -surrounded by the closing ring of German tanks and troops- decide to descend into the city's sewers in a feeble hope to walk under the enemy and reach some bigger division still fighting in another part of Warsaw. More than half of the film concentrates on this infernal voyage through the sewer ('kanal' in Polish means sewer and canal, while its more colloquial use indicates also a hopeless situation or some serious trouble), the group disintegrates in the surreal locations, there is no escape, no redemption, no gratification for the viewer expecting a heroic epic of national dimensions. *Kanal's* lateral narrative displacement was so complete that -as the first ever to touch upon the subject only recently removed from the blacklist of Stalinist censorship- the film was seriously criticized if not rejected altogether as the unjust and extremely ugly vision of the event. It was not until *Kanal* was awarded the Silver Palm at the Cannes festival in 1957 that Polish critics started to rethink their positions towards it, and, influenced by their Western peers, noticed its universal and existential values [51].

*Ashes and Diamonds*(1958), Andrzej Wajda's next film, and only third in his prolific career is once more set against the background of the crucial events of the World War II. The war in Europe is just being won, it is the beginning of May 1945, the Soviet sweeping offensive has conquered Berlin, Adolf Hitler had already committed suicide. Again, using all this as a mere historic reference, the film does not tell the story of the triumphal end of the war. On the contrary, distancing itself from the most exciting element -capitulating Berlin- it places its narrative action some five hundred kilometers behind the frontline, in a small quiet town in central Poland

which was liberated several months earlier. The move from global to local is thus evident: at the time of a great international victory, the end of WWII, a small Polish community is already living a new life, healing their physical and psychological wounds, making political choices, facing a new reality and questioning their own role in the future of the reestablished state. As in the case of *Kanal* this relatively clear isolation of the local site from the broad historical background is made more complex by a particularly oblique choice of the narrative incident, triggered, this time, by a clearly defined individual protagonist. Wajda is once more interested in exploring the complexity of national rebirth rather than composing a song of praise for the New Order to come. Maciek, a young militant in the officially disbanded underground Home Army faithful to the pre-war Polish government exiled in London, considers giving up arms and adapting to civil life. He is evidently one of the survivors of the Warsaw Uprising, went himself through the sewers of the burning city, then joined some partisan group in the forest, and, as Polish patriot, opposes the new government installed by the Soviets not even a year earlier. His last mission is to assassinate Szczuka, a veteran communist committed to the task of enforcing new laws and organizing local government structures in town. We follow Maciek and his friend over the course of a day and a night, but the film opens with their failed attempt on Szczuka's life in which two innocent workers are murdered by mistake, and thus the mood is set for the story to follow. The fighters hesitate, accept to carry out the job properly as their last assignment, consider quitting or going back to the forest to rejoin the decimated groups of partisans in their war within the war. At

night Maciek meets a girl at a hotel, makes (and falls in?) love, senses the attraction of a possible new life, and even makes acquaintance with Szczuka who lives in the room next door, but finally executes the man, against the background of fireworks that announce and celebrate the end of the war. The intensity of another killing -with the dying victim falling into Maciek's own arms- alienates him from his nascent hopes into the decision of going away to join the doomed anti-communist fight. He is spotted by the soldiers on the way to the train station and shot while trying to escape, only to find his own grotesque and unnecessary death in the garbage dump wasteland. By dialectically opposing and then unifying the two men in life and in death, the old one promoting the new and the young one holding on to the old values, Wajda created his desired "short-cut", sketched a complex essay on the issues of national identity and ideological conflict while using the historical reference of victory as the closing point of the film and narratively vital visual metaphor.

If Wajda's films, set mainly within the political framework of World War II, make basic contextualisation a relatively easy task even for a not particularly learned audience, the historical narratives of Miklós Jancsó's choose much more vague referents, if only because -moved further back into the past- they require from the viewer at least an acquaintance with the less spectacular geo-political conflicts that took place on the outskirts of the European continent.

In the case of *The Round-Up* (1965), the global (or, more precisely, continental) event which triggers the narrative is the Spring of Peoples of 1848, a mass international revolutionary movement of more nationalist than class-conscious



nature that shook the whole of Europe from Russia to France and gave several small nations a hope for or in some cases a tangible (if short-lived) freedom from the oppressive forces of the few powerful empires. One should remember, however, that the Spring of 1848 also saw numerous peasant revolts as well as violent protests of the international proletariat, a rapidly emerging social class of exploited urban labourers, and that it was in that year that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their seminal Communist Manifesto. There is not one Hungarian film of Miklós Jancsó that retreats chronologically beyond this date (if one agrees to consider *Elektra* a mythological rather than historical picture), and many themes undertaken in his future works are wound around peasant and revolutionary movements whose ideological background may be traced back directly to the turmoil of 1848 and its socio-political repercussions. Understanding this, the local referent seems obvious. Riding the revolutionary wave, the Hungarians fought against Habsburg Austria and in no time achieved some serious concessions. Under the leadership of Lajos Kossuth, a well educated cosmopolitan liberal, they reformed Hungary into an independent and progressive state, and planned to introduce several radical reforms, the agrarian one among them. The speed of the changes caused the defeat of the revolution, since the powerful landowners turned against the republic determined to keep the feudal status quo. Austria, encouraged by their support, reclaimed Hungary as her property and started a new war, this time backed up by Russia, another reactionary power of gigantic proportions. Hungary was reconquered in less than one year, Kossuth forced to emigrate to England, and what followed were almost two decades of reprisals,

prosecutions and pacifications, while the remnants of the Hungarian army, divided into small groups and dispersed mostly among the peasant populations, continued sporadic hit and run attacks against the Austrian troops but often degenerated into highway robbery [52]. In 1867, the Habsburg empire restructured into a symbolic political union with Hungary with emperor Franz Josef I as absolutist ruler of both. All these historical references could possibly account for a fascinating and patriotic epic (and, sure enough, many have been produced since the end of WWII), but Jancsó rejects all these opportunities altogether, by moving his narrative incident to the fringe that is as morbid and discomfoting for the Hungarian viewer as the young heroes' descent into the sewers must have been for the Polish one. In a move similar to Wajda's, Jancsó ignores the heroic and triumphant moments of the temporary liberation, and chooses a grim aftermath of the republic's prolonged agony. He pushes the temporary setting of *The Round-Up* well into the agonizing 1860s, and localizes it entirely within the confines of a detention camp where the Hungarian military in collaboration with the Austrian authorities sieve through hundreds of detainees in order to find a small group of rebels whose identities remain unknown. The film traces a slow but methodical fulfillment of the machiavellic intrigue set to work by the oppressors along which the prisoners turn to blackmail, betrayal, hatred and murder within their own group before inadvertently revealing their faces and sealing their fate. *The Round-Up*, the director's fourth feature, was the starting point for Jancsó's international career. It also gathered both critical and popular interest both abroad and in his own country, a rare achievement for a politically loaded

Eastern European film. Jancsó himself explains that the Hungarian public rushed to see it upon the time of its original release, because the film was understood as a metaphor for the failed Budapest Rising of 1956 and half a decade of brutal persecutions in its aftermath [53]. Western critics, however, distanced from the historical context to the level of abstraction, escaped the excitement of the local audience, and tended to see the film as a philosophical treatise on the universal human condition and the mechanisms of power and oppression rather than as the narrative of one tangible moment from the history of the Hungarian nation.

*The Red and the White* (1967), Jancsó's next film in sequence, is the one that fits into the narrative displacement rule (global-local-incidental axis) less rigorously than the other three, the main difference being that its action develops in the steppes of South Eastern Ukraine rather than Hungary, and thus the local stage of the equation becomes more abstract and figurative than usual. Still, the film is a Soviet-Hungarian coproduction and, since its group hero is an international revolutionary brigade, the general pattern seems to be kept intact. Again, the international events serving as the film's historical referent are the final stages of WWI and the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921 during which the reactionary Russian forces ("the Whites" from the colour of the Czarist officers' uniforms) in coalition with the British and French divisions were trying to put down the Soviet Revolution of 1917 in its nascent stage. The Red (communist) forces had the -more than welcome- help of the international revolutionaries -mostly German and Hungarian troops- who hoped for the support of a victorious Soviet Republic in creating and securing the international

recognition of their own Marxist states. The local referent, therefore, would be Hungary of 1919, another utopian egalitarian republic which, as was mentioned earlier, had its moment of hope and glory under the leadership of Béla Kun. The opaqueness of this element is twofold. First, the action of the film takes place abroad, in a virtual no man's land, somewhere between Russia, Moldavia, Romania, Hungary and Ukraine, second, the date is specified as 1919, so -taking into account the short life of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, overthrown with the international blessing by ascending right-wing dictator Miklós Horthy within that particular year- one cannot be sure what is the Hungarian soldiers' relation to their own revolution: they are about to fight it, they have just won it or it is already lost forever, the latter possibly explaining their heroic but suicidal determination. The third, incidental level of *The Red and the White* will be, then, the neverending exchange of senseless atrocities, sudden takeovers and ritual executions right there in the nameless steppes of Eastern Europe, a story without a hero, told with such formal discipline and detached beauty that the film was immediately recognized as a masterpiece for its ingenious extrapolation of the abstract from the realistic, of the universal from the particular [54].

As the four films presented above are the topic of more detailed formal and thematic analysis which follows, and the understanding of their specific historical backgrounds and referents will be taken for granted, I think it useful to synthesize the above presentation into a simplified chart for the convenient reference if needed. The

films are put in the chronological sequence of their narrative time frames, which makes Jancsó's titles precede those of Wajda's.

Historical Films:

Referent:	Round-Up	Red&White	Kanal	Ash&Diam
global:	-1848	-WWI (1914-18)	World War II (1939-45)	
defeat	the Spring of Peoples	-Soviet Revolution	-decisive stage	-German
1945	(mass independence movements in Europe)	(1917) and Civil War in Russia (1918-21)	(Summer 1944)	May 8,
local:	-Hungarian Republic (1848)	-Béla Kun's Hungarian	-Warsaw Uprising	-post-war
recon-	-Kossuth's reforms	Soviet Republic (1919)		(VIII-X 1944)
struction - in	-defeat	and		chaos
liberated Poland	in the aftermath (1850s-60s)			
incidental:	-persecution of rebels in	-Civil War atrocities	-evacuation of a	-assassination
of	a detention camp (1868)	involving Hungarian	rebel group through	a communist
by		communist group	the city's sewers	the Home
Army				fighter

What seems worth being stressed again, is the fact that all four films, generally acknowledged Jancsó and Wajda's historical masterpieces, are set on the far edge of important international events and focus on the local (i.e. Hungarian and Polish respectively) variants or extensions of the global conflicts. Moreover, within the local context, the incident is not approached frontally, by its most spectacular and

historically important aspect, but obliquely, in the vague areas of its demise, dissolution or aftermath. This construction, a conscious decentralization of the historical referent, probes the viewer's capability of accepting the personal vision of an artist who does not conform to the traditional methods of dealing with serious but often petrified national themes. It was evidently a success in the case of Jancsó and Wajda, but their films' original qualities are based on the complex interplay of several formal and thematic elements that differ from film to film and are applied differently by both artists. What follows is a comparative analysis of two pairs of Miklós Jancsó and Andrzej Wajda's films. The matching, if somewhat arbitrary, is justified by the main thematic concerns that fit broader discussion of the directors works.

## Chapter Six:

### The Centripetal Descent into Death (*Kanal*, 1956, and *The Round-Up*, 1965)

#### 1. Narrative Structure and Character Formation

There is a whole tradition of the "existentialist" interpretation of Miklós Jancsó and Andrzej Wajda's films [55]. A partial effect of their thematic

centrifugality, the best historical films of both directors refuse to function as epic narratives, becoming detailed but detached behavioural studies of people placed in extreme situations. Among numerous matrices proposed as frameworks for content analysis, often different in respective cases of Wajda and Jancsó, one theme seems to come back often enough in relation to both filmmakers. “Man against (or vis-à-vis) History” was the term applied independently to films of Jancsó by Claudio Taddei, and to Wajda’s by Boleslaw Michalek. Both writers spend much time describing a type of the directors’ heroes, men framed by a historical plot beyond their control, but still making ‘free’ choices, reclaiming their dignity or even basic sense of humanity - since their narrative function seems often similar to that of a hunted animal- through opting to die for the cause that already has been doomed.

Both *Kanal* and *The Round-Up* are films of entrapment and pessimistic inevitability (the Hungarian title *Szegénylegények* translates literally as “the hopeless bunch”, the colloquial meaning of “kanal” has already been mentioned) as the heroes descend reluctantly but steadily into the fateful death trap set up for them by history. This parallel process lends itself as good comparative material. Similarities are evident.

First, both films present us with a group hero, composed mostly of men, none of whom moves himself to the front of the group in the sense of screen time or narrative importance given, besides the omnipresence of the nominal military ranking explicit among insurgents of *Kanal*, vaguely suggested among the prisoners but brutally imposed in their relation to the oppressors in *The Round-Up*.

Second, the groups are isolated and imprisoned, Polish fighters in the city sewers, Hungarian rebels in the fort on the steppes (*pusta*), similarly rounded up by the methodical and consistent enemy forces, against whom they don't have any matching power. The imprisonment also has another, almost abstract dimension, represented by *pusta* and the burning city. Released from the sewers or from behind the walls of the prison, the heroes of the two films would remain hopelessly entrapped in their geopolitical reality: the city systematically scorched and exploded by Germans, or the empty landscape of the Hungarian countryside with no place to hide, to go, to strive for.

Third, the rounding up takes the form of a cruel and unequal game in which one side is inevitably losing, divided and confused, kept in (figurative and literal) darkness by the cunning winner who pulls the strings, sets up the traps, and waits patiently for the fatal mistake of the other side. The chased ones seem to go in chaotic circles, through, again, literal curves of the underground tunnels that confuse the troops into the endless repetitive trekking in *Kanal* and even more graphic circular routines of chained prisoners within the rectangular inner yard, an obsessive ritualistic motif of *The Round-Up*. Against their will and all their desperate attempts to escape fate, some powerful centripetal force is keeping both the insurgents and the rebels in their respective descents into death.

In spite of these three parallel themes that constitute the basic *modus operandi* of their respective narratives, the films' structure and character formation are drastically different. Whereas Jancsó's vision is consistently and homogeneously



bleak, as the film opens with an individual execution and ends with a mass one, Wajda divides *Kanal* into two clearly discernible parts of almost equal length. Although its crucial development starts with the insurgents' decision to enter the sewers in hope of crossing the tightening German lines, the first half of the film unfolds on the ground among the ruins of the city where a group of Polish fighters heroically defend their base against the decisive German attack. This long introductory part has several simultaneous functions of structural, aesthetic, and narrative nature.

Above all, it clarifies the strategic situation, evident for the Polish viewer right from its initial image, Warsaw in ruins and flames. We witness the last days of the Rising, and we know it must end in tragedy. Still, the fighters do not give up, there are some heroic deeds, hopeful plans, optimistic youthful chats, some black humour. The ground action part gives the viewer something he/she expects, elements of national epic (let us not forget that this is the first film dealing with the topic), deceitfully staging the shock of the later descent into *kanals*. At the same time all the principal characters are introduced in bits of action and conversations, and the double function of this is to build up the basic psychology of the protagonists, differentiate among them and create some emotional links with the audience, as well as to set up the pace and method of the narrative, which right from the beginning will oscillate among the characters through constant cross-cutting or parallel editing of bits of action that happen simultaneously.

Nothing like that can be found in *The Round-Up*. Its construction is homogenous in mood and style, absolutely linear in the sense of chronology, episodic

in its treatment of the protagonists. Whereas Wajda follows the classical rule of action/war cinema which is to isolate a group of people in a dynamic event, endow them with psychologically valid identities and let them share the experience with the audience by switching from one to another's point of view, Jancsó develops his own narrative method that reduces the possibilities of identification and does not allow for any psychological enrichment of the characters. They do not supplement each other or the enfolding drama like those of *Kanal* do, they simply replace one another with their sequence-long episodes and disappear abruptly after their brief narrative function is fulfilled (by death, with no exception). There is not one cut in *The Round-up* that would suggest a temporal parallel, not even one "while..." or "in the meantime..." that fill up the second part of *Kanal* when the three small groups of divided insurgents cross or do not cross their routes in the underground maze. Jancsó makes us follow the development of the oppressors' machiavellian scheme at a steady pace and with the emotional detachment of a behavioural psychologist presenting the subject of his research to a scientific panel. Dialogues do not help the viewer in getting to know or empathize with the victims, they consist mostly of commands and monotonous interrogations that explain the charges, punishment and aspect of expected collaboration if the accused wants to survive. There is no insight into the psyche of the prisoners, their drives or motivations beyond the immediacy of the survival instinct. Nothing farther from the tender hopes of Korab and Daisy's unconsumated love, Smukly's alcoholic debauchery or Madry's sense of

responsibility for his group when he realizes they were left on their own by the cowardly cunning of Kula.

## 2. Mise-en-scène and camera movement

*Kanal*'s two-part narrative structure extends its implication into the aesthetic level. The ground sequence, with its relatively open space around and in the fighters' headquarters is filmed mostly in long shots when it follows the military actions, in medium shots if it deals with conversations inside. It is filmed entirely on location among some ruins on the outskirts of the city and the mise-en-scène is designed simply and realistically with the sunlit spaces of the half-burned apartment buildings that enhance the outdoor, semi-documentary feeling of the image. The soundtrack is composed of a chaotic tapestry of shooting guns, shouting people and the noises of tanks and armored machinery except for the archive shots of the opening credits accompanied by the solemn sounds of modern music by Krzysztof Penderecki. The long-take aesthetic dominates and the camera frequently tracks and pans around the urban ruins, but Wajda doesn't hesitate to insert isolated close-ups of faces and details quite frequently in order to enhance the dramatic expressiveness of the plot. Many dialogues are shot in one take using two- or three-shots that keep interlocutors in one frame and the cutting is motivated only by characters' movement. On the other hand, the shot/reverse shot technique is used intensively in the scene of the German attack when the images of the insurgents are contrasted with those of the approaching

enemy in the consistent shot ratio of 1:1. This sequence lasts 7' and contains 38 shots (#39-76).

A moderate (lengthwise) sequence-shot aesthetic with many rehearsals and (ideally) only one take as the working method was often practically imposed on the young East European directors in the 1940s and '50s as their budgets were low and imported film stock very expensive [56], and the look of *Kanal*, as Wajda's second feature could have been influenced by this factor. The opening long take of the film, however, (#5 as the first four shots of the credits sequence are the archival images of the city being scorched and dynamited by the Germans) is by no means an effect of accidental imposition. In the 4'15'' of its uninterrupted duration, the shot presents all the *dramatis personae* with the help of the voice-over and the lateral tracking of the camera which slowly follows the group in their run to the left along the trench and fences. The shot is so strikingly Jancsian in its composition based on the elegant interaction of camera movement with the irregular displacement of the soldiers that the two directors' affinity in their respective stylistic developments comes to the foreground immediately (with a full recognition of Wajda's film's preceding Jancsó's by almost a decade). Still, *Kanal* has more than 230 shots altogether, and *Ashes and Diamonds* over 300. A simple comparison to less than 160 shots of *The Round-up* and barely over 90 of *The Red and the White* (all films are roughly the same length) makes evident the fact that the directors' future careers were not at all parallel in this particular respect [57].

The second part of *Kanal* takes the sudden but logical turn in its visual aspect that corresponds to the exigencies of a radically changed mood and locale. The actual descent into the sewers takes place in shot #115 which divides the film into actual halves of similar editing pace, almost equal time length and the number of shots. Shot #116 is a compositional replica of #5 with its lateral tracking to the left along the soldiers stumbling in the wet darkness of the sewer; it lasts, however, only one minute. Tracking along with the actors becomes a dominant -if not exclusive- camera movement from now on, as the insurgents are in constant movement and the limited space organizes their displacement in a very consistent linear pattern. They are very quickly divided into three groups (in fact, they get separated right upon their entering the kanals), and this fact allows for some diversity of shot composition based mostly on the number of people in each group and some particular dramatic and emotional implications of their respective journeys. The sewers are evidently built as an elaborate set in the studio and the simple technical demands of the filmmaking process turn the underground corridors into an impressive and quite surrealistic space. The sewers are wider than they were in reality and are extensively lit from the sources located low over the water and this creates an intense emotional effect with the expressionist shadows on the walls as well as the faces of the brooding people. This aesthetic design is subtle enough to keep the images in the range of credibility and its abstract beauty serves as a metaphorical comment upon the experience of the group: it is like Dante's *Inferno* (actually cited at one point by a character nicknamed Artist), a description of Hell and human suffering in perfectly chiseled verses of the

poet. The soundtrack is now very different, subtle fragments of violin and piano compositions alternate with ocarina notes played by Artist against the constant sounds of dripping water and movements of the bodies in thick dirty mud. Once in a while, a distant scream of an individual pushed into madness by the imposing labyrinth of the sewers destroys the intimacy of quiet conversations resonating in the tunnels with an oneiric reverb. All this builds up an emotionally loaded atmosphere of enhanced intensity and suspense.

Compared to the mis-en-scène of *Kanal*, the visual design of *The Round-Up* seems virtually ascetic. Rough but animated landscapes of the ruins around and within the insurgent headquarters (filled with some bourgeois furniture and a grand piano in the middle of one room), irrational, dreamlike corridors of the city sewers have nothing to do with the controlled minimalist look of the prison on the Hungarian steppes. Bare walls of the inner yards are no different from those of the attached cottage used by the officials as their quarters as well as the interrogation rooms. Black, cross-shaped gallows being its only adornment, the impeccable whiteness of all the walls conveys the nihilistic feeling of emptiness and destruction. It also reinforces the sense of order and methodology associated with the oppressors. And the flat, neverending *pusta* without any demarcation point, any characteristic of its own besides its overwhelming vastness, is the most impenetrable, ultimate force of imprisonment.

There are three specific shots in the film that use and perfectly demonstrate the oppressive quality of the Hungarian landscape. Shot #13 is the last one in the

opening sequence of the film and contains the only dialogue with an unidentified prisoner who up to this point seems to be the main character of the evolving story. He's taken away from the fort to the interrogation building and the shot is filmed by the motionless camera (a subtle track forward and then backward brackets its 1'20") placed inside of a room. An officer chats with the prisoner at the open door, the background being the vast *pusta*, and we learn from the conversation that the detained man used to be involved in smuggling Kossuth's revolutionary materials from abroad several years before. After half a minute of talking, the officer says "you can go now", and the man starts walking toward the horizon. We watch his diminishing figure for some 25 seconds before a rifle fires off-screen and the man falls dead on the ground. Shot #35 is another one out of the prison walls. A group of detainees is force-walked into the field to pick up food brought by women from nearby villages. The women leave their parcels on the ground and are let go, and the shot opens with the prisoners approaching the food slowly. Suddenly, one of them, who's already known as an accused rebel dashes out of line and runs away using the group of women as a cover. The guards are ordered to shoot in the air and, after several shots are fired, the man stops and slowly walks back resigned. Shot #84 ends another meeting with the women, but this time, a prisoner, one blackmailed into denunciation, is about to identify a rebel commander's girlfriend. Warned suddenly, the girl starts to run away in the direction of the horizon, and the guards seem to wait idly for a while. After 15 seconds, six horsemen enter the frame from behind the

camera and without any rush or violence round up the women to make them turn back.

Three shots of structural simplicity (only the second one has some short lateral camera tracking to the right motivated by the characters' movements) and of utter importance as they convey the oppressive character of the flat landscape, deadly power of the uninterrupted horizon line, the *pusta* that functions in many Jancsó's films as the symbol (or a short-cut in Wajda's term) of Hungary's historically disastrous geo-political position, the country's paradoxical quality of being simultaneously open and enclosed, vulnerable and repressive. All three shots connect the landscape to death and the inutility of human action. One man is turned into a live target after being told to go, another one gives up his hope confronted with the space and is hung in the sequence that follows, a girl rounded-up like in an innocent equestrian game only to be stripped naked in the next shot and then killed in public torture/execution, her round-up being in fact a variation of the opening shot of the film in which an anonymous crowd is surrounded by horsemen against the sun setting behind the horizon.

Still, despite their ascetism, all the shots are meticulously composed and make full use of the geometrical quality of the prison buildings. Lines of the walls often run diagonally across the screen or create the effect of multiple framing of strictly geometrical connotations: a diamond of the yard with its rectangular wall, a symmetrically located arc of an open gate inscribed in the wall with a strong dark line, the arc itself cut in half by the line of the horizon. And, within this composition, the



incessant circular movement of marching prisoners, miniscule figures of horsemen in far background, all counterpointed by the slow diagonal or lateral tracking of the camera, still far from the sophisticated exuberance of Jancsó's later films. All crane-camera shots are of a spectacular elegance, some rising over the walls and thus combining the literal claustrophobia of the inner-yard geometry with the metaphorical entrapment of the landscape, others are set behind the walls, like shot #11 in which the small human figures slowly approach one another following the trajectories that are bound to cross (#12) in the vast field around a small picturesque cottage photographed in a highly contrasted black-and-white aesthetic. A shot of an extreme compositional control that early in the film introduces a couple of Jancsó's crucial themes: importance of space vs. impotence of humans that are forced to inhabit it, people crossing their steps not knowing of each other's existence and their role in the sweeping historical event they are forced to participate in.

Chapter Seven:

The Chessboard of Violence (*Ashes and Diamonds*, 1958; *The Red and the White*, 1967)

1. Explicit Difference of Structure and Style

If *Kanal* and *The Round-Up* share several aspects of their narrative and stylistic conceptualization, notably the lack of clearly defined individual hero, general notion of inescapable destiny within a doomed historical situation as well as some similarities in the employment of the moving camera and the propensity for longer takes (most of them in the range from '30" to 2'30"), the next pair of the directors' consecutive films seem to be diametrically different. Whereas Wajda resorts to a rather traditional form of storytelling based on a literary source and focuses on the experience and evolution of an individual protagonist, Jancsó chooses a more difficult and less secure path of exploring and elaborating his own experimentation into alienating rather than comforting the unsuspecting viewer. Both films mark nevertheless a pivotal moment in the careers of their respective authors, the point of reaching artistic maturity and gaining permanent international critical acclaim. Because of their diverse aesthetic concerns and the relative difficulty of the task of comparing the differences, I will use the basic categories of the previous chapter to see the formal and thematic development of the two films from the standards set by the pair of their predecessors.

As was said in Chapter Five, *Ashes and Diamonds* tells the story of Maciek Chelmicki, its principal character, and several other people who cross his path during one particularly nice day of Spring. Wajda here repeats the time frame pattern he used in the narrative of *Kanal*. Both films start at noon one day and end at dawn the next morning. Both follow the heroes through their day and night as they struggle for survival, as much physical as symbolic, to prove they were right in their cause against

bigger forces of history. As opposed to the war-worn Warsaw of October 26, 1944 in *Kanal*, the date now is May 8, 1945, and the war in Europe is over. This information is smoothly given within the narrative, being in fact a variation of the introductory voice-over of *Kanal*: the exact date and the news of Germany's capitulation is announced through a loud-speaker intercom system in the town's main square where Maciek and his friend arrive after the opening assassination scene. Throughout *Ashes and Diamonds* we see the world as Maciek sees it; there are many examples of his point-of-view shots and the camera stays with him for the most of the film. Not all the time though, as the rich storyline introduces several interesting subplots, like the tragicomic rise and fall of a double-faced opportunist Drewnowski, or Szczuka's personal search for his estranged son who proves to fight -like Maciek- for the old Poland. The other characters, especially Maciek's partisan friend Andrzej and the hotel barmaid Krystyna who becomes Maciek's lover and provides his momentary chance for redemption, are substantially developed and impeccably acted as are some minor but colorful types who represent various social strata of life in the provincial town. It is interesting to see how this apparently limiting hierarchical structure of importance (layered from the principal to important to secondary and anecdotal) works against the egalitarian group structure in *Kanal* which -with all its individual differentiation- seems, in comparison, slightly underwritten and somehow too homogenous.

As we already know, Miklós Jancsó's concept of character and narrative structure is drastically different. If *The Round-up* is already one step ahead of *Kanal*

in its process of rejection of a traditional concept of a hero, *The Red and the White* makes another leap in the same direction. *Kanal*'s eight principal characters who - divided into three groups- strive for survival while walking through the sewers have well defined personal traits and psychologically interesting relationships. They share relatively equal portions of screen time through parallel editing and are human enough to generate the viewer's attention, empathy and the sense of identification with their struggle, all basic ingredients of classical fiction cinema, its *raison d'être*, in fact. *The Round-up* denies the audience any access to the psychology and more profound existential values of any of the protagonists, presenting them as mere objects within the narrative sequence of events, and removing them from the story abruptly without emotional build-up or any attempt to let the viewer understand or feel *for* the protagonist. Still, the characters who come and go (or die) in episodic spurts of unequal length, are identifiable by name and recognizable by face, by their individual actions motivated by the imminent threat of death as well as their function (suspect-victim) within the film's narrative.

*The Red and the White* makes an unprecedented leap into an almost total erasure of the identifiable individual character while still telling a narratively comprehensive story; a story that is suspenseful at times and quite involving throughout, even if what we are presented is nothing more specific than a chessboard war fought by faceless pawns and figures. Obviously, there is consistency and there are rules to this game as well as protagonists with particular goals and personal characteristics, the problem is the fact that it is practically impossible to figure them

out during one single viewing of the film. Jancsó's complex storyline combined with a striking lack of interest in helping out the viewer in organizing his or her usual loyalties and empathy, makes it necessary to see the film at least twice to sort out the characters and understand the sequence of apparently senseless atrocities. In the mass of short lived heroes there is one -a boy we know only as "Hungarian"- who leads the film from its opening till its last scene, but the predominance of long and medium shots of human figures lost in the landscape, their visual similarity caused by the omnipresence of white shirts or half-naked bodies and virtual lack of psychology-enhancing close-ups makes it impossible to perceive any sense of identification with the hero of such a vague and ephemeral silhouette.

The time-frame of Jancsó's films is also much more ambiguous. *The Round-Up* offers a few narrative hints, like self-evident night-time searches and two visits of women who bring food for the prisoners (not more often than daily, it can be assumed) as well as one very suggestive fade-out/fade-in transition between shots #25 and #26 that indicates the passing of a long time, possibly another (i.e. the first) night of the story. *The Red and the White* rejects similar narrative clues to facilitate temporal orientation, as we do not see any nightfall on screen and nothing within the story suggests an accelerated passing of time. On the other hand, several abrupt spatial jump-cuts, like a cut into the airplane attack sequence (shots #51-63), could be interpreted as some significant ellipses, naturally expected in a war film of such an intensity of action. These details, however, seem to be beyond Jancsó's concern as his real interest lies in the detached analysis of human behaviour in the abstracted but

immediate violent historical moment. The chess metaphor imposes itself again, and I will come back to it shortly.

Stylistic development of *Ashes and Diamonds* and *The Red and the White* is strictly connected to their enhanced -even if in opposite directions- conceptualization of the function and treatment of a film character. Wajda definitely reduces the average length of shots while raising their total number and often relies heavily on shot/reverse shot sequences, especially in the conversations between Maciek and Krystyna over the counter in the hotel bar. Stark realism and poetic surrealism that characterized the over- and underground parts of *Kanal* respectively, give way to a specific middle-ground mise-en-scène of the next film. The overall design of *Ashes and Diamonds* is realistic, with the hotel and its several inside compartments (from men's toilet to the banquet room) as the film's main locale, but with the light being used to intensify the emotional effect of many shots and by a very careful selection of props, it delivers a panoply of unforgettable compositions with an intense metaphorical or purely religious symbolism that became Wajda's trademark in the years (and films) to come. It is not by chance that the film's first image is a cross on the top of a country road chapel. The camera tilts down to reveal the close-up of Maciek and then Andrzej resting in the grass and talking about a man named Szczuka in some distance from the building. It is a deep-focus composition, so we see in the background a little girl who tries to open the door of the church. She approaches the men and asks them for help. The shot takes its time and the movements within it are slow; it is a serene sunny day in a Polish countryside some time after the war.

Suddenly, a third man shouts that the car is coming and what follows is a two-minute long sequence of a bloody assassination of two men driving a military Gaz (a Soviet version of jeep). Two shots are particularly suggestive compositions: #9 in which the bleeding head of a driver forms a bottom end of a diagonal line with that of the figure of crucified Christ on the church wall on the top, and the cold assassin's face of Andrzej entering in the middle, all three spatially layered into depth by the use of the wide-angle lenses. The other one (#14) comes after Maciek -who chases a wounded passenger to the church door - fires two deadly series into the man's body (#13). The back of the man's coat catches on fire, and he falls down into the open chapel in front of the figure of a saint surrounded by burning candles. It is the opening sequence of the film, and it instantly presents the dichotomy of its main issues -faith and reason, innocence and guilt, death and rebirth- in a powerful and purely visual way. There are many more shots of strong and contrasted imagery; e.g. the long-take of 1'20" when Maciek and Krystyna visit the ruins of a church and talk about their life prospects. Their small figures approaching from the background are physically dominated by a statue of Jesus hanging upside down in the extreme foreground (a deep-focus composition with chiaroscuro lighting) and within the same shot the boy moves right and places himself in front of two ready coffins, only to be confronted with the bodies of two innocent workers he murdered earlier that day. Other examples are: the death of Szczuka against the fireworks in the night sky, the *polonaise* (a Polish traditional dance of patriotic and ceremonial connotations) started by a drunken bunch at the debauched end of an official presidential banquet, a

mysterious white horse in front of the hotel as well as Maciek's own death in two images: his wound bleeding through a white sheet he has wrapped around himself hiding from the soldiers and his prolonged agony in the garbage dump, actually, the closing shot of the film. The camera movements are less visible here than in *Kanal*, and are often used for pragmatic rather than stylistic reasons, however, *Ashes and Diamonds* still abounds in instances of meticulously arranged longer takes (though never reaching 2 minute mark) with a subtle but assured camera working its way through space.

*The Red and the White's* first narrative shot (i.e. #4, as the previous three - intercut with the titles- seem to have an introductory, allegorical function) establishes the pace, the style and the mood of the film that evolves from it. We see two men engaged in a skirmish on a river bank, one in front of the camera, the other farther in the background. They move back and forth chaotically, shooting off-screen once in a while, the camera tracking with their movement in a slow but consistent pursuit. It is an extreme deep-focus composition, but in the first minute of the shot, the viewer's attention concentrates on the character in the foreground. The two approach the river in an evident attempt to cross it. The man in the background gets to the other side, the closer one hesitates and retreats from the water into the bushes on the slope of the bank. The camera leaves him off-screen, thus automatically changing the axis of the composition from flat lateral into the classical perspective that makes us explore deeper within the vision field. The running man seems to come back in panic, it takes a few seconds before a group of riders appears far away, approaching the river from



the other side. From behind the camera another horseman appears. The rounded up soldier is forced back into the water. The cossack on the horse insults him, investigates (we learn the captive is Hungarian) then shoots him casually and all speed away not aware of the presence of the other man hiding in the bushes. The survivor gets out and runs in the opposite direction, in fact, back into the zone he initially came from. Throughout the whole scene, the camera moves slowly to the right and to the left while discreetly adjusting itself to the characters' position.

This shot lasts 3'10" and perfectly demonstrates the tactics Jancsó employs throughout the film, although it is not until the second half (i.e. after the plane attack sequence) that this composition really dominates. All the basic ingredients of Miklós Jancsó's long take are here: the camera moving with subtlety and grace along a simple trajectory of tracks, usually in a straight line of approximately ten meters, sometimes ending with a curve; but, the effect may also be achieved by a swift pan or a crane-forward combined with the lateral tracking. The most important feature, however, is the camera's positioning in the profilmic space that gives priority to the composition in (often extreme) depth with the specific use of landscape or elements of environment that enhance the effect of 'in-frame editing'. Shot #44 is a perfect example of it. During its 4'20" (it happens to be the longest take of the film), the camera's strategic placement right behind the side wall of a small field hospital makes its minimal movements especially effective. The shot smoothly changes its depth, from the medium deep-focus on the left end of the camera tracks (in the back of the hut with bushes and other buildings closing the space in some distance), to a flat

composition against the wall in the middle, to the extreme depth of the open view at the right end of the tracks (the river and the steppes in front of the hospital). The camera displaces just a few meters to the right along with the action, stops for a while, continues, retreats, stops, moves to the extreme left, therefore producing several diverse tableaux without interrupting the take by cutting. If one adds to it some apparently chaotic (but often circular) movements of people within the frame, sudden appearances of new characters from behind the camera, an intense use of the off-screen space and a postponement or denial of narrative information (through total lack of reaction shots the viewer is left behind the character's awareness of the situation) -all present in the opening shot- the main menu of *The Red and the White's* long take aesthetics seems to be outlined and easy to understand. Still, it must be remembered that the two films discussed in this work are just the first phase in Miklós Jancsó's development of the unique cinematic style that finds its full expression in several of his subsequent works, most notably *Winter Wind* (1969), *Red Psalm* (1972) and *Elektra, My Love* (1975).

## 2. Implicit Unity of Meaning

If *Ashes and Diamonds* does not seem to have any particular affinity with the style and structure of *The Red and the White*, one must look somewhere else to find values and ideas which unify these two historical films. On the superficial narrative

level, they apparently do not share anything either as they are set in a non-compatible geo-political situation and different issues are their primary concerns. *Ashes and Diamonds* tells an individual story of evolving and (mis)adapting, finding one's place in the new reality, coming of age, in a sense, as Maciek -although 24 years old- has been deprived of his youth by the brutal time of war and occupation, and this night of historical victory coincides with his initiation into manhood, his first relationship and his first free existential decision. *The Red and the White*, on the other hand, focuses entirely on the clinical dissection of violence, constituting the register of atrocities that does not allow for any individual evolution of will, consciousness and emotion, being faceless and timeless in its approach to people confined by a historical event.

There is, however, one striking similarity within the structural composition of both narratives which allows for an extrapolation of some interesting conclusions through comparison rather than differentiation. It is an extreme polarization of the films' group and individual protagonists, a dichotomy of such an intensity (stressed by both narrative and stylistic techniques) that, in its ultimate effect, the opposing forces seem to melt in their respective conviction and become more like a mirror reflection than clearly defined adversaries. Again, the chess metaphor seems useful: as the game of war abstracted to a ritualistic exchange of thrusts, and simplified into a strict code of possible movements, it seems to work perfectly as the implicit framework for the actions and motivations of the active agents of the films' narratives. The English titles of both are clearly polarized, but, while *The Red and the White* literally present the colors of the opposing forces on the board, *Ashes and Diamonds*, taken from a poem

by Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid, suggest the binarism of a more allegorical vision. It is interesting -and important- to observe that the original Hungarian title *Csillagosak, kátonak* is taken from an opening verse by József Atilla, a national poet of the Hungarian Republic, and literally translates as *Starspangled, Soldiers...*, thus identifying the main protagonist (the Communist revolutionary martyrs) by listing their poetic, almost ethereal qualities. Different on an explicit level, both titles reveal the ultimate concerns of Jancsó and Wajda: the reciprocity, interchangeability of polar extremes in the demonstrated political conflict, the parallel of motives and deeds. The star-spangled communist international fighters and the soldiers of the reactionary army in *The Red and the White* are literally replacing each other on screen in the chaotic sequences of hostile takeovers of a monastery and a field hospital on the river bank, each one accentuated by the merciless execution of the prisoners and collaborators. Even if we know (or at least are supposed to) who the red and who the white are -and careful watching makes evident a slight bias on the communist side as the more just and humane of the two- both sides ride the same juggernaut of violence and destruction, and there is virtually no political or philosophical discourse that could support their positions or preach the Soviet cause. It is not surprising then that the film had some serious problems with censorship and distribution in the USSR at the time of its release, and smartly enough the Hungarian side kept the right to distribute the film internationally in its original uncut version [58]. Ashes and diamonds from Wajda's film are more difficult to identify as -contrary to Jancsó's colors from its Western version of the title- they carry their poetic value

notions which make the film's message ambiguous and complex. While Jancsó seems not to be concerned with political and historical judgment of the fighting sides, Wajda leaves the question open as any attempt to propose a clear-cut answer would obviously be a distorted simplification. 'Who are we, then?', asks Krystyna, after reading the poem on the wall of the burned church. 'You - surely a diamond' answers Maciek, and his circumvent answer is in a full agreement with his romantic infatuation, but points at the same time to the real issue raised by the film. Both partisans, Maciek and Andrzej are diamonds as they are the 'flower of the Polish youth' of the *Columbus Generation* of 1920 (cf. Wajda's feature debut) who sacrificed their best years fighting for Poland of their childhood memories. They are ashes too, however, as their Poland is a lost cause at this particular historical moment and both are going to die with the dream that is only timber and not fire anymore, one on-screen at the end of the narrative, the other inevitably, as he is going back to the forest in order to replace a rebel commander who has just died in battle. Old communist Szczuka may seem a diamond all along the film (he seems sober, just, ready to sacrifice his life, and seriously concerned with the future of his estranged son), but he himself is implicated in the historical process that requires definitive choices. He fought in Spain in 1936, he could have as well belonged to the 1918 international brigade of Jancsó's film, but now he must fight for his new Poland, so drastically different from the one dreamt by the others. This profound internal conflict of all the protagonists of *Ashes and Diamonds* is best encapsulated by a brief interrogation scene involving Szczuka's own son caught with the group of partisans surrounded in

the forest (the equation is thus perfect). Asked by a communist officer what he was doing during the Warsaw Rising (cf. *Kanal*), the boy answers slowly: 'I was shooting Germans.' 'And now you're shooting Poles', the other accuses him. The boy waits a moment. 'And you, sir - sparrows'. The powerful truth is revealed in this moment. Both sides shoot Poles, shoot one another, themselves, in fact, in the never ending ritual of violence, and it is exactly what the red and the white, star-spangled and soldiers are doing, all no more than simple pawns on the chessboard of destiny.

The four films discussed in the last three chapters of this work seem to demonstrate very well the intriguing parallels as well as perpendiculars of Andrzej Wajda and Miklós Jancsó's thematic and stylistic development at the crucial periods of their respective careers. These interesting convergences and relationships became less and less visible -and practically non-existent- in the decades to follow. Their positions and attitudes as men, artists and intellectuals constantly re-shaped and influenced by the political pulse of their countries and the world, the two filmmakers followed their individual paths to quite different, but similarly uncompromised, ends. Even by the time that Jancsó mastered his historical abstraction with *Csilagosak, kátonak*, a new political situation in Poland ushered Wajda into the exploration of more contemporary problems and motifs within more traditional narrative and stylistic frameworks. Jancsó, on the other hand, continued his formal experimentation into a rigorous long-take aesthetics that more and more distanced the viewer and demanded his or her opening into a new experience of pure cinematic formalism which embraced the most vital class and social concerns of its time.

*Red Psalm* is generally considered Miklós Jancsó's masterpiece of the mature period (1970s as opposed to 1950s and '60s), although the director's longevity and the incessant artistic creativity well into the 2000s render such a description at least imprecise. The film earned Jancsó the Best Direction award in Cannes in 1972 and evidently secured his position of the celebrated political auteur that had seemed slightly compromised by his prolific output following the release of *The Red and the White* in 1967 [59]. In the span of three years that separated the two films, Jancsó directed six features and two documentaries of unequal value. Two of these features (*La pacifista*, 1970, and *La tecnica e il rito*, 1971) were international coproductions (the latter made for the Italian television) and as such they did not approach the trademark Jancsó themes of national / historical relevance, and were not critical or commercial successes at all. *Egi báraní* (*Agnus Dei*), another film of 1970, was overtly criticised [60] for being mannerist and confusing, conceived as to advertently alienate the audience, and therefore, the critical acclaim of *Red Psalm* seemed to be a crucial element in reinforcing the director's international as well as domestic stature. It also convinced the Hungarian cultural decision-makers that Jancsó's challenging aesthetic manner was still of a proper political commitment, and that, in turn, opened for the director an official channel to the West as he was allowed to freely engage in the economically sound co-productions in Rome, where he actually lived some six months each year between 1973 and 1977.

There is, however, a much more important aspect of the *Red Psalm* success, at least in terms of its relevance to the premise of the thesis being developed. The

film, twelfth feature in the director's career, is an apogee of the continuous development of the set of Jancsó's thematic and formal concerns that seem to achieve a perfect balance and harmony being at the same time a film of poignance and originality. As was argued earlier, Jancsó had continued to develop and experiment in the decades to follow, but nevertheless, *Red Psalm's* overall construction on both narrative and stylistic level is undeniably the crowning of a particular period started with *Igy jöttem (My Way Home)* in 1964 and continued through two great films analysed in previous chapters as well as works that followed: *Csend és kiáltás (Silence and Cry, 1968)*, *Fényes szelek (The Confrontation, 1968)*, and *Sirótko (Winter Wind, 1969)*.

As comprehensive film-by-film analysis is not the purpose of the present work, and Jancsó's oeuvre of that period was explored in a sufficient and organized way (with a full book-length study consecrated to *Red Psalm*) by Graham Petrie [61], I will end the thesis by tracing the Hungarian director's later development directly from *The Round-Up* and *The Red and the White* as the preceding discussion of both supplied enough analytic material to draw specific comparative conclusions.

## CONCLUSION



In what way, therefore, are Miklós Jancsó's later films different from their acclaimed predecessors, and what are the particular elements that justify their discussion in terms of an "ascent" or gradual sophistication of their narrative and stylistic characteristics?

Let us start with several notes about *Red Psalm* since its importance within the body of Jancsó's work has just been mentioned. The crucial departure from the style of the earlier films is based on *Psalm*'s narrative construction and character formation within the context of historical film that it still is. The film nearly denies verbal description as it constitutes a purely cinematic experience that presents its political agenda not in a linear but a circular and episodic manner which could constitute many parallel stories or one story told in many different ways. As any film's narrative structure inevitably involves character conceptualization and development, it should be instructive to discuss both issues simultaneously and compare their application in *Red Psalm* to the pair of the films from the 1960s.

*The Round Up* -as has been indicated- offers a linear and chronologically straightforward line-up of characters which have no enhanced psychology beyond the immediate survival instinct, and which replace one another along a clearly defined narrative. They are cases in a behavioural study, but still identified by names and their understandable will to escape the deadly ordeal carefully prepared and conducted by the apparatus of oppression in the prison camp. *The Red and the White* considerably intensifies the progress of character ambiguity by reducing the protagonists to the level of nameless and often faceless pawns on the board of a war game within which

they are set against each other in a clearly symmetrical relationship, thus constituting an abstracted representation of the willing instruments of institutionalized violence. *Red Psalm* transcends these concepts of a film protagonist and achieves an altogether different level. The characters are given no names and no behavioural plausibility and they do not function as simple abstractions of a particular power struggle either. They are elevated -by Jancsó and Hernádi- to the position of allegorical proto-heroes, their function is not to illustrate a historical process on the screen, but rather to open a discussion between the film and its audience, engage into a strictly political discourse. They do not perform specific tasks within the story, they represent a possibility of action, its cause, duration and consequences, entering and leaving the frame in accordance with the director's arbitrary will, at times dying only to be resurrected a couple of shots later.

In fact, one can chart the development of the character conceptualization within the three films as the progressive complexity of a geometrical pattern, from the linearity of appearance in *The Round-Up* to the rectangular symmetry of *The Red and the White* to the circularity of function in *Red Psalm* which is the most complex and demanding as far as the relationship audience - protagonist is concerned.

In *Red Psalm*, Jancsó is not at all interested in retracing the centrifugal axis of historical reference discussed in Chapter 5. The peasant movements on the Hungarian *pusta* do not seem to serve as an anecdotal or incidental outer layer of a particular military conflict that happens simultaneously in Hungary and all around the world. Although rebellious peasant movements were, in fact, organized and developed in the

late 1800s Hungary, and Jancsó himself claimed (62) that all the texts said or sung in the film were written by peasants themselves, the lack of any historical reference point makes the context extremely ambiguous for a lay viewer (63). The director's peculiar choice of narrative strategy and a unique treatment of character within it, seems therefore to achieve a historically universal stature; it goes beyond any politically identifiable struggle and addresses the audience with a passionate discourse deeply submerged in the philosophy of materialistic determinism, itself based on the premise of a circular (or spiral) sequence of political/economic formations replacing one another in their ascent to the ultimate perfection. Jancsó the Marxist openly supports the hope and struggle of the poor, and -like in Chile during the late Summer of 1973- the oppressed and exploited masses all around the world can understand it and identify themselves with the victims on screen.

*Még kér a nép* constitutes therefore the culmination of a particular character-focused experimentation. Most films that Jancsó has made after 1972 share a new (or reinvigorated, at least) concern: an individual hero, a clearly recognisable character identified by name and a well specified position within the surrounding social and/or political environment. Jancsó's films from the late 1970s, and I mention only those that I am acquainted with: *Vizi privati, pubbliche virtù* (*Private Vices, Public Virtues*, 1976) and *Magyar rapszódia* (*Hungarian Rhapsody* 1978), clearly grow out of the Jancsó canon as set in the nineteenth century and probe the issues of power structure, oppression and revolt. Setting aside *Private Vices'* soft-core eroticism as well as the Italian producer and (partially) cast, the two films share

Jancsó's permanent concerns with men facing history, forced or willing to submerge in it head on, in a process that leads to inevitably tragic conclusion. The above mentioned individual hero seems to be the main difference, not only in the very fact of choosing one to weave the narrative about, but also in the specifics of the choice: in both cases, the leading man is (or at least is based on) a real historical character who happens to be an aristocrat rebelling against the vital (if unjust) interests of his own social class.

The most striking development, however, is an apparent rejection of the long-take aesthetics. Both films contain many more shots than *Red Psalm* or *Elektraia*, and the Italian film is indeed different with over three hundred shots and intensive use of close-ups.

*Hungarian Rhapsody*, however, with its 95 cuts, places itself in the range of *The Red and the White* and has an impressive number of sequence shots within which the camera tracks and cranes among the characters in constant movement. Continuing their ingenious application in *Red Psalm*, the mise-en-scène and camera movement of *Rhapsody* further demonstrate the stylistic divergence from the older films as well as the development in Jancsó's treatment and application of movement within the long-take aesthetics. Although the undefined landscape of the flat Hungarian plains has for long been a favorite setting of Miklós Jancsó's films, *Hungarian Rhapsody* reuses it with refreshed vigour and power. The *pusta* is the film's main profilmic environment, but this time ornamented with candles, and bonfires to an oneiric and almost surrealist effect. In full accordance with its movement-centered design and philosophy, the film

elevates its plain rural mise-en-scène to the aesthetically impressive theatre stage filled up with characters in their repetitive movements: dances, group gatherings, skirmishes and riding horses rise up to a constant, intricate multi-layered choreography of obsessive ritualistic intensity.

My intention is to close this thesis with a couple of notes on the most recent Miklós Jancsó's films. *Utolsó vacsora az Arabs Szürkénél* (*Last Supper at Grey Arab*, 2000), and *Kelj fel, komam, ne aludjál!* (*Hey, Mate, Don't You Sleep!*, 2002), constitute the third and fourth installments of the Pepe and Kapa pentalogy, but at the time of conception and writing of the main parts of this thesis they were the latest films made by the octagenerian director. Separated from *Hungarian Rhapsody* by two full decades (in themselves an intriguing transitory period, analyzed in detail by Graham Petrie [64]) the films seem to many a decisive break from Jancsó's traditional style and theme. Made fast and cheap, with low-budget minimalist art direction, the films are a sort of a political cabaret filled with slapstick gags, clownish protagonists, abundance of rock and hip-hop music as well as incongruent episodes that render their loose narratives almost incomprehensible to the Western (or non-Hungarian) viewer. Above all, the films are set in present-day Budapest with its streets, bridges and apartment buildings: is there anything farther from the peasants chanting their revolutionary psalms within the neverending landscape of the *pusta* and horses galloping along the river banks?

Still, the films feel very Jancsian in several important aspects. Their contemporary setting is but a new tactic that allows Jancsó-Hernádi team to conduct a continuous

exploration of the political and historical causes and effects which have shaped Hungary of today. *Hey, Mate, Don't You Sleep!* constantly mixes present and past, concentrating on the round-up of Hungarian Jews towards the end of World War II, while *Last Supper at Grey Arab* explores issues of power and violence by introducing gangsters and paramilitary youth (neo-nazi?) groups as active participants on the political stage of Budapest of twenty-first century. Music, dance and movement have always been the predominant element in the director's aesthetics and still work together to convey the sense of agitation, *camraderie* and defiance.

Finally, a note on the camera work. The camera trajectory has been ever changing and developing since *The Red and the White*, but the basic layout of the tracks has remained pretty simple (as described in chapter 7). By the time Jancsó made *Red Psalm* and *Hungarian Rhapsody* the tracks seemed to get relatively longer with more pronounced curves that occasionally tended to combine into an S-shaped arabesque or half a circle. If in *Red Psalm* the camera gained an almost total independence in a sense of framing and following protagonists while zooming replaced a cut to a close-up thus allowing for a smooth and visually stimulating progress from a long shot to an enlarged detail (or *vice versa*), *Last Supper* brings it to another dimension. It is not a long-take film *per se*, but in a few sophisticated sequence shots, Jancsó makes a full use of the possibilities given by crane in movement and lets it travel freely from place to place and character to character on several vertical and horizontal planes which turns the camera into an entity endowed with the consciousness of the director himself. Whether it follows dancing men, circles around kissing couples or rises over

Pepe and Kapa who wake up on the top of a high downtown statue, Jancsó creates a sense of vertigo by taking us along with or against several layers of movement within the frame.

It is exactly this elaborate combination of elements -sophisticated patterns of movements performed by realistic or metaphorical heroes within the minimalist natural decors- through which films like *Red Psalm*, *Hungarian Rhapsody* or *Last Supper at the Grey Arab Horse* affect the viewer on the most profound level. By confronting the conditioned expectations of a cinema audience with the personal vision of an experimenting artist, Jancsó transforms the intellectual decoding of a narrative discourse into a liberating, purely visual epiphany.

Miklós Jancsó's commitment to social and political issues within historical themes is a constant aspect of his artistic output. His total cinematic oeuvre has been influenced and to some extent shaped by the volatile position that his country has had throughout the twentieth century as well as by the dynamics and fluctuations experienced by the whole region. The sense of forced embedding in an extremely difficult context has been shared by other East European artists, Andrzej Wajda among them. As has been demonstrated throughout the body of this work, both artists have expressed similar concerns but within increasingly different aesthetics.

It seems to me important to close by recapitulating one of the opening ideas. Miklós Jancsó is still an active and imaginative filmmaker, and his films from the last two decades are unjustly marginalized and understudied. Throughout fifty-five years

of his prolific career, Jancsó has been able to constantly stimulate audiences, critics and fellow artists alike, incessantly experimenting and reinvigorating his style while strictly adhering to his ethical, social and political convictions.

It's not the camera movement itself that is important to me, but what it says: the content. I am insecure when things stop around me, when it's quiet. I can't stand in one place, and I don't allow the camera to stop. What stops in life, loses my interest. A new idea is always more stimulating, and every movement - is exactly this: a new idea to start with [65].

## NOTES

1. Jancsó monograph filmographies seem, in general, to be selective and incomplete. The most precise list on a Jancsó Finnish Website page cites 22 titles made in the years 1951-57, prior to Jancsó's feature debut.



2. Bergman: 40 feature films (1946-82) plus 10 TV productions since 1982, Chabrol: 53 features (1958-2003);
3. The following passage on Jancsó's Hungary is based on Hoensch, Jörg K., *A History of Modern Hungary: 1867-1986*, London-New York: Longman Group, 1988, Chapters 4-6
4. Haltof, Marek, *Polish National Cinema*, New York: Berghan Books, 2002, p.73
5. Paul, David W., ed., *Politics, Art and Commitment in the East European Cinema*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983, p.6
6. Ibid., p.7
7. Petrie, Graham, in Paul, ed. p.190
8. Nemeskürty, István, *World and Image: Huistory of the Hungarian Cinema*, Budapest: Corvina Press, 1974, pp.191-203
9. Petrie, Graham, "Miklós Jancsó: Decline and Fall?" in Paul, ed.
10. Nemeskürty, p.204
11. Petrie, in Paul, ed.; also Kelly, William (*Allegro Barbaro*) and Karen Jaehne (*Hungarian Rhapsody*), *Film Quarterly* 34/1 (Fall 1980), pp.47-56
12. Hoensch, ch.5
13. Jancsó, *Kino*, p.44
14. Horton, Andrew J., "This Silly Profession: Miklós Jancsó Interviewed", *Kinoeye: New Perspectives on European Cinema*, Internet Film Magazine, v.3/3, 2003
15. Jancsó, *Kino*, p.42
16. Petrie in Paul, ed., p.190
17. Petrie, Graham, *History Must Answer to Man: the Contemporary Hungarian Cinema*, Budapest, Corvina Press, 1979; also Petrie in Paul, ed., p.191
18. *Miklós Jancsó: Seminarium Filmowe*, Wrocław: Uniwersytet Wrocławski, 1979, p.19
19. Petrie, Graham, and Ruth Dwyer, *Before the Wall Came Down: Soviet and East European Filmmakers in the West*, New York: UPA, 1990, p.[125]

20. *Polityka*, *Kultura*, and *Nurt* often dealt with culture/art and politics issues; *Dialog*, *Literatura*, and *Poezja* were literary oriented monthly magazines that often printed interviews with filmmakers or published scripts of films and plays; *Kino* and *Film* (a monthly and weekly respectively) were dealing directly with cinema; *Ekran*, focused mostly on television talked about film industry as well
21. Bachmann, Gideon, "Jancso Plain", *Sound and Sound* 43 (Autumn 1980), pp.217-221; also Horton, "Jancsó Who?", *Kinoeye*, Vol. 3/3 2003
22. Jancsó, *Kino*, p.42
23. Jancsó, *Film*, p.11
24. Kovács, Dezső, "Co to znaczy historia?", *Dialog*, 4/1982, p.120
25. *Ibid.*, p.121
26. Petrie in Paul, p.191
27. Kovács, p.122
28. Jancsó, *Kino*, p.43
29. Jancsó,
30. Kovács, p.119
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid*, p.120
34. Puzyna, "Historia w wersji romantycznej", *Jancsó: Seminarium Filmowe*, 62-81
35. *Ibid*, p.63
36. *Ibid*, p.64
37. Jancsó, *Kino*, p.42
38. Puzyna. p.69
39. *Ibid*, p.74
40. The following paragraphs are based on several books dealing with history of Poland and Hungary separately: mainly Gieysztor (1969), Halecki (1976), Török (1976), and Hoensch (1988). See bibliography for details;
41. Jancsó, in Horton Interview

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Michalek, Boleslaw, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, London: The Tantivy Press, 1973, p.9
45. Michalek in Paul, ed., p.169-170
46. Michalek, p.36
47. Horton, "Jancsó Who?", *Kinoeye*, Vol. 3/3 2003
48. Senator of the First Cadence of the Senate of the III Polish Republic (1989-91); besides: Wajda was the president of the Polish Filmmakers Association (a very prestigious but extremely difficult position in Communist Poland): elected in 1977 he resigned after the imposition of the martial law in Poland in December 1981 only to become a member of Lech Walesa council (1982-89), more recently nominated a Honorary member of the National Union of Artists of Poland;
49. Puzyna, p.69
50. However, Wajda's first three films are set in chronological sequence within the WWII context, and are considered a trilogy by some writers (cf. Paul, p.3)
51. Michalek, Boleslaw, and Frank Turaj, *The Modern Cinema of Poland*, Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988, p.133
52. Hoensh, pp.7-10
53. Jancsó, in Horton Interview
54. Nemeskürty, p.201;
55. Taddei, Claudio in *Jancsó: Seminarium Filmowe*, pp.82-104; Michalek pp.65-74
56. Michalek and Turaj, pp.3-5
57. The quality of video copies I was working with made precise counting impossible; however, according to Ervin Gyertyán cited in *Jancsó: Seminarium Filmowe* (p.11), the numbers are 150 for *The Round Up* and 88 for *The Red and the White*
58. Petrie in Paul, ed., p.191
59. Ibid., p.189
60. Nemeskürty, p.204

61. Petrie, *History Must Answer to Man*, ch.2, and *Red Psalm/Még kér a nép*, Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Flicks Books, 1998
62. Jancsó in Martin, Marcel and Claude Beylie “Conversation with Jancsó” cited in *Jancsó: Seminarium Filmowe*, p.51
63. Whereas the two films discussed earlier were supplied (at least in their export versions) with the period contextualizing introductions, *Red Psalm* was not. The only historical anchor is Friedrich Engels’ letter “sent” to the peasants read aloud at the beginning of the film which still must be considered rather symbolic than literal reference
64. Petrie, “The Tyrant’s Waltz”, *Kinoeye*, vol.3/4, 2003
65. Jancsó, *Ekran*, 12.IX.1971, cited in *Jancsó: Seminarium Filmowe*, p.46

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25. Anyád! A szúnyogok (Damn! Mosquitoes!, 1999),
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23. Kék Duna keringő (Blue Danube Waltz, 1991),
22. Isten hátrafelé megy (God Walks Backwards, 1990),
21. Jézus Krisztus horoszkópja (Jesus Christ Horoscope, 1988),
20. Szörnyek évadja (Season of Monsters, 1986),
19. L'aube (The Dawn, 1985),
18. A zsarnok szíve, avagy Boccaccio Magyarországon (Tyrant's Heart, 1981),
17. Allegro barbaro (1978)
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13. Szerelmem, Elektra (Elektra, My Love, 1974),
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6. Csend és kiáltás (Silence and Scream, 1968),
5. Csillagosok, katonák (The Red and the White, 1967),
4. Szegénylegények (The Round Up, 1965),
3. Így jöttem (My Way Home, 1964),
2. Oldás és kötés (Cantata, 1963),
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