

Hollywood behind the Iron Curtain

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RÓBERT TAKÁCS



PTa

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The building of Filmmuseum cinema in Budapest.
Source: Film Yearbook [Filmévkönyv], 1980. 230.



Gregory Peck és
Virginia Mayo, a
bemutatásra kerü-
lő »Öfelsége kapi-
tányá« című ame-
rikai film fősze-
replói

Gregory Peck and Virginia Mayo on the cover of the fortnightly journal Filmvilág.
Source: Filmvilág, 1959/2.

INTRODUCTION

“The new conqueror enters with his victorious army”, was how the arrival of the American cartoon *Pinocchio* was announced in the 8th December 1941 issue of *Magyar Film* magazine. The magazine cover featured an image of the wooden puppet Disney hero riding on a donkey, surrounded by other characters from the well-known tale.¹ This was one day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and four days before Hungary’s declaration of war against the United States. It explains why Sándor Barcs, then a journalist for the opposition Smallholders’ Party [which opposed Hungary’s participation in the war], who subsequently became a pillar of press control and sports diplomacy in the Kádár era, wrote with quiet confidence about the new cinematic sensation. “It never fails to touch a chord in me when, amidst the cacophony of a strident, dissonant world, a quiet and gentle voice unexpectedly begins to speak of love, humanity, loyalty, conscience, freedom, and our microscopic minuteness; I am always moved by the sense of powerlessness, of pathetic weakness, that has struggled in vain for thousands of years against huge monsters and evil passions; in vain, yet perhaps not in vain.”² Hollywood had many faces and could symbolise any number of things.

¹ *Magyar Film*, 8th December 1941, 1.

² Sándor Barcs: *Pinocchio*. *Újság*, 6th December 1941 [In the present volume, the quotations and titles of sources are given with their original spelling, with added punctuation only where necessary in the interests of comprehension – ed.]

Here, in conditions of war, at a time when the threat of global conflict had become a reality, an American film was still able to spark a glimmer of humanist hope in the heart of an opposition thinker living in a country that would soon become the enemy.

This was true even if, for the preceding two decades, Hollywood had been synonymous not so much with humanity but with entertainment and saccharine dreams. American films rose to dominance in Hungary in the 1920s, just as they become dominant throughout the world — to the chagrin of the French and Italian film industries. One might add that the American hits and stars of the silent film era were known even in the Soviet Union,³ on the opposite side of the ideological frontline, while in the days of the New Economic Policy, between 1921 and 1928, before the establishment of the Stalinist regime, there had been nothing to prevent the American stars Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks from visiting the Soviet Union in 1927, when director Sergei Komarov seized the opportunity to shoot the silent film *A Kiss from Mary Pickford*, which featured a cameo appearance by the famous couple. The comedy revolves around the character of Goga, a cinema usher, who falls in love with the aspiring actress Dusha, whose head is filled with dreams of the Hollywood stars. Dusha becomes interested in Goga only after he encounters Mary Pickford, who turns him into a celebrity by kissing him.⁴ As the example illustrates, this particular kiss was a message that could be interpreted by audiences throughout the world in the second half of the

³ Reinhold Wagnleitner: *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War*. Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 232–235.

⁴ On the film, see: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018268/> (Downloaded: 05/01/2022.)

1920s: Hollywood had already become a global “cultural superpower”.

Unsurprisingly, this was equally true in Hungary, where American films dominated cinema programmes throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Hollywood’s dominance can even be quantified in terms of “censorship metres” — that is, the length of approved film reels, which amounted to two-thirds of the total volume of film admitted by the censors in the mid-1920s. However, this dominance declined with the emergence of talkies — and with the expansion of Hungarian film production. From a share of 65% in 1925, the proportion of Hollywood films had fallen to less than 50% by the end of the 1930s.⁵ At the same time, the length of the admitted film reels tells us nothing about what the cinemas were showing, or how many times the films were screened. Film meterage was certainly a benchmark that showed the European film industry to its best advantage. The superiority of American films in terms of the number of screenings and attendance figures may have been significantly greater.

Once Hungary had entered the war, films from enemy countries disappeared from cinema programmes: screenings of American films were banned in 1942, and it was stipulated that a certain percentage of programme time had to be devoted to Hungarian films. This led to a boom in the Hungarian film industry, similar to that experienced during the First World War: by 1943, Hungary had become Europe’s third biggest film producer after Germany and Italy.⁶

⁵ Márk Záhonyi-Ábel: Külföldi filmek a Horthy-korszak Magyarorszáján [Foreign films in Horthy-era Hungary]. In: István Feitl (ed.): *Nyitott / zárt Magyarország. Politikai és kulturális orientáció 1914–1949* [Open/closed Hungary. Political and cultural orientation 1914–1949]. Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest, 2013, 239–241.

⁶ Györgyi Vajdovich: A magyar film 1939 és 1945 között [Hungarian filmmaking between 1939 and 1945]. *Metropolis*, 2013/2, 6–10.

In the journal published by the Janus Pannonius Society, a circle of folk-oriented writers, it was observed with bitter irony that Italian films were attempting to fill the void left by Hollywood — in the negative sense, too: “The Italian film industry is working diligently to supplant the films from Anglo-Saxon countries, especially America, that have been banned from Europe. Italian historical films faithfully imitate — albeit with more modest execution — the crowd scenes that feature in American movies; they conjure up jungles in the studio and produce more or less successful apotheoses of the colonial spirit. American films convey a romanticised image of history, as do most of the Italian social films that reach Hungary. The flavour of American kitsch is keenly pronounced in the *Luce nelle tenebre* [Light in the Darkness], recently released in Budapest.”⁷

The present publication explores the public discourse surrounding film admissions policy in the four and a half decades after 1945 through the prism of the evaluation and approval of Hollywood and American cinema. With the exception of the first few years, this was a period during which Hungary was a one-party dictatorship with a controlled public sphere, where cultural and ideological goals and interests were in conflict with both the ideals of American cinema and the economic (and political) aspirations of Hollywood. Although it was clear that the Soviet Union, which was emerging as the dominant power in the region, was not indifferent to the activity of the public sphere, up until 1948 the cultural subsystem, including Hungarian filmmaking, where the first signs of life emerged

⁷ Gábor Szij: Filmek [Films]. *Sorsunk*, 1943/4, 342. (My italics in the quotation — R. T.)

only after the war, and film distribution, which was gaining momentum more rapidly, operated on a basically pluralistic basis.

With the outbreak of the Cold War and the accelerating Communist takeover from the autumn of 1947, as a Soviet satellite state the country's room for manoeuvre in terms of foreign policy was initially reduced to a minimum, and even following the death of Stalin began to expand only within strict constraints. Hungary and the United States continued to be ideological adversaries as part of two hostile systems of alliances until the fall of Communism. But even within the framework of the Cold War — in which, despite periods of keener opposition, the main tendency was that of détente after 1953 — the normalisation of Hungarian–American relations and the presentation of American cultural outputs did become possible. Although the term “Iron Curtain” became a household phrase after being used in a speech delivered by Churchill in 1946 in Fulton, research in recent decades has taken it as read that the Iron Curtain was not hermetically sealed in Hungary, the Soviet Union, or any other European Communist country. For this reason, more recent literature speaks not of an iron curtain but rather of a “nylon curtain”, a semi-permeable membrane, emphasising the aspects of both restriction and permeability.⁸

On the other hand, American culture and Hungarian–American bilateral relations were to some extent dissociated from one another, while the cultural subsystem became

⁸ Gyorgy Peteri: Nylon Curtain – Transnational and Trans Systemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe. *Slavonica*, 2004/2, 113–123; Michael David-Fox: The Iron Curtain as Semi-Permeable Membrane: The Origins and Demise of the Stalinist Superiority Complex. In: Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer (eds.): *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange Across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s–1960s*. College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2014, 14–39.

somewhat “emancipated” and a kind of self-movement of cultural imports developed, even if Western culture was still essentially assumed to be an “ideological threat”. In the Khrushchev era, the threat of a Third World War diminished and the announcement of the policy of peaceful coexistence shifted the crux of the confrontation between the two world systems. While the arms race naturally continued, attempts to conquer space became the salient arena of rivalry, although the main focus shifted to economic competition and ideological debate. These same battles were fought in the world of cinematography. In this period — in contrast to the almost hermetic isolation of the late Stalinist era — both the Soviet and Hungarian Party leadership believed that the future lay in the Soviet galaxy, that the ideological debate could be won, and that, in this context, moderate cultural opening might generate greater returns than costs.⁹

The intention was to reduce these costs by means of the censorship mechanisms that were maintained even amid de-Stalinisation. Within the Soviet bloc, Hungary was no exception in this respect. Pre- and post-censorship extended to all areas of publicity and communication, impacting the creative work of Hungarian artists and journalists, while gatekeepers also controlled the reception of foreign culture. The movements¹⁰ of citizens were also controlled, as was the postal service.¹¹ Hungarian film production, which will be

⁹ For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see: Melinda Kalmár: *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjetrendszer 1945–1990* [In the pull of historical galaxies. Hungary and the Soviet system, 1945–1990]. Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2014.

¹⁰ Péter Bencsik: *Kelet és Nyugat között. Államhatárok, úti okmányok, határátlépés Magyarországon és Csehszlovákiában (1945–1989)* [Between East and West. State borders, travel documents and border crossing in Hungary and Czechoslovakia (1945–1989)]. MTA BTK Történettudományi Intézet, Budapest, 2019.

¹¹ Róbert Takács: *Politikai újságírás a Kádár-korban* [Political journalism in the Kádár era]. Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest, 2012, 104–105.

discussed only tangentially below, was supervised by the Film Directorate, which functioned within the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and the creative process was accompanied, restricted, and influenced by censorship from the moment the script was approved. Film imports were also determined by this state body, together with the Film Admissions Committee, which was subordinate to the ministry in practical matters. Thus, only those films approved by the Film Admissions Committee, which was responsible for the implementation of the party state's cultural policy, could be released in Hungary. Trade in films was carried out by the monopolistic export–import company Hungarofilm, which was established for this specific purpose, while film distribution, handled by the Motion Picture Distribution Company (MOKÉP), and film circulation, were likewise monopolies. The latter activity was not entrusted to one, national company, but rather to one cinema operator in the capital and 19 in the counties. It was also the ministry, rather than the lower-level bodies, that decided which of the purchased films would be released, and when. This monopolistic system persisted until the late 1980s.

Had this unchanged structure resulted in unchanged practice, the present publication would be very brief indeed. However, several important things emerge from the history of the opening that succeeded the high degree of seclusion after the brief period of pluralism in the post-war years. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the “software” — that is, actual practice — was able to change even if the “hardware” — or the principles of cultural policy — remained essentially intact. A glance at the cinema listings from the mid-1950s, which were by no means lacking in Western productions, conveys an entirely different picture from the one that emerges in the mid-1980s. The changes that took place over

several decades were not of course independent of the shifts that occurred in foreign policy and the economy, since the two were closely related. Opening in the context of foreign policy, motivated largely by (external) economic interests, and subsequently the double dependence that had emerged by the 1980s,¹² as well as the interpretation of the role of Hungarian foreign policy that came out of the Helsinki process, all stimulated East–West cultural relations. These circumstances were not unique to Hungary: their main trends were characteristic of the entire region, including the Soviet Union and the whole of the Soviet bloc. Although the extent of cultural and economic openness varied, similar trends in terms of the relationship with American films can be traced in other countries in the region. Although considered “more liberal”, Hungarian and Polish film admissions policy was still closer to the “hardliner” Romanian or East German public sphere than to Yugoslavia, which, after the break with Moscow in 1949, was obliged to pursue an entirely different foreign policy. Hollywood held a particular attraction for President Tito, who constructed a kind of “Coca-Cola socialism” in a Yugoslavia that had quickly become far more open to American popular culture.¹³ Not to mention Austria, which had no significant national film industry and which was occupied by four powers until 1955, subsequently becoming a neutral state with a capitalist system.¹⁴

At the same time, the history of the Hungarian public sphere and Hollywood also reveals that although American film production — which was far more business driven

¹² József Böröcz: Kettős függőség és a külső kötődések informálissá válása: a magyar eset [Double dependency and the growing informality of external ties: The case of Hungary]. *Eszmélet*, 1993/18–19, 74–88.

¹³ Radina Vučetić: *Coca-Cola Socialism. Americanization of Yugoslav Culture in the Sixties*. CEU Press, Budapest–New York, 2018.

¹⁴ Reinhold Wagnleitner: Op. cit.

than European film production — was not homogeneous and likewise developed and changed over the decades, Hungarian cultural policy was unable to adhere consistently to its own principles in the face of economic constraints and audience expectations. The process of de-Stalinisation, which was steered towards greater openness by the first economic reform in 1968 and the second in the 1980s, clarified centre–periphery relations, the roles of the strong and the weak, and, from a different perspective, forced cultural policy into a permanently defensive position. Meanwhile, it should not be forgotten that it was not only foreign policy and the economic environment, and not just society that changed during these decades, but also the media system and the technology that surrounded the film industry.

The present publication follows the developments generated by the processes, influences, interests and principles outlined above, and the reception and approval of American films, which, on an imaginary scale, were perhaps furthest removed from the Socialist film industry, between 1945 and 1989. Our starting point is the beginning of 1945, when cinemas reopened as the fighting came to an end, and our endpoint is 1989, when the party state was forced to give up its power and its organisational monopolies in the film and cinema industries.



Anti-Hollywood caricature. (Text: Neither erotics, nor punch-up - I cut this psalm out)

Source: Ludas Matyi, 1948/38. 8.

1. AMERICAN FILMS DURING THE COALITION YEARS (1944–1949)

Following the liberation of Budapest, life returned to the cinemas. A peculiarly pluralistic system emerged, reflecting, as it did in many other areas, the bargaining among the coalition parties — and, more generally, the political system that was established at the turn of 1944/1945. Firstly, the Hungarian Film Company (MAFIRT), which was allied with the Hungarian Communist Party, was established in January 1945. The reason for the haste was to create the most favourable conditions for Soviet films — that is, to ensure that it was primarily Soviet films that satisfied the hunger for the cinema among Hungarian audiences once the fighting was over.¹ Nevertheless, neither Soviet films nor MAFIRT, which was also backed by the Soviet film exporting body Sovexportfilm, enjoyed a monopoly. The coalition parties decided not to entrust the running of the cinemas to commercial operators, but instead divided up cinema licences² in Budapest among themselves, while each party attempted to retain a foothold in the provincial towns. The new cinema companies, MAFIRT (under the aegis of the Hungarian Communist Party), KIMORT (Independent Smallholders' Party), Orient (Social Democratic Party)

¹ Letter from István Szirmai to Ernő Gerő (23rd January 1945). PIL 274. f. 23/22 ó. e.

² Briefing by the Sarló Cultural Film Department on the subject of the distribution of cinemas. PIL 284. f. 2/33. ó. e.

and Sarló [Sickle] (National Peasant Party), were also a substantial item in the parties' budgets. In other words, all the coalition parties — including, to some extent, even the Communists at the time — had an interest in the operation of film distribution according to market principles. However, among MAFIRT's priority goals were the propagation of Soviet films and, in the long run, the marginalisation of American movies and the elimination of American propaganda. The management of MAFIRT planned to achieve this by applying a different strategy — “a correct, political, professional, and considered method of portioning out Soviet and non-Soviet films”³ — than its Soviet partner. At the same time, Sovexportfilm was keen to see rapid results and cared little for the actual interests of Hungarian audiences, which also generated permanent conflicts with the Hungarian Communist film company.⁴

A report dated August 1945 shows that in terms of quantity, the superiority of Soviet films was successfully ensured in the initial months. According to Soviet data, a total of 149 films were released in 58 cinemas in the capital and in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun county that year, 42.5% of which — 63 films — represented Soviet cinematography. In second place were American films, even though no new American films had yet arrived in Hungary at that time. The 48 Hollywood films accounted for 32% of the reported film supply. Hungarian

³ Reply from the Hungarian Film Company (MAFIRT) to the transcript summarising in 11 points the Russian objections to MAFIRT submitted by comrade Quin. PIL 274. f. 23/23. ó. e.

⁴ On this, see: Gábor Murányi: „A legrosszabb orosz film is jobb, mint egy amerikai.” Dokumentumok a szovjet film magyarországi hegemóniájának megteremtéséről (1945–1948) [“The worst Russian film is better than an American movie.” Documents on the expansion of Soviet film hegemony in Hungary (1945–1948)]. *Múltunk*, 2005/3, 39–102.

productions (22 films, 15%) as well as French (12.8%) and English films (4.3%) came a long way behind.⁵

The supply outlined above failed to satisfy the demand. “In small cinemas, old American movies are proving hugely successful. Productions from the Russian film industry have got off to a flying start, while new American films — almost 40 have arrived to date — have run for weeks in the cinemas”, reported the arts weekly *Fényszóró*, describing the cinema scene in late summer 1945.⁶ The 40 new films mentioned were a gross exaggeration: although, as we have seen, this many films were in fact screened in the cinemas, most of them had already been released earlier, in 1940–1941. The first truly new American film, *Air Force*, was brought in by the U.S. mission in early July, and was followed by several others.⁷ Thus, the first film sent to Hungary was a 1943 Second World War drama, which, although it recounted the story of the joint Soviet–American anti-fascist struggle, did not focus on the joint efforts but rather on the U.S. conflicts in the Pacific.

A survey conducted in 1947 found, unsurprisingly, that Hungarian audiences preferred American (25%) and Hungarian (25%) films. French films were chosen by 16% and English films by 12%. The popularity of Soviet films was very low, being mentioned by just 7% of respondents.⁸ In terms of proportions, this was a third of the number who voted for the Hungarian Communist Party in the elections on 31st August 1947. The picture is reinforced by the available

⁵ Memorandum on the discussions between American and Soviet military leaders held on 27th August 1945. In: István Feitl (ed.): *A magyarországi Szövetséges Ellenőrző Bizottság jegyzőkönyvei 1945–1947* [Minutes of the meetings of the Hungarian Allied Control Commission]. Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2003.

⁶ A magyar filmgyártás helyzete [The situation in Hungarian filmmaking]. *Fényszóró*, 16th August 1945, 12.

⁷ *Világ*, 6th July 1945.

⁸ Annual audit of the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research – 1947. Magyar Központi Híradó Rt. MNL OL XIX-I-10, box 11.

attendance figures: in the autumn of 1946, MAFIRT achieved an increase in attendance at Soviet film screenings from 14% to 21% by organising viewings for groups of school children and factory workers.⁹ American films, on the other hand, easily sold themselves. In fact, there was even an example of an advertising campaign designed to promote a Soviet film backfiring: in May 1947, MAFIRT reported that beneficiaries had redeemed their free tickets for the most popular films — most of which were American. A screening of the Hollywood film *Arabian Nights* was so overrun with holders of free tickets that the box office had to be closed.¹⁰

Post-war Hungarian film production was slow to recover, and scarcely any Hungarian films were produced for years, thus annual cinema demand — estimated at around 160 films per year — was met almost entirely from abroad. The journal *Új Ember*, rightly lamenting this situation, described the country as the colony of foreign film producers, where “the dictatorship of foreign tastes is imposed with something approaching oppression on our way of life and our own film production”, and where cinemas respond to questions that are alien to the Hungarian soul, relying on a foreign morality.¹¹ The two biggest “colonisers” were the American and Soviet film industries, as suggested by the figures from the summer of 1945.

However, in 1945 Hollywood had not yet truly arrived in Hungary. A turning point was marked with the emergence of the Hollywood export company MOPEX (the Motion

⁹ Report by the Hungarian Film Office to the Central Secretariat of the Hungarian Communist Party on its work in November 1946. PIL 274. f. 23/22. ó. e.

¹⁰ Report by the Hungarian Film Office to the Central Secretariat of the Hungarian Communist Party on its work in April 1947. Statement. PIL 274. f. 23/23. ó. e.

¹¹ Béla Kézai: Mit nézzünk a filmen? [What do we see in the film?] *Új Ember*, 1947/46, 5.

Picture Export Association), which was established by eight film studios. According to a report by the newspaper *Közgazdaság*, without this film exporting body the expected dumping of American films would have placed European cinemas in a comfortable position: “In the warehouses of U.S. film companies, there are around 3,000 films awaiting shipment to Europe. If the European branches of the major American motion picture companies were to release these films in the context of free competition, there would be such a glut of films that the cinemas might end up asking for money to screen them.”¹² The Hungarian branch of MOPEX was headed by Dr Miklós Palugyay. Born into a noble family, he had lived in the United States in the 1920s and later worked for Paramount in Romania, the Balkans and Hungary between 1928 and 1942. During the Second World War, when imports of American films were halted, he joined his family business, Jupiter Film Trading Co., which also had interests in film production.¹³ Following trips lasting several weeks to the centres of European filmmaking in London and Paris, Palugyay announced that MOPEX would release around 60 films in Hungary in 1946.¹⁴ According to other reports, Palugyay promised 70 Hollywood films for the 1946/1947 season,¹⁵ and even an annual 80 films, so that before long “audiences in Pest [...] would be free of the surfeit of reruns”.¹⁶ Thus, MOPEX simplified access to American films, while

¹² Film. *Közgazdaság*, 1946/11, 12.

¹³ Source: <https://www.hangosfilm.hu/filmenciklopedia/palugyay-miklos> (Downloaded: 19/02/2022.)

¹⁴ (Fodor): 2500 amerikai filmből válogatták a Budapestre exportált képeket [Images exported to Budapest selected from 2,500 American films]. *Világ*, 1st December 1946.

¹⁵ A MOPEX sajtóismertetése [Press release by MOPEX]. *Képes Sportlap*, 3rd December 1946, 16.

¹⁶ Megalakult a pesti MOPEX [Pest branch of MOPEX established]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 2nd December 1946.

their dubbing and their preparation for distribution were carried out professionally, unlike earlier, when Hollywood films had reached the country primarily through the American mission.¹⁷ In December, Irving A. Maas, the vice president and CEO of MOPEX, also arrived in Budapest to stress that Hollywood was moving up a gear in Central Europe as well. An excellent diplomat, Maas took care to heap “fraudulent praise” on the Hungarian genius, giving his hosts the impression that American cinema “belonged to them” to a significant degree: “I must mention your country with the greatest gratitude, because no other nation has given the American film industry as many great names and outstanding personalities as the Hungarian film industry. What America has achieved in terms of film production is largely due to Hungary. William Fox, Karl Lemmlé [sic!], Adolf Zukor, Markus Löw (one of the founders of Metro), and the first great pioneers of Hollywood filmmaking were also Hungarians. Compared to the size of the country, there are an unprecedented number of Hungarian writers and artists working in Hollywood, while many of the so-called foreign ideas have proved to be of Hungarian origin.”¹⁸

Naturally, not all critics and not all political sides agreed with the praise heaped on American films: some considered the strengthening of America’s position to be unequivocally alarming.¹⁹ Among the coalition parties, the intellectual circle of the National Peasant Party had the strongest

¹⁷ At the end of October 1946, there were 14 American films in the embassy waiting to be put into circulation. Film. *Színház*, 1946/41, 24.

¹⁸ A magyarok hollywoodi döntő szerepéről beszélt Mr. Maas [Mr. Maas spoke about the decisive role of Hungarians in Hollywood]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 22nd December 1946.

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis of American films between 1946 and 1948 according to party allegiance: Róbert Takács: Tehenészgiccs a kultúra bölcsőjébe. Amerika-kép Hollywoodon innen és túl 1945 és 1948 között a koalíciós pártok napilapjainak tükrében [Cowboy kitsch in the cradle of culture. The image of

reservations regarding Hollywood. Their views were characterised by cultural pessimism, a contempt for popular culture, and a concern for the morals of the young and for European cultural standards in the face of American movies that glorified the “world of gangsters”. Unsurprisingly, the Hungarian Communist Party likewise expressed little liking for Hollywood, which posed a threat to the promotion of Soviet film culture. As early as spring 1945, the daily newspaper *Szabad Nép* took a stand for the social role of art and against hollow entertainment: “The kind of ‘entertainment’ that obscures and circumvents the truth, that tosses the audience titbits of dissidence, is likewise politics. Reactionary politics.”²⁰ Besides superficiality, false glamour, and the numbing of the masses’ readiness to act, “American cinematic imperialism” was also accused of choking national film production and European culture. This evaluation was maintained even later, when arguments against American mass culture rested on the idea of European elitism. In the words of a 1947 article, the Blum–Byrnes Agreements²¹ meant that the French public would have to settle for Coca Cola rather than a glass of fine Bordeaux.²² The spokespersons for the Social Democratic Party were in agreement with the above — although they tended to use milder language

America in Hollywood from here and beyond between 1945 and 1948 as reflected in the newspapers of the coalition parties]. *Médiakutató*, 2014/3, 65–78.

²⁰ A bagdadi tolvaj [The Thief of Baghdad]. *Szabad Nép*, 25th April 1945.

²¹ The Blum–Byrnes Agreement was signed on 28th May 1946 by the American government official James F. Byrnes and representatives of the French government Léon Blum and Jean Monnet. According to the agreement, the United States cancelled part of France’s state debt, and at the same time obliged French markets to open up to products from the USA. One key element in the agreement was the opening of the French film market, which had earlier been protected by import quotas.

²² Miért nem szeretik Párizsban az amerikai filmeket [Why they don’t like American films in Paris]. *Szabad Nép*, 4th May 1947.

and to stress the valve function filled by American cinema. According to left-wing evaluations of Hollywood, besides its dime-a-dozen titles it produced only a few films of any value, while war-themed movies such as *Casablanca* were increasingly frowned on for their explicitly American propaganda.

The Social Democrats were not alone in condemning American film imperialism. In the second half of the 1940s, the relationship between the national film industries in Western Europe and Hollywood was far from cordial. In the years following the Second World War, Hollywood was up against some — substantially weakened — national film industries. The Hollywood managers were determined to regain their former dominance in Europe and the Far East. American films moved in everywhere in the wake of the U.S. Army, while American military agencies were involved in the implementation of U.S. film policy.²³ Wherever governments made an attempt to defend themselves by imposing quotas or import tariffs, the U.S. pursued the interests of Hollywood by playing out its loan card.²⁴ Elsewhere, such as in the Netherlands, where national film production did not represent significant competition, the conflict emerged in terms of dominance in film distribution.²⁵

²³ Brian M. Yecies and Ae-Gyung Shim: Disarming Japan's cannons with Hollywood's cameras: Cinema in Korea under U.S. occupation, 1945–1948. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 2010/3, 1–20; Reinhold Wagnleitner: Op. cit., 251–271.

²⁴ Jens Ulf-Møller: *Hollywood's Film Wars with France: Film-trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy*. University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2001, 135–149; Reinhold Wagnleitner: Op. cit., 224.

²⁵ Clara Pafort-Overduin and Douglas Gomery: The high stakes conflict between the Motion Picture Export Association and the Netherlands Cinema Association, 1945–1946. In: Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*. Routledge, Abingdon–New York, 2019, 147–159.

Unlike the other parties in the coalition, the Smallholders tended to recognise the merits of American cinema. At the same time, the anti-Hollywood stance of the parties in the left-wing bloc did not automatically mean that the opposition parties and the intellectuals associated with them were devoted fans of American films. This applied to the bourgeois democrats and bourgeois radical circles, as well as the Catholic intelligentsia. Nevertheless, some of the Catholic intelligentsia also discovered a deeply religious America and valued its portrayal in films such as *The Keys of the Kingdom*, *The Song of Bernadette*, and *Going My Way*. On the right, however, where the United States might represent a counterbalance to the rise of the Communists, an individual Hollywood film could also be seen as the expression of these hopes. *Szabadság*, a weekly newspaper oriented towards Zoltán Pfeiffer's democratic Hungarian Independence Party, read into the war film *The White Cliffs of Dover* the message that there can be no two sides, that "the world is one and indivisible", and, furthermore, that the Hungarian opposition could hope for support from the United States: "America will not abandon Europe. She will not abandon the world. She will not allow it to yield to the tyranny of fear and misery, because each time this has been allowed to happen, she has been obliged to redeem it with her own blood."²⁶

As also becomes clear from the above, American films enjoyed a decisive presence in Hungarian film supply in as early as 1945–1946, and even more so in 1947 and the first half of 1948, when Hollywood films were already being released in Hungarian cinemas via MOPEX. With the arrival of MOPEX in December 1946, the director of MAFIRT, György Angyal, expressed his opinion — to the disapproval of his

²⁶ Dover fehér sziklái [The White Cliffs of Dover]. *Ellenzék*, 1947/2.

Soviet partners — that American films could realistically be expected to remain slightly ahead of Soviet films in the near future. According to his calculations, annual releases would comprise 55 American, 45–55 Soviet, 40 French, and 20 other films.²⁷

From the autumn of 1947, the construction of the one-party system began in the Hungarian public sphere as a whole. In the film sector, too, the process was completed in just over a year. The process was in line with global political trends: the Cold War conflict escalated during 1947, the Cominform was established at the end of September, and Andrei Zhdanov proposed the cultural doctrine of the two camps. Subsequently, power was monopolised in all the Eastern European states of the Soviet sphere of interest, and control over the film and cinema industry was no exception.

At the end of 1947, amidst intensifying attacks in the press, a debate was also taking place within the coalition about the need for and benefits of Western movies. The Communist and Peasant party media represented a position of closedness, while the Social Democrat and Smallholders' newspapers promoted cultural openness. The former did not attack openly, but rather took a stance against "the wasting of currency" in the name of cultural — and moral — self-defence: "The neighbourhoods surrounding cinemas that screen exclusively gangster movies are swarming with dissolute, skiving, hooligan youngsters, who readily admit in court that their inspiration comes from the westerns", wrote *Szabad Szó*, among others.²⁸

²⁷ Memorandum from György Angyal to László Háy (11th December 1946). PIL 274. f. 23/27. ó. e.

²⁸ Tollhegyyel. Amerikában már tilos. [With a pen nib. Now forbidden in America]. *Szabad Szó*, 16th December 1947.

Administrative measures were quickly imposed. In January 1948, the Ministry of the Interior prohibited the films of seven American actors, following this up with a ban on six more in February.²⁹ To back up its arguments, the daily newspaper *Szabad Nép* quoted statements allegedly made by these actors before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The newspaper thus portrayed Adolphe Menjou and Robert Taylor as passionate Communist haters, and the former even as an admirer of Hitler.³⁰ *Szabad Szó* explained the decision as an action undertaken in the interests of halting moral decay, while *Népszava* referred to it as defence against morally depraved films and solidarity with left-wing American actors.

In the anti-Hollywood campaign, the Hungarian Communist Party also mobilised social organisations, following the same recipe it employed in other arenas, too.³¹ The National Council of Hungarian Youth protested to the film companies against “subversive American films” in the name of protecting the country’s youth, arguing in favour of “progressive films”. They first of all approached the board of directors of MOPEX and were eventually promised by MAFIRT that a “satisfactory solution” would soon be reached.³²

²⁹ Decree 451.300/1948 B. M.

³⁰ Kitiltották Magyarországról a fasisztabarát hollywoodi filmszínészek filmjeit [The films of pro-fascist Hollywood actors banned in Hungary]. *Szabad Nép*, 17th January 1948.

³¹ In spring 1947, the Hungarian Communist Party made the operations of *A Holnap* [Tomorrow], the newspaper of the Hungarian Freedom Party, practically impossible by means of protests staged by the printers. Károly Szerencsés: *A nemzeti demokráciáért. Sulyok Dezső, 1897–1997* [For national democracy. Dezső Sulyok, 1987–1997]. Pápa, Pápa Város Önkormányzata, 1997. 214.

³² A magyar ifjúság az amerikai filmszemét ellen [Hungarian youth against American film trash]. *Új Szó*, 9th March 1948.

This solution took the form of the nationalisation of the film and cinema industry in the summer of 1948. At the end of June, the director of the Communist cinema trust was delighted to announce that the high-level representatives from MOPEX had arrived in vain for negotiations in Budapest: “Along with Mr Maas and Mr Kanturek, the cocky gangsters, brilliant billionaires, and a whole army of invincible demons have also departed from Budapest.”³³ In fact, the change did not take place overnight. In the first half of 1948, even the management of MAFIRT was thinking in terms of a gradual phase-out, which appeared to be a rational tactic in light of the proportions of spring releases: according to data published by *Szabad Nép*, three-quarters (33) of the 43 cinemas in Pest were still playing American or English films, while only three were screening Soviet films, three were showing French films, and four were playing Hungarian productions.³⁴ The plan was to make up for the short-term shortfall by selecting from an estimated 250 or so “progressive” American movies made before 1945.³⁵

In July 1948, the newspaper of the Democratic People’s Party, *Hazánk*, highlighted as an indication of the dire shortage of films the fact that the three main cinemas in the capital were screening an American film, under the title *The Jungle Rebellion*, then being marketed by MAFIRT, which had been showing in autumn 1947 under the original title *The White Gorilla*.³⁶ Following the expulsion of MOPEX, the dearth of films became a permanent feature in the cinemas.

³³ György Angyal: A Mopex kivonul Magyarországról [MOPEX withdraws from Hungary]. *Szabad Nép*, 27th June 1948.

³⁴ Tibor Méray: Örültek, kísértetek, bérgyilkosok, hipnotikus álomban lebegők [Maniacs, ghosts, hitmen, and the hypnotised]. *Szabad Nép*, 21st March 1948.

³⁵ Hungarian Film Office memorandum on the situation of film policy in Hungary (12th January 1948). PIL 274. f. 23/27. 6. e.

³⁶ Tanulmányos film-mozaik [Edifying film mosaic]. *Hazánk*, 2nd July 1948.

In December 1948, *Hazánk* reported that only four of the promised American films that had been made during the presidency of Roosevelt had arrived, and only one of the 22 planned Italian films. Without films to show, even the cinemas in Újpest and Csepel, which had been upgraded to premiere cinemas, held only two screenings a week.³⁷

In December 1948, only two – progressive – American films were released. *So Ends Our Night*, made in 1941, was based on a novel by Erich Maria Remarque: it follows the fates of four German citizens who escape from Hitler's Germany to Austria before the Anschluss. *The North Star*, on the other hand, portrayed the period of Roosevelt's war coalition – it was an American film that supported the anti-Hitler efforts in the United States in 1943 by representing the anti-fascist struggle of the Soviet people. “The film as a whole not only portrays honourable human behaviour but also demonstrates the fact that its creators have learned from the great representatives of socialist realism”, proclaimed *Szabad Nép*.³⁸ However, this alliance had disintegrated for good by the time of the Hungarian premiere, and Hollywood films were expelled from Hungarian cinemas for almost a decade, being mentioned only in the context of anti-imperialist attacks in the press.

Zhdanovshchina and isolation

In the spring of 1949, a publication by film director Grigori Aleksandrov that “blew the lid off” American filmmaking appeared in Hungarian as part of the ‘Pocket Marxist

³⁷ Filmsarok [Film club]. *Hazánk*, 10th December 1948.

³⁸ A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Szabad Nép*, 28th November 1948.

Library' series.³⁹ Aleksandrov had personal experience of Hollywood, although his memories dated from the first half of the 1930s, when he was given the opportunity to undertake a field trip to the United States with Sergei Eisenstein. In the publication, he dwelt at length on his conversations with the directors of film studios, including Charlie Chaplin, one of the founders of United Artists. The study tour had taken place during a more open period in the Stalinist era, which was followed by a period of isolation and then a new opening, in the spirit of the World War alliance. This in turn was replaced by the isolation of Zhdanovism, a cultural policy named after the Soviet cultural politician Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov. Aleksandrov's publication essentially contains all the elements of what would be repeated over and over again in characterisations of American cinema in subsequent years: the work summarised and defined the framework for Soviet discourse on Hollywood.

Aleksandrov described Hollywood as a realm for the making of money rather than art, but where some valuable works had nevertheless been made before 1946. However, he labelled the post-Second World War American film industry the executive of Wall Street. He emphasised that the Truman era had marked a change of direction in Hollywood. The dominant "old-fashioned, shoddy, tasteless, kitsch, entertainment films of earlier decades, which had rarely addressed political and social issues" had been replaced by the "fascistisation" of American cinema. The topos of a fascist Hollywood and the insistent search to identify Nazi parallels became one of the primary and repeated accusations in the one-party press. According to Aleksandrov, the change

³⁹ G. V. Aleksandrov: *Polgári film a reakció szolgálatában. (Marxista ismeretek kis könyvtára 21.)* [Bourgeois films in the service of reaction. Pocket Marxist Library 21]. Szikra, Budapest, 1949.

was also symbolised by a changing of the guard: Eric Allen Johnston, a Republican public figure and president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, replaced William H. Hays, who had headed the American Cinema Association for more than two decades. The latter was responsible for the famous/notorious Hays Code, an American voluntary moral film censorship system.⁴⁰ The new director, Johnston, was compared by the Soviet author to Goebbels — and Himmler — as someone who wished to use American filmmaking as a means of worldwide political propaganda.

“The series of American films presented such a collection of vile human emotions, such a display of greed, ignorance, crudity and selfishness, such an image of meanness, evil, treachery and hypocrisy, such a lack of humanity, responsibility or the recognition of social interests, that the spectacle has become burdensome to every participant in the celebration”, was Aleksandrov’s enumeration of the sins of Hollywood.⁴¹ A prominent figure in Soviet entertainment cinema, ⁴² Aleksandrov himself exploited the method of describing in minute detail the bloodthirsty scenes in certain American movies.

He included among Hollywood’s additional sins its invasion of the world’s film and cinema industry, its occupation of national cultures, and its “nihilism” that contaminated the more ambitious, the artistically more

⁴⁰ [no author]: Öv alatt – a Hays-kódex [Below the belt – The Hays Code]. 2000, 2010/2. Source: <http://ketezer.hu/2010/02/ov-alatt-a-hays-kodex/> (Downloaded: 21/02/2022)

⁴¹ Quoted in: János Kelemen: A nyugati filmek az erkölcstelenséget, a képmutatást, a gonosz ösztönöket eszményítik [Western films idealise immorality, hypocrisy, and evil impulses]. *Szabad Szó*, 1st May 1949.

⁴² Aleksandrov shot the musical comedy *Jolly Fellows* in 1934, after his trip to Mexico. The film, which featured a jazz composition by Isaak Dunayevsky, was a huge success in the Soviet Union. At the time of his article condemning American films, a campaign against jazz music was launched in the Soviet Union.

valuable and the more respected traditions of the Western European film industry: “they have entrusted their films with a mission to conquer, thus they are keen to destroy anything that evokes in the spectator an image that opposes ‘American ideals’.”⁴³ The metaphors of infection, disease and madness became a compulsory element in descriptions of American and Americanised European films after the publication of Alexandrov’s study.

On 15th November 1949, a meeting of the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers’ Parties, Kominform, was held in Hungary. Mikhail Suslov, who spoke at the meeting, echoed similar sentiments concerning American films: “One of the most important instruments in the ideological softening of ‘Americanised’ countries is to flood them with American detective fiction and Hollywood movies featuring gangsters and murderers, sadists and rapists, cheats and hypocrites. This kind of ‘literature’ and ‘art’ poisons and stupefies reader and spectator alike.”⁴⁴

The Soviet film *Three Encounters*, in which three officers from the Great Patriotic War are reunited in peacetime Moscow, where they tell one another about their “recent victories on the frontline of labour”, was shown in Budapest during the conference of the Communist parties.⁴⁵ During that same week, the 45 cinemas in Budapest⁴⁶ screened 21 films. More than half were made in the Soviet Union, six others represented the emerging Socialist film production

⁴³ G. V. Aleksandrov: *Polgári film a reakció szolgálatában* [Bourgeois films in the service of reaction]. Op. cit., 28.

⁴⁴ M. Suslov: A béke védelme és harc a háborús gyújtogatók ellen [The defence of peace and the fight against warmongers]. *Tartós békéért, népi demokráciáért!*, 3rd December 1949, 4.

⁴⁵ Három találkozás [Three encounters]. *Szabad.Nép*, 16th November 1949.

⁴⁶ In the following year, they also featured on the programme of cinemas in the Budapest suburbs, although the place of production was not included alongside the titles of the films. *Világosság*, 16th November 1949.

in Czechoslovakia, Poland and East Germany, while Hungarian filmmaking was almost entirely absent from the cinemas, with only one theatrical adaptation of Márton Keleti's comedy *Janika*. The remaining three films were made in the West: all of them had been produced years earlier and all had been released in Hungary before 1949. None of the films were American.⁴⁷

In the following years, members of the Hungarian public were given no opportunity to see for themselves what was brewing in the witch's kitchen of Hollywood. The fact that, in the wake of the MAORT and Vogeler trials⁴⁸, Hungarian–American relations had reached a low point⁴⁹ played little part in this, as the trend was apparent throughout the Soviet sphere of interest. New Western films were released only occasionally. In March 1950, *Szabad Nép* reported that the 20 films released that year would be followed by another 60. Among the films already released, only one Indian film represented the “capitalist world”, while planned releases included one Indian and four Italian films, as well as at

⁴⁷ The three films were: the German musical film *The Bat* (1946); the Danish drama *Ditte, Child of Man* (1946), in relation to which the programme notes stressed that the film was based on the work of the communist novelist Martin Andersen Nexø; and the 1939 British comedy *Come On, George!*

⁴⁸ Legal proceedings against the directors of the American-owned Hungarian–American Oil Industrial Company was launched in September 1948. The company's Hungarian general manager Simon Papp was sentenced to life imprisonment, but was released in 1955. The case provided the legal grounds for transferring the strategically important oil company into state ownership. Robert Vogeler was the regional director for Central Europe for another American-owned Hungarian company, the Standard Electrical Company. He was taken to court in 1950 along with the company's other directors, including an English manager. Vogeler was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment, but he left the country in April 1951. János Honvári: A Vogeler-ügy [The Vogeler case]. *Valóság*, 2010/7, 20–52.

⁴⁹ László Borhi (ed.): *Magyar–amerikai kapcsolatok, 1945–1989. Források* [Hungarian–American relations, 1945–1989. Sources]. MTA Történettudományi Intézet, Budapest, 2009, 26–31.

least one French, one Swedish and one Dutch film.⁵⁰ These statistics also demonstrate how Marxist criticism recognised and praised primarily works of Italian neorealism. The sensation of the year from the West was Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, hailed by the Hungarian Democratic Party's newspaper as "one of those works of realism that reveal the true situation of the people and expose clerical reaction and imperialist colonialists — in other words, that support the struggling Italian working class by firmly identifying the main issues."⁵¹

On the other hand, while imports of Hollywood films to Hungary became impossible, Hungary was making efforts to introduce the cinema of the so-called popular democratic regime to the United States. This was inherently difficult on a market basis, although Hungarians living on the American continent may have represented a certain demand. However, as indicated by the Hungarian Embassy in March 1950, potential American partners were deterred by anti-communist legislation in the U.S., according to which they might be labelled as the agents of a foreign power for distributing Hungarian films.⁵² Nevertheless, there was one company — Artkino Pictures — that agreed to import and distribute films from Hungary and other Sovietised states in the United States, although it repeatedly voiced its reservations. It feared not only the U.S. government, but also the protests of anti-communist and emigrant organisations, and — not entirely independent of this — it was afraid of financial loss. Between 1951 and 1953, the Stanley Cinema

⁵⁰ Hatvan új film kerül bemutatásra az év folyamán [Sixty new films released during the year]. *Szabad.Nép*, 28th March 1950.

⁵¹ M. M.: A biciklitolvajok [Bicycle Thieves]. *Szabad.Nép*, 23rd April 1950.

⁵² Ambassadorial report (9th March 1950). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 40.

in New York proved to be a stable partner; it screened Soviet and other Eastern European films, as well, while two Hungarian-born entrepreneurs — they are referred to in embassy documents as Szenes and Farkas — distributed among the Hungarian diaspora the few films that reached the United States. In addition, it was possible to hold smaller screenings for trade union groups or friendship societies. Between 1950 and 1953, the following Hungarian films reached the United States: *Ludas Matyi* [Mattie the Goose-boy], *Mágnás Miska* [Mickey Magnate], *Déryné, Talpalatnyi föld* [Treasured Earth], and its sequel *Felszabadult föld*.⁵³

While American films were not permitted in Hungarian cinemas, copies of them remained in Hungary, although they could not be used to lend appeal to cinema programmes, or at least certainly not in public. Even the Americans would have objected to this. In October 1950, the U.S. Embassy raised the issue of the return, payment, or destruction of Hungarian copies. Based on the list submitted by the Americans, the Ministry of Culture, at the request of the State Department, compiled a list of 123 American films, of which there were typically one or two copies. The films that featured on this list were Hollywood films that had been shown in Hungarian cinemas between 1945 and 1948. As Hungary had no wish to return the films, or pay for them, it gave an evasive answer, claiming that the destruction of the films was “in progress”.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ambassadorial report (26th May 1952). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 40; Ambassadorial report (26th February 1953). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 40.

⁵⁴ List compiled by the Ministry of Popular Culture of the copies of American films found in Hungary (11th June 1951); memorandum to Comrade Berei (24th July 1951). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA box 40.

Nevertheless, certain information about Hollywood's latest productions was published in the Hungarian press, of course deliberately. These relatively frequent news reports were intended to expose the practices and intentions of "American cinematic imperialism" by discussing ever greater numbers of films that had not actually been seen by Hungarian journalists: the reports typically found their way into Hungarian newspapers from second-hand sources. The most important of these sources was the Soviet press, from where articles slandering American films were either translated or extracted. Less often, the Soviet bloc took over analyses written by Western Communist film professionals. In this case, it could at least be said that the author had significant and personal experience of Hollywood films. The latter included Sorbonne graduate George Sadoul, a film critic who was also renowned in Western Europe and a contributor to *Les Lettres Françaises*, who had joined the Communist movement in the early 1930s, as well as the British film critic John Alexander.

What these two critics had in common was their opinion that American films, or at least a significant proportion of them, promoted warmongering and psychological warfare. John Alexander divided films that "openly glorified" war into two groups. On the one hand, Second World War films continued to be made, and these, at least if they were made in Hollywood, were automatically identified by Marxist critics as glorifications of war. The theme of war itself, and the narrative of American combat and victory — when recounted outside the context of the anti-fascist alliance, as in the case of *The North Star* in 1943 — thus sent a message that "people's everyday lives are boring and aimless, nothing other than a preface to the great novel of war. According to them, war is as

natural and unavoidable as spring water or earthquakes.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, Hollywood adaptations of the ongoing Korean War were also being released one after the other. Alexander condemned — albeit mistakenly⁵⁶ — the film *I Want You* “because it aims to show the eagerness of American peasants to fight in Korea”.⁵⁷

Other writers also made a point of mentioning one-sided American films made about the Korean War. The Soviet Aleksandrov, for example, singled out Republic Pictures — a film company referred to in film history primarily as specialising in westerns and as the discoverer of John Wayne — for producing anti-Soviet films and films about the Korean War. “Along with the mendacious film *The Red Menace*, the company has released *The Battle for Korea*. It has also announced the forthcoming release of another film that glorifies the aggressors: *Wings over the South Pacific*. The film *Size 36* celebrates the ‘heroic deeds’ of the air bandits who bombed schools and hospitals in Korea. It is advertised as showing the flying fortress B-36s at work.”⁵⁸

Besides the two subcategories of war films, the third category mentioned by John Alexander comprised gangster movies. According to the British critic, the main purpose of these films was to extinguish the desire for peace among the masses and to instil in their minds the first law of life: that

⁵⁵ John Alexander: A hollywoodi kígyófészek [Hollywood nests of snakes]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 31st January 1952.

⁵⁶ In reality, the film’s message is far more complex than this: it rather shows how those who had earlier fought in the Second World War, or the small-town citizens who had lost loved ones in that war, experience the Korean War. The relatives of the two protagonists are struggling precisely to have their sons exempted from military service. Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043664/> (Downloaded: 22/02/2022)

⁵⁷ John Alexander: Op. cit.

⁵⁸ Gr. Aleksandrov: Hollywood a háborús gyűjtogatók szolgálatában [Hollywood in the service of warmongers]. *Szabad Nép*, 5th January 1951.

the strongest and most brutal always win. The newspaper *Világosság* quoted the words of the Hungarian-born Gordon Kahn, one of the blacklisted artists, concerning the socio-political role of gangster films: "...they serve as narcotics, or safety valves, for people who might otherwise start reading at home, or worse, thinking, or perhaps even discussing with their neighbours and colleagues the high prices and the measures that should be taken to beat those prices down."⁵⁹ In line with traditional conservative criticism, gangster movies and crime thrillers were also condemned, of course, as a means of corrupting young people and educating them to violence. Sadoul's analysis also illustrates how this could be presented as evidence of the fascistisation of American society, by drawing parallels with Nazism: "In the film *Rope*, two sick-minded young men murder a third and stuff his body into a suitcase. They use the suitcase as a table, set it, and subsequently invite the victim's friends, parents and fiancée to a meal. Entirely in accordance with Hitlerist theories, they endeavour to prove by the example of this 'feat' that human life is of no value for members of 'the dominant race', who can simply kill for pleasure."⁶⁰

Finally, responding to processes taking place within his own nation, Alexander mentioned as a fourth group British films made with American capital, which primarily communicated to the British public the idea that the U.S., as a dominant power, was a necessary support to Britain. He highlighted how in these films, one or more American protagonists always stepped up to resolve situations that the British found unmanageable.⁶¹

⁵⁹ L. L.: A rothadó Hollywood [Hollywood in decay]. *Világosság*, 1st March 1950.

⁶⁰ Georges Sadoul: Az amerikai film a háború eszköze [American films as a weapon of war]. *Tartós békéért, népi demokráciáért!*, 1950/28, 8.

⁶¹ John Alexander: Op. cit.

The milder charges also fitted within the narrative of a culture-abandoning West in decline. They echoed an interpretation according to which the “decadent West” had abandoned the European cultural traditions of the Enlightenment, which it otherwise acknowledged as values, as a result of which, Soviet and Socialist culture was ready to assume the mission of value preservation, with Moscow as the cultural centre of the world.⁶² The decaying American film industry was, meanwhile, producing films of “catastrophic” artistic quality, and its work was sloppy even when adapting noble materials and works of classical realism. Thus, for example, the 1949 adaptation of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*⁶³ was censured for falsifying the film’s message of social criticism. “In place of the heroine, the film portrays a sumptuously elegant lady of fashion from a dress salon. The ‘adapters’ of the film have carefully prevented the fate of Madame Bovary from awakening in the spectator any idea that ‘all is not well’ in capitalist society, or that this society is unjust.”⁶⁴ Oddly enough, the author was similarly horrified by an adaptation that had not even been completed at the time, although the concept of the film, or the acquisition of the rights, had been announced on several occasions since 1941: the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* into an American gangster setting, which was eventually released only in 1955.⁶⁵

The Marxist analyses in which Hollywood was portrayed exclusively as American film imperialism also endeavoured to justify these phenomena by means of a presentation of the

⁶² On this, see: István Hermann: *A polgári dekadencia problémái* [The problems of bourgeois decadence]. Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest, 1967.

⁶³ Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041615/> (Downloaded: 22/02/2022)

⁶⁴ L. L.: *A rohadó Hollywood* [Hollywood in decay]. Op. cit.

⁶⁵ Joe MacBeth. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_MacBeth (Downloaded: 22/02/2022.)

economic background to the film industry. The two central elements in these arguments were economic interpenetration and the crisis in American cinema. In this respect, it is worth quoting from the article by George Sadoul, in which he argued that the eight major studios in the American film industry were owned by “financial capital”, large corporations with interests in heavy industry — that is, in war. “In the hands of the most aggressive warmongers, Hollywood has become a massive centre of imperialist propaganda, a terrible, soul-poisoning factory producing new and insidious opium for the people.”⁶⁶

On the other hand, propaganda in the Soviet Union and its satellite states took full advantage of the fact that the film industry had indeed found itself in an unfavourable economic situation by the end of the 1940s. The Second World War had brought prosperity to Hollywood, which was still apparent in 1946. In that year, at least two-thirds of Americans purchased a cinema ticket on at least one occasion. The peak was reached in 1946, although for the eight major film studios, the fact that they were obliged to divest their cinema networks under U.S. antitrust regulations came as a major blow. This was compounded by the changes in the media system, which made television commonplace in the United States by the late 1940s — years ahead of the similar developments in Europe — and significantly contributed to the fall in attendance figures.⁶⁷ In this context, it was merely the abundance of crisis-related data that was published in the Hungarian press: the fall in spectator numbers along with

⁶⁶ Georges Sadoul: *Az amerikai film a háború eszköze* [American films as a weapon of war]. *Op. cit.*

⁶⁷ David A. Cook and Robert Sklar: History of Film. The war years and post-World War II trends. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture/The-war-years-and-post-World-War-II-trends> (Downloaded: 22/02/2022.)

the most egregious regional examples,⁶⁸ and the alarming rates of unemployment among actors.⁶⁹ Rather than giving the structural explanations outlined above, however, the press reports translated all of this as demonstrating how the American public had grown sick of Hollywood filth and wanted no more of it.

The accusations levelled by Soviet bloc propaganda were not entirely without foundation. Not only could the signs of authentic crisis in the film industry be observed and magnified, and not only was it possible to build on the — by now traditional — conservative criticism of depictions of violence and the corruption of the morals of the young, but the Hollywood studios were also producing numerous films that were aligned with the foreign policy interests of the United States and that served the government's propaganda aims. Although cited as a positive example, *The North Star* was in fact just such a propaganda film, but in a very different world political context.

Hollywood executives themselves saw their role as being that of the “Little State Department”, the representatives of America to the world. Both sides had an interest in cooperation: Hollywood expected government support in securing the world's markets and creating favourable export conditions, while this, in turn, depended on the “patriotism and good value judgment” of American film producers. There was no concrete censorship, merely a reliance on the self-regulation of the film industry intended

⁶⁸ See: “In Cincinnati, cinema revenues in 1950 were 43% lower than a year earlier.” Gr. Aleksandrov: Hollywood a háborús gyűjtogatók szolgálatában [Hollywood in the service of warmongers]. *Szabad.Nép*, 5th January 1951.

⁶⁹ “According to the reports of the Hollywood trade unions, 64% of screenwriters, 48% of directors, and 72% of actors are out of work. The result: the revenue of the film industry continues to fall. This is what Hollywood ‘paradise’ looks like today.” L. L.: A rothadó Hollywood [Hollywood in decay]. Op. cit.

to turn Hollywood into a vehicle for advertising American values, lifestyles and goods. Judging by Western European criticisms of the morally injurious influence of American films, this was not an unmitigated success.⁷⁰

At the same time, the operations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities exerted firm pressure on the film industry to cooperate with the government in the worldwide fight against Communism. According to calculations by Reinhold Wagnleitner, 48 films were made between 1948 and 1952 on the theme of the anti-Communist struggle. Over the next decade, a further 59 such films were produced in Hollywood. Films depicting the Red Peril were typically constructed on the topos of the struggle between good and evil, while in some science-fiction movies the Communist threat was magnified to cosmic proportions. Films of this kind included *Red Planet Mars* (1952) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.⁷¹

The “original sin”, referred to as the prototype for anti-Soviet cinema, was *The Iron Curtain*, released in 1948.⁷² The protagonist in *The Iron Curtain* is a Soviet codebreaker who served in Canada during the Second World War and who remains in his post after 1945; after his colleague is arrested, he hides secret documents about the operations of the Soviet spy network operating in Canada and requests asylum.⁷³ The film is thus a typical “Red Scare movie” that underlined the need for the Cold War schism and warned overseas audiences

⁷⁰ On this, see: Paul Swann: The Little State Department: Hollywood and the State Department in the Postwar World. *American Studies International*, 1991/1, 2–19.

⁷¹ Reinhold Wagnleitner: Op. cit., 246–248.

⁷² Georges Sadoul: Az amerikai film a háború eszköze [American films as a weapon of war]. Op. cit.; L. L.: A rothadó Hollywood [Hollywood in decay]. Op. cit.

⁷³ Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040478/> (Downloaded: 23/12/2022.)

about the Communist threat. In the Hungarian press, the film was consistently described as an “epic failure”, while it was reiterated how the “masters of Hollywood” nevertheless insisted on a sequel, while films such as *I Was a Communist for the FBI*, *The Red Danube*, and *I Married a Communist* were being released in cinemas one after the other.⁷⁴

One article gleaned from the Soviet press even presented the Vatican as the power behind American anti-Communist films. The article is somewhat reminiscent of a classic Radio Yerevan joke: the papal encyclical, to which the author referred based on the Soviet art journal *Sovietskoye Iskusstvo*, was issued not in 1946 but in 1936, and not by Pius XII but by his predecessor, Pius XI, while its main focus was not in fact “Communist Rome”. The *Vigilanti cura*⁷⁵ was not a document of defence against “the peril and spectre coming from the East”⁷⁶ but represented, above all, the need for the protection of the young and a moral panic similar to that which emerged in the Marxist criticism of American films. Pius XI called on Catholic filmmakers and church leaders to take a stance against instruments of entertainment that “often unfortunately serve as an incentive to evil passions and are subordinated to sordid gain”. Pius called church leaders specifically to organise and put into operation the church censorship of films.

The article also mentions an anti-Communist film that reflected on events in Hungary specifically: “The lackeys of the Vatican and Wall Street working for the production company Eagle-Lyon Films, have concocted a complete

⁷⁴ Egy perc. Könyv, film, színház [One minute. Books, films, theatre]. *Magyar Vasárnap*, 1st August 1948.

⁷⁵ Source: <http://szit.katolikus.hu/feltoltes/Vigilanti%20cura.pdf>. (Downloaded: 23/02/2022.)

⁷⁶ Hollywood és XII. Pius [Hollywood and Pope Pius XII]. *Szabad Nép*, 6th September 1950.

fabrication in which they vilify democratic Hungary.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that the Vatican was also mentioned in connection with *Guilty of Treason*,⁷⁸ a film that portrayed the showcase trial of Cardinal József Mindszenty less than a year after his conviction. According to the framework story, events are narrated by an American journalist, who arrives from Hungary at the Overseas Press Club in the U.S., an existing institution that was established in 1939. The film also portrays the Hungarian leader Mátyás Rákosi, played by Nestor Paiva, who was famous for his Zorro films, although the Hungarian press did not mention this fact. Rákosi is depicted in the film as a Soviet puppet, humbly following the instructions of the Soviet commissar Belov. *Guilty of Treason* is also a prime example of how Nazi parallels were used not only by the Soviets but also by American propaganda to convey to Americans the message that there was ultimately no difference between the Nazis and the Communists. At the same time, the love story between the Hungarian Stephanie and a Russian officer, woven into the film in keeping with the “laws” of Hollywood, does depart from the cliché, or rather it follows another cliché by representing the character of an honourable hero on the opposing side.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041437/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3 (Downloaded: 23/02/2022.)

⁷⁹ Kimmo Ahonen: How to Win the Cold War: Borders of the Free World in *Guilty of Treason* (1950) and *Red Planet Mars* (1952). In: Raita Merivirta, Kimmo Ahonen, Heta Mulari and Rami Mähkä (eds.): *Frontiers of Screen History: Imagining European Borders in Cinema, 1945–2010*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, 91–112.

Personal encounters in the late Stalinist period — From Helsinki to Cannes

In September 1949, an American film unexpectedly appeared on cinema programmes. The 1942 documentary *Native Land*, directed by Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand and narrated by Paul Robeson, was one of the few American movies acknowledged as a progressive portrayal of the class struggle. The newspaper *Szabad Szó* made the following claim: “In this film, we see the true face of America. Not the America that drives luxury cars, wears nylon stockings, or sits with a glass of whisky, puffing on a cigar and preaching war, but the America that manufactures the cars, mines the ore, produces the nylon, works the land and longs for peace.”⁸⁰

However, this “other America” also disappeared from the horizon. For years afterwards, Hungarian cinema goers were unable to watch American films, although we know of two examples where a Hungarian journalist was able to obtain their own impressions of a Hollywood film. Nevertheless, there were no first-hand American interviews published from Hollywood during these years — or, more accurately, there was one report, but this was adapted by the Hungarian press from a Soviet newspaper. In May 1951, the newspaper *Kis Ujság*, a relic of the coalition, which had gone out of print by the end of the year, published a report on American filmmaking by the Soviet journalists G. Rassadin and L. Filippov. They were among the few journalists who had visited the United States during these years and who were able to contrast the negatives of America with the Soviet world in the columns of *Pravda* in the spring

⁸⁰ Imre F. Joós: Hatalmas sikerrel mutatták be Paul Robeson filmjét a „Szülőföldem”-et [Paul Robeson’s film “Native Land” released to huge acclaim]. *Szabad Szó*, 24th September 1949.

of 1950.⁸¹ However, even they did not make it to the Los Angeles studios. “Hollywood is barred to the progressive press by an impenetrable curtain”, they claimed, reversing the Iron Curtain accusation in much the same way as Nikita Khrushchev would famously do several years later.⁸² Thus, in an article that was translated into Hungarian a year later, the two Soviet journalists were obliged to form their judgement of Hollywood on the basis of cinema posters: “The movie theatre billboards show heavily armed bandits, half-naked women, people of all kinds with the unmistakable signs of degeneracy. The titles of the films are also revealing: *Lust for Gold*, *Hellfire*, *Gambling House*, *The Werewolf*, etc. Organised crime, murder, and the idea of war are all promoted by films such as *Target Unknown*, *Flying Bullet*, *The Steel Helmet*, *A Yank in Korea*, *Fixed Bayonets!* and many other films with equally militaristic titles.”⁸³

However, one Hungarian who did actually manage to see an American film — and openly admitted it — was none other than Sándor Barcs, CEO of the Hungarian News Agency, a member of parliament, former footballer, and president of the Hungarian Football Association. Barcs was also regarded as a prominent figure in public life in the era of Puskas and his Golden Team: despite his background as a former member of the Smallholders’ Party, he was seen as a reliable Party cadre and was one of the exceptional few who was permitted to travel abroad even in the most rigorous times. As both a

⁸¹ Anne E. Gorsuch: “There’s No Place like Home”: Soviet Tourism in Late Stalinism. *Slavic Review*, 2003/4, 779.

⁸² On the CBS programme *Face the Nation* on 2nd July 1957, the secretary-general of the Soviet Communist Party called on President Eisenhower to “Do away with your Iron Curtain!” Vladislav Zubok: *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2009, 88.

⁸³ G. Rasszadin and L. Fillipov: A háborús hisztéria hajcsárja: Hollywood [The driver of war hysteria: Hollywood]. *Kis Újság*, 26th May 1951.

leading journalist and a sports manager, liaison with the West was an aspect of his work, and while attending the Helsinki Olympics he took the opportunity to go to a cinema in the Finnish capital. Whatever his true feelings, having satisfied his “journalistic curiosity” he reported on his experience in the Bio-Bio cinema in line with the rules of contemporary public life: “I felt nauseous, my head ached, I knew I would only be able to sleep that night with a sleeping pill.”

He referred to the corruption of the young, describing the audience as made up of 17- to 18-year-old “Teddy boys”, while the fact that there were only around 15 of them in the auditorium likewise fitted into the narrative of the crisis in American filmmaking: the lack of interest among spectators. The film he chose was Cy Endfield’s *The Sound of Fury*, a B category *film noir* and a psychological drama that was considered, in its own way, to be a work of social criticism in America. In the film, an unemployed family man takes on a job as a chauffeur, out of desperation, although in reality he ends up driving a get-away car. Although it is clear from Barcs’s description that the film focuses on the struggles of a down-and-out man who eventually gets involved in a murder, his review dwelt primarily on the gorier scenes — the murder of the kidnapped young man and the lynching of the criminals — to illustrate the “sickness” of the American film.

The other “lucky” Hungarian was an even more reliable pillar of the Party, if such a thing were possible. Photojournalist Dezső Révai was the brother of József Révai, the minister of culture, who worked for MAFIRT after 1945. He had the appropriate language skills and local knowledge for his posting to France in 1951, having participated not only in the Spanish Civil War but also in the French Resistance during the Second World War. Although the rift between Soviet and American — Eastern and Western — cinema had

already occurred in terms of international film relations, this period was not entirely devoid of contacts: the moment of “confrontation” between Soviet and American cinema in the presence of Révai took place in Cannes in 1951.

Between the two world wars, the Venice Film Festival was the most important international film event, although in 1938, the idea of establishing a new international film festival emerged following protests against fascist films and the withdrawals of American, English, and French jury members. The festival, which the Soviet Union was due to attend, was scheduled to be launched on 1st September 1939, although due to the outbreak of the Second World War the opening was postponed until 1946. The Soviet Union sent several films, and the jury also included the director Sergei Gerasimov. Among the films that were awarded the Grand Prix were *The Turning Point*, a Soviet film about the Battle of Stalingrad, a key event in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

When Fridrikh Ermler’s film was released in Hungarian cinemas in September 1949, the 3rd Cannes Film Festival (which had been cancelled in 1948) had already begun and had been boycotted by the Soviet Union and the entire Soviet bloc. In July 1949, *Szabad Nép* had published an article written for *Pravda* by the Soviet Minister for Film Ivan Bolshakov, in which he stated that the conditions created by French film directors were unacceptable to the Soviet Union. Most importantly, while “the trash mass-produced by the American film industry” was assured 8 to 12 places, Soviet cinema could be represented by just a single production. This led to them boycotting not only Cannes, but also the Venice Film Festival.⁸⁴ The 1949 “NATO Festival” in Venice

⁸⁴ A Szovjetunió nem vesz részt a cannes-i és velencei filmversenyen [The Soviet Union does not participate in the Cannes and Venice film festivals]. *Szabad Nép*, 2nd July 1949.

was described by the French Communist George Sadoul as a “danse macabre” filled with aggression: “...characterised by serial killings, barbaric brutality, sick eroticism, decadent pessimism, and hypocritical lecturing”.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union returned for the following film festival — in 1950, the festival was again cancelled — after its principal demand had been met: Hollywood was to be represented on a more modest scale, while the Soviet Union was permitted to enter seven films — three feature films (*Mussorgsky*, *Boris Godunov*, *Dream of a Cossack*) and four documentaries promoting the development of the Soviet republics. The 23 participants included Sovietised Hungary with *A Strange Marriage* (*Különös házasság*) — an adaptation of a novel by Kálmán Mikszáth — and two nature films.⁸⁶ Although the festival was not without diplomatic scandal — the screening of Sergei Gerasimov’s documentary *The New China* (also known as *The Liberated China*) was not permitted — filmmakers and film critics from the opposing camps nevertheless sat round the same table. According to Sadoul, despite their clashes they were in agreement concerning the crisis in American cinema: “even the American journalists shared the opinion that the utter artistic disintegration of Hollywood was a dead weight on the film markets and cultures of the countries under its influence.”⁸⁷

The Hungarian participant at the festival and in the discussions also incorporated the presence of American — and Western — filmmakers into the interpretative framework of the era. According to Dezső Révai, the fact that the U.S.

⁸⁵ Georges Sadoul: Az élet és halál filmjei Cannes-ban [Films of life and death in Cannes]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 29th June 1951.

⁸⁶ Dezső Révai: Cannes után – Karlovy Vary előtt [After Cannes – Before Karlovy Vary]. *Szabad Nép*, 8th July 1951.

⁸⁷ Georges Sadoul: Az élet és halál filmjei Cannes-ban [Films of life and death in Cannes]. Op. cit.

sent basically apolitical — that is, “not openly inflammatory” films to Cannes was the manifestation of an “extremely subtle” tactic, and such films were “particularly dangerous because of their veiled nature”. *Bright Victory* (which was erroneously referred to as *Lights Out* by the author) is about an American who is wounded in the Second World War and abandoned by his fiancée, but who eventually rediscovers his place in the world and falls in love again. Révai summed up the message of the film as follows: “The goal of the film is to dispel the fear of war among American workers. The film ‘teaches’ that it does not matter if one loses one’s sight, since in this way one’s ‘inner qualities’ will be further developed, while it is sometimes easier to identify the ‘real woman’ blind than with perfect vision.” As for the intrigues of the Hollywood career story *All About Eve*, he stressed that “through her cold inhumanity, she involuntarily demonstrates the natural consequences of the ‘American lifestyle’: lies, selfishness, cruelty, blatant careerism, and the failure of friendship and any authentic human emotion.”⁸⁸ In the latter case, the aggressive careerism of the young actress appears as the symbol of capitalist society as a whole, and this would survive as a recurring interpretative framework of American cinema in later decades. The former example, however, was far more specific to the first half of the 1950s: each and every aspect of Hollywood and American mass culture was interpreted in terms of violence and the conditioning of American society to war.

However, participation in the festival in 1951 did not bring “cinematic détente” before 1953. The 1952 festival was not attended by the countries of the Soviet bloc, and as a result, American films were not given particular attention when it

⁸⁸ Dezsó Révai: Op. cit.

came to Cannes. For the public in the Soviet bloc, Karlovy Vary became the principle international forum in the late Stalinist years: “The large number of films screened and the large number of participating nations testify to the fact that Karlovy Vary has become an even more international film forum this year, a meeting place where the world’s film production, the qualities and errors of every film, are evaluated, supplanting Cannes and the discredited Western film festivals.”⁸⁹ The festival in the Czechoslovak spa town was dominated by films from the Socialist galaxy, with particular emphasis on the representation of the Far East, China and Korea, while Western European — English, French and Italian — films were also included on the programme. Hollywood films were not screened.

⁸⁹ Ernő Urbán: Ma hirdetik ki a karlovy vary-i nemzetközi filmfesztivál versenyeredményeit [Today the results of the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival are announced]. *Szabad.Nép.* 3rd August 1952.



Scene from the film *The Salt of the Earth*.
Source: *Színház és Mozi*, 1955/20. 13.

2. DE-STALINISATION AND THE RETURN OF THE AMERICAN FILM – THE KHRUSHCHEV ERA IN HUNGARIAN CINEMA

1953–1956

The journal *Színház és Mozi* featured one American film¹ that was shot not in Hollywood but in New Mexico, under the headline “An authentic work by courageous artists”. The director, Herbert J. Biberman, was one of the famous Hollywood Ten, while the screenwriter Michael Wilson and producer Paul Jarrico were also on the Hollywood blacklist. The film commemorates the miners’ strike staged in 1951 by workers for the Empire Zinc Company and supported by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMMSW). McCarthyism² was still rampant in 1954: the film — which was subject to a series of attacks during production, with the Mexican actress Rosaura Revueeltas, who played the lead role, even being arrested by the U.S. authorities — was released in just 12 cinemas in the United States, the first screening taking place in a rather small New York movie theatre.³

The film *Salt of the Earth* did make it to Cannes, although the U.S. government did not allow it to be shown as part of

¹ Gy. Gy.: Bátor művészek igaz alkotása [The true work of courageous artists]. *Színház és Mozi*, 14th May 1954, 13.

² In the early 1950s, Senator Joseph Raymond McCarthy launched a “witch hunt” against Communists and supposed Communists in the United States.

³ On the film, see: <https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/53396> (Downloaded: 23/02/2022)

the official programme.⁴ As a result, it achieved acclaim in the “Socialist galaxy”. In Karlovy Vary, it was awarded the joint Grand Prix together with the Soviet film *True Friends*.⁵ The star of the film, Rosaura Revueltas, also made it “behind the Iron Curtain” to the most prestigious film event in the Soviet bloc in that period. This was a rarity at the time, especially since the U.S. authorities were then attempting to block any journeys to the East by American citizens who were “suspected Communists”. However, by around 1954–1955, the effects of the Khrushchev Thaw could already be felt in the field of travel. The period was nevertheless still largely a time for networking visits in the arts and sports sectors, as well as for the cautious licensing of organised tours.⁶ Meanwhile, some prominent figures in the West with links to the Communist Party, such as the American singer Paul Robeson, had earlier been prevented from traveling to the East not so much because of the Soviets’ refusal to allow them in, but because of the Americans’ refusal to countenance their visits.⁷ The story of the film’s production and the difficulties encountered in terms of its distribution in the United States subsequently became available to a wider audience.⁸ The film’s power in terms of agitation for the Communist movement was by no means negligible: the

⁴ György Non: Cannes-i tapasztalatok [Experiences in Cannes]. *Művelt Nép*, 1954/9, 1.

⁵ Kiosztották a karlovy-vary-i filmfesztivál díjait [The Karlovy Vary Film Festival awards have been distributed]. *Irodalmi Újság*, 1954/20, 10.

⁶ Anne E. Gorsuch: *All This is Your World. Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, 3–15; Péter Bencsik and György Nagy: *A magyar úti okmányok története 1945–1989* [The history of Hungarian travel documents, 1945–1989]. Tipico Design, Budapest, 2005, 23–27.

⁷ Az amerikai reakció el akarja hallgattatni Paul Robesont [American reactionaries wish to silence Paul Robeson]. *Szabad.Nép*, 17th July 1954.

⁸ Ferenc Karinthy: A mexikói filmszínésznő [The Mexican film actress]. *Szabad Nép*, 15th July 1954; István Garamvölgyi: A Föld sója [The Salt of the Earth]. *Népszava*, 3rd July 1954.

example of the mobilisation of the striking American miners was even cited by the French party leader Maurice Thorez.⁹

The beginnings of a revival on the international film scene were apparent not only in Karlovy Vary during these years: signs of change could be observed everywhere as part of the first steps in the process of détente that permeated the relationship between the two world powers following the death of Stalin. In 1954, after an absence of three years, films from the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries were once again featured at Cannes. In the spirit of the cautious opening of foreign policy after 1953, the framework of cinematic contacts was also reinterpreted. Western cinematography outside Hollywood — that is, “national films” that were seen by state socialist countries as battling for existence in the shadow of American films — was seen as a potential ally, and international gatherings such as the Cannes festival offered a chance to reach out to Western countries: “The significance of the Cannes Festival lies in the fact that it has strengthened cinematic relations between nations and thus strengthened national filmmaking in each country over and against the American monopolies.” Furthermore: “The interests of capitalist national filmmaking, which are in conflict with American predominance, coincide with our own interests. We have always been happy to show French, Italian, English, Indian, Mexican, etc. films to Hungarian cinema goers, alongside Soviet productions and works from the people’s democracies. At the same time, we are delighted that our films will be available to audiences in capitalist and colonial countries. We also wish to promote friendship among peoples and a mutual knowledge and appreciation

⁹ Maurice Thorez: Újabb adatok az elnyomóródásról [Latest data on pauperisation]. *Anyag és Adatszolgáltatás*, 1st October 1955, 24.

of one another's cultures. We have seen in Cannes that the easing of international tensions is also opening up new opportunities for us in this respect."¹⁰

Regarding the lessons learned from Cannes, the weekly *Irodalmi Újság* highlighted, on the one hand, that the problems encountered in the building of Socialism must be portrayed boldly, without "rose-tinted spectacles", as proved by the success of the Polish film *Five Boys from Barska Street*.¹¹ On the other hand, it called attention to the fact that Socialist cinema could also learn from progressive capitalist filmmakers, and especially from Italian, French and Indian films. "Ultimately", wrote Imre Komor, "the important conclusion to be drawn from the Cannes Film Festival is that we should make use of every opportunity to enrich our cinemas with good, progressive films, the screening of which will be of enormous benefit to the cultural life of our country as a whole."¹²

The film industry in the United States was not part of this progressive cinematography. Komor reported on the aggressive presence of Hollywood, which paraded itself with enormous hype in Cannes, laying claim to both the opening and the final days. He also stressed that the Americans merely dressed up "old, wishy-washy content" in the new technological garb of sensation. The film festival opened with a so-called CinemaScope¹³ screening, showcasing to

¹⁰ György Non: Op. cit.

¹¹ The film, which won one of the nine international prizes awarded in Cannes, was released in Hungary in January 1955 in the framework of the Polish Film Festival.

¹² Imre Komor: Megfontolandó tanulságok [Lessons to be learned]. *Irodalmi Újság*, 1954/10, 6.

¹³ CinemaScope is a process that uses so-called anamorphic stretching technology. In this technique, a widescreen picture is shot on standard 35 mm film and "crammed" into a frame with an aspect ratio of 1.33:1. It is subsequently "stretched" to the correct aspect ratio on the cinema screen.

European audiences the widescreen technology developed by 20th Century Fox studios the previous year. The technique was one of the more successful innovations in the film industry's bitter struggle against television in the United States.

At the same time, Cannes also provided an opportunity to launch negotiations between the American and Soviet parties on the re-establishment of film relations, with the participation of Grigori Aleksandrov, who represented the Soviet Union at the French film festival and who had been critical of Hollywood on many occasions in previous years. Even after the death of Stalin, the Soviet Union continued to set the direction and pace for the entire Soviet bloc in matters of such magnitude. As a first step, screening licences for some of the American films¹⁴ that were treated as war trophies were renewed. These films had been looted by the Red Army as it advanced westwards at the end of the Second World War. Even in the early 1950s, they continued to surface in the so-called secondary cinema network, for example in Soviet cultural centres and trade union cinemas.¹⁵

Thus, although the presence in Hungarian cinemas of films made in non-Socialist countries increased markedly from 1953, American films played no part in this. In 1953 — since the importing of films was a lengthy process, from the granting of the purchasing licence through the purchase and dubbing of the film to the central planning of the cinema programme and centralised distribution — the number of Western films remained extremely low, at just nine. The four

¹⁴ On this, see: Kristina Tanis: 'This film was captured as a trophy...': the international context of trophy films. *Soviet Cinema*, 2020/1, 2–16. DOI: 10.1080/17503132.2019.1652395 (Downloaded: 10/04/2022)

¹⁵ Sergei Kapterev: Illusionary Spoils. Soviet Attitudes toward American Cinema during the Early Cold War. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2009/4, 792–793, 805.

Italian films included the previous year's Grand Prix winner at Cannes *Two Cents Worth of Hope*, the Gogol adaptation *The Overcoat*, and one of the most outstanding works of neorealist filmmaking, *Rome, 11:00*. One of the two English films was an adaptation of the classic 19th-century realist novel *Oliver Twist*, while the other was a film drama made in 1946 about Ramsey MacDonald, leader of the British Labour Party between the two world wars, which offered a progressive account of the British Social Democrat's "betrayal of the workers", according to the review published in *Esti Budapest*.¹⁶ The other four films were more oriented towards entertainment and included two French titles, the swashbuckling *Fanfan la Tulipe* and the musical biopic *Prelude to Glory*.

It is all the more remarkable that as early as the following year, in 1954, as soon as the policy of the "new phase" had been launched, the number of Western releases rose to 29. The presence of Western films stabilised at this level in 1955, while in 1956 — when no new films were released after 23rd October — cinema goers could watch 31 new releases acquired from capitalist countries in the space of just 10 months. The vast majority of these Western films came from the two most important European film producers: eight Italian and eight French films were released in Hungary in 1954; 10 French and six Italian films in 1955; and 10 French and 10 Italian films in 1956.¹⁷ This means that even in the early years of de-Stalinisation, cinema programmes had become

¹⁶ Az Esti Budapest válaszol [*Esti Budapest* responds]. *Esti Budapest*, 2nd June 1953.

¹⁷ Róbert Takács: Szovjet és magyar nyitás a kultúrában Nyugat felé 1953–1964 [Soviet and Hungarian opening towards the West in the cultural sphere, 1953–1964]. *Múltunk*, 2015/3, 49–50.

diversified, and Western entertainment films had become available to some extent.

At the same time, no American films, not even Biberman's *Salt of the Earth*, reached Hungary, although the movie did make it to Poland, for example. In 1955, Warsaw also hosted a film festival, at which French, English, Japanese, Mexican, Australian, Swiss and Dutch productions were featured, along with the American movie *Salt of the Earth*.¹⁸ In the middle of 1955, however, the Hungarian Embassy in Washington intimated that a – modest – selection of Hollywood films might be made available to Hungarian audiences. Károly Szarka recommended two films in particular to decision makers in Budapest.¹⁹ One of these was *Marty*, made by the United Artists production company, the still highly respected film studio founded by Charlie Chaplin, which represented the everyday world of so-called kitchen sink realism that took its name from the paintings of kitchens and bathrooms by the expressionist John Bratby. The trend, which was prevalent in literature, theatre and film, principally portrayed the difficulties and disillusionments of the everyday lives of the working class. *Marty* caught the eye not only of the Hungarian ambassador: Delbert Mann's film was also awarded the Palme d'Or by the jury at Cannes. The other, lesser-known film was also described in great detail in the Hungarian ambassador's report. According to this report, *Blackboard Jungle*, set in a Harlem school, openly discussed the "race question", the issue of youth violence,

¹⁸ One of the advertisements for the festival also highlights the jazz solo featured in the English film *Geneviève*. "The colour film parades the beauties of the English countryside, while the jazz solo performed by the main character, played by Kay Kendall, is the high point of this comedy." Bemutatjuk a fesztivál filmjeit [Our introduction to the festival's films]. *Világ Ifjúsága*, 1955/7, 16–17.

¹⁹ Ambassadorial report (18th July 1955). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 40.

the underpayment of teachers, and the financial burden of education.²⁰ During a visit to London, Béla Köpeczi also recommended the film to Hungarian spectators, seeing in it a welcome trend that was also brought to the attention of Hungarian readers in March 1956. Also in the spirit of growing openness, the renowned French-speaking historian and researcher of Rákóczi visited Western Europe as head of the Directorate-General for Publishing, the censorship body that oversaw Hungarian publishing activities. He too wrote about the American films being shown in London, adopting a tone very different from that used by Sándor Barcs four years earlier. He attended the cinema near his hotel neither to retch nor to denounce, but rather to gather information and to familiarise the public with the changing conditions in the public sphere. The language used in the article was thus entirely different, although he too found little artistic or educational merit in the typical Hollywood production *The Conqueror*, a widescreen blockbuster about the life of Genghis Khan: “In the deserts of Texas, mounted soldiers gallop about, killing and torturing people, after which naked dancers entertain the exhausted warriors. Needless to say, it was impossible to identify the slightest trace of historical authenticity, although I did learn the extremely edifying lesson that a decisive role in the shaping of Genghis Khan’s empire was played by the beautiful Hollywood actress Susan Hayward.” Köpeczi left criticism of the film — at least in part — to the British critics.²¹

In the first half of 1956, the first American film in about seven years was released in Hungary. It was not the much-lauded *Salt of the Earth*, nor the previous year’s winner of the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Béla Köpeczi: Londoni jegyzetek [London observations]. *Szabad Nép*, 25th March 1956.

Grand Prix at Cannes, *Marty* — which had also been screened outside the competition in Karlovy Vary²² in the summer of 1956 — nor even *Blackboard Jungle*, but rather *Little Fugitive*, a film made outside Hollywood with a largely amateur cast. By no means unknown on the international scene, having won the Silver Lion in Venice in 1953, the film was not screened in the capital until the end of May, although it had been released far earlier outside Budapest — without much publicity — from February in Hajdú-Bihar County, and from March in Békés, Győr-Sopron and Vas counties.²³

The Hungarian émigré press in the United States had already “factored in” that Hungarian cultural policy was driven merely by anti-American propaganda objectives when it purchased the rights to this first film of the New York school, which presented the wanderings and experiences of a frightened young boy who runs away from home to a harbour and the Coney Island funfair: “It is difficult to imagine how this sweet children’s story could be used as anti-American propaganda. But when it comes to Communist incitement, nothing is impossible. According to Bolshevik propaganda, American children think only about murder: this is how the movie will be re-interpreted.”²⁴

But the *Amerikai Magyar Népszava* had failed to notice the changes that had taken place in the wake of de-Stalinisation: apparently it was unable to imagine that a work acknowledged by world cinema could be praised in the Hungarian public sphere as the introduction of the “other America”, a film that undertook to “finally [...] tell the truth

²² A Fesztivál Palota műsorából [On the programme at the Festival Palace]. *Szabad Ifjúság*, 20th July 1956.

²³ See the cinema programme columns in the county newspapers *Napló*, *Viharsarok*, *Győr-Sopron Megyei Hírlap* and *Vasmege*.

²⁴ Hírek Magyarországról [News from Hungary]. *Amerikai Magyar Népszava*, 13th April 1956.

about America”.²⁵ Or, as *Szabad Ifjúság* put it, summing up the aspirations of the New York school more precisely: its goal was to “show spectators a slice of American life with honesty, without stars or gimmicks, but in its own reality”.²⁶

Nevertheless, the return of American films was treated with reservations by the Hungarian press. In the months that followed the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, American films were referred to in the press in a critical but not denunciatory tone, and for the most part merely in passing. “For the Parisian worker, culture is essentially cinema — workers go to the cinema to watch lousy American films, because that’s what they’re given, for the most part”, wrote István Rudnyánszky.²⁷ The journalist relished the ironic observation made by a member of the Finnish parliamentary delegation visiting Hungary, that “to understand American films, all you need to know are three short English phrases: ‘I kiss you’; ‘I love you’; ‘I kill you’”.²⁸

However, the tendency remained to devote attention primarily to those films that had caused something of a stir. In some instances, flippantly appreciative comments made in 1947–1948 by left-wing film critics were echoed, as in a report on the Venice Film Festival in relation to the war movie *Attack*: “A typically American film, on this occasion one of the better ones.”²⁹ On other occasions, an individual film was reviewed in greater detail. The correspondent for *Szabad Nép*, for example, discovered the film *Storm Center*

²⁵ Ibid. Filmkrónika [Film annals]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 1st June 1956.

²⁶ L. J. V.: A kis szökevény [Little Fugitive]. *Szabad Ifjúság*, 31st May 1956.

²⁷ István Rudnyánszky: Illyés Gyulával Párizsban [With Gyula Illyés in Paris]. *Szabad Nép*, 11th July 1956.

²⁸ Pál Pincési: Egyre jobban megszeretjük a mai Magyarországot is [Hungary today is more loveable than ever]. *Szabad Nép*, 10th June 1956.

²⁹ Gy. Ferenc Simon: Az Arany Oroszlán Velencében maradt [The Golden Lion remains in Venice]. *Szabad Ifjúság*, 11th September 1956.

in London, where he had travelled for the Soviet Film Festival.³⁰ His appreciation of the film is unsurprising, since the work by Daniel Taradash is considered the first American production to be openly critical of McCarthyism, unfolding as it does the impact of the persecution of Communists on a local community amidst the ordinary conflicts of a small American town. The protagonist, played by 1930s Hollywood idol³¹ Bette Davis,³² is a children's librarian who refuses to remove the book *Communist Dream* from the shelves of the library, arguing for the right to free speech. After she is dismissed, the mood of the town is turned against her by the public prosecutor, who cherishes political ambitions, and the community's peace of mind is restored only when — following an arson attack — the vilified librarian is entrusted with the task of restoring the library.³³ *Szabad Nép* hailed the film as a highly intelligently constructed criticism of “witch hunters” that brought important truths to the surface (“it is a reassuring reminder that the American lifestyle is not without its flaws”).³⁴

However, until the beginning of October, there was no sign that any specific Hollywood films would be released in Hungary. Then, in early October, the newspapers reported that Eric A. Johnston, president of the American Motion

³⁰ Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049800/> (Downloaded: 26/02/2022.)

³¹ Balázs Sipos: Modern amerikai lány, új nő és magyar asszony a Horthy-korban. Egy nőtörténeti szempontú médiatörténeti vizsgálat [Modern American girls, new women, and Hungarian housewives in the Horthy era. Media history examined from the perspective of the history of women]. *Századok*, 2014/1, 3–34.

³² In memory of Bette Davis as the standard of beauty: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPOIS5taqA8> (Downloaded: 26/02/2022.)

³³ Screen: <Storm Center>. *New York Times*. Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/1956/10/22/archives/screen-storm-center-bette-davis-star-of-film-at-normandie.html> (Downloaded: 26/02/2022.)

³⁴ Külpolitikai jegyzetek. „Viharközpont” [Foreign policy observations. “Storm centres”]. *Szabad Nép*, 2nd June 1956.

Picture Association, who had been described by Aleksandrov a few years earlier as a leading figure in “Hollywood fascism”, would be visiting Hungary in the company of other film experts. Eric A. Johnston was not merely a film expert:³⁵ he had represented the United States at the highest level under several presidents: in 1944, as president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, he had travelled to the Soviet Union, where he had held two and a half hours of negotiations with Stalin.³⁶ He claimed to have visited Hungary on two occasions, first in 1938 and again in 1948 on his way to Yugoslavia, when he passed through the Hungarian capital.³⁷

In the autumn of 1956, Johnston’s main target was not Hungary but the Soviet Union — and the mission of the movie moguls was to pave the way for Hollywood exports in the eastern half of Europe. The words he addressed to the public reflected his confidence in the dominance of American films while emphasising the need for cultural openness: “No one can permanently keep apart from one another the thoughts of different peoples. I travel a great deal around the world and in my experience, people everywhere are working for a higher standard of living and want peace. The means may be different in different parts

³⁵ The daily newspaper *Népszava* was the only one to refer to the American guest as a friend of the president: Eisenhower személyes jó barátja Budapesten [A great personal friend of Eisenhower in Budapest]. *Népszava*, 12th October 1956.

³⁶ J. D. Parks: *Culture, Conflict and Coexistence. American-Soviet Cultural Relations, 1917–1958*. McFarland, Jefferson and London, 1983, 33; for the report on the discussions, see: The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Harriman) to the Secretary of State. Source: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v04/d881> (Downloaded: 2022. 27/02/2022). He was also received by Khrushchev in the second half of the 1950s. Report by Eric Johnston (6th October 1956) Source: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v10p1/d56> (Downloaded: 27/02/2022.)

³⁷ Report to Ernő Mihályfi, Minister of Popular Culture, on the reception held in honour of the American film delegation (13th October 1956). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 41.

of the world, but the goal is the same. This is what makes the free communication of ideas so important, and perhaps the best form of this communication is film, since films are universally understood. I believe I could tell you from the hairstyles of women in central Africa what movie they saw most recently. We need the free exchange of films among the artists of all nations.”³⁸

Hungarian decision makers, like the leaders of other state socialist countries, connected the idea of reciprocity with the opening of their markets towards American films, along with the cultural consumption of their citizens, while the Americans refused to give concrete promises, citing the different economic operating conditions and the autonomy of their film companies. Based on Italian and French import data, the U.S. delegation initially considered the release of 10 Hollywood films a year in Hungary as a possibility.³⁹ Johnston, of course, spoke diplomatically about Hungarian filmmaking and watched the love drama *Merry-Go-Round* — set in a cooperative and reflecting the politics of the new era — which, although it won no prize at Cannes that year, was nevertheless critically acclaimed.⁴⁰ At the end of the talks, Johnston was received by Foreign Minister Imre Horváth, although he did not get to meet Prime Minister András Hegedűs, who was away in Belgrade.⁴¹ The minister of

³⁸ „Senki sem tarthatja tartósan távol egymástól a különböző népek gondolatait.” [“No one can permanently keep apart from one another the thoughts of different peoples.”] *Magyar Nemzet*, 14th October 1956.

³⁹ Note on the conversation with Mr. Eric A. Johnston on 12th October 1956 (13th October 1956). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945–1964 USA, box 41.

⁴⁰ A magyar nép tehetségéről a filmen keresztül is hírt adhat a világnak [The world can learn about Hungarian talent through film, too]. *Szabad Nép*, 14th October 1956.

⁴¹ Amerikai filmszakemberek sajtófogadása [Press conference for American film experts]. *Szabad Ifjúság*, 14th October 1956.

culture, József Darvas, on the other hand, along with some renowned Hungarian actors,⁴² attended the reception held at the American Embassy.⁴³

Before travelling on to the Soviet Union, Eric A. Johnston announced that his Paris representative, Mark Spiegel, would shortly arrive in Budapest to finalise the details. Thus, everything was apparently in place for American films to be released in Hungarian cinemas the following year.

Such news seems to have been eagerly awaited by the Hungarian public. This is suggested, at least, by a memorandum sent by Károly Szigeti, head of department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concerning the reception held at the U.S. Embassy in honour of Johnston's delegation on 13th October: "The most embarrassing moment of the evening was when Chargé d'Affaires Barnes asked Deputy Minister Szarka for permission to allow officials from the Ministry of Culture to attend the U.S. Embassy's film screenings on a regular basis. Barnes had been asked to intercede by officials from the Ministry of Culture, who later gathered in a group outside to await Barnes' reply."⁴⁴

⁴² Based on the illustrated newspaper reports, Éva Szörényi, Violetta Ferrari, and Vera Szemere attended the reception.

⁴³ Fogadás az amerikai követségen [Reception in the American Embassy]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 14th October 1956.

⁴⁴ Szigeti Károly külügyminisztériumi osztályvezető feljegyzése az amerikai filmküldöttség számára adott fogadásról [Memorandum by Károly Szigeti, department head at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the reception held for the American film delegation]. In: László Borhi: Op. cit., 279.

After the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution – Concessions and the establishment of order in 1956–1957

The Party's daily newspaper *Népszabadság* published its first cinema listings following the defeat of the Revolution on 29th November 1956. At the time, the cinemas were open only between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., in line with the curfew that was still in effect. The supply comprised 169 films that had been approved by the Film Directorate. Of these, 29 were Hungarian films, 33 were from Socialist countries, and the remaining 107 (as much as 63% of the temporary film supply) came from the West. The Felszabadulás cinema screened the French swashbuckler *Fanfan la tulipe*, Csillag featured *The Red and the Black* on its programme, Tinódi showed the comedy *Papa, Mama, the Maid and I*, which had been screened during French Film Week in June 1956, while Toldi played the classic *The Thief of Baghdad*. The only American film available at the time, *Little Fugitive*, was also screened in December.

The government, led by János Kádár, was thus well aware of the anti-Soviet sentiments of the public, as clearly indicated by the cinema listings for November and December. For months, Soviet films disappeared from the cinema programmes, and only in January were certain films earmarked for screening — “with the caution justified by the political mood of the time”. By 1957, ensuring attendance for Soviet and Socialist films had even been removed from among the conditions for bonuses.⁴⁵ These films were cautiously reintroduced from February 1957, although the

⁴⁵ Report for the Executive Committee of the Municipal Council on the work of the Budapest cinemas (November 1957). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 16; Letter from András Berkesi to the Film Directorate (22nd July 1957). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 25.

scheduling details were left to the county cinema-operating companies.

Strangely — although in some respects rationally — the question of American films was not taken off the agenda, despite the fact that Hungarian–American relations had once again hit a low point. Already at the end of December, when cinemas were still attempting to entertain and neutralise society rather than educate,⁴⁶ the issue of Hollywood film imports resurfaced in the public sphere. Firstly, an interview was given by János Tárnok, deputy head of the Film Directorate, after which, a few weeks later, István Dósai, the head of Hungarofilm, gave a press conference. Tárnok emphasised that the supply of films in Hungarian cinemas should be at least doubled compared to 1950, to between 120 and 130 at a minimum rather than 60 a year. However, this was possible only by significantly increasing the proportion of Western films: in 1950, only six films had originated from outside the Stalin-led Socialist galaxy, although Tarnok acknowledged that there was a demand for more. The ministerial director deliberately avoided giving away any figures, nor did he mention the fact that this share might rise to one-third from the one-tenth of the 1950s. However, he did stress that: “We have blatantly ignored the fact that cinema goers also want to have fun, to be entertained above all. We must meet this legitimate demand.”⁴⁷ His reply concerning American films was a reference to the fact that Hungarian

⁴⁶ *Népszabadság* published the following account: “It was the honest cinema workers who first tore us from our prolonged and passive seclusion and pensiveness after 23rd October. It was a delight to be able to sit once again for the tenth week before the white screen, to forget our cares for a while and to heal our wounds with the arts.” Október óta tizedszer [For the tenth time since October]. *Népszabadság*, 25th January 1957.

⁴⁷ Tamás Garai: Nagyjelentőségű változás a magyar filméletben [Significant change in the world of Hungarian films]. *Népakarat*, 30th December 1956.

decision makers had already contacted the American film representative in Paris in December concerning the verbal agreement that had been reached in mid-October.

In the second half of January, the newspapers reported that one of the most important figures in Hungarian film imports, István Dósai, had visited South America, partly to sell Hungarian films in the five countries he visited, and partly to broaden the base of Hungarian film imports. It seems, however, that by the beginning of 1957, cultural policy — if it wished to avoid a return to the film shortages of the years before 1953 — could no longer envision a programme without American films. This is evidenced by the fact that Dósai mentioned the release of 14 to 16 American films a year. Hungarian film distribution would not in fact reach this level for more than a decade, although Dósai had already made it clear that it was not only cultural policy but also financial aspects that played a major role in this.⁴⁸ Revised decisions in the case of films that had not previously been admitted also reveal the new trend towards expanding the film supply in order to increase the distribution of films to cinemas. To this end, negotiations with the Motion Picture Export Company, the representative of Hollywood, continued in Paris.⁴⁹

In the first half of 1957, there was no possibility of new American films reaching Hungarian cinemas, although news about them was reaching Hungarian audiences more and more often. Hungarian intellectuals, mostly artists and journalists, reported on their experiences of Western films with no inhibitions and with no self-justifications. Film

⁴⁸ G. T.: Mégis bemutatják Fernandel, Korda és Sartre annak idején elutasított filmjeit [The rejected films of Fernandel, Korda and Sartre will be released this year after all]. *Népakarat*, 17th January 1957.

⁴⁹ Amerikai filmek a mozikban? [American films in the cinemas?] *Magyar Ifjúság*, 1957/3, 4.

director Mária Luttor, for example, watched the widescreen CinemaScope versions of *Joe Carmen* and *Gone with the Wind* during her visit to Vienna.⁵⁰ One of the most interesting accounts was that written by József Vető, who encountered a band of Austrian *Halbstarke*⁵¹ in Vienna following a screening of the musical film *Rock Around the Clock*, about the beginnings of rock and roll. Then, after reiterating his many reservations about the new musical craze and the moral panic reactions that were just as prevalent in the West, he admitted that, despite the rather feeble story and the musicians rolling about on the ground in ecstasy, he had in fact enjoyed an entertaining and amusing film. Indeed, he was essentially sympathetic to the electrified crowds of youngsters who had whistled and drummed in the cinema, thumping their armrests to the beat and even dancing between the rows to the music of Bill Haley and the Comets: “High spirits erupt around the cinema. Hundreds and hundreds of people begin dancing in the streets. (The newspapers the following day report how a police patrol car on the other side of the canal was forced to disband one group of dancers.) But there were no major incidents, not a single window was broken. My glasses were broken, but that’s another story. To be honest, the rock-and-roll move I attempted in the corner of the cinema had looked far easier than it actually was...”⁵² Not long before this, the youth-oriented *Magyar Ifjúság* had even considered it necessary to explain to its readership who

⁵⁰ Cs. M.: Szinkronizálva vagy anélkül [Dubbed or not dubbed]. *Népszabadság*, 25th January 1957.

⁵¹ In German-speaking countries, the name given to the post-war subculture of adolescents was *Halbstarke*.

⁵² József Vető: Fékevesztetten [Unrestrained]. *Népszabadság*, 1st February 1957.

the 22-year-old rock-and-roll idol Elvis Presley was, on the occasion of the London premiere of *Love Me Tender*.⁵³

This transitional period, during which Soviet films were first entirely withdrawn and then carefully reintroduced, and Western — partly American — mass cultural phenomena once again found their way to the Hungarian public, was evaluated in a report by MOKÉP in July 1957 as follows: “Films were a means of restoring the public’s peace of mind.”⁵⁴ During the second quarter, film distributors endeavoured to counter the “cultural concessions” that were experienced in all areas of cultural life, although the statistics for the first five months indicate that they were not yet successful. Of the 57.5 million cinema goers, 49.3% purchased tickets for “capitalist” movies, while 25.5% chose Hungarian productions, 16.6% Socialist films, and only 7.4% Soviet productions.⁵⁵

However, by the end of the year, demands for greater discipline in terms of film policy were being voiced more loudly. “It is desirable that the proportions deemed to be culturally correct are not always distorted in the desperate pursuit of spectators (or in truth, revenue). Let us put an end once and for all to the desperate attempts to catch up with the plan, while in the meantime knocking down everything we have constructed with enthusiasm and idealism in the course of cultural planning.” A memorandum by MOKÉP director Ferenc Bors, dated December 1957, already illustrates how, in the second half of 1957, it was not — or not only — the fear of public reaction after the Revolution that was to

⁵³ Órület a huszadik hatványon [Madness to the power of twenty]. *Magyar Ifjúság*, 1957/5, 5.

⁵⁴ Letter from András Berkesi to the Film Directorate (22nd July 1957). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

blame for failure to achieve the proportions desirable from the perspective of ideology and cultural policy, but rather financial constraints. Defending the former objectives, Bors spoke out against “the screening of Western-made films that are desirable purely from a financial point of view”, and against further “concessions in matters of principle”.⁵⁶

At the time that Ferenc Bors penned these words, the American film *Trapeze*, which was indeed promising in terms of box-office revenues, was on the point of release. The negotiations announced at the beginning of 1957 resulted in the purchase of three Hollywood films. At the same time, the revenues realised in Hungarian forints were accompanied by substantial expenditures in U.S. dollars: the royalties for American films were on a par with the most expensive Western European films (*Aida*, *Don Juan*, *Moulin Rouge*), although overall, including other costs, the highest royalties were paid for a musical starring Gina Lollobrigida, Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster.⁵⁷

The Hungarian papers were reserved when it came to the return of Hollywood, mentioning only Carol Reed’s film *Trapeze* among the standard film reviews, while taking care to highlight the Soviet drama *Other People’s Relatives* as the main event of the week. *Trapeze* received moderate praise as a consistently visually exciting and suspenseful work, although clichéd and based not on artistic merit but rather on technical brilliance. “It presents one of the (apparently inexhaustible) topics of cinematic romanticism for the umpteenth time since the invention of the motion picture: love and jealousy among trapeze artists. [...] The film very effectively traces the

⁵⁶ Memorandum of Ferenc Bors (2nd December 1957). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 16.

⁵⁷ Plan for the importing of import reserve films (11th November 1957). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 16.

creation and development of the trapeze production, and successfully builds the tension towards the climax: the clash between rivals for love in the air”, was the verdict of the critic writing for the trade union daily *Népakarat* [People’s Will], which was published under this name after the defeat of the Revolution, before reverting to its original name *Népszava* [People’s Voice] in 1958.⁵⁸ According to the review, it was not merely the film that was spectacular but also the way in which the filmmakers avoided any appearance of realism: “everyday life in the circus was as glittery as the shows”.⁵⁹

The first half of 1958 saw the release of the other two American films in the “triple pack”, *Marty* and *The Rebellion of the Hanged*. Despite winning the Grand Prix at Cannes, *Marty* was not a real blockbuster. It was far more suited to the cultural and political tastes of the Soviet bloc than to American audiences. “America mass produces thousands of annoying films, filled with gags, costumes, and flashes of thigh, manufacturing its ‘vedettes’ out of fake fly-leg eyelashes, 45-degree eyebrow arches and the like. [...] Then lo and behold, America makes a budget film about a clumsy butcher’s assistant, and it becomes a well-deserved success all over the world. Here in Hungary, in the entirely different world of a people’s democracy, we watch with delight and total empathy the mundane problems of the good-natured Marty, who wants to get married but is so awkward around women, and we recognise these problems as equally valid in Budapest.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ (hárs): Filmsarok. Trapéz [Film club. Trapeze]. *Népakarat*, 18th December 1957.

⁵⁹ (hárs): Filmsarok [Film club]. *Népakarat*, 18th December 1957; B. R.: Filmekről röviden [Films in brief]. *Népszabadság*, 19th December 1957.

⁶⁰ András Rajk: *Marty*. *Népakarat*, 24th January 1958.

The works of the group of British playwrights who came to be known as the “angry young men” after John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger*, also reached Hungary — either as stage performances or through the pages of the world literary magazine *Nagyvilág*, or in the form of cinematic adaptations (*Look Back in Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*). This was a movement that focused on the ordinary individual, members of the working class, portraying their environment, their very mundane struggles, and their discontent without glamour or embellishment.⁶¹ All this was perfectly in tune with the quest for answers in Marxist aesthetics, which sought to move away from Stalinist dogma while adhering to the concept of socialist realism. Thus, *Marty* could count on critical acclaim, although it could not be expected to be a hit with the wider public, even in the countries of the Soviet bloc. In other words, it was the kind of film that the Hungarian film authorities were happy to import from the United States and the West, while only a small segment of Hungarian audiences were willing to buy tickets for it. Similar works of social criticism were more likely to be found among the productions of Western Europe than Hollywood.

The third “American” film was released in Hungarian cinemas as a Mexican production, although Hungarofilm purchased the distribution rights from United Artists. Set in Mexico, it recounted the story of plantation workers who were forced to work almost as slaves. One review considered it important to emphasise that the more gory scenes were not devoid of purpose, nor were they to be identified with the Hollywood scenes of just half a decade earlier, which were

⁶¹ See: <http://www.classicartfilms.com/film-movements/kitchen-sink-realism>
(Downloaded: 02/03/2022)

a means of conditioning people to brutality and wartime massacre: "...spectators cannot be spared from depictions of such horrors as a group of people tied to the branches of a tree, swaying and moaning, their backs whipped until bloody; the cutting off of the shot fugitive's finger to get at the ring stuck on it; and other, similar scenes, which, because of their subject matter, would generally be branded as naturalism in our country, forgetting that naturalism is a matter of perspective and style, not of subject matter."⁶²

With the re-release of *Robin Hood* starred by Errol Flynn altogether five further American films were released during the year: a comedy, *Roman Holiday*, in line with the programming policy of making concessions to lighter entertainment; and *The Charlie Chaplin Festival* and *Knock on Wood* in August followed by *Phone Call from a Stranger* in October. The first not only promised a star-studded cast including Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck, with whom Hungarian audiences had been familiar since the second half of the 1940s, but also a worthwhile romantic comedy: "It is worlds apart from its kitsch, saccharine, fake predecessors: those worlds are humanity, wit, healthy humour and subtle irony."⁶³ Charlie Chaplin, who was a British citizen, was portrayed by the Communist press even between 1949 and 1953 as a "great American progressive filmmaker"⁶⁴ and as one of the few artistic geniuses of the "other America" who did not return to the United States after the premiere of *Limelight* in 1952. Chaplin's latest work, *A King in New York*, an artistic response to McCarthyism in the form of a comedy released in

⁶² István Majoros: Akasztottak lázadása [The Rebellion of the Hanged]. *Népakarat*, 15th March 1958.

⁶³ László Dalos: Római vakáció [Roman Holiday]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1st August 1958, 10.

⁶⁴ See: „A béke gyújtogatója vagyok!” [“I’m the pacifist fire-raiser”]. *Szabad Nép*, 23rd April 1952.

1957, was understandably warmly received by the Hungarian press as a profound criticism of the American lifestyle, a serious blow struck in the fight against inhumanity, and “a cruel satire on the witch-hunting methods employed by the American government”.⁶⁵ However, as the rights to this film could not be acquired in the late 1950s, Hungarian cinema goers had to be content with the silent film compilation *The Charlie Chaplin Festival*.

Thus, when Eric A. Johnston visited Budapest once again as the head of the American film delegation in October 1958, after his trip to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, seven American films had already been released in Hungary since the Revolution. Needless to say, the American film tsar’s meeting with Khrushchev was more important than his stopover in Budapest. The purpose of his visit to Moscow was to finalise the so-called Lacy–Zarubin bilateral cultural agreement⁶⁶ on the resumption of film relations, furthering the negotiations that had been stalled in the first months of the year. The American party, yielding to Soviet demands, agreed to purchase seven Soviet films.⁶⁷ Johnston wished Hungarofilm to commit to a larger contingent of at least 10 films, even if this initially comprised mostly ideologically neutral nature and documentary films. The Hungarian side tried to steer clear of such an agreement and attempted to negotiate separately with individual U.S. film distributors. The Hungarians were clearly motivated partly by financial

⁶⁵ „Egy király New Yorkban” [“A king in New York”]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 17th September 1957; Vera Lévai: Londoni beszámoló Chaplin új filmjéről [A London report on the new Chaplin film]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 11th October 1957; István György: Exkirály és exkapitány [Ex-king and ex-captain]. *Népszabadság*, 16th March 1958.

⁶⁶ An agreement signed on 27th January 1958 between the United States and the Soviet Union on cultural, technical and educational exchanges.

⁶⁷ Walter L. Hixson: *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War*. St Martin’s Press, New York, 1997, 155.

considerations, and especially by the scarcity of foreign currency available for film purchases.⁶⁸

Cinematic relations and Socialist film admissions policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s

In December 1958, the heads of the Socialist film distribution companies convened in the Romanian mountain resort of Sinaia to discuss the current state of film relations.⁶⁹ This was not an unusual event: other state bodies responsible for the management of cultural sectors in the Soviet bloc also held regular consultations during the Khrushchev era. The meeting was attended not only by the European satellite countries but also by China and Vietnam. The forum provided an opportunity to clarify differences of opinion⁷⁰ and to discuss the somewhat divergent film procurement practices.

One of the fundamental rifts was between the film policies of the Communist-led states of the Far East and those of Europe. The Chinese delegation made it clear that they would acquire films from abroad only if they considered them to be politically useful in general, but also if they contributed to the meeting of current “daily tasks”. Only one “capitalist” film made it through this filter in 1958. Films shown in

⁶⁸ Memorandum of István Dósa (20th October 1958). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 29.

⁶⁹ Report by István Dósa on the film conference of Socialist countries (18th December 1958). MNL OL XIX-I-22 box 30.

⁷⁰ On the tensions related to Hungarian and Polish film exchanges between 1956 and 1963 see: Róbert Takács: Desztalinizációs kultúrpolitikák páternoszteren. A túrés és tiltás, nyugati transzferek és kísérletezés, valamint a lengyel–magyar viszony feszültségei 1956 után [The cultural policy of de-Stalinisation in the paternoster lift. Toleration and prohibition, Western transfers and experimentation, and strained relations between Poland and Hungary after 1956]. *Múltunk*, 2021/3, 91–101.

Vietnam were older productions from the West, most of which were spoils of war, such as the Soviet “trophy films”. In the European parts of the Socialist galaxy, on the other hand, Western film connections were revived universally after 1953. In the reports compiled by the delegations, in which they detailed their admissions policies, the same threefold approach emerged, albeit in different ways. Firstly, there were filters in place, meaning that films that were inimical and ideologically highly controversial were not permitted to be screened. Secondly, there was an attempt to apply artistic and aesthetic filters, with an emphasis sometimes on the principles of Marxist aesthetics and sometimes on the education of public taste. The third and final aspect mentioned was the need to provide entertainment — or in other words, diversity — in cinema programmes. This was contested principally by the East German film authorities, who argued that the undeniable lack of entertainment films should be addressed not by means of Western imports but by the country’s own efforts. Bulgaria and Romania were less open in terms of cultural policy: Romania acquired just 10 Western-made films in 1958, while Bulgaria purchased 13 in 1957 and 18 in 1958, although, according to calculations by the Romanian film authorities, the country was to acquire as many as 30 Western-made films by 1959. The Soviet delegation reported that 19 Western films were scheduled for release in 1958 and a further 20 in 1959. By contrast, 60 to 70 of the 160 to 170 annual releases in Poland — almost 40% — came from the West. By 1958, some American films were included on cinema programmes almost everywhere, albeit mostly in small numbers.⁷¹

⁷¹ Report by István Dósa on the film conference of Socialist countries (18th December 1958). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 30.

A certain increase in Western imports was justified not only by the process of opening and attempts to meet audience demand to some extent, but also by a desire to open up the Western film markets to Socialist cinematography — and national propaganda. This demand for reciprocity was an important focus in the negotiations with Hollywood representatives. At the next Socialist Film Conference, held in Sofia in October 1960, greater attention was paid to film export issues than to film admissions. A more important dilemma than the supply in domestic cinemas was how to make Socialism more attractive to the workers and masses in the West by means of films. It was this, among other things, that motivated Khrushchev's policy of opening and the commitment to a policy of peaceful coexistence. As expressed in many articles and conceptual declarations, the receding threat of a Third World War and the launch of dialogue and debate meant not "ideological disarmament" but the opening of new frontlines of confrontation in the economic and cultural spheres. Cinema was one such potential arena.

Soviet — and Socialist — films regularly clashed on the ever-increasing number of international "battlefields", and most notably in Cannes, Venice and Karlovy Vary. From 1959 onwards, Moscow also entered the scene, with the Soviet Union feeling the need to include the Soviet capital biannually on the increasingly dense map of international film festivals. The first Moscow festival took place a few weeks before the America exhibition under the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement. At this exhibition, hosted in Sokolniki Park, the Soviet public were able to see objects promoting the American lifestyle, from nail polish through kitchen

appliances to a modern IBM computer.⁷² The exhibition also involved screenings, although largely to dazzle the inhabitants of Moscow in terms of technique and spectacle. The 45-minute compilation *Glimpses of the USA* was projected simultaneously on seven huge screens showing different images, 16 times a day, for 5,000 spectators per show. According to U.S. figures, almost 3 million people watched the images of the U.S. landscapes, cities, everyday life, environment, and material culture.⁷³

By comparison, the Moscow festival was an “ideologically safe” environment, although the Western productions, which were selected for their locations and directors, were still subjected to criticism: “It was strange initially, although by now we are used to the things we see on the big screen here in the heart of Moscow, in the Kremlin, the citadel of Socialism: from the ‘tragedy’ of the enervated Indian landlord to the love story of a languishing bourgeois wife in Vienna, there is a rich selection of heroes and problems that are far removed from our own.”⁷⁴ The selection from the United States reflected a willingness to engage in political dialogue through art: this was the message of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, despite the opinion expressed by Marxist critics that, deprived of its social context, the film was awash with psychologising.⁷⁵

East and West also clashed on the cinema screens in one another’s countries. Or in many respects, were intended to

⁷² Susan E. Reid: Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the de-Stalinization of consumer taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev. *Slavic Review*, 2002/2, 211–252.

⁷³ Beatriz Colomina: Enclosed by Images: The Eameses’ Multimedia Architecture. *Grey Room*, 2001/2, 5–29.

⁷⁴ Péter Rényi: A világ filmpanorámája [The film panorama of the world]. *Népszabadság*, 12th August 1959.

⁷⁵ Péter Rényi: Lélekrajz és realizmus [Psychology and realism]. *Népszabadság*, 23rd August 1959.

clash. It soon became clear that films from the far larger Western output could pass through the ideological filters of state socialist countries more easily than the smaller Socialist film output of 200 films or fewer were able to pass through the market-imposed filters of the Western cinema industry. István Rudnyánszky adapted the concept of the Iron Curtain to describe this situation, claiming that the “gold curtain” of the West closed rather more tightly.⁷⁶ There was little point in the ministries and state-owned companies involved in the negotiations thinking in terms of reciprocity if Western film distributors shook their heads: they would purchase good Socialist films, but the public were not interested and such films could not be distributed on a market basis. The statement made at the meeting in Sofia, where the need had been established for films that “present the fundamental problems of our day — the struggle for peace, the propagation of the Socialist way of life — in an entertaining, interesting and artistic way”, should be appreciated in this context.⁷⁷

The report of the meeting did not go into detail about so-called capitalist film imports. Only overall figures for films originating from Socialist and capitalist countries were presented: these figures show that the presence of Western-made films had increased everywhere compared to 1958: there were 30 released in Bulgaria, 32 in Romania, 35 in East Germany, which two years ago had adopted a very conservative position, and 47 in the Soviet Union. In other words, taking into account their own film production and Socialist imports, a quarter to a fifth of the films released in these countries were made in the West. Polish data were not

⁷⁶ István Rudnyánszky: „Ki kell szabadítani a filmet az üzletemberek markából” [Films must be freed from the hands of business]. *Népszabadság*, 19th May 1957.

⁷⁷ Report to the film companies of Socialist countries on the Sofia congress (13th December 1960). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 47.

included in the report, thus the only anomaly emerged in the Czechoslovak statistics, where there were 70 Western-made films to 100 Socialist imports, meaning that around a third of the Czechoslovak cinema releases were Western-made productions.

Table 1 *The number and percentage of films acquired from capitalist countries in 1960*

	Bulgaria	Czechoslovakia	East Germany	Hungary	Romania	Soviet Union
Összes	150	170	120	131	132	138
Non-Socialist	30	70	35	45	32	47
(%)	20	41,2	29,25	34,4	24,2	34,1

Source: Film Directorate⁷⁸

The representatives of Hungarofilm did not of course include Hungarian data in their report. If they had done, they would have mentioned 44 films from non-Socialist countries in 1958; 40 in 1959; and 45 in 1960. These figures were essentially on a par with Polish and Czechoslovak programming policy, albeit somewhat behind their imports from the West. This quantity accounted for between 28% and 33% of the total film supply. French and Italian films continued to form the backbone, as the published statistics reported six U.S. film releases in 1958, five in 1959, and eight in 1960. Even so, this was sufficient to push the United States

⁷⁸ Report to the film companies of Socialist countries on the congress (13th December 1960). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 47.

into third or fourth place among the Western suppliers of films to Hungarian cinemas.⁷⁹

However, the U.S. film supply in 1959 and 1960 showed a marked difference. The five films released in 1959 were more entertainment oriented. An older Gregory Peck film from 1951, *Captain Horatio Hornblower*, targeted fans of adventure films, while *Invitation to the Dance* featured the dancing skills of Gene Kelly, and *The Great Caruso* showcased the voice of Mario Lanza. One review drew attention to the social critical aspects of the Gene Kelly film: “The second part encapsulates, in satirical montages, the apocalyptic convulsions of the modern Western lifestyle, the ‘devil-may-care’ attitude, the fear of death in the guise of intemperance, and internal desolation.”⁸⁰

The Lanza film became one of the most viewed productions that year.⁸¹ In light of this, it is scarcely surprising that the singer Mario Lanza gained many fans in Hungary. His second film, *The Toast of New Orleans*, was watched by at least 610,000 people in 1963, and a letter with 1,400 signatures was sent to the Film Directorate requesting the acquisition of more Lanza productions. Several letters from cinema goers and film buffs, expressing either criticisms or requests, are preserved in the archives of the Film Directorate: they suggest that citizens were aware of how film admissions policy operated and attempted to influence the process in

⁷⁹ The United States and West Germany were in joint third place behind France and Italy as suppliers of films in 1958. In 1959 the United States was again in third place, and in 1960 it came fourth behind England.

⁸⁰ M. G. P.: Felhívás tánra [Invitation to the Dance]. *Népszabadság*, 17th July 1959.

⁸¹ The article refers to four hits from the West: besides the American production discussed here, these were the French film *La Putain respectueuse* [*The Respectful Prostitute*]; the West German film *Wunderkinder*, and the English film *Richard III*. Százhuszonhárommillió nézője volt az idén bemutatott filmeknek [This year’s film releases attracted 123 million spectators]. *Népszabadság*, 20th December 1959.

a more active manner than simply by purchasing tickets. However, it was exceptional for spectators to address the Film Directorate in such large numbers and in an organised manner — especially in the case of an American film. It is also clear that their arguments were formulated intelligently and reflected an awareness of the priorities in film admissions policy: public education, the promotion of culture and opera, and the distribution of films that appealed to the public.⁸²

The other two American films in 1959 included a work somewhat similar to *Marty*, about “ordinary America” (*The Catered Affair*)⁸³, and an anti-fascist drama. *The Seventh Cross* was based on the highly acclaimed German (in 1959 East German) novel by Anne Seghers and was made during the Roosevelt era.

In 1960, however, the proportions were reversed: of the eight films released, five involved social criticism to varying degrees, including adaptations of two classic and one contemporary work of literature. Although *War and Peace* garnered considerable acclaim,⁸⁴ Marxist critics saw Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* as having been stripped of its satirical critique of society and the church: they claimed that the cinematic adaptation bore the same resemblance to the original as “a student’s free-hand drawing to a piece of classical sculpture”.⁸⁵ The stage version of the courtroom

⁸² 1,400 letters from cinema goers to the Film Directorate (12th December 1963). MNL OL XIX-I-22 box 84.

⁸³ (gábor): A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 19th November 1959.

⁸⁴ “The better of the two is representative of American filmmaking. Art that does not merely aim to entertain but to offer ideas, to make people think. And if the message it has to convey is not revolutionary in our eyes, in the United States the film is unquestionably a bold step and a meaningful gesture.” Péter Ábel: Háború és béke [War and Peace]. *Népszabadság*, 15th June 1960.

⁸⁵ László B. Nagy: Szent Johanna [Saint Joan]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 25th February 1960.

drama *Twelve Angry Men* had already been performed in theatres in Budapest and Győr. The most highly acclaimed of the eight films was Stanley Kramer's action movie about the pursuit of two escaped convicts, which combined entertainment and a criticism of capitalism in a manner expected of Western productions. "It represents a better kind of American filmmaking, art that seeks not just to entertain but also to provide substance, food for thought. And while its message may not be revolutionary for us, in the United States this film is considered as an unequivocally courageous work, a significant act."⁸⁶ Anna Vilcsek also pointed out that the two main characters were in fact working-class heroes, who had landed in prison as a result of poverty and exploitation and who recognised the importance of social solidarity despite their racial prejudices.⁸⁷

Cinematic relations in the first half of the 1960s

In August 1964, the Film Directorate compiled a memorandum on Hungarian–American film relations.⁸⁸ The memorandum reveals that the two countries had established a moderate but fundamentally market-based cooperation that included not only the sale of films but also Hungarian involvement in American film production.

The most important goal set by state socialist countries in connection to opening, film exports, and, by means of exports, propaganda for the country and the system, was

⁸⁶ Péter Ábel: A bemutatómozik műsorából [On the cinema programme]. *Népszabadság*, 20th October 1960.

⁸⁷ Anna Vilcsek: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 13th October 1960.

⁸⁸ Information on Hungarian–American film relations, 1957–1964 (5th August 1964). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 90.

to achieve success only within strict constraints. One of the arenas for this were the U.S. film festivals on the other side of the Atlantic. Although American festivals did not count among the top events in the world of cinema, Hungarian films were entered in four American film festivals during these years. Founded in 1957, the most important of these events was the San Francisco International Film Festival, where *The House Under the Rocks* won the Grand Prix in 1958. The Hungarian success — which came as a surprise in light of the frosty Hungarian–American relations at the time — was largely down to the festival’s founder, Irving M. Levin, who had seen Károly Makk’s work on an earlier trip to Europe and fallen in love with it. According to the embassy, Levin made special efforts to ensure the film was screened to packed cinemas, and he subsequently purchased the rights to the film, despite the disapproval of U.S. State Security.⁸⁹ In Levin, Hungarian cinema had gained an American ally in the film industry. He visited Hungary in 1960 and 1962 and personally consulted with Hungarian partners as to which films should be included in the San Francisco Festival in these years.⁹⁰ A Hungarian feature film also won a prize in San Francisco in 1960 (*Be Good All Your Life*; Best Child Actor Award), as did two Hungarian shorts (*Immortality* and *You*) in 1960 and 1963. Besides San Francisco, Hungary also participated in other U.S. film festivals (Boston, New York, and the Hollywood Science Film Festival), with *Land of Angels* winning a joint Grand Prix in Boston in 1963.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Report on the San Francisco Film Festival (8th November 1958). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945–1964 USA, box 41.

⁹⁰ Report on the discussion with foreign citizens (29th June 1960). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945–1964 USA, box 41. Report on the recent visit of Levin to Hungary (26th June 1962). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945–1964 USA box 41.

⁹¹ Information on Hungarian–American film relations, 1957–1964 (5th August 1964). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 90.

The other channel, film distribution, did not prove to be straightforward after 1956. In the summer of 1957, the screening of *Merry-Go-Round*, which had also featured in Cannes, had to be suspended due to the regular appearance of protesters in front of the cinema. In the following years, only a few Hungarian feature films were sold for general distribution in America (*Dani*, *In Soldier's Uniform*, *Iron Flower*), besides nature films and shorts. In the meantime, Hungarian Pictures Inc. purchased dozens of films with Hungarian sound for Hungarian emigrés between 1960 and 1963.⁹²

The presence of American films in Hungary was far more widespread, not only because 44 American feature films had been admitted by 1964, as opposed to the half dozen Hungarian films sold, but also because they were screened throughout the Hungarian cinema network, not just in a few niche cinemas catering to the interests of a small circle of cinema buffs. Furthermore, while Hungarian films in America were not expected to be screened a significant number of times, in Hungary, from as early as the late 1950s, the more expensive Western-made box-office hits were shown more frequently in the more prominent cinemas of the larger cities, while the global proportions — the statistics for screenings in Socialist countries — were improved by projections in smaller towns. “In our experience, village cinemas are more politicised than the premiere cinemas in the cities, where cultural policy interests are often subordinated to the realisation of financial plans”, in the words of a memorandum written to Deputy Minister of Culture György Aczél.⁹³

Between 1961 and 1963, the number of American films released in Hungarian cinemas remained unchanged

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Memorandum for György Aczél on the film distribution situation (31st March 1959). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 41.

compared to the end of the previous decade: seven in 1961, five in 1962, six in 1963 and nine in 1964. It was clear to the Hungarian film authorities that the film admissions rates established in the late 1950s could not be changed without political concessions. From the mid-1950s, the principles of film admission did not change significantly. One important criterion was that films from Socialist countries should constitute the overwhelming majority of releases. Although the Film Admissions Committee and the Film Directorate refrained from establishing specific national quotas, or even shares, it essentially adhered to the unwritten rule of a two-thirds to one-third ratio for imports. With regard to the 44 “capitalist” and 80 Socialist films released in 1958, the Film Directorate stated that “an increase in the numbers would lead to a decline in the quality of Socialist films and to a greater number of commercial films in the case of capitalist productions.” In 1963–1964, however, a certain shift in the direction of Western-made films was already discernible.⁹⁴

Table 2 *The number and proportion of films imported from Socialist and non-Socialist countries*

	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964
Socialist	63	75	84	86	87	86	83	85
Non-Socialist	40	44	40	45	45	46	47	58
Proportion of non-Socialist releases (%)	38,8	37,0	32,3	34,4	34,1	34,8	36,2	40,6

Source: Hungarian Statistical Office, *Statistical Yearbooks*

⁹⁴ Circular letter from the Film Directorate to the Executive Committees of the County Councils (16th December 1958). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 34.

Besides the difficulty in keeping a firm grip on release ratios, the 40 to 50 Western-made films that were typical of the period had to be selected from a market of 2,000 to 3,000 titles, while the one and a half to two times that number of “friendly” movies were acquired from a tenth of this available volume. In other words, while in the former case it was sufficient to accept one in 50 films (which included the hundreds of Bollywood⁹⁵ and Japanese titles, of which only a negligible proportion were admitted annually), in the latter case it was necessary to find room for one in every three films from Socialist countries. Ideological filters were thus far easier to apply to Western productions than qualitative filters in the case of Socialist films.⁹⁶

Despite this, and despite the fact that Hungarian film admissions policy in the early 1960s was still very cautious when it came to American imports, around two-thirds of American releases primarily served the purposes of entertainment. Indeed, the composition of these 20 or so films also reflected a certain reserve on the part of the decision makers. There was thus a very substantial proportion of productions from the Walt Disney Studios: in addition to the classic animations (*Bambi*, *Pinocchio*), and *Cinderella*, which was made during the Cold War “quarantine”, the latest Disney production *101 Dalmatians* was also included on cinema programmes. In the 1950s, Disney also began to produce adventure and nature films, from among which

⁹⁵ The name Bollywood refers to the “Indian Hollywood”, the Hindi-language film industry based on Mumbai.

⁹⁶ In the case of Socialist films, the film authorities in individual countries might even “lodge an appeal” with respect to specific films that were not admitted, or against the “breakdown” in reciprocity. By the 1960s, in fact, even ideological obstacles had become commonplace and in several instances it was typical for the admission of an “unproblematic” light-entertainment film to prove far more straightforward than that of a “problematic”, socially and politically “charged” or experimental film, even if it had won international acclaim.

20,000 Leagues Under the Sea and two nature documentaries by James Algar (*The African Lion* and *Secret of Life*) were released. The spectrum of adventure and historical films was even broader. Adaptations of the classics included Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* starring Marlon Brando, and *Around the World in 80 Days*, based on the novel by Jules Verne. Two further American historical adventures, *Swiss Family Robinson* and *The Court Jester*, also featured in the selection. The third major group of entertainment films comprised comedies. Two old burlesques, a 1920s compilation and a Buster Keaton film were joined by four relatively recent comedies (*The Absent-Minded Professor*, *Son of Flubber*, *Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation*, and *Teacher's Pet*). The last of these was a romantic comedy starring Clark Gable, who was in his heyday in the 1930s. The other American comedies, however, also lacked the social critical, satirical edge that the critics of the time found mainly in British films. One other title would have fitted the bill, and the embassy in Washington even recommended it for admission — Stanley Kramer's satire *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*⁹⁷ — but the film was rejected due to technical difficulties.

Compared to the above, fewer musicals and other light entertainment films were acquired. Mario Lanza's second operatic film, *The Toast of New Orleans*, and Gene Kelly's classic dance musical *Singin' in the Rain* stood out in contrast to the third, *Carmen Jones*, which was an adaptation of Bizet's opera into a musical and offered more than sophisticated diversion: it was considered a "progressive piece of Western

⁹⁷ According to the embassy, the search for the buried cash makes fun of people's frailties in good taste, flows easily, and is set in the beautiful California landscape. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took steps to request a copy, it indicated that the film would only be admitted in a CinemaScope version. Transcript from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Film Directorate (24th January 1964). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 86.

art” in the early 1960s. American musicals were seen by cultural policy as a potential source of cultural transfer in the early 1960s, capable of renewing — in terms of both form and content — the maudlin, kitsch operetta of Monarchy days that had stubbornly held sway in the Hungarian theatre scene.⁹⁸ Set in a working-class American context and performed by African American actors, the film coincided with Hungarian aspirations during that period. One romantic drama (*The Apartment*) and one crime story (*Witness for the Prosecution*) were also released, the latter being not one of the “gangster movies” that had received such fierce condemnation in the 1950s, but rather a psychological courtroom drama.

The American component in film supply, which was scheduled in quarterly cycles and accounted for 3% to 5% of releases, was not uniform, with entertainment films forming the bulk in some years. The six films released in 1963 included two comedies, two adventure films, a biopic, and a drama. American cinema thus served rather to diversify film supply than to show the other side of America. The critics occasionally raised complaints about the hollowness⁹⁹ and limitations of neutral entertainment. “In our opinion, however, it is wrong to fling open cinema doors [to these films] simply because the colourful adventure and exciting plot is sure to be a hit with the audience”, wrote *Magyar Nemzet* in connection with *Swiss Family Robinson*.¹⁰⁰

On the other side of the scales, one finds a more restricted group of films that had merit in the eyes of cultural policy.

⁹⁸ Róbert Takács: A magyar kultúra nyitottsága az 1970-es években [The openness of Hungarian culture in the 1970s]. *Múltunk*, 2017/4, 49.

⁹⁹ “Some kind of box-office hit is in any case guaranteed by the liberal use of the standard attributes of success: kitsch plot twists, rose-coloured falsehoods, beach babes...” Z. L.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 13th June 1963.

¹⁰⁰ Z. L.: Robinson család [Swiss Family Robinson]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 25th April 1963.

The fact that there were barely a dozen such films, while the Hungarian film admissions body had a decade's worth of American productions from which to choose, shows that the supply was considered to be very limited in this respect. With three releases in rapid succession in the autumn of 1962, the New York School appeared to offer the chance of a breakthrough in Hungary. One of these releases was *Come Back, Africa* by Lionel Rogosin,¹⁰¹ about racial oppression in South Africa. The director visited Hungary that year, and the film won the Italian Critics Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1959. Set in a working-class neighbourhood of New York City, the second of these releases was the docudrama *On the Bowery*, also by Rogosin, which was followed by a John Cassavetes film, also set in New York City, which traced the conflicts within a Black family. The efforts of the New York School were praised in *Népszabadság*: “[T]hey rejected the decades-long industrial Hollywood tradition of ‘pretty’ films and put their faith in unvarnished reality, narrated in ‘unretouched images’.”¹⁰² These documentary-style films, which revealed the seamier side and the oppressed classes of American — and capitalist — societies, obviously came closest to cultural policy expectations in the context of American film output. Rogosin, who was interviewed in Budapest, was presented as a simple, honest, pro-peace, anti-fascist “cultural worker”, the opposite of the Hollywood movie makers: “He wears neither a checked scarf nor a cap,

¹⁰¹ G. Péter Molnár: Magyar híradókat keres új filmjéhez Lionel Rogosin amerikai rendező [American director Lionel Rogosin seeks Hungarian news for his new film]. *Népszabadság*, 6th October 1962.

¹⁰² Péter Ábel: New York árnyai [Shades of New York]. *Népszabadság*, 5th December 1962.

nor does he sport a huge pair of sunglasses: Lionel Rogosin simply does not look like an ‘American filmmaker’.”¹⁰³

However, not only were these films unlikely to be a hit with audiences¹⁰⁴ (“many fans of the retouched images typical of Hollywood will be disappointed by *Shadows*, but Cassavetes has no intention of satisfying such demands”, warned the newspaper of the Central Committee¹⁰⁵), although the truth was that with these three films, the stocks of the New York School had been exhausted.

The films of the New York School were occasionally mentioned alongside those of Delbert Mann, director of *Marty*, as featuring ordinary, everyday people, although Mann’s two latest productions were considered disappointing compared to his Academy Award–winning debut. According to the critics, the stories had been diluted by making bigger concessions to sentimentality and Hollywood cliché.¹⁰⁶

Film adaptations, where the source play — or at least a different work by the same playwright — had already been performed on stage in Hungary were also regarded as “failsafe” admissions. By the end of the 1950s, the Hungarian public had already embraced the outstanding authors of American realism, especially Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Audiences were treated to the film versions of two of their plays that had not yet been performed in Hungary:

¹⁰³ G. Péter Molnár: Magyar híradókat keres új filmjéhez Lionel Rogosin amerikai rendező [American director Lionel Rogosin seeks Hungarian news for his new film]. *Népszabadság*, 7th October 1962.

¹⁰⁴ Rogosin’s films were watched by 40,000 and 17,000 spectators respectively in the first week. The decline in attendance figures might also indicate the disappointment experienced by the previous week’s spectators. G. Péter Molnár: Magyar híradókat keres új filmjéhez Lionel Rogosin amerikai rendező [American director Lionel Rogosin seeks Hungarian news for his new film]. Op. cit.

¹⁰⁵ Péter Ábel: New York árnyai [Shades of New York]. Op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 26th March 1964.

Miller's *The Misfits* and Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*.¹⁰⁷ *Inherit the Wind*, about the Dayton Monkey Trial,¹⁰⁸ was first performed on stage in Hungary in 1960, and Richard Nash's *The Rainmaker* premiered in 1959.¹⁰⁹ According to the critics, the American direction in the case of the latter film in particular did not follow the progressive, social critical reading of the play that had been emphasised in Hungary, but rather masked a "false ideology".¹¹⁰

Until 1964, American films thus primarily served to entertain audiences young and old, providing them with an opportunity to encounter stars they had not seen for many years, or that had emerged in the previous decade. Only a small number of box-office hits made it to Budapest, mainly because of the enormous royalty fees involved. The small number of "super-productions" also highlighted Hollywood's technical superiority — although Hungarian cinema goers still missed out on the "main point", which was Cinerama projection on a curved screen. The other important aim — authentic, internal criticism of the Western world — was represented by fewer and less influential works.

¹⁰⁷ The former was never performed in Hungarian theatres, while the latter was added to the repertoire of the Katona József Theatre in 1965. Source: <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI341411> (Downloaded: 05/03/2022)

¹⁰⁸ The trial, which caused a huge uproar around the world, took place in Dayton, in the United States, in 1925. A high-school teacher was taken to court for teaching his students Charles Darwin's theory of evolution rather than the biblical story of creation.

¹⁰⁹ Source: <http://resolver.szhaztortenet.hu/collection/OSZMI76273>; <http://resolver.szhaztortenet.hu/collection/OSZMI79366> (Downloaded: 05/03/2022.)

¹¹⁰ László Zay: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 5th October 1961.

The first co-productions

“The ‘White Rabbit’, a tiny white boat that seems no bigger than a toy, sails down the Danube. [...] On board, a charming English girl, Miss Milly, arrives in Hungary to accompany her famous detective father to an international law enforcement congress in Budapest. They stop briefly in Esztergom to visit the museum, where... Miss Milly is shocked to discover that the golden head of St Ladislav has been stolen!” So reads the photo report in *Képes Újság* introducing the film *The Golden Head*.¹¹¹ The contract was signed by Hungarofilm and Cinerama Incorporation, and the script was written by Iván Boldizsár and Stanley Goulding, after the setting and the story had been transferred from Prague to Hungary.¹¹²

The collaboration did not go smoothly. Neither the shooting nor the post-production went according to plan. The English director was replaced by the American Richard Thorpe, after which there was also a change of producer.¹¹³ The premiere, which was scheduled for the 4th Kőszeg Youth Festival, then had to be cancelled. Participants from the Communist Youth Association were compensated with a film boasting greater artistic merit, the Brazilian drama *The Given Word*, which had been awarded the Palme d’Or at Cannes, although they were not left without an American film, being treated to a screening of the comedy *Son of Flubber*.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Aranyfej [The Golden Head]. *Képes Újság*, 1964/1, 8–9.

¹¹² Film Directorate Memorandum (4th November 1963). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 83.

¹¹³ Memorandum of Pál Eszlári and Ernő Gottesmann to Hungarofilm (17th September 1963). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 82.

¹¹⁴ Üdvözöljük a IV. Kőszegi Ifjúsági Napok vendégeit! [Welcome to our guests from the IV Kőszeg Youth Festival!] *Vas Népe*, 6th June 1964.

The Golden Head, which was eventually released in July 1964, met with a lukewarm reception on the part of Hungarian critics. According to *Népszabadság*, it was at best a piece of tourist propaganda that introduced the beauties of Hungary, among them the Danube Bend, the country's "luxury hotels" — long before the Duna Intercontinental had been built with the investment of American capital in 1969, or the opening of the Hilton in 1976 — the architectural heritage of its cathedrals, and the inevitable Hungarikums: goulash, carved shepherd's axes, and gypsy music. In other words, "yippee gypsy folksy dance"¹¹⁵ — things it was high time modern Socialist Hungary moved on from anyway. In the absence of Cinerama theatres (that could offer a panoramic experience on a curved screen), the critic writing for the Party newspaper pointed out that Hungarian audiences would not even be able to enjoy the spectacle by way of compensation for the meagre plot, to see "what it's like when the Danube splashes from the right and left, when the wedding dance performed by the State Folk Ensemble can be seen in several dimensions in the Visegrád night."¹¹⁶

Critics did not even mention the fact that the most important propagandistic message about Socialist Hungary was condensed into the very opening scene, when Milly shouts out from the boat: "Hurrah! I can see it, there it is!" "What can you see?" asks her brother. "The Iron Curtain," replies Milly. "You silly girl, there's no such thing!" "There's no Iron Curtain?" she asks in surprise. "Of course there isn't," her older brother tells her. "Well, what is there then?"

¹¹⁵ László Zay: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 10th December 1964.

¹¹⁶ István Tamás: Az aranyfej [The Golden Head]. *Népszabadság*, 17th December 1964.

Milly demands. “Exactly the same thing as anywhere else: an ordinary border,” Michael informs her.¹¹⁷

The idea of promoting *The Golden Head* at any cost was not embraced even by the Film Directorate. At least it rejected the American initiative to issue a series of three commemorative stamps to mark the film’s release, featuring the bust of St Ladislav, the State Folk Ensemble, and the Opera House ballet corps.¹¹⁸ The first Hungarian film to be co-produced in the West, the 1959 Hungarian–French production *La Belle et le Tzigane*, about a romance between the famous gypsy violinist Jancsi Rigó and an American millionaire princess, was a legitimate parallel to *The Golden Head* but was considered unacceptably kitsch by Hungarian critics.¹¹⁹

In the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, a series of Socialist and Western co-productions were made in order to promote dialogue and ideological influence, but also in the hope of learning and adopting advanced filmmaking techniques and, to a lesser extent, of benefiting from distribution. The first Czechoslovak–French co-production,¹²⁰ the story of a romance between a French sports masseur who escapes to Czechoslovakia and a girl from

¹¹⁷ Source: <https://videa.hu/video/film-animacio/az-aranyfej-1964.-TERi8yilGWgPqOcm>. The above conversation from 4:50 (Downloaded: 25/03/2022.)

¹¹⁸ Letter from Miklós Révész to the Film Directorate (17th March 1964). MNL OL XIX-1-22, box 87.

¹¹⁹ “From the casting to the vapid plot, from the over-elaborate scenery to the appropriate décolletage, from gingerbread Budapest to papier-mâché Paris: every frame has a calculated theatricality.” Péter Rényi: A „Fekete szem” avagy a giécs „éjszakája” [The “Night of Dark Eyes” or the “Night of the Kitsch”]. *Népszabadság*, 14th September 1958.

¹²⁰ Pavel Skopal: Barrandov’s CoProductions. The Clumsy Way to Ideological Control, International Competitiveness and Technological Improvement. In: Lars Karl and Pavel Skopal (eds.): *Cinema in Service of the State. Perspectives on Film Culture in the GDR and Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960*. Berghahn Books, New York–Oxford, 2017, 93–95.

Prague, had already been released in 1957 and was shown in Hungary in the spring of 1959, although it was considered ideologically confused, as was the first Hungarian–French experiment.¹²¹ Nevertheless, a second Hungarian–French film, *Germinal*, followed in 1963.

Hungarian–American cooperation, however, was a phenomenon unique to the Khrushchev era, although the intention had existed even before *The Golden Head*. The idea was typically embraced by Hollywood personalities with Hungarian connections. One such idea came from Joe Pasternak, who was born in 1901 in Szilágysomlyó, Transylvania and who wanted to adapt the story of the 19th century highwayman Sándor Rózsa, although in 1961 the idea seemed neither financially nor politically feasible.¹²²

The other, more serious plan originated from a married couple. “Anyone who has carefully studied our increasingly colourful and fascinating press in recent days will have frequently encountered the names of Jayne Mansfield and Mickey Hargitay.¹²³ Dozens of communiqués, reports, picture interviews and the like have made it known to anyone on the lookout for on sensation that the world-famous couple have arrived in Hungary for a few days’ rest. Radio and TV have likewise sprung into action, covering this unusual event with commendable speed, and the platinum blonde star and her handsome, Hungarian-born husband have naturally been captured on some of our own news footage.”¹²⁴ An article in the *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, on the other hand, poked fun at any organ of the press that considered

¹²¹ Ibid. 93; Ilona Nóti: Filmek [Films]. *Esti Hírlap*, 5th March 1959.

¹²² Report by Tibor Zádor (19th December 1961). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 41.

¹²³ The Hungarian-born film star Miklós Hargitay and his wife, Jayne Mansfield, visited Budapest in 1961 and again in 1963.

¹²⁴ (v. j.): Mansfield. *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, 4th September 1963.

the Hollywood dream couple's visit to Hungary as in any way newsworthy. In a somewhat surreal way, the episode highlighted the deep roots of tabloid journalism traditions in the Hungarian press, and how ready they were to surface as soon as the thaw ushered in by de-Stalinisation had loosened the frozen ground to some extent. Hungarian journalists, meanwhile, revelled in the details of the visits to Hungary by the Kőbánya-born bodybuilding champion, the Hercules impersonator, and the "new Marilyn Monroe".

This was especially the case since Hungary was a semi-periphery country in the context of the film world, certainly in 1963. On the one hand, Hungarian films had yet to have their breakthrough moment: the favourable reception of *Merry-Go-Round* in Cannes in 1956 was not followed by further successes reflected in awards, while the acclaim that greeted *The House Under the Rocks* in San Francisco also failed to translate into real international fame. While the Hungarian New Wave did not gain worldwide recognition until the mid-1960s, Polish and Soviet cinema had already achieved remarkable success in the West in the second half of the 1950s. Moscow and Karlovy Vary counted as centres of the film world, where the presence of stars was not unusual — indeed, they belonged to the brilliance of the Socialist galaxy. In Budapest, however, the situation was different. The celebrated diva was visiting the Hungarian capital merely to accompany her Hungarian husband, while neither Hargitay's nor Mansfield's films were known in Budapest — Hungarian film admissions policy having, for the time being, dismissed the kind of sexuality represented by the irresistible blonde as "the opiate of the decadent West". Besides, the 1963 visit was not the couple's first time in Hungary. Their first trip to the country had taken place two years earlier, and while it had not remained a secret even then, it had not been

given this kind of sensationalist coverage in the Hungarian media. In the photographs published in *Film Színház Muzsika*, Mansfield's father-in-law, a ticket collector on a pleasure steamer, poses in his sailor's uniform.¹²⁵ The photo report by the weekly paper of the Hungarian–Soviet Friendship Society continued the themes of “simplicity” and “dream couple” when Mansfield was photographed in the kitchen of her mother-in-law's thatched cottage in Balatonkenese wearing an apron that matched Mrs Hargitay's, the two of them busy making jam dumplings.¹²⁶ Global balance was ensured in the newspaper with the inclusion of a photograph of the blonde dancers of the Polish folk dance troupe Śląsk, clad in bathing costumes, on holiday in Tihany, Lake Balaton, opposite the photo of the Hollywood star wearing her apron and embroidered blouse.¹²⁷

However, Hargitay's plan to make a film version of *Toldi*,¹²⁸ a Hungarian hero famous for his physical strength, came to nothing, despite the fact that he had been nurturing the idea since 1961. Hargitay had naturally cast himself in the role of Miklós Toldi, while his wife was to be Toldi's sweetheart, Piroska Rozgonyi. In contrast to the sarcasm expressed in *Hajdú-Bihari Napló* regarding the quality of the actress's performances and/or films, other newspapers, such as *Hétfői Hírek*, were rather touched by the fact that “a woman from Pennsylvania, who has made films for almost every studio in America and Western Europe, who has played

¹²⁵ *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1961/26, 36–37.

¹²⁶ „Szőke vasárnap Balatonkenesén” [“Blonde Sunday in Balatonkenese”]. *Ország-Világ*, 1961/28, 5.

¹²⁷ Nemzetközi Terefere Tihanyban [International Chitchat in Tihany]. *Ország-Világ*, 1961/28, 5.

¹²⁸ In 1961, Sándor Dallos took his screenplay to Yugoslavia, where the actress required no special introduction. A Hunniában, Füreden... [In the Hunnia, in Balatonfüred...] *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1961/27, 34.

twenty different kinds of girls and women in twenty different films, somewhere in her heart dreams of playing the role of Toldi's sweetheart in a joint enterprise with her husband."¹²⁹

Co-production negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States had already taken place prior to *The Golden Head*: on 6th March 1962, *Magyar Nemzet* reported that Mitchell Wilson, an American writer highly regarded in the Soviet Union but less noted in the United States, was in the process of casting¹³⁰ for a film based on his novel *Meeting at a Far Meridian*.¹³¹ The film, which would have depicted "friendship and cooperation" between Soviet and American scientists,¹³² was eventually abandoned in 1966. There were also talks about a joint Soviet–American movie about Tchaikovsky, although the first and – until the Glasnost period – last Soviet–American co-production was *The Blue Bird*, directed by the then 77-year-old George Cukor in 1976. Piotr Pawlowski, the lead actor in the Polish film *Pharaoh*, claimed that Poland had wanted to make this large-scale historical film in the form of an American co-production, although it proved impossible to reconcile the ideas of the Polish director Jerzy Kawalerowicz and the American producers, partly because the Americans wanted Elvis Presley to star in the film.¹³³ The American–Czechoslovak co-productions announced in the middle of the decade, including the adaptation of Karel Čapek's novel *War with the*

¹²⁹ György Fenyves: Vasárnap délelőtt Jayne Mansfielddel [Sunday morning with Jayne Mansfield]. *Hétfői Hírek*, 26th August 1963.

¹³⁰ Napló [Diary]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 6th March 1962.

¹³¹ The novel was also published in Hungarian in 1963 by Kossuth Kiadó (the legal successor to Szikra Kiadó, established by the Hungarian Communist Party). It had already been published in Russian in the Soviet Union in 1961.

¹³² Szovjet-amerikai koprodukció [Soviet–American co-production]. *Előre*, 23rd July 1964.

¹³³ Az „ellen-Kleopátra” műhelytitkai [Anti-Cleopatra tricks of the trade]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 24th November 1966.

News (also known as *Salamander Wars*) and a new version of the classic silent film *The Golem*, were both abandoned.¹³⁴

In contrast to American co-productions, however, several films were in fact made with Western European partners, even though it was certainly far from typical for the Soviet bloc states to make ideological concessions to their partners from the West. The first Soviet–French co-production, *Normandie-Niémen*, evoked the anti-fascist alliance during the Second World War through the story of a French air squadron serving in the Red Army. The premiere in Paris, along with a series of other cultural events, was timed to coincide with Khrushchev’s visit to France in March 1960 and was thus an integral element in the Soviet foreign policy offensive.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ *Zalai Hírlap*, 2nd June 1966; *Zalai Hírlap*, 17th June 1966.

¹³⁵ Endre Bajomi-Lázár: Francia krónika [French chronicle]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 23rd March 1960.



Jayne Mansfield is making dumplings with her Hungarian mother-in-law in her home in Balatonkenese, Hungary.

Source: Ország-Világ, 1961/28. 5. Original: Farkas Tibor

3. CONTROLLED EXPANSION – HOLLYWOOD IN HUNGARY IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 1960s

In the second half of the 1960s, the presence of American films in Hungarian cinemas increased compared to the early years. According to official data, 10 Hollywood films were released in 1965, with 9 in 1966, 11 in 1967, 13 in 1968, 10 in 1969 and 13 in 1970. This was, of course, still only a fraction of the very substantial U.S. output that met the film admissions criteria, although it did approach the volume that the U.S. president's "travelling film agent" Eric A. Johnston had considered possible and desirable in the second half of the 1950s.

The fact that the presence of American films in Hungary had not reached this level even a decade after the "cinematic compromise", suggests that the Hungarian film authorities were still attempting to make up the unwritten "capitalist" quota with Western European, and above all French and Italian, films. Up until 1969, with one exception, the number of Italian releases reached 15 a year, while Hungarian audiences were able to watch 22 new French films in 1962. When French films began to decline, their place was taken not by American, but rather by English films, which had hitherto lagged behind Hollywood: in 1970, only eight French films were released, while the number of English releases reached 15. The fact that entertainment was not yet considered the bailiwick of Hollywood in these years is illustrated by the distribution of films in the so-called A and

C categories. Films of high cultural and political importance were classified in category A. According to the film inventory of 1968, there were 30 Hungarian, 29 Soviet, and seven other Socialist films ranked in this category, along with seven Western productions, including two — anti-fascist — American dramas, *Judgement at Nuremberg* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In category C, which comprised films released mainly out of commercial considerations, there were just two Socialist films and two East–West co-productions, besides 39 Western-made films, 19 of which were French and six American.¹

The number of American films might have been higher, but the film admissions body had a higher rejection rate for Hollywood films. In the second half of the 1960s, a regular film forum was held in Brno, Czechoslovakia, where the heads of the Socialist film organisations watched a large number of Western productions. The majority of the films screened at this forum were also American: of the 56 films shown, 20 were made in the USA, according to the report on the forum. Of these 20 films, five were approved, copies of a further two were sent to Budapest for assessment, one of which was eventually purchased,² while 13 Hollywood productions — along with six British films — were immediately rejected.³ The number of rejections was further increased by the fact that copies of certain Western films were requested without any chance of admission, simply to be shown in the projection room of the Film Admissions

¹ Circular letter from the Film Directorate (27th August 1968). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 120.

² The adventure film *Modesty Blaise* was released in 1970, while the story of the self-centred, narcissistic, self-conflicted *Alfie* was ultimately rejected.

³ Memorandum by István Kondor on the IV Brno Film Forum (21st November 1966). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 112.

Committee in Báthory Street for the purposes of professional information.

This was also a period in which Hungarian filmmaking was carving out a place for itself on the international film scene. In 1967, Ferenc Kósa's drama *Ten Thousand Days* won the country's first major award at Cannes, the award for Best Director. Hungarian films also won prizes that year in Venice (*Late Season*), San Sebastian (*Hello Vera*), Locarno and Moscow (*Father*) and Oberhausen (*Five Minutes Thrill*). Miklós Jancsó, who had won the Best Foreign Film award in Britain the previous year with *The Round-Up*, was invited to participate in the Cannes jury. The Film Directorate was delighted to acknowledge that Hungarian cinema had made a "breakthrough" in the West, especially in France and Italy, while Hungarian New Wave films (*Cold Days*, *The Round-Up*, *Twenty Hours*, *Ten Thousand Days*, *Father*) also received a positive reception overseas.⁴

The growing reputation of Hungarian cinema contributed to the fact that, in addition to short films, major feature films were now more likely to be sold in the West: by 1967–1968, revenues from feature films had more than doubled compared to the first half of the 1960s. The rise in sales of short films was more modest — or, more accurately, they had in fact already started to increase in the early 1960s. However, the revenue generated by commissioned film services considerably exceeded the revenues from film sales — by about 25% in 1967, and by three and a half times in the first three-quarters of 1968.⁵

⁴ Report by the Film Directorate on Hungary's international film relations in 1967 (12th February 1968). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 118.

⁵ Report by Hungarofilm for the Cultural Foreign Trade Council (23rd November 1968). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 118.

The short film *Overture*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short in 1965, helped to boost the reputation of short films in America,⁶ and while short films accounted for only 22% of total film export earnings, they accounted for 37% of Western exports in 1968. In terms of revenues, the American market was already playing a surprisingly important role in this period: 26.2% of the revenues from capitalist film sales came from the United States, a further 15.4% from West Germany, 11.1% from Great Britain, and only 6.5% and 5.1% from France and Italy respectively, which were ranked significantly higher from a cultural policy perspective. Typically, however, a large proportion of sales — 40% at the time — were not for distribution in the cinemas but for television broadcasting.⁷

Hollywood in the service of entertainment – Romantic comedies and an aversion to westerns

Even if individual films cannot strictly be categorised as light or serious/substantial works, the majority of releases between 1965 and 1970 can be classified as oriented towards entertainment. While their share in U.S. film imports was less than two-thirds, it was not far off that share.⁸ In other words, although American movies only played second fiddle to French films in terms of entertaining Hungarian audiences during this period, their role in this respect was not insignificant.

⁶ Letter from Mrs László Kristóf to the Film Directorate (7th April 1966). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 107.

⁷ Report by Hungarofilm for the Cultural Foreign Trade Council (23rd November 1968). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 118.

⁸ Almost 60% of the American films screened at that time were primarily entertainment films.

The proportion of comedies within the category of entertainment-oriented movies was particularly high: almost half (17) of the nearly three dozen such films were comedies. Some were classics, such as the Chaplin compilation and a Laurel and Hardy film that was reminiscent of the world of burlesque. The latter, however, did not have a major role in meeting nostalgic longings, nor in filling existing — and substantial — gaps in the education of those born after 1945 in terms of cinema history, since Laurel and Hardy films were regularly shown on television. In 1963, one television critic condemned not only the poorly planned programming — three silent films broadcast in the space of four hours — but also the fact that the presenter had said farewell to the youngest viewers at the wrong moment, before the burlesque scenes: “They were sent off to bed, and then along came Laurel and Hardy, who are popular with children for a very good reason!”⁹

Love stories dominated 1960s comedies, especially at the end of the decade — although *Magyar Nemzet* issued a warning to viewers who expected too much from *Sex and the Single Girl*, which was released in October 1969 as one of seven to eight films in this genre: “Anyone who concludes, on the basis of the title, that this is the first sexy film in our country will surely be disappointed.”¹⁰ Of course, cultural policy was in no position to give the nod to any “sex film” such as the one referred to by the critic László Zay in *Magyar Nemzet*, although it soon — in the early 1970s — admitted a sex education documentary. However, according to the review in *Filmvilág*, the West German *Helga* went rather

⁹ T. I.: TV ÉS RÁDIÓ, TV ÉS TV... [TV and radio, TV and TV...]. *Népszabadság*, 13th April 1963.

¹⁰ Z. I.: A szex és a hajadon [Sex and the Single Girl]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 16th October 1969.

further than was strictly necessary: "...programmatically, the aim may have been sex education, although it contained a copious amount of images that were rather a guarantee of box-office success."¹¹

Imported American romantic comedies included *Some Like It Hot*, starring Marilyn Monroe, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis. Hungarofilm was keen to purchase films by Curtis, who came from a Hungarian family, unlike films starring Mickey Hargitay or even Zsa Zsa Gabor, who was mostly appearing in television series by the 1960s. In those years, the rights were purchased to four films starring Curtis: in addition to *Sex and the Single Girl*, there were two comedies evoking the early days of car racing (*The Great Race* and *Those Daring Young Men in Their Jaunty Jalopies* [also known as *Monte Carlo or Bust*]). While films about car racing could scarcely generate ideological dilemmas, the racy 1959 comedy had to wait six years for its Hungarian release. This was the first occasion on which Hungarian audiences had encountered Marilyn Monroe on the big screen, three years after her death. Prior to this, they had merely been able to read (a vast amount) about her films and her marriage. Monroe was so high up the list of the great female stars of the West that "Ödön Bear", editor of the newspaper's correspondence column, was obliged to scold one reader of *Film Színház Muzsika*, "Évi", for inquiring about the bust, waist and hip measurements of Gina Lollobrigida, Sophia Loren, Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe.¹² Besides her European films, Bardot also made a cameo appearance in an American production in which she was the object of an

¹¹ A vesztes: a művészet. A nyugatnémet szórakoztató film fellendülése [The loser: The arts. The boom in West German entertainment films]. *Filmvilág*, 1970/1, 28.

¹² Ödön válaszol [Ödön responds]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1958/1, 38.

eight-year-old boy's infatuation. According to *Esti Hírlap*, it was only the performances by the boy and the French actress, who appeared in just one scene, that stood out from the "pile of absurdities and logical claptrap" and the "model family" smiling down from the "toothpaste adverts of a Western glossy magazine".¹³ Vittorio De Sica's American film *Woman Times Seven* was likewise a disappointment, especially since the director belonged to the narrow circle of "progressive Western artists" who were held in high esteem by cultural policy, even in the late Stalinist period: "Italian neorealism, the pinnacle of which is *Bicycle Thieves*, is nowadays represented at best by uninteresting comedies: it has been severed from the social context in which its masterpieces were conceived, and from the artistic passion that produced them. Even De Sica is flaunting his directorial drill in films such as the American commercial comedy *Woman Times Seven*."¹⁴

Among the romantic comedies were two film adaptations, the original stage versions of which had already been performed in Hungary. In the case of a third adaptation, other plays by the same author had already been staged, although the farce on which the film was based was not performed until two years after the movie was released.¹⁵ The broadening of the public sphere thus continued to be a typical trend: a stage performance targeting a narrower audience could be followed up with the admission of the film adaptation. This was what happened in the case of Murray Schisgal's *Luv*, which was performed at the Vígsház in October 1966, directed by Zoltán Várkonyi. The main

¹³ (f. f.): Mától a mozikban. Kedves Brigitte. [In cinemas from today. Dear Brigitte] *Esti Hírlap*, 16th March 1967.

¹⁴ V. A.: Biciklitolvajok [Bicycle Thieves]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 17th October 1968. (My italics –R. T.)

¹⁵ Source: <http://resolver.szinhaztortenet.hu/collection/OSZMI56978> (Downloaded: 10/03/2022.)

advantages of a theatrical performance were not simply that it involved a narrower public and was also cheaper in terms of royalties than a film release, but also that the Hungarian — or Socialist — direction could contribute to the play's reception. While Hungarian critics preferred the stage version — which, while it lacked philosophical depth, nevertheless gave voice to a certain amount of social criticism aimed at the level of the averagely educated American audience — they also valued the significant contribution made by Várkonyi's directing: "The director left his mark wherever he touched the play, making his presence felt by enhancing the circus entertainment and adding greater profundity to the bitter thoughts of this significant writer."¹⁶ The film, on the other hand, lacked precisely the kind of nuance and detachment that made the play truly enjoyable on the Hungarian stage. "Everything in the film is real, apart from the story: Schisgal's work itself is transformed in this naturalistic setting, becoming a brash farce with Hollywood traits, losing its charming playfulness while winning over a significant crowd who are merely there to laugh out loud."¹⁷

The other American play was Neil Simon's comedy *Barefoot in the Park*, which premiered at the Madách Theatre just before New Year's Eve in 1965.¹⁸ The master of Broadway box-office hits was not received with great enthusiasm by Marxist critics. His first stage premiere in Hungary was reviewed by István Gábor, whose tone was one of condescending irony. While not directly criticising the original play, he toyed with the idea of how things might have turned out if the script had been written by a Hungarian author. Adopting the persona

¹⁶ Béla Mátrai-Betegh: Szerelem, ó! [Luv]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 9th October 1966.

¹⁷ V. A.: Szerelem, ó! [Luv]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 21st May 1970.

¹⁸ Source: <http://resolver.szinhasztortenet.hu/collection/OSZMI68601> (Downloaded: 10/03/2022.)

of a theatre dramaturge, the critic censured the shallowness of the humour and pointed out the comic situations that had been omitted. Lastly, he addressed the imaginary Hungarian playwright: “But do you really think, my dear Mr N, that it is the task of Socialist theatre to present the audience with such emptiness? We cannot afford the luxury of staging a comedy that contains nothing apart from a few wisecracks, a few witty ideas and comic characters, and which is as far removed from our present-day lives as Makó is from Jerusalem.”¹⁹ This was a permanent dilemma in terms of film imports from the West: while the production and admission rates inevitably meant that Western-made films had to pass through a more stringent quality filter than films from Socialist countries, the censors were more lenient with Western — and thus American — entertainment films than with Hungarian screenplays and scripts. In many cases, what was considered suitable for admission would not have been acceptable as a Hungarian film script. The third theatre adaptation, based on a farce by Georges Feydeau written in the early 20th century, prompted the critic to address this contradiction even more keenly: “Why was it considered necessary to purchase such an antiquated comedy for hard currency?”²⁰

Several of the seven musical films, the second largest group of lighter films after comedies, were also performed on stage in the 1960s. These included the Hollywood version of the 1948 Broadway production of *Finian’s Rainbow*, which was chosen as the vehicle to introduce Hungarian audiences to the genre, as well as the film versions of Western box-office hits such as *Irma la Douce* and *My Fair Lady*, which had

¹⁹ István Gábor: Tanmese és kritika a Madách Kamara bemutatójáról [Cautionary tale and critique of the Madách Kamara premiere]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 8th January 1966.

²⁰ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 7th August 1969.

been staged in the middle of the decade following the initial failure of “home-made” musical-style stage productions. It is no coincidence that three jazz films were also released during these years: one was a re-release of the classic *Rhapsody in Blue* from the 1940s, about the life of George Gershwin, which was followed by *An American in Paris*, starring Gene Kelly and featuring Gershwin’s music, and another biopic, *A Man Called Adam*, starring Sammy Davies Jr. After 1953, jazz was no longer considered a dirty word in Hungary: it was no longer persecuted as a “decadent”, “cosmopolitan” genre, and aficionados were no longer mocked as “Swing Tonis”.²¹ Not only were popular jazz songs being played once again, but an international jazz festival was even held in Budapest in 1958. The trend was not limited to Hungary, of course: softer jazz melodies already featured in Soviet films in the first half of the 1960s.²² It was only in the 1980s that a full-length jazz film was made in the Soviet Union, although its mellow, old-fashioned soundtrack garnered little enthusiasm among spectators when the film was released in Hungarian cinemas.²³

²¹ Swing Tóni was one of the characters in the 1950 Hungarian film *Singing Makes Life Beautiful*, but he also appeared in Rákosi-era cartoons on tableaux depicting the “enemies of the people” V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 7th August 1969.

²² Anne E. Gorsuch: *All This is Your World*. Op. cit., 169.

²³ “Forget it, is what I would say about this film, if I thought there was anyone to say it to. But I’m not sure there is, because on the day that I saw it, I was one of seven people sitting in the unheated auditorium: in fact, by the time the saxophonist had reached the age of 114, there were only six of us. [...] But he wouldn’t have needed to reach the age of 114 if the film had started in 1937, say, or 1949. And if this had been the case, the conflicts — to put it mildly — would have been more authentic and the present would have smelled just as sweet as the director intended. Indeed. But then Citizen Kostya and his ilk would have been playing a rather more trendy, pardon the expression, a rather more decadent style of jazz. It’s all very well that Dixieland exists today, and there should be people who enjoy it while it’s around; but the fundamental element in the character’s conflict is that their music is avantgarde. But for the past 50 years Dixieland hasn’t counted as avantgarde music.” Imre

The turning point in attitudes towards jazz came in around 1962, when the genre, which had earlier belonged to the “tolerated” category, gained an increasing following among the public.²⁴ The two American jazz films thus belonged in the “safe zone” in the second half of the 1960s. Besides, the Sammy Davies film not only slotted into the old–new post-1953 narrative of jazz as the folk music of oppressed Black people, and even of the American working class, but it also corresponded to important elements — huge social inequalities, racial oppression — of the official image of America.²⁵ But while Hungarian audiences were no longer protected from musicals and jazz films — or from the “saccharine lies” of the Strauss biopic (*The Great Waltz*) — the rock and roll of the 1950s (the series of Elvis movies) and the American rock of the 1960s were not accommodated in Hungary.

The fact that cultural decision makers were aware of the tastes and expectations of the young was clearly indicated by three British music films, the first of which was *Pop Gear* (1966), featuring The Animals and Herman’s Hermits alongside The Beatles. When discussing the talents of these British bands, one reviewer mitigated his praise with slight criticism: “While one might be appalled at the state of these young spectators, performing their ecstatic St Vitus dance,

Barna: Kosztya polgártárs és a száztizennégy éves cári szaxofonos esete a moziban [The case of Citizen Kostya and the 114-year-old tsarist saxophonist in the cinema]. *Polifon*, 1985/2, 12.

²⁴ Ádám Ignác: A populáris zene megítélésének változásai a kádári Magyarország ifjúsági sajtójában – az első 15 év (1957–1972) [Changes in the evaluation of popular music in the youth press in Hungary in the Kádár era – The first 15 years (1957–1972)]. *Médiakutató*, winter 2013, 7–17.

²⁵ “[T]his dramatic, even melodramatic, occasionally slipshod film serves the noble goal of protesting against the intolerable situation of Black people in America and against inhumane discrimination.” v. a.: Ádámnak hívták [A Man Called Adam]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 7th December 1967.

the sight does convey an idea of the talent and temperament that elevates these Liverpool lads above the countless, second-rate bands that are following in their footsteps.”²⁶ In the late 1960s, the Film Admissions Committee also approved two other Beatles movies (*A Hard Day's Night*, and *Yellow Submarine*). During a debate on the latter, Endre Sziroky — a representative of the Communist Youth Association, which was primarily responsible for Beat music issues under the rubric of youth policy — argued that young fans deserved to see the movie, even if it held less appeal for viewers over the age of 30.²⁷

Returning to comedies, only two out of 18 films were considered by Marxist film experts to offer any kind of socially critical edge to their satirical portrayal of American society. The “sensible story that was nevertheless a quintessential reflection of the American approach to life”,²⁸ as represented in *What a Way to Go!*, was praised as a clever caricature of the pursuit of material wealth.²⁹ The calamities of an Indian actor in Hollywood, as depicted in *The Party*, made an American society accustomed to luxury appear somewhat ridiculous.³⁰ For Marxist critics, Italian satire was the benchmark among Western-made comedies, with its keen perception of the fault lines in society. One of the best examples was *Divorce Italian Style*, starring Marcello Mastroianni, which exposed bourgeois and Christian hypocrisy. Compared to their Italian counterparts, American

²⁶ L. V.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 7th July 1966.

²⁷ Mihály Gál: “A vetítést vita követte”. *A Filmátvételi Bizottság Jegyzőkönyvei 1968–1975* [“Debate followed the screening.” Minutes of the Film Admissions Committee, 1968–1975]. Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2015, 118.

²⁸ Mit látunk a moziban júniusban? [What was on at the cinema in June?] *Csili*, 1968/6, 12.

²⁹ Anna Vilcsek: Melyik úton járjak? [What a Way to Go!] *Magyar Nemzet*, 16th May 1968.

³⁰ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 31st July 1969.

blockbuster comedies in the 1960s merely scratched the surface: “Of course, there are certain things in Hollywood that [directors] need to be careful about. They can poke fun at the functioning of a mechanised, conventionalised society only within certain bounds, and they must likewise temper their ridicule of millionaires, since it is they who are providing the money for the film; even the millionaires’ hippie kids must be mocked with paternal benevolence, and only to the extent that even those who are entirely on their side will still be willing to watch the film.”³¹

Two other comedies are worth mentioning as highlighting a certain common tendency. Among the Hollywood offerings, neither *The Man from the Diner’s Club*, a detective story about a blundering clerk who ends up a hero, nor *How to Steal a Million*, a crime comedy based on an art heist, are interesting in their own right: they are of note only as the heralds of a new trend in terms of film admissions policy, serving as the first step in the adoption of this particular genre. As in the case of adventure films, which offered similar thrills and chills, Hungarian film admissions policy identified a “failsafe” Hollywood in animal stories such as *Nikki*, *Wild Dog of the North*; *Born Free*; and *Big Red*.

A similar tendency prevailed in the case of a genre that the Hungarian film admissions authorities — in contrast to other Socialist countries — had long been reluctant to embrace: the western. In this context, it is worth skipping back a few years to the summer of 1964, when a Czechoslovak film won the Silver Shell at the San Sebastian Film Festival.³² The international success of this Socialist film was also

³¹ István Csík: Két vígjáték, egy történelmi drama [Two comedies, one historical drama]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1969/32, 8–9.

³² János Komlós: Szocialista filmek sikere San Sebastianban [Socialist hits in San Sebastian]. *Népszabadság*, 16th June 1964.

acknowledged in Hungary, although Hungarian spectators had not had a chance to see it: "...its sarcasm is aimed in many directions: it is a caricature of the western, of the frenzy for advertising, the morals of the early 20th century, alcoholism and prohibition."³³ The Czechoslovak film company was quick to sell *Lemonade Joe or the Horse Opera* to the U.S. "in exchange" for two American titles (*West Side Story*, and *Judgement at Nuremberg*).³⁴ In late 1964, Hungarian cinemas also screened the film, the original idea for which had been penned by Czech writer Jiří Brdečka in the 1940s, at a time when Czechoslovak and Hungarian cinemas were still showing westerns. However, this distinctly American genre did not return to Hungarian cinemas after 1957, being "forgotten" in the banned basket by the state's Film Admissions Committee. This situation remained unchanged, despite the fact that, at the end of the Khrushchev era, even the Soviet Union was screening westerns, the first being *The Magnificent Seven* in 1963.³⁵

In fact, it was not only screening them it was even producing its own so-called easterns, while in Hungary *Winnnetou* was not even published as a novel for the young until 1966, when it was issued by the children's publishing company Móra Ferenc Könyvkiadó. Trashy Western novels published before 1948 were mostly available from flea markets. While cultural policy saw the elimination of such publications as an achievement of the Cultural Revolution, the newspapers occasionally "reminded" the public where to turn for such forbidden fruits. One journalist discovered

³³ László Zay: Az ígéret napjai a fesztiválon [Promising days at the festival]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 8th July 1964.

³⁴ A HH krónikája [The HH chronicle]. *Hétfői Hírek*, 27th July 1964. It is certainly about the film *Judgment at Nuremberg*, which was also released in Hungary.

³⁵ Róbert Takács: Szovjet és magyar nyitás... [Soviet and Hungarian opening...] Op. cit., 53.

a Claire Kenneth trilogy at the Ecseri flea market for 1,400 forints.³⁶ By way of comparison, J.D. Salinger's groundbreaking novel, which had been translated into Russian four years before it appeared in Hungarian and published in the cultural journal *Inostrannaya Literatura*,³⁷ cost 18.5 forints in 1964.³⁸ It was also possible to find westerns in the flea markets, if you looked hard enough. "I nod knowingly, and he takes me into his confidence, producing a few old 20 fillér paperbacks from under the counter", was how the journalist for *Népszava* reported his "success".³⁹

The genre of the eastern had already appeared in Socialist cinema in the 1960s: in the Yugoslav partisan films, in a few Polish productions, and even earlier in the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ These easterns are not to be confused with the Red Westerns:⁴¹ these stories, set in the Wild West, were mainly produced by the East German and Yugoslav film industries in the same decade. But even *Winnetou*, the first major Red Western starring Gojko Mitić in 1963, was seen by the Ferencváros football team that was touring in England

³⁶ We have no way of knowing whether the 1,400 forints requested for the three books was a typo: the sum was almost as much as the average gross salary in Hungary in 1964, which was 1,757 forints. Source: https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_hosszu/h_qli001.html (Downloaded: 16/04/2022.)

³⁷ Róbert Takács: Szovjet és magyar nyitás... [Soviet and Hungarian opening...] Op. cit., 60.

³⁸ Könyvekről [On books]. *Ifjú Kommunista*, 1964/5, 48.

³⁹ (vajk): Giccsvásár – hatósági engedéllyel [Kitsch sale – With an official permit]. *Népszava*, 2nd June 1965.

⁴⁰ The first we might mention is *The Echalon of Doctor M*, made in 1955. Directed by "Žika" Mitrović, the film tells the story of Yugoslav partisans fighting against Albanian nationalists. See: Radina Vučetić: Op. cit., 69–72.

⁴¹ See Vadim Davydenko: Pistols at dawn: The Soviet Eastern versus the Classic Western. *Russia Beyond*. Source: https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/04/08/pistols_at_dawn_the_soviet_eastern_versus_the_classic_western_35681.html (Downloaded: 10/02/2022.)

in 1964 before it was available to Hungarian audiences.⁴² Hungarian audiences were given their first opportunity to see a Red Western movie, *Treasure of Silver Lake*, only 11 years later, in 1973. Even Romanian film admissions policy, which was considered to be far more ideologically driven, had no particular qualms about this genre: *Treasure of the Silver Lake* was already playing in Romanian cinemas in 1964, and *Winnetou* in 1965.⁴³

Easterns, on the other hand, told “Eastern stories” using the clichés of the Wild West. They featured lonesome heroes, preferably on horseback, the struggle between good and evil, and a wilderness to be tamed. The only difference was that the Soviet films were set in the East — Siberia — and not in the 19th century but rather in the period between the 1917 Revolution and the mid-1920s.⁴⁴ After *The Burning Miles* (1957), a decade passed before the next series of easterns appeared: *The Elusive Avengers* (1967), *White Sun of the Desert* (1970), *Dauria* (1975), and *At Home among Strangers* (1974).

The genre of the eastern perhaps best resonated with the Polish film industry. One possible explanation for this may be that the great narratives of Polish and American history, the conquest of the frontier and the taming of the wilderness, contain some essential similarities.⁴⁵ Moreover, Poland,

⁴² Based on the personal tone of the report, three films were selected that were screened in English cinemas: besides *Winnetou*, these were probably two Hollywood films, a spectacular historical film and the Elvis Presley film that was released at that time, presumably *Fun in Acapulco*. (–ry): Futballistákkal Angliában [With footballers in England]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 12th January 1964; https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0057083/?ref_=nm_filmg_act_19 (Downloaded: 11/03/2022.)

⁴³ Mozi [Cinema]. *Vörös Zászló*, 31st October 1964; *Winnetou*. *Vörös Zászló*, 28th July 1965.

⁴⁴ Alexander Morrison: Settler Bolsheviks in the Soviet “Eastern”. In: Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower: *Cinematic Settlers. The Settler Colonial World in Film*. Routledge, London, 2020, 50–62.

⁴⁵ Piotr Skurowski: Dances with Westerns in Poland’s Borderlands. *European Journal of American Studies*, 2018/3. Special Issue: America to Poland: Cultural

which had re-emerged as an independent state at the end of the First World War following 125 years under foreign rule, contained wild landscapes of this kind both in the east (between the two world wars) and in the west (the Recovered Territories following the Second World War). The Polish film *The Law and the Fist* was made in 1964. It was set in 1945, and its wilderness was the Recaptured Territories (the Western Borderlands) that were annexed to Poland after the Second World War. The protagonist, Andrzej Kenig, a former fighter in the Polish resistance, leads a team sent by the authorities to a deserted settlement — in the midst of a wasteland — to safeguard for the Polish state possessions left behind by the Germans. He realises that his companions are common looters, on the lookout for former German property. Kenig ultimately confronts the gang as a lone hero, kills them in a gunfight, and leaves.⁴⁶ The other 1960s Polish eastern, *The Wolves' Echoes* (1968), is set in the Bieszczady Mountains during the Second World War, where a lone hero also fights “deserters”, “gangsters” and “white terrorists”. According to the critic writing for *Népszabadság*, Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski’s work “belongs to the romantic genre in which, as they say, the hero ‘never loads his gun, but always shoots with deadly accuracy’.”⁴⁷

In Hungary, however, neither westerns nor major easterns were released for many years, thus only people who had gone to the cinema in the 1940s had a clear idea of what the genre entailed. It was therefore right to assume, in late 1964, that

Transfers and Adaptations. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.13595> (Downloaded: 11/03/2022.)

⁴⁶ I would like thank Jan Bárta for bringing Jerzy Hoffman and Edward Skórzewski’s film to my attention. In the Polish film database: <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=121952> (Downloaded: 10/02/2022.)

⁴⁷ Zoltán Hegedűs: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 17th October 1968.

half the spectators in Hungary would fail to understand *Lemonade Joe*: rather than decoding it as a satire, they would simply watch it as a western surrogate: “For thousands of spectators, the many excellent and clever parodies (the ‘Knight of Dreams’ dressed in white, who turns and hits a flying wasp with a single shot, without even aiming; the ‘Night Butterfly’ with her beauty spot, who falls for the cowboy hero and whose love is unrequited; and the terribly oversimplified ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ heroes) will thus have no additional significance. They will go unrecognised as the long string of clichés that is otherwise one of the biggest positives in this film.”⁴⁸

The satirical Red Western was followed by western parodies produced in the West: the English *Carry on Cowboy!* in 1967 and the Italian *Little Rita of the West* in 1968, before the arrival of *Hombre*, directed by Martin Ritt, in 1969. This last film was released in the same week as the second Hungarian–American co-production, *The Boys of Paul Street*, an adaptation of the classic novel by Ferenc Molnár who had fled to the United States in the shadow of the Second World War to escape from fascism.

As in *The Magnificent Seven*, which also starred Paul Newman, *Hombre*’s progressive tendencies were briefly brought to the attention of members of the Communist Youth Association: “[*Hombre*] retains all the excitement of the western, while its message addresses vital social issues.”⁴⁹ *Magyar Nemzet*, on the other hand, pointed out the ongoing debate surrounding westerns among cultural opinion setters, although the controversy had rather surfaced in the early 1970s. In any case, the critic maintained his reservations

⁴⁸ Pál Geszti: Limonádé Joe [Lemonade Joe]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1964/49, 4.

⁴⁹ Tamás Kolosi: Mit látunk a mozikban? [What was on at the cinema?] *Iffjú Kommunista*, 1969/2, 55.

concerning the genre: “The romanticism of this 19th-century story has been adjusted to meet the demands of lovers of horror and brutality among 20th-century spectators. The film is directed in Hollywood style, although its old glaze has been burned away in places by the now inescapable influence of American cinematic realism.”⁵⁰

Nevertheless, *Hombre* did succeed in breaking the ice, and the following year the Film Museum screened a 40-year-old classic (*Billy the Kid*), while the cinema’s regular programme also included *True Grit*, starring John Wayne, bringing the era of the western parody to an end. “The spectator will doubtless not be alone in the cinema. Curiosity, if nothing else, will bring in the crowds: after so many western parodies, they will watch a genuine western, a true ‘cowboy movie’, written and directed with all the romance, naivety, brutality, and tale-like quality of the genre.”⁵¹

The pick of American cinematography

The range of films representing high culture on the high culture–popular culture axis⁵² was narrower, although at the same time it painted a more variegated picture than the supply of entertainment-oriented films. There is no trace here of a trend equivalent to the dominance of comedies or musical films: the “serious” films included historical films,

⁵⁰ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 10th April 1969.

⁵¹ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 10th December 1970.

⁵² On this question, see: Herbert J. Gans: Népszerű kultúra és magaskultúra [Popular culture and high culture]. In: Anna Wessely (ed.) *A kultúra szociológiája* [The sociology of culture]. Osiris–Láthatatlan Kollégium, Budapest, 1998, 114–149; Ádám Ignác: *Milliók zenéje. Populáris zene és zenetudomány az államszocialista Magyarországon* [The music of millions. Popular music and musicology in state socialist Hungary]. Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest, 2020, 44–80.

war epics, adaptations of literary classics, socially charged dramas and documentaries. The roughly two dozen films provide a far from comprehensive picture of American cinema, nor were they sufficient to give those responsible for film admissions policy much of a headache, unlike the purely entertainment-oriented films.

Nevertheless, war films might be highlighted should we wish to identify a theme by which to characterise these American productions. In the 1960s, international film festivals became arenas for dialogue between the two opposing global systems. These forums were not, of course, free of controversy, although in the midst of the Cold War conflict they still provided an opportunity for the cinema of the East and the West to articulate a common sense of humanity. Stories set in the Second World War, the period of the anti-fascist alliance, proved to be the most suitable vehicles for this purpose. Between the late 1950s and 1975, some 50 to 60 Western-made films of this kind were admitted to Hungary, most of them made in Europe.⁵³ Among the American titles, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Stanley Kramer's *Judgement at Nuremberg*, *The Heroes of Telemark*, *Battle of the Bulge* and the war adventure movie *Von Ryan's Express* were released in the second half of the 1960s. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which was also performed on stage and which was deemed a film of particular significance, did not make a particularly strong impact.⁵⁴ Hungarian critics were unanimous only in their praise of Kramer's film,⁵⁵ and they naturally reinforced those of its messages that were in line

⁵³ Róbert Takács: A nyugati film és közönsége Magyarországon Sztálin halálától Helsinkiig (1953–1975) [Western films and cinema audiences in Hungary, from the death of Stalin to Helsinki, (1953–1975)]. *Korall* 2016/65, 148–149.

⁵⁴ z. l.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 8th April 1965.

⁵⁵ G. Péter Molnár: Filmekről [On films]. *Népszabadság*, 28th January 1966; László Zay: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 27th January 1966.

with the official position of the state socialist countries: the presence of those responsible for Nazi crimes in the wider, lower levels of society; the Western world's abandonment of the anti-fascist path; the "whitewashing" of criminals; and the integration of war criminals into Western society, and even into the elite.⁵⁶

Stanley Kramer was among the most highly esteemed of all Hollywood directors in Hungary in the 1960s: he was seen as a progressive filmmaker who, in defiance of the underlying tendencies in the dream and propaganda industry, chose to address important social issues in his films.⁵⁷ In 1969, another of his films was released in Hungary: set on an ocean liner, *Ship of Fools* addressed social conflicts in the 1930s. Curiously, audiences in Hungary and the Soviet bloc missed out on Kramer's post-apocalyptic drama, which was released in the form of a global media event: set in the fictional near future of 1964, *On the Beach* showed people facing inevitable death following the devastation of nuclear war. The film premiered simultaneously in four major U.S. cities and 15 cities around the world on 17th December 1959. The premieres were organised by the United States Information Agency (USIA): in London, the Soviet ambassador was a guest of honour, while Moscow also hosted a premiere — the only location in the Socialist world to do so.⁵⁸ In Moscow, however, where

⁵⁶ The latter in particular formed the basis of propaganda against the chancellor of West Germany, Konrad Adenauer, from the end of the 1950s. On this, see: Máté Zombory: Hidegháborús státuszversengés. A Magyar Népköztársaság és a háborús bűnperek második hulláma [Cold War rivalry. The Republic of Hungary and the second wave of war crimes trials]. *Múltunk*, 2019/2, 14–54.

⁵⁷ *The Defiant Ones* (released in Hungary in 1960) addressed the question of racial hatred in the context of an action film, while *Inherit the Wind* (1962) presented the struggle between progress and reactionism in relation to the Dayton Monkey Trial.

⁵⁸ Ncurrie: Preparing for the release of "On the Beach". Source: <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2017/04/25/preparing-for-the-release-of-on-the>

one of the stars, Gregory Peck, and the U.S. ambassador also attended the event, the single screening was permitted to take place exclusively in a workers' club, before a select audience.⁵⁹

On the other hand, the three American Second World War action-adventure movies that were released after 1968, each of which dealt with real events during the war, were viewed very similarly by Marxist critics and were all considered to be detrimental. The films were criticised not only for degrading the anti-fascist struggle by turning it into a spectacle, but also for borrowing the familiar clichés of invincible superheroes from other adventure films rather than depicting real human courage and heroism. Commenting on *The Heroes of Telemark*, the critic contrasted Hollywood's practice not with Soviet or Socialist cinema, but with European cinematography: "These masters of cinema sell to the deluded spectator the sensitivity of film spectacle as a disturbing but universally understandable, primitive reality. Yet modern cinema, and especially European cinema, is more realistic, keener for a knowledge of reality, even in the context of formal experimentation and abstract or grotesque representation, than the old-fashioned, formulaic American movie, which appears to be realistic but which wraps up a child's tale as sensual spectacle."⁶⁰ *Von Ryan's Express*, which depicts the escape of British and American soldiers from Italian, then German, imprisonment was regarded by critics as particularly nefarious, and its release as a political error: "[The film] is inevitably a vehicle for racist opinions of all kinds, and for America's supremacist arrogance. To

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⁵⁹ Gary Fishgall: *Gregory Peck: A Biography*. Scribner, New York, 2002, 211.

⁶⁰ László Zay: Hősök és „hősök” [Heroes and “heroes”]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 17th March 1968.

claim that it is an anti-fascist film is mere pretence, even mendacious, just because its American protagonist happens to be up against the Germans: it merely proves that the American sense of superiority is stronger than the Nazi's sense of superiority."⁶¹

At a more general level, debates of this kind reached the higher echelons of cultural policy, after which a more comprehensive and critical article on Hungarian film admissions and programming policy was published in June 1968. A few months after the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism, an article in *Magyar Nemzet* called for political considerations to outweigh economic ones. Although the New Economic Mechanism also created new conditions in cultural life, cultural policy, which was basically on the defensive, was determined to minimise the economic pressure on culture.⁶² However, the process did not begin in 1968: the criticism by László Zay quoted above rather reflected the intensification of certain disturbing trends. It pointed to the fact that the occasional concession to commercial films⁶³ was gradually becoming the norm and that film admissions policy was moving in the direction of less pronounced resistance, giving way to average rather than valuable — and more expensive — productions, and even promoting them in order to boost attendance figures and revenue. Zay also denounced the fact that Hungarian distribution — that is, the county distribution companies — did not regard the realisation of cultural policy objectives as

⁶¹ Z. L.: Az elrabort expresszvonat [Von Ryan's Express]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 23rd May 1968.

⁶² Róbert Takács: A kultúra reformja – a reform kultúrája [Cultural reform – the culture of reform]. *Eszmélet*, 2015/3, 137–153.

⁶³ The author identified the following Western films: *The Heroes of Telemark* (American), *Press for Time* (American), *Dear John* (Swedish), *Chingachgook* (East German, western), *The Triumph of Robin Hood* (Italian–Yugoslav).

their primary task and that the centrally determined bonus practice was unable to alter this. “Citing economic interests, more and more ideologically harmful films are infiltrating our cinematic programmes. While we fight theoretical battles about the problem of the Socialist hero and shed tears at the fact that our films, vehicles for the complex concepts of the controversial protagonist, are watched by fewer than 100,000 or 200,000 spectators, we are ignoring the fact that our cinemas are busy spreading extensive propaganda for superheroes.”⁶⁴ In other words, one of the most serious accusations levelled against these Western, typically American (in many cases war) action adventure movies, was that they communicated ideals that were alien to Socialism.

These films were in contrast with several war documentaries that took a stance against militarism. However, the interpretative framework for these films was already defined by the context of the 1960s and the Vietnam War. They included an anti-war documentary compilation (*Good Times, Wonderful Times*) by Lionel Rogosin — known from the New York School — and *In the Year of the Pig* by Emile de Antonio, an Italian-born working-class filmmaker. In the 1960s, Rogosin tackled such issues as the personality of Senator McCarthy and the assassination of Kennedy.⁶⁵

The few adaptations of literary classics created less of a problem. Concerning the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* by the Italian director Franco Zeffirelli, the Hungarian critics noted that it followed the lines of *West Side Story*, preserving the dazzling

⁶⁴ László Zay: A hiányzó egynegyed [The missing quarter]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 30th June 1968.

⁶⁵ The latter was also broadcast by Hungarian Television: Tibor Hegedűs: Gondolatok a képernyő előtt [Thoughts in front of the screen]. *Népszabadság*, 23rd October 1968.

world of the Renaissance while in terms of its rhythm and emotion belonging to the 20th century: “In this vibrant production, Romeo and Juliet’s love is not airily poetic and translucent but is filled with unbridled longing, adolescent impatience, passion, and modest immodesty.”⁶⁶ If not in its subject matter then certainly in terms of its style and mood, this is a “’68 movie”, and not simply because of its year of production: “In this love story, the rejection of parental authority and generational conflict are more important than poetry and Shakespearean social history”, concluded the critic Anna Vilcsek.⁶⁷ The sparkling portrayal of Falstaff⁶⁸ by the American director Orson Welles took the form of a Spanish–Swiss co-production. Another American director, Jules Dassin, transposed into the present day not only the pulsating emotions of the Ancient Greek tragedy *Phaedra*, but the story as a whole.⁶⁹

Large-scale historical movies such as *Cleopatra* and *Spartacus*, which were also released in Hungary, bore the marks of a specific period in film history. In Hungary, cinema attendance peaked in 1960, with 140 million tickets purchased that year. By 1971, this figure had fallen below 75 million. This was due, first and foremost, to the appearance — and spread — of television. In around 1962–1963, it became clear that there was no separate Socialist world system for cinema. The same development had taken place in other Socialist countries. In East Germany, for example, the highest number of cinema tickets, nearly 316 million, were sold in 1957. The following year, East German

⁶⁶ Éva Bársony: Mától a mozikban. Romeo és Júlia [In cinemas from today. Romeo and Juliet]. *Esti Hírlap*, 5th November 1970.

⁶⁷ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 5th November 1970.

⁶⁸ Zoltán Hegedűs: Falstaff. *Esti Hírlap*, 16th February 1967.

⁶⁹ Anna Vilcsek: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 15th July 1965.

cinemas lost more than 40 million spectators, and the rate of decline slowed at most in the 1960s. In 1970, cinemas in East Germany attracted scarcely more spectators (91.3 million) than Hungary (79.4 million).⁷⁰ The trends experienced in Hungary were the same as those that had already affected the United States in the late 1940s and Britain in the first half of the 1950s.⁷¹

Film policy in Hungary and East Germany responded to the crisis in a similar way. On the one hand, the number of releases was increased, reaching 160 to 180 per year by the mid-1960s. On the other hand, the number of screenings was initially increased, in the hope that more screenings would mean more spectators. From the 846,000 screenings in 1960, the figure rose to nearly 892,000 the following year. Even in 1966, there were still more screenings than there had been six years earlier. In East German cinemas, the number of screenings between 1958 and 1960 exceeded the number in the record year. However, the statistics also show that even the film authorities thought the only way to win back spectators was by screening Western-made films. Of the additional 46,000 screenings in 1961, nearly 33,000 were films from capitalist countries. This figure slightly increased in the following years — despite the fall in the total number of screenings. In 1962, the Film Directorate also observed that, as a “panic reaction” to the substantial decline in spectator numbers, film distributors in Budapest had increased the supply of Western-made films: in June 1962, there was one week in which as many as 68% of Budapest cinema goers purchased tickets for Western-made films,

⁷⁰ *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR*. Berlin, Staatsverlag der DDR. 1955–1970.

⁷¹ Asa Briggs and Peter Burke: *A média társadalomtörténete. Gutenbergtől az internetig* [A social history of the media. From Gutenberg to the Internet]. Second, expanded and revised edition. Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest, 2012, 254–255.

while in the second quarter of that year there were twice as many spectators — 2.4 million — watching the less valuable B category Western-made films in the capital as there had been a year earlier.⁷²

Table 3 *Cinema screenings by country grouping, 1955–1970*

Year of release / country of production	Hungarian	Soviet	Socialist	Capitalist
	(x 1,000)			
1955	159.9	165.4	135.6	185.5
1956	138.4	160.3	144.0	188.0
1957	162.9	136.8	137.3	307.7
1958	151.6	172.8	169.2	287.5
1959	174.9	192.2	185.8	254.9
1960	204.2	208.1	178.6	247.7
1961	201.9	207.3	191.3	280.5
1962	217.5	178.2	194.4	278.6
1963	216.0	160.7	181.7	286.1
1964	222.3	153.5	181.0	282.4
1965	216.5	134.1	172.7	285.0
1966	217.5	141.3	158.1	312.5
1967	201.7	135.5	173.9	296.2
1968	159.0	109.5	163.4	296.7
1969	197.7	105.2	159.4	303.3
1970	174.5	104.3	156.1	317.1

Source: Tömegkommunikációs adattár, 1975

The presence of Hungarian films did not decrease in this period — in fact, the biggest successes in the 1960s were cinema adaptations of great historical novels with which

⁷² Letter from the Film Directorate to the Department of Popular Culture of the Executive Committee of the Municipal Council (17th July 1962). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 70.

everyone was familiar (*The Man of Gold, Stars of Eger, Men and Banners, The Last Nabob*). These great epic films were in line with the Western cinematic trend of attempting to retain spectators against television competition by offering visual spectacle. Socialist countries also made super-productions similar to those made in the West (*Ben Hur, Antony and Cleopatra, Around the World in 80 Days*, etc.): in the 1960s, for example, the Romanian film industry produced films about the historical legends of Dacia (*The Dacians, The Column*).⁷³ However, in terms of spectacle, the use of Cinemascope and other widescreen technologies gave the Western film industry the edge.

In contrast to the great home-produced historical tableaux of the period, imported American super-productions were not greatly esteemed by Hungarian critics. *Cleopatra* was denounced as bedroom history and as four hours of tittle-tattle,⁷⁴ while *Spartacus* was criticised for the fact that the love story overshadowed the film's social aspects — that is, the depiction of the class struggle from a Marxist perspective⁷⁵ — and for its happy ending, which amounted to a “betrayal of the educated class”.⁷⁶

⁷³ Călin Căliman: Film és történelem, történelem és film. A román történelmi filmek [Film and history, history and film. Romanian historical films]. *Filmtett*, 2002/3. Source: <http://www.filmtett.ro/cikk/1754/a-roman-tortenelemi-filmek> (Downloaded: 23/08/2016)

⁷⁴ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 18th April 1968; Anna Vilček: Történelem és szerelem [History and love]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 21st April 1968.

⁷⁵ The film's release in the Soviet bloc was given particular piquancy by the fact that the novel on which it is based — which Dalton Trumbo, one of the “Hollywood Ten”, used to create his screenplay — was written by the Communist Howard Fast, winner of the Stalin Peace Prize in 1953, who, in the late 1950s, had criticised what was happening in the Soviet Union and Communist countries and who was thus regarded as a traitor in the Socialist galaxy — or, as the critic Ervin Gyertyán put it, as a renegade. Several of his novels were published in Hungarian in the 1950s, including *Spartacus* (Howard Fast: *Spartacus*. Szépirodalmi, Budapest, 1953).

⁷⁶ Ervin Gyertyán: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 9th July 1970.

The half dozen or so films that criticised social conditions in the United States came closest to conforming to film admissions policy. Released in 1965, the off-Hollywood film *One Potato, Two Potato*⁷⁷ was in fact a family drama and a bold depiction of a mixed marriage that was considered fundamentally shocking in 1960s America — a progressive but sensitive depiction, according to Hungarian critics.⁷⁸ A similar perspective was offered by *Rachel, Rachel*, which focused on the small-town environment of a schoolteacher and her opportunities for escape; as well as Elia Kazan's *American, American*, in which the American dream clashes with reality through the story of a Turkish immigrant. For Kazan, the time for “forgiveness” in Hungary came in 1965, when his 1955 film *East of Eden* was finally screened in the Film Museum, followed by his other landmark film *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in 1967.⁷⁹ The left-wing director, who was born in Turkey to Greek parents and who subsequently lived in America, was also a member of the Communist Party in his adoptive country between 1934 and 1936, although in 1952 he cooperated with the House Committee on Un-American Activities and supplied the names of eight of his former Party comrades.⁸⁰ His film *On the Waterfront*, in which he confesses to this in one scene, was never shown in the Soviet bloc, nor was another of his Cold War films, *Man on a Tightrope* (1953), which told the story of a Czechoslovak troupe's defection to the West via Berlin, based on the true story of the Brumbach

⁷⁷ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0058429/?ref_=nm_filmg_dr_52
(Downloaded: 12/03/2022.)

⁷⁸ Z. L.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 27th May 1965.

⁷⁹ Three of Kazan's films were even included on the Film Institute's 1959 list of significant films to be obtained by the Hungarian Film Archive: these two, and *Pinky*. MNL OL MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 38.

⁸⁰ Wendy Smith: The Director Who Named Names. *The American Scholar*. Source: <https://theamericanscholar.org/the-director-who-named-names/>
(Downloaded: 12/02/2022.)

Circus.⁸¹ By the 1960s, however, Hungarian cultural policy had come to respect Kazan's realistic and social critical works as being among the best of American filmmaking, and it was decided that their admission was worth more than a boycott of the director. "We are aware that during the witch-hunts of the early 1950s, Kazan abandoned his convictions and renounced his past and his former comrades-in-arms. Several years have passed since then. In his films, Kazan does not appear to pursue his shocking change of heart but rather strives for even greater honesty and criticism", explained *Nagyvilág* in its introduction to the American director.⁸² At the same time, it is also telling that it was the Film Museum, with its limited capacity, that was chosen as the venue for this film. Hungarian cultural policy had intended to screen Kazan's films earlier: according to a 1961 memorandum, György Aczél had already been approached about the "progressive film" *A Face in the Crowd*, although the Hungarians requested a copy from Warner Brothers in vain. At the time, the Hungarofilm management concluded that Kazan and other "progressive" American directors were on the foreign ministry's list of banned directors⁸³ — or at least they were until Hungarian–American relations were stabilised in 1962–1963.

Mike Nichols also brought a family drama to the screen in his film version of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* Albee's drama was performed at the Madách

⁸¹ Red Terror Stalks the Circus in 'Man on a Tightrope'. *New York Times*, 5th June 1953. Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/1953/06/05/archives/red-terror-stalks-the-circus-in-man-on-a-tightrope.html> (Downloaded: 12/03/2022.) The Yugoslav press did however report on *Man on a Tightrope* (*Magyar Szó*, 30th May 1953.)

⁸² Yvette Bíró: Amerika Elia Kazanja [America's Elia Kazan]. *Nagyvilág*, 1966/4, 611.

⁸³ Memorandum to György Aczél (14th July 1961) MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 56.

Kamarasínház⁸⁴ from December 1967. Albee was one of the few American artists who visited Hungary before their works had been performed there.⁸⁵ Hungarian directors and critics were keen to read into the play a deeper social critique than the author had intended, and to see it as documenting the malaise of American society and the deterioration of moral values.⁸⁶ The critics thus applauded the way in which the emptiness and hopelessness of the American lifestyle was reflected in the film.⁸⁷

The biggest scandal associated with American cinema in Hungary in the 1960s was generated by the outlaw biker movie *Born Losers*, which had been prioritised by the Film Directorate as a category A film for its trenchant exposure of American social tensions.⁸⁸ However, in the face of protests from audiences — and, to some extent, critics — the film was withdrawn from the programme.⁸⁹ “The woman at the box office told me I wasn’t the first person to walk out half

⁸⁴ Today the Örkény Theatre.

⁸⁵ Edward Albee made a visit to Hungary in December 1963, organised by the American Embassy. During his visit, he gave a presentation on American theatre to 75 invited Hungarian writers and intellectuals in the Gellért Hotel and participated in an open discussion in the Hungarian PEN Club. Report on Edward Albee’s visit to Hungary (19th December 1963). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 39. Even at the time, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs interpreted the American move as an obvious attempt at ideological relaxation. János Radványi, chargé d’affaires at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, adopted a decidedly hostile stance with respect to the Hungarian release of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “...the play would provide an excellent opportunity for the stealthy introduction a malign influence, for example, in the case of its release in Hungary.” Ambassadorial report (21st November 1963). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k 1945-1964 USA, box 39.

⁸⁶ Tibor Várkonyi: Nem félünk a farkastól [Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?] *Magyar Nemzet*, 29th December 1967.

⁸⁷ Ervin Gyertyán: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 30th January 1969; László Zay: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 30th January 1969.

⁸⁸ MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 118.

⁸⁹ Letter from Szilárd Újhelyi to the Committee of the Hungarian Young Communist League of the Faculty of Agricultural Engineering of Gödöllő Agricultural University (12th November 1969). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 129.

way through: it's only fit for people with nerves of steel, and where can you find such people nowadays?" complained one angry woman from Budapest, who claimed that the film about American biker gangs, rather than being a deterrent, would in fact encourage Hungarian "hippies".⁹⁰ According to the press, the film was too brutal in its depiction of the world of young American outcasts, thus it failed to achieve its educational purpose — if it ever had one. One reviewer was particularly harsh: "The film illustrates what evil sadists motorcycle hooligans really are. In the meantime, it satisfies the longings of those keen to watch sadism. [...] *Born Losers*, while cleverly and effectively made, is a mendacious film. Many will believe it, and perhaps even celebrate it as a work of social criticism. What it is, in fact, is a new version of an old cliché, cynically fulfilling a need for 'entertainment' that can only be met by the impact of extreme shock."⁹¹ However, the fiasco surrounding *Born Losers* did not deter the film admissions authorities from presenting further American "1968 movies"⁹² to the Hungarian public in the following years.

⁹⁰ Letter from Mrs Miklós Kele to the Film Directorate (2nd August 1968). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 118.

⁹¹ Anna Vilcsek: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 11th July 1968. (My italics – R.T.)

⁹² Films made during and about the period of student revolts.



The Dodge Challenger R/T in the film *Vanishing Point*.
Source: *Filmvilág*, 1973/17. 19.

4. HOLLYWOOD ON THE UP AND UP – AMERICAN FILMS IN HUNGARY IN THE 1970s

In the first half of the 1950s, American films were still regarded as Cold War provocation and as means of conditioning Americans to war, thus new films were not admitted to Hungary and were not screened in cinemas. Hollywood was allowed back into the cinemas from the end of 1957, however, and in the following decade the proportion of American films shown in the cinemas slowly but surely began to rise. Nevertheless, Hollywood films still ranked only third in terms of Western imports as a whole. The selection of films for admission still tended to be drawn from the output of European – Italian and French – filmmakers, who offered more in the way of artistic and (left-wing) political content than the Hollywood studios, whose films, including those with a more profound message, were primarily intended as light entertainment. These proportions changed in the 1970s. At the beginning of the decade, Hollywood was up for the title of number one supplier of Western films in Hungarian cinemas, and despite a slight downturn in the middle of the decade, it had laid steady claim to the title by the end of the 1970s. It was still a long way off the level of imported Soviet films, of course: the numerical advantage of Soviet – and Socialist – films was, and remained, the cornerstone of Hungarian film admissions policy, although even this advantage apparently began to wane in 1979–1980. The decline is reflected even more concretely in the cinema attendance data.

The political situation in the 1970s provided an essentially favourable environment for the processes outlined above. A longstanding obstacle to the improvement of bilateral relations was removed in September 1971, when Cardinal József Mindszenty left the American Embassy in Szabadság Square following the intervention of the Vatican and departed the country. Among the important countries of the West, it took longest to sign cultural agreements with the USA and West Germany.¹ Hungary signed an agreement with the United States on scientific, technical and cultural exchange in the autumn of 1977, while in terms of the regularisation of relations between the two countries a symbolic high point was reached in January 1978, with the return of the Holy Crown of Hungary.

This more relaxed international environment likewise contributed to the “stealthy” encroachment of films from the West, including America. In the decade of détente, the Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1975 by 33 European and two North American countries following several years of negotiations in the Finnish capital. The most important achievement for the Soviet Union was the guarantee of the European status quo and the advance of its sphere of influence as far as the Elbe. In the following years, with the proliferation of increasingly high-level East–West diplomatic negotiations, and during subsequent meetings of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (in Belgrade and Madrid), the main areas of conflict emerged in relation to the “human rights” adopted among the Helsinki

¹ When it came to establish official diplomatic relations with West Germany, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry was obliged to wait until the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia had reached an agreement on the German question. This did not happen until 1973, despite efforts motivated by economic considerations in the late 1960s.

principles, or rather in relation to the issues grouped in the so-called third basket.² This third basket encompassed principles related to the free movement of people and the free circulation of information and cultural assets. The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs attempted to exploit the Hungarian public sphere's relative freedom within the Soviet bloc with a vigour that took even its partners in the West by surprise.³ The fact that Hungary based its self-confidence largely on the extent of its cultural imports from the West likewise encouraged openness with respect to its film admissions policy. In the context of successive bilateral negotiations, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued for a greater volume of Hungarian cultural imports, although it was of course obvious to the Ministry, too, that between a country of 10 million people and the United States, with its population of 220 million in 1977, it was unrealistic to demand identical figures when it came to admissions of cultural products. The Hungarian ministerial materials prepared prior to the meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in Belgrade in 1977, for example, referred to 19 American productions admitted for release in cinemas and 98 for screening on television in 1976, compared to the six Hungarian feature films and 20 short films that made it to the United States.⁴

² The Helsinki Final Act was divided into three principal groupings, or so-called baskets: questions related to European security; cooperation in the fields of economy, science, technology and environmental protection; and cooperation in humanitarian and other areas (this basket came to be known as the human rights basket).

³ On this, see: Róbert Takács: Hungarian Foreign Policy and Basket III in the Cold War Confrontation from Helsinki to Madrid. *Múltunk, Special Issue*, 2019, 59–106.

⁴ Compilation of statistics by the Ministry of Culture for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (27th April 1977). MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-1977-77 box – Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

At the same time, American film imports cannot essentially be considered as a function of bilateral relationships. Film exchanges were commercial transactions, and the agreements signed in the second half of the decade were not a part of this, although the regularisation of relations certainly did no harm. In fact, American films lost nothing of their momentum even during the Vietnam War, and especially in the second half of the 1960s, when serious protests were organised in Socialist countries against the USA's aggression in Vietnam.

There are at least two additional factors that deserve mention and that will be explored in greater detail below: on the one hand, the processes taking place within the cultural subsystem in Hungary, which was increasingly accepting of entertainment that was becoming liberated, even emancipated, from political expectations; and on the other, a shift within American filmmaking, as a result of which the range of films that could be screened expanded, even if ideological reservations persisted. As a consequence, the composition of film purchases changed significantly in the 1970s, primarily within imports from the West. The presence of films from the West rose only moderately in quantitative terms — but appreciably over the decade — although a significant shift in proportions took place among the film-producing countries. According to data from the National Office of Statistics and the Film Directorate, over 10% of the films released between 1971 and 1980 were American. This means that on average 19 American films were released each year in Hungarian cinemas during the decade — 18 to 20 between 1971 and 1974, slightly fewer in the middle of the decade (only 13 in 1975 and 16 to 17 in 1976–1978), after which the number of Hollywood films rose dramatically from 1979: Hungarian cinema goers could watch 23 American films in 1979 and 29 in 1980.

Table 4 *Distribution of films released in Hungary according to nationality*

	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
Hungarian	20	23	22	23	19	18	24	27	28	26
Soviet	32	31	36	37	38	34	40	37	41	42
Other European Socialist	56	46	48	52	48	50	48	47	44	48
American	20	20	18	19	13	17	16	17	23	29
French	18	12	7	10	16	11	15	18	15	20
Italian	8	11	11	13	12	16	9	15	17	14
Total	165	164	171	168	171	178	185	188	210	220

Source: Hungarian Office of Statistics, *Statistical Yearbooks*

This means that, during the 1970s, Hollywood became the second biggest exporter of films to Hungary, with almost 200 films. Most foreign films of course continued to be imported from the Soviet Union: with an annual 31 to 42 productions, Soviet filmmakers supplied Hungarian cinemas with a total of 368 films, almost double the number coming from Hollywood. During this decade, however, the USA unequivocally overtook Hungary's traditional Western partners, France (142) and Italy (126), and even the most important Socialist film producers (Czechoslovakia – 129; Poland – 95; and East Germany – 84). There were just two years in which French film production managed to edge its way up between that of the Soviet Union and America: 1975 and 1978. In 1980, however, more American films were shown than Hungarian — in other words, this was the first year since 1958 in which Hungarian films were relegated to third

place in terms of country of production (in 1958, Czech film imports had exceeded the output of Hungarian filmmakers).

In the context of the Soviet bloc countries, the Hungarian figures are comparable to those of Poland. The level of detail in the statistical data published by the individual countries also reveals something about their level of openness. Detailed data for film imports were published only in the statistical yearbooks of Hungary and Poland. The respective publications in Romania and East Germany provided no important information, while the Czechoslovak data comprised only the total volume of imports, which mainly illustrates that after 1968 — not immediately, but following 1970 — imports of films fell significantly for a good five years, not reaching their 1970 level again until the middle of the decade.⁵ When Jozef Kot, head of department at the Slovak Film Rental Company, stated that the number of films purchased from abroad was between 120 and 150, he was speaking in an interview made during the “ebb” in foreign film imports. He also stressed in the interview that, rather than being dubbed, a substantial proportion of films in Czechoslovakia were screened with subtitles,⁶ including American films.⁷

The number of films released in cinemas in Poland was consistent throughout the decade: between 1971 and 1980, the lowest number was 194 (in 1972 and 1973), while the

⁵ Czechoslovakia imported 138 films from abroad in 1968 and 148 in 1969, then, following an exceptional year in 1970 (184), imports fell once again: 142 films were imported in 1972. In the years that followed, the number of films imported annually ranged between 190 and 200. *Statistická ročenka ČSSR 1970–1980*. SNTL-Alfa, Praha, 1971–1981.

⁶ István Federmayer: A Hét vendége Jozef Kot [Guest of *The Week*, Jozef Kot]. *A Hét*, 1973/16, 2.

⁷ The Western *Buck and the Preacher* was released in December 1973, for example, a few months after the Hungarian premiere. Mit látunk a mozikban? [What was on at the cinema?] *A Hét*, 1973/51, 14.

highest number was 213 (in 1974).⁸ Interestingly, the trend fell significantly at the end of the decade, just when the number of new Hungarian releases rose. The number of American films released, like the number of imported films as a whole, was also stable during the 1970s. Polish audiences were able to enjoy a total of 198 Hollywood releases; this was a little over half the number of Soviet films, which was naturally the highest in Poland, too (358). In other words, the relative proportions of Soviet and American films largely resembled those in Hungary. France's claim to second place among Western film producers was undisputed: the 187 imported French films were clearly a reflection of the strength of the traditional cultural relations between France and Poland. British films trailed a long way behind, at 119, as did Italian films with a total of just 93. The figures quoted above demonstrate that, on average, Polish audiences enjoyed 20 new American releases each year. The highest number (23) were shown in 1975, while the fewest (16) were shown in 1977 and 1980. In addition, the Polish statistical yearbooks published the total number of films screened in the given year broken down according to nationality, from which it can be seen that those living in the bigger cities had access to as many as 100 American films in terms of the total supply, supplemented with releases from previous years. Audience numbers are also available from 1980. In that year, 111 American films were screened at least once in the cinemas, 16 of which were new releases. These 16 films were viewed by almost 25.3 million people at almost 312,500 screenings. This did not generate exceptional attendance figures, with an average of just 81 spectators per screening: an average of

⁸ *Rocznik Statystyczny 1970–1980*. Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa, 1971–1981.

92 for British films, 90 for Soviet films, 86 for Polish films, 61 for Italian films, and 52 for French films. At the same time, the American films were screened far more often than the approximately five times bigger number of Soviet films, thus overall, the American films were seen by around four times as many people as the 505 Soviet films that were screened on just 75,000 occasions. Total audiences for American films even exceeded the figure for Polish films (21.6 million).⁹

“Good” American films – Or the voice of the “other America”

Among the almost 200 films screened during the decade, Sydney Pollack’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* and Martin Ritt’s *Norma Rae* were rated most highly by Hungarian critics. In Pollack’s film, which is set in the Great Depression, critics highlighted the scathing depiction of capitalism: they greeted the film’s depiction of the dance marathon as an exposure of the essential inhumanity and manipulative nature of “liberal free competition”.¹⁰ So much so that the Film Admissions Committee almost automatically requested and accepted Pollack’s later films (*The Way We Were*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *Bobby Deerfield*, *The Scalphunters*), as it had done the films of Stanley Kramer in the 1960s, although its expectations of encountering the same attitude were met with a certain disappointment. Ritt’s film, which was made in the late 1970s, was a classic, no-frills trade union story in which a union official from the north makes problems for a textile factory in the south that is trampling on its workers’

⁹ *Rocznik Statystyczny 1980*. Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1981.

¹⁰ Ervin Gyertyán: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 24th February 1972.

rights: initially, only the title character, Norma, sides with the trade union official, although in the end the majority of workers do stand up for the common cause. The critic writing for the daily newspaper *Népszava* pointed out how the film presented the characteristic features of the American trade union struggle “with powerful artistic credibility and political authenticity”. “The depiction of the workers’ struggle may perhaps seem rather unusual to Hungarian spectators, and rather drawn out in places. But on leaving the cinema, they will have understood something of the power and importance of solidarity. This understanding will have been achieved by simpler means, and indeed more quickly, than if they had read hundreds of brochures or listened to as many boring speeches.”¹¹

The Hungarian Film Admissions Committee made every effort to find any films it could on the topic of the workers’ movement, although apart from the one described above, the choice remained fairly restricted in terms of the American supply. One exception was the biographical film *Bound for Glory*, released in 1980, which tells the story of the anti-fascist folk singer Woodie Guthrie. However, according to Marxist critics, the film was — in its own way, although not without precedent in the string of Western agitative films during this decade¹² — unduly unproblematic: the protagonist, “spurning the temptations of success, reached an understanding of the fate of the workers and became part of the trade union movement following such a direct,

¹¹ Gábor Thurzó: Tájékozatlanság vagy felületesség? [Ignorance or negligence?] *Népszava*, 22nd October 1980.

¹² In connection with the festivals of short films and documentaries organised in West Germany, the most frequent observation was that politically committed films from the West typically fell into the very same trap of direct propaganda from which Hungarian film producers had been attempting to liberate themselves for two decades.

smooth, and admirable path that we seem to be watching a premediated career, or anti-career, story.”¹³ In contrast to Hollywood, various films by European — including Italian and Swedish — filmmakers were more agreeable to Hungarian critics. The positive evaluation of *Norma Rae*, which also met with success in Cannes in 1979, was due to the fact that it represented a contrast with the “typical” American films that were also reaching Hungary by the dozen — films in which a solitary hero meted out justice and stood up against superior forces. Stanley Kramer’s *Bless the Beasts and Children* might be mentioned here as a third film that could be read as a parable of capitalist society from the Elbe to the East. Indirect messages, as an artistic means, were all too familiar and typical in regions more accustomed to political censorship. Films were valued for offering a humanist standpoint and criticism of the oppressive world of the strong and ambitious.¹⁴

The Hungarian film admissions and film distribution bodies naturally continued to try to identify and purchase primarily those American films that contained elements of social criticism. In the 1970s, these were films that preached — or at least portrayed — revolt against the established order; that depicted the Vietnam War and its aftermath; and that took racial prejudice and discrimination as their themes. In fact, no more than half a dozen American films fall into any of these categories, in terms of the films released in Hungarian cinemas.

It was primarily the so-called 1968 films that expressed rebellion and hostility towards the existing system. The

¹³ B. E.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 10th July 1980,

¹⁴ Ervin Gyertyán: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 13th December 1973; A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Magyar Nemzet*, 13th December 1973.

majority of these films reached Hungary in the early 1970s, after the wave of student revolts. *The Strawberry Statement* and *Zabrieskie Point* were released in 1971 (in the Film Museum), *Easy Rider* in 1972, and *Vanishing Point* in 1973. *The Strawberry Statement*, which is set in Columbia University, portrays the world of the student movements: a politically apathetic student begins to engage with political issues in response to an irrational ban and ends up participating in the revolt. However, the Hungarian critics did not see anything pioneering about the film, describing it rather as reliant on spectacle and as a “reeling operetta performance” that “attempted to portray authentic facts in seductive scenes more befitting of vaudeville.”¹⁵ In other words, it was content with documenting police brutality, and, in a manner typical of Western filmmaking, made no attempt to dig down to its genuine causes.¹⁶ Michelangelo Antonioni’s Hollywood film *Zabriskie Point* was described as a contemplative work, although it was praised for the fact that its poignant closing scene suggested, even to American critics, that things could not stay the same, that revolutionary change alone could improve the world, and that the director had taken the side of the young and their demand for a new order.¹⁷ The two other “road films” are set in the world of counterculture and “rebels without a cause”, although they managed to escape the kind of scandal that greeted *The Born Losers*. Nevertheless, Marxist critics could not of course accept withdrawal from society as a solution. The rebellion depicted in the film could be regarded as legitimate only in so far as it could be interpreted

¹⁵ Zoltán Hegedűs: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 22nd July 1971,

¹⁶ A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Magyar Nemzet*, 22nd July 1971.

¹⁷ Ilona Gantner: A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Népszava*, 29th April 1971; László Zay: Tanú-e a film vagy szereplő [Films: Witnesses or actors?] *Magyar Nemzet*, 21st March 1971.

as a negation of American society — and not of the individual as part of a community — and only if it avoided offering “substitute solutions”, especially drugs.¹⁸ Furthermore, in relation to *Vanishing Point*, Hungarian critics claimed that the makers of the film had “intended to conceal and gloss over a fundamentally mediocre story by inserting content and formal elements taken from worthy and successful American social critical movies, while these elements remained no more than dramaturgical building blocks and empty signs.”¹⁹ Most spectators doubtless bought tickets for the film because of its spectacular car chase: letters at least were sent to the magazine *Autó-Motor* by cinema goers keen to establish the make of the car involved in the rampage.²⁰ (Spoiler: It’s a 1970 Dodge Challenger R/T.)

The above criticism was voiced in relation to all films that took a stand against capitalism or the existing social relations in America, since, although these American-made films were greeted as the voice of “the other America” and as the views of progressive, left-wing filmmakers, at the same time their limitations were stressed. Partly, they were unable to shake free from the confines of their own “bourgeois world” (confines that were shattered only in the closing scene of *Zabriskie Point* at the hands of the European Antonioni), thus they were forced to convey a relatively accurate picture of a smallish slice of life, but without going any further — either because they lacked the courage or because they had no wish to. On the other hand, these films were criticised as having been produced for the American film market,

¹⁸ Zoltán Hegedűs: A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Népszabadság*, 6th January 1972; A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Magyar Nemzet*, 6th January 1972.

¹⁹ András Gervai: A közhelyek jegyében [In the spirit of cliché]. *Kritika*, 1973/10, 31.

²⁰ Száguldás a semmibe [Vanishing Point], *Autó-Motor*, 1973/19, 10.

which meant that they were obliged to express their artistic message while meeting the expectations of the market. In the words of György Báron, describing the trends in 1970s Hollywood: the most problem-centric American films are precisely the most problematic, since they are “dressed up as ‘high art’, meaning the directors infuse their films with all the intellectual dross that was discarded in the 1960s.”²¹ Thirdly, however, Hungarian reviewers criticised the fact that these films were transmitting Western material culture — and not without success, as witnessed by the enthusiastic correspondents on the subject of the speeding Dodge.

The typical setting for the so-called malaise films was the (small) American town with its swamp, its intellectual vacuity, its average inhabitants vainly trying to find their place in the world, and its abandoned hopes. Films such as *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* and *The Last Picture Show* portray this world devoid of hope. In the same way, average individuals who are incapable of moving beyond the confines of their own lives and environment are also depicted in several other films, often in situations where the longing to break free and make a fresh start provides the starting point for the plot — although the dreams of these everyday heroes are soon shattered in the big city (*Scarecrow*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Taking Off*) or suffocated by routine (*A Dream of Kings*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*). Such films also broke from one of the great traditions of American cinema, the cult of the “superhero”: the “central figure is not a Romeo or a knight of the Wild West, but an average citizen with all their typical neuroses, anxieties and loneliness.”²² The clash between the individual and the dispassionate,

²¹ György Báron: Hollywood és Marienbad. A film és a „hetvenes évek” [Hollywood and Marienbad. Film and “the seventies”]. *Világosság*, 1980/8–9, 561.

²² *Ibid.*

personality-destroying American milieu is expressed most keenly in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a work that exploited a device found less frequently in American films but well known from Socialist filmmaking: the parable. It is no coincidence that the director, Miloš Forman, was from Central Europe. Whether it was possible within the Soviet bloc to entirely espouse the concept of revolt against the existing system and rules of any kind is another question.²³ According to György Báron, this had to do with the fact that American film directors had returned to Italian neorealism and the portrayal of local conditions, a filmmaking trend that had earlier been highly esteemed in the Soviet bloc.

Hungarian critics interpreted these films as a symptom, reading into them the notion that “Hollywood realists” had buried the American dream. However, the more penetrating voice of the Marxist critics set little store by them, referring to such films as “clever lies”. The literary journal *Élet és Irodalom* spoke out against this tendency in connection with a film drama directed by John Schlesinger, which was screened in the Film Museum: “Audiences are keen to watch *Midnight Cowboy*. After a few minutes, however, they realise that what they are watching on the screen is mere hypocrisy, worthy opposition tamed into business, slushy sentiment disguised as social criticism, but by this time they are so caught up in the gripping story and have such an appreciation for the actors’ performances, falling especially for the acting skills of Dustin Hoffman, that the next day they will even recommend this pleasantly entertaining film to their friends. The more

²³ László Zay: Száll a kakukk fészkére [One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 19th May 1977.

discerning among them will at most be a tad dismissive of its sentimentality.”²⁴

The Film Admissions Committee endeavoured to select films that addressed the two most sensitive social issues in the United States: firstly, racial prejudice or the question of inequality; and secondly, the Vietnam War and its negative impacts on American society. There were very few films in the first of these categories: in the 1970s, only four of the films released in Hungarian cinemas focused on this issue, and these belonged to different genres. The director of *In the Heat of the Night* builds his plot on the social differences between the North and the South: a detective who is highly thought of in the North is regarded as “only a black” by his colleagues in the South. As in *The Defiant Ones*, which was released a decade earlier, the conflict here is also played out in the framework of an action film. *Change of Mind* draws on science fiction: a white public prosecutor is brought back to life — by means of a brain transplant — in the body of a Black person, allowing the director to portray the controversial reactions of the other characters in the story. *Hurry Sundown* connects the fates of a Black farmer and a white farmer on the pretext of a struggle against a rich developer: the underlying situation thus in many respects resembles the film *Oklahoma Crude*, which was likewise released in the 1970s. At the same time, the latter work can also be interpreted in a less ideologically favourable way as a film that perpetuates the myth of American — and capitalist — prosperity and the romanticisation of the freedom of individual enterprise. Only one of the four films talks directly about inequality and disadvantage: *Conrack* tells the story of the struggles

²⁴ Gabriella Székely: Tanuljunk az Éjféli cowboy-tól? [Can we learn from the Midnight Cowboy?] *Élet és Irodalom*, 1975/16, 12.

and ultimate failure of a teacher who hoped to create a school on an isolated island that would tackle inequality in a meaningful way. “What makes him think that he can sever the heads of the seven-headed hydra of racial prejudice all by himself, like some lonesome cowboy?” was the question posed by the critic of the daily newspaper *Népszabadság*. The answer is that *Conrack* is a typically “liberal” film, which identifies social problems that everyone is aware of, but without any attempt to penetrate to the roots of those problems, concealed in the system of social power, instead reinforcing the illusion of freedom (of speech) by scraping at the surface.²⁵ The daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* had a better grasp of the situation, underlining the lesson that, in a dispassionate, inhumane world, even a devoted humanist must become a rebel.²⁶

There is no such directness in the films on Vietnam. The half-dozen movies include a crime film (*The Visitors* — a revenge story based on a conflict among three former American soldiers who served in Vietnam) and even a comedy. Although the latter film, *MASH*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes, is set in Korea — in an American army hospital — in the 1950s, the references to Vietnam are unambiguous. The comedy was released in the Film Museum in 1980, almost a decade after it was made. According to *Népszabadság*, the film made it easier to understand the stance adopted by American intellectuals with respect to Vietnam: rather than condemning the “unjust”, “imperialist” war, it suggests a kind of general anti-war sentiment.²⁷ In this, it was associated with *Catch-22*, released in Hungary in 1972,

²⁵ Ervin Gyertyán: A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Népszabadság*, 30th September 1976.

²⁶ A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Magyar Nemzet*, 30th September 1976.

²⁷ László Zöldi: *MASH*. *Népszabadság*, 12th June 1980.

in relation to which Socialist critics wrestled with the fact that the novel and the film (also) highlighted the folly of the shared anti-fascist war.²⁸ *Coming Home*, however, wove its anti-war message into a love triangle story. Miloš Forman's film *Hair* can also be included among the Vietnam films. Unlike the stage musical, the film very quickly made it through the hoops of film admissions policy and was released in Hungarian cinemas in January 1980. Its rapid admission also signalled that it was regarded by the film authorities as strongly anti-war and humanist, and indeed as a good film.²⁹ Ultimately, the film paved the way for the theatre performance of the rock musical, which had already been discussed on several occasions a decade earlier in the Hungarian public sphere³⁰ following the American premiere, although at the time there was no question of its performance in the theatre because of its "sixty-eightness" — due partly to its frenetic, seditious atmosphere³¹ and partly to its sexual charge.

The Trial of the Catonsville Nine was a direct presentation of anti-Vietnam War protest, telling the true story of nine religious activists who were taken to court for refusing conscription. At the end of the 1970s, only one of the two big films set in Vietnam reached Hungary — *Apocalypse Now*.

²⁸ László Zay: Catch-22. *Magyar Nemzet*, 7th September 1972.

²⁹ V. P.: *Hair*. *Magyar Nemzet*, 17th January 1980.

³⁰ In the early 1970s, Hungarian critics described the musical *Hair* as "sexually overheated". Even Tamás Ungvári, who commended the show, wrote the following about it: "...it chooses to make its point by such unusual means as the spectacle of naked bodies and a string of frenetic songs." Ungvári Tamás: Minden musical! [Everything's a musical!] *Magyar Nemzet*, 20th November 1971.

³¹ "In Hungary, the anarchic glitter and generational dynamism of the performance would doubtless be more keenly effective than any anti-imperialist objection, and no doubt the show's eroticism would remove it further from the function that it performed in its original context", wrote Pál Pándi. Pál Pándi: Németek és németek [Germans and Germans], II. *Népszabadság*, 20th September 1970.

When the film was screened in Cannes in May 1979, one of the central figures in Hungarian film importing, István Dósai, spoke in superlatives of Francis Ford Coppola's film: "Never before has a film of this kind been seen, dealing as it does with the horrors not only of the Vietnam War but of all similar wars — without exception — and with the folly of a war that is condemned in advance to failure. We were privileged to witness one of the greatest events not only of the festival, but in the entire history of film in recent decades."³² By the time the film was released in Hungary, however, the rapture had diminished. While acknowledging that it was possible to present the horrors of the Vietnam War using extreme visual and sound effects, the film was nevertheless criticised for the fact that the hallucinatory images numbed the spectators' sensitivity, and despite the fact that the work comprised a moving presentation of the "darkness", it made no attempt to understand or convey the psychological reasons behind it.³³ As we shall see below, *The Deer Hunter* elicited a rather different opinion.

Towards the end of the decade, several Hollywood films were released that belonged to the more general category in which the target was the world of manipulation. These films were typically set in the media: *The Day of the Locust* offered an entertaining exposé of the seamy side of Hollywood glitter, while *Network* presented the harsh reality of television. *Capricorn One* likewise exposed the functioning of the propaganda machine: the premise is that a failed space mission must be presented as a success story, using fake footage, due to economic and political interests. A similar premise informed the plots of films that

³² István Dósai: Dönt a zsűri [The jury decides], *Magyar Nemzet*, 24th May 1979.

³³ A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 24th April 1980.

exposed the tricks and stratagems of political power. Besides *Executive Action*, a fictionalised account of the assassination of President Kennedy, two films can be mentioned here in which characters who execute the will of higher powers end up in situations that “undermine” the machinery. In *The Domino Principle*, a hitman becomes the tool of forces more powerful than he is, while in Coppola’s *The Conversation*, a surveillance expert ends up under surveillance. This 1974 thriller was given extra resonance by its allusions to the Watergate scandal, although the subject matter itself, the elimination of privacy, alienation, and the dangerous nature of modern technology – as American phenomena – had been integrated into Hungarian discourse in the 1960s through the Hungarian translation of the writings of American journalist Vance Packard.³⁴ *The Front* and *The Way We Were* offered a light-hearted look back at the McCarthy era from a distance of two decades.

Average American films – Entertainment with thrills, tears, and laughter

Films intended as entertainment constituted the bulk of Hollywood films released in Hungary even in the 1970s. In addition to the films discussed above, with their elements of criticism, many American detective films and action movies had by this time made their way onto the programmes of Hungarian cinemas. Their number – including disaster films, thrillers, and action comedies – had risen considerably compared to the 1960s, to around 36 to 38, representing

³⁴ Vance Packard: A meztelen társadalom [The naked society]. *Valóság*, 1966/1, 93–98.

a fifth of all films. Bearing in mind that 25 of these three dozen films were released in the second half of the decade, it becomes apparent that, in terms of the actual practice of the Film Admissions Committee after 1975, it was doing less and less to hinder these types of film. They included hits such as Spielberg's first big film *The Sugarland Express*, the classic Stallone film *Rocky*, the homage to gangster romanticism *The Sting*, as well as *Bonnie and Clyde* and the disaster film *The Towering Inferno*, of which the daily *Magyar Nemzet* wrote: "... the fire generates such tragic poetry and drama that after the film people are anxious even to light their cigarettes."³⁵

Social issues were inevitably broached in most of these films — after all, there can be no chase and no investigation without a crime, while the threads sometimes stretched as far as the law enforcers themselves, and even to the political elite. In this respect, György Báron associated them with the Italian "state affairs films" of the 1970s.³⁶ At the same time, *Serpico* stands out from the field: Sidney Lumet's film is based on the immorality and corruption that pervades the highest levels of the police force, and even the political elite. According to a review in the Party newspaper, the film was thus a portrayal of capitalism itself, even if in a "liberal", permissive manner.³⁷ In many cases, Hungarian critics appeared duty bound to read into — or point out — elements of criticism in films, since several films touched on the question of police corruption, for example, in a more moderate form (*The Organization*, *Fuzz*, *The Drowning Pool*, and *Convoy*). In relation to the last of these, a road action film replete with gigantic trucks, the Party newspaper not only pointed out that this (too) was a western in modern clothing (a clash between representatives

³⁵ A hét filmjei [Films of the week], *Magyar Nemzet*, 21st September 1978.

³⁶ György Báron: Op. cit., 562.

³⁷ László Zöldi: *Serpico*. *Népszabadság*, 29th June 1978.

of the old common law and statutory law); it also expressed with a certain irony the hope that the film would not reap the same dubious “professional” success as *The Towering Inferno*. “A similar undertaking, by the name of *The Towering Inferno*, for example, won the approbation of experts to such an extent that this unquestionably thrilling firefighting drama was even screened at a training session for firefighters in one county. The lives of lorry drivers might be filled with similar excitement: it is not impossible to imagine that this American film based on their adventures will in time become a teaching tool for [the transport company] Hungarocamion.”³⁸ In connection with *Three Days of the Condor*, the same general problem emerged as in the case of the detective and action films discussed above: the majority of spectators presumably interpreted it as nothing more than a thriller, rather than drawing lessons from the exposure of CIA manipulation and unscrupulousness.

The success of American action films was, of course, primarily due to the fact that they were more exciting and more spectacular than their slower, ambling European counterparts, and in particular the Socialist detective films that likewise appeared after 1953. “A few years ago, dull plots would limp on dispiritedly, yet we’ve been thrown into a fever by adventures in which real cars are smashed to pieces, cruising cars end up under steamrollers, and flashy cars lose their ‘personality’”, wrote László Zöldi in relation to the film *Birds of Prey*.³⁹ Besides, in order to retain spectators’ attention, newer and newer levels had to be attained in terms of action and spectacle: in this particular film, after the car and truck chases there is even a helicopter chase, while in

³⁸ László Zöldi: Konvoj [Convoy], *Népszabadság*, 29th December 1979.

³⁹ László Zöldi: Ragadozó madarak [Birds of Prey], *Népszabadság*, 1st February 1979.

another film (*Juggernaut*), bomb disposal experts battle to disarm terrorist bombs to save a luxury ocean liner and its passengers.⁴⁰ By comparison, the Soviet crime film *It's Not My Business* — and its ilk — offered rather more muted excitement. The newspaper *Népszabadság* acknowledged the high quality of the Russian Lenfilm production, arguing that “it takes an honest look at the shortage economy as experienced in the textile industry.”⁴¹

However, the Hungarian critic also pointed out that a certain amount of social criticism, even if it typically remained superficial, had already become part of the spirit of the age or the recipe for success in 1970s Hollywood. According to Zöldi, the American film industry, for example, had been forced to reckon with the social consequences of the fact that “in the last 40 years, several generations of American men have had experience of fighting in a war: in Pearl Harbor, then in Korea, and not so long ago in Vietnam.”⁴² Marxist critics ultimately partly legitimised these pure Hollywood action films by suggesting that they were targeting elements of social criticism. At the same time, they attempted to attenuate this claim, treating it with reservation by evaluating the shift in emphasis in American films as merely a trick, or a concession dictated by business interests — even as a disguise that concealed their true essence. The opposite tendency existed too: it was pointed out that elements of sensation and spectacle — such as nudity and (homo)eroticism — were included in these films in their own right. “Were the lesbians living opposite the private investigator Marlowe included in the film because their abnormal pleasures provided an ideal

⁴⁰ syp: Pénzt vagy életet [Juggernaut], *Magyar Nemzet*, 3rd June 1976.

⁴¹ László Zöldi: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 22nd February 1979.

⁴² László Zöldi: Ragadozó madarak [Birds of Prey], Op. cit.

way to symbolise social immorality, or do the director and cinematographer have a predilection for them merely in the interests of prurience and spectacle?” Such was the question raised by a journalist writing for *Magyar Nemzet* about the film *The Long Goodbye*.⁴³

In relation to romantic films (dramas, melodramas, and comedies), the volume of which was around half that of detective and action films, the critic for *Népszabadság* pointed out that the existence of a moderate amount of criticism of capitalism was a kind of social-psychological trick, by means of which commonplace stories could be conjured into something more exciting: “Naked imitation and junk intended for mass consumption are unmarketable, so it’s worth serving them with a splash of political sauce. [...] [T]his is what turns a genteel comedy into ‘social drama’; a clueless, respectable bourgeois into a communist journalist; and an eccentric American into a housewife with progressive ideas.”⁴⁴ The figures, too, suggest that the Film Admissions Committee was stricter when it came to this genre than it was with action films: in a single year, three times as many melodramas failed to make the cut. Film critics frequently argued that one of the main tendencies in the global film industry in the 1970s was a wave of sentimentality, which Hungarian film admissions policy nevertheless endeavoured to resist to some extent. Thus ultimately — after fierce debate — they did not admit the American film *Love Story*, the harbinger of the decade in this respect, which marked the beginning of the age of the weepy. The film was released in Hungary only after a significant delay, in 1986. However, films that were admitted included *Summer of ’42*, a coming-

⁴³ -te: A hosszú búcsú [The Long Goodbye], *Magyar Nemzet*, 14th August 1975.

⁴⁴ László Zöldi: Világvége közös ágyunkban [A Night Full of Rain], *Népszabadság*, 19th June 1980.

of-age story set in the Second World War; *Jeremy*, which explores the vicissitudes of teenage love; *Griffin and Phoenix*, with its depiction of the emotional world of a terminally ill couple; *Julia*, set in the Nazi era; and *Bobby Deerfield*, which takes place behind the scenes of the car racing circuit.

Thus, the battle against “petty bourgeois kitsch” — at least in terms of film admissions policy — persisted for longer in the 1970s than the resistance to action films and thrillers. In Marxist theory, kitsch was deemed to be a social rather than an aesthetic phenomenon, and it was ascribed a class character. István Hermann stressed that “kitsch always makes a lie of the truth”: it presents the details of the truth, but the questions it raises are always deceptive. It also passes judgement — as typically heard in connection with elements of social criticism in American films — but it carefully avoids essential questions and is content with superficialities. Hermann equated kitsch with the perspective of the “surly petty bourgeois”, which protects an immutability buttressed by class interests by claiming that it offers the potential for advancement, change, and happiness. He saw kitsch as being based on class — even as reactionary — because it helps to preserve existing relations while criticising social progress.⁴⁵ With respect to action films, his objection was rather that they depict self-serving violence: indeed, American detective films were a long way from the Socialist ideal, in which crime stories were regarded as logical puzzles and as a useful way of improving the mind.⁴⁶ Another reason for the difference in the threat was that while sentimental kitsch had a strong

⁴⁵ István Hermann: *A giccs* [Kitsch]. Kossuth, Budapest, 1971, 98, 135.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the essay by László Zay, in which he refers to sentimental films as “Valium films” or “opium films”, contrasting them with the logical plot of violent action films. László Zay: *Mozi és házipatika* [Cinema and the medicine cabinet], *Magyar Nemzet*, 11th May 1969.

tradition in Hungary — light operettas, for example, were included in theatre repertoires even in the Socialist era — Hollywood action films had no real equivalent. Nor were there any Hungarian imitators trying to reproduce them, since the requisite technical and financial resources were lacking in the Hungarian film industry. More importantly, however, politicians failed to perceive any social relevance in action films, thus decision makers deemed them to have a less harmful impact in practice. “We have neither the prototypes nor the authentic equivalents of these concepts anyway. Columbo, Kojak, Derrick — none of them fit here. They cannot therefore have an essentially harmful ideological impact, but they do meet a widespread social demand. They are ‘merely’ incapable of promoting engagement or generating interest in public life.”⁴⁷

Together with comedies and musical films, the rising number of thrillers and action films released in Hungarian cinemas can be regarded as an aspect of entertainment. Since the mid-1950s, entertainment had reclaimed its right to exist in the Socialist public sphere, although assessments fluctuated between inevitably bad and potentially good. Cultural policy recognised a demand for recreation that Hungarian filmmaking was unable to satisfy. Attempts were made to fill the gap by importing English, French, and Italian comedies, even in the early years of de-Stalinisation. In the 1970s, however, light entertainment films dominated the available selection. According to a survey undertaken by the Film Directorate in 1973, more than half the 426 films in an entire two weeks’ selection were commercial films. They

⁴⁷ László Zappe: A televíziós szórakoztatás rangja [The place of televised entertainment], *Népszabadság*, 6th November 1978.

included no fewer than 71 adventure films, 67 comedies, 42 detective films, and 21 musicals.⁴⁸

Thus, having gradually returned to the Hungarian public sphere after 1953, Western commercial films steadily advanced during the following decade, eventually attaining a significant level in the 1970s and emerging as a challenge and a threat to those wanting to safeguard Socialist cultural policy. The advance of popular content after 1956 was also connected with a general trend towards depoliticisation. In the context of 1960s cultural policy, this can be associated with István Szirmai rather than György Aczél, who had rather more elite tastes.⁴⁹ Even so, Aczél too recognised the significance of entertainment and recreation. At the XI Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP), held in March 1975, he expressed this as follows: "The responsible working individual, faced with more demanding working conditions and countless innovations, naturally has a need for entertainment to alleviate stress. Yet those who are eager for enjoyment, rest, and recreation do not expect rubbish that spreads tasteless, inane falsehoods. And even if such a desire were to exist, it ought not to be satisfied. [...] What we need is educational, intellectual, playful entertainment that spreads pleasure and joy."⁵⁰ Cultural policy thus pursued an ideal of entertainment as something that developed and "improved" people, rather than pandering to existing public demand. In an article in *Népszabadság*, the deputy minister

⁴⁸ Report of the working committee on behalf of the Film Directorate (July 1973), MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 144.

⁴⁹ Sándor Révész: *Aczél és korunk* [Aczél and our age]. Sík Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, 134–135.

⁵⁰ Aczél György felszólalása az MSZMP XI. kongresszusán [The speech made by György Aczél at the XI Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party]. In: *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt XI. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve* [Minutes of the XI Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party], Op. cit., 375.

of culture Dezső Tóth emphasised that the main difference between Socialist and market-based capitalist mass culture was that one of the goals of the former was to elevate citizens, while the goal of the latter — in line with what has been said above about kitsch — was to prevent people from achieving self-awareness and thus advancement. The Western entertainment industry, according to Dezső Tóth, “takes back from the working masses the hard-won free time made possible by technological progress, exploiting it for its own material and ideological purposes and thereby hindering the transformation of free time into meaningful, productive time.”⁵¹ Many entertainment films made in the West were apparently tolerated in Hungary precisely because they were exceptions rather than being the general rule. Thus, the following notice might appear for one and a half to two hours: “the cultural revolution is temporarily suspended for the duration of the box office hit”, as the drama critic for *Népszabadság* put it, writing about a play by Neil Simon that was performed in Hungary in 1972.⁵²

By the 1970s, the New Economic Mechanism had created new conditions only in so far as it reinforced existing tendencies. Although attempts were made to protect various cultural sectors from the direct impact of economic reform, there was strong pressure to achieve economic efficiency. The importance of cross-financing increased, based on the concept that the losses incurred by the production and performance of works that were in harmony with cultural policy goals were to be balanced by the production and presentation of works that were popular with wider

⁵¹ Dezső Tóth: A szórakozás kultúrája [The culture of entertainment]. *Népszabadság*, 30th April 1978.

⁵² Tamás Koltai: Színházi esték [Theatre evenings]. *Népszabadság*, 21st January 1972.

audiences. The expected revenue from films imported from the West was also carefully calculated, paving the way for imports of thrillers, westerns, and comedies.

Since the 1950s, a shortage of comedies had been a permanent problem for Hungarian film distributors, although as demonstrated by the above observation in relation to the Neil Simon play, it was also a regular issue in theatre programming. Italian social-critical, satirical comedies were regarded most highly, although by the 1970s there was also a long list of Hollywood comedies, even if, according to Marxist critics, they scarcely approached the level of *Divorce Italian Style*. With 45 or so American comedies released in the course of the decade, spectators were able to enjoy four or five each year in Hungarian cinemas. Admittedly, these included a 10-part Chaplin series screened between 1973 and 1978, which, alongside Chaplin's earlier, classic works, also included two films made after the Second World War that had not previously been released in Hungary (*Limelight*, and *A King in New York*). The delay was caused not by any reluctance on the part of the Hungarian film authority, or any other film authority in the Soviet bloc, but by the fact that the question of the rights to the Chaplin films was not settled until 1972.⁵³ Alongside the Chaplin films there were three earlier burlesques — *The Disorderly Orderly* for example, simply to give the Hungarian public a chance to see at least one Jerry Lewis film.⁵⁴

⁵³ György Sas: Chaplin-stratégia [Chaplin strategy]. *Magyarország*, 26th/27th January 1975. According to *Magyarország*, the Chaplin films seen much earlier were guaranteed to be successful in the cinemas: 1974. Up until 30th November 1974, the rereleased films attracted the following audiences: *Modern Times*: 1,209,384 viewers; *The Great Dictator*: 874,023 viewers; *Gold Rush* (in the space of barely three months): 552,649 viewers.

⁵⁴ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 119–120.

But who could have predicted, back in the mid-1960s, that a decade later the most performed Hollywood drama writer in Hungary would be the uncrowned kind of commercial comedies, Neil Simon? “He has become the most successful Hungarian playwright. Despite the fact that he lives in New York and is a citizen of America”, was the ironic observation made in 1972 in *Népszabadság*.⁵⁵ The American comedy writer was a guarantee of success in the theatres of Pest, and films of his comedies were admitted one after the other in Hungary.⁵⁶

Hungarofilm was also keen to purchase film versions of other comedies that had been successful on the stage, including *Follow me!* and *Cactus Flower* in the 1970s. It was in this period that Hungarian audiences became familiar with the name and work of Woody Allen. A journalist for *Népszabadság* and a member of the Film Admissions Committee had the following words of praise in relation to *Annie Hall*: “...he’s even greater than [Jacques] Tati.”⁵⁷ *Take the Money and Run* was released in 1971, *Play it Again, Sam* in 1974, and *Annie Hall* in 1980. Allen’s depiction of the character of the average citizen met an essentially favourable reception, while in connection with the multiple Oscar-winning *Annie Hall*, László Zöldi spoke of its Chaplinesque heights and depths. However, he did add that most spectators probably failed to understand the film: “The fear is that spectators will appreciate the obsolete jokes in this comedy rather than the lessons being conveyed on the screen.”⁵⁸ The argument that Allen’s humour was too intellectual for the wider public was

⁵⁵ Tamás Koltai: Színházi esték [Theatre evenings]. Op. cit.

⁵⁶ A total of seven films were released with screenplays written by Neil Simon: *The Odd Couple* (1971), *The Out-of-Towners* (1972), *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* (1977), *The Sunshine Boys* (1977), *Murder by Death* (1978), *California Suite* (1980), and *The Goodbye Girl* (1980).

⁵⁷ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 371.

⁵⁸ László Zöldi: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 22nd May 1980.

even mooted at a meeting of the Film Admissions Committee, although the film nevertheless drew an acceptable average audience, being seen by around 350,000 people.⁵⁹

Several of the action and crime comedies that were admitted⁶⁰ offered a modicum of innovation in terms of style and tempo at most, as Hungarian audiences were already familiar with earlier French versions. Attempts were made to keep to a minimum the number of explicitly “fumbling” comedies, but even so, several films that relied on sequences of gags did make it into the cinemas — from among those judged to be more innocuous. Initially, the Film Admissions Committee had described the comedy *The Love Bug*, for example, as a Volkswagen advert lasting 108 minutes; it was rejected, with the claim that they would never approve it, even if the German company paid for it to be screened in dollars.⁶¹

The fourth major category of entertainment films comprised musical films: in the 1970s, these were partly musicals and partly filmed concerts. The great American Broadway hits were screened in Hungarian cinemas one after the other in the first half of the decade: *Darling Lili* and *Oliver* in 1971, *Hello, Dolly!* and *Funny Girl* in 1972, and in 1973 — after a delay of 12 years — *West Side Story*, the stage version of which had been enjoyed by Hungarian audiences in as early as 1965,⁶² then, in the following year, Bob Fosse’s *Cabaret*. Experience in the 1960s had already

⁵⁹ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 371–372.

⁶⁰ *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (Hungarian premiere: 1973); *What’s Up, Doc?* (1975); *Bank Shot* (1976); *Lucky Lady* (1977); *The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes Smarter Brother* (1977); *Silver Streak* (1978).

⁶¹ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 155.

⁶² In 1965, *West Side Story* was performed by an English–American ballet company at the Szeged Open-Air Festival. It was added to the repertoire of the Municipal Operetta Theatre in 1969.

demonstrated that this particular genre fulfilled its intended ideological modernisation mission only in the case of certain musicals that were considered the most valuable from the perspective of cultural policy. *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady* were mentioned most frequently when the genre was first introduced on the stage. Two Hungarian musicals were even produced based on this model: In the 1960s musical *Ki a győztes?* [Who's the winner?], two teams of children confront one another at a Pioneer camp;⁶³ while in the “East Side Story” *Várj egy órát*, a member of the well-to-do coffeehouse set falls in love with a boy from the denim-clad playground gang.⁶⁴

Two types of musical emerged in film, just as they had on stage. Among those offering a progressive message and a realistic depiction of society were *West Side Story*, *Cabaret*, and *Hair*. The ghetto world of *West Side Story* was regarded as the true face of America: “Anything is possible there, but not everything comes true: what does materialise without fail is fear and hatred and the escalation of violence, to the point of idiotic, meaningless death. That is America.”⁶⁵ *Cabaret* could count on a positive reception from the outset by dint of its subject matter and anti-fascist content, as could *Hair*, with its trenchant criticism of the Vietnam War. Another musical that belongs here, *Fiddler on the Roof*, was approved by the Film Admissions Committee in 1973 (as a bitter-sweet, entertaining, and at the same time uplifting film), although it was not released in Hungary until 1986, partly because of the cost.⁶⁶ On the other hand, despite the fact that the

⁶³ Judit Kovács: *Ki a győztes?* [Who's the winner?] *Magyar Nemzet*, 15th November 1961.

⁶⁴ (m-r): *Várj egy órát* [Wait for an hour]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 12th June 1973.

⁶⁵ László Zay: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 18th January 1973.

⁶⁶ Mihály Gál: *Op. cit.*, 253–255.

musical had been performed successfully in the Budapest Operetta Theatre in 1973, it was removed from the theatre's repertoire the following season — doubtless on account of Soviet sensitivities due to the depiction of early 20th-century anti-Semitism in Russia.⁶⁷

The other trend was for mawkishly sentimental, modernised operetta stories, such as the downbeat career story *Funny Girl*, or *Darling Lili*. The latter is set during the First World War. The film's entire ethos, with its bon vivant seducer of beautiful women who finishes off the Germans singlehandedly, was characterised by Anna Vilcsek as follows: “spectacular but insignificant, catchy but mind-numbing”.⁶⁸ She had a similar opinion of *That's Entertainment!*, a compilation of Gene Kelly's classic Hollywood musical films: *Népszabadság* considered it an unequivocally erroneous decision to screen a nostalgic compilation in such “shabby”, poor — American — taste in Hungary.⁶⁹ At the same time, oddly enough, the musical never became entirely successful as a genre in the cinema.

In the case of the other distinctive group of musical films imported from the USA, no general interest was even expected. Beat and rock were regarded as genres for the young, thus Beat and concert films were imported even in the 1970s to satisfy the demands of a specific niche — albeit a significant one — within audiences as a whole. British rock-and-roll films — including the two Beatles films mentioned earlier — had been shown in the second half of the 1960s.

⁶⁷ Minutes of the management meeting of the Association of Theatre Arts (19th September 1974). In: Zoltán Imre and Orsolya Ring (ed.): *Szigorúan titkos. Dokumentumok a Kádár-kori színházirányítás történetéhez, 1970–1982* [Strictly confidential. Documents on the history of theatre management in the Kádár era]. PIM–OSZMI, Budapest, 2018, 212–217.

⁶⁸ V. A.: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 12th August 1971.

⁶⁹ László Zöldi: Hollywood, Hollywood. *Népszabadság*, 6th April 1978.

Although they were handled by the Film Admissions Committee as niche films, this approach is somewhat contradicted by the fact that *Let the Good Times Roll*, for example, was seen by a total of 770,000 people.⁷⁰

Here too, the 1970s were marked by a tendency for the rock experience in Hungarian cinemas to comprise a few American films, although Beat films from Western and even Eastern Europe, including West Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland, were also screened.⁷¹ *The Concert for Bangladesh* was produced from recordings of a huge concert organised in Madison Square Garden, New York; in *Let the Good Times Roll*, stars from the 1950s appeared “in the here and now”; while *The Last Waltz* was a recording of the farewell performance of The Band. *The Song Remains the Same* presented a truly legendary band on screen: made using footage from a Led Zeppelin concert in 1973, the film was described by one critic in terms of the contrast between the amazing visual spectacle and the conceptual vacuity: “The auditorium is a fantastic landscape: sometimes it stares in motionless ecstasy (including one or two ironic shots here), while at other times waves of hysteria bubble through the lava crowd and the rows effervesce, as if everything were happening before, or maybe even after, recorded history. The half-naked singer drips with sweat, and the guitarist leaps around as if a volcano were scorching the soles of his feet. Then, out of the blue, he plucks a bow from somewhere, drawing it back and forth across his guitar like a musical clown in a circus, but even when the bow is worn to a stick there is neither tragedy nor humour in the scene.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 282.

⁷¹ Besides the four American rock films, two Beatles films, one French musical film (*Les Bidasses en folie*, released in English as *The Five Crazy Boys*), a West German musical film (*Heintje*), and a Polish musical film (*Big Beat*) were screened in Hungarian cinemas.

⁷² A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 15th June 1978.

Attitudes to Beat in the Hungarian public sphere in the 1970s also changed: it was more than a tolerated phenomenon, embraced by the Communist Youth League out of necessity and confined within the supervised rooms of the Communist Youth League clubs: it was increasingly recognised as an expressive idiom capable of uniting the world's youth. In an article about the musicians who took part in *The Concert for Bangladesh*, rock music was spoken of as a distinctly progressive genre: "At this stage, pop and rock are no longer a mere pretext for the young to gather in crowds, nor are they simply a form of spontaneous self-realisation or of daydreaming of a different kind of life; instead, they represent a unique, artistic amalgamation of folk tradition and jazz that indirectly expresses the mindset of those who long for a better world."⁷³ Nevertheless, Godard's film *Sympathy for the Devil*, for which the Rolling Stones wrote and performed the song of the same name that included references to the 1917 Russian Revolution, was not released in cinemas. The Film Admissions Committee tacitly disputed the film's Marxist leanings.⁷⁴ Nor was Hungarofilm permitted to purchase the documentary film *Woodstock*, despite the fact that it featured songs critical of consumer society and the Vietnam War. Although it had been approved by the Film Admissions Committee — albeit not unanimously — the Ministry rather sided with those critics who argued that the film, filled as it was with "murky" interviews inciting a spirit of revolt, would have a detrimental impact on Hungary's youth.⁷⁵

⁷³ A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 3rd April 1974.

⁷⁴ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 116.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 161–162.

The popularity of American films

American film releases of course included a good number of genuine blockbusters that were distributed in Hungary precisely because they were expected to be money-spinners. Unsurprisingly, the most popular Hollywood films, even in the 1970s, were those that promised the “classic cinema experience” — above all spectacle, suspense, and action.

Even the Film Admissions Committee itself did not act purely as an ideological filter. Besides ideological and political concerns, its post-screening discussions regularly focused on the quality of the given films, as well as their potential for success in Hungary. Entertainment films were naturally assessed using criteria applicable to commercial films. This accounts in no small part for the popularity of westerns, which were regularly included in cinema programmes following the genre’s return to the screen in 1969. The most successful was the Italian–American production *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which was shown in Hungarian cinemas for a period of over 15 years and which had been seen by 4.4 million viewers by the time of the regime change in 1989. The biggest westerns regularly surpassed the one million mark — even in the context of cinema audiences that were only half the size of those typical of the early 1960s, and a programming policy in which the number of films circulating in the cinemas was steadily on the increase. The film *3:10 to Yuma*, released in 1971, attracted 1.09 million spectators; *Soldier Blue*, released in 1976, attracted 1.22 million; and *The Scalphunters*, released in 1980, attracted 1.12 million. Even *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which was less highly rated but purchased anyway for

the Film Museum due to a shortage of westerns, was seen by a total of 137,500 people.⁷⁶

American action films attracted similarly large crowds. Among those that attracted at least a million spectators were *Easy Rider* (1.9 million), *Breakout* (1.43 million), *Silver Streak* (1.09 million), and *Death Wish* (1.09 million). *Easy Rider*, of course, could be watched and interpreted not simply as an action film, although the others in the list were produced according to the classic blockbuster formula. These films were anyway a type of western in modern garb, featuring a lone protagonist who confronts the “baddies” or the representatives of an unjust authority. Indeed, they also made use of another stereotype: the archetypal hero, compelled by circumstances, who would otherwise be living a respectable, middle-class life if it had not been ruined by this, that, or the other thing. Adventure films also drew huge numbers of spectators, as witnessed by the success of the decade’s most classic American — costume — action film, *Mutiny on the Bounty*: the film was seen by 1.06 million people, while *Lucky Lady*, which was also set at sea, delving into the world of the 1930s mafia and bootleggers, also came close to the “dream target” (at 875,000 viewers). Both films were surpassed by *Spartacus*, which attracted 1.12 million spectators, while the 1980s hit *King Kong* — which had been assessed by the Film Admissions Committee back in 1977 — was among the most viewed (1.85 million spectators). Many cinema goers were attracted by animal adventures: the dog in *Big Red* won the hearts of 1.07 million of them. Spectacular science-fiction movies faced a unique situation: a good many of them reached Hungarian cinemas only with a delay, or were not released in Hungary at all. However, the success

⁷⁶ Source for audience figures: Mihály Gál: Op. cit.

of both *Star Wars* and *Planet of the Apes*, the latter released exclusively in the Film Museum in 1977 and then nationwide from 1981, demonstrates the popularity of the genre, even if Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* attracted barely 500,000 spectators.

Comedies usually promised slightly smaller audiences, although even in this category there were some hugely successful films. The Second World War parody *1941*, directed by Spielberg, which was assessed by the Film Admissions Committee in the 1970s and ultimately not released until the early 1980s, attracted 1.02 cinema goers. Woody Allen's comedies also proved popular, despite the fact that the Film Admissions Committee considered the humour to be too intellectual for the wider public. Its more risqué topic may have contributed to the fact that *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask* attracted 814,000 spectators in the 1980s, bearing in mind that the Oscar-winning crowd-puller *Annie Hall* managed to attract only 350,000. Musical spectaculars garnered even less resounding success in Hungary: while filmed Broadway musicals were blockbusters in the West, decision makers in Hungary faced the dilemma of whether the considerable licence fee costs would be recovered. None of the "Beat films" attracted a million spectators. The 770,000 cinema goers who watched *Let the Good Times Roll* represented an extremely good figure.

Rejected films

Despite the rising number of American films produced in the 1970s, Hungarian decision makers were naturally selective. There was plenty of opportunity for this, since only one in

every 10 or 15 Hollywood releases could be accommodated in the Hungarian film offer. In relation to the selection process, it is interesting to look at which films were not released in Hungary in the 1970s, and the typical reasons for their rejection.

We will look first at which of the biggest American hits did not make it to Hungary. We can take as our basis those films that earned the most prestigious recognition in America — that is, the winners of the awards presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, more commonly known as the Oscars. With respect to the 1970s, calculating with the delay in their admission to Hungary this means the Academy Award winners between 1966 and 1980.⁷⁷ A total of 46 out of 57 Academy Award-winning films (two of which were shown only on television) were eventually released in Hungary — in other words, 80 percent of the American films made between 1966 and 1980 that were judged to be the best or the most significant were available to Hungarian audiences. The other 11 films included two that Hungarofilm was not allowed to purchase, despite the fact that they had won the award for Best Picture. These two films had been greeted with huge acclaim in North America: *Patton* had picked up seven Oscars in 1970, while *The Deer Hunter* had won five in 1979. Both films dealt with 20th-century wars that had been decisive for America, although both in a way that was deemed unacceptable in the eyes of Hungarian cultural policy. The biographical film about George S. Patton, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, was in fact assessed by the Film Admissions Committee. According to the committee, “the film presents the ‘ideal’ soldier in the

⁷⁷ Between 1966 and 1980, 57 winning films in six categories featured on the combined list of winning films in the most important categories (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Screenplay, and Best Cinematography).

oppressive American military, who is even willing to sacrifice his career for the star-spangled banner, [thus] cunningly, deceptively, and effectively popularising the current views of the Pentagon.”⁷⁸ It was only natural that a film about a high-ranking American officer — who was renowned for his anti-Soviet opinions to boot — which reinforced the notions of American glory and honour, and which was thus intended primarily for American audiences, would not be found acceptable by the Film Admissions Committee. The committee did not even request a copy of *The Deer Hunter*: Marxist critics considered Michael Cimino’s film — which had also prompted fierce debates in the West — as reactionary, mentioning it only in connection with the West Berlin Film Festival, where delegations from the Socialist countries had even walked out of the festival in protest at the film.⁷⁹ In the literary journal *Alföld*, József Veress analysed the political errors contained in the film, which he labelled as “an outrageous lie” for portraying the North Vietnamese as behaving cruelly and treating their prisoners inhumanely. He also criticised the fact that all three protagonists were workers who had no interest in politics, who accepted their call-up without any kind of principle or conviction, treating it as nothing more than an “adventure”, and who were unaware of the inevitable ideological consequences of a situation of this kind. Veress gave a concrete example of this: “According to the film, the enemy camp is manned exclusively by stupid, evil, cruel, perverted creatures who act on impulse. Cimino’s Vietnamese soldiers are humans with

⁷⁸ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 152–153.

⁷⁹ Péter Rényi: Érzéstelenítés nélkül [Without anaesthesia]. *Népszabadság*, 15th May 1979.

devil's horns." Above all, the director confuses the identities of aggressor and victim in the given conflict.⁸⁰

With four Oscars, albeit in more minor categories,⁸¹ one of the biggest American box-office hits in the 1970s was *All the President's Men*, which tells the story of the journalists who uncovered the details of the Watergate scandal. Although the bugging scandal surrounding President Nixon was widely discussed in the media even in Socialist countries, the film was deemed to reinforce rather than weaken confidence in the system. "Robert Redford and company aimed to convince the world's cinema goers of exactly the same thing that the book by the 'Woodstein' duo⁸² hoped to make the narrower circle of the politically literate believe: it can happen, so the argument goes, that fame goes to the head of the president of the United States and that he and his accomplices stoop to unlawful behaviour. But then comes the trusty overseer, in the form of the free and liberal press."⁸³ In other words, like *Patton* — although in a different way — the film was regarded as American propaganda.

No such profound ideological questions emerged in relation to the remaining nine Oscar-winning movies. In the case of Stanley Kubrick's films, the fact that the director demanded a percentage of the turnover while Hungarofilm insisted on fixed-price contracts represented a significant obstacle. This was a deciding factor in the case of *Barry Lyndon*, too. Socialist film admissions policy showed no great enthusiasm for romantic dramas: not only did *The*

⁸⁰ József Veress: A szarvasvadász [The Deerhunter]. *Alföld*, 1979/10, 94–96.

⁸¹ Best Supporting Actor; Best Adapted Screenplay; Best Art Direction – Set Decoration; Best Sound.

⁸² The journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who are portrayed in the film as the *Washington Post* journalists who uncover the details of the scandal.

⁸³ Tamás Heltai: „Woodstein” lesújt [“Woodstein” strikes]. *Magyarország*, 1976/17, 12.

Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, a film about a teacher living in the dreamworld of the 1930s, *Ryan's Daughter*, about an Irish woman in love with a British officer at the time of the 1916 Easter Rising, and *Women in Love*, the story of two friends who fall in love with two sisters, fail to reach Hungarian cinemas, but the same fate also befell *Love Story*, a blockbuster in the West during this decade, which otherwise garnered an Oscar only for its score. The film was assessed by the Film Admissions Committee in July 1971, but committee members failed to reach a unanimous verdict. The majority (including even the representative of the Department of Literature in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs) did not consider it to be harmful, nor was it deemed to be any worse than countless other novels or plays that had long been approved, published, and performed on stage. Two members of the committee argued expressly that “we also have a duty to inform, which means giving Hungarian cinema goers an opportunity to see films that have attracted worldwide acclaim.” There were even members of the committee who argued in favour of the film in the expectation of high revenues — that is, from a financial perspective. Nevertheless, the purchase did not go ahead, purportedly in the interests of protecting public taste.⁸⁴ Even so, the film was discussed at length in the Hungarian press, along with the book published under the same title, which had apparently been read by a quarter of all Americans.⁸⁵ The film was in fact released in Romania in as early as 1972 and was screened to packed cinemas in Bucharest.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Mihály Gál: Op. cit.

⁸⁵ Amerikai bestseller: tiszta romantika a „hallgató többségnek” [American bestseller: The “silent majority” is pure romance]. *Magyarország*, 1971/9, 14.

⁸⁶ András Gáll: Love Story, avagy a neoszentimentalizmus dicsérete [Love Story, or in praise of neo-sentimentalism]. *Előre*, 13th January 1972.

The popular 1973 film *Save the Tiger*, starring Jack Lemmon, was not released in Hungarian cinemas presumably because of its more risqué scenes (the protagonist picks up a prostitute in his car and provides strippers for his friends), although the fundamental moral conflict — the salvaging of a capitalist company by means of insurance fraud — would have been in line with Hungary's film admissions policy. The Film Admissions Committee also balked at accepting other Western-made films that portrayed prostitution: in 1970, one member of the committee rejected the western musical *Paint Your Wagon* on the grounds that it was “the apotheosis of prostitution and bigamy”, and although the film was approved for admission by the majority, the purchase did not take place. Hollywood representations of sensuality were perfunctorily branded as “sex films based on public demand”. This was true in the case of *You're a Big Boy Now*, which had been assessed and rejected in 1968 but which was eventually released in 1986.⁸⁷ It was only in the 1980s that Woody Allen's risqué comedy *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask* was released in Hungarian cinemas.⁸⁸ It may also have been for reasons of taste that the detective comedy *The Hospital* was ultimately not admitted, although, in reality, when it came to this genre there was a considerable selection of both American and European films from which to choose. In the other rejected comedy, *The Producers*, made in the late 1960s, a theatre producer and his accountant come up with a plan to make money by staging the worst possible play. Not only do they opt for a Nazi musical (“Springtime for Hitler”), but they also invite a homosexual director who is entirely lacking in

⁸⁷ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 82.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 407–408.

taste. However, the portrayal of homosexuality was at least as thorny a question as the depiction of prostitution: even *Midnight Cowboy*, which had otherwise been greeted with huge acclaim in the West, was released in Hungary only after a delay of many years — not until 1975 — and only in the Film Museum, where it nevertheless attracted almost a full house (85% capacity).⁸⁹

Although the film authorities tried to acquire blockbusters for the sole purpose of making a profit, the revenue sometimes failed to materialise, or materialised only with many years' delay. Among the big hits of the 1970s, *The Godfather* parts 1 and 2, like *Love Story*, only reached Hungarian cinemas after a decade. One of the biggest sensations of 1968, *Planet of the Apes*, found its way onto the programme of the Film Museum only in 1977, by which time part 5 had already long been available to audiences throughout the world, and it was only screened in cinemas in the rest of the country in 1981. Even with this delayed release date, it was hugely successful: it brought in 135,000 spectators while showing exclusively at the Film Museum, and around 1.5 million after 1981.

As we have seen, large numbers of both detective and action films were purchased in Hungary, although the Film Admissions Committee did try to filter out the bloodiest and most violent, such as the crime thriller *Bullitt*, for example.⁹⁰ In the case of *Joe*, although the film was essentially ideologically acceptable, showing as it did a drift towards fascism among the American petty bourgeoisie, the massacre of an entire hippie commune was deemed to be too melodramatic and brutal.⁹¹ Devotees of “progressive

⁸⁹ Ibid., 165–167.

⁹⁰ The film was broadcast by Hungarian Television in February 1987. From the programme of Hungarian Television. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1987/5, 21.

⁹¹ Ibid., 206–207.

westerns”⁹² had to fight for years for the screening of *Soldier Blue*, because the film contained two massacre scenes. This mindset naturally meant that horror films were also barred: although two Hitchcock films did pass the selection process, and one of two films classified as sci-fi–horror movies made it into the cinemas⁹³, even Hitchcock, acknowledged as the classic in this genre, was regarded by many as unacceptable in terms of Socialist cinema. In the 1970s, the Film Admissions Committee even requested a copy of a zombie film, although there was no real chance of it being approved. According to the committee’s minutes, *The Night of the Living Dead* “was regarded by the Film Admissions Committee as repulsive, boring, and ridiculous.”⁹⁴

Few films were rejected exclusively on ideological grounds — *Patton* and *The Deer Hunter* were exceptions in this respect. Of course, most films that were problematic from an ideological/political point of view never even reached the point at which the Film Admissions Committee was required to express an opinion. During the sessions of the Committee in the 1970s, only one other film was labelled “reactionary”: the drama *Wild in the Streets* was referred to as a “rarely encountered, misrepresentative, profoundly reactionary film” that distorted the catchwords of the American youth movement.⁹⁵ The problem of ideological confusion was often brought up. In relation to *MASH*, for example, which was eventually released, it was unclear whether the film was a criticism of the war waged by America or a glorification of the American spirit of survival on the front lines. In the

⁹² Gyertyán *A két katonáról*: Gyertyán Ervin: *Mackenna aranya* [Gyertyán on *Soldier Blue*: Ervin Gyertyán: *Mackenna’s Gold*. *Népszabadság*, 20th August 1972.

⁹³ *Phase IV*, with its mutant ant attack, did, while *Killer Bees* did not.

⁹⁴ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 197.

⁹⁵ The film is a political drama, in which the under-30s take control in the United States. Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 134.

words of the censors: “At the end of the day, it is not self-criticism but the self-justification of the American way of life, and the shoring up of an illusion.”⁹⁶ In connection with American war films, one frequently expressed opinion was that criticism of the military in the USA was typically an expression of general civilian anti-war sentiment: this became problematic in relation to the Second World War especially, when the United States had fought on the same side as the Soviet Union and attitudes to war had been informed by the common anti-Fascist struggle. The Film Admissions Committee rejected *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*, for example, for presenting the liberation of Italy from a completely absurd point of view, with the locals attempting to safeguard nothing more than their hidden stocks of wine.

Delayed films and delayed genres

There was one statistical indicator that set American films apart from other film imports: they were typically older than their Western Europe and Socialist counterparts. In the 1970s, American films were screened in Hungarian cinemas with an average of three to five years’ delay:⁹⁷ this indicator was lower in just one year, 1974, when the delay was 2.4 years. This did not, of course, mean that Hungarian cinemas screened American films only with a significant delay, although the involvement of a large number of participants in the complex film admissions procedure inevitably resulted in a protracted process (films were accepted by the Film Admissions Committee, the Film Directorate then requested

⁹⁶ Ibid., 194.

⁹⁷ I have omitted from this calculation the re-released films made before 1945, and the individual parts of the Chaplin series that ran between 1973 and 1977.

Hungarofilm to purchase the films, after which the Pannónia Film Studio was commissioned to undertake the dubbing, and eventually it was the task of the Film Directorate to decide when to schedule the screenings).

Three main factors can be identified in this respect. Firstly, the high price of American films meant that they were more difficult to import. Since the Hungarian economy and foreign trade sector — a sphere in which Hungarofilm operated as a specialist export–import company — were extremely sensitive to foreign currency, a delay of a few years in the case of imports that demanded substantial expenditure in dollars played an important role in making it possible to obtain the films more cheaply. In the case of certain films, purchase was delayed by the fact that the owner of the rights — or possibly even the U.S. Department of State — was unwilling to allow the films to be screened in Socialist countries. The premiere of the Chaplin biography, for example, was delayed until the 1970s for precisely this reason. Finally, the deliberations of the Hungarian cultural authorities also contributed to the hesitancy: this may have been the case in relation to certain films that the Film Admissions Committee admitted only after reconsideration, or in the case of entire genres. This explains why films that were more than five, or sometimes even 10 years old were regularly released in Hungary. In the 1970s, a total of 51 American films fell into this category — that is, more than a quarter of all the American films released.

Genres subject to delayed release were largely westerns, although horror films (thrillers) and science fiction might also be included here. The typical hostility towards westerns, which was by no means a general phenomenon in Soviet bloc countries, eventually eased by the end of the 1960s, as we have seen. Following the three films shown in 1969–1970, a further 16 American and a few spaghetti westerns were

released between 1971 and 1980. Half of these made it to Hungary by way of “clearing the backlog”. *The Magnificent Seven* — a film that Soviet audiences had been able to enjoy back in 1964 — was released in Hungarian cinemas in 1971, for example, and two further old films were also dusted off (*The Big Country* and *3:10 to Yuma*). The biggest delay — a total of 17 years — was seen in the case of the American national myth *How the West Was Won*. It was, of course, greeted by the critics with reservations: according to *Magyar Nemzet*, the romantic portrayal of the period glorified in the film, and attempts to revive its ideology, had long since had their day.⁹⁸ In fact, drawing comparisons with Árpád Feszty’s painting celebrating the Hungarian Conquest, *Népszabadság* dismissed the film as a contrived “American Feszty panorama” that was not only kitsch but also historically inaccurate: it suggested that America, “this country almost the size of a continent, is the most beautiful and noble of all continents and countries, while its social system is the dream of its Puritan founders come true.”⁹⁹

After the first releases of films in this genre, debates were immediately launched as to whether westerns were desirable viewing for the Hungarian public. Opposition to them was part of a wider debate about popular versus high culture. Westerns were essentially regarded as trashy, even encouraging people’s baser instincts and conditioning them to violence. Besides, they were idiotic — indeed kitsch — stories that “treated adults [...] as children, constantly scaring them with ghosts and baddies, savage Indians, and

⁹⁸ A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 12th July 1979.

⁹⁹ László Zöldi: A vadnyugat hőskora [The heroic age of the Wild West]. *Népszabadság*, 12th July 1979.

even more savage whites.”¹⁰⁰ Even those who championed this essentially American genre were not primarily in favour of the average western, although they did emphasise that such films essentially resembled folk tales, in so far as good fights evil and people are encouraged to side with justice. Others saw discrimination against westerns as entirely devoid of meaning: they were neither worse nor more harmful than the violent costume adventures with their popular “superheroes” that had been shown since as early as the 1950s. At the same time, for others “westerns have a democratic, progressive tendency to strive for popular justice, as well as a racist, reactionary tendency that preaches the law of the strongest and even flirts with fascism.”¹⁰¹

In the mid-1970s, a few “progressive westerns” were released, primarily *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue*, although *Buck and the Preacher* might perhaps also be included here. The first two were regarded as anti-westerns, as they presented the perspective of the Indians, while the last film had a Black protagonist. However, there was no consensus among critics that the makers of any of these films had been trying to convey a more profound truth in place of — or alongside — adventure,¹⁰² or that a Black hero of the Wild West represented some kind of unequivocally positive breakthrough.¹⁰³ Although, in the case of *Soldier Blue*, many

¹⁰⁰ V. A.: Mackenna aranya [Mackenna’s Gold]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 10th August 1972.

¹⁰¹ Ervin Gyertyán: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 25th March 1971.

¹⁰² “Instead of the promised ‘reality’, however, we have simply more or less well made adventures. Every one of the existing Indian stories to date is a long-winded summary.” Ilona Gantner: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszava*, 11th October 1973.

¹⁰³ In the words of Ervin Gyertyán: “[It is hard] to decide whether, from the perspective of the self-aware emancipation of today’s American Blacks, the positive fact that they now have their own daredevil gunslingers outweighs the negative fact

felt that the film ripped apart the myth of the Wild West by depicting the eradication of the Native Indians, according to *Magyar Nemzet* this is only something we choose to read into it: the film itself is a story of revenge and it is never totally clear where justice lies.¹⁰⁴ The second half of the decade saw the return of the traditional western, while thanks to György Szomjas — more than 10 years after the Soviet and Polish versions and the East German Indian films — the first Hungarian “eastern”, *Talpuk alatt füttyül a szél* [The Wind is Whistling under Their Feet] was produced in 1976, followed by *Rosszemberek* [Wrong-doers] in 1979. But while the Soviet, Polish, and East German versions were typically set in the closing stages of the Russian Civil War or the Second World War, Szomjas placed his heroic social outcasts in an earlier historical period better fitted to the setting of the American western — the period that followed Hungary’s defeat in the War of Independence against the Habsburgs, before the Compromise with Austria.¹⁰⁵

Science fiction also had an inexplicably difficult path into Hungary, even though sci-fi novels had been published since the second half of the 1950s, while in the 1960s the controversial West German series *Space Patrol Orion* had even been broadcast on television.¹⁰⁶ Besides, it was

that the tragedy of their history is distorted to fit the conventions of a borrowed mythology developed for others.” Ervin Gyertyán: Buck és a prédikátor [Buck and the Preacher]. *Népszabadság*, 9th August 1973.

¹⁰⁴ A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 8th July 1976.

¹⁰⁵ Györgyi Balogh, Vera Gyürey, and Pál Honffy: *A magyar játékfilm története a kezdetektől 1990-ig* [The history of Hungarian feature films from the beginnings to 1990]. Műszaki Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2004, 201.

¹⁰⁶ The West German series was harshly criticised by many: “It contains an unrestrained number of fascist-like motifs, and the sense of menace it arouses in the spectator does not have a sufficiently sound objective”, wrote László Zay. Another cultural journalist writing for the paper also described the science-fiction series as keeping alive West German militarism (the actors appear in uniform, carrying weapons) and portraying the Communists as a threat (the toad attack being seen as

perfectly possible to put forward Marxist arguments in favour of the genre, based on the claim that it represented and popularised a scientific world view. Efforts were also made in the Hungarian film industry to create the country's own science fiction. In 1969 — three years before Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* — MAFILM attempted to get a sci-fi film included in the planning, and even considered announcing a script-writing competition for a sum of 50,000 forints.¹⁰⁷ Despite obtaining the agreement of the umbrella state body responsible for coordinating film production and distribution companies, the Filmtröszt (Film Trust),¹⁰⁸ which was established during the restructuring that followed the 1968 reforms, more than a decade passed before the first Hungarian sci-fi film was made. When *Transzport* was finally made in 1981, rather than being taken into the future, spectators were instead transported back to the past, to the time of the First World War. Although Hungarian critics were not overly impressed,¹⁰⁹ the film won international acclaim at the Science Fiction Film Festival in Trieste.¹¹⁰

a symbol of the Communist menace). László Zay: Mozi és házipatika [Cinema and the medicine cabinet]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 11th May 1969; Anna Vilcsek: Rút új világ [Ugly new world]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 18th February 1968.

¹⁰⁷ Transcript of Miklós Révész for István Kondor (13th June 1969). MNL (Hungarian National Archives) OL XIX-I-22, box 123.

¹⁰⁸ Following the reforms, the Film Directorate ceased to exist and responsibility for matters of political principle was taken over by the Ministry's Department of Film Art. The Film Directorate was re-established during the restructuring of the Ministry in 1974 and the establishment of the independent Ministry of Education and Culture. Ágnes Keresztényi: A magyar filmgyártás strukturális változásai, 1968–1975 [Changes in the structure of Hungarian filmmaking, 1968–1975]. In: Máté Fábán and Ignác Romsics (ed.): *RMJ60. Tanulmányok a hatvanéves Rainer M. János tiszteletére* [RMJ60. Studies in honour of M. János Rainer on the occasion of his 60th birthday]. Líceum Kiadó, Eger, 2017, 104–107.

¹⁰⁹ László Fábán: Filmlevél. Önellátás [Film letter. Self-sufficiency]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 29th August 1981, 4.

¹¹⁰ The Silver Asteroid for best male actor was awarded to Pál Hetényi. (bé): Ezüst Aszteroid Hetényi Pálnak [Silver Asteroid for Pál Hetényi]. *Esti Hírlap*, 28th July 1981.

Indeed, one critic found fault precisely with the Hollywood-style opening scene: “The film begins with some tense shots in the menacing style of the American adventure film: within minutes of leaving the secret meeting-place, the tight-lipped agent gets a neat hole between the eyes, exactly what you might expect to see in an American adventure film.”¹¹¹

In relation to science-fiction films, a recurring debate emerged in the Film Admissions Committee in the 1970s about whether the ideological content of these films was sufficiently progressive, or whether it was merely their technical advances that made them modern. In 1972, for example, the film *Forbidden Planet*, made back in 1957, was rejected as hackneyed trash mired in the style of the 1930s.¹¹² *Fantastic Voyage* was shown after a delay of 16 years (in 1982, exclusively in the Film Museum), and Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* had to wait 14 years, while the director’s other cult sci-fi movie, *A Clockwork Orange*, was not shown in cinemas until after 1989. However, there was a science-fiction lobby even within the Film Admissions Committee, headed by the science-fiction writer and Kossuth Prize winner Péter Kuczka, who was totally at home in the language of “Socialist advocacy”. He called attention to the fact that the works of Asimov, on whose novel *Fantastic Voyage* was based, had even been published in the Soviet Union, and (in the case of *The Clockwork Orange*) he quoted from a positive Soviet review that had also been published in Hungarian in the magazine *Galaktika*.¹¹³ During the 1970s, three important American science-fiction films easily made it into Hungarian cinemas: *The Andromeda Strain*, which was screened in

¹¹¹ Péter Szentmihályi Szabó: Rejtélyes példázat. Szurdi András: Transzport [Enigmatic allegory. András Szurdi: Transport]. *Filmkultúra*, 1981/4, 23.

¹¹² Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 213–214.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 137, 336–337.

1973; *Star Wars*, which was released in 1979 and which was received by contemporary critics as merely a naïve but nevertheless touching story set in space;¹¹⁴ and Spielberg's epic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the royalties for which were quickly bargained down by a third.¹¹⁵ Indeed, critics considered it as entirely positive — primarily in relation to *Star Wars* — that in place of kitsch falsehoods Hollywood now wanted nothing more than to provide — honest — entertainment through stories of the fantastic.¹¹⁶

Horror films were accepted with a similar delay, and likewise only grudgingly. In the early 1970s, the Film Admissions Committee considered that the time had come to experiment with an introduction to the world of Alfred Hitchcock. The majority view within the committee was that the British film director had become the classic in this genre: *Psycho*, however, was by now over 10 years old, while Hungarian audiences were already familiar with the director's work to some extent¹¹⁷ — partly through the press and partly from television programmes about him.¹¹⁸ Despite the enormous interest generated by the release of *Psycho* in March 1972, opponents of the genre, who continued to regard it as undesirable, went on the counterattack, raising objections to the toleration of “sadism”. “In horror films, there is neither humanism nor solidarity, nor any other

¹¹⁴ In the words of László Zöldi: “American filmmakers, without scruple and with no coherence, inserted into their 20-somethingth-century space adventures everything that any of us who had story-loving parents or teachers were familiar with from childhood.” László Zöldi: Csillagok háborúja [*Star Wars*]. *Népszabadság*, 15th August 1979.

¹¹⁵ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 369–371.

¹¹⁶ György Báron: Op. cit., 561.

¹¹⁷ Mihály Gál: Op. cit., 142.

¹¹⁸ Hungarian Television broadcast Hitchcock's *Notorious* at Christmas in 1968. Rádió, televízió, múzeum [Radio, television, museum]. *Népszava*, 23rd December 1968.

concept that regulates human coexistence (life in our world). But without adherence to our moral standards, it is scarcely possible to pursue an aesthetically demanding and responsible cultural policy”, was the anonymous observation made in the article “What kind of films are they?” published in the daily newspaper *Népszava*.¹¹⁹ The film was withdrawn from cinemas after three weeks due to protests by teachers, although despite its 18 certificate it had attracted 334,000 spectators, with an attendance capacity of 74.3%. In other words, adult audiences would happily have continued to be terrified in their cinema seats, but the opportunity was denied them until the end of the decade. In 1979, however, a later film by Hitchcock, *Family Plot*, was admitted with no qualms. The following year also saw the release of *Phase IV*, a science-fiction/horror film in which humans are attacked by mutant ants. It was directed by Saul Bass, who had worked with Hitchcock and Kubrick on several films — including *Psycho*. In 1982, *Psycho* returned to the cinemas and was met with neither organised nor spontaneous protests.

The screening of one of the decade’s two biggest horror film sensations stood very little chance in Socialist Hungary, while the other, like *Psycho*, was also delayed for 10 years. The fact that there was detailed public discussion about the first of these films, the 1973 blockbuster *The Exorcist*, says a great deal about how the Hungarian public sphere operated. Lajos Korolovszki, who saw the film in Toronto, Canada, in 1974, reported that many of the predominantly young spectators, who regularly screamed at the more frightening scenes, actually walked out of the auditorium, and that “anyone who went into one of the cloakrooms at the end

¹¹⁹ Milyen filmek ezek? [What kind of films are they?] *Népszava*, 25th March 1972.

of the film, or before the next screening, would shudder at the pools of vomit waiting to be cleaned away.” At the same time, the critic emphasised how, despite the intensity of its impact, in the case of a “professional, high-class science-fiction film” the objective of the Americans — an objective not disputed but rather supported by the Jesuits — “was obviously not [entertainment] but the logical conclusion that if there is a devil, then there must also be a God.” Rather than attempting to further this objective through a humanist message, such films “bring to the surface [...] superstitious fears that lurk in the depths, and the tendency towards hysteria that is latent deep within the soul.”¹²⁰ In light of this, it is scarcely surprising that the film was not shown in Hungary until January 1989.

In 1975, Spielberg’s film *Jaws* had terrified audiences around the world, although Tamás Ungvári, one of the most important mediators of Anglo-Saxon culture at the time, dismissed its nomination for an Academy Award as a bad joke: “I find it incomprehensible why and how this perfect replica papier-mâché shark, with all that fake blood pouring from its mouth, has attracted cinema goers in their droves.”¹²¹ Looking back from the mid-1980s, Gyula Hegyi, who was in Poland on a scholarship from the Society of Authors, remembered how, at the time, Polish film admissions policy was “remarkably good”, while its Hungarian counterpart was “atrociously bad”, resulting in the fact that he was able to see *Jaws* in the cinema and even had the benefit of watching it with subtitles. “I enjoyed the story about these deadly jaws initially”, he added, “and my appreciation for it was only slightly diminished later, when visitors from Budapest

¹²⁰ Ibid., 317.

¹²¹ Tamás Ungvári: Oscar – közelről [Oscar – On close inspection]. Filmlevél Hollywoodból [A film letter from Hollywood]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 13th April 1976.

were all curious to see the film (and its sequel, *Jaws 2*), which meant I had the chance to watch it several times, from start to finish, and partly even translated the two-part horror fest.”¹²²

Thus, in the 1970s, the selection of American films did indeed expand, although it shifted towards commercial productions. Not only were Hungarian cinemas screening action and crime films of a kind that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, but they were also releasing genres of film that the Hungarian Film Admissions Committee had long had reservations about. The strengthening of American film imports — chiefly in the second half of the decade — was by no means a phenomenon unique to Hungary: it could also be observed in other countries in the Soviet bloc, including East Germany, which was more isolated than Hungary.¹²³

However, determined efforts were still made to ensure that at least half the American films released were “politically engaged”, and that art fulfilled a social-critical function — or could at least be included in this sphere. In this context, we might bring up a good number of Hollywood films from this decade — whether classed as high or popular culture — that were not released in Hungary despite their fame and global success.

¹²² Gyula Hegyi: A Cápa-Állkapcsok [Jaws’ jaws]. *Magyar Hírlap*, 20th June 1985.

¹²³ Gerd Horten: The Impact of Hollywood Film Imports in East Germany and the Cultural Surrender of the GDR Film Control in the 1970s and 1980s. *German History*, 2016/1, 70–87. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghvo67> (Downloaded: 08/04/2022.)



Olimpia cinema advertising the film *Once Upon a Time in the West*.
Source: Filmévkönyv 1979 [Film Yearbook, 1979], 218.

5. ON THE BRINK OF COLLAPSE – AMERICAN FILMS IN HUNGARIAN CINEMAS IN THE 1980s

By around 1980, the Hungarian film and cinema industry was already well integrated within the international film industry. At the time of the New Wave, in the mid-1960s, Hungarian films had won international recognition, and although they reached the West only sporadically via commercial channels, they were permanent – and often prize-winning – guests at countless film festivals. According to a memorandum compiled in 1980 by the Film Directorate, in the preceding year Hungarian film weeks and film days had been organised in 49 cities in 23 countries on a total of 55 occasions, during which a total of 342 Hungarian feature films and 144 short films had been screened. As evidenced by the extensive list, Hungarian films were shown at a total of 66 foreign film festivals, a substantial number of which were devoted to a more niche trend (documentaries, short films, animated films, children's films, science and technology films, etc.). Five of these festivals were organised in the United States – in Los Angeles, a children's film festival in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago – in cooperation with Hungary. In 1982, a total of 60 foreign Hungarian film-related events and 84 film festivals were reported.¹ As regards the presence of foreign films in Hungary, however, the doors had been open

¹ Report on the Film Directorate's use of foreign exchange reserves in 1979 outside commodities trade (14th February 1980). MNL OL XIX-1-22, box 222; Film Directorate memorandum (20th April 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 234.

to films from the West — as we have seen above — basically from 1954 and the beginnings of the de-Stalinisation process. This did not, of course, translate into major film festivals: in the Soviet bloc, such festivals were confined primarily to Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. The four important film-related events in Hungary in the 1980s — Hungarian Film Week, the Short Film Festival in Miskolc, the Television Festival in Veszprém, and the Children's Film Festival in Kőszeg — attracted international film experts rather than world films.² However, a considerable number of films were reaching Hungary from the West via commercial channels, along with opportunities for film days and film weeks in the framework of bilateral cultural agreements. And while there were indeed masterpieces and blockbusters that were never admitted, or that arrived with delay, Hungarian audiences were still given a relatively broad exposure to global film production — although of course filtered according to the viewpoints of cultural policy. Hungarian cinema goers still had a relatively incomplete picture of American filmmaking in the 1960s, although in the 1970s almost 20 American films on average were released in Hungarian cinemas — and even more by the end of the decade.

Compared to 1979–1980, the number of American films did not rise during the following decade, nor indeed could it have risen without a loss of prestige on the part of Socialist cultural policy. At least until 1987. In this section, we will look at the changes that took place in the film and cinema industry; its economic, social and technical background in the 1980s; the new trends that emerged in the course of the decade; and the external circumstances that could and did

² Film Directorate memorandum (3rd January 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 229.

have an impact on imports from Hollywood. But when were the first signs of the change in political system that took place at the end of the decade observed in terms of film admissions and film distribution?

Cultural policy and the economic environment

In the 1980s, the cultural policy environment no longer played a decisive role in terms of American film admissions. In fact, its impact was not even felt at the time of the Vietnam War, when, despite the pronouncements, and even protests, against America and the expressions of solidarity with Vietnam, imports of Hollywood films not only did not decrease but in fact rose significantly. In the first half of the 1980s — especially in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — relations between the two superpowers were marked by conflict, and a kind of “stand-by” state was reached in terms of the *détente*.³ A striking illustration of this were the two Olympic boycotts in 1980 and 1984, and, in the world of international filmmaking, the withdrawal of Socialist delegates from the West Berlin Film Festival in 1980 in protest at the screening of *The Deerhunter*. Soviet–American cultural relations were generally in decline, although at the same time the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, which was becoming increasingly deeply engaged economically with the West, took steps to safeguard any tendencies towards *détente* during this period.⁴

³ Csaba Békés: *Enyhülés és emancipáció* [Détente and emancipation]. Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2019, 300–307.

⁴ György Földes: *Kádár János külpolitikája és nemzetközi tárgyalásai I* [The foreign policy and international negotiations of János Kádár, I]. Napvilág Kiadó, Budapest, 2015, 194–411.

Although American film imports somewhat declined during these years, this was rather due to economic reasons. This is suggested by the fact that events devoted to American films were organised on two occasions in Hungary during this period, in 1981 and again in 1984, even if they were not widely advertised, in keeping with the accepted practice of the Hungarian cultural and press authorities.⁵ Since the supply of Hollywood films was relatively abundant, the programme for the American film festival in 1981 was put together from films by Sidney Lumet — including three that had not previously been released in Hungary⁶ — and the American director was even invited to attend.⁷ On this occasion, the director did not visit only Hungary: festivals dedicated to Lumet's films were also held in Belgrade and Warsaw. Emphasising the fact that Lumet was not from Hollywood but rather lived and worked in New York, his films were not screened before large audiences but were rather presented in the form of an exclusive, professional event in the Toldi cinema.⁸

In 1984, however, "The World of American Cinema" exhibition was organised to coincide with American Film Week, which, according to one critic writing for the literary journal *Élet és Irodalom*, presented Hollywood's better side through its interactive displays: "The exhibition is fascinating and tasteful the further one goes. The displays present a Hollywood whose heroes are now role models

⁵ Theodora K. Dragostinova: *The Cold War from the Margins. A Small Socialist State on the Global Cultural Scene*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2021, 97–98.

⁶ *Equus, Dog Day Afternoon, Prince of the City*.

⁷ Memorandum of József Veress (15th August 1981). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 225.

⁸ Tamás Barabás: Vendégünk: Sidney Lumet [Our guest: Sidney Lumet]. *Esti Hírlap*, 19th October 1981.

rather than deserving of contempt.”⁹ Films were screened at these festivals that Hungarian audiences had not yet had an opportunity to see, or that were familiar from festival reviews at most, including the Oscar-winning *Terms of Endearment*, Woody Allen’s *Zelig*, as well as *Iceman* and *The Big Chill*.

Out of the cultural policy and economic systems, it was the cultural policy environment that changed less in the 1980s — or at least such was the intention. In other words, the economic situation in the 1980s, and the search for direction in terms of economic policy, had a more profound impact on culture now than it had done in the preceding decades. Already in the late 1950s, Minister of Culture György Aczél had established the guiding principles of cultural policy, which had periodically been reinforced — in such a way as to disguise any changes and shifts in emphasis. In documents and speeches, it was stressed that the enduring principles had to be permanently adjusted to the changing circumstances. New guiding principles emerged, and new concepts and priorities appeared — including the concept of “popular education” (“közművelődés”) in the 1970s — while in practice, from the second half of the 1950s up until the late 1980s, many cultural trends and genres originating from abroad, and many Western film directors, “drifted” from the category of the forbidden into the category of what was tolerated and supported. All these tendencies were experienced in relation to film admissions policy, too, while at the same time Western filmmaking was also undergoing changes of its own. What had been conceivable in the 1960s and 1970s in the confines of film festivals organised in the framework of the Film Museum or bilateral cultural work plans — such as the films of Bergman or Fassbinder, for example — gained admission

⁹ László Zöldi: Egy kis borzongás [A little chill]. *Élet és Irodalom*, 1984/26, 13.

to the nationwide cinema network just a decade later. What had been offered primarily from Italian directors in the 1950s and 1960s — that is, elements of realistic representation — was also being generated by Hollywood, in Hollywood style, from the 1970s.

The biggest dilemma facing the leaders of the Party in the 1980s was how to maintain the confidence and loyalty of filmmakers. The withdrawal of younger generations, their more critical position — if not opposition — towards the Party and the authorities, and their yearning for a relaxation of ideological constraints were apparent in all creative settings, from editorial offices through theatres and film studios to the fine arts. Marxism-Leninism, as a concept that was able, and destined, to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the world — including the world of artistic creation¹⁰ — was faltering, having already surrendered its monopoly during the preceding decades. However, it continued to assert a right to hegemony and to the designation of the categories of truth and their fulfilment, albeit through debate. Seeing the signs of crisis in around 1981 as a tendency,¹¹ the Party leadership in the cultural sector and the public sphere found no other solution to the challenges created by the changes than a firmer stance from 1982–1983 for the next five years or so.¹² This was not, however, the general direction adopted by György Aczél,¹³ who, as well as arguing for increased

¹⁰ Péter György: *A hatalom képzelete. Állami kultúra és művészet 1957 és 1980 között* [The image of power. State culture and art between 1957 and 1980]. Magvető Kiadó, Budapest, 2014, 45–46.

¹¹ Zoltán Imre and Orsolya Ring (eds.): Op. cit., 501.

¹² Péter Agárdi: Közelítések a Kádár-korszak művelődéspolitikájához [Approaches to the cultural policy of the Kádár era]. *Eszmélet*, 1993/20. Source: https://www.eszmelet.hu/agardi_peter-kozelitesek-a-kadar-korszak-muvelodespolitikaja/ (Downloaded: 24/03/2022.)

¹³ Sándor Révész: Op.cit., 286–292. “The difficult situation is no argument for withdrawal from democratism, for confusion and restriction, but on the contrary,

“democratism” in times of hardship, was also capable of speaking in the voice of the system: after acting again as secretary of the Central Committee with responsibility for cultural affairs between 1982 and 1985, he was marginalised in the middle of the decade. No similar politician symbolising the entirety of the system’s cultural policy emerged: Ernő Lakatos, head of Agitation and Propaganda, represented the Party line at the head of public policy, while Central Committee secretary János Berecz did so in the context of ideological control.

These debates primarily influenced the activities of Hungarian film directors, while it was another shift in emphasis in cultural policy — which decades earlier had reinforced the incipient recognition, and indeed the necessity and utility, of the right to entertainment — that had a bigger impact on film imports. Among the many official documents, one that stands out in particular in this decade is the declaration published by the Cultural Policy Working Group of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party in autumn 1984 under the title “On the timely tasks of Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party cultural policy”.¹⁴ The document addressed

we must move forward in the field of democratism.” This was the statement made by György Aczél at the cultural policy conference organised in 1983. György Aczél: Tegnap – ma – holnap [Yesterday – today – tomorrow]. In: István Tóth (ed.): *Művelődéspolitikánk 25 éve. Művelődéspolitikai tanácskozás, Budapest, 1983. december 15–16* [Twenty-five years of cultural policy in Hungary. Conference on cultural policy, Budapest, 15th–16th December 1983]. Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest, 1984, 97–98.

¹⁴ Az MSZMP művészetpolitikájának időszerű kérdései [The timely tasks of Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party cultural policy]. (Standpoint adopted by the Cultural Policy Working Group of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party.) *Társadalmi Szemle*, 1984/10, 3–23. According to Gábor Bolvári-Takács, the document has huge conceptual significance, since it tacitly breaks away from the “policy of the three Ts” and blurs the distinction between what art was tolerated and what was supported in favour of representing a humanitarian value system. Gábor Bolvári-Takács: A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt művészetpolitikájának fő vonásai, 1956–1989 [The principal features of the cultural policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, 1956–1989]. In: *Útközben*. A

the changes that had taken place in the conditions governing cultural life, including the raising of cultural standards, changes in the media environment (and above all the role of television), the transformation of lifestyles, and the impact of increased leisure time following the general adoption of the five-day working week at the beginning of the decade. It also examined in detail the role of entertainment. “With the change in living standards and living circumstances, there has been a society-wide increase and restructuring of leisure time, and demand for cultural recreation and entertainment has grown. As a consequence, recreation and the provision of entertainment demand a greater emphasis than ever before among the tasks of cultural policy.”¹⁵ The document likewise referred to a dilemma that had remained unresolved for almost three decades — the impossibility of “re-educating” audiences either by force or by the lengthy process of guiding their tastes. In other words, even in the context of Socialism, “petty bourgeois attitudes and poor taste have once again emerged.” If citizens were given the opportunity to make their own choices, in their free time they would not opt for self-development but would merely consume what they wanted. Thus a considerable proportion of people “encounter the arts, too, only in the context of amusement

Neveléstudományi Doktori Program Évkönyvei (3). University of Debrecen, CHERD, Debrecen, 2011, 291–292. One might add that, within the policy of the three Ts, difficulties were encountered in many cases in terms of the strict separation between the supported and the tolerated categories. Limiting ourselves to the world of film: the state — via the appropriate bodies and enterprises — bore the production costs of a light entertainment film just as it did in the case of an artistically distinguished film, just as it made as much for an American action film via Hungarofilm as it did for a work of Italian social criticism. Of course, the political value judgement was apparent in terms of the ticket prices — although as shall see, the total number of screenings nevertheless confirmed the cost-effectiveness perspective.

¹⁵ Az MSZMP művészetpolitikájának időszerű kérdései [The timely tasks of Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party cultural policy]. Op. cit., 7.

and diversion.”¹⁶ Drawing on the practice of earlier decades, however, the Party’s attitude could not be one of prohibition: what remained was a declaration of intent and a promise, which were difficult to quantify and enforce: “The desire for entertainment and diversion is a natural human instinct, and in future we must devote greater attention to satisfying it in a civilised way. [...] Creative workshops and intermediary institutes should fulfil the demand for entertainment to a high standard, since in this way the products of culture will reach the widest possible audience and their impact will be multiplied.”¹⁷ At the same time, the economic environment of the 1980s meant that there was no opportunity for the kind of modest but secure growth that had been seen after 1956, or for a continuous rise in the standard of living. In a situation of increasing hardship, the “liberation” of ways in which people could spend their leisure time — that is, the expansion of opportunities for entertainment and the preservation of its role in improving mood — also gained greater political significance.

One of the most important functions of the growing number of Western, including American, films in Hungarian cinemas since the late 1950s was to cater for this need for recreation. It sprang from a kind of necessity, which was noted, and even given expression, by cultural policy, although neither Hungarian filmmakers, who were producing 20 to 25 films annually, nor Socialist filmmakers who faced similar challenges, were able to meet the demand. From the 1960s, the emphasis in Hungarian filmmaking — even in the wake of international successes — shifted unequivocally towards art films. The main “markets” for such films were international

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

film festivals, where Hungarian aspirations were rewarded by a string of prizes. Ferenc Rofusz's *A légy* [*The Fly*] won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 1980, while the following year István Szabó picked up the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film with *Mephisto*.

This situation, which even prompted regular debates in the press, was basically accepted by the cultural leadership and Hungarian foreign policy: "Hungarian films are, primarily, an essential component of our national culture and thus must above all respond to Hungarian demand, but we must also bear in mind that they are an integral part of international film culture and have an acknowledged place as such", argued the head of the Film Directorate, István B. Szabó, in September 1980. He then added, in the interests of clarity: "The international recognition of Hungarian films is a success for our country's political and cultural policy."¹⁸

Within the profession, crowd-pleasers enjoyed significantly lower prestige than so-called independent films: the majority of films intended as entertainment were made by "second-rate" directors, who were less renowned internationally. The range of films made in the lighter genres and intended primarily for Hungarian audiences — such as crime films and comedies — was extremely limited, nor could demand be met from other countries in the Soviet bloc. Some Hungarian films were based on models borrowed directly from the West, the most well-known examples being the films starring István Bujtor that were made according to the "Flatfoot" recipe. Although Hollywood elements were also apparent in other films, Hollywood could never become a role model for Hungarian filmmakers — for

¹⁸ Memorandum of B. István Szabó (17th September 1980). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 221.

financial and technical reasons, quite apart from ideology. At the same time, film imports from the West also had an impact on filmmaking in Socialist countries, contributing to their “exemption” from the mass production of light entertainment films.¹⁹

At the same time, revenues became an increasingly important consideration, and by the middle of the decade popular films were being made in Hungary and the East, including the Polish *Sexmission*, or the Chinese film *The Undaunted Wu Tang*, which attracted over half a million viewers. Even so, the 17 million in revenues garnered by the latter paled into insignificance alongside the 52 million generated by the American record-holder *Jaws*.²⁰ Imports from the West remained the principal source of cinematic entertainment even in the 1980s and encompassed all kinds of films, both those that counted as high-quality entertainment and those that merely entertained. In this respect, it was Italian films that represented the biggest competition for Hollywood.

At the end of 1984, *Népszabadság* organised a round table on the subject of entertainment, in connection with the stance adopted by the cultural authorities. Although the critics, artists and leading journalists who took part had appreciably different relationships to pure — disinterested — entertainment, in the case of cinema the role within entertainment of films imported from the West was not disputed. László Zappe, cultural correspondent for *Népszabadság*, underlined that the need for imports from the West caused by the neglect of Hungarian-made popular

¹⁹ Memorandum of the Film Directorate on the situation of light entertainment films in Hungarian film production. MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 235.

²⁰ Report on the annual work of the Film Directorate for 1985 (19th December 1985). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 243.

entertainment also represented an ideological challenge: “The output from our relatively modest entertainment industry is insufficient to meet [the demand for entertainment], thus we are compelled to accept massive imports of the products of the capitalist entertainment industry in the West. And this is where the ideological problems arise: these products not only entertain but also instil a world view and a model of behaviour. In the dissemination of fundamental ideals and patterns of behaviour, our modest products are thus expected to compete against the glittering output of the capitalist entertainment sector, which relies on a massive financial base.”²¹ Among the negative considerations, in its self-criticism the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party noted the inadequacy of the filters applied when introducing the products of Western mass culture — including films, of course. “When importing the products of bourgeois ‘mass culture’, there is insufficient critical selection in terms of both the standard of the products and the ideological-political impact of the values they convey. As a consequence, fashionable outputs that disseminate retrograde lifestyles and attitudes, and that are foreign to our ideals and standards of taste, are able to exert a huge influence today in the sphere of entertainment.”²²

The cultural leadership naturally maintained its film admissions selection rights until the end of the 1980s, while the situation in terms of cultural policy did not become any easier at all. In the increasingly difficult economic circumstances, the cultural authorities were obliged to fight even harder for the preservation of their own interests and

²¹ A szórakoztatás kultúrájáról [On the culture of entertainment]. *Népszabadság*, 24th December 1984.

²² Az MSZMP művészetpolitikájának időszerű kérdései [The timely tasks of Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party cultural policy]. Op. cit., 7.

values, and for the obstruction of market logic, even within the government. It was relatively easy to defeat the voices within the cultural sector in debate. Miklós Jancsó's co-author, Gyula Hernádi, who also envisaged culture as goods, used the example of film to illustrate his belief that Tibor Liska-style Socialist entrepreneurship would be possible in the cultural sphere.²³ But regulated, open competition for resources was not particularly appealing to players in the cultural sphere either. Arguments for the application of the "Liska model", meaning an economy based on "public property but personal financial responsibility and entrepreneurial competition guaranteed by permanent bidding", occasionally emerged in relation to the operation of cinemas in the 1980s.²⁴

However, there was no real way to argue with the Ministry of Finance, which represented budgetary rigour. As a result of world economic processes in the 1970s, ticket prices proved impossible to maintain, while the general "price adjustment" in 1979 inevitably affected the prices of these cultural products, too. "In 1970, the state contributed an average of 1.70 forints to the costs of producing a book, while in 1978 it contributed 5.3 forints; in 1971, the state added a subsidy of 3 forints to every cinema ticket and 32 forints to every theatre ticket, and 6 forints to every cinema ticket and 72 forints to every theatre ticket in 1978. This discrepancy cannot be maintained any longer. In the interests of halting the increase in subsidies, the price of cinema and theatre tickets should be raised by an average of 30%, and, with a significant

²³ Gyula Hernádi: Igen. (Áru-e a kultúra?) [Yes. (Is culture a product?)]. *Kritika*, 1981/6, 7–8.

²⁴ See, for example: Éva Kuti and Miklós Marschall: Valódi és áldilemmák a kultúra finanszírozásában [Genuine and false dilemmas in the financing of culture]. *Figyelő*, 1985/6, 91.

distinction in terms of their genre, the price of books should be raised by an average of 7%”, explained Mihály Kornidesz, head of the Central Committee’s Department of Science and Culture.²⁵ However, even this 30% increase did not bring prices any closer to profitability. “Film production in Hungary would be profitable if cinema tickets cost the forint equivalent of what they cost in the West, at between 80 and 100 forints. Which is, of course, unthinkable. Even with the present increase in prices, Hungarian tickets are among the cheapest in the world, but if audiences are able to watch films for way below cost, it is contradictory to expect producers to make a profit.”²⁶

In 1982, the Political Committee introduced the second wave of economic reforms in the cultural sphere, too.²⁷ Both the political decision and the measures that followed it — as in 1968 — reflected the adoption of a defensive position: the changes took place in the interests of fundamentally not changing anything. Demands were made for more rational, or in other words more cost-effective, operation and for the simplification of the centralised procedures and bureaucratic regulations to promote it. State subsidies and deductions remained, while in practice the pressure for economic viability demanded further concessions in terms of quality.

In the case of the cinema-operating companies, for example, from 1983 a fixed subsidy was introduced based on the preceding year’s support. According to the managing

²⁵ sz: Beszélgetés Kornidesz Mihállyal, az MSZMP KB osztályvezetőjével [A conversation with Mihály Kornidesz, head of department in the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party]. *A Jövő Mérnöke*, 1979/38, 4.

²⁶ László Ablonczy: Ne feledkezzünk meg a szellemi energiákról sem... [Let’s not forget about intellectual energy...]. *Filmvilág*, 1979/18, 19.

²⁷ The modernisation of the economic regulatory system governing cultural activities and services. Minutes of the meeting of the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party held on 9th November 1982. MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 5/866. 6. e.

director István B. Szabó, this was necessary because the existing subsidy, which had been linked to the number of spectators, was counterproductive, as it rewarded big audiences: “...paradoxically, it is precisely the commercial ‘blockbusters’ that have received the biggest support.”²⁸ In the wake of the Central Committee resolution, seven independent companies were formed in the film sector, based on the Film Trust, and three were “fed to the lions” in the tougher, revenue-regulating conditions of the “commercial sector”. Although the state continued to underwrite production expenses, state subsidies were frozen at the 1981 level, while expenditures rose significantly. By 1984, the film sector had become a net contributor: the Hungarian film and cinema industry — along with public sculpture that was experiencing a decrease in public commissions — had become the big losers in these reforms in the first half of the 1980s.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, in autumn 1986 the situation and further restructuring of the film industry came up independently — as a problem that needed to be solved — before the Committee for Agitation and Propaganda,³⁰ after which, from the middle of 1987, it was reorganised as a new business system.³¹ Although attempts were made to establish premiums in film production that would reward economic and box-office success, the Hungarian market was restricted in terms of economic operation. The reforms did not affect film admissions and film imports so directly, although films

²⁸ Új utakon a filmforgalmazás [New avenues in film distribution]. *Vas Népe*, 21st November 1982.

²⁹ Report to the Agitation and Propaganda Committee on the modernisation of the economic regulations on cultural and educational activities (March 1986). MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/462. ó. e.

³⁰ The restructuring of the film sector and its economic conditions. (14th October 1986). MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/476. ó. e.

³¹ The film sector’s new business structure. (7th July 1987). MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/490. ó. e.

from the West became even more indispensable for the economic functioning of the cinemas. In this latter field — for example in relation to the scheduling of films — the cinema-operating companies were given slightly more room for manoeuvre.

Financial pressure on the cultural authorities further increased from 1986. The Committee for Agitation and Propaganda clearly stated that: “[profitability] can be achieved only at the cost of considerable cultural decline, or at the cost of the intolerable commercialisation of cultural services.”³² The ministry and department heads did not support cutting back the wide cultural institutional system: they were willing to permit cuts in just one area, and that was the cinema network, where earlier — in the spirit of the cultural revolution — cinemas operating once or twice a week, largely showing 16 mm copies, had opened even in the smallest settlements. These cinemas could not be maintained cost-effectively within a structure in which, by the late 1970s, 43% of spectators frequented 112 premiere cinemas, which made up 4% of all cinemas, generating 56% of the revenue.³³

There was strong opposition among cultural decision makers and practitioners to efforts to achieve economic efficiency, for reasons of principle as well as for financial reasons. “This phenomenon can be identified with the somewhat increasing spread of genres that better correspond to the tastes of the masses in the field of book publishing, theatre repertoires, cultural centre programmes (cheap novels, trashy literature, emphatically erotic pulp fiction

³² Report to the Agitation and Propaganda Committee on the modernisation of the economic regulations on cultural and educational activities (March 1986). MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 41/462. ó. e.

³³ Róbert Bán: Hiszek a moziban [I believe in cinema]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 4th July 1981, 18.

and performances), the distribution of films imported from the West, the ‘programming’ of the public education network, the kitsch products of the applied and fine arts, etc., where an expressly commercial attitude is adopted and where programmes are based on light entertainment”, was how the views of the “opposition” were summarised in a memorandum prepared for the Agitation and Propaganda Committee.³⁴

From 1986 — the year in which the press law was passed³⁵ — repeated efforts were made to obtain licences for various kinds of publishing activities (books, records, video cassettes, etc.). In this respect, the interests of the cultural authorities were clearly inconsistent with the spirit of economic reform. They could not in good faith support enterprises that wished to do business in areas that held out the promise of profits. This was partly because it would have led to even less control and to practice that was even further removed from the objectives of Socialist cultural policy. However, it was also partly because if the profitable morsels of meat were stripped from the bone, the state, or rather the state-owned enterprises, whose economic operations had long relied on cross-financing, would face complete bankruptcy. Nevertheless, it was decided that the greater proportion of

³⁴ Summary of the working committee discussion organised on behalf of the Scientific, Educational and Cultural Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/462. ó. e.

³⁵ After several years of preparation, the Parliament adopted Law II of 1986 in spring 1986. It was significant in that it summarised comprehensively and at the highest level the press administrative and press security regulations earlier laid down in lower-level rulings — resolutions and provisions — including those related to press information. The press law thus provided a legal basis for the various publishing endeavours that remained within a Socialist framework.

the cultural sphere could not a priori be operated on the basis of profitability.³⁶

The ideas put forward in 1986 — in line with the above — did not entail meaningful changes: further reorganisation was proposed, this time in terms of film distribution, with the amalgamation of internal and foreign distribution; cost reductions by means of the further closure of small, loss-making cinemas; and credit — via a film fund, that would support production and an increase in the number of releases.³⁷ The film distribution system — which enjoyed a complete monopoly — remained unchanged until 1989, although openings emerged even earlier, thanks to advances in film distribution technology.

Challengers to the cinema

At the same time, cinema operation was affected by the ongoing transformation of the media. In the 1950s — and a decade later in Hungary — the initial blow had been dealt by the spread of television. In the 1970s, satellite television broadcasting seemed to present the next big challenge to press control and the closed media system in state socialist countries. The Party administration was quick to tackle the issue, presumably because — by analogy with the radio — it was easy to envisage the new ideological threat. The Committee for Agitation and Propaganda first discussed the

³⁶ “[W]e wish to avoid a very real danger: that private enterprises will single out for themselves the elements of these activities that are economically profitable, while those elements that require support will be left to the Socialist organisations, which would worsen the state’s finances.” *Ibid.*,

³⁷ Report to the Agitation and Propaganda Committee on the modernisation of the economic regulations on cultural and educational activities (March 1986). MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 41/462. 6. e.

question in 1972, concluding that a medium was emerging that was capable of “interfering in internal affairs” and exerting a negative influence on Hungarian viewers.³⁸ The Party leadership was thus concerned about a fresh challenge to the information monopoly. Although, in 1972, it was predicted that satellite transmission from the West might become a reality in the second half of the decade, there was no concern about Hungarian viewers having access to the inimical films from which they had so far been distanced, or to poor-quality, pernicious popular films — just as the jamming of Radio Free Europe was not because of its commercial radio dramas, while the popular music programmes offered by the West did in fact have a big impact on Hungarian programming and Party youth policy.³⁹ While the satellite channels that became available in several areas of Hungary in the late 1980s also provided entertainment, it was primarily the music broadcasts that attracted viewers, simply for linguistic reasons. Although, by this time, individual satellite dishes were occasionally appearing in Hungary,⁴⁰ it was local cable television that played a decisive role in 1988–1989.⁴¹ Otherwise, for decades the Hungarian authorities had been obliged to put up with the fact that television channels were available in the country’s southern, and especially western,

³⁸ Report of the Agitation and Propaganda Department to the Agitation and Propaganda Committee on the expected development of adverse television propaganda broadcast by satellite transmission, and recommendations for political action. MNL OL XIX-A-24b, box 60.

³⁹ This was very similar to the impact of West European pirate radios on Hungarian mainstream media. Peter Brugge: *Swinging Sixties* made in Czechoslovakia – the adaptation of western impulses in Czechoslovak youth culture. In: Ivan Šedivý, Jan Němeček, Jiří Kocián, and Oldřich Tůma (eds.): *1968: České křižovatky evropských dějin*. Praha, ÚSD, 2011, 143–155.

⁴⁰ Memorandum for Ernő Lakatos (27th November 1985). MNL OL MK–S 288. f. 22. cs. 1985/21. ó. e.

⁴¹ Minutes of the meeting of the Agitation and Propaganda Committee, held on 9th June 1987. MNL OL MK–S 288. f. 41/489. ó. e.

counties — even if not in the highest quality — offering programmes that differed substantially from those available in Hungary: television series and cartoons could be viewed on Yugoslav and Austrian television channels that were not supported by Hungarian admissions policy. Of course, in large parts of the country their enjoyment was hampered not only by technical difficulties, but also by the language barrier.

However, the new challenges for film distributors came not from the television broadcasts of neighbouring countries, satellite broadcasting, or the new medium of video games.⁴² Among the new technologies that had an impact on Hungarian film admissions and the accessibility of films from the West, it was video recording that exerted a significant mass impact by the mid-1980s. When László Nemes's book on video technology⁴³ was published in 1972 in the series *Radio Electronics*, there were still no VCR players in use in Hungarian households. Even during the 1970s, they were — occasionally — written about as something used primarily for industrial or work purposes.⁴⁴ In 1982 — reporting on the West Berlin Film Festival — Ervin Havas observed in connection with cinemas in the West that attendance had been dealt a fresh blow, chiefly in the form

⁴² Among the new media, one might mention video games. From the second half of the 1980s, the games that became accessible via the Commodore 64s and the like that appeared in many households — and of course the grey and black markets connected with them — can be interpreted as an ideological challenge, although it scarcely impacted the cinema industry. On this, see: Jaroslav Švelch: *Gaming the Iron Curtain. How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2018.

⁴³ László Nemes: *Videomagnók* [Video recorders]. Műszaki Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1972.

⁴⁴ For example, they were used in pedagogical case studies in the kindergarten teachers' training college in Hajdúböszörmény. Hírek [News]. *Népszabadság*, 3rd June 1976.

of pirate copies.⁴⁵ By that time, VCRs had appeared in more well-to-do households that were open to new technology, and in 1983 second-hand VCR players were already being offered for sale in the small ads. It was not a cheap form of entertainment: a three-year-old Sony Betamax SL-8000 E was offered for 58,000 forints,⁴⁶ equivalent to the price of a low-range car offered by Merkur, the state's monopolistic car dealership.

Potential points of connection between video technology and the cinemas emerged in the first half of the decade, when the number of VCRs in private households was still low. One pioneering initiative was the room that opened in November 1980 in the Horizont cinema on the Grand Boulevard in Budapest (then Lenin Boulevard), where films broadcast on television were shown via a VCR player twice a day, in the evening.⁴⁷ From 1983, the “TV cinema” continued to operate in the Red Star cinema.⁴⁸ By that time, demand for video cassette players had emerged outside the cinemas, too. Catering venues used them to boost their attractions, and DJs requested licences to stage video discos.⁴⁹ Initially, “forbidden fruits”, such as horror films and erotic films, were also screened in this — necessarily unregulated — form, naturally using pirate copies.⁵⁰ In fact, within a few years one

⁴⁵ Ervin Havas: A kezdet: várakozás, tanácstalanság, lehangoltság [The beginning: Expectation, confusion, dejection]. *Népszabadság*, 17th February 1982.

⁴⁶ *Népszabadság*, 28th September 1983.

⁴⁷ László Zay: Új módszer [A new methodology]. *Magyarország*, 11th October 1981, 27.

⁴⁸ Letter from Sándor Nagy to B. István Szabó (17th June 1982). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 234; (kurcz): Hogyan vált be a videomozi? [Has video cinema lived up to expectations?] *Magyar Nemzet*, 30th March 1983.

⁴⁹ Letter from Ferenc Port to György Vadász (Rákóczi Baking and Confectionery Industry Co-operative) (24th October 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 234.

⁵⁰ Memorandum for Sándor Für (1st February 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 234.

so-called enterprise work team even came up with the idea of recording Hungarian premier league football matches and then screening the video recordings in the then open-air Petőfi Cultural Centre.⁵¹

In around 1983, the press authorities made a first attempt to bring video recording under their own control, closing the “channels” that disseminated “harmful ideological messages” and opening other, supervised channels in their place.⁵² In December 1983 — after the Political Committee had taken VCRs into account in the execution of several of its rulings — the Committee for Agitation and Propaganda adopted a resolution on the application of video technology. It was essentially in line with the principle of the communications policy in force since 1965, according to which, rather than suppressing information, efforts had to be made to control it and present it in an appropriate framework. “[I]f we wish to ensure that our citizens obtain their information primarily from Hungarian programmes and that our national culture continues to be present on our screens in an appropriate manner, and if we wish to disseminate our productions abroad, then we have no other choice than to avail ourselves increasingly of the opportunities offered by video technology and to make use of those opportunities for our own purposes in teaching and public education.”⁵³

At the time of the Committee of Agitation and Propaganda’s resolution, there were probably around 10,000 video cassette players and 100,000 cassettes in the country, although only two-fifths of them were in private ownership.

⁵¹ István Pintér: *Video, ó! Képes Sport*, 1985/37, 11.

⁵² Film Directorate memorandum to Ernő Lakatos (11th December 1984). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 238.

⁵³ Minutes of the meeting of the Agitation and Propaganda Committee, held on 27th December 1983. MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 41/420. ó. e.

All of them had come from abroad — from the West — although the Committee for Agitation and Propaganda also counted on the fact that from the second half of 1984, Soviet-made video cassette players might also appear in shops in Hungary.⁵⁴ However, even at the end of 1985, it was still possible to obtain only blank video cassettes in Hungary. There were no recorded cassettes, which simultaneously raised problems in relation to both royalties and quality. As one journalist for *Világgazdaság* wrote, by the time a solution emerged, it was already unacceptable in terms of cultural policy: “Understandably, however, the Ministry would still be loath to welcome imports of mediocre-quality video recordings of westerns, even if it could obtain them cheaply from the department store.”⁵⁵

The slow but sure spread of video cassettes is demonstrated by the fact that in 1984 the first video rental shop opened in Budapest (run by the internal distributor MOKÉP), after which video rentals soon opened in the county towns, run by the county cinema-operating companies. A ministerial document issued at the end of 1986 refers to 1985 as the “year of the breakthrough”. In 1986, there were already 832 different films available to Hungarian film enthusiasts countrywide on 15,000 video cassettes. These included films produced in the West, although initially there was a bigger supply of films from Hungary and Socialist countries. When publishing videos of films produced in the West, the problem of royalties arose: films that were purchased by Hungarofilm for the cinemas could not be released on video cassette as well. However, there were 70 films obtained from capitalist countries that were available exclusively on video cassette.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Emília Papp: Szalagavató. Videovalóság Magyarországon II [Tape parade. Video reality in Hungary II]. *Világgazdaság*, 8th February 1985.

These could in no way be said to cater for recreational pursuits that conformed with the priorities of cultural policy: many of these films, which belonged unequivocally to the commercial category, were kung fu movies from Hong Kong and science-fiction films from the West. The distribution data also reinforce the fact that consumers were driven by a desire for entertainment rather than cultural objectives: it was primarily these films that were sought by the almost quarter of a million video viewers.⁵⁶

Although these developments also indicate the increasing pressure on the film admissions authority and cinemas, the trade in illegal video cassettes was of greater significance in Hungary, along with the appearance on the black market of dubbed action films. The existence of the black market was nothing new: supplies of sought-after goods from the West, from records to jeans,⁵⁷ had always existed in Hungary and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc,⁵⁸ just as a black market existed for subsidised cinema tickets.⁵⁹ According to a report in the *Ifjúsági Magazin* [Youth Magazine], an individual blockbuster produced in the West — such as *Death Wish* starring Charles Bronson — would still sell well on the

⁵⁶ Evaluation of the 1987 publishing plan of MOKÉP. Materials from the ministerial meeting of the Ministry of Culture, 20th October 1986. MNL OL XIX-I-9-e, box 30.

⁵⁷ A few articles on this theme: Sándor Szalkai: Használtcikk-piac – új köntösben [The second-hand goods market – in new attire]. *Népszabadság*, 15th August 1964; Gábor Béla Kapuvári: Lemezok pultról és szatyorból [Records from the shelf and the bag]. *Népszabadság*, 8th January 1978; Csaba Egerszegi: Hamis farmer – hamisítatlan haszon [Fake jeans – genuine profits]. *Népszabadság*, 27th November 1983.

⁵⁸ Sergei I. Zhuk: Religion, “Westernization” and Youth in the “Closed City” of Soviet Ukraine, 1964–1984. *Russian Review*, 2008/4, 661–662.

⁵⁹ See: István Sáfrán: A filmsikerek vámszedői [Blockbuster customs officers]. *Népszabadság*, 12th November 1978.

black market despite being screened in the cinemas.⁶⁰ The Film Directorate proposed that the most effective way of combatting pirate copies would still be for the cinemas to satisfy audience demands: “Bearing in mind that the new blockbusters offered on video cassette (primarily on the black market) reach viewers within months, it would be worth considering the impact on falling cinema attendance of the waiting time or delays caused by economic factors when purchasing certain films.”⁶¹

Besides its size, the black market presented another serious challenge to the cinema industry: it had emerged five years earlier as a competitor to Hungarofilm, which continued to have a monopoly until 1989 — the year in which Dunafilm and Intercom were established. This was several years before the legal companies established with foreign capital to distribute commercial films produced in the West — Intervideo and VICO, headed by János Fenyő — began to transform the video market in 1988.

Audience pressure

In our examination of the spread of American films in Hungary, we must finally touch on the (trans)formation of cinema audiences. The appearance of television “dealt a blow” to cinema attendance figures throughout the world. In around 1980, cinemas were typically showing more films to fewer spectators compared with two decades earlier,

⁶⁰ Tibor Csontos: Videogalaxis, avagy a (tiltott) gyümölcsízű ráógumi [Video galaxy, or (banned) fruit-flavoured bubblegum]. *Ifjúsági Magazin*, 1986/6, 13–15.

⁶¹ Evaluation of the 1987 publishing plan of MOKÉP. Materials from the ministerial meeting of the Ministry of Culture, 20th October 1986. MNL OL XIX-I-9-e, box 30.

thus the average audience for each film was also smaller. In 1960, the number of cinema goers was still somewhat higher than 140 million, meaning that there were on average 946,000 spectators for each of the 148 films released that year. Audience numbers fell continuously until the beginning of the 1970s. A total of 74.745 million tickets were purchased in 1971, meaning that audiences had almost halved in the space of a decade. In the 1970s, audience numbers stabilised, although in 1979–1980, the figure plunged below 70 million as a result of the significant hike in ticket prices: in 1980, the number of cinema goers fell to 60.718 million. In that year, 229 films (including series) were released in Hungarian cinemas — in other words, the average audience for one film fell to a greater extent compared to total cinema attendance figures — to 265,000 spectators. At this point, it proved possible to reverse the trend, and in the following years spectator numbers clawed their way back to around the 70 million mark — right up until 1987, when numbers once again fell dramatically. From that year on, the average number of spectators for an individual film began to plunge steeply, from the 350,000–380,000 typical until the mid-1980s to not far off 200,000 by 1989. This average of course includes both the Bulgarian films that attracted only tens of thousands of spectators and the American blockbusters that brought in audiences of 1.5 million.

The film authorities were also forced to acknowledge that the composition of cinema audiences had also undergone a significant transformation in the course of two decades. The age structure of audiences shifted towards the two extremes: it was primarily youngsters, typically teenagers, who went to the cinema, while older people made up the second stratum of cinema goers. According to a Film Directorate memorandum

Table 5 *Cinema audiences in the 1980s*

Year	Total audience	Number of films screened	Number of spectators per film
1980	60,718,000	229	265,144
1981	67,090,000	200	335,450
1982	70,026,000	190	368,558
1983	68,900,000	198	347,980
1984	71,017,000	192	369,880
1985	70,179,000	181	387,729
1986	67,929,000	192	353,797
1987	55,833,000	187	298,572
1988	50,730,000	203	249,901
1989	46,519,000	228	204,031

Source: Hungarian Office of Statistics, Statistical Yearbooks

from 1982, a total of 40% of the country's citizens could be reckoned as cinema goers, although in reality it was people below the age of 25 who went regularly and frequently.⁶² According to the 1984 data, 70% of spectators belonged to the age group made up of children and youngsters — and in this context, the ministry criticised the fact that only one or two Hungarian productions per year were aimed at young audiences.⁶³ According to an analysis carried out in 1987, however, 85% of cinema goers were below the age of 24.⁶⁴

⁶² Memorandum of the Film Directorate on the enforcement of the Law on Public Education (January 1982). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 229.

⁶³ Memorandum from Ferenc Kóhalmi to Béla Köpeczi (30th July 1984). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 238.

⁶⁴ The main issues concerning the situation of film distribution and its further development (23rd August 1987). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 255.

This inevitably had repercussions on the film supply, and on imports of films from the West and Socialist countries, since young people were primarily interested in entertainment. Attendance figures for a Socialist action film — in exceptional cases — might rival those for an American thriller. One outstanding example from the mid-1980s was the Chinese kung fu film *The Undaunted Wu Tang*, which was released in Hungary in 1985. In the first year, 1.44 million tickets were sold — mostly to young people. “Along with other spectators at the press viewing, I struggled hopelessly to make sense of the tangled plot, trying to understand who was who, and which of the characters were friends and which were enemies, and indeed why, but my attempts at a logical explanation typically failed. I have to admit that I am relying on people who have seen the film several times, not of course because the film is any good: even with the greatest partiality it can only be called mediocre. Rather because there exists a stratum of cinema goers, most of them teenagers, I believe, who happily flock to the cinema whenever this kind of ‘martial art’ film is screened. And this one is such a bruiser it would put any Hollywood western to shame”, was the verdict pronounced by the critic for *Új Tükör*.⁶⁵

The “hasty” admission of six Chinese films — including three kung fu films — by 1986 proved worthwhile, even though previously scarcely any Chinese films had been screened in Hungarian cinemas. Of course, the prestige of Western, including Hollywood, films, and the average attendance figures they commanded, still remained significantly higher. On the 1986 list of hits, for example, the political action thriller *Blue Thunder* attracted 1.404 million

⁶⁵ Tamás Barabás: A legyőzhetetlen Vutang [The Undaunted Wu Tang]. *Új Tükör*, 1986/14, 3.

viewers, and the Bud Spencer and Terence Hill movie *Double Trouble* attracted 1.302 million. However, Western films that were admitted due to their value in terms of cultural policy or artistry achieved no more than a fifth to a tenth of these figures. The crime mystery *Hammitt*, set in 1940s America, attracted a total of 267,000 spectators, while attendance figures for *Frances*, a drama about the life of the American actress Frances Farmer, reached only 129,000. The Film Directorate also considered it a failure when only 530,000 tickets were sold for *Marathon Man*, an action thriller rated as a “huge commercial blockbuster”, generating a revenue of 10 million forints.⁶⁶ Another thing to bear in mind was that the internal distributor MOKÉP also had very different expectations when it came to Western and Socialist films. While *Marathon Man* was deemed a flop, the fact that audiences for eight Hungarian films exceeded 100,000 was regarded as a considerable success. Of these, *Szerelem első vérig* [Love Till First Blood] (592,000 viewers) and István Bujtor’s Bud Spenceresque *Elvarázsolt dollár* (564,000) were regarded as genuine box-office hits. In terms of Soviet films, the Elem Klimov movie *Come and See*, set in the Second World War, stands out with its 329,000 spectators.⁶⁷

Attendance figures for American films were well above the average throughout the decade, from whatever angle they are viewed.⁶⁸ On the one hand, there were only a small number of films that failed to attract at least 100,000 viewers in the year they were released. Between 1980 and 1986, their number was never higher than four, while in 1983 this happened in

⁶⁶ Report on the annual work of the Film Directorate for 1985 (19th December 1985). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 243.

⁶⁷ Submission on the pro rata implementation of the annual film distribution tasks for 1986 and the film distribution plan for 1987. MNL OL XIX-I-9-e, box 30.

⁶⁸ Viewing numbers for American films were compiled using data from the annually published *Filmévkönyv* [Film Yearbook].

the case of only one film, the biographical country music drama *Coal Miner's Daughter*, which, despite garnering an Academy Award, was classified only in the C/II category of “more valuable commercial” films. However, with the rise in the number of American films admitted, the number of less successful productions likewise rose — to eight in 1987 and to 10 in 1988, while 22 of the 83 films released in 1989 belonged to this category. By contrast, on average over half the American releases achieved attendance figures of 300,000, while the number of films that attracted over half a million spectators in Hungary was between five and 10. The “peak year” in this respect was 1983, when half of the 20 Hollywood releases achieved this level.

Table 6 *American films achieving above- and below-average attendance figures in Hungarian cinemas in the 1980s*

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
American films	29	20	25	20	19	24	26	34	35	83
Attendance below 100,000	4	2	4	1	2	3	2	8	10	22
Attendance above 500,000	5	6	9	10	8	9	6	8	7	8

Source: Film Yearbooks

Between 1980 and 1989, attendance figures exceeded 1 million in the case of 26 American films, while this was true in the case of 21 of the remaining films combined. Among the latter, the biggest number were action comedies starring Bud Spencer and Terence Hill. The 26 American films included plenty of action films, science-fiction movies, thrillers, comedies and romantic movies (*The Postman Always*

Rings Twice) and even animations (*101 Dalmatians*). Several classics that were released in Hungary after a delay of many years (*Ben Hur*, *The Godfather*) also attracted huge interest.⁶⁹

From 1987, however, American films that were capable of attracting a million spectators disappeared — just as audiences began to disappear from the cinemas. Compared to 1986, Hungarian cinemas lost 12 million cinema goers, and a further 5 million the following year. Thus, the only Hollywood films to make it as box-office hits were *Enter the Ninja*, which represented something of an innovation in terms of action movies, commercialising as it did the martial arts of the East while drawing on the myth of the lonesome hero of the western; and the Stallone film *Cobra*, with its generous helpings of violence. In 1989, not one of the 83 American releases broke through the 1 million threshold,⁷⁰ after which cheap Hollywood imports were sufficient at most to prevent the combined attendance figures from plunging drastically.

American films in the 1980s

The film authorities, along with film critics, were agreed that the performance of Hungarian film admissions policy improved in the 1980s. István B. Szabó highlighted two advances. On the one hand, an improvement was achieved

⁶⁹ The list includes: 1980: *Apocalypse Now*; *Hair*; 1981: *Foul Play*; *Coma*; *Alien* (English–American); 1982: *The Godfather*; *Ben Hur*; *The Empire Strikes Back*; 1983: *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; *Blackbeard's Ghost*; 1984: *Kelly's Heroes*; *The Dirty Dozen*; *Herbie Rides Again*; *King Kong*; *Return of the Jedi*; *101 Dalmatians*; 1985: *Tootsie*; *Flashdance*; *Jaws*; *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; 1986: *Blue Thunder*; *The Cannonball Run*; *Romancing the Stone*; *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*; 1987: *Enter the Ninja*; 1988: *Cobra*.

⁷⁰ *Rain Man* came close, with 933,000 spectators.

in terms of “the rapid screening of significant productions in the field of world cinematography and blockbusters” — that is, he noted an improvement in admissions of award-winning or highly acclaimed films primarily made in the West; and on the other hand, an improvement was observed in “the screening of films from developing countries”.⁷¹

In the latter case he was referring to the widening of the film supply in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, in the sense that several films were admitted that did not originate from the big film-producing countries of the West. From the 1950s, the backbone of Hungarian film imports from capitalist countries had comprised French, Italian, and at the time primarily English, then increasingly American films. West German films might also be included here, although their number was the least stable in the period as a whole. By contrast, for example, Soviet film imports in the period of de-Stalinisation likewise broadened to include more “non-Socialist” films, although in a “globalist” manner befitting a world power aspiring to attract the entirety of world film production.⁷² This was in line with the attitude likewise represented by the Tashkent Film Festival,⁷³ which had been launched in 1968 to promote the objectives of Moscow, and subsequently even more clear-cut geopolitical goals. From this perspective, there was greater contingency in terms of film admissions policy, too: while information regarding America, France, Italy and England was regularly obtained via established channels, and while film admissions delegations were organised, apart from specialist journals,

⁷¹ Memorandum of [B.] István Szabó (17th September 1980). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 221.

⁷² Róbert Takács: Szovjet és magyar nyitás... [Soviet and Hungarian opening...] Op. cit., 37–56.

⁷³ Rossen Djagalov and Masha Salazkina: Tashkent '68: A Cinematic Contact Zone. *Slavic Review*, 2016/2, 279–298.

information about film production in other countries could be obtained from film festivals or in the framework of bilateral cultural diplomacy at most. Thus, although certain definite trends emerged, there was a great deal of arbitrariness in the broadening of the spectrum, and it was not necessarily artistic merit that counted but also price, among other things. In 1983, for example, five Brazilian films were released, which was half the number of Brazilian films shown between 1980 and 1986. But the fact remains that, while the number of Western releases that did not originate from the central countries stood at around 14 to 16 between 1980 and 1982, the number of films belonging to this category reached 32 in 1983, 28 in 1986, 19 in 1984, and 19 in 1985. Between 1983 and 1985, films within this category originating from smaller European countries and Anglo-Saxon countries were in the lead with 12 to 14 releases, although the number fell to nine in 1986, while that year the number of films from outside Europe (mainly Latin America and the Far East) was higher (10), even if only by one. Within this group, films from Japan and Hong Kong can be considered separately: in some years, there was a remarkably high number of such films, with eight in 1982, nine in 1983, and nine again in 1986. Although earlier the iconic product of Far East filmmaking had been the Japanese film *The Naked Island*,⁷⁴ which was released in Hungary in 1963, in this period — along with several cartoons — larger quantities of films were admitted from Japan and Hong Kong, including *Cobra* and *Enter the Dragon*. In other words, this subgroup unequivocally served the purpose of providing entertainment aimed at younger audiences that was “reasonably priced” compared to Hollywood. The shift described above could also be defended by cultural

⁷⁴ G. Péter Molnár: Filmekről [On films]. *Népszabadság*, 20th February 1963.

arguments: a knowledge of world cinematography, it was claimed, was a cultural matter; it expanded cinema goers' film-related knowledge, and, besides broadening spectators' horizons, it also broadened the professional horizons of filmmakers, although this phenomenon was hard to interpret without economic motivation. In the year that followed the imposition of import restrictions⁷⁵ even in the cultural sector in 1982, the number of films from the four central Western countries (Italy, France, Great Britain and the United States) fell from 51 to 42, and the number of films from the broader group of countries discussed above doubled, rising from 16 to 32. However, lower royalties were due in these cases than for American, French and Italian productions.

The biggest audiences, however — not only per film but also in absolute terms — were drawn by Western films in the 1980s, even if the Film Directorate continued to maintain throughout the decade at least the semblance that Socialist films made up the backbone of the total number of releases. This claim continued to be upheld even though the one-third share⁷⁶ out of total imports represented by Western films had begun to rise slightly in the 1960s, and by around 1980 was already far in excess of the levels in the late 1950s — and even though the supply of Socialist films was boosted by Hungarian films. The number of the latter — including documentaries and short films — reached 30 in the 1980s. Their presence in cinema programming did not decrease, despite the deterioration in Hungarian film production conditions in the first half of the 1980s.

⁷⁵ Account of a discussion between Culture Minister Béla Köpeczi and Minister of Foreign Trade Péter Veress, held on 27th October 1982 (29th November 1982). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 234.

⁷⁶ Circular letter from the Film Directorate to the County Council Executive Committee (16th December 1958). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 34.

Table 7 *Share of film releases according to country grouping*

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
West	89	76	69	80	76	79	87	88	103	155
of these, American	29	20	25	20	19	24	26	34	35	83
Hungarian	32	28	27	31	33	27	28	25	30	32
Soviet	42	34	30	35	30	30	32	30	30	9
Other Socialist	58	52	57	48	47	36	39	34	36	29
Other/mixed	8	10	7	4	6	9	6	10	4	3
Total releases	229	200	190	198	192	181	192	187	203	228

Source: Film Yearbooks, Budapest cinema programmes: Esti Hírlap, Magyar Nemzet, Magyar Hírlap

As can be seen from the table, in 1980 the 89 new releases purchased from capitalist countries was not far behind the 100 films produced in the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries. The lead was maintained in the following two years, although this was only possible because of the smaller number of releases of Western films. Compared to the 229 new releases in 1980, there were only 200 in 1981, and only 190 in 1982. The supply of Western films fell significantly, to 76 in 1981 and to 69 in 1982 — resulting in only a minimal reduction in terms of the East–West ratio. By 1983–1984, import shares had stabilised; then, from 1985, films purchased on the capitalist market unequivocally made up the majority of films admitted for release. Their share rose markedly from 1984, even if not by leaps and bounds. By 1987, the number of films originating from Socialist countries, taken together with releases of Hungarian films, scarcely exceeded the number

of films from the West: there were a total of 89 Socialist films compared to 88 from capitalist countries. In the following year, however, non-Socialist films formed the absolute majority of releases (50.7%), their number exceeding 100 in the space of a year for the first time.

The quantity of Hollywood films decreased along with the number of films from the West in the first half of the decade, and in fact the share of Hollywood films even fell slightly within the supply of Western films: while in 1980, and in 1982, roughly one in every three non-Socialist films was made in Hollywood, in 1981 and 1983–1984 the respective proportion was one in every four. In the following years, the share once again approached one-third, then in 1987 and 1988, now in the context of a significantly higher number of films, it again reached, and even somewhat exceeded, this level. In these years, 17% to 18% of films released in Hungarian cinemas originated from Hollywood.

Table 8 *Proportions of Western, Soviet, Hungarian and Socialist films released in Hungarian cinemas (1980–1989) (%)*

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Western	38.9	38.0	36.3	40.4	39.6	43.6	45.3	47.1	50.7	68.0
American	12.7	10.0	13.2	10.1	9.9	13.3	13.5	18.2	17.2	36.4
Hungarian	14.0	14.0	14.2	15.7	17.2	14.9	14.6	13.4	14.8	14.0
Soviet	18.3	17.0	15.8	17.7	15.6	16.6	16.7	16.0	14.8	3.9
Other Socialist	25.3	26.0	30.0	24.2	24.5	19.9	20.3	18.2	17.7	12.7

Source: Film Yearbooks, Budapest cinemas programmes: Esti Hírlap, Magyar Nemzet, Magyar Hírlap

A new situation was signalled in 1989: more than two-thirds of premiered films originated from capitalist countries. Since the number of Hungarian films had not fallen, this dramatic reorganisation indicated the beginnings of the collapse of Socialist film imports.

As we have seen, in the 1970s it was unequivocally American films — crime films, action movies, comedies — that dominated cinema programmes. Even in the 1980s, it was still primarily American — and to a smaller extent French and Italian — films that represented the cross-section of entertainment and cinema, closely followed by English films at the very end of the decade. Compared to the 29 American films released in 1980, however, there was a decrease in the following years. In 1984, “only” 19 new American films were shown in Hungarian cinemas, and the number of French films also dropped in parallel. In other words, while in 1980 Hollywood films represented almost two-thirds (32.6%) of films released in Hungary that were imported from capitalist countries, in the following years — with the exception of 1982 — this proportion fell to a quarter. However, the number of action films from Japan and Hong Kong, which were cheaper to import than American films, rose — temporarily — as did the number of films made in other European and Anglo-Saxon countries, which somewhat compensated for the decrease. It also indicates that in these years, Hungarofilm took into account the country’s economic and foreign exchange situation not only by withholding purchases of Western films but also by adjusting the proportions within the capitalist imports.

From 1984, however — while the number of Hungarian films fell slightly and the number of Soviet films stagnated until 1988 — the number of American films that made it into the cinemas rose continuously. In 1985–1986, the rise was

not yet dramatic: the 24 and 26 Hollywood films screened in those years represented just 30% of imports from the West. The figures for 1980 and 1982 were higher. The “turnaround” took place in 1987: on the one hand, the number of American films “took off” in this year: the volume of new Hollywood releases in Hungarian cinemas had never before crept above 30 in a year. On the other hand, up until then the number of both Hungarian and Soviet film releases had surpassed the number of American films in every single year except for 1980. In 1987, however, the 25 Hungarian films and 30 Soviet films both lagged behind the 34 new American films. In other words, 1987 was the year in which Hollywood became the number one film supplier in Hungarian cinemas. It proved possible to maintain these proportions in 1988, too — signifying the surrender of Socialist film dominance. The 35 American films even fell slightly within the vigorously growing imports of films from capitalist countries. In 1989, however, independent distributors that were established with foreign capital also made their appearance in the cinema industry, flooding the Hungarian market with Hollywood films and enticing Hungarian cinema goers with 83 productions from abroad. In total, this meant that over one-third of the entire film supply, and more than half the supply of films from the West, were American movies.

Distribution and circulation

In itself, however, the number of releases does not give a clear picture of what was really happening in terms of film distribution. Besides the absolute number of films, it is also important to look at how many copies of a particular film were distributed, which at the same time also determined

how many cinemas the film was shown in, and how many times it was screened in a given week's programme. Other important factors were the size of the room in which the film was shown, and even which cinema, or which of the cinema's screening rooms, was selected. In the interests of cost-effectiveness, it was argued that films that promised to attract bigger audiences should be screened in cinemas with a bigger capacity, while a larger share of "less promising" screenings should take place in smaller cinemas and smaller screening rooms.

Those who urged support for cultural policy vis-à-vis the cinemas endeavoured to counter this argument. When remunerating cinema employees, it was primarily the attendance figures for Hungarian and Soviet films that were taken as the starting point, and these figures were also used when evaluating the performance of individual county companies.⁷⁷ Evaluations — and task assignments — essentially operated in a far more subtle way. In the course of these evaluations, for example, attention was paid not only to attendance figures but also to the "correct" allocation of the films — that is, whether an individual film had been shown in an appropriate venue, and whether it had been screened a sufficient number of times.⁷⁸ From 1984, financial incentives for employees in the film distribution sector were further reinforced as a way of motivating them to encourage more spectators to watch films offering a higher standard of

⁷⁷ See, for example: Observations from the general supervisory inspection undertaken in Komárom County (1981). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 225; Memorandum for Iván Plathy on the work of the Tolna County Cinema Operating Company (28th February 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 235.

⁷⁸ The Zala County Cinema Operating Company, for example, was criticised in 1983 for the fact that in a given period nine films (one Soviet and 8 Socialist) had not been distributed to a single cinema. The situation of film distribution in Zala County (20th December 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 235.

entertainment — in other words, “prioritised popular films that transmitted ideological values supported by cultural policy, and among these, chiefly films produced in Socialist countries.”⁷⁹ At the same time, it was generally acknowledged that the companies operating the county cinemas could not be run at a profit.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, in the second wave of economic reform, attempts were made to rationalise cinema operation — for example, instead of fixed seat prices, cinemas were permitted a degree of flexibility within a given band, and wages could also be managed more flexibly.⁸¹

In the mid-1980s, the Film Directorate still expected significant efforts to be made to maintain audience numbers for Hungarian, Soviet and Socialist films. But the fact that viewing figures for an individual Soviet film might come somewhere close to those for an American blockbuster on one evening was neither here nor there, if the latter film was shown 10 or 20 times as often — and to bigger audiences. Besides, cinemas in the big cities, and especially in Budapest, set very little store by cultural policy expectations, which again was nothing new: the conflict between the capital and the provinces had been apparent even in earlier decades.⁸² As the Film Directorate pointed out in 1982: “The activities of the Metropolitan Cinema Company are aimed exclusively

⁷⁹ Report to the Agitation and Propaganda Committee on questions concerning the content and structure of entertainment and the provision of entertainment. (24th June 1986). MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/469. ó. e.

⁸⁰ Summary of the discussion of the working committee organised on behalf of the Scientific, Educational and Cultural Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/462. ó. e.

⁸¹ Report for the Agitation and Propaganda Committee on the new structure of the film sector and on the realisation of its position concerning the modernisation of the economic conditions (3rd March 1987). MNL OL M–KS 288. f. 41/483. ó. e.

⁸² Róbert Takács: A nyugati film és közönsége Magyarországon Sztálin halálától Helsinkiiig (1953–1975) [Western-made films and cinema audiences in Hungary, from the death of Stalin to Helsinki, (1953–1975)]. *Korall* 2016/65, 143–144.

at meeting the demands of citizens living in the capital, and its opportunities to influence demand have almost entirely disappeared. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that film distributors are given significant state support precisely for the purposes of strengthening such activities.” According to the data that prompted this scolding, while 21.9% of cinema goers in the provinces in 1982 purchased tickets for Hungarian films, 12.3% for Soviet films, and 6.8% for Socialist films, in the capital the respective proportions were as follows: 16.1%, 6.2%, 3.3%.⁸³ All of which indicates that as many as three-quarters of Budapest cinema goers (74.4%) were watching films made in the West. However, audiences for Western films reached 59% even outside Budapest. A memorandum written in 1983 by the Film Directorate explicitly drew attention to the Americanisation of the films on offer in Budapest cinemas: “It is especially problematic that, based on the programmes of the larger cinemas in Budapest — since each new film is screened in several cinemas — one might easily have the impression that Hungarian film distribution in the entertainment sphere has been Americanised.”⁸⁴

Despite the emergence of Socialist box-office hits in the 1980s, in practice the principle of popularising Socialist films was overridden. In these years, the number of copies of Western entertainment films was regularly between 10 and 20. Among Western films considered appropriate for younger audiences, 19 copies of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, 15 copies of *Star Wars*, 15 copies of *Close Encounters of the*

⁸³ Letter from Noémi Stenczer to the Department of Cultural Affairs of the Executive Committee of the Municipal Council (20th February 1984). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 235.

⁸⁴ Memorandum of the Film Directorate supplementing the material on the further development of the administration of entertainment matters (30th August 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 236.

Third Kind, 13 copies of the delayed release *Planet of the Apes*, 13 copies of *Flatfoot in Africa*, and 12 copies of *Odds and Evens* were distributed.⁸⁵ The significant admissions of American — and Italian — films had their own, unique impact that clashed with the objectives of cultural policy. In the first half of the 1980s, for example, *E.T.* was admitted despite the fact that the 33,000 dollar royalties were five or six times higher than the typical sum for an American film. The consequence of decisions such as these was that the cinema-operating companies had to ensure such films “paid for themselves”. Thus, for example, there were more copies and a more favourable screening allocation: in the case of *E.T.*, there were over 20 copies in 1983, since the decision was taken that every county-based company should be given at least one copy. In cases such as this, it was also stipulated that tickets for C/III category films (this code was assigned to films that promised the biggest audiences, even compared to popular films) should be sold at a higher than normal price, even in cinemas that screened “social”, or in other words non-entertainment films. (The C/K category was introduced for this purpose.) In practice, this meant that the higher-priced tickets, then costing 22 forints, were sold for 30 forints, the 20 forint tickets for 27 forints, and the 16 forint tickets for 22 forints.⁸⁶

By contrast, when it came to films from Socialist countries the opposite extreme was observed. Here, in the interests of preserving the global proportions and nominal dominance of Socialist film production (i.e., its dominance at the level of releases), the film admissions authority was forced to make

⁸⁵ Memorandum on opportunities to supply films to young students after the introduction of the five-day teaching week (1982) MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 230.

⁸⁶ Circular letter from the Film Directorate to cinema-operating companies (3rd November 1983), and letter from József Gombár to the Film Directorate (10th October 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 236.

concessions in terms of quality. However, it was known in advance that some of the films that were admitted would not be successful, and the number of copies was scaled down accordingly. The head of the internal distributor MOKÉP, József Gombár, stated in 1982, in connection with the difficulties associated with Soviet film imports, that several — four of five — films should be purchased with the intention of distributing only one or two copies in total, although he also recommended decreasing the number of copies of “substandard” Soviet films so that the more appealing Soviet films would be given more opportunities.⁸⁷

Evidence of this kind of “game playing” with numbers of copies and cinema allocation could be seen week after week in Budapest cinema programmes. The American comedy thriller *Hanky Panky*, for example, which was released on 9th January 1985, began with a total of 19 screenings a day in eight cinemas in the first week, while the East and West German co-production *Spring Symphony*, a biography of the composer Robert Schumann, was given just five screenings in two cinemas.⁸⁸ In the same year, the American summer crowd-puller *Dragonslayer* was shown in eight cinemas, with a total of 23 screenings per day, while the Polish film *Big Shar* was given six screenings in a single cinema.⁸⁹ If one also takes into account the capacity of the cinemas in question — in other words, how many potential spectators could watch a given film — an even greater disparity is apparent. The American fantasy film was shown in the following cinemas: Uránia (927 seats), Alfa (990), Tátra (940), Madách (801),

⁸⁷ Letter from József Gombár to B. István Szabó (3rd June 1982). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 230.

⁸⁸ A fővárosi mozik műsora [The Budapest cinema programme]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 9th January 1985.

⁸⁹ A fővárosi mozik műsora [The Budapest cinema programme]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 17th July 1985.

Alkotmány (755), Bartók (608), Olimpia (400), and Fény (384), while the Csokonai cinema, in which the Polish film was shown, had just 316 seats.⁹⁰ In other words, while the Polish film could be watched by a maximum of 1,896 cinema goers on any given day, the American film could be seen by 18,595. In this case, therefore, compared to the “balanced” statistics for the number of releases (one Western import to one Socialist film), the American movie had almost four times the number of screenings, while, due to the size of the cinemas, the Hollywood blockbuster had almost a tenfold advantage in terms of potential spectator numbers. Thus, film distribution in itself determined the potential numbers of spectators, and it was naturally adjusted by the Metropolitan Cinema Company based on earlier experience and audience demand.

In other words, audiences, which were largely made up of young people, if they had the means — and in the cities they did — opted for Western, and most often American, films in the 1980s, and the prophets of doom were not exaggerating when they railed against the influence of Western commercial films in matters of taste and ideology. The divergent data for the capital do not necessarily indicate a difference in taste between Budapest and the Hungarian provinces: In Budapest, audiences had far greater freedom of choice, as they were able to select from films offered in several dozen cinemas. Western films generally meant commercial films, entertainment, and complete relaxation, as reflected in the popularity of the “light entertainment” films in category C. Even the average cinema goer outside Budapest watched far

⁹⁰ Source of data on audience numbers: Janka Barkóczi: A FŐMO és a budapesti mozipolitika a Kádár-korban [The Metropolitan Cinema Company and Budapest cinema policy in the Kádár era]. *Múltunk*, 2020/4, 98–103 (based on figures published by the Metropolitan Cinema Company in 1983.)

more light entertainment films (an average of 2.49 per person in 1982, and 2.55 in 1983) than “A” category films, which were valued and promoted by cultural policy (1.59 and 1.63 respectively), although at the same time, Hungarian cinema goers in the provinces also chose an average of 1.65 mid-ranking films in 1982, and 1.66 in 1983. In Budapest, however, where people went to the cinema more often, category C “won”: When it came to this category of film, 4.69 were watched per spectator in 1982 and 4.47 in 1983 — that is, a significantly higher number than all the other films combined (films that were held in higher esteem by cultural policy).⁹¹

Table 9 *Number of visits to the cinema per person according to film category in 1982 and 1983*

	A Category		B Category		C Category	
	Provinces	Budapest	Provinces	Budapest	Provinces	Budapest
1982	1.59	1.90	1.65	1.77	2.49	4.69
1983	1.63	1.65	1.53	1.66	2.55	4.47

Source: Film Directorate

By way of explanation, the films released in cinemas in the 1980s, as they had been earlier, were divided into different categories. The Film Directorate divided the admitted films into weekly premieres according to four-monthly plans that were drawn up based on a combination of programming and political perspectives. Responsibility for how the available copies were allocated belonged to the Metropolitan Cinema Company and the county cinema operators. Films that were considered particularly important from the perspective of

⁹¹ Letter from Noémi Stenczer to the Department of Cultural Affairs of the Executive Committee of the Municipal Council (20th February 1984). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 235.

cultural policy were assigned to category A; films of average significance were classed as B films; while category C was reserved mainly for commercial films. The C category, which came closest to the “tolerated” category within György Aczél’s “policy of the three Ts” (*tiltás, tűrés, támogatás*, or prohibition, tolerance, and support), were primarily of economic significance, since it was these that attracted the most spectators and promised the biggest revenues. Distinctions were even introduced within this category, thus “popular films” might be assigned to the C/II and C/III categories. Among the more expensive tickets for C category films, which included a cultural contribution, seat prices were highest for films classified as C/III.

Most of the A category films were Hungarian or Soviet productions, although not exclusively. In each quarter, several Western films regularly appeared among the important films, their number varying between two and six on the Film Directorate’s lists. Six Western productions were included among those films that were particularly important from a cultural policy point of view for the period May–August 1980: the French–Italian film *La raison d’état*, the American film *Coming Home*, the French film *Madame Rosa*, the West German production *Vera Romeyke ist nicht tragbar*, along with two Italian films (*I Am Afraid* and *Christ Stopped at Eboli*).⁹² Besides three Hungarian, two Soviet and four other Socialist productions, only two Western films were included on cinema programmes for the middle of 1982, however: the French–Swiss co-production *La Provinciale* (*The Girl from Lorraine*) and the American film *Sweet Bird of Youth*.⁹³ A year

⁹² The Film Directorate’s film release plan for May to August (27th February 1980). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 221.

⁹³ Letter of B. István Szabó to cinema-operating companies (12th February 1982). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 231.

later, two Soviet, seven Socialist and six Western A category films were screened during the summer season (the Western productions being *The Glacier Fox* [Japan]; *Gaijin, a Brazilian Odyssey* [Brazil]; *Four Friends* [America]; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [Italy, America and Belgium]; *The Boat Is Full* [Switzerland and West Germany]; and *The Last Metro* [France]).⁹⁴ While most films — whether from Hungary, the East or the West — were placed in category B, it was almost exclusively Western box-office hits that were included in category C. In the three seasons discussed above, the films on offer were as follows: eight Western films in the middle of 1980 (five American, one French, one Italian and one Japanese). The Film Directorate later included in category C two films to be released during the summer, one of which was the Hungarian thriller *Kojak in Budapest*.⁹⁵ All 12 category C films released in the summer of 1982 were made in the West (three of them were American and three Japanese). The 10 Western films released in the summer of 1983 also demonstrate how it was action films, comedies and “super-productions” with high ticket prices that were distributed in this group: *Stir Crazy* (America), *The Professional* (France), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (America), *Shogun's Ninja* (Japan), *Terminus* (West Germany), *Atlantic City* (Canada), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (America), *Cobra* (Japan), *Inspecteur la Bavure [Inspector Blunder]* (France), and *Outland* (America).

The Film Directorate also monitored audience numbers in and outside Budapest and kept a tally of the percentages (see Table 10).⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Letter of B. István Szabó to cinema-operating companies (17th March 1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 234.

⁹⁵ Letter from Deputy Director Péter Karikás to the directors of the county cinema-operating companies (8th May 1980). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 221.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Table 10 *Audience shares by country of production according to distribution in and outside Budapest in 1982 (%)*

	Hungarian	Soviet	Other Socialist countries	West
Provinces	21.9	12.3	6.8	59.0
Budapest	16.1	6.2	3.3	74.4

Source: Film Directorate

Cultural policy makers were thus forced to acknowledge that in 1982, around 60% of cinema goers in the provinces and almost three-quarters of cinema audiences in Budapest were watching primarily light-entertainment films produced in the West. In 1983, however, the share of spectators watching Western productions increased even further in Budapest, reaching as much as 79%.⁹⁷

This was such a marked shift in proportions that it provoked the disapproval of the Film Directorate. What was discussed in the mainstream media, however, was rather the threat to Western European cultural identity posed by the influence of America.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ From the previous decade, we know the proportions of screenings of Western films only: 43%–45% outside Budapest, and 52%–56% in the capital (see Table 10). Bearing in mind that a substantial number of Western films were not only screened more often but were also shown in bigger cinemas, and that light entertainment films attracted wider audiences, based on the above figures the proportion of viewers must already have been above 50% in the early 1970s in the provinces, and above 65% in Budapest.

⁹⁸ For example: “Half, or in many cases 60% of releases are American films, thus revenues are not garnered by European film makers but by the distributors and Hollywood. The biggest box-office hits, almost without exception, are American films, even in Europe, which puts the film industry in the Western half of Europe, which is anyway beset with financial difficulties, at a significant disadvantage.” György Gonda – Péter Szentgáli: *Hollywood offenzívája [Hollywood offensive]*. *Magyarország*, 1982/10, 12

We might add to this the data published in the *Film Yearbooks* from 1979 onwards. These data were at country level only and referred to film releases, and they likewise clearly illustrate the shift in proportions (see Table 11).⁹⁹

Table 11 *Change in the proportions of Western films shown in the given year in terms of releases, screenings, spectator numbers and revenue countrywide, 1979–1988 (%)*

Year	Releases	Screenings	Spectator numbers	Revenue
1979	41.6	57.3	73.6	n. a.
1980	42.0	60.4	77.5	n. a.
1981	39.2	59.1	74.1	n. a.
1982	39.9	62.0	78.5	n. a.
1983	41.8	60.8	76.4	87.1
1984	40.7	56.6	72.4	81.5
1985	45.0	50.6	73.7	82.7
1986	47.1	63.0	69.7	81.1
1987	45.8	67.7	75.3	83.2
1988	50.2	74.5	80.9	98.1

Source: Film Yearbooks

As the table shows, the proportion of Western films in terms of releases in the first half of the decade reached a

⁹⁹ Until 1984, the *Film Yearbooks* also published total figures according to groups of countries, but subsequently the respective figures were provided only per film. Sándor Papp (ed.-in-chief): *Filmévkönyv 1979* [Film yearbook 1979]. Magyar Filmtudományi Intézet és Filmarchívum (FITU), Budapest, 1980; Id.: *Filmévkönyv 1980*. FITU, Budapest, 1981; Id.: *Filmévkönyv 1981*. FITU, Budapest, 1982; Id.: *Filmévkönyv 1982*. FITU, Budapest, 1983; Id.: *Filmévkönyv 1983*. FITU, Budapest, 1984. István Karcsei Kulcsár, Márta Luttor and Lajos Sebestyén (eds.): *Filmévkönyv 1984*. FITU, Budapest, 1985; Id.: *Filmévkönyv 1985*. Magyar Filmintézet (MFI), Budapest, 1986; Z. Ágnes Erdélyi ed.-in-chief): *Filmévkönyv 1986*. MFI, Budapest, 1987; Id.: *Filmévkönyv 1987*. MFI, Budapest, 1988; Z. Ágnes Erdélyi and Lia Somogyi (eds.): *Filmévkönyv 1988/89*. MFI, Budapest, 1989.

significant level of around 40%; this share began to approach 50% in the second half of the decade, and in 1988 even exceeded 50%. The proportion of screenings, however, was higher than this, at around 60%, although it dropped noticeably in 1984–1985. However, this remained essentially imperceptible in terms of spectator numbers: audiences for Western films remained stable at above 70%, with the exception of 1986. From 1983, following the Political Committee's resolution on economic reforms in the cultural sphere, the *Film Yearbook* also revealed a restructuring in terms of revenue. Owing to the higher average number of tickets purchased for Western films, it moved up into a higher band. In 1988, however, it was almost exclusively Western films that generated revenue.

What is clearly apparent is the government's resolve in the mid-1980s to put a stop to the further incursion of Western films, which can most readily be seen in the reduction in the proportion of screenings: in 1985 — when the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party was celebrating the 40th anniversary of the country's liberation from German forces — the proportion of Western films dropped to almost 50%. However, this barely troubled cinema goers, who essentially continued to find their way to Western productions. Thus, no remarkable change took place, since cultural policy had little room for manoeuvre in the worsening economic conditions of the 1980s. Although the Film Directorate was still making efforts to improve the position of Socialist films in the middle of the decade, from 1987 it was unable to maintain the global proportions.

Besides, the films broadcast by Hungarian Television did nothing to popularise Socialist film production either. According to data from the *Film Yearbook*, in the 1979–1988 period, between 166 and 222 films were broadcast annually.

With the exception of two years, more than half of these were purchased from capitalist countries. These two years were 1984 and 1985, when the combined impacts of increased ideological rigour and import restrictions were experienced: the proportion of Western films dropped from 57% in 1983 to 37% in 1985. Between 1986 and 1988, the proportion of Western films shown on television returned to the earlier 53%, subsequently rising to the 60%–63% level typical of the early 1980s.¹⁰⁰

Late and new arrivals

By the end of the 1980s, Hollywood films had thus attained dominance in Hungarian cinemas, where programmes began to resemble those of Western European cinemas. However, it is also apparent that this was not a smooth process. Not only were certain downswings experienced in the first half of the decade in terms of the number of releases: there was no steady improvement in terms of how new the films were, either. The film admissions and film distribution authorities were unable to maintain the unequivocally “good report” earned in 1981. In that year, it had proved possible to keep the average age of the films released in the cinemas from the four big film-producing countries in the West — the USA, France, Italy, and England — to below 4 years (3.9), while 58.6% of films were shown in Hungarian cinemas within two years of their original release (i.e., films made in or after 1979). Within this group, the average age of the American releases was higher, at 4.5 years, and lower in the case of films originating from the other three countries. It can be seen from the data that

¹⁰⁰ The author’s own calculations, based on the respective data published in the *Film Yearbooks*.

the average age of American films — just as in the 1970s — remained for many years higher than the average age of films from the four countries combined — in other words, American films reached Hungarian audiences later than French films, which were almost permanently below the average age.¹⁰¹ Even so, it was still the case that well-known films reached cinemas relatively quickly. A few examples: *The Empire Strikes Back* was released in Hungarian cinemas in 1982, with two years' delay; *Outland* and *E.T.* were released in 1983 with a delay of two years and one year respectively following their world premieres; *Return of the Jedi* was first shown in 1984, also with a one-year delay; while audiences had to wait just two years for the Hungarian premiere of *Flashdance*.

Table 12 *Average age of American, French, Italian, and English releases in Hungarian cinemas in the 1980s*

	American	French	Italian	English	Total
1981	4.5	3	3	2.6	3.9
1982	4.5	2.1	2.4	2.5	3.7
1983	5	2.4	5.9	1.7	4.3
1984	6	2.2	2.7	3.9	3.9
1985	4.9	3.1	3.8	5.3	4.3
1986	8.3	2.1	6.5	3.6	6.1
1987	4.7	4.8	3.8	1.5	4.3
1988	4.4	3.3	5.4	5.2	4.4
1989	3.6	2.5	8.7	3.5	4.4

Source: Author's own calculations using film-related databases (IMDB, port.hu etc.)¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ The only exception was 1987, when two animated films (*Asterix the Gaul* and *Asterix and Cleopatra*) reached Hungary with a delay of 19 and 20 years respectively, which resulted in a significant worsening in the average age of French films.

¹⁰² Re-releases — that is, films that were screened in the cinemas again after a gap of several years — have not been included in the calculations.

The average age of Western films did not deteriorate significantly after 1981, while the most striking downswing was experienced in the case of American films. Nine Hollywood films were released in Hungarian cinemas in 1981 before they were two years old, while the respective total was nine in 1982 and eight in 1983. In 1982, Hungarian cinema goers were even able to watch a documentary about the life of Elvis Presley just one year after its original release.¹⁰³ Thus, while the films that starred the rock and roll legend did not make it to Hungary, at least stills and excerpts¹⁰⁴ from them did. In 1982, the year of the Hungarian premiere of the Elvis documentary, an Elvis fan club was even founded in Hungary, in Wesselényi Street in Budapest, with a substantial delay compared to the rockstar's heyday.¹⁰⁵

In each of the following two years, there were just four films that reached Hungary with minimum delay. This meant that the proportion of genuinely new releases, also among American films, fell significantly from the level at the beginning of the decade, when as many as 40% to 45% of films belonged among the latest productions. The low point was reached in 1985, when only a quarter of films that were less than two years old were Western productions, while in the case of American films the proportion was just one in six.

In other words, with limited resources available due to the country's critical currency situation, attempts were being made to manage Hungarian film imports in such a way that the quantity of imported films did not drop significantly. To achieve this, however, concessions had to be made in terms of qualitative expectations — that is, how recent the films were. Some of the late admissions were extremely significant

¹⁰³ (k. b.): Elvis Presley. *Magyar Nemzet*, 11th November 1982.

¹⁰⁴ Tamás Barabás: Elvis Presley. *Esti Hírlap*, 11th November 1982.

¹⁰⁵ Sándor Oszfolk: Elvis-klubok [Elvis clubs]. *Új Tükör*, 1983/4, 42.

from the perspective of film history: these included *Ben Hur*, which was released in 1982 after a delay of 23 years, and *The Godfather*, which was also shown in 1982, a full 10 years after it was made. Other latecomers were *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1983, and in 1985 the Hitchcock film *Vertigo* and the somewhat different class of horror film, *Jaws*. In these years, the number of latecomers was not particularly high: Hungarofilm reckoned with between four and eight annually.

The number of the most recent releases in the following years did not reach the same level as at the beginning of the decade either: in 1986, Hungarian audiences were able to enjoy seven films at most that were less than two years old, and eight in 1987. The exceptionally high average age of American films in 1986 was due not to the lack of new films, but to the rather high number of older films released that year. Including the revival of the film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They*, which had already been released in the 1970s, a total of eight films were shown in Hungarian cinemas, including three that were intended to introduce the oeuvre of outstanding directors, even if belatedly: Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and, after *The Godfather* films, Francis Ford Coppola's *You're a Big Boy Now*. There were even two disaster films that had not been welcome in the 1970s (*Earthquake* and *The Poseidon Adventure*), along with a western (*The Wild Bunch*) and a cartoon. In 1986 and 1987, a third of Hollywood films were revivals or late admissions.

The 13 relatively recently produced American films released in 1988 demonstrated that film admissions policy was beginning to catch up with the latest productions: new releases made up 37% of the American films screened. In the following year, however, it was new films that defined

Hollywood film imports: 53% of the American films released belonged to this category. While over a dozen older films were admitted in the interests of making up for earlier omissions, these included hits from earlier decades that had been much discussed in Hungary despite never being screened in cinemas: among them were the 1973 film *The Exorcist* (and its “companion” film *The Omen*), along with the 1962 film about the Normandy landings, *The Longest Day*.

Table 13 *New films made in America and the big film-producing countries in the West released in the 1980s*

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Less than two years old	34	25	16	20	15	20	24	31	64
Of these, American	9	9	8	4	4	7	8	13	44
As a percentage	58.6	49.0	38.1	37.7	26.3	37.0	37.5	41.3	50.0
Proportion of American films (%)	45.0	36.0	40.0	21.1	16.7	26.9	23.5	37.1	53.0
American films more than five years old	4	6	7	8	4	9	11	9	15
As a percentage	20.0	24.0	35.0	42.1	16.7	34.6	32.4	25.7	18.1

Source: Author’s own calculations using film-related databases (IMDB, port.hu etc.)

While cinemas began to open up to American action films and westerns in the 1970s, film admissions policy in the 1980s did less to hinder purchases of science-fiction and

horror films and the more violent action films, just as it did less to obstruct depictions of sexuality. However, it was the series of Bud Spencer and Terence Hill “fight movies” that represented the golden mean in this decade.

In the case of both blockbusters and films aspiring to a higher quality, the supply that reached Hungarian audiences can also be evaluated based on whether there were any significant films that never made it into Hungarian cinemas during the decade. There was a palpable change in this respect, too — while the 1970s had been the decade of catching up with westerns, for example, the 1980s made up for lost time when it came to horror films. As we have already seen, the *Jaws* films were screened in Hungary only after a decade’s delay, although the 1979 film *Alien* was already showing in Hungarian cinemas in 1981. Action and adventure films and science-fiction movies, however, “trickled” into Hungary with sometimes inexplicable omissions. The first *Rocky* film, for example, made it into the cinemas easily, although the sequels were not shown in Hungary until 1990 — not just Part IV, in which Cold War rivalry was played out in the ring, with Rocky defeating his Soviet opponent, but even Parts II and III as well. Even the first part of Stallone’s other blockbuster, *Rambo*, made in 1982, was not admitted. *Rambo* was considered to be contrary to the 1970s tendency towards a self-critical approach to the Vietnam War, which had led to the admission of several films for distribution in Hungary.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, viewed from the perspective

¹⁰⁶ “The danger inherent in the Rambo philosophy lies precisely in the fact that it does not settle for the psychotherapeutic handling of the trauma of Vietnam: it does not merely attempt to erase any memory of those ‘defeatist’ films (*Apocalypse Now*, *Coming Home*) in which the Vietnam aggression was depicted as shameful and infamous, but by championing the concept of patriotism, it rehabilitates those who were responsible for the Indo-Chinese escapade, and those who participated in it, by suggesting that the fault did not lie in the undertaking but in its flawlessly

of 1989, the reluctance displayed a few years earlier was less understandable: “The ban that has existed to date illustrates a unique mechanism of interpretation. The film deals with the rejection of a Vietnam War veteran by civilian society. The conflict degenerates to the point at which the soldier, if he wishes to remain alive, must rely on the fighting tactics he employed in the Far East. What was objectionable about this film? It was clearly negative that the Vietnam aggressor was portrayed as a good soldier (and that, in some flashbacks, the Viet Cong were depicted as abhorrent). At the same time, the American public has clearly had enough of the Vietnam myth — which is positive from the Soviet perspective; the U.S. enforcement agencies are also clearly depicted as unscrupulous — which also coincides with Soviet conceptions. So why was it that the first — negative — viewpoint was accorded the greatest weight at the time the film was banned?”¹⁰⁷

As a general rule, whatever the film admissions authorities deemed appropriate, and providing the purchases did not fall through for financial reasons, would sooner or later be screened in Hungarian cinemas. Later, in more than one case. The American film *The China Syndrome* might be mentioned as a specific example in this respect. The plot of the 1979 thriller/drama centres on the exposure of coverups surrounding a nuclear accident. The Film Directorate included it in its 1982 draft programme, although the planned national premiere on 6th May had to be postponed due to the intervention of the agitprop leadership¹⁰⁸ and in

reproducible execution.” Sándor Böcz: Hős kerestetik [Heroes wanted]. *Népszabadság*, 22nd July 1985. (My italics – R. T.)

¹⁰⁷ Gizella Vörös: R+R=S. S. Kérdések egy mítosz körül [R+R. Questions about a myth]. *Kultúra és Közösség*, 1990/2, 93.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum from B. István Szabó to Dezső Tóth (26th March 1982). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 230.

the end the film was not screened until January 1984. The reason behind the delay was that the construction of the nuclear power plant in Paks was then in its final phase — the plant finally went into operation in December 1982 — and the Party leadership wished to avoid any public opposition to nuclear power at this time.

In the final year of the party state era there was no openness to erotic films in the cinemas, or to erotic content in the publishing sector. The first erotic magazine, *Erato*, was published in 1988. This did not of course mean that the occasional Hollywood sex scenes were out of the question. While in the comedy *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask*, released in February 1984, Woody Allen merely talked about the average individual's sexual complexes,¹⁰⁹ the British film *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was released at the end of December, left nothing to the imagination. "Sylvia Kristel, already the embodiment of the superb Emmanuelle, pines with prodigious expertise, panting, sighing, and writhing. Just how Lady Chatterley should. But the director otherwise respects the rules of the game. While he demands a variety of poses from his infatuated protagonists (to the delight of the prurient spectator), having them romp with abandon in the grass, at the foot of the stairs, before the hearth, and sometimes — after all, variety is the spice of life! — even in bed, among the pillows, the filming remains impeccably tasteful throughout."¹¹⁰ The proportions, however, remained undisturbed: Hungarian film admissions policy continued to lean towards action films rather than erotica when meeting

¹⁰⁹ László Zöldi: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 23rd February 1984.

¹¹⁰ József Veress: A hét filmjei [Films of the week]. *Népszabadság*, 28th December 1984.

the Hungarian public's demand for entertainment — perhaps to the disappointment of many.¹¹¹ Not even the idea of releasing *9½ Weeks*, one of the biggest erotic sensations of 1986, within one or two years in Hungarian cinemas came up as a realistic option. On several occasions, the weekly journal *Film Színház Muzsika* referred to the film as the “tragic story of love that demands total self-sacrifice”, quoting articles published in the French-language magazine *CINE Revue*.¹¹² Besides, Kim Basinger's films were preceded by the actress's reputation as the “hottest woman on screen...”.¹¹³ The film was eventually released in cinemas in January 1990, at the time of the change of political regime. However, in autumn 1987, the management of the distribution company MOKÉP had suggested that it would be worth admitting the iconic Italian classic erotic film *Emmanuelle* to halt the slump in attendance figures, along with the American *Superman* films, the horror film *Poltergeist*, and two English James Bond films from the late 1970s.¹¹⁴

It can therefore be argued that in relation to entertainment films, the sensitivity threshold was lowered in the 1980s, with the removal of obstacles to the screening of many science-fiction, crime, and horror films. While members of the Hungarian public had been able to watch almost all the films that won important awards at the Oscar ceremonies in the

¹¹¹ “[B]ish-bash, bim-bam, beating each other's brains out, that kind of thing's allowed. Violence can be shown, but all you get is a glimpse of porno scenes, or not even that much. But if sex cinemas existed, there's no doubt the film distributors would see a profit in 5 or 10 years at most...” This criticism was aimed at the Film Directorate by a cinema goer from Debrecen, who complained about having to travel to Vienna to see an erotic film in the cinema. Letter from Zoltán T. to the Film Directorate (1983). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 235.

¹¹² Kilenc és fél [Nine and a half]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 28th June 1986, 25.

¹¹³ Nadine. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 10th January 1987, 25.

¹¹⁴ Letter from József Gombár to Ferenc Kóhalmi (1st October 1987). MNL OL XIX-I-22, box 256.

1970s — with the exception of *Patton* — here, too, a certain shift can be observed in the selection in the 1980s: on one side of the scales were the box-office hits that reached Hungarian cinemas relatively quickly, while on the other side were several films that were highly regarded on the other side of the Atlantic but not admitted to Hungary. At the same time, every one of the films that won the Academy Award for Best Picture — including three non-American films¹¹⁵ — was included on the programme in Hungarian cinemas. *Kramer vs. Kramer*, which won five Oscars in 1980, was released in Hungary as early as the following year, as were *Out of Africa* and *Platoon* in the second half of the decade. The 1989 publicity for *Rain Man* relied explicitly on its recent award. Intercom, the new distributor on the Hungarian market, emphasised that anyone purchasing tickets for *Rain Man* “felt that the film — because it was screened simultaneously with the West — had brought them closer to Europe.”¹¹⁶

However, the waiting time for the other three films (*Ordinary People*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *Amadeus*) was longer, at between four and six years. Although the stage version of *Amadeus* had already been performed in Hungary in the 1981/82 season,¹¹⁷ the film was not released in Hungarian cinemas until 1990. With respect to *Ordinary People* and *Terms of Endearment*, the critics also observed, on the one hand, that they belonged within the same trend as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, as films that broke away from the

¹¹⁵ The English film *Chariots of Fire* in 1982, the British-Indian film *Gandhi* in 1984, and Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* in 1989.

¹¹⁶ M. Zoltán Érsek: Megújuló filmforgalmazás [Film distribution revived]. *Magyar Hírlap*, 30th May 1989.

¹¹⁷ Source: <http://resolver.szinhasztortenet.hu/collection/OSZMI41909> (Downloaded: 24/03/2022.)

idealisation of traditional family relationships.¹¹⁸ On the other hand, parallels could be drawn between the melodrama of *Terms of Endearment* and *Love Story*: “There haven’t been this many tears shed in the cinema since ‘*Love Story*’.”¹¹⁹

Interestingly, the only film not admitted was *Reds*, which won an Oscar for Best Director and which told the story of John Reed, the American who chronicled the 1917 Russian Revolution. The public were informed by the American correspondent János Avar — since the film was discussed in the press — that Warren Beatty’s interpretation, as both director and actor, was not entirely in keeping with the Marxist-Leninist canon, although this had not raised problems in Yugoslavia, for example, where the film was shown: “Beatty is not on the political left, he is at most an idealist who became fascinated with a tragically short life that led from Harvard to Petrograd: he does not understand the Communists and their ideas, although he thinks he understands ‘Jack’ Reed, whom he portrays as an incredibly engaging figure on screen.”¹²⁰

Among the films that garnered Academy Awards for Best Actress and Best Actor, however, there were several that Hungarofilm did not purchase, even though six of them were featured at one or other of the European film festivals — in Karlovy Vary and West Berlin. Henry Fonda’s last film, *On Golden Pond*, won an award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. According to the Hungarian reviews, the film was old-fashioned and devoid of interest: “Rydell’s film is about the ugliness of aging, of course depicted very nicely

¹¹⁸ “A veritable onslaught of films dealing with family problems and the powerful relaxation of traditional notions has begun in recent years in America.” István Karcsei Kulcsár: Könyvek [Weepies]. *Magyarország*, 17th June 1984, 26.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ János Avar: „Vörösök”. A film, amely megrengette Amerikát [‘Reds.’ The film that shook America]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 22nd December 1981.

and sympathetically. But that's all it's about. [...] The film is reminiscent of the old Hollywood style, the Hollywood of the past, whose glitter now forms a delicate layer of dust on museum objects that preserve old-fashioned values."¹²¹ Two decades earlier, this would presumably have been the kind of Hollywood film on which Hungarian film importers would have pounced, along with the half dozen others that were typical of the films admitted at the time. At least in the "stand-by" period of détente that followed the years in which Soviet–American cultural exchange had foundered, the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who was an active figure in the normalising of relations, included it among those Hollywood films that deserved to be screened even in the Soviet Union. His words were quoted by a journalist writing for the newspaper *Magyarország*, and on reading them one becomes aware that Yevtushenko's rhetoric contains the kind of Hollywood clichés that had essentially disappeared from the Hungarian public sphere by the end of the 1950s: "According to [Yevtushenko], American film producers are making not only 'Warnography' (a portmanteau word coined by Yevtushenko himself from 'war' and 'pornography') (such as *Rambo*, *Red Dawn*, and *World War III*) but valuable films, too. None of these films, such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Amadeus*, *The River*, *On Golden Pond* [...] and *Terms of Endearment* have yet been seen by Soviet audiences."¹²²

The war films mentioned by Yevtushenko had not, of course, been released in Hungary, either. The reasons for the rejection of *Rambo* have already been discussed above. The two other war films mentioned by Yevtushenko dwell on the tensions between the two superpowers in the early 1980s.

¹²¹ Éva Bársony: Történelem és álmvilág [History and cloudland]. *Esti Hírlap*, 6th July 1982.

¹²² László Zsuzsics: Hídverés [Bridge building]. *Magyarország*, 1986/4, 27.

*Red Dawn*¹²³ envisions the joint invasion of the United States by the Soviets, Cubans and Nicaraguans, while *World War III* tells the story of a sabotage mission carried out by the Soviets in Alaska.¹²⁴ With a name reminiscent of a Hungarian agricultural cooperative, *Red Dawn* was also discussed in the Hungarian press, where emphasis was given to the fact that although the film was fiercely criticised even by American reviewers, it was a huge success overseas and led to aggression in cinema auditoriums.¹²⁵ Besides, in the spirit of growing Cold War hostility, the USA even nominated the film for the Cannes Film Festival in 1984.¹²⁶ Released in Hungary in 1989 and attracting 800,000 spectators, *Red Heat* — which was partly shot in Budapest — signalled a changing Cold War narrative: the Soviet policeman played by Schwarzenegger has to cooperate with his American counterpart to bring down a Georgian drug lord. Once they've dealt with the baddies, they sit down to chat about baseball.¹²⁷

The other Oscar-winning films that were not released — unlike the examples above — were not rejected by Hungarian decision makers on ideological grounds, but because they were not regarded by the Film Admissions Committee as particularly good films: This was primarily because Hungarian film distributors continued to look unfavourably

¹²³ Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087985/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 (Downloaded: 23/03/2022.)

¹²⁴ Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084919/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 (Downloaded: 23/03/2022.)

¹²⁵ Sándor Köröspataki Kiss: Vörös Hajnal Hollywoodban [Red Dawn in Hollywood]. *Új Tükör*, 1984/38, 42.

¹²⁶ Even during the period of improved Soviet–American relations, in 1987, an American film series (*Amerika*) was produced, which portrayed an America occupied by the Soviets, set in 1990s. Emma Piper-Burket: The History of America and Russia's Cinematic Cold War. Source: <https://www.rogerebert.com/features/the-history-of-america-and-russias-cinematic-cold-war> (Downloaded: 23/03/2022.)

¹²⁷ Ibid.

on the sentimental, melodramatic side of Hollywood. *Tender Mercies*,¹²⁸ about the comeback of an alcoholic country music singer, was regarded as a film of merely “local interest”, while after its screening in West Berlin, *Places in the Heart* — which evokes a nostalgia for the good old days and the American South that did not sit well in the Socialist Hungary of the 1980s — was dismissed as “sentimental claptrap”,¹²⁹ as was *The Trip to Bountiful*, which tells the story of a journey undertaken by a sick, elderly woman who yearns to revisit the town where she was born.¹³⁰ *The Color of Money*, which was also screened in West Berlin, was dismissed as a pool-hustler film lacking human depth or any content of public interest.¹³¹ Nor did Hungarofilm think much of the Robert Redford film *The Natural*, with its sentimental “comeback” theme, which belonged to the tradition of American sporting movies (although it failed to win an Oscar): “The blond, Redfordian naivety of this baseball talent, who returns after 15 years and starts over again practically from scratch, appeals to the American soul.”¹³²

¹²⁸ Since *Tender Mercies* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086423/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1) was not distributed in Hungary, the press referred to it using several different titles. Mihály Szalontay: Oscar-díjasok, 1984 [Oscar winners in 1984]. *Fejér megyei Hírlap*, 19th May; A. J.: Kiosztották az Oscar-díjakat [The Oscars have been awarded]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 11th April 1984.

¹²⁹ László Fábíán: A Berlinale mozizik [Berlinale screening]. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 9th March 1985, 8. “Robert Benton’s new film is nothing more than a reconstruction of the old Hollywood myths. The sugary sweet mythology of the rancher films of the past, which idealise the beauty and purity of country life with the help of the guardians of the family hearth, the brave, heroic women.” Ilona Gantner: Ma este díjkiosztás [This evening’s awards]. *Népszava*, 26th February 1985.

¹³⁰ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090203/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 (Downloaded: 23/03/2022.)

¹³¹ József Veress: Kudarcc minden mennyiségben [Unmitigated disaster]. *Népszabadság*, 25th February 1987.

¹³² János Avar: Az eltűnt idő nyomában [In search of time past]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 19th May 1984.



Hungarian movie poster of Star Wars.

Source: Filmévkönyv, 1979. [Film Yearbook, 1979] 139.

6. EPILOGUE: FROM THE EXPANSION OF SOVIET FILMMAKING TO HOLLYWOOD-STYLE ENTERTAINMENT – FOUR AND A HALF DECADES OF DEVELOPMENT IN HUNGARY

“The Uránia was the first cinema to open in Hungary; it was the cinema of the Nazis and the supporters of Hitler; it was then taken over by the state, thus the fact that the film was premiered in this venue has an almost symbolic significance”, reported the coalition-based daily newspaper *Szabadság* on 3rd February 1945.¹ The monumental news film, which the newspaper advertised under the title *Felszabadulás felé* [Towards liberation], became more widely known as *Az orel-i csata* [The Battle of Orel].² A few weeks later, Budapest’s other major cinema, the Corvin, also greeted the Red Army and survivors of the fighting with this same film.³ The failed German offensive, launched at the beginning of July 1943, is known in the history books as the (tank) Battle of Kursk. The victory over Germany and its allies was also presented to the Hungarian public as a symbolic success in the early months of 1945. The story of the battle was quickly made available not only on film but also in print publications: “Genuine, excellent writers such as Grossman, Ehrenburg and Tikhonov recorded the military action. After the Battle of Orel, the German troops were driven out of the territory of

¹ Kétezer méteres orosz híradófilm Budapesten [2000 m Russian news film in Budapest]. *Szabadság*, 3rd February 1945.

² Gábor Murányi: *Op. cit.*, 39.

³ BMA: Mozitörténet (1895-től napjainkig) [The history of cinema (from 1895 to the present day)]. Source: <http://bp-mozitortenet.hu/2010/11/08/mozitortenet-1895-tol-napjainkig/> (Downloaded: 19/04/2022.)

the Soviet Union, and this publication celebrates this great historical event.”⁴

This was the starting point in 1945: having expelled the German troops and liberated the country from the rule of the Arrow Cross fascists, the Soviet Union “arrived” in East-Central Europe as an occupying force, regarding it as a foregone conclusion that it would enforce its own interests in the region — in public life and the cultural sector, just as in the political sphere. At the time, this was still compatible with a multiparty system and pluralism in cultural life. In the cinemas operated by the four-party coalition — thanks to film distributors that operated on a market basis and an American export company with solid capital that had appeared by 1946 — audiences were soon presented with a genuine choice, based on which it also became obvious that nothing much had changed during the war years in terms of the preferences of Hungarian audiences. Despite the efforts of the rival Communist Hungarian Film Company (MAFIRT) and Szovexportfilm, Hollywood quickly began to reclaim the dominance it had enjoyed in the 1930s. The Hungarian film industry did nothing to hinder this, being hampered not only by the devastation of the war but also by diverging interests and struggles among the political players, which meant that scarcely any Hungarian films were produced for years after the economic situation of wartime.

By the second half of 1948, the effects of the Communist takeover had become apparent in the film and cinema industry, too, which closed the door against American films, although Western-made films that were considered more progressive were admitted and shown. The scanty

⁴ János Kelemen: *Szovjet könnyek Budapesten* [Soviet tears in Budapest]. *Szabad Szó*, 1st April 1945.

supply — made up chiefly of Soviet films, as well as some from Hungary and other Socialist countries — was enlivened by a few films at most originating from Western Europe or the Global South. At the same time, the thirst for films was occasionally — at least in the Soviet Union — alleviated by American trophy films looted during the war. Communist persecution spread to the American film industry, which was also affected by the impacts and objectives of the Cold War, while the East European press provided information about these persecutions in denunciatory reports. Dialogue between the two opposing blocs was also broken off in the film sector: during those years, anyone with a talent for filmmaking was forced to become a mouthpiece for anti-American propaganda. The encounter that took place in Cannes in 1951 — and the related conflicts — can thus be seen as something of an exception.

The gradual opening and the political changes that began after 1953 were very quickly visible in the data for cultural imports: as early as the following year, imports of films from the West began to approach one-third of total film imports. The rejection of American films became less stringent, although for the time being no films produced in the United States were purchased. Before 1956, the only American film to achieve success in the Soviet galaxy — *Salt of the Earth* — portrayed the oppressive nature of American capitalism. Only one American film — *Little Fugitive* — was distributed in Hungary before the revolution, at the beginning of 1956: although it was produced in the USA, it was made on the west rather than the east coast, and in terms of its style and message it represented a denial of the traditions of the Hollywood dream factory. In October 1956, a few days before the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution, however, a verbal agreement was reached about the return of Hollywood to

Hungary. Eric A. Johnston, a leading figure in the American film industry and a confidant of the U.S. president, was making efforts to expand the market for American films not only in Hungary, of course, but throughout the Soviet bloc.

The alignment of the countries lying within the Soviet sphere of influence is clearly demonstrated by the fact that in the second half of the 1950s, not only films from the West but American films, too, reappeared everywhere — with the exception of Albania⁵. Soviet efforts to ensure that the countries in the bloc harmonised their de-Stalinised cultural ambitions, including their film import and export policies and the processes of controlled opening, were still perceptible at that time. In this framework, it is worth examining how it was that, despite the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution and the growing hostility in Hungarian—American relations, Hollywood films were once again being screened in Hungarian cinemas from the end of 1957. In the same way, American social critical, realist literature — although filtered by various censorship mechanisms — was also being published in journals and books and performed on the stage. The Hungarian Revolution, or rather its defeat, did not therefore invalidate the process of cultural opening: as a temporary impact, however, it was Soviet films rather than films from the West — by way of audience neutralisation — that disappeared from cinema programmes, if only for a few months.

The task of the film authorities after 1956 was to represent Socialist cultural policy. To this end, they continued to

⁵ Rejecting de-Stalinisation and seeking an alliance with China, Albania took cautious steps only towards West European films. See: Elidor Mëhilli: Globalized Socialism, Nationalized Time: Soviet Films, Albanian Subjects, and Chinese Audiences across the Sino-Soviet Split. *Slavic Review*, 2018/3, 611–637. doi:10.1017/slr.2018.202

ensure a decisive numerical superiority for Socialist films by means of film purchases, although, due to the restricted supply, compromises had to be made in terms of quality. In the meantime, in the case of Western films, where there was a far wider selection from which to choose, attempts were made to uphold both ideological and quality-related criteria. However, at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, it became clear that a significant number of Western films — including a slowly increasing number of American movies — served the purposes of entertainment, a need that could not be met from the Socialist supply. Furthermore, from then on — around a decade after similar processes in the Anglo-Saxon world — the impact of television could also be felt in the eastern half of Europe: from 1961, cinema audiences began to shrink rapidly in Hungary. The Film Directorate attempted to respond: it was forced to make visible concessions in terms of admissions policy and hidden concessions in terms of film distribution. In the 1960s and 1970s, not only did the proportion of Western films rise slightly, but the number of screenings of Western films also rose — far more sharply. In the wake of this, an even bigger discrepancy emerged in terms of the offer available in cinemas in big cities compared to smaller settlements: in the cities, bigger audiences were able to watch, and were watching, a bigger number of Western films, and from the 1970s Socialist films no longer enjoyed an advantage in this context.

By the end of the 1960s, the Hungarian film authorities also abandoned their resistance to Hollywood films, while those who maintained their reluctance did so only in the case of the occasional film that was judged to be alien to Socialism. The film authorities made peace with westerns only at the beginning of the 1970s; with science-fiction movies by the end of the decade; and with horror films and melodramas

only during the 1980s. While countless American comedies, action films and crime thrillers had already been released in Hungarian cinemas in the 1970s, it was these that had a far greater impact on the character of cinema programmes than the kind of Hollywood productions, likewise guided by changing American expectations, that offered greater self-reflection and came closer to realism. Although, by the end of the decade — when a point of stability had been reached in Hungarian–American bilateral relations — American films had achieved the top spot within film imports from the West, there were still countless outstanding films that did not make it to Hungary despite having achieved worldwide acclaim, in many cases due to foreign exchange considerations rather than censorship decisions.

In 1980, the *Uránia* cinema was refurbished to the tune of 4 million forints: new seats were installed in the auditorium, and the “richly ornate interior” was also restored. The film selected by the Municipal Cinema Company (FŐMO) for the ceremonial reopening was the American thriller *Death Wish*, starring Charles Bronson.⁶ While not commending the company’s choice, Marxist critics did not in fact condemn the film too harshly,⁷ although scarcely three decades earlier they would certainly have referred to it as a conspicuous example of war psychosis and the conditioning of aggression. The keywords in this case were Korean war veteran, western-style plot, and serial killings.

⁶ *Magyar Hírlap*, 14th August 1980.

⁷ “The first 45 minutes are taken up with the lead-up to the subject — actor and spectator both flounder — while in the second 45 minutes the director rushes to get the ‘baddies’, practically any perpetrator of public scandal in New York, in front of the protagonist’s pistol. As a consequence, the conveyor belt sequence of murders becomes boring, devoid of meaning; it suggests, probably despite the director’s best intentions, that, in an alienated society, the alienated citizen can easily become enamoured of taking the law into their own hands.” László Zöldi: *Bosszúvágó* [Death Wish]. *Népszabadság*, 14th August 1980.

Thus 35 years after the opening of the Uránia following the Second World War, not only was there no Soviet — or Hungarian — film that the Budapest film distributor found appropriate for the gala premiere, but it actually selected a Hollywood action film that was far from ideologically unproblematic. It could easily have chosen Francesco Rosi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, an Italian anti-fascist film that was highly regarded even from the perspective of cultural policy.

With this decision, however, it was truly in advance of the 1980s. Ahead of a decade in which those who controlled cultural life were less and less able to impose a barrier to financial constraints and the spread of commercial films. They were drawn in this direction by technical, social and political forces. The spread of video cassette players and the rapid expansion of a black market in this new medium brought with them the danger that audiences would evade the channels controlled by censorship, while due to cross-financing there was a bigger and bigger shortfall in revenues. The predominantly young audiences, however, had grown up with a view of the cinema primarily as entertainment. Once in their twenties, the teenagers of the 1970s expected to see the kind of blockbusters that they had earlier missed out on — and most of them were able to pay the higher ticket prices to do so. And in the deteriorating economic situation, the mood-improving, and thus political, role of films intended to help people switch off — but not “switch over”⁸ — also increased.

Hungarian filmmaking, faced with increasingly demanding expectations in terms of economic efficiency, also tried

⁸ See the statement by Árpád Juhász, section head at the Film Directorate, published in 1977: “We did not admit explicitly harmful or kitsch films; films that switch viewers over rather than helping them switch off.” Julianna R. Székely: Akt, járulékkal [Nude, with extras]. *Új Tükör*, 1977/33, 8.

to catch up with these trends. Besides the financial and currency crises in the first half of the 1980s, this also played a role to some extent in the fact that the number of American films, after the upswing at the end of the 1970s, did not continue to rise in the 1980s. Even in this decade, Socialist film admissions policy stood in the way of Hollywood dumping. Ideological protection thus contributed simultaneously to national protectionism: otherwise, it could scarcely have been expected that a market of 10 million would have been capable of supporting the 20 to 30 films produced annually, and that, starting from the mid-1960s, Hungarian film production would have been present at the growing number of international film festivals with films that regularly won acclaim.

However, young audiences preferred to watch films from the West, and primarily from America, rather than this considerable number of Hungarian films and the predominant — in terms of number of releases — Socialist films, and it was these that provided over four-fifths of cinema revenues. In the words of the song *Adj gázt!* [Step on it!], performed by the band Neurotic, the first in Hungary to include elements of rap in its style, “The hero’s shot a dozen times / Walks off with barely a scratch / Blow down the barrel, spin the cylinder / Let’s do it like America”.⁹ In 1987, when, for the first time, more American films were shown in Hungarian cinemas than Hungarian or Soviet films, the words of the first stanza represented an obvious frame of reference for fans of the band who belonged to the younger generation. However, the Hollywood films released in Hungary also contributed to the positive image

⁹ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvUKUWEo2PM>. (Downloaded: 01/03/2022.)

of America. The “Hollywood emissaries” of American soft power — even if their presence was not immediately visible — contributed to the emergence of new concepts in place of the Soviet utopia that had disintegrated in the 1960s. Concepts in which an America that was rarely personally experienced but frequently encountered on the screen represented the baseline and the measure of progress, while American science-fiction films illuminated the future.

In 1989, with the ending of the monopoly in film admissions and film distribution, the foundations of Socialist film programming policy collapsed. However, with the elimination of state subsidies, the American films that now flooded into the country with no ideological control — in 1989, the number of American film releases already exceeded a third of the films on offer; in 1990 it approached half; while at the end of the decade, in 1999, it amounted to 68%¹⁰ — occupied an ever-increasing share of the shrinking market.

¹⁰ Orsolya Cserta: A kulturális piac (ki)alakulása Magyarországon [The shaping of the cultural market in Hungary]. *Statisztikai Szemle*, 2002/5–6, 591–593.



Caricature about the delays in film import. (Text: In the Christian era, what does 10 years here or there matter to MOKÉP?)

Source: Ludas Matyi, 1983/30. 2.

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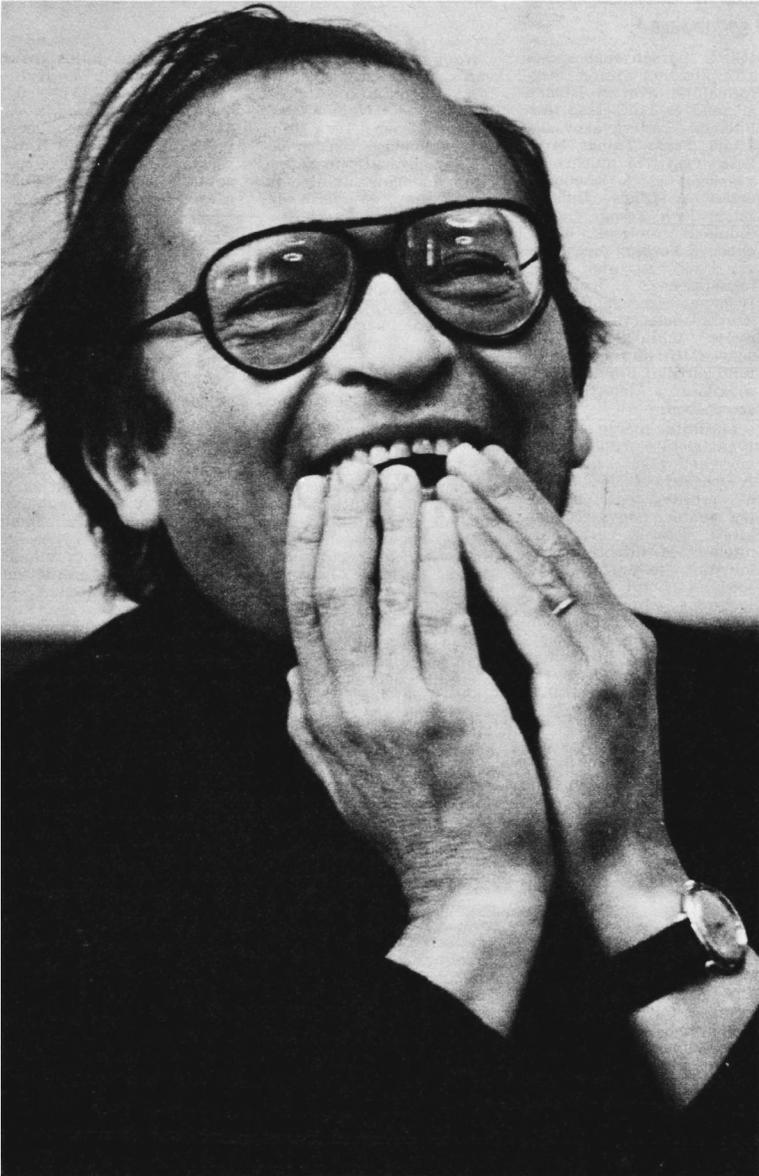
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Sidney Lumet in Budapest in 1981 on the American Film Days screening his films.
Source: Film Színház Muzsika, 1981/44. Original: Kata Kádár

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LIST OF AMERICAN FILMS RELEASED IN HUNGARY BETWEEN 1956 AND 1989

1956

Little Fugitive (1953; d.: Ray Ashley, Morris Engel, Ruth Orkin)

1957

Trapeze (1956; d: Carol Reed)

1958

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938; d: Michael Curtiz, William Keighley)

The Charlie Chaplin Festival (1916; d: Charles Chaplin)

Knock on Wood (1954; d: Melvin Frank, Norman Panama)

Marty (1955; d: Delbert Mann)

Phone Call from a Stranger (1952; d: Jean Negulesco)

Roman Holiday (1953; d: William Wyler)

1959

Captain Horatio Hornblower (1951; d: Raoul Walsh)

The Catered Affair (1956; r: Richard Brooks)

The Great Caruso (1951; d: Richard Thorpe)

Invitation to the Dance (1956; d: Gene Kelly)

The Seventh Cross (1944; d: Fred Zinnemann)

1960

12 Angry Men (1957; d: Sidney Lumet)

The Country Girl (1954; d: George Seaton)

The Defiant Ones (1958; d: Stanley Kramer)

Francis (1950; d: Arthur Lubin)

Saint Joan (1957; d: Otto Preminger)

Tom Thumb (1958; d: George Pal)
War and Peace (1956; d: King Vidor)
The Wizard of Oz (1939; d: Victor Fleming)

1961

The Apartment (1961; d: Billy Wilder)
Around the World in 80 Days (1956; d: Michael Anderson)
Bambi (1942; d: James Algar)
Cinderella (1950; d: Clyde Geronimi)
Julius Caesar (1953; d: Joseph L. Mankiewicz)
The Rainmaker (1956; d: Joseph Anthony)
Secrets of Life (1956; d: James Algar)

1962

The African Lion (1955; d: James Algar)
Carmen Jones (1954; d: Otto Preminger)
Come Back, Africa (1960; d: Lionel Rogosin)
The Golden Age of Comedy (1957; d: Robert Youngson)
Inherit the Wind (1960; d: Stanley Kramer)
On the Bowery (1957; d: Lionel Rogosin)
Pinocchio (1940; d: Ben Sharpsteen)
Shadows (1959; d: John Cassavettes)
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937; d: David Hand)
The Toast of New Orleans (1950; d: Norman Taurog)
Witness for the Prosecution (1957; d: Billy Wilder)

1963

The Absent Minded Professor (1955; d: Robert Stevenson)
The Court Jester (1955; rd: Melvin Frank, Norman Panama)
Middle of the Night (1959; d: Delbert Mann)
Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation (1962; d: Henry Koster)
Lust for Life (1956; d: Vincent Minelli)
Swiss Family Robinson (1960; d: Ken Annakin)

1964

20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954; d: Richard Fleischer)
The General (1926; d: Buster Keaton)
The Misfits (1961; d: John Huston)

One Hundred and One Dalmatians (1961; d: Clyde Geronimi,
Hamilton Luske, Wolfgang Reitherman)
Separate Tables (1958; d: Delbert Mann)
Singin' in the Rain (1952; d: Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly)
Son of Flubber (1963; d: Robert Stevenson)
Sweet Bird of Youth (1962; d: Richard Brooks)
Teacher's Pet (1958; d: George Seaton)

1965

The Diary of Anne Frank (1959; d: Georges Stevens)
America America (1963; d: Elia Kazan)
An American in Paris (1951; d: Vincente Minnelli)
East of Eden (1955; d: Elia Kazan)
The Legend of Lobo (1962; d: James Algar)
The Old Man and the Sea (1958; d: John Sturges, Fred
Zinnemann)
Phaedra (1962; d: Jules Dassin)
One Potato, Two Potato (1964; d: Larry Peerce)
Some Like It Hot (1959; d: Billy Wilder)

1966

Chaplin-mix (film compilation; d: Charlie Chaplin)
Image of Love (1965; d: Lou Stoumen)
Judgment at Nuremberg (1961; d: Stanley Kramer)
Love with the Proper Stranger (1963; d: Robert Mulligan)
The Man from the Diners' Club (1963; d: Frank Tashlin)
Nikki, Wild Dog of the North (1961; d: Don Haldane, Jack
Couffer)
Rhapsody in Blue (1945, d: Irving Rapper)
Sleeping Beauty (1959; d: Clyde Geronimi)

1967

Can-Can (1960; d: Walter Lang)
Dear Brigitte (1965; d: Henry Koster)
Irma la Douce (1963; d: Billy Wilder)
Jungle Cat (1960; d: James Algar)
Laurel and Hardy's Laughing 20's (1965; d: Robert Youngson)
A Man Called Adam (1966; d: Leo Penn)

A Streetcar Named Desire (1951; d: Elia Kazan)
Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines (1965; d: Ken Annakin)

1968

Battle of the Bulge (1965; d: Ken Annakin)
The Born Losers (1967; d: Tom Laughlin)
Cleopatra (1963; d: Joseph L. Mankiewicz)
Cool Hand Luke (1967; d: Stuart Rosenberg)
Good Times, Wonderful Times (1966; d: Lionel Rogosin)
The Heroes of Telemark (1965; d: Anthony Mann)
How to Steal a Million (1966; d: William Wyler)
A Man for All Seasons (1966; d: Fred Zinnemann)
The Taming of the Shrew (1967; d: Franco Zeffirelli)
Von Ryan's Express (1965; d: Mark Robson)
What a Way to Go! (1964; d: J. Lee Thompson)
Woman Times Seven (1967; d: Vittorio De Sica)

1969

Barefoot in the Park (1967; d: Gene Saks)
Born Free (1966; d: James Hill)
A Flea in Her Ear (1968; d: Jacques Charon)
The Fortune Cookie (1966; d: Billy Wilder)
The Great Race (1965; d: Blake Edwards)
Hombre (1967; d: Martin Ritt)
My Fair Lady (1964; d: George Cukor)
The Party (1968; d: Blake Edwards)
Sex and the Single Girl (1964; d: A szex és a hajadon)
Ship of Fools (1965; r: Stanley Kramer)
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966; d: Mike Nichols)

1970

Bedtime Story (1964; d: Ralph Levy)
Big Red (1962; d: Norman Tokar)
Billy the Kid (1930; d: King Vidor)
Finian's Rainbow (1968; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1968; d: Robert Ellis Miller)
In the Year of the Pig (1968; d: Emile de Antonio)

Luv (1967; d: Clive Donner)
Rachel, Rachel (1968; d: Paul Newman)
Romeo and Juliet (1968; d: Franco Zeffirelli)
Spartacus (1960; d: Anthony Mann, Stanley Kubrick)
True Grit (1969; d: Henry Hathaway)
The Waltz King (1963; d: Steve Previn)

1971

3:10 to Yuma (1957; d: Delmer Daves)
The Big Country (1958; d: William Wyler)
The Boston Strangler (1968; d: Richard Fleischer)
Buona Sera, Mrs. Campbell (1968; d: Melvin Frank)
Cactus Flower (1969; d: Gene Saks)
Darling Lili (1970; d: Blake Edwards)
Funny Girl (1968; d: William Wyler)
The Graduate (1967; d: Mike Nichols)
Hurry Sundown (1967; d: Otto Preminger)
In the Heat of the Night (1967; d: Norman Jewison)
If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium (1969; d: Mel Stuart)
The Magnificent Seven (1960; d: John Sturges)
The Odd Couple (1968; d: Gene Saks)
Oliver (1968; d: Carol Reed)
Petulia (1968; d: Richard Lester)
The Strawberry Statement (1970; d: Stuart Hagmann)
Take the Money and Run (1969; d: Woody Allen)
They Call Me Mister Tibbs! (1970; d: Gordon Douglas)
Zabriskie Point (1970; d: Michelangelo Antonioni)

1972

Catch- 22 (1970; d: Mike Nichols)
Change of Mind (1969; d: Robert Stevens)
Charly (1968; d: Ralph Nelson)
Easy Rider (1969; d: Dennis Hopper)
The Great White Hope (1970; d: Martin Ritt)
Hello, Dolly! (1969; d: Gene Kelly)
John and Mary (1969; d: Peter Yates)
Laurel and Hardy and the Ladies (compilation)
The Lawyer (1970; r: Sidney J. Furie)
The Lion in Winter (1968; d: Anthony Harvey)

Mackenna's Gold (1969; d: J. Lee Thompson)
The Molly Maguires (1970; d: Martin Ritt)
A New Leaf (1971; d: Elaine May)
A Night at the Opera (1935; d: Sam Wood)
The Out of Towners (1970; d: Arthur Hiller)
Psycho (1960; d: Alfred Hitchcock)
The Secret of Santa Vittoria (1969; d: Stanley Kramer)
Slaves (1969; d: Herbert J. Biberman)
They Shoot Horses, Don't They? (1969; d: Sydney Pollack)
WUSA (1970; r: Stuart Rosenberg)

1973

The Andromeda Strain (1971; d: Robert Wise)
Bless the Beasts & Children (1971; d: Stanley Kramer)
Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961; d: Blake Edwards)
Buck and the Preacher (1972; d: Sidney Poitiers)
Chato's Land (1972; d: Michael Winner)
Cold Turkey (1971; d: Norman Lear)
Divorce American Style (1967; d: Bud Yorkin)
Five Easy Pieces (1970; r: Bob Rafelson)
I Walk the Line (1970; d: John Frankenheimer)
The Last Picture Show (1971; d: Peter Bogdanovich)
Little Big Man (1970; d: Arthur Penn)
Modern Times (1936; d: Charlie Chaplin)
Mutiny on the Bounty (1962; d: Lewis Milestone)
The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes (1970; d: Billy Wilder)
Quackser Fortune Has a Cousin in the Bronx (1970; d: Waris Hussein)
Vanishing Point (1971; d: Richard C. Serafian)
West Side Story (1961; d: Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise)

1974

The African Elephant (1971; d: Simon Trevor)
Cabaret (1972; r: Bob Fosse)
The Concert for Bangladesh (1972; d: Saul Swimmer)
The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds
(1972; d: Paul Newman)
Follow me (1972; d: Carol Reed)
The French Connection (1971; d: William Friedkin)

The Gold Rush (1925; d: Charlie Chaplin)
The Great Dictator (1940; d: Charlie Chaplin)
The Glass House (1972; d: Tom Gries)
Macbeth (1971; d: Roman Polanski)
Once Upon a Time in the West (1968; d: Sergio Leone)
The Organization (1971; d: Don Medford)
Play It Again, Sam (1972; d: Woody Allen)
Ransom for a Dead Man (1971; d: Richard Irving)
Summer of '42 (1971; d: Robert Mulligan)
The Trial of the Catonsville Nine (1972; d: Gordon Davidson)
The Visitors (1972; d: Elia Kazan)
The War Between Men and Women (1972; d: Mel Shavelson)

1975

The Agony and the Ecstasy (1965; d: Carol Reed)
City Lights (1931; d: Charlie Chaplin)
The Conversation (1974; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
A Dream of Kings (1969; d: Daniel Mann)
Fuzz (1972; d: Richard A. Colla)
Limelight (1952; d: Charlie Chaplin)
The Long Goodbye (1973; d: Robert Altman)
Midnight cowboy (1969; d: John Schlesinger)
Oklahoma Crude (1973; d: Stanley Kramer)
Scarecrow (1973; d: Jerry Schatzberg)
The Stalking Moon (1968; d: Robert Mulligan)
Two People (1973; r: Robert Wise)
What's Up, Doc? (1972; d: Peter Bogdanovich)

1976

The Alpha Caper (1973; d: Robert Michael Lewis)
The Bank Shot (1974; d: Gower Champion)
Blume in Love (1973; d: Paul Mazursky)
The Circus (1928; d: Charlie Chaplin)
Conrack (1974; d: Martin Ritt)
Executive Action (1973; d: David Miller)
Journey Back to Oz (1972; d: Hal Sutherland)
Juggernaut (1974; d: Richard Lester)
The Kid (1921; d: Charlie Chaplin)
A King in New York (1957; d: Charlie Chaplin)

The Last Detail (1973; d: Hal Ashby)
Let the Good Times Roll (1973; d: Sidney Levin, Bob Abel)
Miracles Still Happen (1974; d: Giuseppe Maria Scotese)
Mr. Majestyk (1974; d: Richard Fleischer)
One Is a Lonely Number (1972; d: Mel Stuart)
Paper Moon (1973; d: Peter Bogdanovich)
Soldier Blue (1970; d: Ralph Nelson)
Taking Off (1971; d: Miloš Forman)

1977

The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother (1975, d:
Gene Wilder)
Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974; d: Martin Scorsese)
Breakout (1975; d: Tom Gries)
The Chaplin Revue (1959; d: Charlie Chaplin)
The Disorderly Orderly (1964; d: Frank Tashlin)
Jeremy (1973; d: Arthur Barron)
Lucky Lady (1975; d: Stanley Donen)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975; d: Milos Forman)
Papillon (1973; d: Franklin J. Schaffner)
The Prisoner of Second Avenue (1975; d: Melvin Frank)
Rage (1972; d: George C. Scott)
Silent Movie (1976; r: Mel Brooks)
The Sunshine Boys (1975; d: Herbert Ross)
T.R. Baskin (1971; d: Herbert Ross)
Zandy's Bride (1974; d: Jan Troell)

1978

The Blue Bird (1976; r: George Cukor)
Bobby Deerfield (1977; d: Sydney Pollack)
Coming Home (1978; d: Hal Ashby)
The Domino Principle (1977; d: Stanley Kramer)
The Drowning Pool (1975; d: Stuart Rosenberg)
The Entertainer (1960; d: Tony Richardson)
The Front (1976; d: Martin Ritt)
Harry and Tonto (1974; d: Paul Mazursky)
Murder by Death (1976; d: Robert Moore)
Rocky (1976; d: John G. Avildsen)
Serpico (1973; d: Sidney Lumet)

Silver Streak (1976; d: Arthur Hiller)
The Song Remains the Same (1976; d: Peter Clifton)
The Sting (1973; d: George Roy Hill)
That's Entertainment! (1976; d: Gene Kelly)
Three Days of the Condor (1975; r: Sydney Pollack)
The Towering Inferno (1974; d: Irwin Allen, John Guillermin)
The Way We Were (1973; r: Sydney Pollack)

1979

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968; d: Stanley Kubrick)
Birds of Prey (1973; d: William A. Graham)
Bonnie and Clyde (1967; d: Arthur Penn)
Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson
(1976; d: Robert Altman)
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969; d: George Roy Hill)
Chinatown (1974; r: Roman Polański)
Convoy (1978; d: Sam Peckinpah)
Cry for Me, Billy (1972; d: William A. Graham)
The Day of the Dolphin (1973; d: Mike Nichols)
Family Plot (1976; r: Alfred Hitchcock)
The Great Scout & Cathouse Thursday (1976; r: Don Taylor)
Griffin & Phoenix (1976; d: Daryl Duke)
How the West Was Won (1962; d: John Ford, Henry Hathaway,
George Marshall, Richard Thorpe)
Julia (1977; d: Fred Zinnemann)
The Jungle Book (1967; d: Wolfgang Reitherman)
The Last Waltz (1978; d: Martin Scorsese)
McQ (1974; d: John Sturges)
Once Upon a Time in the West (1968; d: Sergio Leone)
Opening Night (1977; d: John Cassavetes)
Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins (1975; d: Dick Richards)
Star Wars (1977; r: George Lucas)
Stunts (1977; d: Mark Lester)
The Sugarland Express (1974; d: Stephen Spielberg)
A Woman Under the Influence (1974; d: John Cassavetes)
Won Ton Ton, the Dog Who Saved Hollywood (1976; d: Michael
Winner)

1980

- Across the Great Divide (1976; d: Stewart Raffill)
Annie Hall (1977; d: Woody Allen)
Another Man, Another Chance (1977; d: Claude Lelouch)
Apocalypse Now (1979; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
The Ballad of Cable Hogue (1970; d: Sam Peckinpah)
The Best of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventures (1975; d: James Algar)
Birds Do It, Bees Do It (1974; d: Nicolas Noxon)
Bound for Glory (1976; d: Hal Ashby)
Capricorn One (1978; d: Peter Hyams)
California Suite (1978; d: Herbert Ross)
Coming Home (1978; d: Hal Ashby)
The Day of the Locust (1975; d: John Schlesinger)
Death Wish (1974; d: Michael Winner)
The Front Page (1974; d: Billy Wilder)
The Goodbye Girl (1977; d: Herbert Ross)
Hair (1979; dr: Milos Forman)
The Love Bug (1968; Robert Stevenson)
MASH (1970; d: Robert Altman)
Network (1976; d: Sidney Lumet)
Norma Rae (1979; d: Martin Ritt)
One Little Indian (1973; d: Bernard McEveety)
Phase IV (1974; d: Saul Bass)
The Scalphunters (1968; d: Sydney Pollack)
The Sea Gypsies (1975; d: Stuart Raffill)
The Serpent's Egg (1977; d: Ingmar Bergman)
Slaughterhouse-Five (1972; d: George Roy Hill)
An Unmarried Woman (1978; d: Paul Mazursky)
Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe? (1978; d: Ted Kotcheff)

1981

- Alambrista! (1977; d: Robert M. Young)
Alien (1979; d: Ridley Scott)
All That Jazz (1979; d: Bob Fosse)
Being There (1979; d: Hal Ashby)
Bloodline (1979; d: Terence Young)
Blue Collar (1978; d: Paul Schrader)

Breaking Away (1979, d: Peter Yeats)
Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977; d: Steven Spielberg)
Coma (1978; d: Michael Crichton)
Foul Play (1978; d: Colin Higgins)
Gunfight at the O.K. Corral (1957; d: John Sturges)
The Hurricane (1979; d: Jan Troell)
Kramer vs. Kramer (1979; d: Robert Benton)
The Long Riders (1980; d: Walter Hill)
Manhattan (1979; d: Woody Allen)
Movie Movie (1978; d: Stanley Donen)
Paradise Alley (1978; d: Sylvester Stallone)
Planet of the Apes (1968; d: Franklin J. Schaffner)
Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York (1975; d: Sidney J. Furie)

1982

1941 (1979; d: Steven Spielberg)
The Apple (1980; d: Menahem Golan)
Ben-Hur (1959; d: William Wyler)
The Black Stallion (1979; d: Carroll Ballard)
The Blue Lagoon (1980; d: Randal Kleiser)
Bronco Billy (1980; d: Clint Eastwood)
The Children of Sanchez (1978; d: Sanchez gyermekei)
Days of Heaven (1978; d: Terrence Malick)
The Godfather (1972; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
Heartland (1980; d: Richard Pearce)
House Calls (1978; d: Howard Zieff)
Kojak: The Marcus-Nelson Murders (1973; d: Joseph Sargent)
A Little Romance (1979; d: George Roy Hill)
The Mountain Men (1980; d: Richard Lang)
Nine to Five (1980; d: Colin Higgins)
Seems Like Old Times (1980; d: Jay Sandrich)
Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (1980; d: Irvin Kershner)
Starting Over (1979; d: Alan J. Pakula)
This Is Elvis (1981; d: Andrew Solt, Malcolm Leo)
This Is America (1977; d: Romano Vanderbes)
A Wedding (1978; d: Robert Altman)
Whitewater Sam (1974; d: Keith Larsen)

1983

- 10 (1979; s: Blake Edwards)
Atlantic City (1980; d: Louis Malle)
Blackbeard's Ghost (1968; d: Robert Stevenson)
The Chase (1966; d: Arthur Penn)
Coal Miner's Daughter (1980; d: Michael Apted)
Donald Duck and his Companions (1960; d: Dick Lundy, Jack Cutting, Jack King)
E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982; d: Steven Spielberg)
The Fantastic Seven (1979; d: John Peyser)
Four Friends (1981; d: Arthur Penn)
The Godfather: Part II (1974; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
Jesus Christ Superstar (1973; d: Norman Jewison)
Klute (1971; d: Alan J. Pakula)
The Legend of the Lone Ranger (1981; d: William A. Fraker)
Missing (1982; d: Constantin Costa-Gavras)
Outland (1981; d: Peter Hyams)
The Postman Always Rings Twice (1981; d: Bob Rafelson)
The Pursuit of D.B. Cooper (1981; d: Buzz Kulik, Roger Spottiswoode)
Rhinoceros (1974; d: Tom O'Horgan)
So fine (1981; d: Andrew Bergman)
Stir Crazy (1980; d: Sidney Poitier)

1984

- Absence of Malice (1981; d: Sydney Pollack)
Back Roads (1981; d: Martin Ritt)
The China Syndrome (1979; d: James Bridges)
Deathtrap (1982, d: Sidney Lumet)
The Dirty Dozen (1967; d: Robert Aldrich)
Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex... (1972; d: Woody Allen)
From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China (1979; d: Murray Lerner)
Harlan County U.S.A. (1976; d: Barbara Kopple)
Herbie Rides Again (1974; d: Robert Stevenson)
Kelly's Heroes (1970; d: Brian G. Hutton)
King Kong (1976; d: John Guillermin)
Looker (1981; d: Michael Crichton)

A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy (1982; d: Woody Allen)
Raging Bull (1980; d: Martin Scorsese)
Six Pack (1982; d: Daniel Petrie)
Star Wars: Return of the Jedi (1983; d: Richard Marquand)
True Confessions (1981; d: Ulu Grosbard)

1985

Android (1982; d: Aaron Lipstadt)
Breakin' (1984; d: Joel Silberg)
Dragonslayer (1981; r: Matthew Robbins)
Eyewitness (1982; d: Peter Yates)
Flashdance (1983; d: Adrian Lyne)
Hangar 18 (1980; d: James L. Conway)
Hanky Panky (1982; d: Sidney Poitier)
High Risk (1981; d: Stewart Raffill)
Jaws (1975; d: Steven Spielberg)
Koyaanisqatsi (1982; d: Godfrey Reggio)
Marathon Man (1976; d: John Schlesinger)
Nighthawks (1981; d: Bruce Malmuth, Gary Nelson)
Ordinary People (1980; d: Robert Redford)
Prince of the City (1981; d: Sidney Lumet)
Ragtime (1981, r: Miloš Forman)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981, d: Steven Spielberg)
Sophie's Choice (1982; d: Alan J. Pakula)
Stranger Than Paradise (1984; d: Jim Jarmusch)
Staying Alive (1983; d: Sylvester Stallone)
Tootsie (1982; d: Sydney Pollack)
Vertigo (1958; d: Alfred Hitchcock)
Victory (1981; d: John Huston)
Whose Life Is It Anyway? (1981; d: John Badham)

1986

To Be or Not to Be (1983; d: Alan Johnson)
Blue Thunder (1983; d: John Badham)
Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo (1985; r: Sam Firstenberg)
The Cannonball Run (1981; d: Hal Needham)
Donald Duck's Summer Magic (1977; d: Charles Nichols, Jack
Hannah, Milt Schaffer)
Earthquake (1974; d: Mark Robson)

Grace Quigley (1984; d: Anthony Harvey)
 Hammett (1982; d: Wim Wenders)
 Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984; d: Steven Spielberg)
 Krull (1983; r: Peter Yates)
 Ladyhawke (1985; d: Richard Donner)
 Maria's Lovers (1984; d: Andrey Konchalovskiy)
 Mary Poppins (1964; d: Robert Stevenson)
 The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956; r: Alfred Hitchcock)
 Popeye (1980; d: Robert Altman)
 The Poseidon Adventure (1972; d: Ronald Neame)
 Rear Window (1954; d: Alfred Hitchcock)
 Romancing the Stone (1984; d: Robert Zemeckis)
 Triumphs of a Man Called Horse (1983; d: John Hough)
 Under Fire (1983; d: Roger Spottiswoode)
 Unfaithfully Yours (1984; d: Howard Zieff)
 Walt Disney's Cartoon Carousel (1975; d: Charles Nichols, Jack Hannah, Jack Kinney)
 The Wild Bunch (1969; d: Sam Peckinpah)
 You're a Big Boy Now (1966; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
 Zelig (1983; d: Woody Allen)

1987

48 Hrs. (1982; d: Walter Hill)
 Annie (1982; d: John Huston)
 Back to the Future (1985; d: Robert Zemeckis)
 The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez (1982; d: Robert M. Young)
 Beverly Hills Cop (1984; d: Martin Brest)
 The Bounty (1984; d: Roger Donaldson)
 Broadway Danny Rose (1984; d: Woody Allen)
 A Chorus Line (1985; d: Richard Attenborough)
 The Cotton Club (1984; d: Francis Ford Coppola)
 Cutter's Way (1981; d: Ivan Passer)
 Desperately Seeking Susan (1985; d: Susan Seidelman)
 Enter the Ninja (1981; d: Menahem Golan)
 From Here to Eternity (1953; r: Fred Zinnemann)
 F/X (1986; d: Robert Mandel)
 Heart Like a Wheel (1983; d: Jonathan Kaplan)
 Heartaches (1981; d: Donald Shebib)

Herbie Goes Bananas (1980; d: Vincent McEveety)
Honeysuckle Rose (1980; d: Jerry Schatzberg)
Jagged Edge (1985; d: Richard Marquand)
Jaws 2 (1978; d: Jeannot Szwarc)
Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985; d: Hector Babenco)
Love Streams (1984; d: John Cassavetes)
Out of Africa (1985; d: Sydney Pollack)
Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid (1973; d: Sam Peckinpah)
Runaway (1984; d: Michael Crichton)
Silverado (1985; d: Lawrence Kasdan)
Table for Five (1983; d: Robert Lieberman)
Tempest (1982; d: Paul Mazursky)
Terms of Endearment (1983; d: James L. Brooks)
To Live and Die in L.A. (1985; d: William Friedkin)
Trading Places (1983; d: John Landis)
Windwalker (1980; d: Kieth Merrill)
Yellow Hair and the Fortress of Gold (1984; d: Matt Cimber)
Young Frankenstein (1974; d: Mel Brooks)

1988

After Hours (1985; d: Martin Scorsese)
Aliens (1986; d: James Cameron)
The Bedroom Window (1987; d: Curtis Hanson)
Big Trouble in Little China (1986; dr: John Carpenter)
Birdy (1984; d: Alan Parker)
Black Widow (1987; d: Bob Rafelson)
Blade Runner (1982; d: Ridley Scott)
Cobra (1986; d: George P. Cosmatos)
The Color Purple (1985; d: Steven Spielberg)
Down by Law (1986; d: Jim Jarmusch)
Draw! (1984; d: Steven Hilliard Stern)
The Final Countdown (1980; d: Don Taylor)
Hannah and Her Sisters (1986; d: Woody Allen)
Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo (1977; d: Vincent McEveety)
The Jewel of the Nile (1985; d: Lewis Teague)
Labyrinth (1986; d: Jim Henson)
The Last Starfighter (1984; d: Nick Castle)
The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh (1977; John
Lounsbery, Wolfgang Reitherman)

Parades (1972; d: Robert J. Siegel)
Platoon (1986; d: Oliver Stone)
The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985; d: Woody Allen)
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975; d: Jim Sharman)
Runaway Train (1985, d: Andrey Konchalovskiy)
The Secret of NIMH (1982; d: Don Bluth)
Short Circuit (1986; d: John Badham)
Soul Man (1986; d: Steve Miner)
The Sure Thing (1985, d: Rob Reiner)
The Terminator (1984; d: James Cameron)
¡Three Amigos! (1986; d: John Landis)
Tokyo pop (1988; d: Fran Rubel Kuzui)
Touch and Go (1986; d: Robert Mandel)
TRON (1982; d: Steven Lisberger)
Westworld (1973; d: Michael Crichton)
Witness (1985; d: Peter Weir)

1989

Angel Heart (1987; d: Alan Parker)
Barabbas (1961; d: Richard Fleischer)
Batman (1989; d: Tim Burton)
Beverly Hills Cop II (1987; d: Tony Scott)
Blind Date (1987; d: Blake Edwards)
Broadcast News (1987; d: James L. Brooks)
Bullitt (1968; d: Peter Yates)
The Care Bears Movie (1986; d: Arna Selznick)
Children of a Lesser God (1986; d: Randa Haines)
Cocktail (1988; d: Roger Donaldson)
Coming to America (1988; d: John Landis)
Commando (1985; d: Mark L. Lester)
Cop (1988; d: James B. Harris)
Dangerous Liaisons (1988, d: Stephen Frears)
Deadly Obsession (1988; d: Hodi Jenő)
Death Wish 3 (1985; d: Michael Winner)
Die Hard (1988; d: John McTiernan)
Dirty dancing (1987; d: Emile Ardolino)
Empire of the Sun (1987; d: Steven Spielberg)
The Exorcist (1973; d: William Friedkin)
Extremities (1986; d: Robert M. Young)

Fatal Attraction (1987; d: Adrian Lyne)
Fist Fighter (1989; d: Frank Zuniga)
The Fly (1986; d: David Cronenberg)
Ghostbusters (1984; d: Ivan Reitman)
Good Morning, Vietnam (1987; d: Barry Levinson)
Gremlins (1984; r: Joe Dante)
Hairspray (1988; d: John Waters)
Haunted Honeymoon (1986; d: Gene Wilder)
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989; d: Steven Spielberg)
Innerspace (1987; d: Joe Dante)
Invaders from Mars (1986; d: Tobe Hooper)
Iron Eagle (1986; d: Sidney J. Furie)
Jaws: The Revenge (1987; d: Joseph Sargent)
K-9 (1989; d: Rod Daniel)
The Killing of America (1981; d: Sheldon Renan)
Legal Eagles (1986; d: Ivan Reitman)
Lethal Weapon (1987; d: Richard Donner)
Licence to Kill (1989; d: John Glen)
Lone Wolf McQuade (1983; d: Steve Carver)
The Longest Day (1962; d: Andrew Marton, Bernhard Wicki,
Darryl F. Zanuck, Gerd Oswald, Ken Annakin)
The Land Before Time (1988; d: Don Bluth)
Lock Up (1989; d: John Flynn)
Mamba (1988; r: Mario Orfini)
Manhunter (1986; d: Michael Mann)
Marie (1985; d: Roger Donaldson)
Midnight Run (1988; d: Martin Brest)
Moonwalker (1988; d: Colin Chilvers, Jerry Kramer, Jim
Blashfield)
The Morning After (1986; d: Sidney Lumet)
The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad! (1988; d: David
Zucker)
New York Stories (1989; d: Francis Ford Coppola, Martin
Scorsese, Woody Allen)
Nutcracker (1986; d: Carroll Ballard)
Nuts (1987; d: Martin Ritt)
The Omen (1976; d: Richard Donner)
Once Upon a Time in America (1984; d: Sergio Leone)
Police Academy (1984; d: Hugh Wilson)
Police Academy 2 – Their First Assignment. (1985; d: Jerry Paris)

Police Academy 3 – Back in Training (1986; d: Jerry Paris)
Prince of Darkness (1987; d: John Carpenter)
Project X (1987; d: Jonathan Kaplan)
Radio Days (1987; d: Woody Allen)
Rain Man (1988; d: Barry Levinson)
Red Heat (1988; d: Walter Hill)
Road House (1989; d: Rowdy Herrington)
RoboCop (1987; d: Paul Verhoeven)
Running Scared (1986; d: Peter Hyams)
Sahara (1983; d: Andrew V. McLaglen)
Slayground (1984; d: Terry Bedford)
Starman (1984; d: John Carpenter)
The Swap (1979; d: Jordan Leondopoulos)
Three Men and a Baby (1987; d: Leonard Nimoy)
Tough Guys (1986; d: Jeff Kanew)
Twins (1988; d: Ivan Reitman)
Wall Street (1987; d: Oliver Stone)
WarGames (1983; d: John Badham)
White Dragon (1987; d: Janusz Morgenstern, Jerzy Domaradzki)
Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988; d: Robert Zemeckis)
Willow (1988, d: Ron Howard)
The Witches of Eastwick (1987; d: George Miller)
Wrong Is Right (1982; d: Richard Brooks)

Films produced in American–Hungarian coproduction

The Golden Head (1964; d: Richard Thorpe, James Hill)
The Boys of Paul Street (1969; d: Zoltán Fábri)
Brady's Escape (1983; d: Pál Gábor)
Lily in Love (1984; r: Károly Makk)