

## Remarks on The Confrontation & an Interview With Jancsó

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Miklós Jancsó's first film in colour, *The Confrontation*, tells the story of a typical ultra-left-wing Hungarian student group, members of the Nekosz movement, in 1947, after the Communist Party had taken over complete control of the country. Both Jancsó (a Soviet prisoner of war who studied law and joined the Communist Party in 1946) and his scriptwriter, Gyula Hernádi, played an active part in the Nekosz movement, students of the People's Colleges, who concerned themselves with revolutionary action to bring about changes in education. The student group in *The Confrontation* move in on a secondary school run by the Catholic Church using creative and idealistic methods, including singing and dancing, to bring open debate into the classrooms. When this produces no response, the group dismisses its secretary, the main advocate of these non-rational methods, and turns to punitive means. The new group leader claims that the pupils' behaviour - that's to say, their silence, their lack of response - is passive fascism and must be countered by revolutionary terror. However, members of the Party central office arrive and demand, in a thoroughly totalitarian manner, the re-instatement of the original group secretary, not so much it seems, because they support his methods, nor even because they disapprove of the terror, but rather in order to stifle independent, unsanctioned actions by members of the party.

According to the official press handout, *The Confrontation* is one of the most searching examinations of communist morality ever to have come out of a communist country, dealing with what is referred to in communist countries as 'the alienation of revolutionary power', i.e. the alienation of the revolution both from the people for whose sake it was made, and from its own democratic and libertarian ideals." These things are quite true, and are supported in a vague kind of way by the average critic, eager perhaps for a doctrinal lead. Indeed, the story seems a simple one, but closer examination reveals a good many subtleties and ambiguities in it, without an understanding of which the film is liable to seem trite and simplistic. Moreover, Jancsó's style is as oblique as always, and a number of "facts" contained in the story only emerge indirectly during its course.

Most critics tend to report such facts as if they were conspicuously given - in fact they tend to simplify the story, unaware, it seems, that it is often the ambiguities and indirectnesses of the style that contain the crux of the film. To me, Jancsó's films share especially with those of Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini and Resnais, an obliqueness and ambivalence which led Susan Sontag to write of Bergman's *Persona* that "even the most skilful attempt to arrange a single plausible anecdote out of the film must leave out or contradict some of its key sections, images and procedures: Attempted less skilfully, it has led to the flat, impoverished and partly inaccurate accounts of Bergman's film promulgated by most reviewers and critics." I think these remarks apply equally to *The Confrontation*. But the ambiguities - implicit, without being fully spelled out - are absolutely crucial to the structure of the art.

The film opens with the Nekosz group on its way to the school - but this is a fact of which we are not yet aware; all we can see is that here is a group of lively youngsters. Inexplicably, they stop a group of police who come driving along the road, and start singing and dancing with them, playfully jumping, shoving and pushing each other into a reservoir by the roadside. We see that one of the students - who turns out to be the

secretary - and one of the police - who turns out to be the young police officer - know each other. Only at a much later stage do we discover that they were at college together. At this point we can be aware of little more than a feeling of camaraderie which nonetheless is conditioned by what we may somehow or other the equals of the police. The relationship of the students to the police is a main sub-theme in the film, and the police officer himself plays a particularly ambivalent role.

The assumed camaraderie finally begins to give way when the police officer asks the students' help in weeding out a small number of counter-revolutionaries among the pupils - at the school. The secretary is desperately reluctant to be seen to cooperate with the police. He pleads with the officer not to do anything which would destroy the first traces of trust which he believes he has at last begun to draw out of the pupils. (This is the scene which Jancsó refers to in the interview below when everyone sings and dances with the folk musicians, and the police officer comments, "You are the sons of the same people" - does his use of the word "you" effectively exclude himself? If so, this is a significant declaration.) The officer is adamant, concerned only with the job at hand, and most of all, strong in the knowledge that he doesn't really need the students' help at all: asking for it was an act of humouring them. But then he doesn't seem openly to approve after the secretary has been dismissed and the group has begun its punitive counter-action, although his actions were obviously instrumental in bringing about this change of regime. Finally when the girl who led the new regime has been dismissed by the Party officials, and she is wandering by the reservoir of the film's opening, the young officer consoles her with an enigmatic remark about the roles that both of them will be called on to play in the future. The still sheet of water which lies undisturbed except for the high spirits of the students symbolises, perhaps, the role of illusion, like a mirror to the impulsive belief in their own vision which so strongly motivates the students, both in their original expedition, and in their internal coup.

A second important sub-theme concerns one of the school's pupils, a Jew, who was kept safe hidden by the Catholics during the war. He is the only pupil who shows any kind of actual response to the Nekosz students, and his response is critical. Cast in a perhaps typical symbolic role for a Jew, it is through his agency that the students are led at least to the brink of real questioning of their activities. In comparison with the problem which he sets them, the questions which they set the pupils to answer in open debate - stock ideological questions about "the meaning of history" and so forth - show a singular lameness and absence of imagination.

I have said that the style of *The Confrontation* is oblique, as always in Jancsó's films. Some critics have tried to make out that here, in his first colour film, there is a new stylistic departure. But as Jancsó himself makes clear in the interview below, *The Confrontation* participates in a developing technique which has so far reached its furthest point in *Sirocco*: long takes in which the camera defines the action, moving, gliding round the actors whom it seems to circumscribe, to pin down, almost impassively, in their roles. When I asked Jancsó about his technique, and he replied that he constantly improvised, I have to confess I was surprised. And yet, as an example of the kind of thing which struck me, I had referred to the single element which Jancsó later admitted was calculated - the way the camera picks out a character who suddenly comes into focus, both in the technical and the dramatic sense. It is also clear that he relies a great deal on the atmosphere created by the setting in order to ensure a consistency of image, and hence the appearance of pre-determination, in the - as he puts it - accidental compositions of the camera. But this means that the enclosed areas of the school do not

mark a different style from the horizontal expanses of *The Round-Up* or *The Red and the White*. On the contrary, the same concept of the stylistic function of space operates here as in the earlier films. Thus, in the earlier films, space defines the relationship of the men who are let loose and run wildly across the plains, to their pursuers chasing them on horseback. Remember, for example, the chilling casualness with which the pursuers wait before setting after them in *The Round-Up*, knowing that they can't get far. So in the confined spaces of *The Confrontation*, the Nekosz students move in perfect, army-like formation at unspoken commands, herding the straggling lines of pupils in their own playground, across the same spaces which are, in another moment, filled with the organically weaving lines of the folk dances.

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The interview which now follows was recorded in London (with the aid of an interpreter) in the spring, when Jancsó visited England for the opening of *The Confrontation* at the Academy Cinema.

Since Jancsó was himself a member of just such a group as he portrays in the film, I began by asking him what type of role he played in the group.

"In fact, twenty or twenty-five years ago, none of the roles was exactly the same as in the film. The film already embodies the experiences, the lessons of the last twenty-five years." But it seems in the film that he is more sympathetic to the secretary of the group who is dismissed, who hopes to achieve revolutionary reforms by creative means, than with any other group or individual.

"I am more in sympathy with democracy, naturally." What does he mean by democracy? (Laughs.) "By democracy, I mean the use of the least possible violence, achieving success by the work of the ordinary people. In the final analysis, democracy is a state of affairs where the majority is in power allowing the voice of opposition to make itself heard."

Is this the state of affairs in Hungary today?

"To be able to answer this question directly, you would have to know so much about Hungary and its history. But I can tell you that the present position is the best that has been for a very long time.

The questions turned towards Czechoslovakia. Jancsó intimated that if this particular line of questioning continued, he would find it very difficult to answer, so we returned to *The Confrontation*. It's a very complex film; how conscious was he when he made it, of the different possible levels of interpretation?

"I don't like interpreting my own films in retrospect. I like interpreting other people's films. But let me answer you like this: I knew, when I made this film with my friend Hernádi (who wrote the script) that it was a timely film, as well as being historical. It has personal meanings, because we lived through it, but we *did* want it to be didactic, to bring some lessons home in connection with various questions of the time."

Were these lessons directed more at people in Communist countries, or were they equally applicable to people in Western countries?

"I couldn't answer that. I know one thing, though: and that is that all revolutionary movements show a certain similarity. And not only revolutionary movements, but human groups in general. The question of what it means to be in power, of what it means to be broken up under power, these are similar wherever they arise."

There are many idealistic left-wing young people in the West who would like to do things the way the Secretary in the film wanted to do them. Were Jancsó and Hernádi conscious not only of the historical importance of the subject in Hungary, but of its contemporary importance to such left-wing groups in the West? "Yes." But the Secretary was thwarted by some kind of imminent fascism. Did Jancsó see the same thing threatening idealism now?

"This is a more complicated matter. I also think there is a danger of fascism in the world, and in these left-wing groups too. I'll give you an example. I have a young friend in France who made a film about Rudi Dutschke, before he was shot. The film is very moving. Dutschke is very intelligent, a real revolutionary, very honest, you could only be enthusiastic about him. But there came a point in the film where I felt very uneasy: Dutschke and his friends are taking part in a large meeting, several thousand youngsters are present. His friends and his opponents also speak. Amongst his opponents there are also extremists, naturally. Let us call them extreme right. One of these opponents, a young teacher, is suddenly surrounded by Dutschke's friends, dragged down from the platform and taken out; they simply threw him out as if he were an animal, amidst the approval of all. Then I felt, you know, I lost my pleasure in it. Although I know that against those who use violence only the true revolution has effect. Young colonels who kill anyone who is in favour of democracy can't be fought in any other way but violence. So to speak plainly, I'm not an enemy of violence, but I'm deeply offended by inhuman violence. Naturally against inhuman violence, inhuman violence must be used."

Does this mean that when the Police Officer in *The Confrontation* tells the Secretary that he is a romantic, that Jancsó agrees with him, that Jancsó is saying that romantic idealism doesn't work?

"In my opinion, you can only do things romantically. I think the possibility of direct democracy always remains a little romantic. We can't do anything else. We must always stand by this because it's the only possible way for humanity."

Did Jancsó mean the epithet "romantic" historically or philosophically?

"Historically."

In other words, of the early nineteenth century?

"A little."

Then it leads to another question: Would it be right to identify the creative means the Secretary was trying to use at the school with the romantic idea of aesthetic education, reaching for freedom through art, and through creative activity, an idea which left-wing student movements in the West have learnt from the writings of Herbert Marcuse, who inherited them from Schiller? [See the chapter 'The Aesthetic Dimension' in Marcuse's *Eros & Civilisation*.]

"Not quite. I also advocate Schiller's ideas because I also advocate reaching for freedom without causing deaths. Art is a good means for expressing yourself, for fulfilling yourself, because it doesn't kill anybody or harm anybody, so Schiller's ideas are quite right for anyone who doesn't engage in politics. But to those who want to shape society Schiller says very little, because to achieve freedom in art is very easy, but in social life it's difficult. The Secretary wants to achieve freedom in society, and that's a much more difficult thing. He wants to shape society."

But Jancsó said he intended his film to be didactic. Doesn't this mean that to some extent he hopes he can shape society through his art? "Yes, always." So when he said he was something of a romantic, he meant it in this sense? "Yes, in this sense, too."

What of the role of music in the film? There is a great deal of singing and dancing.

Did Jancsó feel that people's differences are somehow submerged in music?

"On the one occasion when they dance together, their differences are submerged. When the folk musicians come, they achieve a sense of unity, because after all, they are the sons of the same nation. There is a section in the dialogue which expresses this, when the police officer says it: "You are the sons of the same people."

What value does Jancsó place on music in the film?

"I don't think anything else but a force to give atmosphere, a force to create a mood into which the people fit. So the sounds don't have a 'philosophical' value, but a much more ancient meaning. It's like a ritual."

What value does Jancsó place on music in his own life?

"I like music very much, although I use little of it in my films."

Would he consider it a compliment if one said that his films possessed a very musical character in their construction?

"Yes, I would consider it a compliment, although some people express this differently, and do not mean it as a compliment - they say my films are *lyrical*; and that means I do not achieve the aims I set myself, which is to be intellectual. On the contrary, they say that my films have nothing to do with thinking, and yet *my* aim is to make people think."

Turning to questions of technique: one gets the impression that everything is highly calculated, for example the exact moment when someone comes into focus as focus is pulled on the camera. How much does Jancsó exercise control over the cameraman in this kind of thing?

"My films are completely improvised. Nothing is calculated. So much so that while the camera is running I speak to the actors and tell them what to do." (This means the films are post-synchronised, i.e. the sound is dubbed on later, in contrast to the preferred nouvelle-vague technique of using actual location sound if at all possible - and even sometimes when not!)

What concern does he have for what the camera actually sees?

"In effect we never know what we have - neither the cameraman nor I know precisely. We have one or two technical tricks by means of which we can keep things together. For instance, the duration of the shots is fairly long, less so in *The Confrontation* than in *Sirocco*; the scenes are about five minutes long in *The Confrontation* and about ten minutes long in *Sirocco*: the whole trick is that I always define the actor who has to be kept in focus by the cameraman. This means precisely that that person has to be kept in the centre of the shot. But this changes: sometimes we let somebody go out and somebody else becomes the centre of the picture."

And this would be decided beforehand?

"Only this would be calculated."

What about camera movements, which are very complicated?

"In practice, we first establish the movements of the camera and then make the scene according to this. We do fix certain points, for instance, the scene where all dance together, we set four different areas, this is where the action should take place."

Was that scene filmed with one camera or with more?

"I always work with only one camera."

If the filming is improvised, but we get an impression that it is highly calculated, how is this possible?

"It is in the nature of photography, that as you move around, though it's quite accidental what you get in the camera, nevertheless it's always a composed picture, even

more so with film than with still photography. The camera moves, and your impression is that everything is being composed."

But then how much does it matter to Jancsó exactly where the cuts in the editing of the film come?

"Editing hasn't got any great significance because the shots themselves are tailored. Hardly anything is left out of the rushes. The last film (*Sirocco*) consisted of only twelve scenes, *The Confrontation* was twenty-two or twenty-seven scenes altogether, I can't quite remember, and there's hardly any cutting." So editing within a scene is not important, and for Jancsó, the main agent is the camera itself, and its movements.

Which film directors are most important to Jancsó?

"Antonioni is the most important. I think I've learned a great deal from him. There are another two or three - Bergman, Andrej Wajda, Godard. I like Godard because he's not concerned with what other people think of him. He invented something which is specifically himself. He invented the political film, which may be of great use to humanity. But I'm afraid he's not using it for what it ought to be used for. I'm afraid that he uses it to stir up feelings which are unworthy of him, and unworthy of left-wing movements."

Is this suspicion connected with distaste for the Dutschke incident?

"It's not a suspicion. It's a conviction. I too have done it, used means which are superfluously inhuman, which take you to the frontiers or fascism."

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