

Continuing the Deviating Tradition of Hungarian Experimental Film Art: András Jeles's *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*

Gábor Gelencsér, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Abstract: *This article places Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible (József és testvérei—Jelenetek egy parasztbibliából, 2003) by Hungarian experimental filmmaker András Jeles within the social, institutional and cultural context of Hungarian film production. It surveys the sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to the formal and political radicalism of Hungarian experimental cinema; it provides an insight into the workshop of the Béla Balázs Studio, which played a determining role in shaping the various alternative discourses of Hungarian filmmaking, and suggests that András Jeles's work is a particular manifestation of form-breaking radicalism. Two different narrative and stylistic modes of expression in the film are examined: shadow play and infrared camera use, as is the deployment of these two kinds of visibility in the parallel structure of the film. Cultural memory and the technical conditions of the filmic medium are considered from the perspective of aesthetic experience.*

Introduction: The Analysis of the World

Miklós Erdély, filmmaker and a prominent figure in the post-1945 Hungarian neo-avant-garde art scene, defines the task of experimental—or, as he calls it, cognitive—film as follows: “[E]xperimental or cognitive film analyses itself as a reproduction of reality that is rearrangeable, unbiasedly permutable, thus it can perform the analysis of the world” (184; author’s translation). The notion of self-exploring film is inherent in this definition; experimental film is in a continuous search for the essence of the medium, thus its subject matter is the nature of the medium itself. The idea of the “reproduction of reality” is also inherent—although it is more rarely used in the definition of experimental film—as a basic medial feature that arises firstly from recording on film and secondly from the necessary “rearrangement” after recording. (The artistic aim of most experimental film is to surpass the “reproduction of reality”.) “The analysis of the world” is, however, the least evident purpose of experimental film. Extending the notion of experimental film from researching the medium to the analysis of the world is worth considering for the purposes of this article for two reasons. On the one hand, it highlights the specificity of post-1945 Central and Eastern European avant-garde filmmaking, which, even in spite of the political difficulties, does not renounce the analysis of the world within experimental film, or in the terrain of social, historical and political discourses. Indeed, the main feature of Central and Eastern European avant-garde art is its political embeddedness: its formal radicalism goes hand in hand with political radicalism—the two imply each other. It is not accidental that the majority of the avant-garde work created in the 1970s and 1980s, including work by Miklós Erdély, was banned by Hungarian authorities at the time, for political rather than aesthetic reasons.

On the other hand, both Erdély's ideas and art were highly inspirational for András Jeles. Jeles is profoundly influenced by Erdély's ideas regarding experimental film, as described above. Amongst Erdély's films, *Version* (*Verzió*, 1979/1986) had a direct impact on Jeles, as this film contains the main themes of Erdély's oeuvre, the Holocaust and suppression under totalitarian regimes. Moreover, Jeles virtually commandeers one of Erdély's frequently used experimental procedures, namely, the asynchrony of image and sound, whereby images appear a few frames before the corresponding dialogue is heard. This strong connection is acknowledged at the end of *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* (*József és testvérei—Jelenetek egy parasztbibliából*, 2003) where Jeles expressly pays homage to his already deceased mentor by dedicating all projections of the film to his memory. Jeles's film continues the tradition of the neo-avant-garde experimental films of the 1970s and 80s, and within that, the spirit and style of Miklós Erdély's films belonging to this tradition, as shall be discussed in the article.

The Béla Balázs Studio

The principal source of experimental tradition in Hungary in the period discussed was the Budapest-based Béla Balázs Studio (BBS), an institution of great importance to Central Eastern European neo-avant-garde art. A brief outline of the work characterising the BBS, of the role played by the films made there in the political discourse of the time and of the techniques used to accomplish this role is of significant use here in the analysis of *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*, and in defining its position in Hungarian film history. This brief survey of the history of the BBS pays particular attention to neo-avant-garde work, which can also be interpreted as a deviation from conventional form and from mainstream cinema.

In the lengthy historical period that followed the 1956 revolution in Hungary, which is presided over by the figure of János Kádár, the Secretary General, the so-called “second public sphere” was formed in the worlds of culture and politics. This “transitional twilight zone” was based on the “TTT” (*Tiltott, Tűrt, Támogatott* [Banned, Tolerated, Supported]) principle that described the classification of artists and artworks according to the political propaganda of the time (Révész 82). The “second public sphere” provided a place for artists and arts who or which were banned or tolerated, but by no means supported. From the 1970s onwards, one of the most important bases of Hungarian artists belonging to this sphere was the BBS, which was founded in 1959 as a debate club, and then became a filmmaking workshop, which started to produce films in 1961 (Havasréti 96).¹ From the 1960s onwards, the institution was “tolerated”; however, while it enjoyed the support of the political authorities, some of its artists and films were categorised as “banned”. The reason for this turnaround was the third incarnation of the BBS, which took place at the end of the 1960s, when it became a studio that would transform Hungarian film history. Besides producing the first short films of newly graduated filmmakers at the beginning of their career—such as István Szabó, a key figure of the Hungarian New Wave, or Sándor Sára, who worked both as a cameraman and a director—the BBS started to provide space for artists making nonfilmic work, and thus became, in both a spiritual and practical sense, an important workshop for avant-garde and experimental projects. Thus artists who did not specialise in film directing also had the opportunity to make films, such as the writer Péter Dobai, the composer László Vidovszky and other versatile artists working in the areas of poetry, happenings, performance art, installation art, etc., who were on the margins of official cultural channels, such as Tibor

Hajas, Tamás Szentjóby and the aforementioned Miklós Erdély. The exceptional autonomy and democratic self-governing character of the BBS as well as the lack of obligation to present the work produced to the larger public, which simultaneously opened up new perspectives while creating restrictions, also predestined the institution to be the home of canon-altering work.

The BBS gradually opened its doors to neo-avant-garde experimental artists who thought differently and who wanted to remain as outsiders without joining the official institutional system. In this way, paradoxically, the BBS, which was founded by the state, became the main source of experimental projects; however, as a consequence of the state support it received, the artists in the BBS were constantly exposed to harassment by the political authorities and to officially nonexistent but fully functioning censorship (Kovács 65–88). Due to the presence of the underground neo-avant-garde artists, intermedial relations were powerfully represented in the BBS; the artists became deviators, crossing boundaries and employing new and innovative forms.

The “island of freedom”—as the BBS became known after the consolidation of the Kádár regime in 1963—attracted the (neo)-avant-garde artists of the 1970s who had been marginalised. Thus, the BBS became a repository of alternative and subversive ideas, in both a formal/artistic and a sociopolitical sense. The artists graduating in film also became more radical; they continued the critical tradition of social analysis of the 1960s (the internationally best known representative of which is Miklós Jancsó, one of the innovators of modern film language, and a pursuer of the parabolic form) making documentary-style films with sociological content. They analysed the processes of everyday life, and were in political conflict with the official political reading of these processes.

Characteristically, the experimental artists active within the BBS either did not wish to belong to the mainstream, as it would have threatened the very freedom of their views and language, or occasionally tried to manifest their individual vision in mainstream feature films, always returning, however, to the production of alternative films within the BBS. The most typical example of the former attitude is Miklós Erdély; the latter is represented by—among others—András Jeles. Erdély’s five surviving films, including the most renowned, *Version* (*Verzió*, 1979/1986), were all created in the BBS. Jeles shot his only BBS film in 1979, in the same year he made his first full-length feature film, *Little Valentino* (*A kis Valentinó*, 1979). Similarly to *Little Valentino*, the structure of *Montage* (*Montázs*, 1979) is characterised by the experimental clash between documentary and fiction film forms, which mutually deconstruct each other. Any further involvement with the BBS on Jeles’s part was confined to recording to video two performances by his Monteverdi Wrestling Circle theatrical company, which were considered as landmarks in the history of Hungarian theatre: *Dramatic Events* (*Drámai események*, 1985–86) and *The Realm of Smiles* (*A mosoly birodalma*, 1986).

The confinement of experimentalism to the BBS was, in one sense, the natural consequence of experimentation with form. However, the fact that the endeavours of the underground cinematic scene were invisible to the greater public—as in the case of András Jeles’s second feature film *Dream Brigade* (*Álombrigád*), which was filmed in 1983, but banned and only released for public viewing in 1989—was not necessarily the consequence of experimentalism, but rather that of the conservative film-historical tendency of the 1980s.

Nevertheless, the confinement of experimentalism to the BBS also had positive consequences. In the years following its foundation the image of the BBS gradually changed and acquired an experimental character that was unique in Europe or perhaps throughout the world. Although there was virtually no avant-garde cinema in Hungary in the 1920s, from the 1970s onwards, a significant avant-garde film art, connected to the international avant-garde, was born within the BBS. Thus, even if the impact of alternative filmmakers upon the mainstream was minimal, their autonomy was strengthened. Miklós Erdély became the most prestigious and influential figure of this autonomous neo-avant-garde film art working exclusively in the BBS, which no longer sought connections with the mainstream. With his film *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*, as discussed below, András Jeles returns to Erdély's tradition of representing the alternative canon of Hungarian film art: he pays homage to his great predecessor by adopting Erdély's formal solutions, while continuing to demonstrate art of a deviating spirit, according to which the experimental form is suitable for extending the boundaries of both the medium and our understanding of the world. As a result of these two interrelated aspects Hungarian experimentalism of the 1970s became a radical form of expression both in poetical and political terms. Jeles continued this tradition in almost total seclusion, in an age that was unreceptive to radicalism whether in a poetical or political sense.

A Deviating Artist: András Jeles

The film *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* clearly points to a specific tradition defined by Erdély. At the time of making the film András Jeles was already a key figure in the “other” tradition—the alternative canon of Hungarian film history. Although *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* is only András Jeles's fifth feature-length film in a twenty-five-year career, the director's significance to Hungarian film history is indisputable. However, his films have not enjoyed an international reputation. His lack of international fame can be attributed, in part, to the director's persistent radicalism in terms of film language. Jeles's full-length films do not increasingly move towards classical forms within his own style, but instead retain its prevailing innovative spirit and radicalism. This is also true of *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*: even if it deploys Hungarian film-history tradition, it locates this tradition in the radical neo-avant garde and in Miklós Erdély's underground film art. This artistic attitude characterises the entirety of Jeles's work, it is therefore worth considering how the director's previous work points towards *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*.

András Jeles began his filmmaking career as an amateur, while studying philology. As an experimental filmmaker situated at the periphery, his films constitute a real challenge for those accustomed to mainstream cinematic conventions. Since 1974, when he obtained a diploma in directing and cinematography, he has directed a total of five full-length feature films. There were calls for the first, *Little Valentino*, to be banned from the time it was released as a B-movie. In the case of his second film, *Dream Brigade* (1983), the film was not released for seven years as it was promptly banned by the authorities. Following almost immediately after, *The Annunciation (Angyali üdvözlet)*, 1984), an unusual adaptation of Imre Madách's canonical work, *The Tragedy of Man (Az ember tragédiája)*, 1861)—a Romantic philosophical dramatic poem inspired by Milton on the history of mankind—also caused a huge scandal. *Parallel Lives (Senkiföldje)*, 1993) did not cause a similar stir—possibly because it was more conventional and less original in terms of language and form as

compared to Jeles's previous work, much to the disappointment of many. Another decade passed until *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* was released. Given this timeframe, Jeles can be regarded as a nonconformist, form-breaking artist who deviates from the film-historical canon and who cannot be judged merely within the confines of a specific era.

A further important question should be asked in relation to the entirety of Jeles's films: in what way does Jeles *not* form part of canonical Hungarian film history? He is outside—but how did he get there? He is form breaking—but what form does he deviate from? Jeles's deviation is not wholly independent of what he rejects: his way of thinking is a result of the epoch, the rules of the game of politics and the prevailing clichés, genres and styles of cinematic language. Paradoxically, his own cinematic forms stem from the tradition that he considers impossible to continue, which is why he proposes to deconstruct it.

In his study of 1980s Hungarian film art, András Bálint Kovács (*The Eighties* 240–82) characterises this age as the period of tearing down tradition during which, alongside a few other artists, András Jeles played a most important role. In *Little Valentino*, Jeles turns the 1970s documentary tradition upside down; the *Dream Brigade* is a radical deconstruction of 1950s Hungarian films; *The Annunciation* offers a similarly thought-provoking reworking of the tradition of literary adaptation that pervades Hungarian film history; finally, *Parallel Lives* opens up a new perspective on the topic of the Holocaust. This deconstruction of tradition and subsequent reconstruction carried out on its ruins is a determining element of Jeles's art; his theoretical and philosophical interest also points in this direction. It is not accidental that the essence of Jeles's quantitatively small oeuvre—but all the more significant for that in terms of intensity—is viewed in relation to tradition, where tradition acts as the possibility of expression rather than as a referential system. Furthermore, Jeles is deviating in the following sense: he goes beyond the boundaries of the moving image; more precisely, he approaches the moving image from beyond filmic boundaries, from the direction of literature, theatre and photography. Jeles is primarily interested in the possibilities stemming from the conjunction and interplay of media and intermedial influence.

The film director's theoretical writings—essays and articles about film—deal with the issues of documentary and fiction. Jeles does not approach his subject matter from the direction of (film) language, his interest is instead ontological: how can the moving image function as documentary and as fiction. He upends the ontological status of these two fundamental traditions of film art by simply inverting them. In his theoretical article *Theory and Action*, he writes about his contemporary, the experimental filmmaker Gábor Bódy:

These considerations are essentially already present in the film project *Cosmic Eye*. Bódy may have also been inspired by the Big Misconception: he also noticed (obviously earlier than the writer of these lines) that “documentary” is fiction (so far as it has only been functioning as the element of a kind of fiction, and absorbed, already before its coming into being, the self-sufficiency and inexhaustibility of documentary), and I would be disappointed if Bódy did not know that conversely, fiction is documentary, an indirect, mostly hidden (for the contemporary cinematic consciousness) and profound unveiling of the demands of producing fiction. (“Theory and Action” 40; author's translation.)

For Jeles, instead of considerations regarding language and form, philosophical questions or, rather, doubts pertaining to the nature of cognition lie in the background of the interchange of the two traditions.² Certainty is offered by the particular works, crystallising thought into style—and theory into action.

All this is carried out in its purest form, through the interplay of the traditions of documentary and fiction, in *Little Valentino*, Jeles's first film. By the end of the 1970s the documentary trend that had reintroduced the film-historical paradigm of the 1960s was already on the wane; the trend of fictional documentary film that replaced it became known as the Budapest School. Jeles's film apparently stands close to this endeavour, in which amateur actors mediate real or fictitious stories or perform their reconstruction. The efficacy of this method lies in its authenticity, as compared to the earlier realist "problem films", revealing life situations and characters that had been inaccessible to filmmakers before (as, for instance, in Béla Tarr's early films). *Little Valentino* deconstructs this tradition of documentary feature film; instead of trying to shoot a fictitious or reconstructed story as real, *Little Valentino* stylises a real-life situation into fiction, and fiction into "reality", in such a way as to make the notions of both documentary and fiction—and the attempt at combining them—absurd and uninterpretable. *Little Valentino* clearly shows how the director evokes a particular tradition, starts in a particular style, employs a generic convention then deviates from it and withdraws it, leaving a visible trace on the celluloid. Moreover, Jeles does not deconstruct film language within some abstract context, but in the easily identifiable Hungarian social environment of the 1970s, in scenes in Budapest and in the countryside. At the same time—and this is closely related to, virtually the reason for, form breaking—he avoids the route of the sociologising Hungarian film. He doesn't analyse, doesn't take a position and doesn't even criticise; instead, through displaying and withdrawing conventions, he formulates the basic experience of the 1970s: the feeling of nothingness and hopelessness, the lack of prospects, in a social sense, in a real social environment.

The *Dream Brigade* deconstructs, even more radically than *Little Valentino*, the traditions of a highly compromised genre, that of the social realist production film, the only existent genre in the Stalinist dictatorship of the 1950s. In this case, Jeles's toolkit is that of the experimental film, as he uses a narrator whose discourse is put into ironic quotation marks, while the degree of stylisation of particular scenes goes well beyond the accepted realist conventions of fiction, prefiguring Jeles's later theatre performances. However, the plot of the *Dream Brigade* does not unfold in some abstract context, but—and this is what most exasperated the censors—among workers who try to stage a Soviet play about a workers' brigade that refuses a bonus that the workers think they have been unworthily awarded. The critique of paternalism constitutes a sharp criticism against the Kádár regime, causing similar difficulties around the premiere to the ones that the Oláh brigade face in the film. The events in the narrative levelled an even more severe—and more direct—criticism against the regime, leaving aside the subtle games of style which, for instance, connect existing socialism to the world of operettas or popular songs. Thus, the political radicalism of *Dream Brigade* rivals its linguistic radicalism.

The Annunciation expands the sociopolitical pessimism of the period in question to a cosmic scale, while the deconstruction of tradition is also made manifest on a wider scale. The film is the adaptation of Imre Madách's 1861 dramatic poem, *The Tragedy of Man*. Ever since its first stage adaptation *The Tragedy of Man* has provoked more interpretations than adaptations; staging it is at least as great a challenge as its conceptual dimension. The stage

adaptations of this literary work, which hold a special place in the Hungarian literary canon, are, on the one hand, festive occasions (the present National Theatre in Budapest opened its doors with a performance of the poem in 2002); on the other hand, they provide an opportunity for the radical rethinking of the literary work. The basic idea of Jeles's screen adaptation in terms of "form" is that all the roles of the visionary poem evoking the history of mankind from Adam and Eve to the end of the world are performed by ten- to twelve-year-old children. Alongside this *trouvaille*, the otherwise exceptional variety and richness of forms and composition almost fade.

In the film *Parallel Lives*, the narrative framework is guided by a child's perspective; more precisely, by the figures of an adolescent Jewish girl and of Charles Dickens's David Copperfield, stepping out of literary fiction. After a decade-long hiatus, Jeles approaches the theme of the Holocaust doomed to silence—that is, hardly interpretable or arrangeable in terms of narration—in a French-Polish-Hungarian coproduction. Unsurprisingly, the parallel structure did not make a great impression on the public; however, this makes the film's closing scenes all the more noteworthy. The fictional narrative follows the fate of the girl's Jewish family up to the point of deportation; at the end of the film the spectator is faced with black-and-white documentary footage of men and women, old people and children, marching in endless queues. The *existing* images of the tragedy of the Holocaust cannot be reconstructed.

Notwithstanding, can anything that actually belongs to life be reconstructed or reproduced? Jeles's entire art is determined by this skepticism, which is why he frames his deconstructive approach within a philosophical context instead of a sociohistorical one. Sándor Kardos, cinematographer in Jeles's early films, in his notes to his *Horus Archive*, which is a collection of spoiled pictures (blurred, miscomposed, badly lit or simply unsuitable for the photographer's purpose) deviating from the norm, ponders the limited possibilities of artistic creation in relation to the recording of an accidental, inimitable moment.³ The deviating images provide a new model for Jeles, the contingency of which poses an almost insurmountable task for the artist. Perhaps this is the reason for Jeles's subsequent extended silence. After *Parallel Lives*, it took him another decade to release his next film, *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*—and, in the decade that has passed since, Jeles has not made any further feature films.

Shadowland: Juxtapositions in András Jeles's *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*

In the same spirit as neo-avant-garde artists pursued their activities in the Béla Balázs Studio, in *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*, Jeles seeks new possibilities of cinematic expression; however, similarly to his predecessors, this is not merely for the sake of it, but in order to analyse the world. Moreover, Jeles does this with an almost didactic immediacy, which is, albeit, hidden from the viewer by the exceptional complexity and richness of his mode of cinematic expression, thanks to which the film provides real audiovisual pleasure. In the following analysis, I highlight only those aspects of this highly complex, full-length film that are relevant to the medial language employed and the juxtapositions within it.

Juxtaposition is the film's structuring principle. The first thread is the adaptation of the so-called *Peasant Bible*. In Hungarian folklore, a textual tradition exists that retells the original stories of the Old and New Testament in vernacular language, transforming the biblical environment into a local one, stylising them into folk tales and often rewriting them or reestablishing the connections between them. András Jeles resorts to this textual tradition in the script of *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*. In addition to imitating the style of speaking, Jeles also adopts the structuring principle of rewriting and altering the stories; furthermore, he borrows from other narratives, principally from Thomas Mann's novel of the same name, *Joseph and His Brothers*. However, next to the biblical thread, he places another, diegetically unconnected, fragmentary story of a young girl's training to become, and being active as, a prostitute. The underlying motif behind the juxtaposition of the two stories is commerce: through this, Jeles formulates the tragic worldview that characterises his entire oeuvre. The motif of commerce employed in conjunction with several other stories from the Bible suggests the sacrificial nature of human fate. In the Bible this motif points towards redemption, as we can see from the stories of the sacrifice of Isaac, Joseph and, finally, Christ, as a kind of meta-story. However, the idea of redemption is not present in Jeles's darker worldview, burdened by the scandals of the twentieth century, the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust and right- and left-wing dictatorships. This is why the biblical stories are accompanied by a contemporary story, with similar content, but which lacks a similar metaphysical perspective. Jeles expresses his vision, through the juxtaposition of the two stories, but also in the representation of their visual universe—and this is where self-exploring experimental film, as discussed at the beginning of the article, becomes suitable for use in the analysis of the world.

Using the director's viewpoint as a premise for interpreting the film, we can unpack it as follows: the biblical events evoke prehistorical times, while the contemporary events evoke posthistorical times; the former is rendered audible and visible through a precinematic technique, whereas the latter is made so using a postcinematic one. In Jeles's view, biblical stories evoke prehistorical, mythical times, when sin, betrayal, commerce and carnal pleasures—represented with peculiar grossness in the *Peasant Bible*—are present in their unreflected, innocent and childish state, as the anthropological bases of human frailty. This can also be considered as a naïve existential state, perfectly expressed by the discourse of the *Peasant Bible*. In contrast, the contemporary story represents the posthistorical world, in which the same sins are listed in a mechanical way, oblivious to the hope of redemption, and belittling biblical tradition with a phlegmatic sense of superiority in the few short dialogues that take place. Thus, the director looks for a film language form suitable for expressing this idea of the philosophy of history and finds the solution of juxtaposing the two kinds of visual universe.



Figure 1: *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* (András Jeleš, 2003). Panoráma Film, 2003. Screenshot.

The scenes formulating the prehistorical image of man come to life as shadow images, evoking precinematic moving images, while the posthistorical world is mediated by an infrared camera. To examine the roles that these two film language techniques play in Erdély's "analysis of the world" I focus firstly on the temporal aspects of these procedures, specifically, on how the two image types refer to the past and to the future, respectively; secondly, I investigate the visual and aesthetic consequences of these two techniques and, thirdly, I focus on the issue of point of view and on what kind of spectatorial identification is triggered by the two distinct techniques.



Figure 2: *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible*. Panoráma Film, 2003. Screenshot.

The first aspect refers to the temporality of the film techniques employed. The shadow image is evoked as the memory of the film medium, or the cinematic past, the medial chronotope of the shadow image being superimposed on the cultural chronotope of the *Peasant Bible*. The shadow play creating the moving image in two-dimensional contours

relates to film as the *Peasant Bible* relates to the Bible: both can be regarded as a kind of *Biblia pauperum* in that they impoverish the medial possibilities of the original form of expression, and in this way address the poor (or naïve) receiver.⁴ Thus, analogously, we can call the shadow play “cinema pauperum”. This temporal dimension of the shadow play and the *Peasant Bible* requires no further investigation as the similitude between them is heuristic, as made plain by the director’s successful adaptation of his own rewriting of the *Peasant Bible* entitled *Joseph and His Brothers. Scenes from a Peasant Bible*.

Infrared camera, is a long-used procedure for nighttime image recording, which, like many cinematographic innovations, is borrowed from military strategy. Nevertheless, it evokes the visual universe of neither the past nor the present, but that of the future, more precisely—in close connection with Jeles’s line of thought—that of a dystopian future. Rather than using the futurist design of streamlined high technology from science fiction narratives, dystopias tend to formulate their negative image of the future using an aesthetic reminiscent of the apocalyptic degradation of amortised industrial waste repositories. Accordingly, the infrared camera reduces and deprives the environment of its aesthetic values, colours, tones, contours and details, and subjects it to its own monotony and monochromatic representation. Thus, even if not factually or historically correct, but as a result of the generic connotations it evokes, the infrared camera is the perfect temporal counterpoint to the shadow play: in contrast to the cherished past, it envisions the ominous future.

Secondly, in relation to the aesthetic character of the techniques used, the precinematic, two-dimensional toolkit of the shadow play, which separates the background from the foreground and is restricted to the depiction of contours, is poorly suited for conveying subtle nuances. It is, however, more suitable for the atavistic, visceral, less-than-naturalist representation of the functioning of man and of the world. It is neither a spiritual nor a material image, but lies rather in between the two, similar to the mythical world of the Bible or the carnevalesque world of folklore. While the most sacred things are often called by their names with a brusque directness in the text, bringing them closer to the naïve or common reader, the shadow image, by virtue of its medial character, can remove even the most naturalist events, such as copulation or defecation, from reality and present them instead as aesthetic spectacles.

Jeles fully employs the technical possibilities afforded by the shadow play. For example, as a result of the spectacle being restricted to the contours of figures lit from behind, the overlaps have a strange surreal effect. The most impressive is the double figure of the biblical characters Rachel and Leah. The two female figures, placed one behind the other, positioned in profile, looking right and left respectively, are superimposed; however, when they both lean forward, they turn into a creature with two heads growing out of one trunk. Something similar can be said about the relationship between the painted background and the foreground with “live figures”, and about the various shots and frames imitated by the projected shadow image. Jeles’s technique to evoke the prehistory and early days of film art is not at all naïve; however, his brilliant use of it is not overstated, and remains almost invisible to the viewer, who is also, like the pauper, naïve as regards the applied shadow play technique.

In addition to the immediate impression created by the spectacle of the film, other filmic aspects reinforce the *Peasant Bible* features of the story. The painted background, for

instance, deploys an animation technique; here, the meaning of the word animation (“action of imparting life”) acquires a literal theological meaning in this story. The era of shadow play and shadow-image films is evoked by using silent film fragments and intertitles, which are not thematically related to the given biblical series of events but rather have ironic connotations. The archives used, similar to the shadow images, evoke the naïve-charming, nonreferential period of early film, and in this way they correlate with the view of the *Peasant Bible*. Moreover, the director further “contours” the meaning of the intertitles by placing them as expressly ironic counterpoints to Hungarian folklore, occasionally hinting satirically at the ostentatious Hungarian mentality. Thus, the ironic imitation of the use of folkloric language use in the *Peasant Bible* is also achieved by visual means.

The images recorded with the infrared camera have a more homogeneous aesthetic meaning—a characteristic of the technique which prompted the director to use it in the first place. The greyish-green, grainy, damaged images, which are burnt by the luminous surfaces like a glowing cigarette, similarly convey a disintegrating, disorganised and dehumanised image of the future. The more or less recognisable environment: the car park, the car interior, the forest road and finally the luxury hill-top apartment create a depressive, uncanny feeling, deriving not from the spectacle itself, but from the cold, artificial and technical vision of the infrared camera. The director emphasises the uniform, monochrome effect through the extremely fragmented storyline, which is almost wholly restricted to the topics of prostitution and commerce; the figures (they can hardly be called characters) appearing in it are similarly one-dimensional. It seems as if what is portrayed on screen is the negative of existence—which is quite aptly expressed by the infrared camera images.

Finally, the third aspect, that of the viewpoint, raises the most complex questions. As a consequence of the shadow play technique, the viewer follows the events from a fixed point and always sees the figures sideways, in silhouette. It is not possible to change shots within a scene, which results in the technique rejecting the most significant cinematic procedure of making possible, and, moreover, enforcing, the viewer’s identification. The resulting effect is theatrical—indeed, the recording of the shadow play is performed in theatre-like circumstances: the figures move in front of a background that is projected by means of an overhead projector. Similarly, a reverse cinematic experience is created in that when a film is projected, the light hits the screen from the direction of the viewer, whereas, in the case of the shadow play—if we watch it live, and not as recorded material, it is the other way round: the light issues from behind the characters towards the viewer. The fixed viewpoint and the light emanating towards the viewer from behind endow the shadow play with an atavistic power. The image of the infrared camera suggests surveillance cameras, which are also suitable for making nighttime recordings for security reasons. Moreover, Jeles expressly resorts to the use of this technique, identifying the narrative point of view with the viewpoint of surveillance cameras. This is an omniscient, though not invisible, observational and narrative position, which has an important role in Jeles’s negative theology and posthistorical image of man. The observing gaze becomes part of the diegesis several times. In the opening scene, when the status of the sketchy storyline is unclear, the figures gather in a strange, manège-like space, some of them wearing animal masks or angel wings. The majority of the fragmentary monologues are profane, blasphemous texts, in part directly addressed to the camera, that is, to the observing gaze. The observing gaze also becomes part of the diegesis in the scene that takes place in the car. The characters address their words to the camera; they describe the character whose viewpoint coincides with the camera’s as if it were one of the travellers, from whose viewpoint we follow events. However, we never step out of its viewpoint, its

identity is never revealed; it remains an invisible but identifiable “viewpoint”. Moreover, at the end of the film, in the last shot, in a dramaturgically crucial moment, it starts to speak. At the end of the uncanny process of humiliation and torture, when stressing its commercial aspect, someone ironically quotes St. Paul’s hymn to love. This is the moment when the “viewpoint” starts to speak, signalled by the gaze of the other characters turning towards it; its distorted voice makes the following comment: “Go on! I find the gospel really arousing”. It is hard to imagine a more serious withdrawal of the “Good News”. In this final moment the surveillance camera can be directly identified with the Antichrist.

The experimental film language used in András Jeles’s *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* relies on the historical dimensions of the applied image types. Its philosophy derives from its innovative language use, which in turn is nourished by its underlying philosophy. Beyond what has been discussed above, this draws attention to a kind of “juxtaposition” that is inherent in every masterpiece, including András Jeles’s film.

Conclusion

The character and value of an artistic oeuvre is generally determined by the wider art historical context: to what extent it is connected to the given age and whether it forms part of the avant-garde, the main body or the rearguard of a particular period. In the case of András Jeles this does not seem to be a relevant viewpoint, as this article has tried to point out. András Jeles has not set out a manifesto, has not founded a school or workshop, he does not have any followers—just as we cannot recognise a particular influence in his work or way of thinking either, at least not in the domain of filmmaking; if there is an influence it is Miklós Erdély, another isolated, form-breaking, deviating artist.

However, Jeles’s career cannot be separated from the age in which he was doomed to create—and also to keep silent—from the processes unfolding from the end of the 1970s onwards. This relationship, which is highly controversial, can also be traced back to a spectacular paradox whereby Jeles formed part of Hungarian film-historical manifestations (which in the Central Eastern European region were concomitantly sociopolitical) by deviating from and placing himself outside—or perhaps above—these.

Notes

¹ On the circumstances related to the founding of the BBS, see Udvarnoky and Varga 15–28.

² It is in the spirit of these that Jeles has been formulating his philosophical, aphoristic fragments more or less systematically for decades. For volumes of his collections, see Jeles (*Büntető század; Füzetek*).

³ As regards the pictures of the Horus Archive, see Haris.

⁴ *Biblia pauperum*: the simplified version of the Bible for the illiterate as exemplified by the *Peasant Bible* in Hungarian folk tradition. The version edited by Annamária Lammel and Ilona Nagy served as a model for András Jeles's text *Joseph and His Brothers. Scenes from a Peasant Bible* (*József és testvérei. Jelenetek egy parasztbibliából*).

Works Cited

- Erdély, Miklós, "A filmezés késői fiatalsága (Az underground filmmozgalom kialakulásának társadalmi háttere)" ["The Late Youth of Filmmaking (The Social Background of the Emergence of the Underground Film Movement)"]. *A filmről*. [On Film.] Budapest: Balassi–BAE Tartóshullám–Intermedia, 1995. Print.
- , dir. *Version* [Verzió]. Balázs Béla Stúdió, 1979/1986. Film.
- Jeles, András. *Büntető század* [Punitive Century]. Budapest: Kijárat, 2000. Print.
- , dir. *Dramatic Events* [Drámai események]. Balázs Béla Stúdió, 1985–86. Film.
- , dir. *Dream Brigade* [Álombrigád]. Hunnia, Társulás, 1983. Film.
- , dir. *Joseph and His Brothers—Scenes from a Peasant Bible* [József és testvérei—Jelenetek egy parasztbibliából]. Panoráma Film, 2003. Film.
- , dir. *Little Valentino* [A kis Valentinó]. Hunnia, 1979. Film.
- , dir. *Montage* [Montázs]. Balázs Béla Stúdió, 1979. Film.
- , dir. *Parallel Lives* [Senkiföldje]. Dialóg Filmstúdió, AB Films, Dom Filmowe, Globe Film, 1993. Film.
- , dir. *The Annunciation* [Angyali üdvözlés]. Hunnia, 1984. Film.
- , dir. *The Realm of Smiles* [A mosoly birodalma]. Balázs Béla Stúdió, 1986. Film.
- . *Füzetek. "Főúr, füzetek!"* [Notebooks]. Bratislava: Kalligram, 2007. Print.
- . "József és testvérei. Jelenetek egy parasztbibliából" ["Joseph and His Brothers. Scenes from a Peasant Bible"]. *Holmi* 1 (2000): 3–27. Print.
- . "Teória és akció." ["Theory and Action."] *Töredékek Jeles András Naplójából* [Fragments from András Jeles's Diary]. Eds. László Fodor and László Hegedűs. Budapest: Fodor László—8 és fél Bt., 1993. Print.
- Haris, László, ed. *Hórusz Archívum/Horus Archive. Exhibition Catalogue*. Budapest: Millenáris Park, 2004. Print.

- Havasréti, József. *Alternatív regiszterek. A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavantgárdban.* [*Alternative Registers. Forms of Cultural Resistance in the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde*]. Budapest: Typotex, 2006. Print.
- Kovács, András Bálint. “Nyolcvanas évek: a romlás virágai.” [“The Eighties: The Flowers of Evil.”] *A film szerint a világ* [*The World According to Film*]. Budapest: Palatinus, 2002. 240–82. Print.
- . “The Experimental Cinema of the State: The Béla Balázs Studio.” *Experimental Film: The Missing Frame*. Ed. Benjamin Meade. Kansas City: Avila University Press, 2010. 65–88. Print.
- Lammel, Annamária, and Ilona Nagy, eds. *Parasztbiblia.* [*Peasant Bible.*] Budapest: Osiris, 2005. Print.
- Madách, Imre. *Az ember tragédiája.* [*The Tragedy of Man.*] Budapest: Emich Gusztáv, 1861. Print.
- Mann, Thomas. *Joseph und seine Brüder.* [*Joseph and His Brothers.*] Stockholm and Amsterdam: Bermann-Fischer, 1948. Print.
- Révész, Sándor. *Aczél és korunk* [*Aczél and Our Age*]. Budapest: Sík Kiadó, 1997. Print.
- Udvarnoky, Virág and Balázs Varga. “Variációk egy stúdióra. A BBS megalakulásai és a kora-kádári kultúrpolitika.” [“Variations Upon One Studio. The Formations of the BBS and the Culture Politics of the Early Kádár Regime.”] *BBS 50. A Balázs Béla Stúdió 50 éve* [*BBS 50. Fifty Years of the Béla Balázs Studio*]. Ed. Gábor Gelencsér. Budapest: Múcsarnok–Balázs Béla Stúdió, 2009. 15–28. Print.

Suggested Citation

Gelencsér, Gábor. “Continuing the Deviating Tradition of Hungarian Experimental Film Art: András Jeles’s *Joseph and His Brothers*—*Scenes from a Peasant Bible*.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 9 (Summer 2015). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Gábor Gelencsér, PhD, is Associate Professor at Eötvös Loránd University, Film Studies Department (Budapest, Hungary). His research interests are related to Hungarian cinema and Hungarian film adaptation. He worked as editor and as member of the editorial staff for the periodicals *Filmvilág*, *Filmkultúra*, *Metropolis*, *Filmzett*. He has published four monographs, more than 150 essays, reviews and articles in different magazines. His books are: *Az eredendő máshol. Magyar filmes szólások* [*Other Places. Trends in Hungarian Cinema*] (2014); *Káoszkeringő. Gothár Péter filmjei* [*Chaos Waltz. The Films of Péter Gothár*] (2006); *Más világok. Filmelemzések.* [*Other Worlds. Film Analyses*] (2005); *Filmolvasókönyv. Írások*

filmművészeti kötetekről [Film Reading Book. Essays on Film Books] (2003); A Titanic zenekara. Stílusok és irányzatok a hetvenes évek magyar filmművészetében [The Orchestra of the Titanic. Styles and Trends in Hungarian Cinema of the Seventies] (2002).