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András Schreiber's Interview Lajos Koltai:

Seeing the Person, and an Angel Flies Past

Abstract

At 75, Lajos Koltai is considered one of the world's best cinematographers. He has photographed nearly 90 moving pictures. He operated the camera for works significant to both Hungarian and international film history – such as *Adoption*, *Confidence*, the Oscar-winning *Mephisto*, *Mrs Déry Where Are You?*, and *Time Stands Still*. His direction of photography has been recognized at numerous international festivals. For example, in 1999, he won the distinguished European Film Award for best European cinematography on account of the films *Sunshine*, shot with István Szabó, and *The Legend of 1900*, jointly created with Giuseppe Tornatore. Then, in 2001, he was nominated for an Oscar for *Malena*, also directed by Tornatore; yet, for both Tornatore films, he won the most prestigious Italian prize, the Italian Film Academy's David di Donatello Award. Having received both the Béla Balázs Prize and the Kossuth Prize in addition to the title Artist of the Nation, Lajos Koltai made his directorial debut in 2005 with his adaptation of Imre Kertész' novel *Fateless*. Two years later, he adapted Susan Minot's *Evening* for the silver screen with great success. Starting in September 2021, he has taught the master program in film direction at the renewed University of Theatre and Film Arts. Moreover, he will soon begin shooting his new film about Ignaz Semmelweis' years in Vienna.

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Editor-in-Chief: Zsolt Antal

Copy editor: Tímea Kiss

English translation: Patrick Mullaney

Contact: University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, Institute of Drama Theory
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Seeing the Person, and an Angel Flies Past

András Schreiber's interview Lajos Koltai

At 75, Lajos Koltai is considered one of the world's best cinematographers. He has photographed nearly 90 moving pictures. He operated the camera for works significant to both Hungarian and international film history – such as *Adoption*, *Confidence*, the Oscar-winning *Mephisto*, *Mrs Déry Where Are You?*, and *Time Stands Still*. His direction of photography has been recognized at numerous international festivals. For example, in 1999, he won the distinguished European Film Award for best European cinematography on account of the films *Sunshine*, shot with István Szabó, and *The Legend of 1900*, jointly created with Giuseppe Tornatore. Then, in 2001, he was nominated for an Oscar for *Malena*, also directed by Tornatore; yet, for both Tornatore films, he won the most prestigious Italian prize, the Italian Film Academy's David di Donatello Award. Having received both the Béla Balázs Prize and the Kossuth Prize in addition to the title Artist of the Nation, Lajos Koltai made his directorial debut in 2005 with his adaptation of Imre Kertész' novel *Fateless*. Two years later, he adapted Susan Minot's *Evening* for the silver screen with great success. Starting in September 2021, he has taught the master program in film direction at the renewed University of Theatre and Film Arts. Moreover, he will soon begin shooting his new film about Ignaz Semmelweis' years in Vienna.



'It all began when we broke the ice.' With that statement, Francois Truffaut began his monumental volume of interviews with Alfred Hitchcock, published in 1966, recounting how he fell into a pool with Claude Chabrol ten years earlier at the Saint-Maurice Studio in Joinville, where the British director was working on the post-synchronisation for To Catch a Thief. Also, thanks to that fall in the water, Hitchcock would never forget either the critic or the director that Truffaut later became; since, ultimately, one of film history's most exciting conversations arose from that accident. I brought up that story, only because I find it an interesting parallel to the destined nature of your career. As far as I know, your passion for composing pictures began precisely with a plunge in the water...

■ Yes, and what's more, it happened quite early, when I was three years old. It was a summer vacation at my grandparents' in Tiszadob, at a dead branch of the Tisza River that the natives call the Tisza Corpse. People went there to take dips, and, in one unfortunate instant, I also set off into the water. I was already immersed when a woman in multiple skirts soaking her feet noticed, and all she screamed to my father was 'The child!' My father leaped in after

me, but he only saw my pants, not me. Fortunately, I had on pants with red straps, which were fashionable then and easy to spot. My mother, who sewed her whole life, made them. So finally, grabbing the strap, my father hauled me out of the water. That's when I saw that particular image that's burned in me forever – strangely distorted and yet clear – I could see the opposite shore and the poplar trees.

Decades later, I went there with my daughters to see the Tisza Corpse and the poplars. The trees were much bigger, but otherwise, everything was how I remembered it. The image stayed with me. I've thought a lot about it – how the palpable experience in that image started me on my career, how then and there my fate was decided, that I would compose pictures. After all, a person's fate must be sealed some time. At some point, it's born in them, the orientation that they will pursue. And I believe that was it. I embarked on the path of visualisation, and I staked my life on it. It came about when I was three years old.

It is just like in the Tornatore film that you photographed, The Legend of 1900, when the little orphan boy spots the piano in blurry outlines through the glass wall of the luxurious ocean liner's ballroom, and then his fate sealed. It's as though the scene is a reflection of that inciting experience of your immersion...

■ Even more. There's another relevant scene in that film – namely, when the character 1900, played by Tim Roth, is in the lowest part of the ship, seeking the girl in third class who inspired him. I wanted to make that moment memorable, when the man sees the sleeping woman. I thought that there are so many things on that liner that create inexplicable light patterns, so why couldn't we build a glass ceiling and a pool filled with water, so I could light the woman's face through it? As the ship moves, the water undulates constantly; and that's just how the broken, reflected light danced in waves, lending the woman a supernatural presence. The pianist is walking down the stairs. There are bunks everywhere, children sleeping, a little baby cries out. Tiny petroleum lamps are burning, so the world has a warm feeling despite the poverty. Then, the man suddenly turns into one row of beds, and he proceeds into this strange, blue, aquarium-like phenomenon. And that's where he finds her, the woman in this marvellous light with tiny little waves rippling over her face. I feel here my own decisive experience underwater reoccurred quite strongly.

Getting back to the parallel with Truffaut that you mentioned, there's something uniquely humorous in that statement about everything happening with a fall into water if we consider that he's one of the greatest figures of the French New Wave as both a director and film critic, just as I started my cinematography career at the time of Hungarian film's new wave. And speaking of waves, water is inevitably my first association. So, in both cases, it makes sense in two ways – everything beginning with immersion.

I suppose, now that the first master course in direction has commenced at the renewed University of Theatre and Film Arts, in the case of the eight selected pupils as well, their personal initial motivations came up during the admission process. Were their similar inciting incidents?

■ Those types of palpable experiences, caught in a strong, early, vivid image, did not come up. So far. Because, of course, already during the selection process and ever since, I've sought out the motivations of my students – what brought them there, what brought them to me. I don't go digging into family matters. These things come to the surface on their own. The midterm exam film, for example, when we talk about the screenplay or a synopsis. Many times, it's revealed that there's some personal experience behind the idea. It's practically unavoidable. For some time, artists have nothing else to cling to besides their own lives – at least, if they want to be credible. Indeed, later as well, when they've had a career for a long time, often they will draw on their memories to produce situations. In the course of creative work, we inevitably reflect upon what we learned from our parents and teachers, how we grew up, and what impressions we had.

While I was growing up, it was during a period of total political and societal upheaval. That's what *Time Stands Still* is about, which comes to my mind now, because recently I was asked to screen it and talk about it at my former school. And of course, at the mere question, old memories immediately came up – not just about the film and the shooting, but the Sándor Kőrösi-Csoma Secondary School in Óbuda, where I graduated. What's more, I was born in the house next to the school, so my mother could see from the window if I went into the building or not, and everyone called me by my nickname Sutyi by that time – even the teachers and the principal. Ultimately, that film is also about my life; and during the filming, I drew on experiences from my adolescence – the light, the

colours, the atmosphere. In terms of style, I drew inspiration from what I had lived through. I should add that this is typical as a teacher, too. First of all, I'm in the unique position that, by and large, the subject I was asked to teach is me. After all, my career is rich in both films and experiences. So much happened to me, and on top of that, I have more than a little international experience. So it's a bit like the university has invited someone from here and from abroad. And everything that I can pass on is what I've lived through. It happened to me. I wasn't told about it. Therefore, I am trying to convey the experiences and knowledge I acquired from everywhere in the course of my rich lifetime.

Your master was György Illés, a decisive individual at the school for camera operators after World War Two. What values did you learn from his as a technician and instructor?

■ As a teacher, pedagogy was central to Papi (*his nickname for György Illés – trans.*), but perhaps I can most tellingly explain his distinct pedagogical sensitivity through our shared work. We were very close. When I left college, he invited me with him. I worked on three films beside him. For example, in *Ant Hill*, directed by Zoltán Fábri, I sat behind the camera, because Papi was the only one in the county who used the American method – that is, instead of the directory of photography, the camera operator handles the machine. He regularly groomed someone and put them behind the camera. Here he chose me and would not allow me to stand. He said, 'Sit there and do it.' We were on formal terms then. It took three films before I could speak to him informally. And I pulled off the most complicated takes, so by the end, he and Fabri would come up to me and say, 'Look, Lajos, this is the set-up, but go ahead and make it your own.' As a rule, I worked fearlessly with Papi. What's more, we got our hands on an especially sensitive colour raw material, and we started showing off with it. In one of the loveliest scenes, when the nuns rebel, there were two bulbs on the ceiling originally; but, before shooting, I came up with the idea of removing one of the bulbs. György immediately told me, in especially crude terms, to go to Hell. Then, I saw him walking around, and ten minutes later, only one bulb was burning. And the scene turned out gorgeous. I'll just add that back in college we worked a lot with one light. Literally, we got famous after a while for making our films with a single bulb, which caught on with people in the other departments. That here are these guys who see the world differently, and collaborating with



Photo: Filmarchivum/Sándor Domonkos

Fig. 1. Ant Hill

them is terribly simple, because they hold the camera, bring one light with them, and still work wonders.

To return to Papi, his pedagogy consisted of allowing people to develop. This was his principle – that his pupils should think, dare to experiment, and not even accidentally follow his lead. In college, he showed three ways to illuminate a face or a space, but there's at least one hundred other versions besides those; and he knew that his pupils, if they were individuals, would eventually find the hundred-and-second way. He showed the basics, but he was careful not to smother individuality; and if he saw anyone embark on a path that was traversable, then he'd gently guide them onward. As a teacher, I also find this guidance in a good direction to be favourable. It's almost a bigger deal than teaching in the strict sense. Old Man György extended a helping hand, but he never nudged anyone, since that could have accidentally propelled them in a certain direction. He was simply there, making sure that no one had a chance to stray from the journey that they had commenced and considered correct – and which was, by all means, their very own.

Regarding your own journey, it's fitting to mention in connection with your work as a camera operator, that in the 1980s and 1990s, you worked as an equal creative partner with directors of the most diverse stylistic principles, playing a leading role in the creation of the visual world of both documentary features and aesthetic and stylistically-oriented Hungarian feature films. In connection with this, and in a manner unique among Hungarian cinematographers, you incorporated into black-and-white filming the ideas you developed in colour film photography. Do you agree with this?

■ This is film history and film aesthetics – and from that perspective, it's true. Of course, experiments, if done well, yield results. Something takes shape, and then it becomes increasingly refined. It gets visibly more polished. As far as documentaries and aesthetics, for me, the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they support one another and form one unit. Take, for example, my thesis film, *The Agitators*, which Dezső Magyar directed. It was his first full-length film, too – and, what's more, it was the Béla Balázs Studio's first full-evening production. Obviously, you know it was made in 1969. The screenplay won a competition to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Yet, ultimately, the authorities felt that the finished film captured the nature of revolutions in an excessively lively manner. They found it pessimistic, too, and on top of that – if only on account of the co-writer and star Gábor Bódy – remarkably complicated and hard to digest. The film demanded great attention and literally exuded youthful impatience. It's precisely for these reasons that it was banned for a good long time.

And in numerous respects, it was a groundbreaking work which made bold and innovative use of archive clips...

■ Yes. And that's exactly what I wish to expand upon. In the film, there were actually original, archive clips, but not primarily for illustrative purposes. Instead, they served to counteract the overweening verbosity and, other times, to evoke associations. To this end, we had to film the fictional story, which was filled with essay-like debates performed by the actors, to suit the authentic documentary clips – fittingly in black and white. Thus, on account of the film's utterly strange, fanatical structure, it succeeded in being both aesthetic and documentary-style. We knew that this philosophical story, at the time of the Hungarian

Soviet Republic, could only be told one way. We had to shoot it so the film would have the scent of a newspaper. Therefore, in terms of the images, we had to create a world that somewhat imitated a document, as though we just happened to record actual events from reality. At the same time, it was not our genuine experience of that period, only our imagination – therefore, it was an artificial documentary that was actually fiction. There was no tradition for this approach whatsoever – or rather, Dezső Magyar and I had a bit of a shared past, and we'd presented this style, because we made our third-year final film together. That was also a sort of feature film performed in a documentary style, in which three girls are on holiday at Lake Balaton and happen upon a deserting soldier. But the more interesting aspect of the exam film was that I used hand-held shooting. In order to express the story, we had to give the camera great freedom. Later, in *This Day is a Gift*, it became truly typical of me – the way the camera behaved like a speck of dust in the air, zooming into the space naturally, circling a face or a figure. Thanks to this natural freedom, the camera could always go where something of significance happened. Everything has its roots – to such an extent that I myself was amazed when, not too long ago, I watched my first-year exam film – which I shot with Gyula Gazdag about a boy's weekend, a documentary story about confinement – because it already bore signs that appear in my later films as well.

In connection with the black-and-white Agitators and its dramaturgy, you also mentioned the experimental spirit of This Day is a Gift, but ten years passed between the two works. Meanwhile, you worked on such films as Adoption, which was directed by Márta Mészáros and won the main prize in Berlin, or Mrs Déry, Where Are You?, considered the greatest of your early colour films. It was directed by Gyula Maár, and Mari Törőcsik won the Best Actress Prize for it at Cannes...

■ You're thinking of comparing black-and-white and colour film. Obviously, both techniques communicate different types of thoughts. Besides, back then, we were many times forced to shoot on black and white, because it was simply impossible to obtain colour raw material. But it's no accident that many films are made in black and white today for various aesthetic reasons – mainly because the lack of colours benefits the story. *Schindler's List*, for instance, would have never been good in colour. Among my own works, the colours in

Fateless are greyer, because the visual world should look the way that the historical period, within the death camps, lives on in human memory. The authentic archive documents and pictures of that period that remain are only available in black and white. Hence, if the film is in colour, it must be adjusted to the black-and-white recollection. Moreover, it was a hardened world. Thus, the lack of colour or the greyish base tone accentuates the era's darkness in every sense of the word.

In part, the same applies to *Adoption*, which is set in the foggy Communist era of the 70s. A middle-aged, widowed, working-class woman wants a child, but her married lover is not willing to assume responsibility for an illegitimate child. Finally, thanks to a random meeting, the woman decides upon adoption. So we have a brave, independent woman who decides to take her fate in her own hands. In the very middle of the Communist era! Simply on account of the story and the time period, it suited the film for us to shoot in black and white. First of all, it had a sort of documentary tone, which strongly resonated with the gloomy reality of Communism and society's mood. Meanwhile, it expressed no ideology, because it was a remarkably natural film.

Of course, in its own subtle, heartbreaking manner, the sensitive and lyrical *Mrs Déry, Where Are You?* presents an actor's fate. It's about an uncertain age and a woman having to make a decision – and not so very indirectly about the artist's situation, which is subject to the zeitgeist and various trends, her dilemmas and stubborn resolutions. But here the nineteenth-century world and story practically demanded colours, if only because we remember the vibrant paintings depicting that period. True, in terms of colouration, *Mrs Déry, Where Are You?* is a highpoint in my cinematography career, because it represented the pinnacle of that light and colour palette later referred to as 'honey-brown twilight'. It's practically my cinematic trademark.

Then, four years later in 1978, István Szabó sought me out and said, 'The honey-brown twilight is a prime accomplishment, but without forgetting any of that, please, let's go in another direction.' From that request came our first joint film, *Confidence*, a drama about love taking place in a cold period around the Second World War – which, on account of the visual memory I mentioned earlier, was not suited to warm tones either. Instead, we had to create a stark, blue and greyish, inexplicable world. Furthermore, a large part of the film is set in a single tiny room. We filmed for fifty days in this cold, tight space. It was a huge challenge. Luckily, though, István is an absolutely visual director who is

capable of composing images very precisely. We always planned out everything beforehand – the scene, the takes, the placement of the actor on the set, where the light comes from... Then, we were painting the walls and furniture for weeks to get the greenish-grey that we'd imagined, in order to convey that strange bleakness. In the film, history brings together two people, and what was initially most important was how the woman, portrayed by Ildikó Bánsági, would arrive at the flat where she had never been. However, she is compelled to, since she is stopped on the street by a man – played by none other than Gyula Gazdag – who tells her that she cannot go home. Instead, she must go into a flat where there's a man, and she must pretend to be in a relationship with him. So the woman goes into the flat and steps into the room where there's a single bulb burning in the chandelier – not surprising due to war shortages – and that perfectly suited the visual bleakness, that light itself had abandoned Mankind. At the same time, in the mirror, you could see a fire in the fireplace, only its heat does not reach people. So the woman enters a strange place, and she feels strange, because she sits on the love seat in her long coat. Now, already sitting in a strange place on a strange love seat in a long coat – that's a decision. It's the result of some very bad inner feeling. On account of the palette and the light patterns, the image is very lonesome – the lonely feeling of sitting in a long coat in a heated room. Confidence is a very realist film, and it's aesthetic at the same time, precisely because István always worked to get the psychological underpinnings into the image.

That same year, you made This Day Is a Gift, directed by Péter Gothár, in which the exceptionally stunning colour dramaturgy, balanced on the edge of reality and fantasy, supports in large part the absurd tone, which crosses from realism into grotesque, surreal territory...

■ That was considered a very special film at the time, containing warmth and bleakness alike. It addressed the housing situation – quite a popular topic in the film community. That's why it had a documentary style, but, at the same time, it didn't deal with huge societal questions. Instead, it really focused on the people. It was concerned with what people were capable of, the lengths they would go to obtain a flat, and – just like in reality – the impossible human situations created by the housing shortage. This realism veering into absurdity was an unbelievable success abroad. *This Day Is a Gift* won the prize for Best First

Film in Venice! That's when I began using neon light, which was also considered completely groundbreaking and ahead of its time. Only later did many people marvel over how the grotesque counterbalance in the film was aided by the neon's disturbing and cold presence – or how neon is unique in that it brings out certain features. We discover things we hadn't noticed before on a face or in the set.

Three years later in *Time Stands Still*, for example, the people in the kitchen look as though they're in a tunnel. This resulted in precisely the sort of aquarium-like settings that we talked about earlier – a little bit underground, a little bit underwater. Still, the actors inhabit it as they would in the real world, only they're surrounded by this type of environment. At the beginning of *Time Stands Still*, the mother says, 'Well, fine, here's where we going to live.' But where is here, and what is meant by 'live'? It's the beginning of the Kádár Era, when the everyday compromises of that grey reality are breaking the adolescent spirit. *Time Stands Still* looks back at the past, set mostly in the early 1960s. Gothár's first film was set in the present day, at the end of the 70s, but if we watch the two films in the reverse order of their creation, we realise how much nothing has changed in the meantime. Under Communism, time actually stood still.

I referred to this earlier, but *This Day Is a Gift* was not only exciting on account of the colour dramaturgy and the neon world, but because, like *Confidence*, we shot it mostly in a tight interior with a hand-held camera. This gave rise to the 'speck of dust' situation I mentioned. In spite of the cramped space, I could zoom in quite freely – but so close that the faces were almost distorted, enhancing the scene's claustrophobic effect. There is a scene which is taught all over, when Tamás Major bursts in and ransacks the flat. So the basic situation is that the woman, played by Cecília Esztergályos, signed a certain contract with an older woman who later died, so the flat could be hers. All of a sudden, though, the old woman's brother arrives; and this man, a complete stranger to her played by Major, starts rearranging the flat at an incredible pace, turning everything upside down, searching for valuables. At the same time, the brother brings in movers who take away the furniture while he confiscates the beer left on the kitchen table. So I recorded this whole motion-filled sequence in one long take. Thanks to the 'speck of dust' technique, there was a natural feel to the camera – when it approached and when it retreated – and the two-min-



Photo: Filmarchívum / István Jávör

Fig. 2. This Day Is a Gift (Judit Pogány and Cecília Esztergályos)

ute take from the flat's entrance to the kitchen was only interrupted once, with a double jump cut when Major takes out a knife and begins brandishing it.

To this day, they write about the formal virtuosity of the film's camera work. I agree with that, if only because executing it in that tight space truly was masterful camera work. I shot it with this old Arriflex camera, which was developed for the war. Correspondents worked with it, only back then the casing was still made of wood, so the machine was lighter. Now it's made of metal. So with the camera on my shoulder, I operated the focus with my right hand – with my finger – and with my left hand, I was always pulling the actors into the best position. I literally dragged Cecília Esztergályos into the composition. She came with me, where I led her. Meanwhile, I was so close to her, I could practically only see her flaws. Still, that's not why I was so close. It was so people would fall in love with her. I wanted to see her as someone we love, or someone we want to help in a bad moment when they're beaten down. We produced remarkably tense and active images this way – which I teach now, too, because we have to create images with tension. Since the picture always conveys a message about a setting, a face or a person, it must have tension.

The way you recount this 'speck of dust' scene and its execution, a person is struck by how you were already in effect directing. After all, you were handling the actors – at least, in the space and in terms of their positioning in front of the camera...

■ Yes, of course – only then, I was conscious of it differently. In Hungary at the time, that was the convention. The director of photography was a co-creator of equal status. He was responsible for the synergy of story and pictures, for creating the light – in other words, he directed the images. At that time, there was much tighter camaraderie among actors and cinematographers, because he saw the people, and the people would appear as the camera operator saw them. Even the director was more at his mercy, up until video technology made it possible to project the image on a monitor. Before shooting, the director would look through the view-finder and check the set-up; but, during the filming, only the camera operator could see what was important. I've often said how István Szabó would always ask after calling cut, 'Did you see the angel fly by?' And if I said no, we would shoot it again until the angel flew past in the scene. I should add that

Photo: Filmarchívum/Buda Gulyás



Fig. 3. On the shoot of Fateless

István is a completely exceptional director who's aware of the image. The way he thinks is very rare among directors. It's no accident that I've made fourteen films with him, more than with anyone else. From *Confidence* on, with the exception of *The Door*, I've photographed all his films. And when I decided to put down the camera and direct exclusively, I said I would only be willing to work as director of photography again for Szabó.

I don't want to name names, but I've worked with plenty of directors who had no clue about the image. But it wasn't just me. All the great camera operators of my generation encountered this. It's no accident that for a while they said the cinematographer was king in Hungary, because the situation came about through necessity. As far as the image was concerned, most directors had to rely on us completely. I dare say that many times we, the camera operators, created an organic whole from the films' stories with our images. That makes it seem like there's an emphatic message, when actually it was not thought out at the time. All the tiny details come together through the images – or feelings that arose in the cinematographer, and he followed through with them consistently. Good films – many times, masterpieces – were born this way. In the long run, it's thanks to the camera operator and his subjective presence. He doesn't direct in the traditional sense, but in many ways, he created that film.

After that, this question seems a little shameless, although that's not my intention. Still, I am bound to ask. When you began directing, how did your opinion of the director-cinematographer partnership change? Did you handle it differently? How much freedom did you give to Gyula Pados who photographed your 2005 directorial debut, Fateless, and Evening two years later?

■ When directing, I think like a cinematographer. That's an inalienable trait of mine. Gyula accepted this completely. After all, he was aware that, in order to direct, I had to arrange the set and know it through and through. So he only got behind the camera once I had decided on the image. That's how it was with *Fateless* – and *Evening*, too, when we were already working together in America. This is not to detract from his merits. Both films turned out lovely. Still, he primarily did what I'd already choreographed in the space with actors.

Otherwise, on *Fateless*, I had to think through matters seriously with the set designer, Tibor Lázár. We had to construct the entire Buchenwald Camp. It was a huge undertaking, because we had to make a set that not only corresponded

to reality, but also suited my directorial vision. I'm sure he remembers the scene where the child, who is skin and bones, is being carted into the lager. There's practically no life left in him, and he suspects this is his final journey. There, for instance, we had to plan very precisely where he was headed, so the boy, who was wasting away, could look back one more time at the camp, just as they were carrying past a big cauldron of soup, his favourite thing in the lager. I remember we shot the scene in July, when it was hottest. Luckily, though, everything came together, so the sequence could pass for late autumn. Still, we had to create the conditions – for example, with the set – so the light would fall at the right angle, so the mud on the ground seemed authentic while giving off that greyish base tone... You must always do everything around the set in order to create the image and preserve it. By the way, this type of set knowledge already came about in my work with István Szabó. As I said, we planned everything in advance, but particularly locations and sets – including what time of day the scene occurs, where the light comes from and when. Film is remarkably complex – a Renaissance art, if you like. You have to know a little about everything, because it incorporates something from everywhere. Nothing comes about on its own. Everything that's created, I put it there; and it has a certain colour, because I chose that colour, since it expresses what I have to say. If we shoot on a set, then there's a window cut out of the wall; and it's cut out precisely there, because I know that I will want to light from there. I want to direct the light from there onto a performer's face.

I taught once at Norman Jewison's film school in Toronto, where I analysed *Colonel Redl* shot for shot – why it's there and how it's interrelated. Parenthetically, it was attended by people like Michael Ondaatje, who wrote *The English Patient*; and he came because of me, because *Time Stands Still* was one of his favourite films. After the class, a young Japanese girl came up to me and said she had never heard such a fantastic and intense presentation about the process of filmmaking, but she wanted to ask, 'Did it have to be taken so seriously?' Well, yes. It has to be taken so seriously. That's what I teach my students now. Nothing happens by itself in a film – only what I envision, plan and execute. I'll add here that previously I'd taught a cinematography course at a college in Munich. At the end of it, I did a lighting practice, illustrating everything I had told them. I set up two walls like a corridor and started playing around. What happens if it has an open door or an open window? How is it if I light it like a hospital corridor? What all could be at the end of the hallway, and so on? In two days, I had created seventy-five different moods in the space made up of those same two



Fig. 4. On the shoot of *Time Stands Still*

walls. I myself was shocked, although I knew, more than that, simply everything is possible between two walls. But the point here is that a camera operator will only do one version on a shoot, so it's not at all the same – the make-up of the set, his intentions and those of the director.

This kind of creative consciousness combined with your subjective presence, which can be felt in your films – and I'm asking this of Lajos Koltai, the cinematographer – how easy was it, do you feel, to develop overseas? Since the second half of the 80s, you worked as a director of photography mainly in the United States. When you did return to Europe and Hungary as a cinematographer, it was usually for the sake of István Szabó and Giuseppe Tornatore, as well as Klaus Maria Brandauer...

■ As for the outcome, it is not for me to decide. Still, I feel, in most cases, it's quite clear that I managed to acquit myself, even if I had to battle a producer, an



Fig. 5. Vera Angi (centre, Vera Pap)

actor or a director from time to time. I'll add right away that, in most cases, I was hired for American productions, because they liked my work and my vision in the first place. That's how I got to Mexico, and from there to Hollywood, because the Mexican documentary filmmaker Luis Mandoki, who was well-known then, had seen *Vera Angi* four years earlier at a Mexican festival and really liked it. While preparing for his first American production, he decided he wanted the camera operator from *Vera Angi* by all means; because, the way he saw it, that guy over in Hungary – the name escaped Mandoki at the time – was the man for him. So, all of a sudden, a telex arrived at Hungarofilm – which made it possible back then to arrange work like that abroad – that he was looking for the cinematographer on *Vera Angi*, because he wanted to shoot with him a biopic entitled *Gaby: A True Story* about the author Gabriela Brimmer – who, as a result of central nervous paralysis, could only communicate with her left foot, and that's how she wrote the novel that was the basis of the film.

I met with Mandoki at a tennis club in Mexico. We sat across from each other in the garden, and he confessed that he was terribly pleased, because he wanted the cinematographer from *Vera Angi*, and he hadn't known – it only became clear to him when Hungarofilm wrote it in a reply telex – that I'd done the Oscar-win-

ning *Mephisto* and *Time Stands Still*, too, which had a huge cult following then in America. It was a very interesting talk, since Mandoki didn't speak a word of Hungarian, although he had Hungarian roots. I couldn't speak English yet, only German. Around that time, Szabó and I shot a lot in Germany; and, besides that, I did plenty there, including a beautiful film with the legendary Wolfgang Staudte. And there was an aristocratic woman there who spoke five languages. She was the film's co-producer. I spoke to her in German, and she translated for Mandoki in Spanish. It soon turned out that they didn't handle things the way I was used to with Szabó, because when I asked when we would go over the screenplay, he immediately answered, 'Why should we? It's all written.' I told him how we usually did it, and, of course, Mandoki was filled with enthusiasm. 'What a fantastic working method!' Later, we went through all the scenes. Mandoki always rehearsed with the actors in the afternoon. Huge names – Liv Ullmann, Robert Loggia and Norma Aleandro, who was nominated for an Oscar for that performance – and he took along notes about what we'd talked over in the morning. The stars were bowled over by how prepared the director was. Later, when we made our films *White Palace* and *When a Man Loves a Woman*, Mandoki himself asked when we'd sit down and go over the screenplay. Disney was behind the latter, and the film's producers envisioned a very cautious handling of the theme. After all, *When a Man Loves a Woman* is about an alcoholic woman and her husband, and the topic quite simply scared the studio. I maintained that, for the film to be credible, we had to show alcoholism by all means. We couldn't present the problem without seeing the woman drink, but the producers didn't want us to discuss drinking so openly. To this, Mandoki replied that he wanted to do it the way Lajos did. We had to fight a battle in order to film the scene where the woman walks out of her house, takes the bottle out of the trash and drinks from it. But without that, the whole film would have amounted to nothing!

Did any conflict arise with Meg Ryan, who portrayed the alcoholic young woman, over showing the visible signs of alcohol abuse on a person?

■ Not at all! Stars can be very sensitive about their appearance and the image that they've created about themselves, but eventually she understood I was there to serve her – along with the story, of course. But if we're on the subject of actors' sensitivity, it was during the filming of *White Palace* that I received the best compliment, directly from Susan Sarandon. Part of the story is that Mark Rosenberg,

one of the film's producers, really liked and supported me, and he was a big fan of European artists in general. He recommended having a camera operator for filming, because he saw how much I helped Mandoki, all the while sitting behind the camera. I was not too keen on giving up that position, but I went along with it. The guy showed up for the shoot, Michael Stone, who had unbelievably good credentials. From a technical standpoint, he knew everything. He was terribly professional, but he lacked soul. He had no idea what I was doing or why. He just sat behind the camera and toiled away. I always had to tell him to follow the actors. In the film, the two leads, Sarandon and James Spader, constantly talk about what on earth keeps them together. After all, there a vast gulf between them, in terms of both class and age. It's about a young man in marketing and a middle-aged waitress. In scenes like that, there were separate cuts. We shot it where the actor was not really talking to the other actor. Instead, they looked at tiny dots painted on a filter in front of the camera's optics and spoke, but behind the dots, there was the face of the cameraman as well. Intimate, personal statements were delivered this way. When Susan Sarandon came to the shoot and saw that someone who meant nothing to her was seated behind the camera, she told Mandoki, 'I'm sorry, but I can't say this to that person. I'd like to see Lajos' face when I say it.' What's more, I'd be looking through the view finder with one of my eyes closed. Still, she asked for that half face with one closed eye. At that, Spader said right away that he wanted Lajos, too.

In that same film, there is a rather intense, erotic scene between Sarandon and Spader with many close-ups...

■ Yes, right at the beginning – which is necessary, because we wouldn't believe the story without it. There Susan told me separately to take care, because she had given birth not long before, so I should photograph her cautiously. I didn't show her unfavourably. I remember lighting that early-hour lovemaking scene. I saw to everything, so it would look like an angelic visitation, bathed in warm light. As I worked, I suddenly realised that Susan was standing behind me. She looked at me and said that all she wanted me to know was that she trusted me with her life.

There are situations like that with male actors, too – huge American legends. In *Wrestling with Hemingway*, I lit the cinema where Richard Harris, dressed in a dinner suit, was hitting on Piper Laurie. Robert Duvall was having fun watching them from a distance. So while I'm lighting, I realise that Duvall is sitting in one of

the boxes. He was a very tough guy who always stayed in character till the end of filming. You couldn't really speak to him, but he didn't have to be there, anyway, because it was his break. He could have easily gone off to eat or rest in his trailer. I wasn't especially occupied with him, but it eventually dawned on me that he was watching how I worked, because it would determine how he treated me. Then once, when a bad lighting situation came up, because the sun shone in an unfavourable spot in the Florida park where we were shooting outdoors, I told him to move his chair a little to one side. Immediately, he answered, 'Are *you* asking me, or the director?' I told him I was, at which he nodded, 'Fine, then I'll do it.' Later, Jodie Foster saw that film, and right away she invited me to handle photography on *Home for the Holidays*, which she directed, because she said she wanted to work with someone who saw people the way I do.

One decade later, you were working with huge stars as a director on Evening...

■ Vanessa Redgrave, Claire Daines, Toni Colette, Meryl Streep, Glenn Close... A monumental cast came together. It was a very good feeling that they accepted me and believed in me. Especially Redgrave, who happens to be mad for Hungarians. In 1956, she went all over London to demonstrate for us. You can work really well with her, because she's constantly asking what you want and how, because she'll do it that way. I have *Fateless* to thank in part for that film. Susan Minot wrote the novel, and Michael Cunningham, who also wrote *The Hours*, did the screenplay. One afternoon, they went together to see *Fateless*, which was playing at a single art cinema in New York. Later, they told me they were practically bouncing down the street, because they finally had their director. From then on, the whole shoot continued in a spirit of love.

I'd like to foster the same loving spirit on my next film's shoot. Next year, I'm filming about Ignaz Semmelweis, the hardest period of his life, his Viennese years. It's a very beautiful script, written by Balázs Maruszki, among others. The producer is Tamás Lajos, whom we have to thank for many successful historical films. And, of course, the whole project will feature subtle parallels between the challenges of researchers and doctors in the face of today's global pandemic and Semmelweis' discovery, which made him the saviour of mothers. I can hardly wait for the filming – as a teacher as well, because then I can carry out the master training in a practical setting. Indeed, I'll take my pupils to the shoot, so they can see what I'm talking about.

Who will be the cinematographer?

■ András Nagy, who is considered one of his generation's best Hungarian camera operators. He's done very beautiful things. (White Palms, Johanna, Bibliothèque Pascal, Eternal Winter and Tall Tales – ed.) I feel that he thinks a lot like me. How he sees people and how he caresses their faces with light is quite similar to my style. We met on the shoot of Zoltán Kamondi's film *Drop Dead, Please!* I was the creative producer on that. Then, he worked with me as a direct assistant on Szabó's latest film *Final Report*.

Final Report, released in 2020, is also his first digital film. Many feel that digital technology will take the place of celluloid for good. What do you foresee as the practical and aesthetic consequences?

■ It was actually András who assisted with all the digital technology on *Final Report*. So, first of all, there's one side to it, that old bikers like me have to adjust to new technology. But, in terms of lighting, composition and the like, there's hardly any difference if the man behind the camera not only knows his work, but feels and understands what he has to do and why. I, too, struggled a lot with it, because a person is capable of clinging to what he's used to and what he likes. Still, nowadays, the digital image is really not so far removed from raw material, and raw material is a huge expenditure. You have to purchase it, you must be economical with it, you need to take it to the lab, and it's good if the man there has a talented developer on staff, and so on.

Of course, we are still used to the classic analogue camera. As I said before, I began with an old Arriflex camera. What's more, it made so much noise that I couldn't hear the actors over it. Everything had to be done with post-synchronisation. There's still a great advantage to that. You could still rewrite the dialogue if something no longer pleased you. They were actors who were geniuses at that. Mari Törőcsik could act and say dialogue during shooting, so later anything could be changed to anything. While it's absolutely certain that the actors were bothered by the noisy machine, they were still able to perform.

That's how we did all our full-length films. I shot *Vera Angi*, *The Stud Farm* and *Mephisto* with such cameras. Moreover, we in Eastern Europe at that time couldn't get anything. Buying a camera was practically impossible, because it counted as a hard-currency item. Yet, we could obtain parts. There were real



Photo: Filmarchívum / István Jávör

Fig. 6. The Stud Farm (József Madaras)

geniuses among us, truly wonder technicians, who could assemble a camera out of parts. They knew so much that if it had reached the ears of the Arriflex engineers, they would have offered them jobs straightaway. Those were heroic times, but digital technology does not rob an image of its soul or spirit.

Well, there are some who says that digital technology means the death of the cinema...

■ I know these sentiments. Back in the day, Vittorio Storaro – the legendary cinematographer for *Last Tango in Paris*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Reds* and *The Last Emperor* – who is my very good friend, practically said in despair that our lives were over, that film reels would disappear. Then, look. A few years ago, he convinced another celluloid Mohican, Woody Allen, to film digitally, because there were heaps of things they could do that were not possible with film. Also, Spielberg said that, as long as there was Kodak, he would film on that. Later, even he tried

out digital camera work. Of course, I can understand the stubbornness, because Kodak has a unique scent when we thread it. It frees something up, like the smell of benzene for a drag racer.

These examples also show that there are some who formerly rejected digital photography out of principle; still, they could be tempted to try it out of curiosity, the spirit of experimentation or some other reason. It could simply be because technological development is a blessing that the creator is not able to halt on his own. Naturally, he wants to see if he's capable of getting somewhere with the new gear. What I'm getting at is that this debate has become overheated. It's good that some stick to celluloid tooth and nail and want to protect it as long as possible. It's also good that, thanks to digital technology, artists who must really watch their expenses can also create, and they can tell a beautiful story precisely because of the digital camera.

At the same time, the digital revolution affects the entire film industry, including film-watching habits as well. In the time of streaming services, many are panicked, trying to find the niche for cinema houses...

■ Serving the comfort of viewers who sit at home already began with VHS. In fact, at the time of television's appearance, many sounded the death knell, but the cinema still didn't die. Meanwhile, television workshops have produced a bunch of exciting film artists. Back in the day, Szabó and I made TV shows for the Germans. Meanwhile, though, we were preparing our next feature film. Everything depends on whether the artist can find his freedom within the given framework. Can he produce something of value that's appealing? Would he like to experiment? Does he have any ambition? For example, there is Alfonso Cuarón, who was my assistant, together with Emmanuel Lubezki, on *Gaby*. They are good friends and have worked together a lot. They won their first Oscars for the very same film. Cuarón's latest film, *Roma*, was produced for Netflix, and he earned three Oscars for it – out of which, in my opinion, Best Cinematography was an exaggeration. But that's not the point here. The point is that even a currently popular and in-demand artist (or a legend like Scorsese) may feel it is worthwhile to accept the offer of a company that basically specialises in home movie viewing – not purely for the sake of survival, but because he can realise a project that's important to him. Or while streaming could be a source of peril from the point of view of cinemas, it could also represent an opportunity for creators.

Photo: Filmarchivum/Magda B. Müller



Fig. 7. Mephisto (Klaus Maria Brandauer)

Then, afterwards, the same creators want to shot films again for the cinemas, where there's an oversupply, anyway.

As far as I know, there's a lighting technique called 'lajos-ing', named after you, which is part of the American cinematographers' jargon, and it arose out of a television production...

■ To be completely accurate, it was an HBO production shot in Canada, *Descending Angel*. Yes, it came about in the New World, born out of necessity. I was forced to consider how I could use reflected light unconventionally. I wanted a warm-toned world, so I finally used the reflected light from the dark furniture. Hence, set pieces coloured the light. After that, my colleagues abroad called it 'lajos-ing'. That is, if they want to do this trick with reflected light, they 'lajos it'.

Anyway, on that shoot, I had an unpleasant experience with an actor. George C. Scott played the lead role, and there was simply no way to establish a connection with him. There was a long take. Scott stands singing in a flat. Then, the camera turns around him, goes through the whole flat, later returning to him. We didn't succeed in getting the shot the way we wanted the first time, so the director Jeremy Kagan told Scott that we needed another take. At this, he began to protest. Why on earth would we want to shoot it again? Kagan began to explain very patiently that it was a very long take, and we had to do it again, because there were some mistakes. So Scott replied, 'I was good the first time.' After an awful argument, he was willing to do it one more time. That's how Scott was, just like his role in *Patton* or in *Dr Strangelove* by Kubrick. I almost shot a film with him a little later.

You mean with Stanley Kubrick?

■ Yes. The producer Jan Harlan, who is also Kubrick's brother-in-law, called my flat in Budapest to say Kubrick wanted to meet me. This was in 1993, and I had some business in London, anyway. A failed producer was paying me twenty-five thousand dollars in compensation, so it was easy to accept this invitation of rather unclear intent. It didn't get much clearer later, either; although it turned out Kubrick knew some half dozen of my films by heart, shot for shot. He sent a chauffeur to pick me up and take me to his home, where Kubrick began questioning me. His appearance was frightening. He wore an old, threadbare army

coat, worn-out jeans with holes in many places, and white sneakers also full of holes. He went off to pee every five minutes, and in the meantime, he simply questioned me non-stop. But about totally baffling things like 'where in Budapest can you get the type of shirt they wore in the 40s, as well as buttons for it?' Or 'where is it possible to speak with Holocaust survivors?' Just stuff like that. After a while, it was obvious that he wanted to make a Holocaust film, for which he wanted to get me under contract for 24 weeks. Yet, he kept delaying. Meanwhile, Brandauer contacted me, because he got an offer to direct *Mario and the Magician*, but he wouldn't film it without me, and if I said I wouldn't take it on, he would go to the studio and inform them that there would be no film. I wrote to Kubrick that I would be making a film with a friend, and I did not know how long I could go on waiting for our joint project or when the shoot would begin, to which he wrote back, 'You must help your friend now.' Then, I learned that he invited others to join the film. He seriously wanted to do it, but he finally abandoned the idea when he saw *Schindler's List*.

I have tons of stories like this. My life is full of such experiences, which I can draw from as a creator and as a teacher. Because I must teach my students how to deal with a failed shoot, how to form relationships with creative partners and actors, how to persuade them, how to get them on our side, and also how to get them to accept our instructions and arguments. To this end, János Vecsernyés, head of the master program for camera operators, and I have brought together the two departments to forge strong director-cinematographer relationships. As a teacher, my task now is to pass along knowledge, to aid in forming contacts, and mainly to perceive their individuality, their unique way of thinking. As for pedagogy, there is only one thing I stand by, because it is what ultimately connects everyone – love.