

Doctorate School of the University of Theatre and Film Art

JUDGMENT IN HUNGARY

Making a politically sensitive film in Hungary,
based on my experience as a director.

“doctoral dissertation theses”

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I would like to make the kind of films, and watch the kind of films that make the viewer think, are provocative and that explore a segment of reality that is somehow considered to be taboo and surrounded in tension. Such topics very often reopen painful wounds that lie deep within a family the discussion of which can prove painful but their suppression may prove fatal. Living in a state of permanent tension and hatred is bad for all concerned and the only way to deal with such issues is to bring them to the surface, where they can be debated in the light of day.

It is especially challenging for a filmmaker if they chose to work with topics that current cultural politics prefer to hide away or only debate in a context that serves their own political aims. The majority of my films explore the tense relationship between the Roma community, or the Jewish community, and the world at large, and how racism and anti-Semitism affect the underlying structure of modern society.

In recent years, Hungarian cultural politics have not only found it hard to accept social criticism, but have actively spurned artworks that criticise nationalist politics and the concept of cultural supremacy. The majority of my films do exactly this, as with “Judgment in Hungary” that explores the trial of those accused in the anti-Roma serial killings, who took part in “Gárda” initiations (the paramilitary organisation linked to “Jobbik” – the party representing the extreme right in Hungary), who made reference to “Hír TV” (a media empire then closely linked to the governing party) and said they acted “for the nation, in defence of the nation”. The viral marketing campaign entitled “Racism Sucks” showing everyday acts of racism, similarly confronts the expected cultural political narrative. My third work, which also gains mention in my dissertation, “The FIDESZ Jew, the mother with no sense of nation, and mediation”, explores sensitive issue of fundamental political division in Hungary. Whilst making these films, I was not only forced to struggle with political obstacles, political control and political revenge but also a very divided response by viewers. Some “praised me to the heavens”, while others lambasted me as an “enemy of the homeland and a traitor”.

Political pressure, crushing financial constraints, production difficulties, directorial identity, the solitude of the the filmmaker, serial killers as main characters, and grave moral decisions are all areas discussed in my dissertation on the making of Judgment in Hungary and other politically sensitive films. My dissertation is written based on my own experience as a director, examining the views and experiences of numerous fellow directors in these areas.

Throughout my dissertation, I continually emphasise the views and experiences that accompany the making of politically sensitive films in Hungary. I very much hope, that on reading my dissertation, a student will gain a genuine insight into how a film can still be made despite impossible circumstances and that all obstacles can be overcome if a filmmaker has sufficient faith in their project.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows:

Chapter 1 looks at the circumstances surrounding the initial naissance of the documentary film entitled “Judgment in Hungary”. What is personal motivation and how does it develop? What problems occur when “testing taboos”? It also examines the political and social atmosphere in which such a film is born and what is to be done when the topic of the film we choose to make fails to fit into the “content of national culture”. How is it possible to win financial support for a contradictory film and how was it possible to make “Judgment in Hungary”? Filmmakers and makers of documentary films often find themselves faced with apparently unassailable obstacles in dictatorial and nondemocratic societies, when they set out to make a film that contradicts the accepted status quo. Beyond my own personal experience, I also look at “Divorce Iranian Style” by Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini¹, filmed in an Iranian court and showing the legal proceedings surrounding the divorce of three Iranian couples.

Chapter 2 looks at the director’s concept, the genre of the courtroom drama and about the tools at a director’s disposal. Does the presence of the director/filmmaker leave a mark on the film and how does it influence the behaviour of the characters? I write in detail about the obstacles encountered when making “Judgment in Hungary”, as well as the conflicts that occurred in the process. Production difficulties, cooperation with the crew, the isolation of the director and the political and social sensitivity of the topic are all factors that made the making of this film such a memorable experience. “Judgment in Hungary” was made in a cultural atmosphere that sees anyone criticising the nation branded as an “enemy of the homeland”. What is the best way to react to this?

Chapter 3 introduces the characters in the film. These characters can be divided into three main groups: the side of the victims, the side of the accused and those working in the court or for the authorities in general. All three groups differed in terms of the establishment and development of a directorial relationship. I speak about by directorial relationship with the characters in the film, the

¹ Kim Longinotto és Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Divorce Iranian Style, documentary film, 1998.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divorce_Iranian_Style

victims, the accused and the court and state employees, and detail various ethical and moral dilemmas as well as highlighting scenes that I consider to be of specific importance. What kind of relationship can a director have with coldblooded murderers? Can a victim prove interesting on the screen? What influence did the judge have?

Chapter 4 looks at the most important steps involved in editing and shaping the film. How can 3,000 hours of material be condensed into just 107 minutes? What were the main dramaturgical considerations? Why did I decide to show photographs of the five-year-old murder victim's face scarred by terrible gunshot wounds? Which scenes had to be omitted and why? How can editing help the main character's development on the screen? This chapter also looks at the ethical aspects of editing and the associated issues of manipulation, distortion and the relationship between truth and lies in the documentary film using an extraordinary study to reflect the complexity of this topic. Directed by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman, "The Specialist" is constructed of edited footage of the 1961 Eichmann Trial, and was criticised as having used manipulative editing to distort and falsify reality. The director was actually reported to the Jerusalem authorities for falsifying history.

Chapter 5 looks at debut screenings of the film. How can we maintain a distance from politics? Why is this important? And what happens when politics comes to us and it is no longer possible to maintain a distance? In relation to this issue, I relate in detail an incident provoked by politicians representing the Hungarian government that took place at the Berlin premiere of "Judgment in Hungary".

Chapter 6 examines the media reaction to the trial and about the distortions and untruths surrounding the trial that appeared and spread in the media, as well as a short account of how the Hungarian media reacted to "Judgment in Hungary".

Chapter 7 recounts screenings of the film to non-traditional target groups and the "outreach programme" seeking to bring positive social reform by taking the film into educational institutions, to various professional bodies, into Roma communities and presenting it to politicians active in Europe.

The appendix has an interview that I conducted with the Hungarian film director Gyula Gazdag that reflects in detail on various points covered in my dissertation such as political censorship, the self-censorship of the citizen, the isolation of the director, and the relationship between the minority and majority as well as social taboos in Hungarian public life.