

University Of Theatre and Film Arts, Doctoral School

Scales and Balance
The Question of Realism in the Oeuvre of István Szóts
Summary of DLA Thesis

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Our DLA thesis consists of three chapters and in the first one we have tried to examine all those aspects that are significant in the process of creating the interpretation of reality regarding Szóts's oeuvre. The reason why we made a methodically necessary attempt is that – using Casetti's statement – 'realism is a complex formation which needs a manifold and pluridisciplinary approach', that is why we could not neglect the scholarly medium in which the motion picture discourse is being done, moreover, we had to consider all those possible explanatory frames that might be connected to a director's understanding of realism. A directoral understanding of realism might be theoretical, shaped by formal reflections, aspiring to achieve abstraction, a film reality that strives to gain self-expression in abstract ways, however, it can be something like Szóts created. He put practically no theory before creating the shapes of his pieces but in his reflectionless though exact way, namely with accurately, unambiguously and precisely captured objects, kinemas, settings, movements of the camera he created a language of form that was able to carry his figures being designed internally. Szóts never denied that he wanted to express, to tell something but he was not enmeshed in inventing self-reflections and bravura applied in language of form but very simply he was looking for a way to tell a story may it be the greeting of spring, dying of eggs or carrying a dead woman's body home in a passenger train. However, he found a uniquely special phraseology to his own plain aesthetic directorial needs by applying technical precision, craftsmen's elaboration and simplicity, an earthbound endeavour to express himself seemingly without any instruments (and in this sense with evident bravura in forms) and so capturing objects, stones and castles with his camera. To the mentioned clarity we wished to find different viewpoints in the first chapter to be able to grasp all the layers of meaning regarding Szóts's understanding of realism depicted in his pieces of art. From the chapters it is possible to deduct a problematic point that pervaded and organized the whole chapter and shaped its self-movements. Each chapter has become an angle based on the films' first chapters' happenings and so it discusses our findings on the field of realism:

- (a) artistic interpretation of reality
- (b) importance of traditions
- (c) reality as experience
- (d) film reality
- (e) dream reality
- (f) lyric realism

(g) neorealism

In the second chapter we have analysed Szóts's works of art that are connected to the questions of realism from an autobiographic and filmographic perspective, in order to create a link between the first chapter's completely theoretical thinking and the director's life and oeuvre. Based on the second chapter's examination, the Szóts autobiography and film analyses, we have formed a Szóts-understanding with which the first chapter's observations can be paralleled.

The third chapter attempted to make an inventory based on the first and the second chapters' correspondence connected to the concept of the Szóts-realism:

(a)

- Szóts's artistic interpretation of reality lies in the reality's experience that is based on archaic motifs.
- This interpretation of reality regards people and nature as a sensible and destiny-possessing part of a sensible cosmos.
- He grabs the archaic experience with cosmic, filmlike films that are both close to humans and nature, where these two live and exist in the relation of timelessness (or in other words in eternity)
- Object is represented not in an abstract but in an exact way, accurately, precisely, unambiguously, which he achieves through a meticulous directoral work.
- The basis for such interpretation of reality is mythic, where the universe's unity of thought-word-deed comes true in myths and where a concrete person's unique destiny is always part of the whole of a myth.

(b)

- Szóts's picture of persons is not sophisticated – based on the great-realism he wants to construct a plausible film-universe. For him the film's task is to reveal the essence of reality and also humans' reality being aggregated from little parts.
- At the same time, however, he is a small-realist as well, because similarly to Zavattini he is also led by 'the need for knowing others', in this sense on the level of facts he does not know banality or unfamiliarity.

- His concept of personalities is dialogic: the subject becomes itself in the relationship with others and the cosmos. This concept of subjects assumes social embeddedness and is not individualistic.
- History is a crucial factor not only in the sense of the outer world but also in the sense of film history as well, as during this time, during the Second World War realism becomes not only an expectation among the others but a coherent demand for this specific film style. In this sense Szóts's film historical place is (seemingly) obvious.
- For Szóts history is a free place, a communal reality, in which we live but do not indulge in fully. Person and history are free.
- The basis and medium of this independence are the intellectual traditions, primarily the obvious medium of the Jewish-Christian tradition, furthermore, the folkloristic heritage of Hungarians.

(c)

- The experience of reality is a task not a fact – 'reality is always bigger'.
- Reality, as experience, is a network of free acts, where there are not casual but connotative connections between persons.
- For Szóts reality has opened up in different ways (differently thematically, historically, in genres and in art forms, etc.) and his films are the manifestations of these different world-experience. His sensitivity, openness, ability and talent for these make him stand apart from film historical trends.

(d)

- In Szóts's films archaically shaped stories, mythical (thought-word-deed) experience speak. These are segments of experience of the world's cosmic unity and the different themes are subordinated to this unity.
- Szóts's films are the films of acting people. May these be feature films, ethnographic films or portrait films about artists, the actors are acting and because the act may be right or wrong, their moral overtones can be heard.
- In Szóts's film reality (in any art forms) any of the three significant formations can always be seen: poverty, Hungarians and those regarding the universal human values. Poverty must be understood socially, Hungarians culturally and the need for universality in the Jewish-Christian way, catholically.

- Szóts's film reality stylizes classically, namely the language of forms is always subordinated to the expressed segment of reality but at the same time he uses every means to enhance his power of expression. In this sense he might be called lyric expressionist as well.
- In the films the cameraman's, the lighting technician's and the editor's work, the voice, the musical motifs, the direction of actors, the narrative threads and the elements of the language of forms all contribute to a complex, well-designed unity experienced in his films. All of his work is done sensitively, far from extremities, based on classic understanding of arts and self-interpretation.
- Which characterise Szóts among others style and form historically are documentarism, sociographic sensitivity and the need for creating a reality-approaching film reality (film universe). What is more, all of this is done with respectful turning towards strangeness, which tells of great self-control and benevolence.
- He was not touched by 'the films being illusory', the 'optical delusion', the 'orgies of falsification', the 'film's manipulation', the 'optical unconscious' – so generally the psychologism.
- We would not call him 'tone-deaf' in the sense of psychology or unaffected by it, yet due to the archaic and cosmic worldview of his works of art his films are better analysable based on Jung's than Freud's psychological premises.
- Szóts's film world is easy to survey, he finds the significance of art in intelligibility, in well-formulated art, in being beyond time and in simplicity. (F. Wotruba) For us this is integrated in the concept of transparency.

(e)

- For Szóts the psychological unity of reality is guaranteed. In this sense the film world and the characters' world, the outer events and the inner movements represent an integral whole.
- Wishes, phantasms, visions, apparitions, illuminations and other processes – in Freudian sense – taking place in the psyche are all considered by Szóts to be an organic part of reality. The spiritual phenomena are in organic correspondence and in mutual reference to the other dimensions of reality.
- Spiritual processes at Szóts are integrated in Jungian and not in Freudian basis. The guarantee for this is an internal conviction which originates from a basic, ancient,

'prime-original', archaic experience that the world is originally sensible and organic, and which guarantees the possibility of achieving spiritual health.

- From the foregoing it is clear that the purely psychic problems are out of his interest, as these are merely by-products of the world being out of joint and this is how he handles them.
- On the level of the language of forms he does not step back to neglecting instruments when describing inner processes, but in harmony with his realistic aspirations does he show the dreams, visions and even madness.
- It follows from this that the representation of dream, vision, and fantasy during a wound-fever is an equally great challenge for him as another segment of reality.

(f-g)

- According to R. Arnheim 'the essence of genuine realism is the interpretation of the raw materials of experience done by meaningful forms.' Szóts is a classical modern director who cannot be classed among any other members of the trends of realism. Comparing the Szóts oeuvre with the lyric- and neorealism, his uniqueness is clearly visible and at the same time his own picture of realism can be conceived as the unique mixture of the mentioned two types. The solitariness of Szóts was not due to a distinction in history of style or in language of form, the examinations being delivered in this subchapter showed a worldview, a world's experience that explain why Szóts's experience about reality remains a curiosity in the history of films. He alone represents a trend in realism which could portray a form of language being organic in every form of art and genres and could also depict dramaturgical and narrative culture on a high temperature together with meaningful forms. He was not a formalist, in a sense reality forced him always to choose the given frames. Which has become important to him was noteworthy and significant indeed. The basis for this significance and meaningfulness is reality itself that was represented as cosmos for him.

Being close to nature, organic, cosmic reality and grasping it in a filmlike film – this conception of realism is called cosmic realism. This is not identical with any literary or other types of magic, it has no references to any types of reconstruction. Quoting Kracauer we can say that it is partly about redemption (Errettung) but not only in the sense as Kracauer and others talk about physical reality. For Szóts the cosmic experience denotes a state from before history, subject and any kinds of tradition; when the organized, unified and sensible

correspondence, namely cosmos had emerged from chaos. This basic inner experience precedes everything at Szóts and this experience ('a dialogue with reality') interprets everything in advance and subsequently. Cosmic realism finds the everything preceding unity and timelessness in the consecration of a willow-catkin, in the blood-feud of mountain people, in feature films, in ethnographic films, in the works of Wotruba, Schiele, Geyling and others, or if he cannot find it then he creates that pure relation, understanding of reality with his own way of speaking, to which these meetings had led him. He maintains his relation with the universe, as reality is not a closed fact but an open task. Szóts was able to talk about everything in the field of this task, to relate everything with everything – to speak in a cosmic way and this way reality can remain what it is in real. A secret.