

**University of Theater and Film Arts (Budapest) - Doctoral School**

**THE CINEMATOGRAPHY OF THE FILM *SON OF SAUL***

**THE THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

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The first part of my dissertation deals with my earlier work with a bearing on *Son of Saul*, with examples to outline the experiences that formed a part of the grounds for the conceptual background to our full-length feature film.

*Before Dawn*, my first film using the plan-sequence technique, begins this series of films. It required the tempo to already be defined as we were filming it, and the viewer's understanding of the space deepens with the camera movement based on an elaborate choreography created in the course of the rehearsals. The most important thing I learned from the approach of the director, Bálint Kenyeres, was that every decision concerning the cinematography has to be dictated by the story – the *subtext*, to be exact. In *The History of Aviation*, also made with Kenyeres, I had a chance to experience the extreme detachment of film plot and fable: the short film, showing the influence of Miklós Jancsó's metaphors, is not about the action that the camera shows. With Kornél Mundruczó we made films based on philosophical ideas, and from this I learned how to employ film language to formulate the essence, without extra flourishes, as well as how to think in a framework of rules with which we imposed limits on ourselves. The drastic differences between the two versions of the film *Delta* are great examples of how our approach had to change from complete fabrication of the construct to an organic minimalism, as demanded by the film. Among the works I completed abroad, the Mexican film *Miss Bala*, and the British miniseries *Southcliffe* contributed the most to the work on the concept of *Son of Saul*, the first by being a story seen from a subjective perspective, in which the camera reflects on the mood of the protagonist, and the latter through its economization of cuts, presenting the scene with as few cuts as possible, only presenting what is most important.

*With a Little Patience*, the first short film I made with László Nemes, can be considered a preliminary study for *Son of Saul*. Aside from its story, it also anticipates the latter with the use of a shallow depth of field and by always keeping the heroine near. We learned the way to feed information to the audience in a meticulous and gradual way here,

and also how to work together, which is a process requiring that for every film I have the absolute maximum possible understanding of the script. *The Counterpart*, which followed, brought us up against challenges of a technical nature, which meant that we had to synchronize the whole crew as a unit to solve these problems. *The Gentleman Takes His Leave* is linked to our full-length feature film by its sense of detachment, not allowing either the camera or the viewer to be *touched*, and so not giving way to an easy sense of relief.

In the second part of my dissertation I give account of the various aspects considered and steps taken leading up to the radical cinematographic concept of *Son of Saul*, explaining our decisions from our basic approach, through, among others, our cuts, the camera movement, to our choices of format, filmstock, aspect ratio, and lens.

Our visual inspiration was primarily Elem Klimov's war film *Come and See*, not only for its colors and camera movement, but also its shockingly powerful, merciless presentation of chaos. Another film that could not be skirted around was the documentary *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, as well as the effect of our personal visit to Auschwitz. Our material for historical reference comprised the four extant photographs of the Sonderkommando. Imperfect, blurry, taken hurriedly: in mortal fear – which we strived to translate into moving image.

Our point of departure was the inseparability of form and content, which for us raised issues of presenting a subjective "experience", depicting what is *impossible to show*, and how to avoid clichés. We could only achieve this through what was in practice a dogmatic self-limitation, strictly adhering to a list of twelve points, which includes amongst others the use of a single lens, *practical lighting*, avoidance of illustration, and use of the hand-held camera, and keeping exclusively to point of view shots and close ups. By these means we managed to lay out a method of working that follows organically from the underlying meaning

of the film, the subtext, while our consistent adherence to it did good service to the film as a whole.

To determine the *quality* of the image László and I made decisions through a similar process, where instead of the seemingly obvious, we looked for solutions that were most valid to this specific film. To both of us, the use of 35 mm filmstock means the kind of experience and effect we wanted to achieve: its particular texture, enigmatic character, true darkness, and sense of space. For the sake of integrity we shot the whole film on a single type of filmstock, the important features in choosing it being low color saturation, contrast and grain. On the basis of our shared experience and our short feature film *With a little Patience*, we elected for an aspect ratio of 1:1.37, and the separation of Saul from the outside world was best defined by small depth of field.

Since we had an important dramatic role planned for the focus, an extended period of tests also preceded the final choice of lenses. Because the aesthetics of out of focus images can only be correlated among themselves, but not quantified – so in this matter we had to *feel* our way to find what sort of image is no longer *too* concrete, but is *still* interpretable. For focal length, the 40mm lens was an ideal choice because of its straight forwardness and similarity to human sight.

The chapter on shooting the film is divided in two to deal with lighting and camera movement separately, first in terms of general strategy, then demonstrating our working methods through specific problems that came up and solutions found for them. How, for example, we managed to follow Saul in extreme situations (getting onto the truck, revolt scene, swimming across the river), specifically mentioning those moments when we had to deviate from our rules if demanded by a scene.

The camera does not react, but moves along with Saul, leaving no other option to the viewer but to feel with him. This is how the onlookers themselves become participants, just as the camera becomes another dancer in these complex choreographies. The pairing of the hand-held camera with sequence shots gives a sense of mixed chaos and organization, so on the one hand the cameraman had to assume the state of mind in which the protagonist is, while on the other, soberly follow the plan. In similar fashion, the work of the actors was facilitated by the authenticity of the 360° view of the set and takes lasting several minutes, while the crew was forced out of its comfort zone – all of this was made possible through preliminary planning and rehearsals of the action of actors and camera movement.

We “dirtied” the lighting and the colors of the film print deliberately and consistently, which made them disharmonic, avoiding beauty and artful play on the emotions by these means as well, while helping the film feel visceral. The plan specified that the three floors of our main location had three contrasting lighting schemes: the *industrial*, shadow free lighting of the undressing room and the gas chamber; the *practical* and justified lighting of the medical room and the furnace; the more *intimate* lighting of the living quarters. This way “all” that needed to be done was to supplement the motivated lighting, so there was a 360° view and factuality had also been preserved.

In the post-production phase we continued to work with this puritanical approach, with the intention of not letting the color correction be noticeable in the film. Moreover, contrary to custom, the analogue print of the film was completed first, and this was used as the basis for preparation of the digital version.

In conclusion, I close the study with a few of the most important professional reflections I received after the premiere, in the hope that I will have a chance to take part in a

similarly, or at least half as brave project as *Son of Saul* was, since my real goal is to make films of such importance. While this dissertation may concern the perspectives of the cameraman, they mean nothing without the right director, an understanding of the script, and the laying down of a coherent internal logic. If my work is about the discovery of the new and unknown and about capturing the *meaning* of the film, the images I create can have validity.

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