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Lilla Tóke

Abstract: The article reviews recent scholarship on Hungarian cinema in the age of rising nationalism, anti-Semitism and World War II. It looks at two books specifically as they examine issues such as the film industry's transition from silent to sound film, the nationalization of the film industry system, the impact of anti-Jewish legislation on film making, and political censorship. The article also considers how the books address genre and the birth of star system in Hungarian film.

Keywords: *Hungarian cinema, film politics, World War II, anti-Semitism, national cinema*

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In his seminal book, *Word and Image: The History of Hungarian Cinema* (1974), István Nemeskürty observes that Hungarian sound picture was born "in an atmosphere smelling of ministerial antechambers and clerks' oversleeves" (Nemeskürty 1974: 74). In the two chapters dedicated to the 1930s and 1940s, the author reiterates that the industry, before and during the Second World War, functioned as a servant of the government politics and military agenda. Typical of its time, the book gravitates towards blaming right-wing fascism as the root cause of the state overhaul while it underplays the grave impact of anti-Jewish legislation on Hungarian film production and distribution. Nemeskürty recognizes that the "change of guards" meant the eradication of Jewish film makers from the industry, but his focus stays on analyzing cinematic treatments of class relations, specifically representation of the proletariat and peasantry. The first comprehensive examination of Hungarian cinema, Nemeskürty's arguments were obviously



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tainted by communist ideology. It took almost forty years for Hungarian film scholarship to rectify this problem. In the 1990s Tibor Sándor published two monographs that examine film history within the context of Hungarian anti-Semitism and extreme right-wing legislation. In *Őrsékváltás után, zsidókérdés és filmpolitika 1938-44* ['The Changing of the Guards: the Jewish Question and Film Policy 1938-1944,' 1997] Sándor relies on extensive archival research to create a systematic and detailed account of the changes in the film industry structure and its governing bodies showing how the disappearance of Jewish filmmakers from public life changed Hungarian cinema in profound and permanent ways. However, his study does not extend to the close examination of the actual films produced in this era.

The technological and industrial transformations that characterize this time period provide a rich ground to explore the role of cinema in nation building. The two recently published books do exactly that as they bring the scholarship on the impact of growing anti-Semitism on the Hungarian motion picture landscape up-to-date. Gábor Gergely and David Frey agree with previous studies that show anti-Jewish legislation and the increasing state control to have a shattering impact on the Hungarian film industry. The authors, however, also provide new insights into behind-the-scene negotiations and necessary compromises as part of the continuing efforts of Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarian filmmakers to produce profitable and entertaining movies. The books seek to unearth a period in Hungarian cinema that so far has received little attention in English language scholarship. Moreover, they do so in a way that complicates dominant paradigms about the role of state control and censorship and about the role of cinema to entertain and indoctrinate in prewar and wartime Hungary.

The books cover issues related to the transition from silent to sound film, the transformations in the film industry structure due to nationalization and anti-Jewish legislation, questions of political censorship, movie genres and the birth of the Hungarian film star system. Gergely's study extends over a slightly longer time period (1929-1947) and more diverse topics that include commentary on film scholarship, theories of the nation and nationalism, cartography, and semiotics as well as the close reading of many movies. His book focuses less on a systematic mapping of changes in the Hungarian film industry and more on the pitfalls of previous scholarship as well as on the movies themselves. The book mostly relies on secondary sources as it makes the case that common misunderstandings, underlying racism, and obvious anti-Semitism are deeply embedded in most research related to this film corpus. Frey, who is a historian by training, keeps the scope of his research within the limits of cultural history. His book offers an in-depth and coherent narrative with "wonderful plot twist" (Frey 2018: 2) about the industry's quest for self-determination in the face of political pressure. The study sheds light on backroom deals, infighting, forced mass exile, German machinations, and it exposes resistance to political pressure born from fiscal practicality and the need to produce mass entertainment. Frey's focus is not as much on the films as on domestic politics and international diplomacy as a framework that defined production and distribution practices.

Gergely engages directly with the works of Nemeskürty and Sándor and pushes back against some of their premises. He claims that existing scholarship has arbitrarily defined essential traits that differentiate Jewish Hungarian filmmakers from other Hungarian filmmakers. Based on what he perceives as a non-essentialist redefinition of Jewishness, Gergely unequally

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argues against connecting the mutilation of Hungarian filmmaking during this period to the overrepresentation and swift elimination of Jewish presence in the film sector. Instead, he proposes that Hungary's national cinema emerged from racist exclusionism as well as from the major historical trauma of the Trianon Treaty. The book also makes the categorical statement that anti-Semitism can be detected in virtually all films of the period whether made by Jewish Hungarians or anti-Semites.

Published simultaneously with Gergely's book, David Frey's study offers a murkier picture about the struggles, failures, and successes of Hungarian cinema in an era full of political contradictions. The book relies on an impressive array of archival material as it attempts to piece together a byzantine story about "smashing success and fabulous failures" (Frey 2018: 2) in Hungary's 1930s and 1940s film industry. He describes the destructive ideological transformation of Hungarian film during this period as characterized by highs and lows and also the industry's struggle to establish a national identity of its own. The work carefully contextualizes the birth of Hungarian national cinema within the global vortex of Hollywood mass entertainment and the country's political and military alliance with the Axis powers. The author likens the motion-picture world to a cauldron where, Hollywood's influence on European cinema, growing anti-Semitism, Hungary's position in the Nazi 'New Order', ongoing conflicts between Central European states, and capitalist modernity are all boiling together.

The two monographs overlap in their objective to find a common thread in the complicated fabric of Hungarian film history during these years. Both introduce original elements into the narrative about Hungary's transition to sound cinema and about the industry's transformation impacted by nationalization and nationalism. The books also investigate the impact of anti-Jewish legislation on the film industry and recognize the profound contradictions between Nazi ideology dominating film policy and the movie industry's financial viability. Finally, the books examine the film corpus in terms of style, genre, the star system, and political propaganda. It is important to note however that Gergely and Frey's shared scholarly journeys take place in different theoretical frameworks, under different disciplinary demands, and they also lend conclusions that are largely divergent. While Frey examines Hungarian film's problematic position in the Nazi "New Order" with an emphasis on Hungary's international cultural-political relations, Gergely makes an explicit argument against international relations and deemphasizes Hollywood and genre cinema's impact on Hungarian film at the time. Gergely believes that lifting the medium out of a strictly Hungarian context is a mistake as it prevents us from acknowledging the "very real diversity of a cultural industry peopled by Hungarians whose individually complex identities reflected the heterogeneity of the Hungarian national community" (Gergely 2018: 22).

One of the most enduring developments in Hungarian cinema during the pre-war era was the shift from a profit-based, privately funded industry to government-run cultural administration. Prior to 1919, Hungary had a significant presence in the global silent film industry, standing only behind the United States and Denmark. But the transition to sound film brought technical and distribution challenges, given that only 8.7 million people in the world spoke Hungarian. The industry's move towards state-sponsorship was initially a way to compensate for Hungarian cinema's severe loss in the global sound film market. But later on, it

became an effective way to impose political censorship. Both books address these transformations in detail, but explain them differently.

Gergely sees the increasing involvement of the state in the film industry, which included nationalized studios, control over all aspects of production, distribution and exhibition through censorship, film quotas, and taxation as detrimental. While his book acknowledges that these interventions ensured that the Hungarian film industry "did not grind to a halt" (Gergely 2018: 101), it puts forth the characteristically neoliberal argument that competition benefits the market and that favoring certain, state-owned businesses and regime-friendly artists resulted in less and of lesser-quality films. Frey, however, positions the debate over state control within a larger framework of competing social, political, economic, artistic, and ideological agendas that dominated the film industry in the era. His book highlights the perils of complete state takeover, especially in terms of instituting propaganda and censorship practices in service of "national, nationalizing and nationalist missions" (Frey 2018: 76). At the same time, it also explains nationalization in the context of Mette Hjort's theory of "small nation cinemas" (2005), meaning that small nations often have to rely on state-sponsorship and centralized film production system to be viable and to successfully compete in a heavily globalized, profit-oriented film world.

Instead of contextualizing the shift in cinematic practices within a global framework, Gergely proposes that "national trauma" lingered behind the crisis and restructuring of the motion picture industry. He contends that the major factor behind the sharp drop in output was the Trianon Treaty and he finds traces of this trauma in just about every aspect of film making at the time. Frey, on the other hand, recognizes that the arrival of sound film technology played a significant role in Hungarian film output during the early 1930s. With the appearance of sound film, a medium that, during the silent era, was deeply cosmopolitan and transnational, suddenly faced linguistic limitations. This was especially devastating for small nations such as Hungary. At the same time, Frey understands that sound film had the potential to serve as "a pedestal upon which the national culture rested" (Frey 2018: 27), that finally Hungarian national cinema had a chance to materialize. This potential, he contends, was enormously complicated and ultimately spoiled by political radicalization and the outbreak of the war.

The two books also place different emphasis on Hungarian film import and export strategies. Frey dedicates an entire chapter (Chapter Six) to illustrate the country's ambitions to become the new "film sensation" (Frey 2018: 281) in the Axis and German-occupied territories, specifically in Italy, Yugoslavia and Germany by replacing Western films that have disappeared from these markets. Gergely, however, spends very little time on this issue, describing it as a limited engagement and comparing Hungary to a "poor cousin" (Gergely 2018: 232) who was taken advantage of and strategically limited by big powers such as Germany and Italy.

Gergely and Frey both caution against essentialist definitions of Jewish identity in Hungary while also acknowledge that the movie industry's viability largely depended on Jewish script writers, directors, actors, producers, distributors, and movie theater owner. But the two accounts interpret the aggressive removal of Jewish Hungarians' from all areas of film making in different ways. Gergely insists that current scholarship, in which he includes Frey's book based on the publisher's preview, overemphasizes Jewish dominance in the film industry at the expense of examining the anti-Semitic messages in the films themselves. Frey offers a story of

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ideological infighting between Christian ideologues and pragmatic film producers, between newly emerging nationalist administrators and established industry leaders, whose competing interests ultimately allowed some Jewish Hungarians to continue working up until the early 1940s.

Quickly growing anti-Semitism combined with emerging nationalist groups such as the *Turul Szövetség* ['Turul Fraternal Society of Fine Arts'] and three anti-Jewish laws (1938, 1939, and 1941) had an undeniable, direct, and shattering impact on Hungary's film world. In the midst of the tragedy, Frey is looking for ambiguity and for instances when the bureaucratic system of oppression broke down due to individual resistance or capitalist pragmatism. Gergely, however, finds such accounts of resistance to be harmful due to their potential to perpetuate stereotypes of Jewish "ügyeskedés" ['wangle']. Calling it "stróman" ['strawman'] theory (Gergely 2018: 213), Gergely warns against creating narratives that perpetuate the idea of ongoing, behind-the-scene Jewish control and that underplay the devastating impact of state control and expropriation on Jewish Hungarian film makers.

Gábor Gergely's book, *Hungarian Film 1929-1947: National Identity, Anti-Semitism, and Popular Cinema* (2018), promises to dismantle important misconceptions about Jews and anti-Semitism in Hungarian cinema. Gergely questions several, what he believes to be, unjustified assumptions about Hungary's film industry before, during, and after World War II: that filmmaking was primarily a Jewish industry before the 1940s; that the changes during post-war, communist period were transformative; that the religious and ethnic background of filmmakers would be significant to their movies; and finally, that there was a group of Hungarians impervious to politics. He directly engages with a wide array of studies in cinema, history, semiotics, philosophy, and cartography published in Hungarian and in English to propose a different definition of national cinema and to offer his insights into anti-Semitism and racism in the films themselves.

The book argues against a definition of national cinema based on the opposition between Jews and Hungarians; and instead, in the context of Anderson's "imagined communities" (2016) and Haywood's (2005) analysis of the myth of the nation, it defines national cinema as a body of films that are part of the "complex discourse that imagines and thus constructs the nation" (Gergely 2018: 41). Chapter One is an extended, whimsical deliberation on various terminology related to the nation and nationalism. The author's explanations arch from "honfoglalás" ['Hungarian settlement'] in the tenth century all the way to the nineteenth century revival of nationalism and to Trianon. The impressionistic adventure into Hungarian history is then followed by a cartographic study of the symbolic meaning of - on and off screen - maps that display greater Hungary.

Much of Chapter One is dedicated to semantic debates around the meaning of "nemzeti" ['nation-al'] and "nemzethalál" ['death of the nation'] and the various ways that these terms can be translated into English. Gergely even includes a partial translation and close reading of Mihály Vörösmarty's 1836 poem about national independence. Curiously enough, when he discusses the "nightmare visions of the death of the nation" (Gergely 2018: 62), a recurring theme in Hungarian national imagination, the author neglects to mention the prime example of such "foretelling" – Johann Gottfried Herder, whose eighteenth century pessimism about the

disappearance of Hungarian language had lasting impact on the intellectual and political life in Hungary during Enlightenment. The last section of the chapter introduces analytical concepts related to race and racism as a way to understand fascism and anti-Semitism in Hungary. Gergely relies on racial theory throughout the book to discuss cultural politics as well as important films from the period. While his observations are insightful, the unnuanced use of racial theory in the book does not necessarily help readers better understand the particular characteristics of anti-Semitism in Hungary.

Gergely's book goes on to give an exhaustive overview of existing bibliography on its subject. Chapter Two lists all Hungarian and English-language scholarship about the film industry in the 1930 and 40s and it contextualizes the works in the time period when they were published. Contemporary, communist, post-communist studies are all accounted for in a detailed, albeit highly critical description that emphasizes other scholars' shortcoming as much as their contributions to the field. Gergely's explicit goal is to highlight the contrast with his own ideas. Despite its overly critical tone, this chapter is useful for anyone who wishes to study this crucial time period in Hungarian film history.

Chapter Three outlines the emergence of a new film industry structure between 1931 and 1935. Gergely claims that the main factor behind the sharp drop in film output was the Trianon Treaty and the subsequent economic meltdown caused by the territorial loss. While it is true that, as a result of the treaty, Hungary lost one of its major film studios located in Kolozsvár, the shift that sound film technology brought to the global film industry are clearly underestimated here. There is no doubt that Hungary was struggling economically; however, the national film industry in particular was grappling with the transformative technological revolution that effectively put an end to Hungary's robust presence in the global silent film market. Instead, the book turns the attention to the establishment of *Filmipari Alap* [Film Industry Fund] in 1925 as the first step towards complete government takeover. Gergely blames this new, state-controlled system for the quick and effective elimination of Jewish Hungarians from the industry and for the increased presence of anti-Semitic ideology in the films. Accordingly, he ties Hungarian cinema's earlier success to the absence of stifling state regulation and the freedom of market-based competition. While this argument has some merit, it also ignores the fact that, in the sound film era, Hungary's only chance, as a "small nation," to remain viable and financially realistic was to institute some form of state sponsorship.

The rest of Chapter Three provides close readings of various films to show covert anti-Semitism. Class conflict, which is at the basis of *Hyppolit, a lakáj* ['Hyppolit, the Butler,' 1931] is interpreted as commentary on the behavior of a Jewish, aspiring bourgeoisie family in Hungarian aristocratic society. Although Gergely admits that there is nothing overtly Jewish about the characters in this Hollywood style hit comedy; nevertheless, he disregards theories of genre to make the case that the film is a blueprint for hidden anti-Semitic messages in most films produced at the time. The chapter goes on to discuss costumes and clothing in films such as *Lila Akác* ['Purple Acacia,' 1934] and *Dankó Pista* ['Pista Dankó,' 1940] as a way to reinforce earlier arguments about the Hungarian's community's "racist imaginings" (Gergely 2018: 124). Perhaps the book's most interesting argument comes at the last section of Chapter Three, where Gergely identifies "folkspolitiation" movies (Gergely 2018: 136) as a coherent genre consisting of films,

which are characterized by a rural setting with a focus on traditional, peasant life in small villages. Films such as *Hortobágy* ['Life on the Hortobágy,' 1936], *Földindulás* ['Landslide,' 1940] and *Emberek a havason* ['People of the Mountain,' 1942] were shot on location and, according to Gergely, had a uniquely key presence in Hungarian film culture at the time. The analysis shows that rural films provided an imaginary mirror for Hungarians to see themselves as unified through a national "folk essence." In the films the folkish, national culture is often threatened by "other" – meaning modern, bourgeois urban – forms of life stereotypically associated with Jews or cultural and linguistic minorities such as the Roma. To the extent that such unified symbolism exists, I believe, Gergely correctly identifies rural film as a genre most effective in fostering the perception of an ideologically coherent and ethnically selective "Hungarian-ness."

The next chapter relates the story of the industry's anti-Semitic reorganization from 1936 to 1941. The implementation of anti-Jewish measures through three, consecutive decrees had devastating effects on Hungarian cinema. Gradually, Jewish Hungarians, who had played key roles in all aspects of domestic film production, were pushed into the shadows, denied work, while their movie theaters were expropriated. Many were forced into emigration or ultimately faced fate even worse. Opportunist newcomers joined a younger generation of Christian Hungarian filmmakers to move into newly designed, state-run artistic and administrative positions, a process that was often stymied by infighting. These conditions were only exasperated by Hungary's military participation in the ensuing war. Gergely considers that the transformation due to the anti-Jewish laws had to do less with the loss of Jewish talent, instead they were related to a general "loss of specific key personnel" (Gergely 2018: 146). The author's vigilance about perpetuating essentialist views related to Jewish economic power is understandable. However, blaming state interference and "the replacement of key personnel" ignores the fact those displaced and replaced were *all* Jewish Hungarians and they lost as much as in this fight as Hungarian cinema did.

In Chapter Four Gergely looks at the emerging star system and claims that it lacked a Hollywood-style, strong structure of star production and instead it was characterized by 'amateurism' (Gergely 2018: 165). In lack of a clear criteria to assess what it mean to have a "successful" star system, it is hard to see why Hungarian actors such as Pál Jávör, Katalin Karády, or Gyula Kabos would not qualify as real film stars. In the chapter, Gergely returns to the question of genre to argue that crime films were a "national genre" and that dislocating these films from their "narrow political context" (Gergely 2018: 169) would be a mistake. This idea is surprising given what we know about Hollywood's global appeal and especially given that the vast majority of films produced during this time (1931-45) were genre films, specifically melodramas and comedies very much in the style of Hollywood.

The sections on Gyula Kabos exemplify best the missteps in Gergely's argument about anti-Semitism in the films rather than the industry. His decision to ignore global influences on Hungarian cinema allows Gergely to claim that Kabos's name became synonymous with Jewish humor and he essentially performed various iterations of a stereotypical Jewish character. However, such claims are based on a misinterpretation of Kabos as a film star and his significant roles in the period's comedies. Kabos was and continues to be well-loved by Hungarian film

audiences. His disappearance from the screen, his forced migration to the U.S. fraught by personal struggles and artistic failure had little to do with his film roles and much more to do with his Jewish cultural heritage. Gergely assigns Kabos' wide and lasting popularity to anti-Jewish sentiments rather than recognizing that audiences were looking for escapist entertainment about the "little man" who had moral authority but lacked financial means. His films had a broad, populist message, critical of "the ruling class," its snobbery and corruption.

The last chapter of Gergely's book (Chapter Five) covers Hungary's wartime film production, including the first color film, *A beszélő köntös* ['The Talking Rob,' 1941]. The chapter describes the mass exodus of Jewish film stars (including Iren Ágay, Zita Perczel, Erzszi Pártos, Alice Rajan, Gyula Kabos, Imre Ráday, Oszkár Beregi, Lajos Gárdonyi, Gyula Gózon, and Kálmán Rózshegyi) and the rise of a new generation of star actors. The chapter also returns to earlier arguments about state control and its detrimental effect on the film industry. Gergely's neoliberal argument implies that Hungary's continuing efforts to maintain significant film production was made difficult due to the fact that competition had been erased from the marketplace. Gergely considers export efforts of Hungarian film fruitless as, he claims, Hungary had very limited access to other markets and Germany essentially exploited Hungarian film talents and facilities and offered very little in return. His narrative depicts Hungary as a victim rather than an active promoter of self-interest and a willing participant in film diplomacy with the Axis powers.

Through discussions about war films, the depiction of doctors in film, and propaganda films, the book comes back to an important point related to national identity in Hungarian film. The section entitled "Mountain Films" echoes the earlier argument that Gergely made about rural film as a genre and its national(ist) symbolism. These films, including *Emberek a havason* (1941), *A hegyek lánya* ['Daughter of the Mountains,' 1942], and *Kalotaszegi Madonna* ['Madonna of Kalotaszeg,' 1943], formed part of a larger group of "folksploitation" movies, a genre identified earlier in the book that attempted to represent the "Hungarian spirit" through melodrama and landscape symbolism. If there is a point in the book that demonstrates a cinematic articulation of national identity, it is the demarcation of "rural film" as visual and narrative expression of Hungary's self-identified exceptionalism and victimhood.

David Frey's monograph, *Jews, Nazis, and Cinema in Hungary: The Tragedy of Success 1929-1944* presents a cultural history of technological, political, and ideological forces that shaped Hungarian film production. As the title suggests, Frey's study reveals an uneven landscape full of paradoxes and it highlights the failures of aggressive, interventionist cultural politics. The book illustrates the ways in which political extremism led to increasing control not only in film financing, but in all areas of film production. It insightfully contextualizes the cultural debates around Hungarian film and the perils of a small nation cinema within a global, sound film market. The author argues that deeply contradictory interests made it impossible to create an "authentic, legible, and exportable" (Frey 2018: 6) concept of the nation through film. The wide archival research and information-rich original sources lend this argument credibility and strength.

According to Frey, the cinematic image of Hungary as a strong, imagined community never really materialized due to ongoing contradictions between political indoctrination and the

need for entertainment, between state propaganda and financial imperatives, and between anti-Semitic laws and the industry's continuing reliance on experienced film makers. Full-fledged state control was never achieved because of these contradictions and because of the need to compromise between the industry's bureaucracy and film artists. In addition, national and transnational collaborations also failed due to competition for profit and fame. The book makes the case that, ironically, it was a "cosmopolitan, progressive, class-crossing, Jewish produced vision of nation" (Frey 2018: 9) that came the closest to offering a Hungary's distinctive national film form. In Chapter One, Frey explores how the cultural and political elite in Hungary rose to the challenge of creating a viable sound movie culture in this most troublesome time period in the nation's modern history. He suggests that the sound system, in a way, "nationalized" (Frey 2018: 35) film, meaning that the decline of silent film and the rise of sound opened the door for unprecedented national appeal through the emphasis on linguistic and cultural particularities. However, as the book lays it out, under the new circumstances it was extremely hard for a small nation like Hungary to maintain a financially viable film industry, a fact that pushed the country towards governmental centralization of film production.

Chapter Two goes on to talk about the bureaucratic and structural changes born from the general political consensus that film had a mission beyond entertainment and profit and that it should promote social and cultural cohesion and provide a stronger sense of national identity. The first step in the process reform process was to create the *Országos Mozgóképvizsgáló Bizottság* ['National Censorship Committee'] in 1920 and the even more powerful, *Intra-Ministerial Committee* (representing the Ministries of Interior, and Commerce, Religion and Education) in 1933 both tasked to oversee that all aspects of film production adhered to the government's anti-Semitic, nationalist political agenda. The chapter also addresses the role of important individuals (such as Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös) and organizations outside the industry (for instance, the *Turul Szövetség*) in ensuring that film transitioned into a government-directed enterprise. The chapter closes with an overview of early sound films and illustrates the failure to balance aesthetic entertainment with ideological propaganda.

For Hungarian film to survive in the new era of sound film, it was imperative to find ways to attract international investors and to push the films onto the international market. Hungarians living in minority after the Trianon Treaty provided great potential in this respect. However, the need to cultivate larger audiences extended beyond greater Hungary. In Chapter Three, Frey describes the successes and roadblocks in Hungarian cultural diplomacy to access audiences outside of Hungary, including the three million ethnic Hungarian living in Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia but also Axis powers such as Germany, Austria, and Italy. This history is especially enlightening as it reveals not only the ongoing political tensions among the Axis countries but also the intricate cultural entanglements within the film industry itself, the impetus for simultaneous cooperation and competition.

Contradictory imperatives are at the heart of the next chapter as well, which describes film as an example of how Hungarian culture became a battleground for growing anti-Semitism and nationalism. While rejecting the essentialist idea that there was fundamental dissimilarity between Hungarian Jews and non-Jews "aesthetically, nationally, ideologically, biologically or otherwise" (Frey 2018: 184), Frey contends that Jews dominated the Hungarian film industry in

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terms of number and influence, even into 1939. Frey sees this as an example of the many ways in which Jewish artists were heroically committed to Hungarian culture. Given their contribution to Hungarian culture, the aggressive political and legislative measures of the government to deploy institutions such as the *Színművészeti és Filmművészeti Kamara* ['Hungarian Theatrical Arts and Film Arts Chamber'], the *Filmipari Alap* ['Film Industry Fund'] and *Országos Nemzeti Filmbizottság* ['The National Film Committee'] with the purpose to eliminate Jews from the industry, is even more heartrending. While Frey is careful to emphasize the devastating effect of these measures on Hungarian film production, in accordance with the book's overall argument, he emphasizes inherent contradictions between ideological and financial imperatives (especially in the area of film financing) as well as significant entanglements in the bureaucratic jungle, which allowed some Jewish Hungarians to continue their work.

It is undeniable that after 1939 the national film industry became an exclusively Christian enterprise, one that, as Frey shows, continued to be fraught by disagreements and disparities among the agencies and their lead actors. Chapter Five focuses on the various ways in which anti-Jewish legislation was weakened by *Magyar Mozgóképzemengedélyesek Országos Egyesülete* ['Hungarian National Association of Movie Theater Licensees'], the *Belügy Minisztérium* ['Interior Ministry'] and the *Országos Magyar Mozgóképipari Egyesület* ['Association of Producers and Distributors']. On the one hand, the radical right, represented by the *Országos Nemzeti Filmbizottság* ['National Film Committee'], ruled much of the industry and took systematic steps towards the exclusion of Jews through periodical crackdowns and censorship. On the other hand, long-term government officials and industry insiders with financial stakes in the business of motion picture, disrupted such "ideological purification" until, for better or for worse, World War II interrupted the battles in domestic film politics.

Initially, the war brought new opportunities for Hungarian film to go global. With the annexation of new territories, Hungary gained access to a wealth of film theaters while the population in the occupied lands was thirsty for escapist-style, mass entertainment. Hungarian film makers managed to establish strong export to Yugoslavia, Italy, as well as in Austria and Germany for a while. Chapter Six describes the complex import and export negotiations and the "schizophrenic hope" (Frey 2018: 309) that motivated Hungarian film makers to raise their international profile by replacing American and French films that had historically dominated the market. Hungary was clearly infatuated by German Nazi ideology and the promise to become a powerful political and cultural entity in Europe. At the same time, the competition on the international landscape intensified and film became a proxy in Hungary's attempt to resist the complete takeover by the German political and military machine. Gradually, however, it became clear that Hungary's *filmpolitik* (Frey 2018: 286) with Germany was a losing battle. Thus, the brief flame of success that Hungarian film enjoyed at the beginning of the 1940s quickly died and by 1944, the Hungarian film industry was in shambles.

The closing chapter of Frey's book turns our attention to tensions within the industry between populist forces arguing that film's mission was mass entertainment and the artistic desire to produce "serious" national cinema. The author presents this debate through the analysis of three film genres: literary adaptations, "hero" films, and "problem" films. While research shows that wartime audiences preferred the Hollywood-style, comic or melodramatic

entertainment familiar from the previous decade, bureaucrats insisted on educating the masses through "serious art" infused with ideological propaganda. Between these opposing views, with the exception of a few films such as Istvan Szóts' *Emberek a havason* (1942), Frey argues that Hungary's attempts to generate a distinct national film culture ultimately failed.

In 1942, just one year after Hungary joined the Axis powers, the movie *A harmincadik* ['The Thirtieth'] was distributed in cinemas nationwide. The film tells the story of a mining village as it struggles to bring social reform by creating a community school for the children. The plan meets hostile resistance by the capitalist owner and the mine's upper level administration. The film was part of a larger wave of propaganda movies to offer cultural reinforcements to Hungary's increasingly fascist and anti-Semitic policies. It was produced in cooperation between a state institution (*Magyar Filmiroda*) and a private film production company (*Iris Films*) belonging to the director, László Cserépy. Even though the script was written by two, well-known right-wing authors (Márton Kerencsendi Kiss and Imre Apáthy), censorship authorities rejected the initial iteration of the project. Cserépy risked losing an HP 300,000 investment and thus decided to revise the film's narrative to make it "anti-Semitic enough" to pass censorship. Instead of a battle between workers and the capitalist ruling class, the film now centered on the (presumably Jewish) mine owner as a scapegoat for the oppression and injustice. The film was shot masterfully by a talented cinematographer, Barnabás Hegyi, and also featured two famous film stars, Antal Páger, the cinematic face of Hungarian right-wing populism, and Artúr Somlay. Finally, in terms of reception, *A harmincadik* was released to glowing reviews at the time, but it quickly faded into oblivion.

The story behind production, distribution, and reception of the film is indicative of its era fraught with aggressive state interventions, ideological imperatives, the need for profitable, mass entertainment as well as contradictions between critical and popular fame and it captures well the state of Hungarian filmmaking during the 1930 and until the end of World War II. Gergely and Frey's descriptions of the film's fate also illustrate the fundamental difference between their understandings of the history of Hungarian cinema. Gergely, with a clear interest in bringing race theory into Hungarian cinema, cites the film as a prime example of "Hungarian race films" (Gergely 2018: 282) and focuses on its ideological message as anti-Semitic propaganda. Frey, however, relies on the same film to demonstrate the degree to which the state authorities intervened in film's production and stirred it in a direction suited for their anti-Semitic ideological purposes.

While the two books differ significantly in their focus and argument, they find an important point of converge in their conclusion. Both authors draw a purposeful parallel between film politics at the time and the current political interference in the Hungarian film industry. Just as in the 30s and 40s, the FIDESZ government during the last nine years has engaged in aggressive cultural politics to reshape the film industry's financial and regulatory system and, more broadly, to influence national culture through political censorship and sponsorship. Contemporary Hungary, both authors claim, seems to repeat a dangerous political cycle of growing ethno-nationalism and anti-Semitism as well as aggressive government intervention in all spheres of culture. This comparison is important as it validates the books' argument within the larger context of the country's film history and cultural politics. Under these circumstances,

Tőke, Lilla. "From Escapism to Propaganda: Hungarian Cinema in the Age of Growing Anti-Semitism, Nationalism, and World War II. Review Article of Frey, David. 2018. *Jews, Nazis and the Cinema of Hungary: The Tragedy of Success, 1929-44* London, New York: I.B. Tauris. 462 pp. illus. and Gergely, Gábor. 2018. *Hungarian Film 1929-1947: National Identity, Anti-Semitism, and Popular Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 329 pp. illus." *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 12 (2019) DOI: 10.5195/ahca.2019.356

these books take on an important scholarly imperative: to highlight the powerful role that cinema can play in ideological coercion and political indoctrination as well as the danger therein.

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