

A poor attempt to explain the twentieth century

Sunshine, directed by István Szabó, written by Szabó and Israel Horovitz

David Walsh
10 July 2000

István Szabó's film *Sunshine* recounts the experience of several generations of a Hungarian Jewish family, from the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth. The family's principal male representative in each generation is played by a single actor, Ralph Fiennes.

In Budapest Emmanuel Sonnenschein (whose last name means "sunshine") founds the business that makes the family's fortune, distilling a tonic called "Taste of Sunshine." The lives of his two sons, Ignatz (Fiennes) and Gustave, take quite different directions. Ignatz, a loyal citizen of the Austro-Hungarian empire, rises to prominence as a lawyer and a judge. Gustave becomes a socialist, an enemy of the regime. They are rivals for the affection of their cousin, Valerie, who falls in love with and marries Ignatz.

In an effort to find entry into Hungarian society all three change their last names from the Jewish-sounding Sonnenschein to something "more Hungarian"—Sors. Ignatz' willingness to turn a blind eye to the corruption of the government, mirrored by his growing internal corruption and bitterness, eats away at his marriage to Valerie. Their relationship implodes in the aftermath of the collapse of the empire. Gustave, a participant in the 1919 Hungarian revolution, is forced into exile.

Ignatz' son Adam, who faces anti-Semitism at an early age, becomes a champion fencer. To compete and win at the highest levels he is obliged to join the officers' fencing club and convert to Christianity. Driven by the desire to get back at his tormentors, by personal ambition and by patriotism, Adam (also Fiennes) wins the gold medal for Hungary at the infamous 1936 Olympic games, held in Berlin. He also finds himself involved in an affair with his brother's wife.

Although the Sors family members have done everything possible to assimilate into Hungarian society, they don't escape the Nazis' grasp. Adam and his young son, Ivan, are sent to a labor camp. A brutal fascist official beats Adam to death when the latter insists on identifying himself not as a "stinking Jew," but as the Hungarian national fencing champion.

Ivan (Fiennes for a third time) returns to postwar Budapest, and to his grandmother Valerie's house, determined to revenge himself on the fascists who murdered his father. Gustave, now an elderly man, comes back from exile. Ivan joins the Stalinist police and takes part in the interrogation of former collaborators or suspected collaborators. He begins an illicit and dangerous affair with a woman married to a hero of the resistance.

Ivan encounters anti-Semitism under the new regime as well. His immediate superior, Andor Knorr, is absurdly accused of belonging to a Zionist conspiracy "against the socialist state." Knorr, an Auschwitz survivor, refuses to confess to the invented charges and eventually dies in

prison. Ivan begins to turn against the new government, which is proving as corrupt and cynical as the previous ones. For his role in the 1956 revolt he's sent to prison for several years. At the end, he takes back his old name, Sonnenschein, and in a voice-over declares: "For the first time in my life I walked down the street without feeling I was in hiding ... I knew the only way to find a meaning in my life would be to account for it."

István Szabó (born in 1938) belongs to a generation of Hungarian filmmakers that came to prominence in the 1960s during something of a political thaw. Probably the best known of these directors is Miklós Jancsó (*The Red and the White* [1967], *The Confrontation* [1969] and *Red Psalm* [1972]).

Szabó began making films in the early 1960s, after graduating from Budapest's Academy of Film Art. In the early part of his career he made *Father* (1966), *Love Film* (1969)—semi-autobiographical works that expressed the hope that the society was moving toward a less repressive state—and one of his most respected works, *25 Fireman's Street* (1974), which explores the fate of the residents of one apartment block. His international reputation was made with *Mephisto* (1981), based on the Klaus Mann novel about the once leftist actor who becomes a protégé of the Nazi regime. Klaus-Maria Brandauer, the Austrian actor, starred, as he did in two other historical films made by Szabó in the 1980s, *Colonel Redl* (1985) and *Hanussen* (1988).

This generation of Hungarian filmmakers was shaped in large measure by the experience of Stalinism, including of course the crushing by Soviet forces of the 1956 revolution. Decisive in their ideological development, as was the case for artists throughout eastern Europe and the USSR, was the lack of serious contact with any left-wing critique of the bureaucracy. Jancsó's outlook was probably not untypical. Critics Mira and A. J. Liehm noted that "his hatred for everything that deserved to be hated was expressed with supreme formal mastery. The persecutors and the persecuted of his films merge into a strange whirl which carries them all towards an inevitable and merciless end: there is no hope for either group. Jancsó sets his films in different historical eras ... but the historical background and the given situations are merely pretexts. Jancsó always has as his real subject violence and the loss of the power to hope; and he never passes judgment" (*Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, edited by Richard Roud, 1980).

The restoration of capitalism has not apparently done much to restore Hungarian filmmakers' "power to hope." Viewings of recent Hungarian films suggest, in fact, that the directors are gloomier than ever.

Szabó has set himself the task of chronicling the twentieth century. What does he make of this remarkable and often tragic period? He wanted, he says, to show how "people's private lives have been influenced

by history and politics.... So I wrote this story, showing how these supposedly different regimes—be they an empire, a republic or a foreign dictatorship—have put individuals under pressure. All regimes promise happiness, but dreadful things have happened in that name. Authority uses people. When it no longer needs them, it throws them away or destroys them. This enormous experience is only the experience of the twentieth century.”

The film is not subtle in conveying its central themes. The annoyingly superior Valerie tells her grandson: “Politics has made a mess of our lives.” Gustave the lifelong socialist, on his death bed, asks, “What was the purpose of this miserable life?” At the funeral of Andor Knorr, Ivan declares that he and his kind had wanted “to make a better world” and instead had made one “so much worse.” During the 1956 revolt, he tells a crowd: “This revolution is not about politics, it’s about morality.” And so forth.

To drive home the point that one regime is much like another, Szabó stages a hunting party organized by aristocrats under the old Hapsburg regime and reprises the sequence when the Stalinists are in charge; if anything the latter are more vulgar and bloodthirsty. Equally, certain images deemed to represent the lyrical, nonpolitical possibilities of life—a courtyard full of flowers, a woman caught unawares with her right foot up on her left knee—appear and reappear.

Politics, it turns out, has only one impact on private lives: destructive. It’s best to keep one’s distance from the entire business. Music, flowers, nature, sex, on the other hand, are privileged. This is where real life is to be found. Valerie and the female characters generally hold the key to this side of things. In an early scene Valerie intervenes in a political argument between Ignatz and Gustave, declaring that she wants nothing to do with either the political power revered by the former or the oppressed championed by the latter. I want to be a poet and grow like a wild flower, she says, or something to that effect.

A parallel theme is that of Jewish identity. Everything seems to go downhill after the trio of young people decide to change their names. Ivan, a couple of generations later, only becomes whole when he gets his old one back. Szabó and Horovitz play games with historical fact in the effort to assert their brand of identity politics. By a sleight of hand they identify assimilationism with careerism and accommodation to anti-Semitism (signified by the name change). However, the most advanced Jewish intellectuals and workers in the latter part of the nineteenth century didn’t seek to enter the social mainstream because they were ashamed of their ethnicity or wanted to “get ahead in life.” Most perceived assimilation as a way out of backwardness and narrowness; and far from aiding them in their careers, assimilation for many was an entryway into socialist or oppositional activity of one sort or another.

There was much in European, Hungarian and specifically Hungarian Jewish history in the last century that was tragic. Szabó is not making any of this up. One must ask, however, whether it might not be possible to respond in a manner that, without discounting in any fashion the depth of the ordeal, contains some insight into the origins of the tragedies and some clue as to a manner of overcoming their conditioning factors.

The film is not malicious, not dominated by ferocious anticommunism, but terribly confused and, for the most part, shallow. In any event, the scope of the work virtually ensures the shallowness of any given sequence. Szabó has attempted to treat events—the crisis and decline of the Austro-Hungarian empire, World War I, the Hungarian revolution of 1919, the rise of fascism, World War II, the Holocaust, the emergence of the Stalinist-dominated states in eastern Europe, the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and, in a final voice-over, the ultimate collapse of Stalinism—that would be impossible to summarize in a single feature film, even one undertaken with the best of intentions and the greatest breadth of knowledge. Szabó originally planned to make a television series out of this story. That wouldn’t have solved all his difficulties, not by a long shot,

but at least it might have created the conditions for a more reflective work.

As it is, *Sunshine* largely skates through the twentieth century, barely making contact with its contradictory surface, only to draw the conclusion at the end that the hundred years shouldn’t have taken place at all. Following the logic of the film, there seems no reason to believe the same sort of tragedies won’t repeat themselves in the next century. History is merely a series of misadventures that knocks the innocent middle class bystander on the head.

Szabó has the right to his opinion, but as an explanation of the century it seems pretty thin. Mind you, this is certainly a popular view. It’s the sort of self-serving conclusion a broad and generally prosperous international layer of academics, intellectuals, artists, journalists and commentators of varying sorts has drawn: last century’s experience with social revolution in particular proved a ghastly error. *Sunshine* is one congealed expression of this outlook or mood, a kind of contemporary intellectual lowest common denominator.

It’s not terribly convincing or moving as a drama. Ralph Fiennes increasingly mistakes a perpetually pained expression for emotional depth. Jennifer Ehle and Rosemary Harris (mother and daughter in real life) are equally supercilious as Valerie. David De Keyser as the wise, old patriarch (Emmanuel Sonnenschein) is somewhat wearing. Anyway, this is too pretty a picture. Why should we suppose that a Jewish businessman in nineteenth century Hungary, starting from scratch and with everything against him, would not turn out hard as nails? There are interesting moments and possibilities, but they get lost in the shuffle for the most part.

There are all sorts of loose ends in the film, strands of the narrative that seem to lead nowhere. Much is made of the incestuous character of Valerie and Ignatz’ relationship in the first part of the film (first cousins, they’ve been brought up as “brother and sister”), or what appears incestuous to his parents. Where does this lead? Is it some comment on the “dark side” of eastern European Jewish existence, that, isolated and persecuted, these people were forced to fall back on each other rather too intimately and too intensely for support and love? But they marry and seem happy enough; at any rate, incest is not their problem. In fact, each of the three characters played by Fiennes has a self-consciously intense, but rather pointless affair. The love and sex seem added on as an afterthought, to provide some texture and depth, one feels, to what would otherwise be a fairly dull script.

Szabó has the right to his political opinions, but not to make such an artistically predictable and insipid work. His failure to digest the historical material certainly contributes to the weakness of the drama and his willingness to “swim with the current” ideologically and aesthetically cannot be healthy. Does Szabó have doubts about his own conception in the back of his head? Does he really know better in some part of his being? It’s hard to say, but worth pointing out that the strongest figure in the film is Knorr (William Hurt), the Communist survivor of a concentration camp who refuses to capitulate to the Stalinists.

The current popularity in artistic circles of the view that politics, particularly radical politics, is the mortal enemy and destroyer of poetry, love and all things personal and intimate seems to suggest that we’ve been transported back one hundred and fifty years in history. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the most socially perceptive artists were already drawing different conclusions.

For Oscar Wilde, for example, socialism would be “of value simply because it will lead to Individualism.” Increasingly artists saw their interests and concerns, including the defense of personality and emotional freedom, as bound up in one way or another with the fate of the working class. The Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky hailed the October Revolution, perhaps too familiarly, as a co-conspirator in a love affair. The Surrealists understood all this; André Breton declared that “Lyricism is the beginning of a protest.”

The left-wing French writer Paul Nizan perhaps addressed the problem most directly, in *Aden Arabie*: “You think you are innocent if you say, ‘I love this woman and I want to act in accordance with my love,’ but you are beginning the revolution. Besides, your love will not succeed. What a sin it is to demand freedom and announce that you want to do something to achieve it! You will be driven back: to claim the right to a human act is to attack the forces responsible for all the misery in the world.”

The traumas of the past three-quarters of a century have had their impact. Szabó's film gives some indication of that. It's hard to believe that the most perceptive filmgoers will be satisfied with his conclusions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact