

71st Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

***Natural Light* from Hungary: What war and barbarism do to a human face**

Verena Nees
18 April 2021

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the 2021 Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, which took place March 1–5. The first part was posted March 16, the second March 20 and the third March 25.

The 71st Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) was held in early March in the form of online screenings of selected films to an audience of film professionals and some journalists. Public showings and the official award ceremony are planned for June.

Natural Light

Natural Light (*Természetes fény*) is an anti-war film of a special kind. “It was for me an intriguing experience to base a feature film solely on a motionless face,” declared the young Hungarian director Dénes Nagy about his film, which won the Silver Bear for direction at this year’s Berlinale. He describes this as the essence of his work.

Indeed, the dark, furrowed face of Hungarian sergeant István Semetka (Ferenc Szabó) is nearly always present, barely illuminated by the rays of light that occasionally break through the trees in a swamp. Semetka is one of the 100,000 soldiers of the authoritarian Hungarian regime of Admiral Miklós Horthy (who ruled from 1920 to 1944), allied with Hitler, deployed against partisans in Soviet territory invaded and occupied by the German military.

The film takes place in the Second World War but has a more universal significance. It is also more than just a response to today’s Hungary, where the Viktor Orbán government celebrates the country’s former fascist collaborators as heroes.

Semetka is not a hero. He is a simple Hungarian peasant recruited for a war he instinctively rejects but does not rebel against. We do not see or hear much about the war against the partisans and the punitive actions taken against the civilian population. There is very little dialogue. The blows and screams become all the more frightful when local residents are

terrorized and rounded up in a village square.

They are peasants like Semetka. He fixes his gaze on their feet, which the thin light illuminates in an eerily dark environment: gnarled and old, dirty, in tattered peasant shoes, interposed are naked children, girls’ feet. These are images that get under the skin.

During a patrol in the soggy forest, the commander falls victim to partisan fire and at short notice Semetka is called upon to lead the unit. He shows compassion for some villagers locked in a barn. When the light falls on the face of a young girl with her infant, he complies with her request to “fetch us water.” The young mother first gives her child a sip and then hands the cup to other fellow prisoners.

One senses the deep shame behind Semetka’s stoical expression. It is not his war but sees no possibility of intervening. Nagy explains: “He is a man who doesn’t want to hurt anybody, who tries to stay away from violence but, at the same time, he tries to avoid complications and problems for himself. We could say he is a good man. But he is a weak man too.” The director wanted to show this contradiction.

When a new commander arrives and sends him on patrol in the forest, Semetka takes a long look at the barn where people are being held—one suspects terrible things lie ahead. Semetka, however, follows orders. When his squad returns, through the trees the structure can be seen in flames.

Later, when reporting back to headquarters, Semetka does not mention the brutal crime. He remains silent with a stony face when the general declares, “Let’s forget all about this!,” and urges him to take a few days’ holiday with his family. At the end, we see Semetka on a moving train, with his motionless, sombre soldier’s face, sitting opposite a civilian from the present day, a person who is relaxed, friendly, carefree, somewhat complacent.

The contrast makes one shudder. As the director says in an interview, there is war all around us today. He wanted to show how people suddenly find themselves in an unknown situation, not knowing what to expect and realizing too late what is taking place.

Natural Light is based on a novel of the same title by Pál

Závada, which was published in 2014 and is a bestseller in Hungary. In the book, Semetka cannot cope with the trauma of his war experiences and commits suicide a few years later.

Nagy, however, has only taken one small excerpt from the novel, set in the year 1943. He didn't want to deal with the story to its end, but rather focus on a snapshot: "What led him to become involved in the murders? What choices did he fail to make along the way?" The director wanted to show a person who realizes his situation "too late," adding, "I think we can easily be in the same situation."

To make his film as authentic as possible, Nagy cast his film solely with non-professionals. For years, he searched for the right people in the rural populations of Hungary, Lithuania and Russia. He also wanted the movie's location to resemble the actual situation during the Second World War as closely as possible. The Hungarian actors were brought thousands of kilometres to the Lithuanian-Russian border, where they faced the actors of the Soviet villagers. They were in an unknown place, as is the case in a real war, together with people speaking another language who, like themselves, come from the agricultural population.

The director uses images of nature and the four elements of water, earth, fire and air, which "never appear friendly or gentle or civilised," but rather raw, powerful and indifferent to human life. His approach includes showing raw animal meat at the beginning of the film when soldiers cut open an elk—according to Nagy, this is the only means today for a direct encounter with nature.

Nagy counts famed Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky amongst his strongest influences, especially the latter's award-winning film *Andrei Rublev* (1966), about the 15th-century Russian icon painter, which focused on the precarious relationship between artist and society.

Tarkovsky's films create deliberative moods through an almost static visual imagery. The filmmaker, who died in Paris in 1986, asserted in *Sculpting in Time* (1987) that he did not want to communicate with the viewer about content that could be easily recounted. It was necessary instead to create a basic "psychological state" that was universally valid and comprehensible. The "logic of poetry in cinema" was closer to Tarkovsky than "traditional theatrical writing which links images through the linear, rigidly logical development of the plot," since the latter is based on "a facile interpretation of life's complexities." This approach is successful in some of Tarkovsky's work, although not all.

Nagy also cites the Lithuanian film *Three Days* (*Trys dienos*) by Sharunas Bartas (1991) and the French film *Flanders* (2006) by Bruno Dumont, which won the Grand Prix in Cannes and tells the story of a man who experiences the horrors of a war in the Middle East in which he increasingly and unthinkingly takes part.

Nagy's impressive debut feature film deservedly won a Silver Bear. The two imperialist world wars sacrificed

humanity to barbarism, and millions of people were dragged into the carnage and its catastrophic consequences. The results of any future world war carried out with nuclear weapons must be grasped before it is too late—that is the unstated conclusion to be drawn from Nagy's film.

However, at the end the film lands in a philosophically questionable cul de sac and tends towards a Christian humanist outlook. While it is entirely correct to point out the contradictory nature of the individual, Nagy tends to view the main problem as one of immutable human nature. The roots of wars past and present, stemming from a capitalist system riven by social inequality, remain in the dark. Before Semetka takes his seat in the train, we see a short scene of believers kneeling and praying in front of images of saints.

Nagy refers to this in his interview: "The question is addressed to us, to me. We think we know what is right and wrong, who has failed and who has succeeded. We believe we have acquired a clear judgement about the things around us, we believe we know what our task in life is. The film wants to challenge that image of ourselves."

His comments downplay the critical foundations of human progress and the ending once and for all of the scourge of war, enlightenment and reason. Nagy continues: "I want to show that what actually unites people is this kind of fragility, not consciousness. In that sense, this fragility is what we all share, while consciousness only divides us."

Such culturally pessimistic and irrationalist positions derive in part from the Stalinist betrayal of an international socialist perspective. The 41-year-old Nagy was just nine years old when the disastrous, reactionary policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy led to the restoration of capitalism in the USSR and Eastern Europe.

Particularly in Hungary, where the suppression of the 1956 workers' uprising left deep scars, and where today an extreme right-wing government is enforcing the super-exploitation of Hungarian workers, lessons must be drawn from the experiences of the Semetkas of that time and today: it was not *socialism* that failed, but rather its opposite, *Stalinism*. The unification of workers and all of suffering humanity in a world without war and barbarism is the essence of the programme of socialism and requires the elimination of the capitalist profit system.

To be continued



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact