

POWER RELATIONS AND THE INEVITABLE:
THE CINEMA OF MIKLÓS JANCsó FROM A FOUCAULTIAN
PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the concepts of power relations, identity, and personality in the cinema of Miklós Jancsó. Even though I take the film *My Way Home* (1965) as the object study, I point out that the analysis can be applied to the rest of his filmography, since it consists of a recurrent study of similar narrative patterns and topics. To achieve this goal and offer a better understanding of the philosophy behind the cinema of the Hungarian director, I approach the study from a Foucaultian perspective, from which I find a set of relevant similarities and differences between the political visions of both authors. I conclude that how power relations are represented in Jancsó’s films lead to the idea of the inevitable, in which characters are not in control of their fate.

Keywords: Miklós Jancsó, Michel Foucault, power relations, Hungarian cinema, structuralism, identity

In one of the first scenes of *My Way Home* (*Így jöttem*, 1965), Miklós Jancsó filmed a series of interactions between individuals from different sides at the end of the Second World War in Germany. The protagonist is Jóska (András Kozák), a young Hungarian who tries to go back home, but is caught by a group of Soviet deserters. Suddenly, a group of military men who were trying to stop those deserters catch them all and take them to the place where they are holding a group of captive war prisoners. All of them will soon be executed. However, just before this is going to happen, Jóska saves

his life because he is Hungarian. The leader of the military group spares his life and tells him to go back home. At the same time, one of the deserters starts speaking in Hungarian, showing that he also belongs to that nationality, and hence, he deserves to live, too. This person with an unknown name is not that lucky and is executed, along with the rest of deserters.

In another scene, later in the film, the protagonist meets a group of Hungarians who are hiding from the military, trying to go back home. When they start talking, they tell him to join and return, but he refuses, because he feels comfortable in his new situation — he has established a friendship with a Soviet soldier who, in the beginning, was his captor. When the group discovers what is happening, they start pushing him to go back to his previous identity — him as an average Hungarian, a situation which necessarily means understanding the Soviets as the enemy, until his friend arrives to protect him. These two scenes not only expose the way Miklós Jancsó understood power relations and identity but the similarities and differences with Michel Foucault's approach to those topics.

Both authors think of power as something that can only exist through social dynamics of interaction. It is applied because it is possible to do so, and because it is what defines interaction as such, not because of the wickedness of the ones in power. Also, power is something that escapes any type of control, allowing a switch from oppressor to oppressed. However, Michel Foucault claims that there can be no power relation where there is no freedom from the side of the oppressed. Therefore, according to the description of the first scene, Jancsó and Foucault would strongly differ at this point. Regarding the identity of the individual, there is a sense of individuality as a form of oppression, since it makes the individual isolated, but at the same time deprived of a true personality, since identity is built up from the system of rules and social norms, which at the same time are defined by the power relations. As a result, achieving an actual, true personality would become a form of resistance towards power. In this essay, I claim that there is a close connection between Miklós Jancsó's cinema and Michel Foucault's

philosophy regarding power relations and identity and that the vision the director offers of life is pessimistic, since there is a feeling of the inevitability of fate that conditions the lives of protagonists.

POWER RELATIONS

Michel Foucault is straightforward when it comes to defining power. As it can be found in his text *The Subject and Power*, he claims that “there is no such entity as power, with or without a capital letter; global, massive or diffused; concentrated or distributed. Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action”. But it is also important to have in mind that power does not appear as direct action on others — for example, physical force applied on the other’s body — but as an action that affects the other’s action/s (1997-2001, 340). At the same time, the author claims that “power is exercised only over free subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behaviour are available”. As he points out afterwards, if we consider this approach, then the exercise of power cannot exist in relations to slavery or, in other words, freedom needs to exist in order to make the use of power possible (1997-2001, 342). This is the reason why resistance is possible and necessary: we would not want to become slaves, but we do react by resisting the effect of power and, by doing that, we actually make power possible. In summary, power appears in human relations as a dynamic entity that needs the presence of freedom and resistance to existing.

When we analyze the way Miklós Jancsó reflects on the use of power, there are important similarities but also significant differences. If we take the two scene samples exposed in the introduction, we can see two types of use of power. The first one would be that in which freedom is erased. From Jancsó’s perspective, when soldiers take enemies as prisoners, they are using power against them, up to the point of erasing freedom, but this

does not prevent the appearance and survival of power relations; on the contrary, they are more present than ever. But this is not the only case when power relations appear. Analyzing the second scene, a type of situation very similar to what Foucault describes appears. There is a group of people in power, who oppresses the protagonist. Even though the oppressors become violent towards him, he is still free to choose and he decides to resist this pressure that comes from them. So, by resisting, he allows power relations to establish: they take actions to affect the other's actions. We could, thus, conclude that from Jancsó's perspective, life is just a matter of power relations, which are present all the time.

This coincides with the analysis developed by Lorant Czigany in his text *Jancsó Country: Miklós Jancsó and the Hungarian New Cinema*. The author exposes that the cinema of this director is a reflection of power relations. When talking about the beginning of *Silence and Cry* (*Csend és kiáltás*, 1967), Czigany describes the opening scene in these terms: “[t]he killing, and it is a killing, not an execution or a murder, is a completely casual, bloodless, and emotionless business. A basic human relationship is established: the man with the gun has the power, the victim accepts it. Death is a result of a move.” (1972, 47). Another important point stressed in the article is the way characters relate to each other, with special regard to ones in power. The result of the communication is never a dialogue, but a command: the ones in power communicate by giving orders to the oppressed, not only the captors to the prisoners, but also the higher rank soldiers to the lower rank ones (1972, 48). Having this in mind, it is understandable that Jancsó always chose to direct historical films during periods of war or revolts because, in those situations, the exercise of power is more intense than ever. In those contexts, he can expand his idea of power relations as part of nature, something accepted by both the oppressors and the oppressed.

Again, taking *My Way Home* as a reference, an interesting contrast appears. In the central part of the film, the protagonist establishes a friendship relation with a Soviet soldier. In the beginning, they were supposed to be enemies but a series of situations provoke each of

them starts taking care of the other, discovering that, in fact, they understand each other at a human level. Here, the interpretation could be that, despite roles, identities and norms of behaviour, two apparent enemies who cannot speak the same language can establish a real connection, where the interaction is not based on power relations and communication is not based on commands. But, in the end, having this type of life means self-isolation because this horizontal way of relating is not accepted in society, neither by the oppressors nor by the oppressed.

In the end, we could conclude that, from Jancsó's perspective, and as Foucault claimed, power does not exist as an entity but is exercised through power relations. At the same time, the Hungarian author does not agree with the French philosopher when exposing that power can be exercised in deprivation of freedom, up to the point of proposing this situation as the purest form of power relation. Even though there are attempts to establish another type of human interaction, as it was exposed in *My Way Home*, the pessimistic vision of Jancsó exposes the impossibility of getting rid of power relations and all their painful consequences.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND POWER

When it comes to the way an individual is affected by power relations, we could conclude that what is understood as personality is something created and modulated by this power. Foucault expressed that “[t]his form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects” (1997-2001, 331). Later in the same text, the French philosopher affirms that the modern state is “a very sophisticated structure in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific

patterns” (1997-2001, 334). In that sense, individuality exists, but it becomes a form of subjecting people, modelling their behaviours and attitudes based on power relations with other individuals, up to the point that actual individuality, understood as a genuine personality, does not exist as such in this matrix of influences which is the system of power relations that forms the modern State.

This pattern of individualization can be seen in Jancsó’s films through the use of metaphorical or literal uniforms. If we take Foucault’s perspective, we can understand nationality as some sort of totalizing individuality, which forms, at the same time, the individual and the collective. In his films, power relations appear due to this concept — nationality can be exchanged for ideology and it would work the same way— and affect the actions of the individuals. When it comes to relations between the captors and captives, nationality is the source for that. In other words, being an ally or an enemy is a matter of nationality. This not only explains the conflicts between different nationalities but inside the actual nationalities as well. The same way the Soviet deserters take the protagonist as a prisoner because he does not belong to their group, he is later freed from being executed precisely because he is not a Soviet soldier.

It is crucial to understand that power relations are also imposed inside a group of people belonging to the same nationality because it is the most important aspect Jancsó wanted to reflect on in *My Way Home*. Here it is fundamental to add the idea of the traitor of the consensus, a concept used by scholar Tibor Hirsch and used in his lectures about Miklós Jancsó (2020). This term is used to explain the conflict that arises when a character does not want to follow the ideological set of the environment in which he lives. In other words, it is the effect of power relations over the protagonist, who suffers the actions that others do in order to try to modify his actions, in an attempt to make him follow the set of rules and patterns that define individuality, as expressed previously regarding Foucault’s thoughts. The protagonist questions the hegemonic ideology and, as a result, wants to live his life the way he considers appropriate, in an attempt

to reach a genuine personality, with genuine values and thoughts. This means stepping out of the system built up by the modern State. The individuals are part of this State, and their actions are controlled or modified by it — concretely, by power relations. At the same time, their actions modify others' actions, so they assure the survival of the system. In this sense, even the oppressed — the group of Hungarian prisoners who are trying to escape and ask the protagonist to join them — can become the oppressors — they force him to join and reject his attitude of being friends with the enemy and not following the social norms.

The attitude of the protagonist can, thus, be understood as a form of resistance. At the beginning of his text, Michel Foucault exposed the different types of forms of resistance, and, in the end, concludes that they are a form of confronting the ideology imposed by the state, which does not respect genuine individuality and forces individuals into concrete, pre-established patterns of behaviour and thought (1997-2001, 331). These ideas describe the attitude of Jóska, who establishes a new way of life along with his Soviet friend. They live self-isolated from both sides, developing a horizontal way of communication, where power relations do not exist. In the rest of the contexts, both when talking with comrades and enemies, the form of communication was that of the command. Here, there is actual understanding, mutual respect and openness towards the other's decisions and actions. It is, in other words, something like an oasis in the middle of the war.

Even though this idyllic situation takes place, Jancsó is pessimistic about it. It can indeed take place, but it is also true that it is possible because they are isolated from society. The contrast can be perceived when the protagonist needs to interact with members of society again. The first time, he goes to a group of Hungarians to find a doctor who would cure his Soviet friend. To achieve this, he needs to put on a uniform, both metaphorically and literally: he can only receive help through the use of power relations, that is, through pretending to be a Soviet and using his gun to force the doctor to help him. But more importantly, at the end of the film,

he tries to go back home using one of the trains in which many other Hungarians are trying to achieve the same goal. When he is on top of it, the group of Hungarian prisoners, who had a conflict with him previously, recognize him and start punching him, preventing him from returning home. This literal act can be interpreted as a metaphor for the impossibility for the protagonist to reintegrate into society having a different set of values. In other words, having a genuine personality, different from the one imposed by the state, means the incapability to live inside society.

CONCLUSION: MIKLÓS JANCsó'S STYLE AS THE CINEMA OF THE INEVITABLE

As it has been exposed in this essay, Miklós Jancsó's style is based on the exposition of power relations, which are very close to the theories exposed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. There are strong similarities, such as how power is executed within people belonging to the same social group or the idea of identity as a pre-established personality that is not actually genuine and which provokes the necessity of adopting an attitude of resistance as a way of obtaining it. The biggest difference appears when it comes to power executed in the absence of freedom, that is when captors interact with prisoners. Whereas for Michel Foucault there is no power when freedom does not exist, for Miklós Jancsó power relations are possible both in the presence or absence of freedom.

After having exposed how similar the ideas of both authors regarding power relations are, I have pointed out an important characteristic of Jancsó in this field, which is the idea of the inevitable. This is, in fact, a concept that also connects him to Foucault. The philosopher pointed out that the oppressed is part of the system of oppression, and this is the basis of Jancsó's discourse. He takes this proposition to the extreme, exposing how the oppressed are accomplices by their own fate, up to the point that they, in some way, participate even in their own death. This is clearly exposed in the already mentioned scene, where the protagonist

forces a doctor to help him by using a gun. In this scene, there are four people against the protagonist, which means that, if they acted, they would probably succeed in taking his gun. And yet, they do nothing. This is just an example of a narrative pattern that appears constantly in his films. This situation could be understood as Jancsó sending the idea that the oppressed accept their role, even if it would mean to be executed. Execution scenes are actually very typical in his cinema.

To conclude, I would like to point out that the cinema of Miklós Jancsó not only reflects the already exposed ideas of power relations but also how they provoke the inevitable, in the form of accepting the role inside the system, the fate that this situation might lead characters and how being part of society establishes a strict set of rules of behaviour thought that people need to adopt them if they want to be integrated. In the end, the individual, deprived of a genuine, authentic personality, cannot control his fate if he stays inside society, because power relations control the way they behave and think.

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