

László Strausz

## VISEGRAD SCHOLARSHIP RESEARCH REPORT

I began researching the propaganda and educational films produced by the Film Studio of the Hungarian Interior Ministry (HU OSA 394-0-1 Propaganda and educational films [Propaganda- és oktatófilmek]) roughly one year before being awarded the Visegrad Scholarship. Throughout the Summer of 2017, I spent about a month and a half at the Open Society Archives and watched each film of the folder HU OSA 394-0- for the first time. Initially, I started to sketch my observations about the films but soon decided to start building a database with detailed categories which related to the narrative and stylistic characteristics of the films.

My initial impression was that through the films, I will be able to observe the strategies of self-representation of the socialist state. Thus, when I applied for the Visegrad Scholarship in October 2017, my research proposal was built on this hypothesis.

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First approach

### **State socialism in the mirror: strategies of self-representation in the Hungarian Interior Ministry's propaganda and educational films between 1955-1989**

The goal of my proposed research project is the analysis of the propaganda and instructional films produced by the film studio of the Hungarian Interior Ministry (IM) from the perspective of self-representation. A significant part of this collection can be found at OSA (HU OSA 394-0-1 Propaganda and educational films). The ways in which these films played an active part in the knowledge production of the state authorities reflect on the practices of ideological indoctrination and education both for the members of the intelligence community (state security services), but also for the broader public. In my research project, I will approach the texts of the films as products that rely of cinematic conventions recognized by audiences, but also as screen media products that participate in the broader *circuits of communication* of the regime's propaganda machinery. Throughout the project I will attempt to explore how the films' rhetoric conjures up the image of the state as a benevolent but stern father guiding its subjects. Thus, I approach the studio's output as performative acts of the authorities that endeavour to rewrite collective identity. Via the analysis of the thematic and formal strategies and technologies of identity formation, my project will trace the outlines of an imagined community created by the films.

The knowledge production of the film studio needs to be analysed in the context of the post-1956 goals of the state socialist system: namely the consolidation of the Kádár-regime. The generically and rhetorically very different corpus of the films depicts the workings of (both the openly and secretly functioning) repressive state apparatuses that correct the citizens' deviations from the centrally defined political and social norms, deter, threaten and retaliate when necessary, but also educate authorities on how to avoid these ideological aberrations.

The almost three hundred surviving films have not yet been systematically analysed within the framework of an academic research project. Currently, the films of the IM studio can be found scattered across various collections, a comprehensive catalogue about the items is not available. Among the films, we can find fictional, documentary works. The fictional pieces contain re-enacted situations, docu-fictional stories, but also full-length films featuring well-known actors. A large number of the films depicts the usage of surveillance technology, while other demonstrate the formation of interpersonal relations. The preliminary goal of my project is to map the surviving pieces across the various archives.

However, my central interest lies in the re-enacted-, the docu-fictional works and the feature films, which create distinct spectatorial subject positions for their viewers by cinematically forging points of identification. Audiences of the IM studio films are twofold: they primarily target members of the state authorities (members of police, border police, intelligence services), but some works were screened to a broad public. This duality plays an important role for my project, as it allows for a comparison of rhetoric of the two set of screen texts. My proposed research project thus makes use of the methodology of media and film studies in order to identify the main components of the films' expressive language and locate the modes of emotional and/or intellectual identification and creation of meaning through genre patterns (film noir, crime- and action film conventions, melodramatic modes).

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However, as soon as I completed a first viewing of the films, I started to look for a broader interpretive framework. I realized that the concept of self-representation does not take into account the complex ways in which the films attempt to govern their audiences' understanding of statehood, government and ideology. It seemed, therefore, more productive to try to change the perspective of the project and look for the methods of persuasion that the films adopt.

These strategies of persuasion have changed over the course of the three decades when the IM studio has been producing films. Thus, the change in the perspective of my project reflects the understanding that the films rhetoric needs to be understood in a historicized way. In a second articulation, therefore, I approach the films as documents which shed light on the how propaganda was practiced through these media texts.

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Second approach

### **The instrumentalization of propaganda**

The goal of my research project is the analysis of the propaganda- and educational films produced by the film studio of the Hungarian Ministry of Interior between 1958 and 1988 from the perspective of the changes in the applied ideological methods and the rhetoric of persuasion. The films in question played a central role in practical and ideological education of the state security services. However, and probably more importantly, the films display the propaganda strategies of the state socialist regime. According to the hypothesis of my research project, the traditional-archaic ideological language of the films produced during the 1950s and early 1960s gradually gives way during the mid-1960s to a technical language that emphasizes the specialist knowledge of the secret services. Persuasion loses its ideological

character and turns into set of practical considerations. This transformation can be traced in the expressive language of the propaganda films.

This project is part of an ongoing research program. I will attempt to catalogue the films and work on an interpretive model that will allow me to talk about the studio's products as useful films that highlight the authorities' conceptions on the ways persuasion and propaganda can be used to reach political goals.

The workings of the film studio of the Ministry of Interior need to be analysed in the context of the consolidation effort of the Kádár-regime after the defeat of the 1956 revolution. In the generically and rhetorically substantially different films, the activities of the state's repressive apparatus are depicted as ones that (1) try to paternalistically correct deviations from the state-defined political and social norms, (2) create the image of the deterring, threatening and retaliating power, and (3) educate the services on the techniques of supervision and control. While in the earlier films produced during the late 1950 and early 1960s these goals are executed by referencing a transcendental ideological principle, the later works provide tools of propaganda via technical means. In other words, the value-based propagandistic model gives place to practical knowledge and technicization as the preferred methods of persuasion. The goal of the project is to trace these changes through the formal-rhetorical devices employed by the films.

The surviving three hundred-something films have not yet been systematically analysed by any researcher. The corpus of the studio first of all needs to be catalogued and coded for content, themes, topics, locations, production circumstances etc. After this preliminary mapping of the propaganda films, I plan on analysing their language by focusing on the spectatorial positions they construct for their viewers and their strategies to foster identification. The audiences of the films are twofold: the primary target audiences were the member of the state apparatus, but some of the productions were also screened for a broader public. This duality plays an important role for my research project, since it allows for a comparative analysis of the films with reference to the different viewers they were screened for.

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This turn in my interest in the propaganda films coincides with the actual research I have done at the Open Society Archive throughout July and August 2018. To follow up and be able to test the above hypothesis, I started to build an Excel database, which reflects the various narrative and stylistic parameters of the films. My assumption was that the changing propaganda strategies will be discoverable in these textual characteristics of the films. While my database of the films is not yet ready, I was already able to see some trends by rendering charts from the coded films.

These trends show, how the producers of the films shifted their persuasive strategies from a traditional-archaic ideological language towards an instrumentalized, technical mode of speaking that does not engage with ideological questions anymore and frame propaganda as a modernizational-bureaucratic issue. In order to exemplify this first findings and the intermediary state of my research, I have below attached the slides of my presentation that I gave at the Open Society Archives on July 30 2018:

# STATE SOCIALISM IN THE MIRROR

STRATEGIES OF SELF-REPRESENTATION  
IN THE HUNGARIAN INTERIOR MINISTRY'S PROPAGANDA AND EDUCATIONAL  
FILMS BETWEEN 1955-1989

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# THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF PROPAGANDA

GOVERNMENTALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY  
IN THE *BM STÚDIÓ* FILMS 1955-1989

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### Films of the 1950s and early 1960s

- intuitive impression: early films work with an assumed ideological consensus
- social change is necessary for ideological reasons
- ideological objectives represented more efficiently in a fictional context
- dramatized films – immersive diegetic world

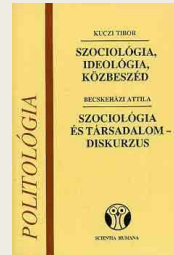
### Films of the late 1960s and onwards

- intuitive impression: later films work with an instrumentalized consensus
- ideology “disappears” and gives place to a set of technical considerations
- “how-to films:” how to follow subject etc.
- non-fictional, technical films

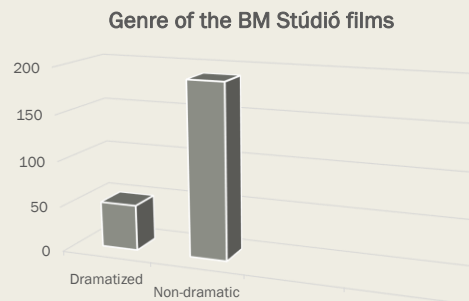


**Kuczi Tibor: Szociológia, ideológia, közbeszéd (1992)**

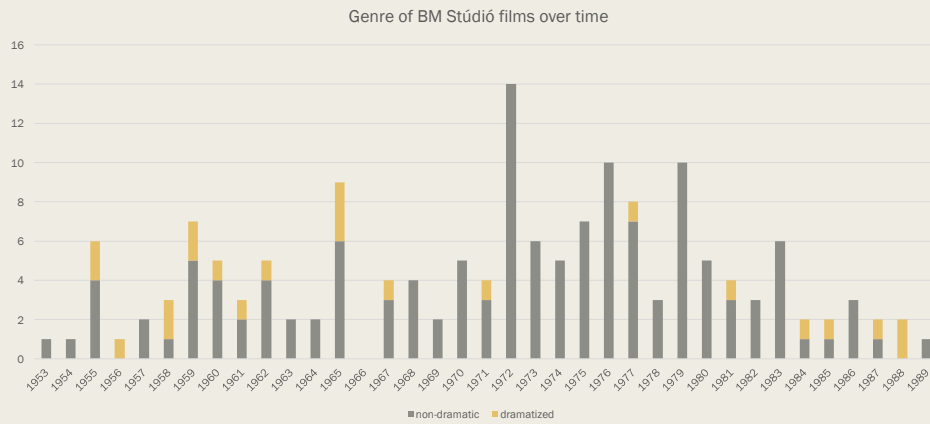
- the ideology of the 1950s - an *archaic mode*:
  - events take on meaning beyond their immediate significance
  - reality represented as signs of Good and Evil
- 1970s: *modernizational-bureaucratic ideology*:
  - professionalization of language
  - knowledge and rationality play important part in the thematization of reality
  - remains transcendent in the articulation of the social Whole



- OSA holds 223 films in the folder 'Hungarian Interior Ministry Propaganda and Education Films'
- Dramatized: 50
- Non-dramatic: 173



## STRAUSZ: THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF PROPAGANDA



## STRAUSZ: THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF PROPAGANDA

### Films of the 1950s and early 1960s

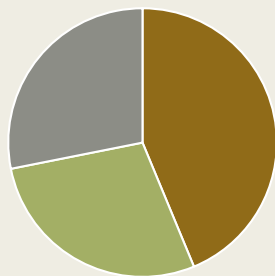
- *narration*: diegetic narrator (part of the films' world)
- *characters*: stern, but benevolent superior officers, prodigal-son protagonists
- *formal style*: flash-backs, dream sequences, subjective images,
- *thematically*:  
emotional recognition, alignment, allegiance



**Films of the late 1960s and onwards**

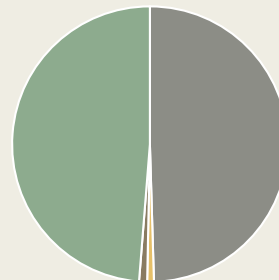
- *narration*: non-diegetic narrator, reenacted scenes, no speaking parts
- *characters*: bureaucrats, part of an impersonal machinery
- *formal style*: documentary cinema with illustrative-educational material (charts, animation etc.)
  
- *thematically*: even petty crime is investigated with the means of the state apparatus
- improbable and disproportionate operations: the theft of eggs from the coop investigated by a large CSI team with chemical traps (*Vegyí tolvajcsapdák*, 1968)

Narration in dramatized films



■ Diegetic narrator ■ Voice-over narration ■ Yet to be categorized

Narration in non-dramatic films



■ voice-over narration ■ diegetic narrator ■ no narrator ■ yet to be categorized



### Films of the late 1960s and onwards

- dramatized films return in the late 1980s
- characters have changed: technical professionals (engineers, trade company executives, businessmen)
- themes have changed: industrial and economic information must be stolen, or protected
- the ideological goal of these operations is not discussed
- either self-explanatory or private
  
- what about the formal characteristics of the 1980s dramatized films?

### Future plans:

- finish the coding of characteristics in theme and style
- analyse the changes in across the 1955-1988 interval
- think about the status of the *Kék fény* shows in the light of my two categories these
- hypothesis: *Kék fény* represents a third category - moralizing
- qualitative analysis of the films

I would like to thank the Visegrad Fund and the Open Society Archive (especially Zsuzsa Zádori) for supporting this research endeavour. As I tried to outline above, this support has been immensely helpful, since it allowed me to spend considerable amount of time with the films, and develop my project.

While this research project will continue, I hope I can say that I have already reached some goals by being able to refine the research question, my methodology and hypothesis. I plan on returning to OSA when I find some time to continue my research project.

Sincerely,



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