

SEASON OF MONSTERS

Interview with Miklós Jancsó and Gyula Hernádi
at the shooting of their new film

The venue is at Inota, a small locality halfway between Budapest and Lake Balaton, in the vicinity of a big thermo-electric plant—the scene where Miklós Jancsó's new film, *Season of Monsters* (Szörnyek évadja), is being shot. Shooting is in its tenth day; everyone has now taken up their position, waiting for the red disc of the sun to slide to the desired level, all set for the camera to start filming, at the word "action", the sequence whose length will make it resemble a scene in a stage play. It's going to be a ten-minute take, requiring maximum concentration on the part of the actors and actresses, of cinematographer János Kende, the technical crew, the make-up and costume men alike. Everyone is on edge, apprehension at the prospect of causing a retake of the shot is general. A girl with no clothes on is seen on the lakeside; and all the while a waggon carrying a party of merrymakers is coming nearer in the background. The camera is moving down the long track, panning onto a deserted ruined pump-house in whose doorless opening a huge tongue of flame leaps, and a man (György Cserhalmi) drops out. Further on, a young man is seen leaning against a wall of the house, hugged by two girls. A third girl heaves into the picture, and then the three girls, laughing, dash off towards the lake. A man (József Madaras) shows up on the lakeside, and warns the girls that there is a monster in the lake. They don't believe him, and, without a care in the world, start splashing about in the water. In the meantime, the party of merrymakers have arrived, and continue their merrymaking in the foreground, opening a bottle of champagne. The man who just fell out through the door, having crawled across under the camera, joins the revellers. Again, the waggon is seen, pushed by the girls from the foreground into the distance.

Throughout the shooting, Miklós Jancsó speaks little—everyone knows their job. This scene was preceded by a day of rehearsal, and is being taken three times in a row. Each movement has been designed and planned, and everything is proceeding according to a set order. Time and again actors who happen to be out of

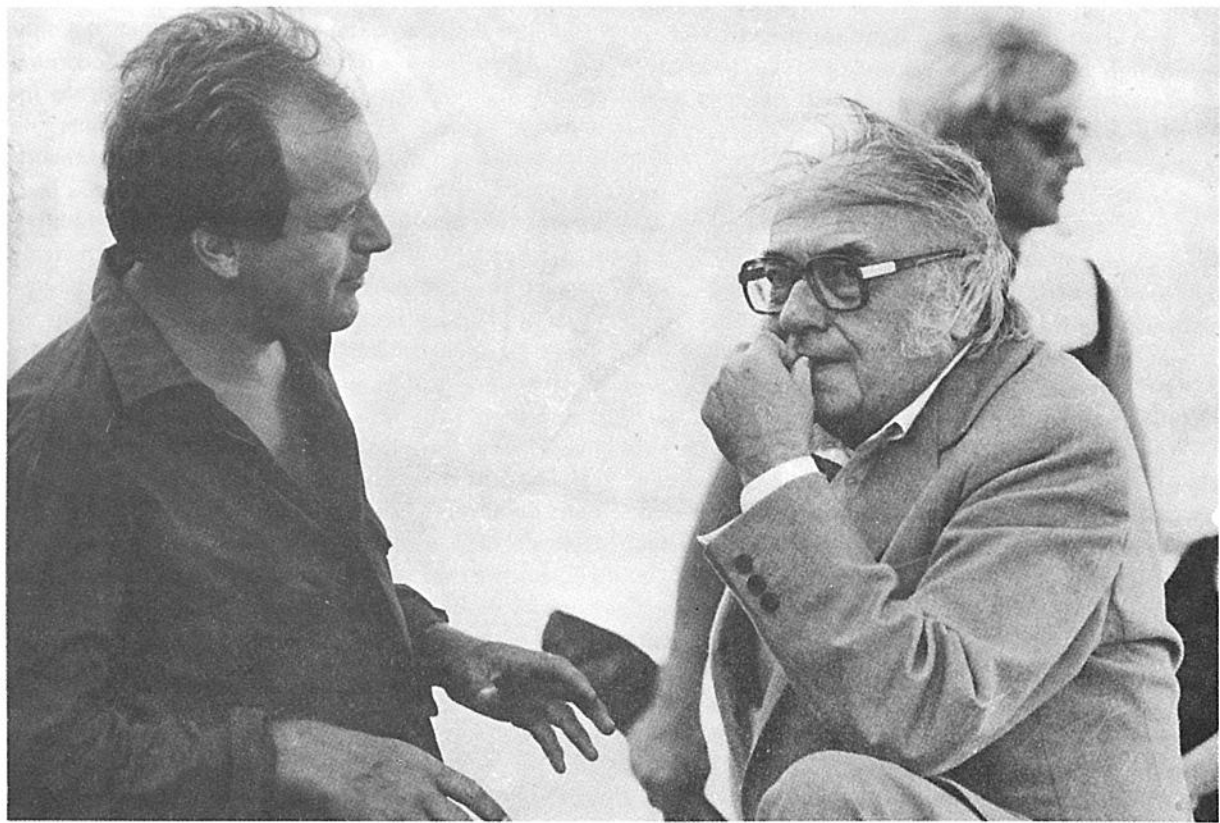
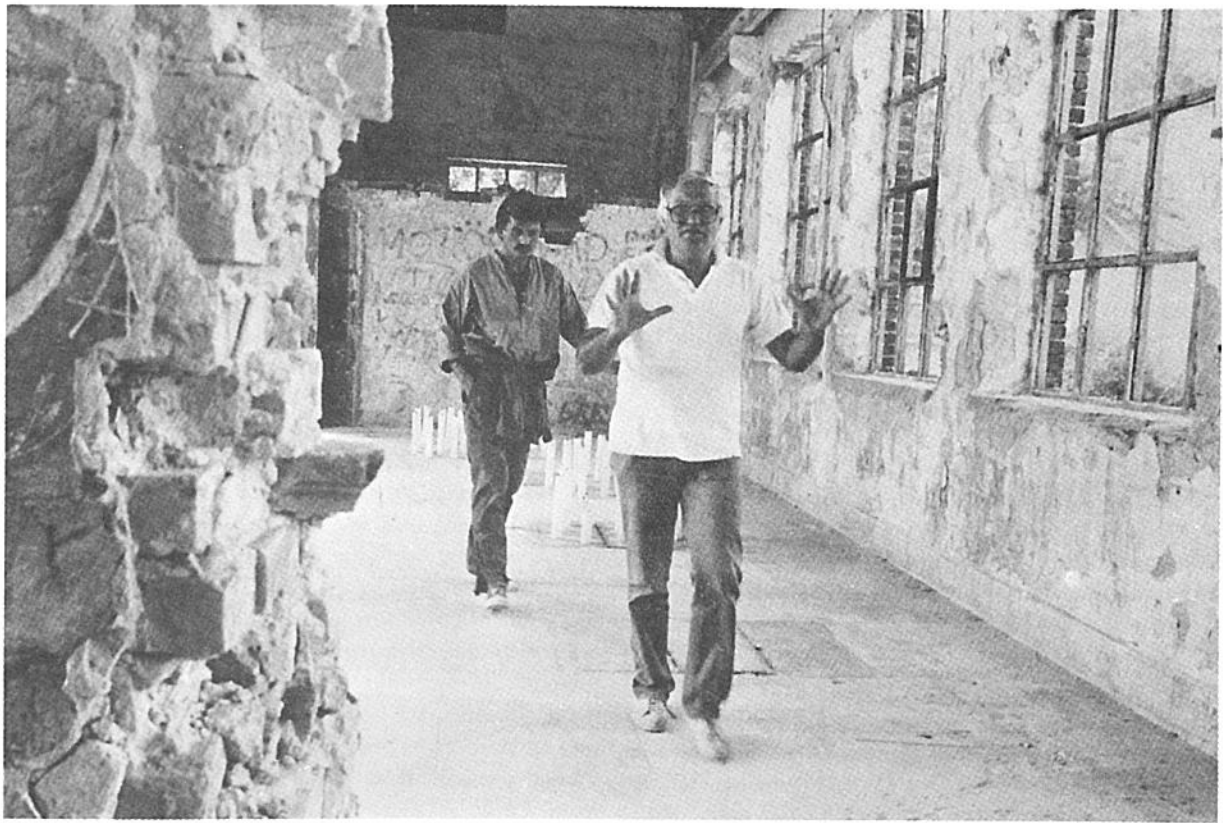
the shooting put in a word of advice like "go closer up", "hold it" or "go now". All are anxious to give of the best of their ability and skill, and to help others do so. What stands out quite clearly in the atmosphere on the set is that it's the film that matters, rather than individual performance. Director Jancsó is buttonholed during a break.

Of all the films you have directed so far, Cantata (Oldás és kötés; 1963) and the Italian production La Pacifista (1970) are the only ones that are devoted to a contemporary theme. What prompted you to pick a today theme again this time?

I don't know. I think audiences in this country by now have a shrewd idea of the way the world is manipulated, and of the mechanism involved. Gyula Hernádi and myself felt that the themes we have addressed ourselves to so far are pretty well known beforehand. That's probably the reason why.

You have said in an interview that your interest is claimed by historical periods and stories that you believe hold out the possibility of an analytical approach. What is it in your present picture you wanted to put to scrutiny?

It seems to me that the world is becoming more and more irrational: it is impossible to know exactly why anything is there, and where it originated. The world defies any attempt at explaining it with the aid of things we believe, or know, or have seen to be an explanation. The various philosophies, hypotheses, religions that have been produced for thousands of years all provide explanations of a subjective kind. Though, frankly, I wouldn't be able to tell if there's such a thing as objective explanation. True, science is making steady advances in gaining a knowledge of the world, but no matter how far it is advancing, a lot of questions remain unanswered.



In your films so far you have formulated your meaning more concretely. In them, you explored social and moral issues. Does Season of Monsters put a question mark on your former outlook?

No, it doesn't. It's rather that we rose slightly above those problems. Until now, we would speak about certain antagonisms—social anomalies or some of the anomalies of society. About power and about being defenceless. That is more simple and more easy to see through than to discuss ultimate problems. Maybe in *The Tyrant's Heart* (*A zsarnok szíve*) there were some signs of our changed way of thinking.

How would you define your film in production? After all, it does not, it appears, continue the line of your "ideological" or "sublimated realist" films; and it seems as though you have made a slight concession to audience appeal in this exciting, mystic story.

I wouldn't be able to tell how far this production is going to turn out different from my other films. Just possibly it's got more action in it, really, in the physical sense of the word. I can't see any substantial difference. When it comes to that, I always make audience-oriented pictures. As for the actual viewing rate, that's a different story. I am not an extremist, or an avantgarde, an Andy Warhol or other innovator who makes his productions expressly for a small audience with a particular, special taste.

All the same, as it turned out, your films were received by a narrow stratum of intellectual people. It is my feeling that this picture is set to get a wider audience reception.

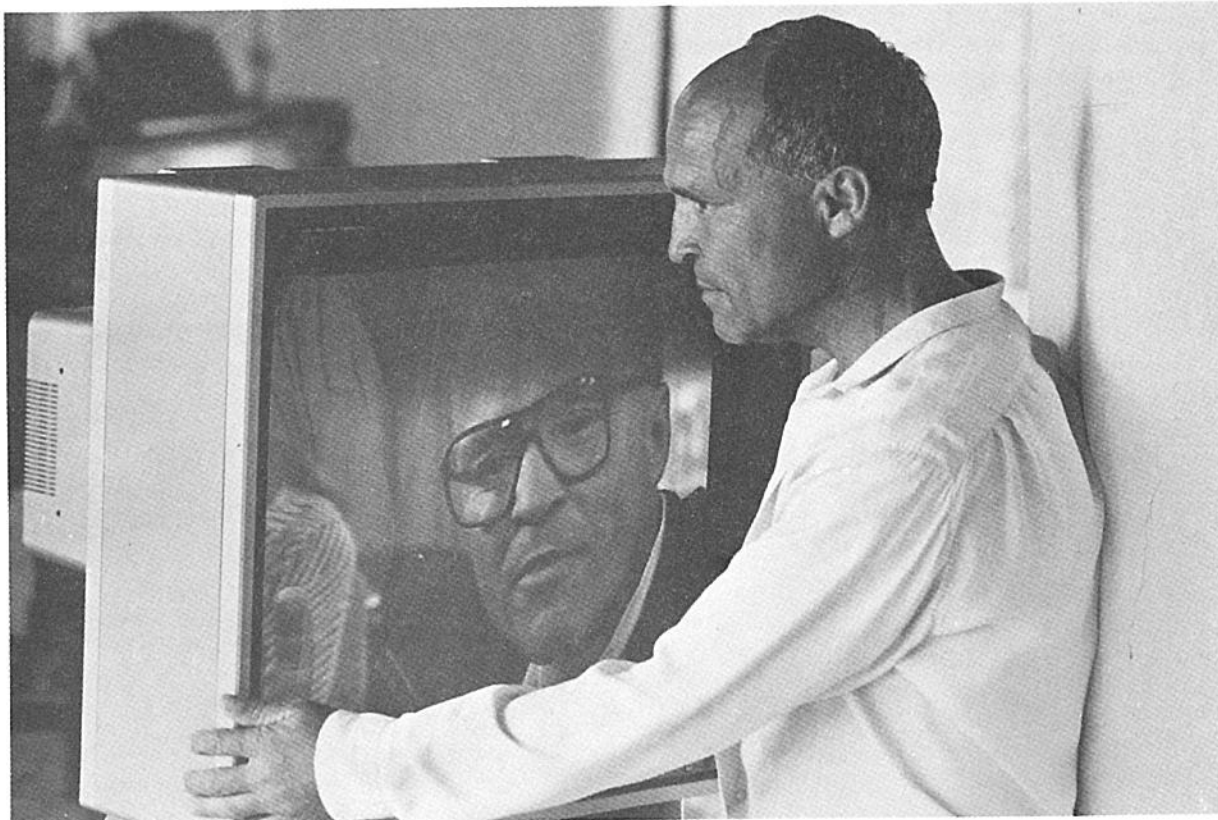
You think so? I don't know. I don't think you make such things on purpose. Customarily, the accusation is made vis-a-vis István Szabó that when he was making *Mephisto* or *Colonel Redl* he transcended his self and made audience-oriented films. This is not true. Those are very beautiful films, and are unmistakably Szabó films. Which of the two is more, and which less of a Szabó film I wouldn't know. Anyway, I think this goes for me too whenever my films are being criticized.

The break was over, and the conversation with Miklós Jancsó had to be terminated, but there was a chance to continue it with Gyula Hernádi, the screenwriter of all Jancsó films made in Hungary since *My Way Home*.

Would you please tell me about the way the story of this film took shape; about the set of ideas that was your starting-point in writing the screenplay.

Jancsó and I had been talking about how the age of historical films was over, at least for the time being. In the Sixties—exactly in 1965—when with *The Round-Up* (*Szegénylegények*) we started a line of films of this type, we were guided by two main intentions. For one thing, we were attempting to bring onto the screen a criticism of Stalinism; for another, we sought to clarify and formulate the Hungarian historic conscience. At the time of *The Round-Up* this was something new; by now it is something of a commonplace. It's the talk of the town. We realized that we had treated this theme from every possible aspect, so we wanted to drop that set of thought and try something else. We thought this could only be done by treating a present-day theme. So we tried to formulate the deep-set layers of the human condition which are ultimately decisive for the destiny of mankind. Now what are the two or three theses mankind is grappling with; which, should it fail to solve, are bound to push it towards an eventual catastrophe? One is equality, one of the principal problems mankind has been facing throughout history, from Christ's teaching through the French Revolution to the ideas of socialism. The other is elitism, the belief in rule by an elite, according to which the only thing that matters is giftedness, capabilities. According to this doctrine, it is the capable, the skilled, the intellectual leaders, that make for progress, while the poor and weak rest do not matter. This is the theory that leads on to the transcendental. The third is fear; this is often manifested in the nowadays very fashionable disaster theories, which proclaim that there is nothing really disturbing about the prospect of war. After all, it was through successive disasters that mankind's existence materialized. The planets, the solar systems, the galaxies were all formed, like the origin of life upon earth came about, through catastrophes. In the Hegelian theory, time passed through wars and horrors, and now we are finding ourselves in the Twentieth Century, in possession of computers, all kinds of technical devices, space ships, and yet nothing is solved. Though now we have better chances—for example the average life expectancy has risen from twenty-five to seventy years, and so the framework is given for a happier life—yet there's something not quite right. Well, these were the thoughts that suggested the idea of the screenplay.





Would you give a short account of the story of your film?

An elderly professor—impersonated by Ferenc Kállai—as he is celebrating his sixtieth birthday on his ranch, is visited by several of his former students. One of them, a Hungarian-born physician from Sweden (József Madaras), is a believer in the principle of equality. The advocate of the elite theory is a Hungarian psychiatrist (György Cserhalmi). A nurse turns up, to become the person symbolizing the disaster theory. This is the skeleton of the "pseudo crime story" that we built up. There is a lake on the ranch, and a monster dwells in that lake. This monster, or devil, is both the symbol and the lord of equality, and he tries to redeem the world in a way that is his own. However, this way turns out to be impracticable. For there is no such thing as equality; nor does the elite theory by itself offer the right way—this is demonstrated in a single combat between the physician and the psychiatrist. More and more unaccountable, baffling episodes occur. The physician surfaces in the lake as a murderer, and this gets him locked up in a small room, but two minutes later, in the same take, he is seen arriving by helicopter from Budapest. There are several such surprise turns in the film—what we are

seeking to suggest by these is that, no matter how hard we are trying, the world defies any attempt at cognition. You never can tell who is doing what in reality, whether it is indeed that which we see. The physician and the psychiatrist accuse one another of murder, and they both eventually are locked up in the small room, where they kill one another. Meantime, a rain began to fall. The nurse rebels, and makes the disaster complete by setting fire to the ranch buildings. They all die. Early in the morning Jesus comes and, urged by Peter and Paul to do so, raises all from the dead. The driving rain sends the resurrected scurrying into a deserted house—it's Noah's Ark—which is full of doves. The rain is pouring inside the house itself. The ideologists we met before make an attempt to get the doves to take wing, but they refuse to fly in a rain.

That is to say, the monster manipulates us. In the course of the story, the good mingle with the bad, the personality of people changes before our eyes. One wonders who it is that manipulates us? Is it the monster or is it Gyula Hernádi?

That is impossible to tell. Gyula Hernádi does not manipulate; he attempts to describe the biology of

manipulation. Jancsó and I have come to realize it as a fact that the world has ceased to believe in anything. That's what we are trying to demonstrate through the medium of art.

The Jancsó—Hernádi films so far, virtually without exception, have probed the relationship between power and morality. By contrast, this film doesn't depict relationships. In this film, in a way we all seem to be victims. Victims of a monster or some sort of a negative god.

At this juncture, our being at the mercy of our own nature is the central issue. This is about being exposed to the laws, or lawlessness, of human existence. About that negative god, as you said—negative taken in a good sense. In the Manichean teaching, god isn't the real being: he is its second born. The firstborn is the monster, the devil whom god, the dethronizer, ousted by tricks and sharp practices, and pushed him into the sea. He is an "amateur" who bungles his job. Significantly, Lucifer and Mephisto—or Prometheus, in another line—were all of them rebels in a positive cause. Our monster isn't unequivocally the monster that is generally identified with evil. That is to say, a false-minded god identifies the devil with Evil, although the latter is out to create unfinite existence with the right to die, instead of finite existence with inevitable death imposed. To have a chance to decide whether it would be a good thing to go on living endlessly or to have the possibility of exercising the right to die by leaving life whenever we wish to, or whether the beauty of life is just in its being brief and not subject to human will or decision. After all, this is the ultimate, central question of every religion and philosophy.

However, these philosophical thoughts form what is only the frame, the skeleton of the film. The important is the formulation, the realization. In this respect, we have once again built the events around a feast where anything may happen. In all our films from *Red Psalm* (*Még kér a nép*) to *Allegro Barbaro* some sort of a feast is at the pivot of the action. A feast is of particular relevance as it makes the elevated form justified on several counts. For this "theatrical" elevated form isn't an idle invention; it is suited to the subject; in other words, a feast has to be presented in a festive manner. This is the keynote of form.

Speaking on radio a few days ago, you said Season of Monsters is a continuation of Confrontation (Fényes szelek). In what sense is it so?

Many of the actors are the same: they now play in this film eighteen years older. Another thing is a string similarity in Jancsó's life and mine. We both have the same background, both of us were prisoners of war, both he and I were active participants in the postwar movement of people's colleges, and we both were youthful enthusiasts and believers in ideals. In *Confrontation*, in a way we sought to confront enthusiastic belief with disillusionment. We attempted to show the way manipulation was present behind enthusiasm. By now we have come to realize that if and when hope become predominant, this is to the detriment of rationality. One has to know how far one can go in entertaining hopes. Our present outlook is a broader one, more disillusioned perhaps, but certainly more concerned. These films express Miklós Jancsó's and Gyula Hernádi's view on the world. We do not mean to say that this is what the world is like. We state this openly. This is our view of the world.