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Sunset (Napszállta) and the politics of the period film

Thomas Austin

University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper investigates how László Nemes' Sunset (Napszállta 2018), a drama set in Budapest of the early 1910s, gestures to but problematises the pleasures of ‘heritage space’. The film combines the careful assembly of period mise en scène with a countervailing and systematic attenuation of this reconstruction, achieved through tight framing, shallow focus and extreme focalisation on the protagonist Írisz Leiter. This strategy consigns many of the splendours of Belle Époque Budapest to off-screen or out-of-focus space. I explore how Sunset's deployment and complication of the visual, and narrative, pleasures of the period film engages critically with attitudes towards history and the past; the resulting response to the film among Hungarian reviewers; and the gender politics of the film. The institutionalised gender abuse behind the beautiful façade of the Leiter hat store and its opulent clients parallels contemporary scandals. Like many period films, Sunset is set on the cusp of change, a moment when ‘the present imagines itself to have been born and history forever changed’. But it refuses to be sealed off as a closed history to be either nostalgically enjoyed or smugly judged at a safe distance from the present.

Ten minutes into László Nemes’ Sunset (Napszállta 2018), a drama set in Budapest of the early 1910s, the protagonist Írisz Leiter (Juli Jakab) leaves the prestigious milliners and hat store that had once belonged to her late parents. The scene offers the first exterior shots of the film, and the camera, which has often framed Írisz’s alert, determined and unsmiling face in closeup, temporarily retreats to frame a medium long shot, before coming close again for two extended mobile closeups. This sequence of nearly two minutes’ length, in which Írisz, a lone, unaccompanied woman, walks in the public space of the sweltering city, notably resists the high-angle establishing shots that one might expect at this point to showcase a painstakingly assembled reconstruction of the dual monarchy era. Indeed, although Sunset has no shortage of period mise-en-scène, evident in costumes, decor and settings (including elegant classical facades and fashionably dressed men and women walking in the background of this sequence), the predominant use of tight framing and shallow depth of field relegates these carefully assembled and spectacular objects to the margins of the visible, often kept offscreen or out of focus. In this way, Sunset simultaneously gestures to but deliberately problematises the visual pleasures of what Andrew Higson has called ‘heritage space’, defined as ‘a
space for the display of heritage properties rather than for the enactment of dramas’ (Higson 1993 [1993/2006], 99). In this paper I will investigate how the partial withholding of such conventional pleasures of the period film, while perplexing for some reviewers of *Sunset*, is central to its aesthetic and political impact.\(^4\)

**Disrupted pleasures**

It is important to understand the significance of *Sunset* not as a necessary corrective to an inherently conservative genre (although there are certainly conservative tropes and pleasures on offer in many period films),\(^5\) but rather as an example of the entwined political and aesthetic potential of the period film to pursue a critical intervention in views of the past from the present moment. Pertinent to my inquiry here is Belén Vidal’s work on period films of the 1990s and 2000s, especially what she terms a mannerist aesthetic, which offers a ‘common ‘language of pastness’” that may be less about reconstructing a specific historical moment and more about projecting contemporary fantasies about the past’ (Vidal 2012, 187). Vidal writes: ‘Formally, the mannerist aesthetic denotes a productive matrix of fantasy driven by a fetishism of the markers of period reconstruction. It connotes a conventional system of realism that has become figuratively excessive’ (Vidal 2012, 22). Interrogating the genre’s celebrated display of objects via detailed, dense and often luxurious mise en scène, she argues that ‘Period drama’s mannerist “perfect-edness” (the rounded coherence and apparent finitude of its narrative images) contains nonetheless the very “unfinished-ness” of the spaces of fantasy. […] Film does not read the past, but rather the past becomes a mask that reads *our desire* through unresolved tensions about gender and sexuality, self and cultural imaginary and actual loss’ (Vidal 2012, 44, italics in original). I want to build on Vidal’s insight here by developing an inquiry into *Sunset* and the matrix of gender, power, and loss that it exposes. In terms of audience desires, I argue that the film both registers and disrupts a 21\(^{st}\) century nostalgic gaze inclined to seek pleasure in stories and opulent images of a century ago, commonly imagined as a prelapsarian era ended by the carnage of World War One.\(^6\) These indivisible elements of desire and loss are embedded in *Sunset’s* particular staging of the past.

Following the international success of Nemes’ debut feature, *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia, 2015*), which won numerous awards including the Jury and FIPRESCI awards at Cannes and the Academy Award for best foreign language film, the writing, pre-production, and production budgets of *Sunset* were significantly supported by the Hungarian National Film Fund, which spent sums of 22 m forints (70,000 US dollars), 65 m forints (220,00 US dollars), and 1,590 m forints (approximately 530,00 US dollars) respectively on these stages.\(^7\) The film is both a revisionist exercise in genre filmmaking and the recognisable work of an auteur. Nemes’ stylistic signature is clearest in his deployment of focalisation on the figure of Írisz, a style previously employed in *Son of Saul*. In that film, centred on a few days in the life of Saul Ausländer (Géza Róhrig), a member of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, extreme focalisation delivers an immersive representation of ‘the here and now of the extermination machine’ from one prisoner’s perspective (László Nemes in Ratner 2016, 62, cited in Gibson and Howell 2018, 150). Through the use of tight framing, shallow focus and precise sound mix, *Son of Saul* signals the quotidian prevalence of atrocities, which take place just off-screen or out of focus as much as they do in the
foreground. Both _Son of Saul_ and _Sunset_ are thus instances of what Nemes calls ‘subjective cinema’ that he contrasts with a dominant objective perspective in contemporary cinema, through which ‘the audience has less and less to do’ (Nemes 2019). In _Sunset_ this device is deployed to complicate the visual and narrative pleasures of the period film.

Having arrived in Budapest to seek a job at the store that still bears her parents’ name, Írisz is grudgingly given a bedroom at the back of the building by the new owner, Oszkár Brill. Against his wishes, she tries to find out more about her parents and the shop, and finally meets a brother she never knew she had, who is planning an attack on Leiters with a gang of armed men. Three different temporalities are interlaced in _Sunset_, all of which occur 100 years or more prior to the moment of viewing. These are: the ‘present moment’ of 1910s Budapest in the cinematic ‘now’; the past event of Írisz’s parents’ death in a fire at the store, several years before this moment; and, in the film’s coda, the trenches of world war one, shown as the imminent future of the diegetic ‘now’. The film acknowledges its belatedness to both the 1910s and the prior history of the period film, and responds in two ways. First, aesthetically, in a double move that combines the careful assembly of appropriate properties of period mise en scène (encapsulated in the familiar iconography of horse-drawn carriages, steam trains, grand parks, and the high-necked blouses and wide-brimmed hats of fashionable women) with a countervailing and systematic attenuation of this painstaking reconstruction, achieved through tight framing, shallow focus and extreme focalisation on the protagonist. This strategy consigns many of the visual splendours of imperial Budapest to off-screen or out-of-focus (and hence unclear) space. For instance, at one point a parade of a marching band and soldiers on horseback is shot out of focus, partly obscured by a crowd of onlookers, and subordinated to a key narrative revelation: a tense conversation in the foreground during which Írisz learns that she has a younger brother, Kálmán. Nemes has elaborated on his approach to production design: “The costume designer did an incredible job in developing these costumes, and yet I didn’t want the production designer or costume designer to operate as if we were in a showcase film.” Second, narratively, by means of a mystery plot in which Írisz’s curiosity enlarges its scope from the family melodrama of her parents’ death (how did they die; can she trust Brill; who is the brother she has never met?) to the secret of systemic sexual abuse of young women that has for years underpinned the role of Leiters in Budapest’s high society, and in which both Brill and her own parents were complicit. In doing so, _Sunset_ reworks filmic conventions of representing the past as a combination of spectacular display and narrative revelation, and resists any simplistic retrospective nostalgic account of Europe before the Great War.

### Critical reception

If, as Axel Bangert, Paul Cooke and Rob Stone have argued, an understanding of the significance of heritage cinema in contemporary Europe is best pursued by asking ‘how the films, and the cultures in which they are embedded, actively define what counts as heritage and to whom it belongs’ (Bangert, Cooke and Stone 2016, xxvii) pertinent cultural contexts cannot be taken for granted. Indeed they are often shaped by complex negotiations and disputes over narratives of the national past, and how any given film may or may not be seen to accord with such mythologies. In the case of _Sunset_, the film’s
account of prewar Budapest proved controversial precisely in terms of diverse investments in historical stories of the nation. This was intensified by the ambiguity of its plot. A review by Lóránt Stöhr (2018) in the liberal weekly newspaper Élet és Irodalom asked:

Is the real villainy the sickly-sweet cruelty of exploitation and commoditisation wrapped into beauty and forms by the owners of the millinery? Or is it the Austrian aristocracy that represents the pinnacle of European civilisation and who in their intoxicated superiority complex only see developing Hungary (“the third world”) treated as a province – as a mere brothel and raw resource? Or is it the brutality of highwaymen and terrorists, which contrasts the subtle and covert violence fuelled by anger with open merciless violence triggered as a ruthless reaction?12

The range of reviewers’ responses must be situated in terms of the ongoing culture wars within and beyond Hungary, particularly in relation to the country’s relationship with the European Union and other, competing notions of Europe. In their recent work of political psychology The Light That Failed, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes note how a demographic panic over the departure of thousands of young Hungarians moving west to look for work has been displaced and reformulated as a politically expedient campaign against immigration from Africa and the Middle East. According to this anti-liberal narrative, the Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán stands tall as a last redoubt against the dilution of white Christian Europe, its traditions and culture. Thus Orbán in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland have positioned themselves against a ‘mis-guided’ European Union, attacking Western liberalism ‘while claiming the mantle of Europeanness for themselves, describing Central Europe not only as the true Europe but as Europe’s last line of defence’ (Krastev and Holmes 2019, 46).13 It is in this particular setting that existing debates over the history of Hungary, and of Europe more widely, coalesced around Sunset. Thus, as Barbara Klinger has argued in an important contextual study of melodrama, a genre which often overlaps with the period film, ‘we can envision and debate the dynamic impact history has on the meanings of melodrama, that is, its role in constantly reshaping the genre’s ideological function over time’ (Klinger 1994, xiv). Klinger’s research is diachronic, tracing the mutability of meaning across time. But even in the present synchronic study, the significance of historical context is evident, shaping the film’s critical reception, and traceable in part through contemporary reviews.

A review in the social democratic newspaper Népsava praised Sunset as ‘a crushingly visual masterpiece’, but one that was ‘pessimistic and militant’. It concluded: ‘it shows how fragile a phenomenon civilisation is. How easily it can break, just like in Sunset’ (Csákvíri 2018). By contrast, a commentator in the right-wing Fidesz-supporting newspaper Magyar Idők complained:

From one or two trailers and [publicity] photographs the only details to emerge were that the plot takes place on the “eve” before the First World War in Budapest and the leading actress is a girl who gets employed in a millinery, whilst she gets around the locations of the capital looking for certain secrets. From all of this one could infer that it is about a nice, neutral, lyrical tableau, where fashionably dressed ladies in period costumes from the beginning of the century perambulate from the millinery to the Városliget [a large public park in Budapest]. […]

[However] each of its frames is exactly calculated and administered poison to the Hungarian viewer [.]. This is exactly the aim of Marxists: to raise remorse in today’s Hungarian viewers for the Monarchy’s wrongdoings (Deák-Sárosi 2018).14
For this reviewer, *Sunset’s* doubled critique via narrative and mise-en-scène, routed via genre expectations of ‘a lyrical tableau’ and other pleasures, is a cause for dismay and political disapproval rather than a source of interest or engagement. Such disappointment can be partly elaborated via the Brechtian concept of the boomerang image. Paul Willemen has applied Brecht’s model to Douglas Sirk’s cinema of excess, which magnified audience expectations of onscreen luxury and family dysfunction. Drawing on Bernard Dort’s work on *The Threepenny Opera* and Brecht’s pre-epic theatre, Willemen (1972, 129) writes:

Brecht presented the theatre public with the image of life it wanted to see on the stage, but in order to denounce the unreality of such an image, to denounce its ideological character. [..]

‘Brecht puts on the stage what seems to be the image of the kind of exotic society that the spectator wants to see. In fact what the spectator discovers in the very unreality of such an image is himself [sic]. The mirror of the stage does not reflect the world of the audience any more, but the ideological disguises of the audience itself. It bounces the images of the spectacle back to us - like a boomerang’.15

In *Sunset*, what (some) audiences desire – stories and images of the monied classes of pre-war Europe – is simultaneously presented and undercut. The film temporarily invites a nostalgic gaze at the era, but bounces it back to audiences in order to challenge the prelapsarian mythology that such a gaze invokes. Having mobilised the desire for a selective rendering of the past, it emphatically refutes it, in the process foregrounding and interrogating the viewing strategies that this desire impels.

*Sunset* also confounds a teleological progress narrative which by contrast assumes that the current moment is inevitably an improvement on the past. In his seminal essay On Ethnographic Allegory, James Clifford wrote of a salvage paradigm characterised by ‘its relentless placement of others in a present-becoming-past’ (Clifford 1986, 115, cited in Russell 1999, 4).16 While Clifford was concerned with dominant tropes within ethnography, his critique can also be usefully applied to period cinema, which may offer audiences a temporary immersion in a diegetic present located in a time which is also rendered as already and irrevocably past. This asymptotic gesture approaches but never reaches the past moment. A sense of loss may thus coexist with the validation of the present. Like many other period films, *Sunset* is set on the cusp of historical change, one of several moments when ‘the present imagines itself to have been born and history forever changed’ (Sadoff and Kucich 2000, x, cited in Vidal 2012, 34). However, and despite initial appearances, *Sunset* is never nostalgic about the Austro-Hungarian empire in the 1910s on the verge of its loss to history in the fall enacted by the Great War. Nor does it engender a sense that contemporary society is any better than the decadent Budapest it portrays. On the contrary, the institutionalised gender abuse revealed behind the beautiful façade of the fashion house and its opulent clients provides a chilling parallel to contemporary scandals in the era of the Me Too movement, such as those involving Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein. *Sunset’s* historical setting is thus not sealed off as a lost moment to be nostalgically enjoyed or smugly judged at a safe distance from the present. It is the inverse of a recent cycle of European retro films, which, Eric Rentschler has suggested, ‘provide conciliatory narratives that seem above all driven by a desire to heal the wounds of the past and thereby seal them, to transform bad history into agreeable fantasies that allow for a sense of closure’ (Rentschler 2013, 243).
**The inquisitive heroine**

The Leiter store is in some ways analogous to the (upper-class) house, a key trope in the period film that constitutes a site for the display of spectacular objects connoting wealth and pastness, but is also a nexus of memories, hauntings, secrets, and contested property rights. Írisz is the disinherited heiress to her parents’ business, but does not come to claim her property, rather to discover it, ultimately exposing its decadence and helping to destroy it. An intimation of this trajectory is given at the reopening of a room in the store that had been reserved for the exclusive use of Elizabeth (Sisi), Empress of Austria, a historical figure integrated into the fiction, who was assassinated by an Italian anarchist in 1898, around fifteen years before the narrative takes place. One of Brill’s staff announces to a crowd of guests: ‘Only one client has ever set foot in this room. It has been sealed [ever] since. That client was Empress Sisi herself! Legend has it that she dropped a hairpin, lost within these walls ever since. It’s like opening a tomb!’ As Brill invites Írisz to enter the tomb/room then leaves her standing there alone, the dark and hitherto empty space embedded within the brightly lit elegance of the store becomes a metonym for the secrets both past and present that she has begun to disintegrate.

_Sunset_ does not accord easily with the designation ‘melodrama’, but it does deploy, and rework, certain stock narrative oppositions and stylistic devices from the melodramatic mode. Most obviously, Írisz is positioned as the isolated heroine, struggling against social disapproval and male villainy while trying to unearth a series of hidden events. Furthermore, the imperial setting brings _Sunset_ close to the politics of pre-revolutionary 18th century melodrama in France, Germany and England, which typically pitted a lone individual against an implacable aristocracy. Thomas Elsaesser’s summary is instructive here:

> deriving their dramatic force from the conflict between an extreme and highly individualised form of moral idealism in the heroes (again non-psychological on the level of motivation) and a thoroughly corrupt yet seeming omnipotent social class (made up of feudal princes and petty state functionaries). [...] The ideological ‘message’ of these tragedies, as in the case of [Samuel Richardson’s 1747 novel] _Clarissa_, is transparent: they record the struggle of a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism (Elsaesser 1972, rpt in Gledhill 1987, 45).

However, although often frustrated in her search for answers, Írisz is also a much more active heroine than those women in Hollywood family melodramas of the 1950s who, in Elsaesser’s terms, are confronted by ‘victimisation and enforced passivity [...] women waiting at home, standing by the window, women caught in a world of objects into which they are expected to invest their feelings’ (Elsaesser 1972, 62.). Instead she overcomes attempts to mislead, subdue and contain her, and ultimately appears more like the ever-curious protagonist in the gothic melodrama or ‘paranoid’ woman’s film.

Just as importantly for my purposes, the melodramatic mode (as derived from a long European tradition of fairy-tales, folk songs, music-hall and popular theatre) is more interested in the symbolic function of characters than their presentation as psychologically credible, rounded individuals. As Elsaesser notes in his seminal 1972 account:

> The characteristic features [...] in this tradition are not so much the emotional shock tactics and the blatant playing on the audience’s known sympathies and antipathies, but rather the non-psychological conception of the _dramatis personae_, who figure less as autonomous
individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation. In this respect, melodramas have a myth-making function insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualised experience (Elsaesser 1972 rpt in Gledhill 1987, 44).22

Írisz combines both a character function and a witness function, which moves beyond the common device of a character arriving in a new location and/or being confronted with a mystery and thus operating as a surrogate for viewers. This double role is crucial to the political ambitions of the film and their realisation via aesthetics as much as story. Nemes notes that, as the film develops, Írisz increasingly ‘guides our view in this labyrinth’ in a way she becomes the film itself.23 She starts to uncover the abuse of selected young women working at Leiters after meeting the widowed Countess Rédey, whose husband was killed by Írisz’ brother, Kálmán.24 After asking her carriage to wait, Írisz is shot in closeup walking along a hedge, one of many instances of dorsality in the film.25 At the end of the hedge she moves away from the camera and part of the countess’ mansion becomes visible behind a low wall and a line of trees. Again there has been no conventional establishing shot of the property. The sequence foregrounds Írisz’s function as a witness present in every scene, here meeting the countess, who has been smoking opium, and then peeping through curtains to eavesdrop on an unexpected visit by the Austrian aristocrat Von König, who seems to rape the countess offscreen.

The threat of male sexual violence intensifies throughout Írisz’s lonely quest, from a soldier towering over as he demands that she dance with him to an attempted gang rape which is only interrupted by her mysterious brother Kálmán, who appears to be the leader of the working men involved.26 This scene, where the men crowd around Írisz, touching her face and body before one drags her by the back of the neck and lays her down, anticipates a similar and even more chilling, if less explicit, scene of her inspection by the Austrian prince and four other men awaiting the ‘chosen girl’ from Leiters in a palace room. While Írisz again escapes, the right young woman (Zelma), delivered to the same room by Brill, will not be so lucky, although the abuse is anticipated rather than shown. Even the climactic attack on the Leiter store by Kálmán’s men, which Írisz attends dressed in her brother’s clothes, appears to involve the rape and murder of the young women who work there.

In addition to Sunset’s attenuation of visual display, key narrative information is repeatedly withheld from both sound and image tracks. Nemes has commented: ‘There’s this confusion that has to be part of the experience. And we have to let go of the control, as a viewer. […] We tried to take out the parts that were over-explaining or trying to make it more conventional [with] what we call the scaffolding.’27 Lóránt Stöhr notes the film’s ‘complexly composed soundscape of noises, music excerpts and densely layered fragments of dialogue [that] is nearly as shocking to the senses as the noise music of the Auschwitz terror [in Son of Saul].’28 Dialogue is often left indistinct or inaudible. For instance, Írisz’s pivotal meeting with Fanni, one of the previously ‘chosen’ young women sent to serve royalty in Vienna, and now back in Budapest, is so elided that it is impossible to know exactly what she has learned. Fanni appears silently in a doorway, her face disfigured by burns, but this is followed immediately by a shot of Írisz walking away down the corridor. Shortly after this Írisz leaves the store, along with one of Brill’s men, to look for her brother and his followers on the edge of town, near the railway tracks. A transitional sequence of 18 seconds links the two distinct spaces, and comprises a lateral
tracking shot parallel to a busy street, which is entirely out of focus, in both foreground and background. While Írisz’s body (and face) is wholly absent from the scene, the blurred image intimates her interiority (anguish and deep thought), and her passage through an urban space to which she is entirely inattentive. But this sense of preoccupation is never fully articulated. The image both gestures to Írisz’s inner turmoil and registers a refusal to clarify it, instead asking audiences to infer her state of mind. The sequence is thus an emphatic rejection of what Nemes has called the ‘very objective perspective’ that dominates contemporary cinematic narration, in which ‘everything is pointing in the same direction’ (Nemes 2019).

Írisz’s witness function is reiterated in an oneiric coda that follows the attack on the Leiter store. For one minute a slow tracking shot snakes through a water-logged trench occupied by Imperial soldiers in the blue-grey uniforms of world war one. Strikingly, for the first time in the film the mobile camera is no longer anchored to Írisz, but diverges from both her point of view and her movement, until it finally discovers her in a nurse’s uniform, emerging from a dark dugout. Her unblinking stare at the camera is the final image of Sunset. Pouring rain and an indigo gloom have replaced the heat and deceptive sunshine of pre-war Budapest. Moreover, the coda is shot in 70 mm (as opposed to 35 mm for the rest of the film) and abandons the shallow focus that has characterised much of the preceding footage for deep focus. Consequently, although the image is crepuscular, it offers just the display of period detail that has been repeatedly frustrated in the main body of Sunset.

Írisz’s piercing gaze at the camera punctures the seal of pastness and so prevents this sequence, and the film as a whole, from being closed off as a history to be enjoyed nostalgically or judged piously from the vantage point of the present. Rather like Walter Benjamin’s celebrated ‘angel of history’, but with an inverted gaze, she looks forward, not back, from the wreckage of history, witnessing a storm that, it is implied, continues into the current moment. Like Benjamin’s angel, she embodies the rejection of history as a linear narrative of progress. She is a reminder that the ‘hope in the past’, which for Benjamin can be conjured by the ideology of an inevitable technological trajectory that constitutes the gap from past to present, is nothing but a consoling myth. Her interruptive presence in the final scene is a reminder of both the bloody end of the empire and an anticipation, in this staged moment, of the horrors still to come in the hundred years from then until now.

Notes

1. Nemes comments: ‘I didn’t want the postcard kind of approach to period, to costume film, to start with the establishing shot, the outside of a hat store and we [then] go in with her [Írisz]. I wanted to start within the action […] and unfold it from there’ Sunset DVD (2019) director’s commentary.

2. The dual monarchy was established in the Compromise of 1867, which was an attempt to cement relations between Austria and Hungary following Austria’s loss to Prussia in the Seven Weeks War of 1866. It lasted until the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. The dual monarchy thus overlaps, but is not entirely coterminous with, the Belle Époque, which is usually dated from 1871–1914, that is, from the end of the Franco-Prussian war to the outbreak of World War One.
3. By contrast, in his influential essay on the British heritage cinema of the 1980s, Andrew Higson notes the prevalence of ‘self-conscious crane shots and high-angle shots divorced from character point-of-view [used to] display ostentatiously the seductive mise-en-scène of the films’, particularly in Merchant-Ivory productions (Higson 1993 [1993/2006], 99).

4. For examples of negative reviews see: Fagerholm, M. 2018, (‘Not only do the backgrounds rarely come into focus, the story never rises above the level of incoherence.’); (Kiang 2018), (‘designing intricate exteriors of period Budapest, and then perversely consigning them to out-of-focus background noise as we trail around looking at the back of Jakab’s neck [,] it just feels silly’); (Lambert 2019) (‘Nemes loses sight of the basic mechanics of plot and scene work that are necessary for his film to form a coherent, meaningful whole.’)

5. For summaries of the debate over the politics of British heritage cinema, see Bangert, Cooke and Stone (2016, xviii-xix) and Vidal (2012, 16–20).

6. Of course this popular myth ignores the carnage wrought at the time by the European colonial powers in the ‘scramble for Africa’, and the United States in the Philippines, Central America and the Caribbean.

7. In Hungarian cinemas 268,714 tickets were sold for *Son of Saul*, while only 48,293 were sold for *Sunset*. All figures provided by Lóránt Stóhr, University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest. For a review that accuses Nemes of something close to complicity with the Orbán regime because of the substantial funding granted to *Sunset*, and concludes unconvincingly that ‘the movie can be read as a cautionary tale – the polygot [sic] Habsburg Empire perhaps standing in for the European Union – and seen as an advertisement for indigenous culture as opposed to a decadent cosmopolitanism’, see Hoberman (2019).

8. To this extent the film has some parallels with *Passenger* (*Pasazerka*, Andrzej Munk,1961/1963), another film about Auschwitz which uses very different techniques, including staging in depth, to situate murder and acts of brutality in the background of several scenes, thus suggesting their unremarkable status in the context of the camp. See Turim (2011). While much debated in ethical terms, representing an event from the Holocaust allows audiences to bring a degree of extratextual awareness to the film, more so than with the less well known last days of the Habsburg empire.

9. ‘Filmmaking is becoming more and more standardised. First and foremost, it takes a very objective perspective: like filming a football game – the camera is always in the right place at the right time. [...] From editing, to directing, to VFX, everything is pointing in the same direction: the audience has less and less to do. Everything is pre-fabricated, there’s less [room for] imagination, less [room for] emotional engagement. This is something I’m really worried about. I am not being rebellious just for the sake of it. I’m interested in the subjective experience of life being conveyed through cinema.’ Nemes (2019).

10. *Sunset DVD (2019)* director’s commentary. He also notes that researchers assembled a 900-page document for the crew, detailing objects and photographs of the period.

11. To this extent *Sunset* might be considered an instance of what Matthew Boswell has called ‘dark heritage’. ‘Heritage film is a genre that can be applied to darker subjects as well as lighter ones. The question, of course, is whether this then becomes less about the art of memory and more about the art of forgetting. [...] Do we consume these films and books so readily because we see absolutely no link with our own lives and societies?’ Boswell (2013).

12. Thanks to Lilian Gergely for translating this and other Hungarian reviews for me.

13. Krastev and Holmes further situate this self-presentation in relation to an ‘imitation imperative’ in post-communist Europe, and the feelings of inferiority and resentment towards the initially copied west that it has generated among increasingly anti-liberal politicians and voters.

14. The review also complained about the extensive financial support provided to ‘such a high cost and manipulative falsification of history’ by the Hungarian National Film Fund, and about the participation of two French co-writers, because the French ‘belonged to the enemy in the First World War’.

15. Willemen is citing Dort (1960, 190–191).
16. See also Eric Rentschler’s application of the term to a very different film, the middle-brow Stasi drama *The Lives of Others* (2006), which he calls ‘a salvage text that enacts a redemptive Western allegory, a tale of consensus for a unified Germany’ (Rentschler 2013, 242).

17. This display is to both characters within the diegesis and audiences of the genre, and its connotations will vary accordingly. For more on the house in period film see Vidal (2012, 65–81).

18. Elizabeth married Emperor Franz Joseph in 1854. She became popular in Hungary and the marriage helped Franz Joseph start to repair political relations with Hungary following the 1848–9 revolution. Elizabeth was crowned Queen of Hungary, and Franz Joseph its King, as part of the Austro-Hungarian compromise which established the dual monarchy in 1867.

19. In identifying this parallel, I do not intend to minimise significant differences between Europe in the mid 18th and early 20th centuries.

20. Elsaesser quotes Douglas Sirk on his use of deep focus in *Written on the Wind* in order to impart ‘a harshness to the objects and a kind of enamelled, hard surface to the colours […] to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters which is all inside them and can’t break though’ (Elsaesser 1972, 43). Objects do not have this power as externalisations of sublimated emotions in *Sunset*. Instead they are inserted into its particular reworking of the visual pleasures of the period film.


22. But the actions of these symbolic or representative characters are also accompanied by ‘a proliferation of “realistic” homely detail’. Of course the combination of, on the one hand, uncommon events, foregrounded artifice and moments of ostensive style, and on the other, the abundant superficial realism of filmic verisimilitude, is an abiding tension at the heart of almost all mainstream film-making, in Europe and the US at least. However, the coexistence of what Lesley Stern has called performative and mimetic modes has a particular place in traditions of melodrama across theatre, literature and screen (Stern 2001, 324). As Augustin Filon wrote in 1897, in his book *The English Stage*, ‘Melodrama […] offers the extreme of realism in scenery and language together with the most uncommon sentiments and events’ (Filon 1897, cited in Elsaesser 1972, rpt in Gledhill 1987, 68).


24. Írisz comes to believe that Kálmán was trying to save the countess from repeated abuse by her husband. In a later scene Kálmán tells Írisz that Brill ‘sacrifices’ young women from Leiters, but she flees from him and when he follows she attacks him and thinks that he has drowned in the Danube. When she sees him at a street fair later on, it remains unclear whether or not she is imagining it, as he never appears again.

25. J. Brandon Colvin writes: ‘the three basic functions of dorsality are (1) compositional defamiliarization, (2) denial of clear psychological/emotional access to characters, and (3) the exploration of what I will call ‘displaced point-of-view (POV)’ alignment’ (Colvin 2017, 194).

26. Nemes comments about the men led by Kálmán: ‘It’s not clearly anarchist, it’s not really political. There’s something that they are preparing, and you don’t know if these people are workmen or thugs, or friends or foes.’ *Sunset DVD* (2019) director’s commentary.


29. ‘His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. […] The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.’ Benjamin (2003, 392), italics in the original.

30. Esther Leslie argues that for Benjamin ‘hope in the past’ can mean both conventional ‘hope for progress […] encapsulated in the arc between past and present’ (203) and a more radical ‘hope for the future in past potentials that did not materialize.’ (79) On the latter, which is never simply nostalgic, she elaborates: ‘To revisit the past from the perspective of the now,
with all the despondency that entails, is undertaken because a return to that past will determine for us what has been lost, what has been betrayed, and also what is yet possible’ (Leslie 2000, 79–80).

31. Stöhr’s review concludes: ‘the only morally acceptable way out [for Írész] seems to be the self-imposed sacrificial role. Until that too is incorporated into modernity’s total and totally amoral machinery’ (Stöhr 2018).

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Notes on contributor

Thomas Austin is Reader in Media and Film at the University of Sussex. His latest book is Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), co-edited with Angelos Koutsourakis. He is currently editing The Films of Steve McQueen (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2023).

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