

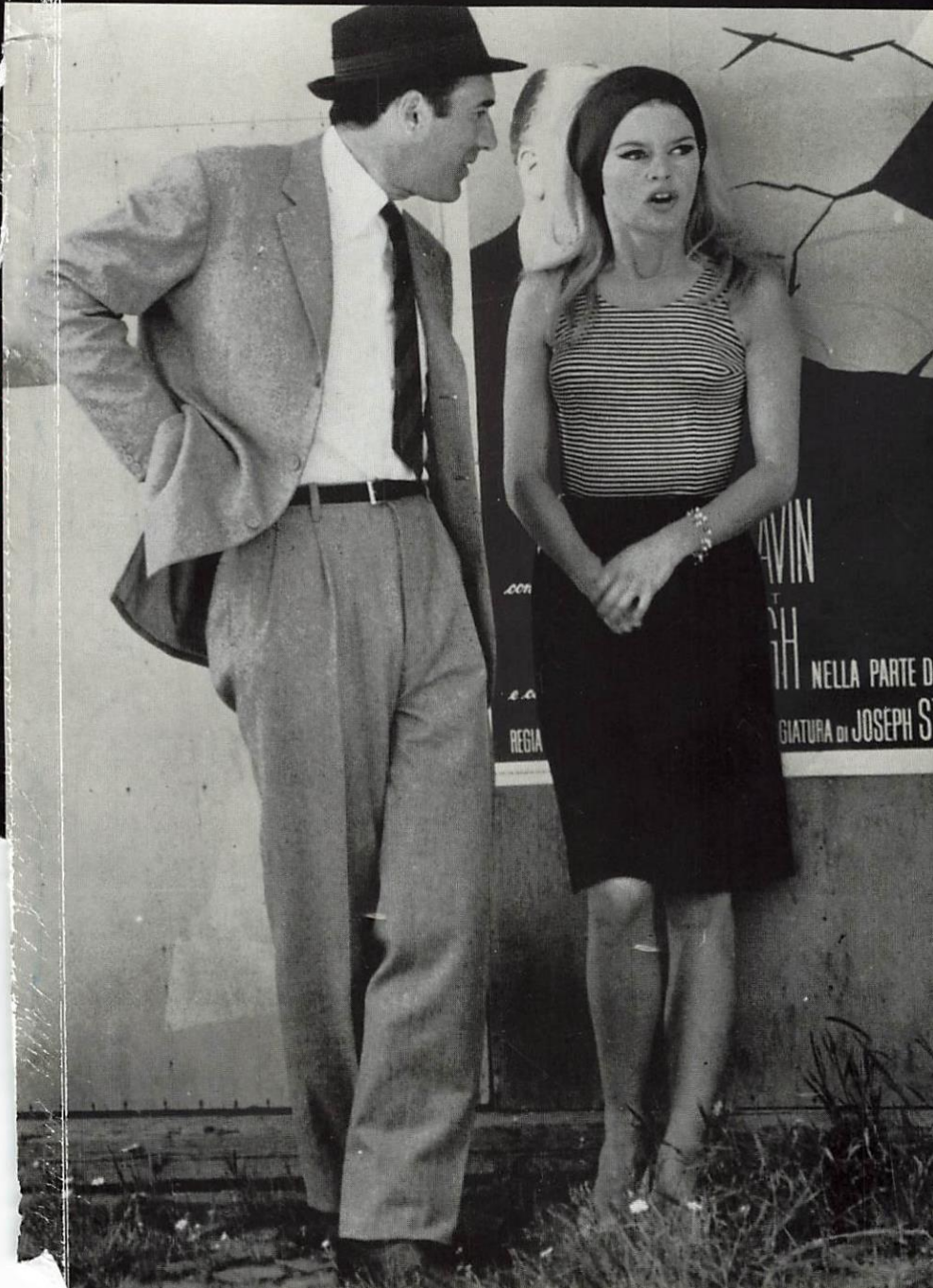
Spring, 1998

FILM CRITICISM

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potential of *The Rebecca Project* will be expanded. The prospects are truly extraordinary and should be welcomed enthusiastically by the community of film scholars and critics.

Charles L. P. Silet

World Cinema: Hungary

by Bryan Burns.

Cranbury, NJ; Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1996.

Bryan Burns' book is the most comprehensive study of Hungarian directors in English yet. This does not make it, however, a comprehensive study of Hungarian cinema. *World Cinema: Hungary* leaves the reader with deeply ambiguous feelings: yes, one learns a lot, but after reading it one remains with a lot of questions.

Apparently Burns has had abundant research material and has faced the challenging task of organizing it in a concise manner. The form that he chooses seems to work as it allows covering the extensive matter, but it is also the main problem of the book—Burns has exclusively concentrated on the major directors, which allows him to pay tribute to most deserving names on the roster of Hungarian filmmaking. Of the fifty-four units in the monograph, forty-eight feature particular directors. Each director's account is structured following the template of an extended encyclopedia entry. We are given accounts on the work of earlier Hungarian filmmakers from the 1930s on, such as István Székely, Pál Fejös, Bela Gaál, Georg Höllering, László Kalmár, István Szöztz, Géza Radványi, Frigyes Bán, László Ranódy, Félix Máriássy, Imre Fehér, and more. Burns follows the migration paths that many of those earlier Hungarian directors have taken and includes reports on the works they produced after leaving their homeland. Further, there are entries on the work of the "great generation" of Zoltán Fábri, Károly Makk, Miklós Jascsó, András Kovács, Péter Bascó, István Gaál, and István Szabó. The chapter on "our contemporaries" gives overviews of the creative work of more than twenty filmmakers, of which directors such as Márta Mészáros, János Róza, Judit Elek, Gyula Gazdag, Zoltán Huszárík, and Péter Gothár are well known in the West. But Burns also pays attention to the work of directors whose films have mostly been seen at esoteric festivals and have never enjoyed a wider Western exhibition, such as Gábor Bódy or Gyula and János Gulyás. Burns' extended descriptions of some features are so detailed and excited that often one feels at a loss for not having had the chance to see all of these pensive and beautiful films.

There is, however, space for disagreement over some of the author's judgments on particular directors. For instance, Burns does not do justice in his evaluation of director Károly Makk, as he overlooks some of his important works (*Love* and *Cat's Play*, for example), while paying unbalanced attention to films of much lesser weight (*A Very Moral Night*). If one abides by "generational" criteria, one can easily challenge the presence of István Szabó along with the directors of the "great generation" because Szabó was born in 1938 whereas many of the directors in the chapter on "our contemporaries" were born a decade or so earlier (Géza Bőszörményi, b. 1924; Pál Zolnay, b. 1928; Imre Gyöngyössi, b. 1930). Szabo has certainly achieved international prominence comparable to and even surpassing that of the members of the "great generation," but this fact does not change his belonging to the newer generation in Hungarian filmmaking. Burns' selection of "contemporaries" does not seem to extend to present day filmmakers: the exclusion of directors such as Ildikó Enyedi (*My Twentieth Century*, *The Magic Hunter*) or György Szomjás (*Junk Movie*) is inexplicable.

Each part of the monograph opens with a dense four page introductory overview of the particularities of Hungarian filmmaking in a given period. In these, or scattered at other places in the text, Burns occasionally offers some very valid observations. For example: "The ethos of Hungarian cinema, unlike that of Hollywood, is resistant to transplantation or to interbreeding: its great virtue is its close relationship with a particular, local culture and its servicing of the needs of that culture" (113). Or: "Above all, it is intelligent; it seeks to take centre-stage in the presentation of the social and political problems of the time, both in Hungary and elsewhere; and it gives searching analyses of the difficulties with which it deals. It is not often light-hearted, and its bias is not toward comedy. But it offers *quality* above all: often in directing, and almost always in acting and cinematography. It has authority and distinction, and these are not at all to be treated lightly" (202). Burns is also right to note that "many Hungarian films are competent to a high degree and relatively limited in scope; they are small, and make the most of that unaspiring condition" (190).

But this is about it. The form that Burns has chosen for his study is its limitation—one does not see the forest for the trees. By using so specific an auteurist approach, Burns provides information on the directors and their films without discussing the context of Hungarian cinema, its cultural functions, topics, other personalities (DPs, actors, writers), or, most importantly—its style. The author avoids outlining the general trends in the artistic development of this sophisticated tradition. There are no concise accounts of major personalities of Hungarian cinema. Although such actors as Mari Törösik or György Czerhalmi are mentioned with superlatives

numerous times, Burns has not found it necessary to outline their contribution in even a paragraph. Cameraman Lajos Koltai is mentioned in the book on at least twelve occasions, but at no place is his extremely original and creative camera work profiled appropriately. Further, the "encyclopedia of directors" approach taken by Burns prevents him from outlining the interactions and mutual influences in topics and styles that permeate Hungarian cinema and make its unique character. Despite the detailed accounts of the various films, no connections are made to other Hungarian films dealing with the same topic. Thus such persistent thematic concerns in Hungarian cinema as the experience of the 1950s (*Love, Diary for My Children, Angi Vera*), of the 1956 uprising (*Diary for My Father and Mother, Whooping Cough*) or of the subsequent exile (*Love Film, Just like America, American Postcard*) remain unmentioned, as are characteristic sociological satires (*Witness, Red Earth*), the treatment of minorities (*Gypsie, Koportos, Gyur*), or the profound moral explorations (*The Fifth Seal, Cold Days, Mephisto*).

Burns' work on Hungarian filmmaking is the fifth volume in the series on world cinemas launched by the British publishing house Flicks Books in the 1980s. The other volumes cover the cinemas of Poland, Sweden, Holland, Ireland, and Israel. Like the other editions in the series, this volume is illustrated with carefully selected, high quality stills from major Hungarian films, thus giving a relevant visual sampling of the prevailing aesthetics. A selected bibliography and filmography, an index, and a list of useful addresses complement the edition. With its uniform accounts on directors this otherwise extremely informative text by Burns reads like an encyclopedia. It may make a valuable reference. Yet, if one looks for an insightful study of major thematic tendencies and stylistical features of Hungarian cinema in English, I would not recommend Burns' monograph but another one from twenty years ago—Graham Petrie's *History Must Answer to Man: The Contemporary Hungarian Cinema* (Budapest: Corvina Books 1978).

Dina Iordanova