



**ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY LIVES  
THE CINEMA OF MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS**

# The Girl

Once a major European cinema name, but comparatively neglected since the early 1990s, Márta Mészáros has long been overdue a revival. If the upcoming 90th birthday retrospective at BFI Southbank in London doesn't span the whole of her impractically enormous filmography, it does at least showcase the Hungarian National Film Archive's recent restorations of her most important features. Mészáros has recorded several personal introductions, and she was also kind enough to contribute to this piece.

Watching a dozen Mészáros films in rapid succession, it's immediately apparent how quickly she found her own distinctive voice, how consistently it was maintained, and how relevant it remains today. *The Girl* (1968) was one of the first Hungarian fiction features to be directed by a woman, but she plays down the triumph-over-adversity angle. 'It was an easy transition to get money for my first feature film because I was already an acclaimed documentary-maker in Hungary, Poland and Russia. Back then, not many women were allowed to make films, and I was one of the first who made features and documentaries, and that was the key to their success as well. My films were screened throughout Europe, and I'm not sure why they were successful, but once they became popular I didn't have to fight hard to get funding, because I was a curiosity as a female director, and then it just kept going. At the very beginning, documentaries came very naturally because I was very interested in people. And the difference between making documentaries and making feature films isn't significant. For me, the protagonist is the only important thing. Is the story interesting for me? Is it unique?'

*The Girl* exemplifies the smoothness of this transition, because Mészáros's interest in people (especially but not exclusively women) and her keen eye for tiny but telling details is in evidence throughout. Typically, story is narratively if not psychologically straightforward. Raised in an orphanage, 24-year-old Budapest factory worker Erzsi (the singer Kati Kovács) finds her birth mother living in a rural village. But the reunion is decidedly chilly, Erzsi has nothing in common with anyone she meets, and although she attracts passing male interest (more quizzical than predatory; a city girl is an anthropological curiosity), she doesn't want a lasting relationship, even with the more sophisticated young man that she meets on the train. Back in Budapest, she meets an elderly man who claims to be her parents' friend, but proffers details that Erzsi knows to be untrue, suggesting that he's hiding something. Variations on these themes – the yawning gaps between men and women and between social classes, the creative massaging of personal (and, later, national) histories – recur throughout Mészáros' work.

However, the story matters less than its treatment. Dialogue is mostly functional, with far more attention paid to body language, and Mészáros frequently sustains close-ups of her protagonist's face for longer than conventional film grammar would recommend. 'There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face,' burred the drunken porter in *Macbeth*, but Mészáros, like her younger compatriot Béla Tarr (who would later push the sustained facial close-up to far greater temporal extremes) seems determined

to disprove the adage, and we do indeed get to understand her characters far better by witnessing emotions scudding across their faces (or the lack of them: more than one film features a woman engaging in consensual but uninterested coitus) than from what they say or do. How detailed were Mészáros's directions? 'I never give instructions, I never rehearse, I just cast people I'm interested in and ask them to be themselves in front of the camera. I'm only interested in people who can tell their stories honestly, who can open up for me and who can communicate. In this respect, documentaries and feature films are very close to each other, and documentaries are often more interesting to me than features with mediocre actors. The single most important thing is telling the truth and being faithful to the core of the story.'

This attention to human detail is augmented by the accretion of exquisitely observed background elements, especially the procedural nature of workplace and domestic chores. The camera choreography is as formally virtuosic as that in the films of Mészáros's former husband Miklós Jancsó (cinematographers Tamás Somló and János Kende are Jancsó veterans), but less showy. She favours the squarish Academy frame, although her second feature *Binding Sentiments* (1969) used anamorphic widescreen to tell a story initially set in claustrophobic interiors, as the recently bereaved Edit (Mari Töröcsik, one of Hungary's biggest stars) pays lip-service to social convention while making it clear to anyone prepared to pick up on numerous unmistakable (albeit often non-verbal) signals that she never particularly liked her husband and would much rather cut herself loose from the past, whatever her son István might prefer.

*Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!* (1970) uncharacteristically concentrates on men, with the teenage Juli (Jaroslava Schallerová – *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, 1970) saying very little, preferring to let her beaux thrash out their differences (at one point literally, if ineffectually). The film extensively features Hungarian popular songs, often performed live, which fuse Beatles-inflected rock 'n' roll with lyrics adapted from major poets like Attila József to forge a distinctively Hungarian variant on western counterculture.

*Riddance* (1973) casts a caustic eye on a class system that notionally shouldn't exist in socialist Hungary, via the relationship between ambitious university student András and factory worker Jutka. Jutka initially pretends to be a fellow student, which flowers into a more elaborately fictionalised backstory when she meets András's parents, developed further when she persuades her father to play along, only to find him enjoying the conceit a little too much when he starts adding his own improvised family subplots.

The core relationship in *Adoption* (1975) is between two women: 43-year-old Kata, conscious of a loudly ticking biological clock, and troubled teenager Anna. Their relationship is a two-way process, with Kata simultaneously trying to mould Anna while quietly admiring her fiercely independent spirit. The international acclaim that followed its Berlin Film Festival Golden Bear led to Mészáros regularly being described as a feminist. Although she no longer rejects this as emphatically as she once did, 'it's not that I'm unhappy with the label, but I'm rather indifferent towards it. It's just not accurate. A film is either good or bad. The audience either gets the meaning or it doesn't. For a long time, I didn't even understand what feminism meant. I wasn't making films about feminism, I was making films about people.'

Mészáros then made international co-productions, shot in colour and starring non-Hungarians like Jan Nowicki (with whom Mészáros had a lengthy

relationship), Marina Vlady and Isabelle Huppert. A common factor in *Nine Months* (1976), *The Two of Them* (1977) and *The Heiresses* (1980) is the extraordinary Lili Monori, who became the quintessential Mészáros protagonist via riveting studies of complicated, conflicted and frequently unsympathetic young women. Monori's fearlessness as a performer extended to her giving birth for real in *Nine Months* (Mészáros, having gone through the process more than once herself, was disinclined to soft-pedal its treatment here), and her often stormy relationships with Nowicki's characters (her boss in *Nine Months*, an alcoholic in *The Two of Them*, a principled army officer in *The Heiresses*) are counterpointed by electrifying double-acts with her female co-stars.

In *The Two of Them*, middle-aged housing manager Mari (Vlady) offers Juli (Monori) and her young daughter illicit shelter in her office. This initially protective arrangement sees them becoming much closer, and Mari starts questioning her own seemingly stable marriage. In *The Heiresses*, the gap is class-based, as Monori's wealthy but infertile Szilvia hires her seamstress friend Irène (Huppert) to bear her an heir. That things don't pan out as intended is unsurprising, although the viciousness of Szilvia's subsequent behaviour still comes as a shock.

While its predecessors were all set in the then present, *The Heiresses* spans the years 1936-44, and represented Mészáros's first significant engagement with her country's tragic history as it unfolded within her own lifetime. This would become the major theme of the trilogy that remains her best-known work, with *Diary for My Children* initially being shelved by nervous officials for a couple of years before its premiere in 1984 at Cannes, where it won the Special Jury Prize. Although names were changed, the film was openly autobiographical, with protagonist Juli channelling the young Mészáros as she leavens the fraughtness of her relationship with her foster-mother with regular trips to the cinema. Whereas Mészáros's previous films had been, if not wholly apolitical, at least discreetly circumspect, *Diary for My Children* firmly grasped the nettle of living under Stalinism, and the constant tension between revolutionary aspiration and grim reality. In its interweaving of a reconstruction of the late 1940s with flashbacks, real and fictionalised newsreels and fondly remembered cinema trips, Mészáros's film language became far more intricate than before.

She didn't plan from the outset to make a series, but the first film's international success led to the continuation of Juli's story in 1987's *Diary for My Loves* (that last word sometimes misleadingly rendered as 'Lovers'). This was inspired by Mészáros's attempts to become a film director, first in Budapest and then at the film school VGIK in Moscow, while also trying to find her sculptor father (the real-life László Mészáros vanished in the USSR in the late 1930s before being confirmed dead in 1945). Set between 1950 and 1956, the film captures the spirit of optimism that fleetingly emerged after Stalin's death, only to be dashed by the Soviet-backed crackdown in Hungary.

*Diary for My Father and Mother* (1990) sees Juli becoming politically active in the immediate wake of the 1956 revolution, after finally managing to return to her native Budapest. It's particularly striking for its full-blown assault on the Soviet Union (albeit from a historical perspective) in a way that would previously have been unthinkable in anything from a Warsaw Pact country. How did Mészáros get away with it? The Gorbachev thaw helped, but so too did her own past. 'In socialist Hungary it was very beneficial for me to have

graduated in Moscow, as Hungarians were afraid of Russians and they didn't know who I was connected to and what I did in Russia. So they weren't sure of the Soviet stance on my films, and just let me do my thing. They assumed that the Soviets would accept my films regardless, so I could get away with a lot. The most important thing was to be able not only to speak Russian but also to think ahead, to know what the Soviets would allow, and to know what subjects would definitely be rejected. But there were subjects that the Soviets didn't understand, and that's why they accepted it. Filmmaking is easy in that sense; you just have to know who you're working with, and who you'll face, and what they understand from what you're telling them."

*Diary for My Father and Mother* was Mészáros's last big international success, but she has continued to make films, including (among several others) a fourth, much less widely released *Diary (Little Vilna: The Last Diary*, 2000), a biopic of the executed Hungarian prime minister Imre Nagy (*The Unburied Man*, 2004) and, most recently, *Aurora Borealis* (2017), a very Mészárosian trawl through a family's hitherto concealed history, with real-life mother and daughter Mari and Franciska Töröcsik playing the same woman in different decades. Mészáros hopes that this won't be her swansong, but ruefully acknowledges that 'it's a bad time for filmmaking in Hungary at the moment. On the one hand, there is not much money, and on the other the funding bodies only back stories about nothing. I have two story ideas, but it's very difficult to do them because they're not really political, but they're about life in Hungary now, which is very stupid and full of lies. It's not a good time to make art in Hungary. But I try, I try. I am an old woman, but I believe that God...' – at which point her voice tailed off and she pointed skywards.

**Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 2021. With thanks to Márta Mészáros, Jákob Ladányi and the Hungarian National Film Archive.**

## **The Girl**

The girl works in a weaving mill and meantime searches for her parents because she was brought up in an orphanage. Her mother is now living with her new family in a village.

When they met, she is asked to keep her true identity hidden from the family. The girl feels desperately alone, she starts up a series of short-term relationships and helps a dissolute man who tells her of the death of her father.

This movie inserts a decidedly new, female voice into Hungarian film history. Successful rock-singer Kati Kovacs lent her face to this rebellious female character who is sincere, self-aware, tough and yet fragile. Márta Mészáros's auteur oeuvre is threaded through with various types of self-aware female characters; she has dedicated her life to candid depictions of the situation of women, the reality they face and emotional personal relationships.

'Due to its profound and chaste sensitivity, and the mesmerising presence of a first-rate actress, I consider this film to be a little masterpiece.' (Marcel Martin, 'Cati. The Golden Eyed Girl', *Cinema 69*, No. 138, July-August 1969)

**Eszter Fazekas, *Restored Films of Márta Mészáros*, National Film Institute Hungary – Film Archive**



THE GIRL (ELTÁVOZOTT NAP)

Directed by: Márta Mészáros  
Production Company: Mafilm Studio 4  
Production Manager: György Onódi  
Head of Studio: István Nemeskürty  
Assistant Director: Péter Zimre  
Additional Assistant Director: Pál Gábor  
Screenplay by: Márta Mészáros  
Story Editor: Luca Karall  
Director of Photography: Tamás Somlo  
Assistant Cinematographer: Tibor Banok  
Edited by: Zoltán Farkas  
Art Director: Tamás Banovich  
Costume Designed by: Piroska Katona  
Music by: Levente Szörényi  
Lyricist: János Bródy  
Sound Director: Zoltán Toldy

Cast

Kati Kovács (Erzsi Szőnyi)  
Teri Horváth (Erzsi’s mother)  
Ádám Szirtes (Zsámboki)  
Jácint Juhász (boy from the train)  
András Kozák (Gábor)  
Gábor Agárdy (depraved tailor)  
Ilona Gurnik (teacher in Fót)  
Ida Siménfalvy  
Zsuzsa Pálos  
Gáspár Jancsó  
Gábor Harsányi  
Zsolt Körtvélyessy

Hungary 1968  
80 mins

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The Girl (Eltávozott nap)

Mon 5 Jul (preceded by ‘Introducing Márta Mészáros’ talk);  
Fri 16 Jul 20:50

Binding Sentiments (Holdudvar)

Tue 6 Jul 20:50; Sat 17 Jul 15:20

Don’t Cry, Pretty Girls! (Szép lányok, ne sírjatok!)

Wed 7 Jul 17:40; Sun 18 Jul 18:40

Woman With a Movie Camera Presents: the World Restoration  
Premiere of Riddance (Szabad lélegzet)

Sat 10 Jul 17:30 (+ pre-recorded extended intro by Márta Mészáros);  
Wed 21 Jul 21:00

Adoption (Örökbefogadás)

Mon 12 Jul 18:00 (pre-recorded intro by Selina Robertson,  
Club des Femmes); Thu 22 Jul 20:30

Nine Months (Kilenc hónap)

Tue 13 Jul 17:40; Sun 25 Jul 12:30

The Two of Them/Two Women (Ök ketten)

Wed 14 Jul 20:50; Mon 26 Jul 18:10

The Heiresses (Örökség)

Sun 18 Jul 15:20; Tue 27 Jul 20:30

Diary for My Children (Napló gyermekeimnek)

Sat 24 Jul 14:10 (+ pre-recorded extended intro by Márta Mészáros);  
Wed 28 Jul 17:50

Diary for My Loves (Napló szerelmeimnek)

Sat 24 Jul 17:30; Sat 31 Jul 20:30

Diary for My Father and Mother (Napló apámnak, anyámnak)

Sat 24 Jul 20:45; Sat 31 Jul 14:40

The restorations in this season were made from the original camera negatives, original magnetic tape sounds and positive prints, supervised and presented by the National Film Institute Hungary – Film Archive. The restorations were carried out at the NFI Film Archive and Filmlab.

T A P E PRESENTS: BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

Eyimofe (This Is My Desire)

Thu 1 Jul 20:30; Fri 9 Jul 17:40

Black Girl (La noire de...)

Sat 3 Jul 11:40; Mon 12 Jul 18:20

Burning an Illusion

Sat 3 Jul 14:20; Thu 8 Jul 17:45

While We Live (Medan vi lever)

Sat 3 Jul 17:30; Tue 20 Jul 20:30

Binti

Sun 4 Jul 18:20; Mon 19 Jul 20:40

Pinky

Sat 10 Jul 20:50; Sat 24 Jul 11:40

Head-On (Gegen die Wand)

Sun 11 Jul 18:30; Tue 27 Jul 20:40

The Namesake

Wed 14 Jul 17:40 (+ live spoken-word performance); Wed 21 Jul 20:40

What Will People Say (Hva vil folk si)

Fri 16 Jul 20:30; Sat 31 Jul 17:30

In Conversation with Nikesh Shukla

Fri 23 Jul 18:20

Lilting

Sat 24 Jul 17:20; Fri 30 Jul 20:40

Shoot the Messenger + Q&A with director Ngozi Onwurah, hosted by  
T A P E’s Angela Moneke

Thu 29 Jul 17:45

Culture Shock: Short Film Programme + Q&A with UNDR LNDN

Fri 30 Jul 17:40



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