

Doctoral School of the University of Theater and Film
Documentary and history
Theses for a doctoral dissertation

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My dissertation sets out to analyse the process by which documentary film, in particular film on historical subjects, has developed and where it stands in Hungary today. I have addressed a several questions about the future of such films in Hungary. Why is it important for a documentary to narrate the history right from the start? Why do film-makers here approach history differently from their colleagues in Western Europe or North America? What social or film-history reasons have led to the regional differences in the role of historical documentary film? What do historians and film-makers expect of each other?

The introduction draws on analysis by Bill Nichols, Erik Barnouw, Jack C. Ellis, Betsy McLane and Patricia Aufderheide in deciding what is meant internationally by various types of documentary film, and what historical documentary film is taken to be. I go on to cover (mainly through the typology of Rudolf Ungváry) the scope in Hungary for interpreting narrative presented in this form.

Chapter I reviews briefly international examples of documentary films on historical subjects, from the outset to the present, showing the role of their makers in developing the genre, even if history was not their typical subject-matter, for their influence on documentary film-makers remains decisive nonetheless. They include John Grierson, Fred Wiseman, the Maysles brothers, Jean Rouch, and many others. This international review of filmed narration of history shows how the differences in outlook between Hungarian historical documentaries and their Western, particularly Anglo-Saxon counterparts derive from the approach to the past taken by their makers and by societies at large. This decides what pieces of history film-makers choose, what they see as essential to the present day.

When Western European films approach history, they see it as “useful past”—useful for comprehending and seeking solutions to present-day conflicts. In Hungary, on the other hand, history becomes relevant to film-makers by its “incompleteness”. This is demonstrated by a debate, very revealing about the development of Hungarian practice, that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s between film-makers and historians, mainly in the periodical *Filmkultúra*. I recount in the next chapter typical positions taken and cite significant examples of Hungarian historical documentary to arise out of this preparatory intellectual atmosphere by presenting the development of such film in 1980s Hungary. I stress the innovative boost given to

documentary film-making by the Béla Balázs Studio, the essential change of outlook expressed in its *Sociological Film Group!* manifesto, and its direct effects on film-making. In presenting the most important historical documentaries (Judit Ember's *Pócspetri*, Pál Schiffer's *By the Danube, Without Breaking the Law* by Gyula and János Gulyás, *Recsk* by Livia Gyarmathy and Géza Bösörményi, etc.), I list some key subjects in the suppressed history of Hungarian society that these films brought up, thereby breaking taboos in a way that had deep effects on society in their day.

I pick the films that played a positive role in preparing for the change of system, devoting a separate chapter to films of 1988–91 such as Pál Schiffer's *Expiation* and Judit Ember's *New Magyar Lament* and *Right of Asylum*.

The changes in documentary film cannot be understood outside the context in which they are made and financed. I summarize subsequent film-making context and the new system of state financing introduced. This has a sad relevance today as the second Orbán government in 2010 abolishes the self-governing, foundation-based system of financing base introduced in 1991, leaving it unclear at the time of writing what will replace it in 2011.

One effect of the new financing system that got under way in 1991–2 was to open a new phase in historical documentary film-making. The earlier subjects steadily gave way to films that focused social problems in the new environment. Meanwhile there was a technology change from 16 mm to video, spawning a massive, devaluing increase in documentary filming (with 150–200 works a year entered for the Film Review). This I analyse in the next chapter of the study, focusing on the group of films intended to present the history of the 1956 Revolution. I seek reasons for this devaluation and the chances for historical filming to overcome it.

The outlook of history as a discipline has changed over the decades; the problem-sphere of post-modern trends of social history, micro-history and reminiscence has come to the fore. This change affects film as well: historians are acknowledging film's role in our understanding of the past and seeking ways in which it can contribute to the past's narratives.

Film-makers are also influenced by post-modernism, as I show briefly through a selection of

documentaries appearing internationally. These I had the chance to see at the Amsterdam IDFA Festivals in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

After these international examples, I end my dissertation with a review of some Hungarian documentaries that have tackled historical narrative in new ways in recent years. These show the plurality of available routes to renewal of documentary film-making.

I append an account of the history programmes made by Hungarian Television up to the change of system, noting the key importance of Péter Bokor's series *Our Centuries* and the *Chronicle* series made by Sándor Sára. In another three addenda I give the main details of the television programme *Close of Day* (1989–91), a list of the foreign films discussed in the dissertation, and a filmography of Hungarian historical documentary films made in 1982–2010.