

Borderline Bargains: Dealing with István Szabó's *Mephisto*

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István Szabó's 1981 *Mephisto* is a film about adaptation at its core. It invites us to examine the many levels at which adaptation as a phenomenon involves far more than relationships between, say, a literary and film text. Though those aspects are obviously there. And in that regard, Szabó's screen version of Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto: Novel of a Career*, unmistakably based on his ex-brother-in-law Gustav Grundgens in the lead character Hendrik Hoefgen, played in the film by Klaus Maria Brandauer, is masterful and deserving of the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film it earned in 1982, Hungary's first. But intrinsic to the engagement with the concept of adaptation itself is the film's incorporation of the Faust tale along with the "Mephisto" theme as larger than just the novel. Embedded in Szabó's interpretation are the foundations of ambition, seduction, and weakness, each of which on the plot level test resistance and strength against the German Nazi machine and the failure of those efforts on a personal – and allegorically – societal level. The framework of National Socialism serves, however, as an emblem, both on the larger scale of totalitarianism, and, in a not so nuanced way, as a commentary on the Hungarian regime of the early 1980s, recognized on the one hand as the most liberal of the Eastern Bloc states, ever seeking to establish closer ties to the West, yet on the other hand, still led by an ultimately hard-lined government. Anyone, such as this author, who ever witnessed a police beating of a saxophonist for freely playing on a street in Budapest during this time, can attest to that fact. And cases get worse than that. The collaboration of the Hungarian producers of *Mephisto* (filmed in German) with both West Germany and Austria nonetheless exemplified the desire and efforts to link Hungary with the west.

To what extent is *Mephisto* a commentary on Hungary's reliance in the 70s and 80s on the financial power and cultural currency of its neighbors to the west? And what conceptual

deals are made to cinematically stage this German novel and its approvability as sanctioned anti-fascist material to simultaneously cast a mirror on communist Hungary entering the decade of the 1980s? How can one read the film today in the midst of the rise of far right-wing populism in both Germany and Hungary (and in the case of Hungary led by a far-right regime)? The answers to each of these are connected to notions of adaptability that wager against boundaries and the limited relationship between a supposed purpose of adaptation and the valences that emerge not in linear but in multilateral fashion, as is the case in Szabó's *Mephisto*.

Through its use of the Faust story, the film's adaptability is already inherently multi-contextual. While we encounter a Faust tale and its rendering in the form of a specific story during the Nazi era, used as an allegory of the dark sell-out of National Socialism itself, these themes go well beyond the source material of Klaus Mann's novel, or to go a step further back, of Gründgens' life. These components literally take on lives of their own through the reception of film viewers and critics at the time and subsequently, and serve to illuminate new connections between the histories and intertwined legacies of totalitarianism in Germany and Hungary and, more specifically, of the relationship between political power and the bending of the arts.

Szabó, a leading Hungarian director at the time and still today, himself can be read as sensing his own potentially Faustian position steering the "Mephisto" project in the early 80s. But it is also clear that this position was not his own. It reflected the circumstances of all artists, including film directors, as potentially having to compromise and meet governmental and ideological expectations in their work. In this regard, the use of a Nazi Mephisto character to simultaneously tempt and satisfy the appetites of Hungarian (and other) audiences seeking displayed critique of the contemporary environment in and from which the film emerged in the early 80s, is genius. Sadly, what remains equally brilliant about the film is its resonance in post-communist, hyper-nationalist Hungary today with its current governmental weight in the

national arts and the national media and the deals that are made in tandem with that. The aims of Szabó's "original" adaptation unveil adaptabilities lodged in what already streams into the Faust legacy, the history of imperial and fascist German-Austro-Hungarian relations, and in the classically grand narrative of art, politics, and compromise. Here, "Mephisto" lends itself 40 years later as a critical instance of what defines adaptation: a borderline bargain between acquiescence and innovation.