

WOMAN OF CLAY: GABOR'S *ANGI VERA*

Anthony Thomson

Eastern European cinema has basked in several moments of critical acclaim in the West. This cyclical acceptance has generally followed the loosening and tightening of the artistic straight-jacket and the accompanying periodic production of films which are thematically 'universal' (for example some of the productions of the Czechoslovakian 'spring') or which articulate opposition to the political regimes. In this respect the recognition granted Wajda's *Man of Iron* by the moguls of American cinema is essentially a reflection of current political evaluations.

Although currently overshadowed by the significance of Solidarity and its celebrated celluloid memoir, the Hungarian director Pal Gabor has combined the theme of 'universal humanism' with a critique of institutionalized communism in a very interesting political film entitled *Angi Vera*. Both the subject itself and Gabor's handling of it have won considerable praise from many Western critics and socialists alike. This mutual acceptance can be explained through an articulation of the political posture which suffuses the film. Throughout, Gabor reveals his standpoint as much by what he condemns as by what he fails to criticize and thereby implicitly accepts. Ultimately, if I agree with much of the former, what I regard as the political short-comings of the film are crucial to its successful production and its appreciation in the West.

Two Triads

Chronologically, the film is linear in construction. Vera Angi—the surname is given first in Hungarian—works in a hospital as a nurses' aide, one anonymous worker among hundreds of others. She singles herself out during a staff meeting by standing up and delivering a criticism of the administration which, while hesitant and modest in style, is forthright in content. This individual step is the first in a progression which is the obverse of individualism. Seen as having leadership potential, Vera is drawn out of the hospital and into the Party and sent to receive education at a large cadre school. She appears to be honest, modest and principled—exactly the image the Party might be expected to have of itself. But throughout the course of the movie, both these images are dispelled.

Through a few other well-timed and contextually appropriate assertions, and a timely acquisition of a female mentor, Vera solidifies her status as a model student. This position—and Vera's practical future—is threatened by a brief affair with a teacher which is finally resolved climactically in a formal criticism/self-criticism session. In the end she is singled out for a favoured post.

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This is the story, then, of the making of a political opportunist—one who places individual benefit ahead of principles and collective needs to the detriment of the interests they represent. Yet the film is considerably more subtle than this bald assertion suggests. As Gabor slowly reveals Vera's character, it proves to be complex and enigmatic. The outcome of her actions makes them appear consciously manipulative, yet in themselves they seem motiveless and not calculated. It is as though she has an instinct for doing what appears to be the right thing in the short run for very different long-term results of which she is, at most, only dimly aware. In this respect Vera is symbolic of more than just the seduction of a relatively honest innocent by a corrupt organization.

Angi Vera is also a conscious political statement, examining many of the troublesome dichotomies of socialism: the distinction between theory and practice, the chasm between the leaders and the mass, the antagonism between disciplined action and spontaneity, and, embracing all of these, the relationship between the intimate and the personal on the one hand and the public and the political on the other.

The film narrates Vera's experiences in the cadre school as they involve four central characters. Of these, two are men. One is a miner who, through substantial individual hardship and sacrifice, had made important practical contributions to the revolution. He finds the transition to the school, with its strict discipline and formal intellectual demands, very difficult. In response, he goes AWOL to visit his family. By following his 'proletarian instincts' in the insurrection he had won favour with the Party, but when his 'instincts' demanded personal intimacy, they were condemned. By implication Gabor goes further and suggests both the irrelevance of theory and the inherently repressive nature of institutions.

To explain his indiscretion the miner, who had been admonished publicly, offers only an officially acceptable portion of the truth—that study was difficult for him. At this juncture Vera distinguishes herself for a second time by offering to tutor him privately. In these extra lessons he memorizes stock phrases about the inevitable dissolution of capitalism while Vera stares disinterestedly out of the window. Gabor never declares that Marxist theory, in itself, is irrelevant; but nowhere does he suggest that theorizing has any value in social practice. While the miner is flattered by the individual attention he is receiving, and responds by developing an emotional attachment, Vera remains coldly distant, giving the impression that he is merely instrumental to her ends.

Istvan, the teacher, is in many respects the opposite of the proletarian miner. He is an intellectual with command over book-learning—theory in the narrowest sense—but with very little practical experience (a point made explicit by some of the women through sexual allusions). This judgment is undoubtedly correct, but in this scene Gabor represents gossip as a 'human' form of criticism in contrast to an organized and explicit forum which is 'inhuman'. Yet it is this absence of structure and context, as well as the motives behind personal gossip, which make the practice dishonest and destructive rather than open and constructive. For Gabor, people understand spontaneously and the intervention of organized politics, where it doesn't pervert this knowledge, obscures it.

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Vera secretly conspires to rectify Istvan's practical short-coming, but also only in its narrowest sense. School-girlishly she flirts with him, asks questions after class (with no interest in their answers) and eventually seduces him. In contrast to her attachment to the working class miner, which is 'officially correct' but condescending, her attachment to Istvan is 'incorrect' and manipulative. During the final criticism and self-criticism session Vera confesses the affair publicly, thus perhaps undercutting potential exposure. Against the advice of his colleagues that he should deny the charge, Istvan acknowledges the affair and publicly declares his love for Vera—the personal sphere as the vessel of truth and integrity. His desire for Vera, who is more attractive in the conventional sense than his wife, is not seen as illegitimate, and there is no implication that the liaison was improper. The mysteries of love and attraction are far more significant for Gabor than notions of socially appropriate relations between students and teachers. The former is seen as quite 'natural' and therefore accepted unequivocally.

Presented with the necessity to choose between the personal and the political at this crucial juncture, Vera accepts pragmatic counsel and denies a reciprocal feeling declaring that she had been merely attracted to his authority. With this sanctioned explanation (hardly a self-criticism of any depth or sincerity) she again wins approval for herself but at the cost of the emotional ruin of her supposed lover.

Besides these two men who, with Vera, complete one triad, there are two important women in the film. Anna is a middle-aged party functionary and careerist who becomes Vera's mentor. Like Istvan, she is sexually repressed, but unlike him she has long given up any 'illusory emotions'. An editor of an important Party newspaper, Anna is Vera's ladder to success. When she eventually graduates at the top of her class, Vera is given a job at this paper. In the final scene, while the other graduates travel away from the school by train, these two women travel more prestigiously by automobile towards their respective futures.

Throughout the film Vera's moments of initiative are brief. With Anna, Vera is especially passive and any marginal activity involves other characters. While the Party boss has harsh personal criticisms of the other students, about Vera all that he can say is that she is "accommodating"—in his eyes a political virtue. From the facial close-up of the opening credit sequence to the final close-up gradually dissolving in blue, Vera remains virtually inert. When Anna denounces a former member of the Democratic Socialist Party as a counter-revolutionary, Vera signs it without comment. For Anna the personal has merged with the public and the Party determines her standards of personal integrity and morality, in effect demanding that she dissolve both in acceptance of Party infallibility. Not only Moscow but Budapest also does not believe in tears!

The other woman is Maria, a lusty and outspoken character whose spirit and independence in the face of the domination of the Party bring her into frequent conflict with the authorities. Her relationship with Vera is complex, fittingly so because if Anna represents the renunciation of spontaneity Maria embodies its consummation. For her integrity is first an individual issue. She is not a success at

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the cadre school and is last seen by Vera, whisked away in the car with Anna, doggedly pedalling a bicycle against a strong wind. She has apparently not renounced the ultimate political goal but, in this use of a standard cinematic image, is unwilling to compromise her personal principles in the long and arduous journey. In place of Anna's suppression of the personal in favour of unquestioned service to the representatives of an idea, Maria's individualism determines her political standards. Gabor is sympathetic to Maria. Boisterous in the private realm, she survives publicly by a tactical withdrawal from public issues, by non-involvement. It is ironic when the claim to having made no political mistakes depends upon insularity and privatization.

Political Critique

Angi Vera raises some crucial political questions and it may be surprising that the film was successfully completed and released. This may be explained both by what the film was about and by what it is not about. Set in the late 1940s during the consolidation of the Hungarian Workers' Party, it is outwardly a critique of 'Stalinism', things having presumably changed for the better. Its use of history to comment on the present is oblique. As the car/bicycle sequence attempts to demonstrate, the explicit standpoint is 'within socialism'—Maria is cycling in the same direction as Vera and Anna. More importantly the alternative statement is not threatening to the present regime.

The film criticisms of the Stalinist Party are powerful. The cadre school looks like a concentration camp and the students like uniformed internees. In one dining hall scene Gabor focusses on rows of identical water pitchers dispensing bland liquid to all the inmates. Do the pitchers represent the content of the political education offered at the school (suggesting the need for reforms) or do they stand for the entire tradition of socialism seen as a fundamental denial of individualism? Only in the context of the whole film can this be answered. Eating and drinking are important themes: After uncovering the 'counter-revolutionary' Anna devours two rich cream cakes, asserting in between swallows that they are just desserts for doing the work of the Party, while Vera eats more sparingly, but eats nonetheless.

The only vaguely revolutionary aspect of the school's chief commissar is his red tie. Otherwise, looking nothing short of a Gestapo agent, he comes the closest to being an actual caricature. With this exception, Gabor goes to some length to show elements of 'humanity' in all the characters. Even Anna is given a moment of personal anguish when she recalls her own tragic love affair, to surround her callousness with some degree of pathos. And Vera experiences a brief moment of remorse after ruining Istvan, being rescued from self-imposed exposure to the winter elements by Maria who counsels endurance and fortitude. Like Hungary itself, she is forced by circumstances beyond her control to adjust to a foreign ideology and is only able to persevere, to roll with the punches.

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The contrast between the mechanical submission demanded by the Party—a set of amoral absolutes which, according to Istvan is 'inhuman' in its severe judgments (he calls this statement the only 'truth' spoken during the criticism meeting)—and what Gabor sees as the abstract principles of spontaneous life are heightened by the use of colour and space. The film was made in the winter and external shots are bathed in cold blue. People are separated from each other by space and by layers of thick, grey clothing. By contrast, in an evocative early scene, the womens' shower room is bathed in warm yellows and amid the radiating heat the women banter in a manner both uninhibited and sensual. Physical proximity expresses a genuine comradeship whereas elsewhere the term "comrade" is suspect: it has been appropriated by the Party and emptied of all its former meaning. Anna uses the term unconsciously when addressing the old Social-Democrat she was about to denounce, a word which ironically revealed that a "comrade" was the last thing she might be. (Gabor has the victim condemned, pointedly, for opinions rather than actions).

The Party leaders are separated in space from the others, often standing on a stage and shot from the back of the room. In the opening scene the camera pans down the hospital corridor towards the staff meeting while the words come at first indistinctly, from a distance, as they do for the hospital staff, though in their case the distance is ideological rather than spatial. They sit in boredom and fear hoping not to be singled out of their private sphere and asked to contribute. The Party rhetoric about socialist democracy is sharply at odds with the passivity of the audience and with Vera's public criticism, which begins with practical problems in the hospital and ends by declaring ('condemning' would be too strong) the arrogant attitude of the officials. Later the chief hospital administrator admonishes Vera for this betrayal of her personal loyalty to himself and his senior staff. Had they not taken her in as a child and looked after her? This apparent disloyalty (to surrogate parents) is paralleled later by the disavowal of Istvan, yet these two events should not be seen automatically as identical. In the hospital Vera had made a public criticism of a public capacity. Legitimacy was on her side and it was the administrator who was attempting to use nepotism to deflect apparent truth. But the parallel is no accident, and the viewer is forced to ask at what point did Vera's 'conversion' occur? When did quantity change into quality? What was conscious and what unconscious?

Like history, Vera's actions can be reinterpreted. Her target, it seems, was only the most accessible. For all its pronouncements about democracy and socialism the Party is hardly less arrogant, and is perceived to be so by the staff. The practical issues she raised are implicitly antithetic to the abstractions being dished out from the stage. On these scores, however, Vera is silent. The result is personal advancement. She passes directly from the paternalism of the hospital to the paternalism of the Party, being assured that "we will take care of you."

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The Personal and the Political

The essential 'inhumanity' of the Party is seen by Gabor to be its perversion of the appropriate relationship between the public and the private—the public invasion of the sacredness of the personal. In its campaign to suppress the spontaneous, becoming a "good communist" is defined as a complete renunciation of the personal, becoming instead a functionary of an all-powerful and correct Party. The impersonal regime demanded of the cadres amounts to a repudiation of life and dedication to an ideal apparently as other-worldly as any spiritualism, complete with a corrupt this-worldly priesthood. This religious image is explicit in the film. Following the opening credit shots and before moving to the meeting inside the hospital, the camera focusses momentarily on two nuns outside, a theme which is revived in the final scene when Vera and Anna motor towards their futures—two secular nuns who, by sacrificing their individualism for the Party, have taken the vows. An abstract 'higher end', orchestrated by some unseen deity, directs their destiny and demands a dedication no less severe than taking the veil.

The problems the party school should have been addressing are patently obvious: overt careerism, bureaucratic strangulation of initiative, rote learning, arrogance of leadership accompanied by its corollary, a compliant and unquestioning following (complete with the inevitable grumbling and gossip). Rather than redressing these fundamental abuses, however, in a perversion of purposes the school works to recreate them. The self-criticism session is an absolute parody of the intended purpose of such an exercise.

Dressed in a cloak of omniscience and separated from the cadres by elevation and a large red stripe on the white tablecloth, the 'revolutionaries' are demarcated in perpetuity from the underlings. Gabor, however, goes further than the obvious point that the people who, most charitably, need re-education, are those systematically mis-educating their successors, by implying that these cadres themselves are not in need of education. Granted that the main point is a critique of the abuse of authority: the absolute degeneration of a "workers' party" into a bureaucratic jungle strangled by the self-interested manipulations of a new mandarin. The problem with the film is less that Gabor doesn't offer a genuine solution, an alternative for Eastern Europe—if such had been the case, *Realpolitik* would certainly have intervened—and more with the solution that is implied. His standpoint does not permit any distinction between the petty opportunisms all too characteristic of daily life and the principle of 'life' itself. Rather they are seen not only as natural but are celebrated as the 'spice of life'. Gabor pays lip service to the 1960s dictum that the personal is political by linking the political short-comings of his targets to negative personality characteristics. Yet even 'integrity' is no guarantee that wrong things will never be done for supposedly 'greater ends'. He demonstrates that political opportunism has its foundations in self-interest, but cannot, at the expense of his contrast between the spontaneity of life and the stultification of institutions, expose the link

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between such opportunism and the petty practices of everyday life.

Inevitably the viewer is left with an individualistic rather than collective alternative to the bureaucratized Party. We have only monolithicity or an abstracted humanism, a celebration of the mysteries of life and the splendid isolation of individualism. It is not only the critique of Stalinism that gives the film some legitimacy in the eyes of the Party in Hungary, but also its individualistic philosophy. This is not to assert that liberalism is identical to the official ideology of the Party, but rather to claim that it is not threatening. Nor is it only the film's ambiguity, which leaves room for multiple interpretations, that makes it acceptable for western critics. There is, instead, a basic, ideological similarity. Maria may be the most admirable character, but any real opposition to the degenerate politics of the regimes in Eastern Europe demands more than the principled integrity of a few intellectuals, a dramatic refusal that stops only at a desire to retain clean hands, however abstractly logical the view that, 'if only everyone . . .'. It is this solution, the film's dubious socialism and, ironically, its anti-intellectualism that are the sources of the film's acceptance by western intellectuals.

Sociology
Acadia University