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From the Aesthetics of Hope to Crisis Aesthetics¹

The Philosophical Film
and Art Theory of Jenő Király

Abstract

Jenő Király created a unique, unparalleled, and unprecedented film aesthetic. The outstanding result of this period was the description of the movement between cultural spheres, locating the place of popular culture and its emancipation. In his second artistic period, he created a collective philosophical art theory that fits into the framework of general anthropology, which originally stemmed from films. This period, most strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theories, develops a film analysis that transcends conventional film studies and explores the “deeper layers”. This illustrates a personal, societal, and even evolutionary crisis, thus, the philosophical stance of his second period is characterised by anthropological traits and his approach to aesthetics through metaphysical influences (crisis aesthetics). Both periods present the crucial role of critical intellect, whose principal motivation is to warn, teach and better humanity. The present study aims to highlight leading ideas and provide an overarching perspective of Király’s unprecedented work on film aesthetics and also hopes to encourage a critical discourse regarding it.

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Keywords: Király Jenő, photophonic delivery, popular culture, *Mozifolklor és kamera-töltőtoll* ('Film Folklore and Camera Fountain Pen'), *Mágikus mozi* ('Magical Cinema'), *Frivol múzsa* ('Frivolous Muse'), *A film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Film'), *A mai film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Film Today'), film analysis, mourning ritual: crisis, the aesthetics of hope, the aesthetics of dread

Jenő Király

Jenő Király (1943–2017) is the Balázs Béla Prize laureate film aesthete, lecturer, and the outstanding figure of art film theory. He completed his studies at the Humanities Department of the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). Here he taught film aesthetics at the Andragogy, then Public Education, and later the Cultural Management Department. Meanwhile, he served briefly as a researcher in the Department of Film Theory and Film History at the Hungarian Film Institute and Film Archive. His first independent book (a university textbook), co-authored with linguist János Zsilka, was published in 1975: *Kommunikációelmélet* III. ('Communication Theory III') (Király and Zsilka 1975). From 2009, he was a lecturer at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Kaposvár, where his eight-volume series on genre theory, *A film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Film'), was published in collaboration with Hungarian Television. In 2013, on his 70th birthday, a conference on genre theory titled "Király 70" was organised in his honour. In 2017, the year of his death, his work *A mai film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Contemporary Film') was published as the conclusion to *A film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Film') series. However, two of his other works remained unfinished. Jenő Király's monumental series is often referred to as "the bible of film aesthetics", and he himself is sometimes called "the Béla Balázs of our time".

Surveying Jenő Király's body of work is no easy task. Some of his books (classified as manuscripts) are university lecture notes, and their bibliographic details appear online with numerous errors. His major summary series reached only a few people due to distribution difficulties. (However, it is now available online.) Jenő Király consciously stayed out of academic life. He did not attend conferences. He lived for his films and his students. In his writings, he did not follow the standard format of academic publications, making it a difficult task to review his massive, multi-thousand-page works and references.

The two artistic periods of Jenő Király

Jenő Király is generally regarded as a film aesthete. However, a review of his work reveals that he was concerned not merely with film and the art of cinema, but with humanity itself. Taking film as his starting point, he developed a general anthropological theory of art that encompasses both humanity and art as a whole. Jenő Király's theory of art (film aesthetics), which fits into a general anthropological framework, can be divided into two periods. The first phase, spanning 1975–1995, can best be described as communication-theoretical, structuralist, and semiotic, characterised by a realist aesthetic derived from Marxism (Balázs 2025a). In the shift following 1995, a sense of crisis emerges, and in the writings of the crisis theorist Jenő Király, psychologism intensifies, reflecting the influence of Freud, Jung, Eliade, Fromm, Sándor Ferenczi, and Imre Hermann (psychologist), though traces of the influence of philosophers Nándor Várkonyi and Béla Hamvas are also present. Other frequent references include: Propp, Todorov, Bakhtin, Derrida, Habermas, Ricœur, Foucault, Adorno, Campbell, Žižek, Schelling, Sloterdijk, Béla Balázs, György Lukács, Miklós Almási, Béla Bacsó. Among writers and poets are Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Brecht, Kosztolányi, Csáth, Karinthy. The second period could best be described as metaphysical or crisis aesthetics. The dividing line between the two periods was drawn by Jenő Király himself through the gesture of "rejecting" his writings published prior to *A tömegkultúra esztétikája* ('The Aesthetics of Mass Culture') and *Frivol múzsa* ('Frivolous Muse') (Varga 2017, 631).

It is a fitting metaphor that, referring to István Nemeskürty's book *A film-művészet nagykorúsága* ('The Coming of Age of Cinema') (1966), Király initially believed in the rise of film and its transformation into an art form, but later spoke of "the second childhood of film" (Király 1992). This can be paralleled with humanity's second childhood, characterised by cultural loss, re-primitivisation, and devolution (regression). Anna Varga (2017, 640), who assisted in the publication of his collected works, aptly put it: "In the first half of his life, he sought to rehabilitate frivolity within a culture of snobbery; in the second half, he sought to rehabilitate emotions within a cynical, cold culture."

The first period: Structuralism, Aesthetic Realism, the aesthetics of hope

Jenő Király's first major studies were published in the lecture notes series of the Faculty of Humanities at ELTE ("as manuscripts"). In 1975, in the volume *Kommunikáció-elmélet III. ('Communication Theory III')* (*Homogén médiumok* – Homogeneous Media), co-authored with János Zsilka, the legendary professor of linguistics, he published his extensive study titled *Fotofonikus tükrözélmélet* ('The Theory of Photophonic Reflection') (Király 1985). The very first homogeneous medium is language. The most modern is film. The former was described by János Zsilka, the latter by Jenő Király. In one place, he regarded film as a "primitive", "archaic" language (Király 1975, 148).

The term "photophonic transmission" ("motion picture with sound") emerged during a lecture given to public education students. The formal language of film is shaped by a meaning-generating and meaning-carrying apparatus, determined by the specific characteristics of the film medium, that serves as a photophonic artistic and journalistic reflection of reality. Traditional film theories have alternately prioritised content or form. The dialectical theory of reflection views filmmaking as a dynamic process, uniting technique with form and form with content (Király 1975, 83). The essence of his concept is a further development of György Lukács's theory of double reflection: quadruple reflection (Király 1975, 84). The first reflection being: narration, description; the second being: the object in front of the camera. The third being: the image, scene, caption, sound, music. The fourth being: montage, editing, sequence construction, camera movement. Already in this study, he lays out the idea of myth ~ quasi-mythology: "Themes that capture the fundamental turning points and stages of human development, condensing them into general and simple basic lines, are particularly obstinate; they constantly return, attract newer and newer forms of art to themselves, and migrate through modernisations and adaptations. [] These recurring major themes lend works of art historical and epic credibility, a perspective reaching deep into the past, just as myth does for classical art" (Király 1975, 111). And the story (fairy tale) is: "an abstraction of the past, the past reduced to a simple form through language []. Literature approaches the moment through the story, while film approaches the story through the moment" (Király 1975, 120–121).

His textbook *A marxista filmelmélet alapjai* ('The Foundations of Marxist Film Theory') (Király 1980) is the first work in his systematic, comprehensive film theory.

(The title was originally supposed to be 'The Phenomenology of the Photophonic Message', which he changed to facilitate publication.) Király (1980, 22) focused his attention on the expansion of film, film viewing, and film culture: "We do not examine film merely as an art film or an entertaining feature film. We conceive of it as one of the major modes of social and intellectual interaction, a means of communication, one possible application of which is artistic expression." He summarises its history as follows: "The cinematic image (motion picture), which originated as a silent film, first evolved into a photophonic image (sound picture), then television broadcasting emerged, and most recently, visual programmes stored on electromagnetic tape or discs (video discs, videocassettes). Today's audience can encounter a film in several ways: on the movie screen, on the television screen, or reproduced via video technology. The film remains the same in all three forms. The more technical forms in which a film appears, the more difficult it is to define the meaning of the word 'film' []. In its most general sense, the word 'film' refers to recorded moving-image programmes (announcements)" (Király 1980, 24).

In what ways and to what extent is Jenő Király a Marxist? Marxist film studies (aesthetics) "places film aesthetics within the perspective of the unfolding of human self-consciousness" he wrote (Király 1980, 26). He refers to Marx when he regards new media as "the emancipation of the senses and qualities of all people": "The task of the new media is the expansion and development of the human sensory and spiritual world [...] film as a medium of communication and as an art [tool, contribution] to the fundamental tendency of human history, the unfolding of human freedom, and the exploitation-free organisation of an integrated humanity" (Király 1980, 26; 27). And although he uses the term "naive realism" from Marxist aesthetics in quotation marks, he takes realism "to neorealism and beyond" but does not describe the terms "critical realism" and "socialist realism". In his final life-story interview, Jenő Király reflected as follows: "I wanted to modernise Lukács's aesthetics with the help of Brecht. Lukács made the symbol the norm and the allegory a deviation. In my first book, I built the system on deviation and allegory. From the mid-1970s, I was drawn to structuralism and semiotics. At the beginning of the 1980s, my goal was simply to listen to films and write an ideology-independent aesthetics of experience. In this, all forms of psychoanalysis and the phenomenology of religion were of the greatest help." My own worldview took shape in my book 'Frivolous Muse', which compiles excerpts from my performances of the 1980s. Its essence lies in a reckoning with the system scornfully called socialism. The film's symbolism summarises the results of

later performances, no less provocative than the previous one, and its essence is a reckoning with capitalism. Here, the chorus always denounces the previous, defeated, fallen system. The lesson of my intellectual adventures is that one must attack the present, aiming right at its heart. The totality of today is a total scandal" (Kelecsényi 2013).

It would be fascinating to explore the extent to which Jenő Király viewed the changes taking place in society and art as a kind of "end of history" or, in our case, "end of art". From the avant-garde to the present post-postmodern (or even transhuman) world, it remains true that "only the medium remains of the message: the medium as a spectacle. The message is a message about the medium and not a message through the medium, a pseudo-message, a play with the medium", the reception of which "sometimes borders on physical pain [...]. The subject of art is no longer the world, but only language itself or the artist himself" (Király 1980, 31; 34).

In the collection of essays titled *Film és szórakozás* ('Film and Entertainment'), Jenő Király's (1981) fifty-page introduction lays the foundation for mass culture. This idea recurs in all his later works. The diagram on pages 34 and 37 illustrates the interweaving of cultural layers (see table 1):

Primal Culture		
Folk Culture	Popular Culture	High Culture
New General Knowledge		

Table 1. Simplified version of Jenő Király's cultural spheres and historic division (own edit)

Jenő Király's theory is underpinned by the dichotomy between two types of film: "high, authentic" and "light, low, inauthentic", and their aesthetic distinction. He uses a wide variety of terminology in his books, which I have compiled into a table.

His 1982 work *Filmelmélet* ('Film Theory') elaborates on his theory in meticulous detail, broken down into points and subpoints (Király 1982). Key terms are as follows: film culture, film work, popular film culture. This latter section is the first thorough exposition of his theory of mass cinema, or, in this context, popular cinema, and it is from this that his entire body of work unfolds. The pillars of his system: the quasi-anonymity of the creator, professionalism, the work of art and the viewer's experience, popular myths, elements of popular aesthetics

art film	non-art film
explorative	entertaining
intellectual	mainstream film
analytical	popular film
confessional film	commercial film
experimental	popular film
avant-garde	dream factory
underground	blockbuster film
independent	hit film
	trash film
	B-movie
	sleaze film
	cinematic kitsch

Table 2. Art film – non-art film dichotomy (own edit)

(standard complexes, archetypes), individual–collective invention, forgetting–obsolescence, the memory of humanity.

The most exciting section: *Búcsú a folklórtól* ('Farewell to Folklore') (quasi-folklore, pseudo-folklore, the cult of folklore), which was discussed in greater detail in the volume *Mozifolklór és kameratöltőtoll* ('Film Folklore and Camera Fountain Pen') (Király 1983; Balázs 1985). In this, his first independent book (published outside of an academic context), he writes about the folkloristic features of film, but also about its nature as mass culture. Traditional aesthetics, based on the sacred–profane opposition inherited from theology, divided aesthetic culture into two opposing spheres: authentic–inauthentic; canonised–non-canonised; and the aesthetic is either a true, valuable aesthetic or a pseudo-aesthetic. Based on this, the arts can be divided into two major groups: the professional or so-called "high" arts and the non-professional, that is, popular arts. Jenő Király refers to folklore as "dead" popular aesthetics. Folklore is accepted and considered valuable, whereas the aesthetics that developed alongside it and eventually replaced it, mass culture, is deemed worthless. Instead of the previous binary

division, the author outlines a three-tiered aesthetic contact level. At the tip of his “pyramid” lies the generative (productive) value-producing aesthetic. In the middle is the regenerative (reproductive) aesthetic, which serves to preserve memory. This generally replicates the results and values of the higher level, thereby strengthening the collective memory. The author considers the valuable aspects of mass culture to belong to this category. At the base of the “pyramid” lies the degenerative (unproductive) aesthetic, which shows signs of decay and is incapable of reproducing even existing constellations of signs. In the third chapter, he describes the dynamics of cultural spheres as follows: “Since the disintegration of primal art, alternative modes of artistic production have coexisted: sacred and profane, aristocratic, and vulgar, cultured, and trivial, intellectual and sensational aesthetics. In the relationship between competing art forms, the folklore-based popular aesthetic that stands in opposition to canonised art is supplanted by mass culture. During the process of supplantation spanning from the Industrial Revolution to the Scientific-Technological Revolution, folklore and mass art coexist” (Király 1983, 143–144). Mass-cultural products strive to connect with popular myths in as many ways as possible. Manifest and latent popular myths have emerged in the world of film. Pure and combined myths have entered the world of film from literary and folklore traditions. Meanwhile, medium-immanent, and medium-transcendent popular myths migrate between the various spheres of mass culture. Mass culture is playing an increasingly significant role and, in essence, appears to be replacing folklore.

Another major work from his structuralist period, *Mágikus mozi* (‘Magical Cinema’) (subtitle: *Műfajok, mítoszok, archetípusok a filmkultúrában* – ‘Genres, Myths, and Archetypes in Film Culture’; Király 1998), is divided into three main sections: I. Genre Film and Film Genre; II. Archetypes in Film Culture; III. Genres and Archetypes in Midcult Film. During this period semiotics is still flourishing, as Király (1998, 9) speaks of “film semiotics”: “Film semiotics and film grammars investigate the general cinematic sign system, while film aesthetics investigates the general sign system of film art. The general system of film art is semiotically specific, yet aesthetically general. For film semiotics, film art itself is a specific sign system, while for the study of film art, genres, styles, subgenres, and stylistic variations are the specific sign systems.” The central question of the volume is genre: “The film, which expands the appetite for genres, is the keeper and organiser of genres” (Király 1998, 19). The other research question concerns style. He quotes Ferenc Versegly, an almost forgotten but rather unique Hungarian

linguist who wrote on the aesthetics of the Hungarian language, and who distinguishes between the substantive (thematic) and stylistic components of style. Style is "the mark that the author's individuality, or at least the momentary fluctuation of his mood, imprints on the work..." (Király 1998, 55). The relationship between genre and style: "The virtue of style is sensitivity, surprise. [...] Style dictates less to genre than genre does to style. Therefore, we can speak of a style of the age..." (Király 1998, 69); Styles are "deprecated cultural assets", whereas genres, in contrast, have risen to prominence: "Dracula moves from folklore tradition into Bram Stoker's novel, and as a result of a long evolution, ultimately captures the interest of the elite as well" (Király 1998, 73–74). We also refer to this phenomenon as (neo)folklorism. On the characteristics of mass culture: "Hungarian mass culture is drawn to the anecdotal genre and the light-heartedness of farce, American culture to irresistible action, and Chinese culture to legendary fantasy" (Király 1998, 103). Even in this work, the anthropological and psychoanalytic perspective that would later become more prominent already emerges: "The spirit is the organ of expansion; the soul is responsible for states of equilibrium. The spirit strives for mobility; the soul for harmony; the spirit is tormented by stagnation, the soul by disharmony. [...] The spirit seeks the tools and solutions necessary for problem-solving in the future, while the soul seeks them in the past." The archetype—a spiritual unity: "The relative of folklore, which preserves the original forms of archetypal culture, is mass culture, which has adapted to the conditions of urbanisation, industrialisation, massification, the production of cultural commodities, technical reproduction, telecommunications, and consumer electronics: a paradoxical formation, the product of the modernisation of archetypes. "Amid the conditions of cultural dichotomisation and the differentiation between vulgar and elitist culture, it was vulgar culture that carried forward the narrative material, iconography, and strategies of symbolisation derived directly from primal culture: the original experience of the world" (Király 1998, 147–148). Following Freud, Jung, and Eliade, he analyses the King Kong archetype: the apple, solidity and allure, adventure and love, sexuality, the island, ecstasy, the hero, the ancestor, the man, the shaman, the god (beauty and beast), man's fear of woman, the birth of death. As well as King Kong in New York, on Broadway, the descent into disaster film, Jurassic Park, and the endgame ("King Kong in Hong Kong"). And what is the function of the archetype? "The archetypes of the collective unconscious play the role of soul guides in individuation. Individualisation is a successful expansion of consciousness based on the acquisition of a solid inner

centre, as a result of which a person can assimilate everything that happens to them. This is guided by the realisation that the world did not create the person by chance, but that what happened to them happened precisely because the world needed the person to whom all this happened" (Király 1998, 168).

The second period: Philosophical Anthropology, Metaphysical Film Aesthetics, the aesthetics of despair and dread

The precursor to the comprehensive summaries of his life's work is a substantial university lecture manuscript (1,048 pages; still classified merely as a "manuscript"): *A tömegkultúra esztétikája* 1–2. ('The Aesthetics of Mass Culture 1–2') (Király 1992). 'Frivol Muse' was based on this work. These two major works (Király 1992; 1993) already signal a shift in focus. Besides and succeeding mass culture, structures, and frameworks, the film aesthetician turned his attention to archetypes, then to fiction, the fantastic, decay, crisis, and the world of emotions. The latter became the main theme of his second creative period.

Chapters on *A tömegkultúra esztétikája*: Volume 1: Part 1: Forms of Communication: Fiction and Nonfiction; Part 2: Forms of Fiction: Representation and Narration; Part 3: Forms of Narrative Fiction: Adventure and the Fantastic; Volume 2: Part 4: The Poetics of the Fantastic; Part 5: The Wild and Artificial Flowers of Decay: The World of Black Fantasy; Part 6: Aesthetica in nuce (The Small Aesthetics of the Great Aesthetic); Part 7: The Shadows Grow (Conclusions and Hypotheses); Part 8: The Dark Night of Being (Summary and Outlook). This revised and expanded edition is titled *Frivol múzsa: A tömegfilm sajátos alkotásmódja és a tömegkultúra esztétikája* ('Frivolous Muse: The Unique Creative Method of Mass Cinema and the Aesthetics of Mass Culture'). Parts 1–6 are identical to the earlier work. The subsequent parts signal a shift in theme and perspective: Part 7: The Horror of the Beginning (On the Theory of Art History), Part 8: Sexual Aesthetics, Part 9: The Dark Night of Being (summary and outlook). The vast body of knowledge, the immense cultural-historical perspective, and the conceptual framework within which individual themes, genres, and works are situated are truly impressive. Tibor Hirsch calls it a work of epoch-making significance, a "non-Euclidean aesthetics", and compares it to János Bolyai's mathematical revolution (Hirsch 1995).

There is a great deal of confusion surrounding her second period. Even within professional circles, it is sometimes said that he is merely continuing his earlier

works, but the main reason is clearly that critics do not know how to approach his monumental body of work, nor his “film analysis” that goes far beyond conventional film criticism. According to Anna Varga, his least resonant works are *Csak egy nap a világ* (‘Just One Day in the World’) (Balogh and Király 2000), co-authored with Gyöngyi Balogh, as well as the eight-volume series, *A film szimbolikája* (‘The Symbolism of Film’). A grandiose work that marks a shift in emphasis within his oeuvre while simultaneously serving as a summary of it (Király 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2011), as well as the book *A mai film szimbolikája* (‘The Symbolism of Contemporary Film’) (Király 2017). Anna Varga, the foremost expert on Király’s work, summarises the significance of these works as follows: “*Frivol műzsa* is characterised by a distancing, even severing sadness, a melancholy that observes from afar and thus takes in the whole picture; *Csak egy nap a világ* by nostalgia; *A film szimbolikája* by confession and mourning; *A mai film szimbolikája* is disgust, and I would call the planned volume (whose title would be ‘*A film szimbolikája: a társadalmi változás szimbólumai*’ – ‘The Symbolism of Film: Symbols of Social Change’) the aesthetics of anger” (Varga 2017, 637). As for his entire body of work: the early writings of Jenő Király were characterised by “the aesthetics of hope”; “the optimism of the early writings also had an aesthetic nature; Király believed at that time in the coming of age of film art”. Nevertheless, the “descent from hope to horror” took place; the “initiation ritual” of the *Frivol műzsa* (‘Frivolous Muse’; the term echoes Hamvas); the “mourning ritual” of *A film szimbolikája* (Varga 2017, 638). Since it is not so simple to navigate through the latest system of summaries, I created table 3 based on the memory of Anna Varga (2025).

The *Frivol műzsa* (‘Frivolous Muse’; 1993) thus dealt with the relationship between popular culture and popular cinema. The four-volume work, *A film szimbolikája* (‘The Symbolism of Film’), totalling more than four thousand pages, goes beyond film aesthetics. It is, in fact, a philosophical theory of art, a philosophical anthropological (or, to use an earlier Hungarian term, “spiritual-historical”) discourse in which film occupies a prominent place. This is reflected in the subtitles of the first two parts, which also incorporate the approach of the earlier period: *A filmkultúra filozófiája és a filmalkotás szemiotikai esztétikája* (‘The Philosophy of Film Culture and the Semiotic Aesthetics of Film Production’). The further development of the theory of mass culture and film culture written during his first creative period is, in fact, philosophy (or anthropology), but its foundation remains the interpretation of signs (here in a more specialised form: film interpretation, following Freud’s dream interpretation). Subsequent volumes present genres and

Number of Volumes	Volume Numbering	Title
1., 2.	I/1., I/2.	<i>A film szimbolikája: A filmkultúra és a filmalkotás szemiotikai esztétikája</i> ('The Symbolism of Film: The Semiotic Aesthetics of Film Culture and Film Production') (University of Kaposvár)
3., 4.	II/1., II/2.	<i>A film szimbolikája: A fantasztikus film formái</i> ('The Symbolism of Film: Forms of the Fantasy Film') (University of Kaposvár)
5., 6.	III/1., III/2.	<i>A film szimbolikája: A kalandfilm formái</i> ('The Symbolism of Film: Forms of the Adventure Film') (University of Kaposvár)
7., 8.	IV/1., IV/2.	<i>A film szimbolikája: Erőszak és erotika a filmben</i> ('The Symbolism of Film: Violence and Eroticism in Film') (University of Kaposvár)
9.	V.	<i>A mai film szimbolikája (Eszmélet)</i> ('The Symbolism of Contemporary Film [Consciousness]')
[10.]	[VI.]	[<i>A film szimbolikája: a társadalmi változás szimbólumai</i> ('The Symbolism of Film: Symbols of Social Change')—a volume begun but not completed]
[11.]	[VII.]	[<i>A hetedik művészet kulcsa; A hetedik ajtó kulcsa</i> ('The Key to the Seventh Art; The Key to the Seventh Door')—a novel begun but not completed]

Table 3. Jenő Király: *A film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Film') (I–VII.)
(own reconstruction, edit)

subgenres using film examples. The author defines referential and fictional communication and introduces the concept of the "fiction spectrum". In referential communication, we explore philosophical and social truths. In fictional communication, we identify unconscious contents. The initial narrative forms of the fiction spectrum represent the emotions of horror, hatred, anger, and anxiety. The anthropological dimension of the fiction spectrum (human existence) sheds light on the communicative characteristics of films. An approach based on basic human motivations ("the law of reason"; "the law of the heart"; "the law of instinct") is also possible. The method of interpretation: film analysis and film interpretation. The difference between the two: "Analysis proceeds from relationship to relationship, seeking to reconstruct higher-order units from the elements. It moves from

the details toward the whole and classifies the wholes into higher-order wholes (body of work, period style). Interpretation proceeds from the whole toward the parts, seeking the work in its moving (soul- and culture-modifying) effect, and within the work, the formula of the connections responsible for that effect [...]. Analysis deconstructs. Interpretation presupposes reconstruction. Interpretation is also analysis, but analysis is not interpretation. [...] "We must view analysis and interpretation as one" (Király 2010a: 1/2, 5, 7). In his review of the book series, Deák-Sárosi (2012) notes that "disciplinarily, it transcends the frameworks of film theory, aesthetics, philosophy, and semiotics on multiple levels. The psycho-analytic orientation is strong through the motivations of both creators and audiences." The latter unfolds particularly in Volume IV: eroticism, violence, sexual aesthetics, and bio-poetics.

Jenő Király's second creative period falls within the post-regime change era. During this time, his artistic forms of expression and his aesthetic interest in film took on anthropological dimensions and deepened. Presumably, the "revolution" in information technology and society, brought about by digitisation, the IT revolution, and the social form he most often referred to as turbo-capitalism² (or, in other words, neocapitalism), have unsettled his purely aesthetic convictions, and through his films he has been preoccupied with the great questions of humanity, the precariousness of human existence, the disintegration of the self, as well as cultural decline and crisis. In the context of turbo-capitalism, he saw the disappearance of people living in harmony with nature, the community, and themselves. The "deeper layers" of the films reveal: "once hell was full, the time came when it vomited out its contents" (Király 2010a: 1/1, 293).

What is the root cause of the crisis? He identified three main factors: (a) Science and technology "emerged as anxiety-reducers, and they retained this effect even when we have far more reason to fear them than the dangers they avert; ultimately, it is precisely their role as anxiety-reducers that grants them unlimited power over us []. Only turbo-capitalism has created a humanity that is criminal in its entirety, one that consumes and squanders the life prospects of future generations" (Király 2010a: 1/1, 300); for Hamvas, the dead end of science is even clearer: scientism (Balázs 2025b); (b) The rejection of the absolute: "While science

2 Turbo-capitalism (alias neocapitalism) is present in the literature of globalism critiques in Hungarian too, see: Martin, Hans Peter and Harald Schumann. 1998. *A globalizáció csapdája* ('The Trap of Globalism'), Hungarian translation by Anikó Szmodits. Budapest: Perfekt, 249. (Király also quotes the book.)

expels God from the world, in the imagination the absolute returns in vengeful, debased, degenerate forms as images of universality and primal power. We also find the sublimated counterparts of mass culture's man-eating horrors in the new elite culture, where, for example, language devours the work and the text devours the author" (Király 2010a: I/1, 391). The same applies to Hamvas, which is why he proposes the revival of the metaphysical tradition as a remedy for ontological decay (Balázs 2025b); (c) The destruction of souls: "postmodern coldness" (Király 2010a: I/1, 304). Furthermore: "Singles' loneliness and a lack of solidarity, and the increasingly inhuman groups and their leaders brought to the surface by the extreme situation of the world order: the narrative evocation of the experience of horror as the Big Bang of the spirit is realised through the mediation of contemporary conflicts, which stir up or destroy the soul to its very depths" (Király 2010a: I/1, 405–406). Additionally, the unverifiability of information, falsified and manipulated images, a decline in quality. Public opinion as an opinion forced upon people, a culture of entertainment, nonsense, trash, a "colonial language" that labels sins as virtues, alienation (Király 2010a: I/1, 23; 25; 26; 53). The latter remain burning issues today as well; just think of artificial intelligence or the phenomenon of deepfakes.

Király expounds his dark vision most succinctly in the theoretical section. He speaks here of lost nature, of people who have become homeless and doubly alienated, of mechanisation (today we would say: a transhuman world), of collapse, of neocapitalism; of the emptiness of mass culture's stars; of the responsibility of the exploratory, creative artist. And is there a solution? "Nowhere is the vision of the existential task to be solved as grand and clear as in collapse, in insolubility, in incommunicable alienation. The society-builder who is homeless in nature becomes homeless in society as well: this double alienation is lived out by the explorer, the creator, the artist. "The cultural stars of neocapitalism, grinning broadly and gracing magazine covers, its writers, painters, and scientists strutting about with the confidence of major generals—these are not artists in the old sense, but merely intellectual interior decorators" (Király 2010a: I/1, 385). Finally, the attack on the concept of humanity: "A natural being has become unfit for nature..." (Király 2010a: I/1, 381). At the beginning of his triumphal march, man was a "not-yet-human". This being is no longer an animal, but not yet a human. Then, over millions of years, it became human, and by the end of the 20th century, it was "no-longer-human", but not yet a machine. "The no-longer-human is the mirror image of the not-yet-human" (Király 2010a: I/1, 390). Of course, we could

ask Király, if we could, whether it is not merely the continuous raising of the “stimulus threshold”, thanks to technology, that causes the horror encoded in films, the “non-human” world.

These crisis-theoretical ideas bring him into alignment with Béla Hamvas, the great Hungarian thinker of ontic decay or devolution, or with the proponents of the “collapse theory”. In his view, films increasingly reflect this “frightening” world. Unfortunately, we can no longer discuss with him to what extent the mass culture and mass cinema he intended (rightly, by the way) to emancipate during the early creative phase of his career led to the mass man who has lost his bearings and self-understanding, wandering aimlessly and without a future through the world. Who is responsible for the culture-destroying activities of the primitivised mass man, or is this merely the self-imposed law of “progress”. To what extent is the “supranational visual language”, which is at the centre of Jenő Király’s work, responsible for this? In one place, he does pose the question (on behalf of humanity abandoned by the modern world, Király 2010a: I/1, 245; 246): “Has the world moved forward through films?” Does film have an answer to the question of “how one should be (as a human being)?” The answer lies within the poetic question itself (cf. Antal 2025).

At the end of human history stands the film: “The film marks the end of art history just as the first cave paintings marked its beginning. The cinema is the same cave at the other end of time. The two styles of Stone Age cave paintings, actionist and naturalist, correspond to the moving image and the image of time. And above all, the most recent art evokes, as its history unfolds, the oldest anxieties ever more fully. The age of cinema: a new spiritual Stone Age. Therefore (as we attempt to rethink general aesthetics based on a century of film and expand it into an ontology of art, while also seeking the ‘path’ leading from the ontology of art toward the ontology of signs), we must confront the end of time” (Király 2010a: I/1, 386).

A gloomy, dark vision. As a critical intellectual, Király sought to draw attention to this phenomenon and the underlying connections. His work remains exemplary even if he, too, could not offer an antidote or solution to it. More precisely, perhaps a message regarding the preservation of aesthetic sensibility and against the self-abandonment of aesthetes: “Just as Semmelweis was the ‘saviour of mothers’, so today the ‘sphere of the muses’ awaits the ‘saviour of the muses’, the lost aesthete” (Király 2010a: I/1, 182).

Critics have amassed high praise on this “masterpiece”:

- *A film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Film') is thus not merely philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics, or communication and cultural theory, but a comprehensive interpretation of the world. Király's encyclopaedic work is, in both a semiotic and practical sense, “the meaning of our time” (Deák-Sárosi 2012).
- “It lifts us out of the usual jargon and reaches deeper layers through the complex theories of philosophy, literary and cultural studies, and psychology. A world opens before the reader where films are no longer just for entertainment or for discussion over a beer. They are parts of a grand narrative that stretches above and among people” (Márki 2018).
- “The fact that Király reinterprets film culture in the shadow of today's rampant global turbo-capitalism and 'over-civilisation' is one of the most provocative and thought-provoking aspects of his work. [...] There are moments when the ordinary Hungarian feels right at the centre of the world. His heart overflows, his eyes mist over, his chest swells when he realises that one of his compatriots has created something previously unimaginable, something world-shaking. [...] Recognition of Jenő Király's now three-decade-long career as a genre theorist, which can confidently be described as world-class, is not only delayed abroad (this can be explained primarily by the prosaic fact that not even one of his books has been translated into a foreign language), but also at home, and the latter is truly saddening” (Pápai and Varga 2013).

In his latest work, *A mai film szimbolikája* ('The Symbolism of Contemporary Film') (2017), Király speaks not merely of a crisis, but of an apocalypse. “Contemporary” art depicts a hell on earth. Such is the race to produce, accumulate, and consume. “Competition divides us, profit elevates some above others, and joy is merely narcissistic pleasure”; “the success of turbo-capitalism is based on unpaid labour and the extortion of consumers”; the intertwining of hedonism and militarism; the depth of horror; “the self places itself above society, the others below society”; “liberalism as form without content”; “Hungarians, threatened with incessant retaliation, are the Indians of Europe”; the nation's greater potential for identification and cooperation, even all of humanity could become this way (but it does not); zombie romance, infantilised American blockbuster; aggressive trivialisation that “brings human aesthetics closer to the animal”; primitive re-feudalisation; “the exploitation of future generations by today's profligacy”; the depth of horror... (Király 2017, 21; 23; 25; 26; 27; 30; 34). Furthermore: “The development of

the information society points toward a new cultural revolution..." (Király 2017, 33). This is where his life's work came to an end, even though, despite struggling with his illness, he still had so much more to say...

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