

JOSEPH ZSUFFA

**BÉLA BALÁZS, THE MAN AND THE ARTIST**Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of  
California Press, 1987. xiii + 550 pp. \$ 55.00

Why should a book be published in English about Béla Balázs? The answer to this question is by no means obvious.

The writer and film critic Herbert Bauer, who later changed his name to Béla Balázs, was born in 1884, in Szeged, a city in Southern Hungary, and died in 1949, in the capital of the same country. Although he tried his hand at writing of all sorts — he composed lyrics, plays, and prose narrative — he was fairly minor in all literary genres. Considering the fact that there is no book available on such major poets as Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Attila József, Sándor Weöres, or János Pilinszky, and the only full-scale monograph on Kosztolányi was written with good intentions but without scholarly ambitions (Dalma Hunyadi-Brunauer and Stephen Brunauer, *Dezső Kosztolányi*, München, 1983.), the urgent need for a lengthy work on Balázs is rather questionable. Fortunately, Joseph Zsuffa focused on Balázs's activity as a film critic. In this field the author of *Der sichtbare Mensch, oder die Kultur des Films* (1924), a book largely based on the more than one hundred film-related articles written for the Viennese daily, *Der Tag*, was one of the pioneers.

Joseph Zsuffa must have spent many years with a close reading of manuscripts in city archives before he made his analysis of the role played by Balázs in the history of film criticism. The strength of the book lies in passages in which Joseph Zsuffa admits that his hero was mistaken to believe that *Der sichtbare Mensch* "was the first attempt to formulate the aesthetics of film" (p. 120), and in which he stresses the limitations of Balázs as a writer. Less convincing is the way the biographer defends his hero when commenting on his disagreements with such major artists as Bartók, Babits, Eisenstein, or Brecht. The moral grounds he tries to rely upon are hardly acceptable. What Zsuffa calls Balázs's "survival instinct" (p. 230) made him change his convictions several times in his life. During World War I he published chauvinistic poems; in 1919 he posed as a spokesman of international Communism; and during the years spent in the Soviet Union (1931–1945), he attacked Expressionism, in a style somewhat reminiscent of the language used by Goebbels. He sent a letter to the Comintern, distancing himself from his own brother who had been arrested in Leningrad, and composed not only a "Testimonial" on the occasion of the eighteenth congress of the Soviet party but also a poem "Auf ein Stalinbildnis".

Having stated this, all the written complaints Balázs made about being slighted by the Communist Party seem ridiculous. For similar reasons, it is absurd to suggest that "to pin down the cause of animosity against Balázs in postwar Hungary is well-nigh impossible" (p. 362). As Zsuffa himself mentions, Balázs reached Hungary in a Soviet military plane. Since he appeared as the representative of a foreign oppression and glorified Stalin, his alienation from the Hungarian people was complete from the very beginning. His quarrels with the Hungarian Communists, described in detail by his biographer, were of negligible significance if it is remembered that he was awarded the Kossuth Prize in a period when much better artists and writers were silenced, forced to leave the country, or persecuted.

Some of the inaccuracies in this book are of no great importance. The misspelling of the name of nineteenth-century Hungarian statesman Széchenyi may be due to a typographical error (p. 22), the statement that "both Bartók's and Kodály's wives were Jewish" is only partially untrue (p. 473), and the reference to "the Norwegian writer August Strindberg" (p. 473) must be an instance of oversight. There are, however, some distortions which may lead to serious misunderstandings. The remark that "all Bartók's compositions premiered abroad before they were — if ever — presented in his homeland" (p. 159) is in strange contradiction with facts mentioned by Zsuffa himself: both *The Wooden Prince* and *Bluebeard's Castle*, the two works with libretti by Balázs, had their first performances in Budapest.

The weakness of this book is at least partly caused by the biographer's reluctance to keep a certain distance from his hero. Zsuffa fails to compare the diary he kept with other documents. Balázs maintained that he "collected folk songs together" with Bartók (p. 29), but this statement is not supported by any other source.

"I had to have Bartók break through the front of Hungarian indifference" (pp. 60–61). Such claims were characteristic of Balázs's patronizing attitude towards greater talents. Zsuffa is too honest a scholar to deny that when *The Wooden Prince* and *Bluebeard's Castle* had their first performances, the Hungarian critics praised Bartók's music and flayed Balázs's libretto. What the biographer could have added is that time has not changed the verdict: today Balázs the writer is remembered mainly as the author of those two libretti.

Whenever Joseph Zsuffa steps beyond the field of film, he tends to lose perspective. He does not deny that in 1917 "Balázs favored German culture and hoped for its victory in the war" (p. 53). What he fails to mention is that the "animosity" of the major poet Mihály Babits (1883–1941) toward Balázs was the result of three factors: as were all the members of the circle of *Nyugat*, the most important Hungarian journal of the period, Babits was sharply critical of the war, wanted to see French as more influential than German culture in his country, and considered Balázs a minor poet.

Because of his almost unqualified admiration for his hero, the biographer is tempted to misinterpret not only the literary but also the historical context in which the career of Balázs has to be examined. To make the point that Balázs's father, a high-school teacher, was punished severely for his anti-clerical views, Zsuffa calls Lőcse, the place to which he was transferred, "an insignificant town" in which "during seven hundred years there was little change" (pp. 4–7). This is a gross simplification. Although by the 1890s Lőcse was in decline, it had been one of the centers of the rising bourgeoisie since the Middle Ages, and the strong cultural traditions of its largely German population must have been advantageous to an intellectual whose task was to teach Goethe in the original.

The portrait of an artist cannot be complete without an analysis of the circumstances under which he lived and worked. The time spent in the German-speaking community of Lőcse must have contributed to bilingualism, just as his spiritual education was largely the result of his membership of the "Sunday Circle", a group which played a major role in the preparation of the first Hungarian Commune (21 March–1 August 1919). (Cf. Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation 1900–1918*, Cambridge, MA 1985.) Unfortunately, this biography does not offer a satisfactory analysis of the activities of this intellectual movement. On the one hand, Zsuffa fails to mention two important members of the Sunday Circle, the writer Emma Ritoók, who turned against the Commune, and the art historian Lajos Fülep, who was the editor of the only periodical of the group. On the other hand, the biographer makes the sweeping generalization that "the Hungarians felt that they had been abandoned by the West and betrayed by Wilson, so they turned to the East and Lenin for deliverance" (p. 78). In view of the fact that the Party of the Communists of Hungary was founded in Moscow and the short-lived Commune led by Béla Kun and others (Béla Balázs and György Lukács among them) was extremely undemocratic and unpopular, this assumption is misleading. In any case, it cannot help us understand the reasons why Balázs spent the years 1919–1945 outside Hungary.

Joseph Zsuffa's biography succeeds in pointing out that Béla Balázs has a place in the history of film criticism. What it fails to emphasize is that he was a second-rate writer who served the dictatorships of Kun, Stalin, and Rákosi.

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## AUSTRIA-HUNGARY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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The Habsburg contribution to the origins of the First World War is usually presented as a tale of two cheques. The first cheque is the blank one, given by the Kaiser and his Chancellor on 5–6 July, which guaranteed German support for Habsburg action against Serbia. The second is the 'lost cheque': Pasic's alleged