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Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

S T A R R I N G T H E A R C H I T E C T

The documentary „Masterschool of Architects” and the lessons from sociological, literature and film examples for the explanation of professional and identity shifts of architects

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The masterpiece:

MASTERSCHOOL OF ARCHITECTS I-II., a 120 min. documentary

Program

Conception, preparation, direction and edition of the documentary “Masterschool” was elaborated and executed between 2007 and 2010 by me and Attila Madzin as co-director. The film was produced upon request of leaders of the Masterschool.

The fundamental aim of the film was to present a summary of the institution, which had a strong influence on the Hungarian architecture during the postwar period.

Although the institution was responsible for the post-graduate education of designers, its functioning has been determined mainly by tradition, unwritten rules and correlations. Instead of accurate documentation, the film intends to provide a historical perspective to that common narrative. The aspect of keeping distance was crucial for us.

In the process of the film the myth of the Masterschool is completed by the common memory, which may keep it open for future exploration and evaluation. This common memory is put together from verbal and visual fragments, from pieces of stories, subjective opinions, pictures, drawings, photos and videos.

The aim of the extremely low-budget film was to generate an understanding of historical coherences from the paradoxes or parallel varieties that may be able to help architects or laymen interested in architects to dispel the mist of the common past or to simply inspire them to discuss it. Behind the direct information we tried to focus on the human side of postwar history of Hungarian architecture.

For the purpose of deeper exploration of this background I started my doctoral research on a dual thematic thread, on the one hand to study the sociological literature of the history of the identity and profession of the architect, and to examine those films which can be useful for the enrichment of the general architectural view on the other.

Research, execution, structure

Parallel with the preparatory work of the film I began to explore the huge (approx. 80 boxes) collection of documents, the results of the research directed towards the policy of profession, carried out by architect-sociologist Gábor Petróczy, and to find further sources

for that subject (Oral History Archive of Institute of 1956, State Security Archive and sociological literature of professionalization). In my previous papers in the Doctoral School I also investigated the literature and filmography related to overlaps in art forms of motion picture and architecture (i.e. "Traces of motion on architectural structures and forms", "Inspired spaces", "Budapest on screen", "Architectural view of Rudolf Schwarz", "Architects on screen").

Due to thematic reasons, our documentary is divided into two parts. The history of the Masterschool was interrupted during the sixties at political command, so there is a rupture in the story lasting from 1951 up to now. The first part summarizes the period before the interruption; the second part is structured into thematic chapters. Each level of this structure is composed from a collection of various experiences, opinions that organized and stimulated the whole story of the Masterschool, such as personal motives, the entrance competition, study-tours, design competitions, generation gaps, political considerations, the determining figure of the former leader Jenő Szendrői and Imre Makovecz, and in the end, the hopes of the future and the revival.

The dissertation:

STARRING THE ARCHITECT

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THESES

Motives, actuality, aspect, story of research

The dichotomy of architectural view from inside and outside the profession is a basic feature of the genealogy of modern architecture. The inevitable consequence of this unsustainable tension is the periodical shift and reevaluation of architect's role and identity.

Difficulties in re-definition of professional identity, uncovered and non-reflected passions accumulated during the last decades, unsettlement are making the discernment and decisiveness of the Hungarian architect society confused. It is especially problematic in the rapidly changing context and charged by an acute crisis.

Reversing the internal regard, approaching a well defined profession only through external sources with uninitiated eyes, then examining the reflected image, comparing it with the internal one – this is maybe the most effective method to provoke somebody to critical self-knowledge.

Profession and modernity

The architect's profession has a particular mediator role not only between different disciplines, arts and engineering sciences, but also between moment and eternity, profane and sacred, powers of heaven and earth, community of society and the sphere of power. This mission is fulfilled not only by the works of the architect, but by his personal activity as well.

The professionalization of architects begins in the second part of 19th century, in the process of fast growth of western civilisations. The society of architects accrued in short time in mass production, felt authorized to shape the course of people's lives. First their view and relationship with the wider society and authorities was modified, later it has manifested its objectives in self-assertive organizations.

In case of architects, two models of profession are mixed, the "missionary" modern technocracy with the 19th century idea of an artist. When one confronts the architect's role with reality, two kinds of myths must be taken into consideration.

The examination of the architect's profession during the Kádár-era is indispensable for the sociological historiography, because more than 2 millions of people are living in panel housing estates in Hungary even now. The consideration of this grave heritage is also important for a deeper understanding of the historic factors of that era.

Architects of the Stalin-era, as artists, directly sensed the bright and shaded sides of their high priority status; the years after the takeover by Khrushchev have been characterized by an ideal image of social engineer.

The strategies of survival and compromises of former generations could not offer a real alternative to the young architects of the seventies and eighties. They wanted to redefine their position related to modernism and belief in technical progression in the frame of informal – "second" – publicity. A new initiative began that time to find the shifted role of architects and to explore the social communication, alternative approach and language after the age of modern.

However the structure of the architect's society may transform, for the purpose of reaching a higher level of freedom in design the architect's profession must be socially more embedded. It is true not only in case of celebrity architects, but also of politically active architects fighting for the democratization of decision processes.

Starring the architect

Most of the professions that require self-giving – such as doctors, lawyers, priests, teachers, detectives, artists, etc. – generally belong together with typical human attitudes and conflicts; their stereotyped depiction is familiar from popular stories, even from particular artistic works. The characteristics of the architect protagonists are shaped from specific motives of their professional activity.

Beyond the artistic borders

The representation is not only a technical-practical question for architecture, but one of its attributes. The imagery is a mean of communication, making connections, sharing thoughts.

From head to belly

Tower-like constructions, from the megalithic menhirs up to the skyscrapers, have been the symbols not only of authority, will, masculine creative power, but also of risk and phobia.

The cinema had a significant role in the success of modern architecture in the USA in the thirties, since the public taste was influenced strongly by the “new look” of American films. The left-wing modernist ideology imported from Europe went under a metamorphosis in a certain sense, because it was regarded as an individual aesthetic movement. Due to economic aspects, it managed to find its own way in the world of cinema settings and in the “normative” architectural practice as well.

Except Fritz Lang’s dystopian vision “Metropolis”, the film production of the pre-war period was dominated by the belief in the future, through the imagery of the exciting, busy life of big cities (Lumière brothers, Edison, Ruttmann, Moholy-Nagy, Vertov and others). In the second part of the last century, due to works of the French and Italian new wave, a new kind of visual scepticism arose against the modernist social architecture, when the bizarre products of mass housing became a determining factor in the suburban areas of old towns with their social-aesthetic contradictions.

In the context of postmodernism developing parallel with the increase in popularity of neoliberalism the strongest supporting pillars of modernist belief got injured. The contour of the well-shaped image of the architect began to fade, since he was one of the symbolic figures of that ideology and epoch, for which the architect society had to pay with painful loss of prestige.

The presented examples of literature and films reflect a rather strange picture referring to the architect-man, who is forced to face the failure of his mission, own “memorials” and frailness, then tragically falls into the abyss.

Engineer-stories in the Kádár-era

The golden age of the representation of engineers’ activity on film in Hungary was in the sixties. In the film production, which was functioning under a strict political control, the figure of the engineer obtained a dominant role in educational documentaries and feature films alike.

The school established by András Kovács, János Herskó, later Sándor Simó attempted to find the adequate motion picture form for the politically expected stories of a doctor or an engineer, scented with false optimism and enthusiasm for socialism. Other directors, such as Miklós Jancsó, Károly Makk, István Szabó and others were searching for alternative ways for the solution of that task. These infantile stories, which were mocked “intellectual melodramas” by Gábor Bódy, were put together with the adopted filmic language of the new wave.

These directors making films in a critical tone learned to sense the borderlines and the possibilities of exceeding them eventually.

The questions about dwelling discussed in the film “Those Who Wear Glasses”, which affect the protagonist directly, highlight the defects of relationship and communication between the architect and “civil” society. The architect’s praxis can be followed in the context of giant state offices of design where he is working in a state of uncertainty, alienated from clients, the future inhabitants, and from the economic interests, the executor’s aspects as well. The

natural contact of these actors, which would make common thinking possible, seems to be eliminated.

According to the evidence of the film, at the end of the sixties in Hungary the design of housing estate lost its moral motives not only from the social, but the professional and individual-existential aspects too. In the given political context, there seemed to be no chance to change the constrained situation.