

## **Interview with Attila Horányi about Marcell Esterházy**

### **If you had to single out one work from all those made since the turn of the millennia, what would your vote go for?**

Right now, I would say it is *Feketén-fehéren /Black-and-White* by Marcell Esterházy, a video he made in 2010. It is a 40-second clip looped, that is, repeated again and again. In the black-and-white video we see a man sitting in on a train from relatively close. He is wearing a jacket and a chequered shirt with its collar out. He stares in front of himself with his head down. Then raises his head and looks up at us from behind his black rimmed glasses, and after a few seconds, he lowers his head again. Not a single word is said in the movie, the only sounds you hear is the clattering of the railway car's wheels, which grow fainter for a few seconds when the man raises his head, and then it begets louder again. I think this relative silence gives extra emphasis to the man's gesture of raising his head and his eyes, to make the subsequent lowering of the head even more dramatic.

### **Is this a reminiscence?**

Of course, Marcell Esterházy borrowed this sequence of movements. It is from the closing scene of *Sípoló macskakő* (The Whistling Cobblestone), a movie made by Gyula Gazdag in 1971. Through the story of a couple of secondary school students from Budapest in a mandatory summer construction camp, Gazdag's first movie presents the disappointing clash of youthful impetus and the rigid social order. In the last scene of the movie, the three main characters sit down in the compartment where the man in Esterházy's video is sitting. We, the spectators see the man through the boys' eyes, and the movie ends with the man lowering his head. Esterházy took this metaphor of hopelessness from the movie and changed it radically. In his video, there are no boys, no dialogue, and we do not see the parents' generation the secondary school students' eyes. Instead, we look back from 2010 at 1971, the slowly fading hopes and the disillusionment of the early 1970s. The raised head expresses that there is hope, while lowered, it says that all hope is lost. And more than those things are expressed by the raised and lowered head. The man acting in the scene is no other than Mátyás Esterházy, the artist's grand- father, who lived in his son's memory as a brave and dignified man turned out to be an agent of the communist internal police, according to state security service documents. The head raised is therefore also a metaphoric gesture of facing the facts and consequences, while the lowered head is that of guilt. Meanwhile, the man in the movie appears here clearly as a father and a grandfather at the same time: a man who loved and protected his loved ones, and whose look from 40 years ago can make those who knew him recall him in his flesh and blood reality. Although it may seem very simple, Esterházy's work is amazingly complex. And what is also amazing is that Esterházy creates this complexity with just a few cuts and noise effects.

### **Was it a simple and clear choice or did you consider other works too? What were the criteria for your decision?**

In fact, this is not the only work that stands out from those made in the past decade. I hesitated for a long time because I consider *Háttér / Background* by Péter Szabó Pettendi at least as important as Esterházy's work.- First presented in 2005, on the

Chain Bridge, on the occasion of the Bridge Festival, that work documents the distance of people living in villages from the capital, especially the Buda Castle and the Chain Bridge. Obviously, the distance is not geographical, as none of the villages is further than 200 kilometres from Budapest. However, the economic and social gap between the two places are so enormous that having one's photograph taken in front of the Buda Castle is possible only in the form of creating an illusion, by the photographer taking the image of the castle to the village on a huge banner, and photographing his models in front of it. One of the features that make this work exceptionally significant is its multi-mediality. The photos are shot on colour film, but the situation, the relationship of the background, the model and the photographer is also recorded in black-and-white digital images. Furthermore, Szabó Pettendi takes a video interview with all of the characters, too. As a result, beyond documenting the gap, his work is also about the job and responsibility of the photographer and photography, and fills the image of its characters with life – with a biography, desires, poverty and dignity. Background is a complex and sharp but clear work. The reason why I eventually chose Esterházy's work over this is that Black-and-White is more poetic. What I mean by this is that while it is not less society-centred, it is much more dense and abstract, but at the same time, it is perhaps more playful. These are the qualities that today I find very important in evaluating a work of art. Abstractness and density are perhaps the values of classical modernity, while a society-centred view was rooted in the dissatisfaction with the insularity of classical modernity in the past few decades. Playfulness, which I would not want to mix up with humour, means lightness in the works, or a grace with which the artist presents pieces of reality and abstracts phenomena away from them at the same time, creating a kind of coherence that is open to various types of viewers' strategies. In short, the artist plays with his or her material and invites his or her partner, the viewer to do so, too.

### **Why do you consider this work as representative? What makes it topical?**

These are difficult questions, and I am not sure that I can answer them. I am not even sure that they can be answered at all? I do not think that one work, or twenty-one, for that matter, can be the most representative of the age and the art scene of the time, however important we may feel them. Just recently, I have heard a presentation by Edit Sasvári, discussing the art of the 1960s, from the point of view of the relationship of power and art. She chose two exhibitions of the works of Lajos Kassák, a series of exhibitions of Hungarian artists living abroad, and a statue of János Kovács Szántó made by József Somogyi in 1965 to represent the complexity of the art scene of the age. She considered these works and situations the most representative to be used for the purposes of discussing the 1960s in the relatively small time-frame of a presentation. And although my task is a little simpler here, I also have problems concerning the question of topicality.

### **Why is this work important today, looking back at the past decade? What gives its significance?**

I think I have already answered this question: its abstractness, density, society-centred position and graceful playfulness are the qualities that distinguish this work in the bulk of those made in the past decade. It is a contemporary work while being genuinely related to modernism. Another merit is that this work can be simple and complex at the same time, while remaining clear and accessible. Any viewer who

looks at the work with just a little attention can sense the human, social and political drama condensed into an experiential gesture through the changing position of the head. If in no other way, they can experience all this when asking themselves the basic question: “Why does this man lower his head again and again?”

### **What is the position of this work in the artist’s oeuvre?**

Well, I am not sure that we can speak of an oeuvre in the case of an artist who is just 35 years old. Nevertheless, I will answer this question as there are at least three features that relate this work to others by Esterházy. One is the mapping of his own place, situation and identity through studying the family – but not exclusively through that. The most important work connected to this is v.n.p. v2.0, a video made of the other grandfather. But v.n.p. v3.0 also belongs here, as do Orthodrom, also about the Esterházy grandfather, Ganz project, Mészöly Miklós szemüvege (Miklós Mészöly’s glasses), or atelier\_bp. The second important feature is a society-centred attitude, but this is present in so many of Esterházy’s works that I will not even attempt to enumerate them. The third feature is condensing. This is present in numerous works. In fact, Esterházy has an amazing talent to sum up, simplify and render tangible very complex and divergent issues and questions.

### **Does this work fit into the present context of Hungarian art? What is Esterházy’s position in the Hungarian art scene?**

In Hungary as well as abroad, a radical pluralism rules in contemporary art: there is such a variety of contexts and processes that it is not very easy to tell which one of them Esterházy’s work belongs to.

One thing is certain, however: this work definitely belongs to the circle of conceptual, media-conscious and often political works. Despite the relatively small number of his works, Esterházy is undoubtedly an A-category artist, who although his subtle observations are very closely and richly related to Hungary, is perfectly compatible with the international scene.

### ***Attila Horányi***

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