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## INTERVIEW

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# **Conversation with Yvette Biró: interviews conducted in Paris, 5 July 2008, and New York City, 1 November 2008**

Essayist, theorist, screenwriter and Professor Emerita at New York University's Kanbar Institute of Film and Television, Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Division, Yvette Biró has inspired viewers, students, film scholars, film-makers and readers throughout the world. Her books and essays, translated into French, Chinese, Czech, German, Greek and Slovenian, among other languages, include *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design* (2008); *The Metamorphosis of the Image* (2003); *To Dress a Nude: Exercises in Imagination* (1998, first published in French as *Habiller un nu – de l'imagination au scénario* (La FEMIS, 1996), and in Hungarian as *Egy akt felöltöztetése* (Osiris Kiadó, 1996)); *Festina Lente: In*

*Praise of Slowness* (1997); *The Seventh Art* (1997); *The Order of Disorder* (1993); *Filmkultura 65/67* (collected essays) (1991); *Profane Mythology: The Savage Mind of the Cinema* (1982); *Miklós Jancsó* (1977); *The Dramatic Structure of Film* (1968); and *The Language of Film* (1964).

These magisterial texts, at once complex and devoid of jargon, traverse disciplinary boundaries from philosophy and literature to art history, aesthetics, music and film culture. Whether foregrounding Kiarostami or Kieslowski, Agnès Varda or Gus Van Sant, Wim Wenders, Béla Tarr or Wong Kar-wai, they argue in favour of an international cinema of resistance, of silence, of contemplation and reverie.

In her native Hungary and in international co-productions, Yvette Biró has collaborated with major directors including Zoltán Fábri (*Late Season/Utószezon*, 1966); *Twenty Hours/Husz Óra* (1965, Grand Prix, Moscow International Festival); Károly Makk, Márta Mészáros, Agnieszka Holland, George Sluizer (*The Stone Raft* (2002), based on the novel by Nobel laureate Jose Saramago), and Miklós Jancsó (*Winter Wind/Téli sirokkó* (1969)); *The Confrontation/Fényes szelek* (1968); *Agnus Dei* (1970); *Red Psalm/Még kér a nép* (1972, Grand Prix du Jury, Cannes); Thomas Harlan (*Wundkanal: Execution for Four Voices* (1984), Reader Jury Prize, Berlin Film Festival); and Sudhir Mishra (*Twist with Destiny/Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi* (2003), India/France). Biró's screenwriting collaboration with Kornél Mundruczó includes *Delta* (2007, Grand Prize Golden Reel and Gene Moskowitz Foreign Critics Award, 39th Hungarian Film Week; FIPRESCI Prize, Cannes Film Festival (2008); *Johanna* (2005, Best Director, Hungarian Film Critics Award); and *Pleasant Days/Szép Napok* (2002, Silver Leopard, Locarno).

Now residing in Paris, Yvette Biró has been visiting professor at Stanford and Berkeley, and at universities in Budapest, Paris and Jerusalem; she frequently conducts master classes in screenwriting in the United States, Canada, Europe, Africa and Asia. The recipient of numerous awards and distinctions in each of the fields in which she has worked, she served as vice-president of FIPRESCI from 1970 to 1977. After twenty years of exile, she was awarded the Béla Balázs Prize for Life Achievement in Cinematography in 1995.

CP: *Your most recent book, Turbulence and Flow in Film, focuses on temporality as a primary element of film-making, on the ways in which rhythm endows cinema with its particular power through the flux and progression of images and the pacing of narrative. What did you wish to express that also is reflected in Delta? There seems to be an intimate link between these extremes or polarities. I'm especially interested in the connections between your generation and that of younger film-makers today.*

YB: There are two major questions here, both deserve an answer. For the first – the sense of time and rhythm in contemporary film-making – my intention came out almost as a cry against the hysterical speed of action films. I wanted to remind us of the values of human emotions, contradictions, complexities, calling attention to the calm and patience we need for a deeper understanding. In *Delta*, we consciously emphasized these often-neglected features.

Regarding the generation gap, yes, I dare say that there is a huge difference between mine and the contemporary one. My generation grew up with the excitement and pleasure of the discovery of the New Wave, of Antonioni, the Czech films of the 1960s, with the great challenge to classical storytelling, and tried to find a freer approach in terms of style, *mise-en-scène*, subject matter,

performance – in fact, what film as an art has to contribute to contemporary culture. That period was the peak of modern film history, and my generation was inebriated by it. In Eastern Europe, it was further coloured by a social and moral urge to refuse a kind of official orthodox conception of film, to try to be at once personal while at the same time touching upon the most intense dissatisfaction and anxiety of a whole society and its ruling order.

We called this refusal ‘democratic opposition’ and raised our voices against the prevailing repression and limitation of free speech. In *Filmkultura*, a journal I founded and edited, we tried to touch upon those taboo issues, to talk about the needs and pain and restrictions of personal and public life, risking the punishments that followed. Once it was no longer the artists’ subversive and audacious task to promulgate the goals of democracy, film-making lost something of its earlier fantastic power and opportunity to be the leading art that it had been during those years. It became something more common, closer to entertainment, which is not a bad thing or something to blame. Regrettably, however, the sense of a higher inspiration is very rare as a kind of primary need.

There is no longer an everyday battlefield in the arena of film-making. Political struggle is no longer the privilege of the artistic endeavour. Something has been achieved, but something has also been lost. The exceptional role of film in the 1960s and 1970s worldwide is no longer prevalent. But, on the other hand, you still have to find your audience and understand how to address them with issues they’re concerned with, even though not necessarily on a daily basis, and sadly too often this can mean a loss of quality. It is understandable that film-makers today have to meet the needs of their own public, but it shouldn’t have to mean giving up taste and meaning. I’ve always believed that film has the right to play on different registers, some deliberately more ambitious than others. Making a good comedy is demanding and not easy.

Moviegoers today are mostly very young, and there’s no reason to underestimate their needs, even though they’re so attracted to popular entertainment. There is still room for intriguing enterprises, not only the cheap or the vulgar. Technology, of course, has changed the whole structure of the role of film in society, and its potential is far from being exhausted. The surprising and the imaginative should and will find new genres and forms.

*CP: You’ve been collaborating with Kornél Mundruczo since 2001 on several film projects (Pleasant Days/Szép Napok (2002); Johanna (2005); Delta (2008)). You’ve also been instrumental in launching and encouraging the film-making careers of many younger directors such as Marcell Iványi, whose short subject Wind/Szél (Hungary, 1996) won the Palme d’Or for Best Short Film at the Cannes Film Festival. Iványi has said that you create an ideal setting for writing through your charismatic energy.*

*YB: When I first saw Kornél’s diploma film, *Aphtha/Day after Day* (2000), a short subject (which won several international awards), I was surprised by the ‘nothingness’ of the story and the subtle richness of the fine observations, so characteristic of today’s marginalized adolescents (all non-professionals, of course), with their unspoken desires, confusion and painful restlessness. The film was almost silent, the experience was expressed only in gestures and physical movements. Our ongoing dialogue started at that time, about seven years ago. When he started to prepare his feature film, he asked me to collaborate on it as well, first as a mentor and then as a consultant on *Pleasant**

*Days*, and as a co-author on *Johanna*. For *Delta*, we decided to share the writing process and the elaboration of the idea. The drama, the tragic, sudden death of the original lead actor, Lajos Bertók, during the first half of the production process obviously affected us, and we immediately understood that if ever we wanted to recommence it, we had to radically depart from the more classical *Electra* story of Euripides, with its murder of the father that has to be avenged. Simplifying the plot entailed, of course a radical change of tone and style. We were striving for excessive simplicity. Not so incidentally, I had just published an essay, 'The Fullness of Minimalism', in *Rouge* (no. 9, 2006) which very much preoccupied not only me but also influenced both of us in the work on the film.

CP: *You have said that Mundruczó was the most brilliant participant in a workshop you conducted at the Hungarian Film Academy. Your discussion of his Diploma film, Aphta – his first prize-winning short film – began the substantial dialogue that endures today in your close collaboration. How would describe his creative process and your working relationship?*

YB: We start our 'reaming' process by thinking about interesting human characters who have a destiny, a path they have to follow. We try to imagine their behaviour, movements and motivations, sometimes even writing a whole CV of their origins, relationships. At first we don't set up formal plots. I believe it is very important that, coming from the world of theatre, Kornél has had extensive acting experience. He instinctively senses the inner dynamics of action; he pays attention to the emotions and passions as they work 'underneath' at each moment. He looks for the most telling *gesture* as it embodies the latent turmoil of the characters. What is concealed and startling has to come through the smallest sign. Our discussions revolve around these aspects, and the final meaning has to spring out of this palpable vision, when suddenly a kind of model takes shape, in a distinct design, a living structure, a recognizable 'topos'.

One of our perhaps distant but nonetheless important inspirations in *Delta* was the Heinrich von Kleist novella, *The Earthquake in Chile/Das Erdbeben in Chili* (1878) with its cruel and unexpected ending when, after the relief of exoneration, a terribly evil indictment occurs. As in classical drama the denouement carries out a tragic destiny. Which also means that in our revised story the 'moral' has changed: instead of a justified revenge, we wanted to focus on the injury caused by a suddenly ravaging intolerance.

CP: *In Mundruczó's artistic development, which film-makers would you say have been most influential thus far?*

YB: There have been two basic masters: Bresson and Ozu, although Fassbinder is of substantial importance to him as well.

Absolute de-dramatization was the major principle of Bresson. In our collaboration on *Delta*, we wanted to emphasize that, as in *Mouchette* (1967, based on the novel of Georges Bernanos), the dramatic conflict and the conditions that lead the girl to suicide are never dramatized, only touched upon. The viewer has to put together the allusions, the bits of information, and when we arrive at the ending, the death becomes the inevitable yet somehow unexpected solution.

CP: *The primal, poetic tragedy of Delta follows the unwelcome return of a prodigal son, his incestuous relationship with his sister, and their attempt to build themselves*

*a house in the middle of a river, far away from everybody else, to celebrate their freedom. What was the point of departure for making Delta?*

YB: Kornél first discovered the landscape (the Romanian Danube delta) and felt deeply that it called for a film. He made two short film études of its stillness and dangerous beauty, its non-idyllic yet more mysterious nature. Since distances there are so vast that people cannot easily communicate, that landscape evokes solitude, even threat. Everything is so isolated and far away, which makes you feel a sense of non-belonging. Buying timber takes almost a full day, which is why the girl has to sleep in their father's once-abandoned shack for the first time. But we only understand this from a short sentence. These are subtleties – nothing is really spelled out. There is rape here, too, as in *Mouchette*, but it remains deliberately so much in the background that the spectator has to feel it from the distance, without lingering on the terrible action.

*CP: What were your reasons for bringing Bresson's work to Kornél's attention in making this film?*

YB: I felt that Bresson would be indispensable to the process of absorbing the film. For the purity – it's so shining, it's more dramatic than anything else, more than huge confrontations or expressions of fury or turbulence. In their unadorned simplicity, actions and events are almost sacred. In *Mouchette* the whole narrative is like a flow, which inspired the title of my book, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: the Rhythmic Design*. And the turbulence that lies just below the surface throughout creates a feeling of foreboding. I think that also in *Delta* the ambience is constantly menacing, although not explicitly so. We feel the stepfather's hostility, his harshness, but little is shown directly.

*CP: Were you inspired by other film-makers as well?*

YB: We 'studied' *A Story of Floating Weeds* (1959) and others by Yasujiro Ozu, in which the events are about everyday life, the conflicts beneath, without any special emphasis. Nothing theatrical, again, it's the lack of strong dramatic accents, the flow that we were so fond of. Since we had the water – the Danube – the stream of images seemed natural. But by the end, the development had to become much more fragmented, creating a different tone and rhythm. This aspect was already in the script, but to realize it was a bit more complex. It's my custom never to go to the shoot; it is and has always been Kornél's work. With Miklós Jancsó, I did go on location because everything was created on the spot, through camera movement. Here, on the other hand, I followed it through e-mail and by telephone. I might be partly responsible for the specific approach and mood, but he's the director and has to be given, with my great pleasure and confidence, this freedom.

We discussed to what extent the expected evenness, the steady current (a defining characteristic of Bresson's and Ozu's film-making) could be acceptable to a wider public who might find it boring, hoping this smoothness would be rewarding, and that the visual part would be so sensuous, caressing, particularly with its troubling undertone, that the film would be engaging. The camera moves as the water flows, tenderly. On the other hand, so much of the film's time is dedicated to the physical work of building the house that it brings about another aspect of the couple's life – it becomes the tie that binds them together. No reason to deny the symbolic nature of this house-building – creating a free, independent home is the dream of people longing for liberty.

*CP: How did you work out the structure of the dialogue, then?*

YB: The dialogue is a work of progressive reduction – at the beginning it was much more written, and we constantly minimized it. He said: I think I'll cut this part, and I said, do it. I can see the gesture, the composition of the *mise-en-scène*, so there's no reason to discuss it. Cut it, cut it! When we got to the editing, a lot was eliminated, because we realized that, by itself, the scene was strong enough without comment or verbal explanation.

*CP: How is this way of working different from other experiences you've had with directors?*

YB: It is different, because it is not very common to have this kind of close exchange. My other relatively recent experience was the Jose Saramago story, *The Stone Raft* (1996), in which I had a more initiating role. I discovered the book, wrote the screenplay out of passionate love, without a director in mind, and the master writer gave me full permission for everything. It was not easy to find the appropriate director, but in the end George Sluizer, a successful and intelligent person, faithfully followed the unusual, poetic story.

*CP: Can you talk a bit more about how you and Kornél work together as screenwriter and director?*

We discuss a lot and we discover from our long, long conversations what seems to be authentic, memorable. It's an eternal dialogue that elucidates on both sides things that weren't strong, or clear enough, before. Usually he has a more or less vague dream. But by discussing and questioning, then changing, restarting, omitting, we go recurrently all along the knots and decisive moments. The power of the ambience, the hidden emotions have to prevail. We work according to the inevitable rule: first building up, expanding the fabric and later cutting it away, peeling it off. So it's not a one-way process. He needs a partner to discuss, to explain and imagine what he wants, and to listen to the impact. If I say no, that doesn't work, we'll find another solution. And then he asks: can you tell me in one sentence what it's all about, the kind of core, the substance that sums it up? Tell me – and since I can feel it and I'm used to expressing myself in words, I can do that! It helps define the focus of the scene.

*CP: In your teaching at NYU and the many master classes in screenwriting and workshops and seminars you're invited to give around the world, what concerns, fears and aspirations expressed by your students are particularly striking? What kinds of questions do they ask about your own work in cinema, such as your collaboration with Jancsó and Mészáros? And how does your workshop teaching differ from your classes at NYU?*

YB: I'd rarely talk about my personal inspirations or approaches. My only piece of advice in this matter could be: listen to your worries, the experiences that bother you, to the 'pain' and/or pleasure that doesn't let you sleep peacefully... And then in class I usually say: forget everything you've ever known, read, were taught about film-making. I don't believe in iron-clad dramatic principles, I want to hear what you're thinking, imagining, dreaming... What do you want to let me feel, what should I experience. And then I can help to clarify it, to define to what extent the little story serves the inner idea. We continue in a dialogue, I listen and discuss, since each

one needs a different structure, style, tone. I try to follow this inner dream and stand by in the shaping of it – I'm not teaching. I'm listening and then weaving and shaping the piece. Are you aware, I will ask, of the impact of what you're doing? Is it precisely what you originally wanted? All the changes happen in this 'dialogical' way. Ambitious students understand it and like it, I hope that they've gained something through this method and therefore may come back to me over and over.

*CP: You've obviously had a profound and lasting impact on film culture for many years. Would you say that you have a particular method or approach to working with your film-making colleagues?*

YB: I like to listen, discuss and read, so over the years I have found some kindred souls, directors, writers, thinkers with whom I feel close, in different fields, including psychiatrists, neurologists – not exclusively among film people, since I've never practised only a single profession. In addition to screenwriting, I've written critical essays and books, and taught in many settings. I've always combined them, each has helped the other, and I'm sure that without teaching I wouldn't be so sharp and open, impolite and direct. With the critical essays, I am always affected by the sensual power and impact of the film – it is the emotional force of the movie that excites me, more than the plot. At NYU we have to follow the work with our students to the bitter end, from inception to the finished piece. I am happy to do so and am very familiar with each step and stage.

*CP: Are there, in your view, significant comparisons to be made between the process of film-making and the art of teaching? How might you characterize your greatest pleasures in each mode?*

YB: To put my finger on something which affected, touched me. This is a procedure, a process, you attempt to name a complex entity in a meaningful sentence, a specific idea or vision, to define something that has been so unfathomably vague. What intrigues me is how to seize the particular secret of a given work. I want to go for that special feature, the quality that characterizes the director's or student's talent, or even a general topic that could make a work unique and significant. That's why I like to write reviews and critical essays as well. In some cases, it comes down to a single image or metaphor. I'm a 'film person' – but hopefully not imprisoned by that category. Painting, literature or music may offer a better way of summarizing the substance. For me, referring to musical terms and compositional elements can be very productive. Godard says, in a beautiful sentence, that to change from a close-up to a long shot is like going in music from flat to sharp – that's a terrifically fine remark. He's right that in film if you are aware of these chances and subtleties, your work will be extremely sensible and varied.

*CP: In Turbulence in Flow in Film you say that Béla Tarr uses only two lenses, two frame scales – the extreme close-up for the face, and the wide shot that contextualizes the environment and distances character. Both are associated with long takes, allowing 'the elimination of all concrete and realistic descriptions', as you suggest. What is the significance of this focus for you?*

YB: Little has been written about the role of rhythm in film, though I believe that it provides the spirit and ambiance of the work: patience and outburst are deeply interrelated. In the book, I tried to suggest that there is no turbulence

without flow, and vice versa – to feel and understand this alternation is the heart of a film. Turbulence is an unexpected accumulation of invisible, growing energies, but it is a consequence, a result of deeply streaming forces. I'm clearly in favour of 'slow films'. I do believe that we must rediscover the power of peacefulness and calm that rises to the surface, as in *Delta*. It's the secret of the dynamics of energy. I adore Bergman, the great master of this psychic realm of unexpected outbursts of hatred and repression, which come out for reasons not logically related to the moment, but from far away. What is the unconscious, after all, if not repression? The lack of awareness, lack of understanding, of acceptance, the falsifying and covering up which after a while will come out – that's turbulence. It doesn't necessarily conform to direct intentions or sentiments; it may even seem unjust, as in *Delta*. It's not a logical decision but irrepressible passion, emotion – in the end, experienced only physically.

*CP: And what of the meaning of 'flow', in your conceptualization?*

It's our need to live life, to enjoy it, to pay attention, to be patient, to be calm, to wait, to wait, to wait. In cinema as in life we have to wait, following ongoing events for something that will definitely happen, there is no seamless unfolding of events. Therefore it is expectation that creates real suspense. The more you can wait and look forward to the next moment that hasn't yet arrived, the more suspense can grow. Hitchcock does this consciously in a cunning way – playing with delaying techniques. All elements can be present to delay the denouement.

Acceleration in modern life has become so aggressive and violent that we have no time for our pain or pleasure, events follow each other so quickly, we want to do everything at once, make love, go to the movies, watch TV – the rhythm of daily life is quite dizzying. It's a tragedy that makes me want to say: slow down, stop, to become truer and richer in experience.

*CP: Your life and career have always been in some sense grounded in several cultures and languages at once. What would you say are some of the effects of that multicultural experience with regard to your concerns and inspirations today?*

*YB:* I'm trying to talk about art, as a person who came from Eastern Europe and fortunately succeeded in moving around in the larger world. I studied in Budapest and began my career there. When I realized I couldn't fully accomplish what I wanted there, circumstances brought me to America where I found a totally different world. I enjoyed the freedom and enormous energy that I deeply respect and admire; I found that classical American films had great power, and that they were different from what we in Eastern Europe had imagined. On the other hand, I remained very deeply rooted in European ideas and culture, especially French culture, having spent many years going back and forth. Clearly, the major master film-makers of those days marked my ambitions and taste even today. I was fortunate to be able to benefit from both European and American visual cultures, never claiming or pretending that I could be an American artist, which I'm not. But I've learned and absorbed a great deal from living and teaching in the United States and especially meeting so many wonderful young people. And, since the world has become globalized, it's been fantastic to be in the midst of these cultural influences, including those from Japan, Korea and Hong Kong, which are so important to me.

*CP: So would you say that your artistic and intellectual life has bridged these cultures?*

YB: I have the fortune or perhaps misfortune of not being rooted in a single culture, having instead lived in many different ones, which has brought me a broad experience as an artist. I could never state that I belong to any of them in particular. As a result, I became a wanderer, enjoying all these new influences, trying to use them in my own way. I've worked in Rome, Paris, Jerusalem, Germany, Finland, Istanbul and in India – in many, many places. My curiosity and openness didn't allow me the option of landing in any one place, nor of claiming that there is one single, particular well-defined idea of the art of film.

*CP: In what ways, then, does being a wanderer have an impact on your experience as a film-maker?*

YB: Although there is still of course national film production everywhere, over the last few years it seems to me that the 'wandering camera' has become far more frequent. My students go to study and work in Prague, Budapest, Berlin, Beijing, as I do. Because of its mobility – film, after all, was born as a mobile art – it has become ten thousand times more open to travel. I think this is another reason why the boundaries between fiction and documentary are called into question so much today. To discover what's new, anywhere – in Turkey, in Taiwan – is a fantastic contribution not just to culture but to our lives, to our attitudes. How do we approach things, how do we shape our lives, our children's lives? What should our world become tomorrow? I have no grand answers to any of this ... what's exciting in drama and film is that you can focus on a small, personal issue. By developing it, you reach out to something larger, more general.

You know, for me, *Delta* is a story about the terrible consequences of the refusal of difference, a story of rejection of the other. Intolerance happens all over the world. One cannot talk about it enough, or show its horrifying impact enough. Irrational hatred, envy and destructiveness are the most intolerable phenomena – their frequency and savagery have become the most scandalous banality of our time.

*CP: You seem to have a special affinity with and profound understanding of younger people – your students and film-makers. What do you find to be the source of this sustained interest?*

YB: Because they're younger, they come from different circumstances and sensibilities. I hope I can learn from them – I 'exploit' them! I try to understand their different lives, their affinities, why they choose a story, for instance, what the core of their passion is, and then eventually to help them articulate it. When I came to NYU for the first time, I told them: I'm here to disturb you. I want to shake you up – to have you become restless, excited, to think further and more deeply, not simply do your homework. As you might imagine, this kind of thing was not so popular – here I was, coming from Europe where people are fond of irony, which is natural to me, but not necessarily to them! Yet I really felt that was my mission here – to disturb students. We played the game, ever more joyfully, and I hoped to help them find their own truth. Instead of following rules I say: try to discover who you are – then you'll have a personal voice that will be unique whether you come from Slovakia or Hong Kong or Turkey, so develop it.

Writing about a film-maker I love comes from the same passion as talking to a student who needs to bring out her own voice, just as I'm looking for the heart or central metaphor of a book, film or piece of music. In my writing, and in my own, unruly way, I may be emotional, biased, even rhetorical, but hopefully more or less consistent. This may sound strange, given all I've said, but I'm not patient, I'm not slow, I'm very fast, and maybe this explains my longing for calm and slowness. A paradox? Of course! I believe that we can stop time and in this way bring it closer to our needs and pleasure. I wanted to argue that we can tame time, joyfully – defeat, in some way, the tyranny of passing time.



*Figure 1: Yvette Biro.*

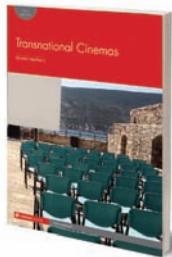
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# Transnational Cinemas

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## Aims and Scope

*Transnational Cinemas* has emerged in response to a shift in global film cultures and how we understand them. Dynamic new industrial and textual practices are being established throughout the world and the academic community is responding. Our journal aims to break down traditional geographical divisions and welcomes submissions that reflect the changing nature of global filmmaking.

## Call for Papers

*Transnational Cinemas* covers a vast and diverse range of film related subjects. It provides a new and exciting forum for disseminating research. The editors are seeking articles, interviews, visual essays, reports on film festivals and conferences. Articles should be up to 6,000 words in length and should be written in English, with all quotations translated.