

Charles Martig

Film Review

ON BODY AND SOUL (Ildikó Enyedi)

HU 2017

ON BODY AND SOUL (Ildikó Enyedi, HU 2017) is an astonishing film that offers a precise and sensitive look at everyday life. The plot presents an unusual love story between Mária, a young woman who has just begun to work as a quality controller, and Endres, the chief financial officer of the factory where she has been appointed. That business is a slaughterhouse, a peculiar place that is presented as a good working environment, where people speak to and respect each other. The close-up on the transformation of living being into dead meat builds the main setting of ON BODY AND SOUL and offers a scenario where corporality is very much present.

For different reasons, the two protagonists do not have easy access to life and are confronted with limits that challenge them every day. Communication between the main characters is almost impossible. Accidentally they discover that they regularly meet in dreams. The images of those dreams present nature as a place without limitation and of an incredible beauty and intensity, which is in juxtaposition to the concreteness of death within a slaughterhouse. The contrast between freedom and constraint is staged not only within the narration but also with a style based on close-ups on small things in everyday life.

After receiving the Golden Bear and the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival, Hungarian director Ildikó Enyedi presented her new masterpiece ON BODY AND SOUL at the Zurich Film Festival in September 2017. This film review consists of an interview with Enyedi focusing on the interactions between religion and film in this new work and more generally in her cinematography.

You received the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury in Berlin. How did you response to this?

It was a complete surprise for me. I was called to receive the FIPRESCI award, the prize of the international film critics, and I didn't realise that I would receive the Ecumenical award at the same time. It was a wonderful surprise.

What does it signify for you?

Well, it has a special importance. Exactly what this ecumenical approach is trying to do is what we try to do in every community at any level. It is so heart breaking to see what happens in society. At least for the moment it seems to me that we go for confrontation and accentuate differences. In fact deep down all my films are about the importance of what we can do in our everyday life. What we do in families and communities affects bigger movements of history.

How does this interaction take place?

We feel that we are just tiny bits of paper floating on the waves. But I think very locally in your life if you try to be sincere to yourself and open to other people around you, you will be much harder to manipulate. In fact, in all my films, beginning with my first film MY TWENTIETH CENTURY (HU 1989) up to ON BODY AND SOUL (HU 2017), the leading idea is that you feel yourself powerless as a person because somebody else is deciding about your destiny instead of you. But this is not the case.

What makes the difference?

If you do not have access to political power, the way you live makes you more authentic. This helps the people around you to be more authentic as well.

This is also the theme of your new film ON BODY AND SOUL, a love story between two outsiders.

Yes, it is. Love is the most extreme form of opening up towards another human being. Therefore it is good to show this in the form of a love story. But in fact it is about taking the risk not to shatter yourself or defend yourself but to be fully present in your life.

But you chose a slaughterhouse as the setting for your love story. This is quite unusual.

What I realized some years ago is that the structure of everyday life has become very practical. Those frames that religion gave to us in the past are emptied. Nobody is turning to them anymore. In this big void everybody wants to be efficient. We want to resolve the situation instead of living through it. I would like to give a simple example. In the past an ordinary meal was not just an occasion to stuff some food in your mouth. It was also about your remembering that you are part of something bigger than yourself. It's a wonderful thing to be aware of this bigger context. The transcendent was very present in everyday routine.

This was also the case in your Hungarian context?

Yes, the same was true for childbirth or marriage, for the death rituals that involved saying goodbye to somebody. Today in the hospital you have all the machines and the professional care. But there is no space in there, you really have to force in that

a person has to prepare for a big journey and say goodbye to this world and to that person's beloved.

In your film you are very interested in the aspect of the soul.

What do you intend by doing so?

In this film, wherever we show bodies, human and animal bodies alike, this is mostly about their soul. This young woman Mária is trying to open up her soul. She is really exercising. She is making steps to discover the sensual world around her: the richness and the beauty of nature, for example, or the power of the sunshine and the touch of the grass. The woman evolves through sensitive impressions. In this very indirect way I wanted to show that body and soul are a whole. What we are is the interaction of these two aspects.

You work with a lot of sensual details in your film-making. Your approach includes a lot of “finesse”. What is your intention when you set up a camera and look at persons or at different details of life?

I am an only child and my greatest enjoyment during this period of my life was reading and observing. It can be a passionate thing to sit in a park and watch people. I find it very touching to see people forget themselves in any kind of action. Somehow I see in honest work, in how to cook or handle wood as a carpenter, for example, an economy of gesture. In this beauty I see the transcendent aspect of human life. To me it is very much alive in the way you touch an object. Every gesture is somehow a communication with the world around you.

How does this relate to film-making?

If you want to see humanity at its most wonderful state, go onto a film set. I'm again and again deeply touched that hardworking people who have families at home to feed come at four o'clock in the morning and work 14 hours a day for something that is not necessary. Film is something fully imaginary. But the film-making team is able to believe in it so strongly. It is wonderful to see that not only the film crew but also the guards and the drivers of our film production knew exactly what we were planning to do. I wrote a synopsis and wanted everybody to know what this film was all about. This resulted in an extraordinary sense of detail. The whole crew was very exact. They knew exactly what was right or wrong. We were all of us very keen to accomplish film-making in detail.

While listening to you, this seems to me like a kind of “spirituality of film-making”. You are referring to reality through your camera work and your directing with an attitude of spiritual impact. What do you think about this idea?

I actually agree. The wonderful thing is that you can accomplish this level of film-making. In a poem you can not add anything or take anything away. You really have to be very exact. To write a poem with 60 people is an amazing experience. I had ext-

raordinary moments of communication with these people because if they wanted to make this work right they really had to understand the depth of the film. **ON BODY AND SOUL** was like a fragile princess. The slightest fake or not rightly balanced gesture could ruin the whole thing. Even during the grading, it was not about aesthetics but about the meaning of the scene. We were talking about Mária's feelings and how her world is changing.

How did your actors respond to your insights and your working procedures?

We had very good communication between the actors and me as director. You have to get to know them and understand how they communicate. The special thing on the film set was that the whole crew was so deeply immersed in the film. With Alexandra Borbély the work was very symbiotic. I barely had to tell her anything during the shooting. We did all the work beforehand. It was really nice to see her way not of trying to understand Mária and then play the role but of finding the body and the soul of this character. Géza Morcsányi, who plays the chief financial officer of the slaughterhouse, and Alexandra Borbély in her role as a quality controller are very different. In the love story of these two characters I was barely required to make major changes in their acting. In-between smaller corrections were necessary. This is due to my approach to film-making as a holistic workflow.

Is your film-making truthful?

Yes, absolutely. It is a priority in my cinematography.

How was **ON BODY AND SOUL received by the audience?**

After the excellent response at the Berlin International Film Festival where it won several prizes, we presented the film in Hungary in the first week of March 2017 and it is still in cinemas.

This is definitely a long-term presence in cinemas. What about its release in other countries?

The film brought a far larger audience than the production company had expected. Several countries in Europe are releasing the film in the autumn, Germany, Great Britain, France and the Scandinavian countries, for example. The film will be shown in nearly every European country.

The starting point of this success was in Berlin?

A prize can help launch a film, of course. But afterwards it can't really endorse the promotion. What was very rewarding – for all us who made this film – was the direct response to **ON BODY AND SOUL**. In discussions with audiences after screenings, I really made an effort to connect not on an intellectual but on a sensitive level. I tried to make the point that sensitivity and the soul are somehow the same.

Is this the secret of a successful launch in cinemas?

It was my intention to give audiences the chance to have this experience and to connect with the idea that body and soul are corresponding parts of human life. There is also a very fine balance between “laughing” and “laughing at”. These two aspects are so close to each other.

How did you accomplish this kind of balance?

In the editing we worked on this balance. Through this love story I wanted to give the spectator a heart-warming sensation by experiencing openness. If you keep the humour in the drama at too low a key it can hardly be understood and the film becomes pretentious. ON BODY AND SOUL seems to balance these elements perfectly. We found a balance of body and soul in the film and give this experience to the audience.

FILMOGRAPHY

MY TWENTIETH CENTURY (AZ ÉN XX. SZÁZADOM, Ildikó Enyedi, HU 1989)

ON BODY AND SOUL (TESTRŐL ÉS LÉLEKRŐL, Ildikó Enyedi, HU 2017)