



# JANUS FILMS

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## THE FILMS OF Márta Mészáros

This first U.S. retrospective of Márta Mészáros's films brings together essential new restorations that reveal her to be one of postwar European cinema's major unsung voices. Few female directors emerged from 1960s Europe to carve out so enduring a career, one that has spanned more than half a century and continues to this day. Mészáros brings her own life experiences to her intimate, deeply personal films. As an orphan whose father was killed in the Stalinist purges, as a Hungarian raised in the USSR and caught between Soviet oppression and her country's struggle for independence, and as a woman navigating the promises of a burgeoning feminist movement, Mészáros returns time and again to themes of motherhood, nontraditional families, relationships between women, and the traumas of twentieth-century Hungarian history. Her rich and cohesive body of work—uniquely attuned to the social, economic, and political forces that govern the lives of working people, especially women—has made her one of Central Europe's foremost directors and a pioneer among women filmmakers worldwide.

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# MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS

## BIOGRAPHY

Márta Mészáros was born on September 19, 1931, in Budapest, Hungary. In 1936, her family emigrated to Kyrgyzstan (at the time a republic within the Soviet Union), where, over the next few years, both of her parents died. Her father, the avant-garde artist László Mészáros, was executed in a Stalinist purge—the details of this state-sponsored murder would only be officially confirmed for his daughter six decades later. Raised by a foster parent, Márta Mészáros moved back and forth between the USSR and Hungary before eventually settling in the latter country in the mid-1950s. By the late fifties, she had trained at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, worked for the Budapest Newsreel Studio, and produced material for the Alexandru Sahia documentary studio in Bucharest, Romania. In the midsixties, she joined the Mafilm Group 4 collective, through which she directed her debut feature (*The Girl*, a.k.a. *The Day Has Gone*, 1968) and in the process became one of the first Hungarian women to helm a full-length film.

From the beginning of her career, and despite resistance from Hungary's authoritarian Communist regime, Mészáros sought to depict the social complexities and challenges of working-class citizens, and especially of women, in her native country. She first found international success with *Adoption* (1975), a selection at the Cannes Film Festival and winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. As with *The Girl*, for *Adoption* Mészáros drew on her personal experience as an orphan to depict the bond between a middle-aged woman and the troubled teenager she takes under her wing. Other notable works of the seventies include *Nine Months* (1976), a portrait of single motherhood, and *The Two of Them* (1977), an exploration of female friendship and independence. From the mideighties through the early nineties,



Mészáros embarked on the first three entries—*Diary for My Children* (1984, winner of the Cannes Grand Prix), *Diary for My Lovers* (1987), and *Diary for My Father and Mother* (1990)—of what would come to be known as the *Diary* quartet, an autobiographical project that collectively spans Hungary's tumultuous post-World War II history. In 2000, *Little Vilma: The Last Diary* would conclude the tetralogy, which was also a family affair due to the participation of her son, cinematographer Nyika Jancsó (Mészáros was married to his father, renowned director Miklós Jancsó, for thirteen years). To date, her last film has been 2017's *Aurora borealis: Északi fény*.

## SELECTED MÉSZÁROS FILMOGRAPHY

*The films below are narrative features unless otherwise noted.*

- |      |  |      |  |
|------|--|------|--|
| 1955 | <i>A History of Albertfalva</i> ( <i>Albertfalvai történet</i> )<br>[thesis documentary] | 1964 | <i>Blow-Ball</i> ( <i>Bóbita</i> ) [narrative short]   |
| 1959 | <i>Life Goes On</i> ( <i>Az élet megy tovább</i> ) [short documentary]                   | 1966 | <i>Miklós Borsos</i> ( <i>Borsos Miklós</i> ) [short documentary]                              |
| 1961 | <i>Heartbeat</i> ( <i>Szívdobogás</i> ) [short documentary]                              | 1968 | <i>In Memoriam: László Mészáros</i> ( <i>Mészáros László emlékére</i> )<br>[short documentary] |
| 1961 | <i>Colors of Vasarhely</i> ( <i>Vásárhelyi színek</i> )<br>[short documentary]           | 1968 | <i>The Girl</i> (a.k.a. <i>The Day Has Gone</i> ) ( <i>Eltávozott nap</i> )                    |
| 1962 | <i>János Tornyai</i> ( <i>Tornyai</i> ) [short documentary]                              | 1969 | <i>Binding Sentiments</i> ( <i>Holdudvar</i> )   |
| 1962 | <i>A Town in the Awkward Age</i> ( <i>Kamaszváros</i> )<br>[short documentary]           | 1970 | <i>Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!</i> ( <i>Szép lányok, ne sírjatok!</i> )                           |
| 1963 | <i>Saturday, 27th July</i> (1963, <i>július 27, szombat</i> )<br>[short documentary]     | 1971 | <i>At the Lorinc Spinnery</i> ( <i>A lőrinci fonóban</i> ) [documentary]                       |
| 1964 | <i>Szentendre: The Town of Painters</i> ( <i>Festők városa</i> )<br>[short documentary]  | 1973 | <i>Riddance</i> ( <i>Szabad lélegzet</i> )   |
|      |  | 1975 | <i>Adoption</i> ( <i>Örökbefogadás</i> )   |
|      |  | 1976 | <i>Nine Months</i> ( <i>Kilenc hónap</i> )   |
|      |  | 1977 | <i>The Two of Them</i> ( <i>Ők ketten</i> )  |
|      |  | 1978 | <i>Just Like at Home</i> ( <i>Olyan mint otthon</i> )  |



1979 *On the Move* (Útközben)  
 1980 *The Inheritance* (a.k.a. *The Heiresses*) (Örökség)  
 1981 *Mother and Daughter* (Anna)  
 1983 *The Land of Mirages* (Déliabok országa)  
 1984 *Diary for My Children* (Napló gyermekeimnek)  
 1985 *Ave Maria* [short documentary]  
 1987 *Diary for My Lovers* (Napló szerelmeimnek)  
 1989 *Bye Bye Red Riding Hood* (Piroska és a farkas)  
 1989 *Travel Diary* (Utinaplo) [documentary]  
 1990 *Diary for My Father and Mother* (Napló apámnak, anyámnak)  
 1991 *My Favorite Opera: Don Pasquale*  
 [television documentary]  
 1993 *Edith and Marlene* (Edith és Marlene) [television movie]

1994 *Ostatni dzień Anny Kareniny* [television movie]  
 1994 *Foetus* (A magzat)  
 1996 *The Seventh Room* (A hetedik szoba)  
 1998 *Három dátum* [documentary]  
 1999 *Daughters of Luck* (A szerencse lányai)  
 2000 *Little Vilma: The Last Diary* (Kisvilma: Az utolsó napló)  
 2001 *The Miraculous Mandarin* (A csodálatos mandarin)  
 [narrative short]  
 2004 *The Unburied Man* (A temetetlen halott)  
 2009 *The Last Report on Anna* (Utolsó jelentés Annáról)  
 2011 *Ármány és szerelem Anno 1951* [television movie]  
 2012 *Magyarország 2011* [short for omnibus film]  
 2017 *Aurora borealis: Északi fény*

## RETROSPECTIVE FILM SYNOPSES

### *The Girl* (1968)

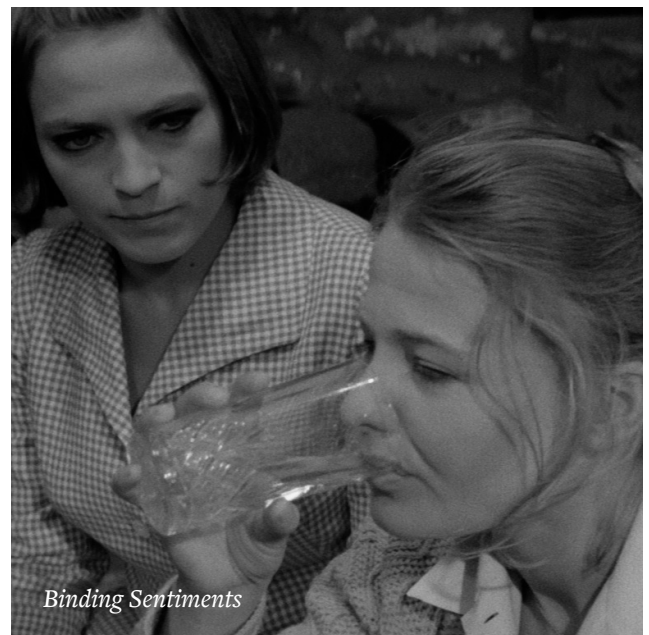
One of the first Hungarian feature films directed by a woman, Márta Mészáros's debut feature is an assured expression of many of her recurring themes: broken families, the relationships between parents and children, and the search for stability in an uncertain world. Erzsi (Kati Kovács), a young woman living in an orphanage in Budapest, sets out to reconnect with her birth mother (Teri Horváth)—a quest that leads her to a small town where Erzsi's modern, urban sensibilities clash with the conservative, provincial attitudes of the woman who brought her into the world but with whom she has little else in common. Laced with the feminist concerns that would become a hallmark of Mészáros's work, *The Girl* is a minutely observed portrait of a woman searching for where she came from in order to figure out where she is going.



*The Girl*

### *Binding Sentiments* (1969)

Family ties become a trap from which a woman struggles to escape in Mészáros's quietly devastating sophomore feature. Following the sudden death of her prominent politician husband, middle-aged Edit (Mari Törőcsik) finds herself plunged into an existential crisis, caught between her desire for independence and the machinations of her elder son, István (Lajos Balázsovits), who seems intent on controlling her life just as his father did. In the middle of it all is István's young fiancée, Kati (Kati Kovács), who gradually realizes that she may be repeating Edit's mistakes. Though *Binding Sentiments* is rare among Mészáros's works in its focus on a wealthy, rather than working-class, milieu, it strikingly illustrates how the predicaments of patriarchy affect all women.



*Binding Sentiments*

### *Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!* (1970)

Infused with the spirit of rock and roll and rebellion, this music-driven counterculture snapshot unfolds to a near wall-to-wall soundtrack of late 1960s–early 1970s Hungarian psych and folk

as it traces the odyssey of a young woman (Jaroslava Schallerová, star of the Czechoslovak New Wave classic *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*) who, on the eve of her marriage to a factory worker (Márk Zala), experiences a final moment of freedom when she runs away with a touring band. One of Mészáros's most formally experimental works because of its minimal dialogue and almost proto-music-video style, *Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!* reflects the cultural sea change sweeping Europe at a time when traditional values were being shaken by a youthquake of individual self-expression.

### *Riddance* (1973)

Mészáros explores class, gender, and generational conflict in *Riddance*, which stars Erzsébet Kútvölgyi as Jutka, a young factory worker who pretends to be a university student. The ruse attracts the romantic interest of András (Gábor Nagy, who would go on to appear with Kútvölgyi in Mészáros's *Diary for My Lovers* and *Diary for My Father and Mother*), a handsome young man from an upper-middle-class family, but when Jutka reveals her true background, their relationship becomes increasingly strained. In representing Hungarian society's clashing attitudes and prejudices, Mészáros depicts a working-class woman's attempt to overcome the perceived inferiority of her social status as well as her own familial dysfunction and feelings of inadequacy. Following *Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!*'s portrait of youthful idealism, *Riddance* shows with somber compassion the complex societal and cultural barriers that can separate even the most hopeful of young lovers.

### *Adoption* (1975)

Trailblazing auteur Mészáros gives aching expression to the experiences of women in 1970s Hungary in this sensitive and absorbing drama, which became the first film directed by a woman to win the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. Through intimate camerawork, *Adoption* immerses the viewer in the worlds of two women, each searching for fulfillment: Kata (Katalin Berek), a middle-aged factory worker who wants to have a child with her married lover, and Anna (Gyöngyvér Vigh), a teenage ward of the state determined to emancipate herself in order to marry her boyfriend. The bond that forms between the two speaks quietly but powerfully to the social and political forces that shape women's lives, as each navigates the realities of love, marriage, and motherhood in her quest for self-determination.

### *Nine Months* (1976)

A defiant woman asserts her autonomy in the face of a disapproving society in Mészáros's complex look at the ways in which women's bodies and minds are held in check by the strictures of patriarchy. Frequent Mészáros collaborator Lili Monori delivers a fearless performance as Juli, a young woman who begins a new job at a brick factory where she is immediately pursued by possessive coworker János (Jan Nowicki)—a relationship that grows complicated when he discovers that she is raising a son from a previous lover. Mészáros's background as a documentarian is evident in her feeling for the industrial landscapes of northern Hungary and in the astonishing final scene, in which the boundaries between actress and character are radically dissolved.



*Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!*



*Adoption*



*Nine Months*



### *The Two of Them* (1977)

Two women, each at a critical crossroads in life and love, find refuge in their friendship in this multilayered look at female solidarity. Mari (Marina Vlady), a middle-aged director of a hostel for working women, grapples with her insecurities about aging and her husband's impending departure to Mongolia; Juli (Lili Monori), an unruly young factory employee raising a daughter (Zsuzsa Czinkóczi, future star of Mészáros's *Diary* tetralogy), struggles to escape from her tumultuous relationship with her alcoholic husband (Jan Nowicki). With characteristic sensitivity, Mészáros traces the protective yet complex bond that forms between the two, each at a different stage of life but dealing with the same questions of freedom and autonomy as they chart their rocky paths toward independence.

### *The Inheritance* (1980)

The brilliance of a young Isabelle Huppert lends quiet intensity to this piercing period elegy. Budapest, 1936: Szilvia (Lili Monori), a wealthy heiress to an enormous family fortune, befriends Irèn (Huppert), a young shopgirl of modest means. Unable to give birth, Szilvia offers Irèn money in exchange for conceiving a child with her husband (Jan Nowicki) on her behalf—a transaction that blurs the boundaries of the two women's social roles and leads all involved into a moral, emotional, and romantic minefield. Set amid the glimmering decadence of a prewar Europe being consumed by the encroaching rot of Nazism, *The Inheritance* is a coolly harrowing dissection of class and the cost of motherhood, and a haunting vision of lives on a collision course with history.

### *Diary for My Children* (1984)

Mészáros drew on her own wartime experiences to craft this portrait of a young woman coming of age amid a turbulent historical moment. After losing her father in the Stalinist purges, strong-willed teenager Juli (Zsuzsa Czinkóczi) is brought back to Hungary to live with Magda (Anna Polony), a rigid Communist

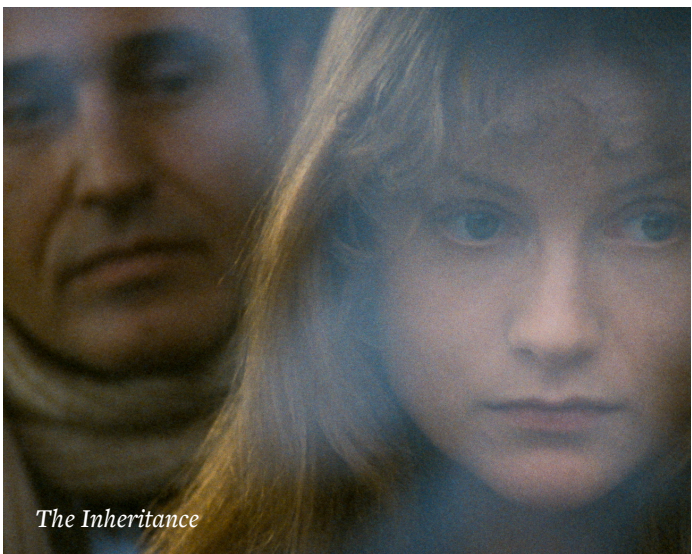
Party official who embodies the icy intellectual repression that has begun to take hold in the country. As she navigates an unfamiliar new world—one caught between the shock of World War II and the rising tide of Stalinism—Juli must fight to retain her sense of self. Winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes, *Diary for My Children* is a heartrending personal testimony from an artist revisiting the traumas of the past with a clear and critical eye.

### *Diary for My Lovers* (1987)

Mészáros' follow-up to *Diary for My Children* picks up the story of teenage Juli (Zsuzsa Czinkóczi), the director's alter ego, as she defies the wishes of her Stalinist aunt and guardian (Anna Polony) and leaves Hungary in order to pursue her dream of becoming a filmmaker in Moscow. There Juli must navigate the bureaucratic propaganda machine that demands she conform to its ideas of "realism" while searching desperately for her missing father. Interweaving its heroine's journey with the political upheavals of the postwar Eastern Bloc—from the death of Stalin to the short-lived promise of liberalization to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution—*Diary for My Lovers* is a stirring depiction of a young woman finding her voice in a world intent on stifling it.

### *Diary for My Father and Mother* (1990)

The heartrending third installment of Mészáros's autobiographical *Diary* series continues to trace the journey of young orphan Juli (Zsuzsa Czinkóczi) through the tumult of postwar Hungary. Set in the wake of the failed Hungarian Revolution, *Diary for My Father and Mother* follows Juli as she leaves film school in Moscow and returns home to Budapest, where she discovers a shattered world, one where brutality, fear, and anxiety permeate every aspect of life as Soviet forces tighten their grip on power. Seamlessly interweaving documentary newsreel footage with stirring human drama, Mészáros creates a portrait, at once epic and intimate, of history as she experienced it, bearing witness to both the horrors of totalitarian oppression and the courage of those who resist.



*The Inheritance*



*Diary for My Children*

## NOTEWORTHY FACTS

*The Girl and Binding Sentiments* star Kati Kovács would go on to become one of Hungary's most famous singers. Since 1970, Kovacs has released more than twenty-five albums in a variety of genres and styles.

*Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!* acts as a compendium of performances and music by the most important Hungarian psychedelic and folk-rock bands of the late 1960s, including Illés, Metró, Kex, and Syrius. Though most of these bands remain unknown and unrepresented by official releases outside their native land, tracks by Illés and Metró appear on the compilation album *Well Hung: 20 Funk-Rock Eruptions from Beneath Communist Hungary, Volume 1* (Finders Keepers, London).

Mészáros has explained that the Hungarian word for adoption (*örökbefogadás*) implies a second meaning: adaptation. The title of *Adoption* thus evokes not only the protagonist's desire to adopt a child but also her ability to adjust when confronted with challenging life events.

*Nine Months* was Mészáros's first color film.

Lead actress Lili Monori was really pregnant during the production of *Nine Months*, which concludes with documentary footage of the birth of her son Balázs.

Polish actor Jan Nowicki performed as János in *Nine Months* by speaking in his native tongue. In the first of several on-screen pairings with Nowicki, Monori found it difficult to act alongside someone whose language she didn't understand, but in interviews Mészáros has stated that this barrier was crucial in *Nine Months* for representing the communication gap between Nowicki's and Monori's characters.

Mészáros originally wrote *The Two of Them* for Monori and Nowicki but stalled on the project until she decided on Marina Vlady for the part of Mari and Zsuzsa Czinkóczi (who would go on to play Juli in Mészáros's *Diary* films) for the role of the child.

*The Two of Them* is the only film to pair Vlady with her third husband, Vladimir Vysotsky (in the role of Cameo).

Hungarian actress Éva Szabó provided the voice dubbing for Vlady in *The Two of Them*.

*The Inheritance* was Mészáros's first film to be set in the past.

*The Inheritance* was the second of four screenplays that Mészáros cowrote with Nowicki, her romantic partner at the time of the film's production. The first screenplay on which they collaborated was *On the Move* (1979); the two that followed *The Inheritance* were *Bye Bye Red Riding Hood* (1989) and the TV movie *Ostatni dzień Anny Kareniny* (1994).

*The Inheritance* was the first film for which Isabelle Huppert's dialogue was dubbed (by well-known Hungarian stage and screen actress Erzsébet Kútvölgyi).

In an interview with Lawrence O'Toole for *Film Comment*, Huppert spoke about working with Mészáros on *The Inheritance*: "The noticeable difference [between collaborating with a female director and working with a male director] was that you are less handled by a woman than a man. It has to do with her history. For centuries she hasn't the habit of handling certain things. It's also a matter of her relationship to power; it's not the same as a man's. We don't expect a woman to be that powerful."

Mészáros has stated that *Diary for My Lovers* was challenged by Hungary's Ministry of Culture, which strongly encouraged the director to alter the film's critical depictions of post-World War II Soviet Russia. After she held her ground, however, those sections of the film were left unchanged.

In an interview with scholar Catherine Portuges, Nowicki states that at the time of their making he saw Mészáros's *Diary* films "as laying the foundation for the new East European cinema; they touched upon themes wholly inconceivable before Gorbachev came to power, and broke a number of taboos in East European filmmaking. It's fascinating for me to see her cinema as a kind of *danse macabre*; with apparent ease, she resurrects the dead and buried in ways that others never dared to attempt."



*Binding Sentiments*