

## The Screen Anniversary Béla Balázs Symposium, 1 May 2009

The symposium, organized by Annette Kuhn (*Screen* co-editor and Professor of Film Studies at Queen Mary, University of London) and Erica Carter (Professor of German Studies, University of Warwick) took place at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies in the School of Advanced Studies, University of London. Speakers were Sabine Hake (University of Texas at Austin), Hanno Loewy (Jewish Museum, Hohenems, Austria), Erica Carter, (University of Warwick), Andrew Webber (University of Cambridge).

The aim of the event was to develop film-critical awareness of the work of the Hungarian-born film critic and theorist, Béla Balázs, by situating him as one of the writers of the interwar period trying to think through the aesthetics of a then-new medium; and also to open up discussion of the relevance of Balázs's work to understanding contemporary media aesthetics.

As one of the events celebrating *Screen's* 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the symposium was set up in conjunction with the forthcoming publication (by Berghahn Books) of the first-ever English translation from the original German of Balázs's two early works of film theory, *Visible Man* (1924) and *The Spirit of Film* (1930): <http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=balazsearly>.

The new translation, by Rodney Livingstone with an introduction by Erica Carter, will recuperate Balázs for Anglophone film studies by situating his work within the wider context of his early film theory. Translated extracts were published, with an introduction, in *Screen*, vol.48, no.1 (2007): <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/48/1/91>. The translation has been funded by *Screen*, the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the Humanities Research Centre at the University of Warwick.

The morning session, on Balázs's intellectual geography, opened with a talk by Sabine Hake on Balázs, film folklore, and the re-enchantment of the modern masses, in which she drew on the intersection of film and fairytale in Balázs's theoretical and literary writings to argue for the centrality of *reception* in his work, and in early film theory generally, illustrating her argument with extracts from *Der blaue Licht/The Blue Light*, a 1932 film co-directed by Balázs and Leni Riefenstahl. Hanno Loewy followed with a talk on Balázs's explorations into time, space and film, contextualizing Balázs's writings on film within the considerable range of his literary output, and exploring the relationship between his aesthetics and the experience of time and space in cinema.

The afternoon session, on the body in contemporary film theory, opened with a screening of *Afgrunden/The Abyss* (Urban Gad, 1910), starring Asta Nielsen. Drawing in part on Balázs's writings on film acting in general and on Nielsen in particular, Erica Carter's talk on Balázs and the cosmopolitan body explored the contradictions surrounding Balázs's conception of the body on film, excavating from his early film theory an understanding of the body as a social entity and a vision of a poetic cosmopolitanism centred around the embodied experience of intersubjectivity on film. Andrew Webber followed with a talk on the cinematic body in film theory after Balázs, drawing on Balázs's theories on the cinematic body to consider the status of embodiments in current thinking about film.

The symposium concluded with a panel discussion, followed by a reception hosted by the Hungarian Cultural centre.

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