Istvan Svabo’s Oscar winning film, MEPHISTO, was shot from the script he wrote with Peter Dobai from Klaus Mann’s novel. The cast featured Klaus-Maria Brandauer, Rolf Hoppe, Gyorgy Cserhalmi, Krystyna Janda, Ildiko Bansagi, Karin Boyd, and Tamas Major, and Lajos Kottai was the camera person. Szabo’s previous film CONFIDENCE was premiered in January 1980 and in February won a prize at the West Berlin Festival. Shown at the festival was another Szabo film, the West German production DER GRUNE VOGEL (The Green Bird), which has yet to be seen by Hungarian audiences. In this interview, first published in the Autumn 1983 New Hungarian Quarterly, Istvan Zsugan talks with Svabo.
Q: Klaus Mann’s *Mephisto* was published in Hungary in a single edition in 1957, and it met with no particular response, only a few people read it. How did you happen to choose that particular novel?

A: As a matter of fact, the novel first appeared in Hungarian as early as 1945, but actually I didn’t discover it myself, but the producer who asked me to make *The Green Bird* drew my attention to it.

Q: What was your West German film about?

A: *The Green Bird* is a love story, and it is about compromises. I hadn’t yet completed *Confidence* when a series of my films was shown in Federal Germany, and that prompted a West German producer to ask me to make a film with him. He came to terms with our Interconcert, and after we completed *Confidence* in Hungary, we shot *The Green Bird*. It was financed by private capital in extremely simple circumstances, and that, I think, went a long way in teaching us, the cameraman Lajos Koltai and myself, how to work under restricted conditions. We undertook to shoot the film for a given budget, and the producer simply had no more money at his disposal. So whenever we felt the need to change something during the shooting, we had to find the cost out of the basic budget at the expense of other scenes. I may say with some irony that we were bound to learn how to build a house out of exactly the material and money originally available for it.

Q: Do I detect a touch of resignation or malice in what you are saying?

A: I have no reason for malice or resignation. The film was given the category *Besonders wertvoll*, which counts as the highest artistic category in Federal Germany (meaning that it is advertised as an “especially valuable” film), which was obviously pleasant news for both of us.

Q: Let’s return to the story of *Mephisto*.

A: When I read the book, I took it to immediately, since I saw in it the possibility for an extremely exciting film. This was even though up to then I had never made a feature film based on a literary source, only from my own scenarios. For a long time I had wanted to find out what it felt like to be a director, in other words, what it felt like to make a film where you use your energies not in drawing up words, dialogues and situations, but exclusively in the production. And Klaus Mann’s novel also coincided with an old conviction of mine that you cannot or, rather, should not, make a film from a truly perfect literary work, where you have a masterpiece; the most perfect possible statement of its message is the book itself, so you only have to read it. In my opinion more suitable raw material for a good film is in a literary work which in its conceptual material is exciting and original enough but for some reason is still not a first-class literary work.

This Klaus Mann novel deals with an extremely exciting and instructive subject, but the treatment lacks permanent value. It simply narrates events, often just sketching them, without any real conflict of fully developed characters. And when the story arrives at what the plot considers as the most significant historical phase, Klaus Mann can only rely on his imagination, as he wrote the novel in 1936 in exile. The story is about the life of a highly gifted actor, who begins his career as a member of a small-town company. He is in strong sympathy with the leftwing movements in Germany in the second half of the 1920s. His friends are also leftwing-minded intellectuals, and so he often takes part in artistic and political actions, in which he can also assert his exceptional talent. He soon gets to Berlin, where his stage career is increasingly successful and he continues to support leftwing movements. Then Hitler comes to power, he becomes frightened and thinks he must get out of the country, but he is called back by his adoring public, and after that, with a clever adaptability, he soon wins the sympathy of the Nazis. He becomes the protégé of one of the highest National Socialist leaders, and his career soars upwards irresistibly. He becomes the manager of a theatre and later is appointed as the Intendant of the state-run theatres. He is fully aware of what he is doing, but always manufactures ideologies for himself to explain his acts, not only to justify himself but to consider himself the protector of human values. He sometimes speaks his doubts within a small circle, but even that is somewhat of a histrionic production. All the same, he actually does save a few people, of course people who are close to him, and so he feels he can safely believe that he has done everything humanly possible. In short, *Mephisto* is the story of a strange man whose career has much to tell us.

Q: What you say seems to indicate that the story is one of those works which illustrate different versions of the relationship between the actor—or the artist in general—and power.

A: This film is not about actors, nor about the power versus artist relationship. The film wants to portray a single character. It wants to speak about the existence of characters or, rather, bad characters, or more exactly still, of the bad sides in many people, which drive them to push themselves to the fore at any cost, under any conditions, to make themselves successful. It is a natural thing to feel secure and well if one is being loved and recognised. But to acquire everyone’s love, everyone’s support, the affection and support of every political regime, every political group, and in order to achieve that to be en garde night and day, to make oneself adaptable by the second to manoeuvre to find out the latest direction to turn in, to eternally examine which way the wind blows—this is a dangerous thing.

The protagonist of this film is one of those people who are always supported and accepted by everyone, only able to live successfully and in success, only willing to walk on the sunny side of life, and so his really exceptional talent and positive value can be put at the service of any evil interest. He allows the bad side of his character to rule his decisions. Yet because his abilities could make him an essentially valuable man, he is in eternal doubt and often despises himself. But his doubts, his self-contempt and his nostalgia for the good are not strong enough to overpower his desire always to be in the limelight, to get success, to get to the top, so he explains his steps to himself, he’s always ready to fabricate a self-absolving ideology.
Q: Klaus Mann's book and the film take place in a specific historical period and place, the Germany of the 1920s and '30s. What do you think makes the analysis of that specific historical period timely?

A: What we wanted to analyse or characterise was not the historical period but this specific character. And I think the historical situation outlined in the novel can illuminate such a character with the sharpness of a spotlight. As the example is exact, it allows a sharp and exact analysis of the character. Those were extremely hectic years, with sudden twists and situations which obviously made it possible and necessary to make choices. Since then history has produced scores of situations in Europe and throughout the world in which this individual story could take place. It is still doing this even today, you just have to open a newspaper or watch the news on television. In our half of the century events speeded up greatly and one has to cope with many different situations in a single lifetime as a normal state of affairs. So it is small wonder that in such a world an attitude similar to that of our protagonist has become rather general, whatever the contents. And if that is the case, it must be pointed out, it must be analysed.

Reviewing my film *Confidence*, you wrote that I seem to want to deal with public therapy in my films. I felt surprised by the term which was not sure to be meant as a recognition, because I felt that I myself had been unable to formulate my endeavour as exactly that. The expression became a challenge for me, it put into words what I would like to do to deal with public therapy. This film also would like to do just that. And the technique of therapy is to identify the disease of the character, to call attention to the forms of its appearance: to make certain features of the protagonist sympathetic so that the viewer can identify with him, and when his emotions are changing towards the hero with whom he has identified himself, when he comes into opposition with his own earlier emotions and prejudices, when he discovers similar traits in his own character — that may be of some help.

And although in the film the phenomenon occurs in the area of grand politics, and so we have discussed here its forms of appearance only in that context, the disease itself can be found in smaller communities, in the teaching staff of a school, in a factory, an office, anywhere where petty group interests enforce themselves, by making use of talents which want to prevail always and at any cost, which strive greatly to feel secure and protected, and always, under all circumstances, accepted.

Q: In other words, if I follow you correctly, *Mephisto* is trying to be a portrayal of careerism.

A: No! This is not simple careerism. This is the portrayal of the permanent state of readiness of a gifted man, to be able to exert himself at any time and in any situation, and if he is offered a role by history for which his humanity is insufficient and he still accepts it, even his talent will turn against him.

Q: I would like to return to the historical period you have chosen. What do you think may be the reason for the international fashion for recalling the period — *Cabaret* or The *Serpent's Egg* — to name but two obvious examples.

A: I cannot assess the reasons, but it is certain that fashions in themes have never been accidental. The European bourgeois seem to have lost their sense of security because of the history of recent years. They are tired and afraid of terrorism, economic crises and failures, the changing and uncertain political order. There are many who think, and indeed argue, that someone should come, a "strong hand", who puts his foot down and makes order. This situation in Western Europe therefore shows a superficial resemblance to the Germany of the 1920s and '30s. There must be something, perhaps the atmosphere, which gives rise to certain associations, to similar public feeling, and that might explain this thematic vogue. But from the point of view of our film, I don't consider this typical or of interest at all, and this part of the analysis is so utterly superficial on my part that I'm almost ashamed of it.

Q: Let us return then to your career. Your first films, *The Age of Daydreams*, *Love Film*, *Fireman Street*, and particularly *Tales of Budapest*, were described by critics in Hungary and abroad as subjective, lyrical autobiographies of your own generation; later they ascertained that with your 25th film, *Confidence*, you intended to expand the sphere of depiction into an allegorical and social autobiography; while the extremely restricted psychological drama of the two characters in *Confidence* came from a need for a definite change of theme and style. What considerations influenced those changes?

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Q: Does that mean that you consider it logical, a natural development, that both in the cinema and in literature we've come to a period which is usually called by the critics the phase of privatisation?

A: If the crop of a period, as a whole, makes up such a picture, there obviously must be some natural development behind it, and I'm also sure that when people are occupied with vital problems of existence, private troubles don't take priority. Now it seems the world has once again come to such a phase — and not only our little world in itself but the whole wide world around us — now we feel again to our cost what a large extent of our own life is determined by the movements of the world, so that once again we are paying attention to the effects of more comprehensive steps too.

What I want to say is that although in each case I myself decided the theme and the scenario which I used in my films, yet I have to see how basically and directly my choice of subjects, all my steps have been influenced either by the world at large or the microcosm around me. To tell the truth, I think that every really successful work contains, along with the tiny movements of the microcosm, the mysteries of the great historical spheres of motion, and we as film makers are always trying to approximate a completeness in that sense. However, this is very hard to achieve, and it is not merely a question of intention or will, or lofty goals — unfortunately.