

NATURAL LIGHT

A FILM BY DÉNES NAGY





NATURAL LIGHT

By Dénes Nagy

2021 / 103' / Hungary, France, Latvia, Germany
Color / 2.39 / 5.1 + 2.0 / Hungarian, Russian

SYNOPSIS

World War II, occupied Soviet Union. István Semetka is a simple Hungarian farmer who serves as a Corporal in a special unit scouting for partisan groups. On their way to a remote village, his company falls under enemy fire. As the commander is killed, Semetka has to overcome his fears and take command of the unit as he is dragged into a chaos that he cannot control.

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CAST

Ferenc Szabó, Tamás Garbacz, László Bajkó, Gyula Francia, Ernő Stuhl, Gyula Szilágyi,
Mareks Lapeskis, Krisztián Kozó, József Barta, Aivars Kuzmins, Liene Kislicka

CREW

Director: Dénes Nagy

Screenwriter: Dénes Nagy

DOP: Tamás Dobos HSC

Editor: Nicolas Rumpl

Music: Santa Ratniece

Set Design: Márton Ágh

Costume Design: Márton Ágh

Sound: Dominique Gaborieau, Jocelyn Robert

PRODUCTION: Sára László, Marcell Gerő (Campfilm)

CO-PRODUCTION: Inese Boka-Grūbe (Mistrus Media), Caroline Piras (Lilith Films),
Melanie Blocksdorf (Propellerfilm), Viktória Petrányi (ZDF arte, Proton Cinema), Olivier
Dubois (Novak Prod)

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DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY

Dénes Nagy graduated from the University of Theatre and Film Arts of Budapest in 2009. As a guest student he spent a year at the Berlin Film Academy.

His short fiction *SOFT RAIN* was premiered at the 45th Directors' Fortnight in 2013. The premiere was followed by an important international festival circuit where the film was repeatedly awarded the main prize (ex 26th "Premiers Plans" IFF, 14th Odense IFF, 7th Vilnius IFF etc).

His documentary *ANOTHER HUNGARY* had its premiere at the 43rd IFF Rotterdam, while his latest documentary *HARM* at the Documentary Competition of the 21st Sarajevo Film Festival.



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After your first 12 short fiction and documentary films, in what way did you feel that the writing and direction of this story had to be done in a feature film format?

In all my films, I try to work on faces and landscapes. Or in other words, on landscapes seen through someone's eyes, landscapes being related to faces. It was for me an intriguing experience to base a feature film solely on a motionless face or so it seems. This is something I wanted to experiment. I would say that this is the essence of the film. This face, which is constantly present on screen, is still kept at a distance, almost without any movement, fragile and unknown.

The story is based on a novel by Pál Závada. Did you make any changes to adapt it to the screen? And if so, why?

The original novel is a 600-page book, and the story covers 20 years in the main characters' lives, from the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s. From all this, I only chose 3 days in 1943. Strictly speaking, this is not a true adaptation. But still, even if I use very little from the book, the film's spirit is very close to the novel. Semetka, the main character in the film, is very close to Semetka in the book. I would say the strongest common ground between the film and the book is Semetka himself, while 90% of the scenes in the film are not from the book.

To what extent do you think this story resonates in today's world? And was it therefore a priority for you to see it brought to the screen?

I think that it only makes sense to make a film that resonates in today's world. This film is not about telling and giving light to an old story. The essence of this story is happening everywhere, all the time. It leads us to the problem of not seeing clearly,

because of the fact that we are not able to clearly see in ourselves. It brings into focus our essential failure in trying to explain and to constantly justify ourselves.

The question is towards us, towards me. We believe we know what is right and wrong, who failed and who succeeded. We think that we have acquired a clear judgment about things around us, we believe that we know what is our task in life. The film wants to question this image of ourselves. It wants to show how fragile this image is.

I want to show what actually unites humans is this kind of fragility, instead of consciousness. In this sense, this fragility is what we all share, while consciousness is what divides us.

Is it intentional that we know so little about all characters, their personal stories, including Semetka's, your main character? Is it deliberate to show the war in its most extreme form, without resorting to psychology or sociology that would allow us to know more about what happened to some of the men before this tragic episode?

In this film, I wanted to show an in-present man. To be able to observe someone at the present moment, as closely as possible, watching how he thinks, how he constantly processes things around himself, things that he doesn't fully understand.

Semetka feels that this war is not good for him, that it is not his war. He has a bad feeling but he doesn't know what his task is in this situation. He only knows that he would like to be back home as soon as possible, and he believes that he will somehow get over this uncomfortable period of time and go on with his life as a farmer.

I want to propose a human being's portrait that may be unusual. It is not interesting for me what he did before, what he lived through, what kind of traumas he suffered, what sins he committed, etc. I want to show an attitude in life of constant hesitation, watching this man here and now. Being with him, seeing through his eyes. I want to show a man who sees but, yet, doesn't understand. Who is on the verge of understanding, but who



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still is one step behind.

In this sense, only a period of war (in this case World War II), of occupation of one country by another allows a character like Semetka to be intimately confronted with extremes?

Yes, in a way, that is the reason to set this story during World War II. It is an extreme example that might create this intimate confrontation.

In a way even today there is a constant war around us, but as long as no one is killed, we rarely are confronted to it. A war of different world views, different ideas on how to develop the economy of one's country, how to make the world a safer place, a fight for recognition and resources, etc. And we would like to believe that we are on the right side, that we are among the cleverest ones who know what is good and what is bad for others.

We like to imagine ourselves on a mountain peak, where we can look down into the valley, and understand everything we see down there.

Showing people in the film who arrive into the unknown, in a situation where they don't know what awaits them, where things are neither clearly named nor defined, I propose a life portrait, which seems to be more like being disoriented in a semi-dark cave, where groping deeper doesn't help in any way. A cave where it is not possible for you to react cleverly and sensitively enough on what surrounds you.

Why do you think there is no sense of revolt or rebellion towards his hierarchy in Semetka? And why does he have a benevolent and good-hearted attitude towards the people of this village from the moment he arrives there, when his «mission order» is to be wary of them?

I think this is only partly true. This is the trick in a way. He seems to be human to the villagers, but he obviously eats their food. He doesn't hurt the raftsmen but takes away

their prey, the moose. He doesn't offend the girl but accepts the family's generous present, the bowl of wild berries. He doesn't investigate the woodcutters, although he is clearly aware that they might be dangerous.

I think Semetka is interesting because he is in between two worlds, there is a strange ambiguity about him. He is not a hero. He is a man who doesn't want to hurt anybody, who tries to stay away from violence but, at the same time, he tries to avoid complications and problems for himself. We could say he is a good man. But he is a weak man too. Can a man be good and weak at the same time?

Why did you cast non-professional actors? Is it to gain more authenticity, more naturalness in the situations in which you plunge your characters?

I have been searching for two years to find the actors of this film. I was only looking for amateur actors, peasant faces who showed something archaic, innocent in their gestures, unknowing in their eyes, their skin bearing the trace of time. Where a whole story is told by how one holds a cigarette in one's mouth, how one cuts bread, how one eats, how one remains silent.

I have been mostly searching on cow and pig farms all around the Hungarian countryside, looking for men between 30 and 40, to become the members of the Hungarian army unit in the film. It has been quite an experience to get to know all these people, their families, their thoughts, slowly, over many visits, gaining their trust and their desire to be part of the film.

In the end, we took 25 farmworkers with us, thousands of kilometers away from their home, to Eastern Latvia where we shot the film.

In a way it is the same as what happened to those farmers who were drafted during the Second World War and sent to Russia to fight. We took these 25 farmers, gave them weapons, dressed them in uniforms and took them to an unknown country, where they didn't understand the local language. They had to go through military

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training, become a unit during long marches with (and in) their extremely heavy equipment, and then, day by day for the film, to face the unknown Russian villagers/peasants (men, women and children who were also played by local Latvian/Russian peasants) who were, in a way, the same kind of people as themselves. Working with such people was a key to the film. They brought their own personalities on screen. In the film, they didn't have to become actors, they had to be themselves. And the film ultimately adapted to their personalities.

Throughout the film, the 4 elements – water, earth, fire and air – are constantly present on screen in a kind of raw, threatening and tragic combination. Does this bring a symbolic virtue to this story, or is it on the contrary a way to anchor it in a most brutal realism as close as possible to reality?

Nature in the film has an important role. It is always close, it is constantly present, but what is interesting about it is that this kind of nature is never friendly, it is not a gentle or tamed nature. It bears a kind of indifference. It is powerful, but not sentimental. It remains a constant outsider, an observer of human interference. It does not want to influence humans, yet it affects everything. Nature becomes a point of reference from which human life seems distant and transitory.

In the listing of natural elements, one was forgotten, which is significant for me, and which appears only in the beginning of the film, when the soldiers cut up the moose. It is flesh. I want to mention this, because in our daily lives, we usually are protected against the 4 elements – water, earth, fire and air. We sit in the car if it is cold and windy; we use an umbrella against rain, we put on sunglasses and sunscreen when the sun shines, etc. But flesh is one of the last remains of rawness in today's world. Touching raw meat when we cook is one of our only opportunities to get in touch with this

untamed, indifferent nature, with raw reality.

The cinematography is stunning. In the almost motionless landscapes, in close-ups and portraits under natural light, in the slowness of camera movements, but also – more incidentally- through the photos that Semečka is asked to take with his small camera, one has the impression that your cinematographic approach comes as close as possible to photography. Is this something you claim?

The photographic approach of the film is very much based on faces, on observation of faces. Being able to carefully observe a face as one from a photograph. With the film cinematographer, Tamás Dobos, we believed that all the faces define the film. Tamás had also an important role in the casting process. Besides the fact that the images in the film had to generate strong moods, we were sure that the image can only work if it is based on a concrete, true and authentic face.

On the other hand, this photographic approach, the stillness of the observation creates another effect, the feeling that what we see, this face or this landscape, cannot fully reveal itself to us. That a part of its real identity will always remain in the shadows. There is a feeling of the impossibility of becoming integrated, a sense of only-partly-knowing tragedy.

Images are continually enriched with barely perceptible but very precise background sounds: outside in the wild, in the village, inside houses and between men when together. As if on-alert senses are part of the whole story. Is it a work on sound that you were particularly keen to do?

It was very clear from the beginning that this film would require much more from the sound compared to a film with many dialogues. The absence of dialogue creates a great sound opportunity, as well as the fact that we see many things only through the main



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character's eyes. Basically we watch a silent face, and we only imagine what is really happening all around from the sounds we hear. For example when the soldiers enter the village we see very little of the real action, of the kicking of doors, or the herding of people out to the street. We only hear the sounds of shouting soldiers and villagers, the sounds of objects falling on the floor; etc. Or another typical scene is in the barn where the villagers are gathered, we hear the sound of a brutal outside interrogation. While we watch the silent faces in the barn, we hear the screaming of a villager as he is being tortured.

But there are many hidden animal and nature sounds. Howling of birds in the distance, horses nervously moving and neighing, crackling of trees in the wind, the sound of knocking rain on the window glass, the sound of tightening ropes as the raft moves in the river; or a barely perceptible whispering between a mother and her child. Sound designer Jocelyn Robert and re-recording mixer Dominique Gaborieau were able to create a sonoric space around the main character; a fictional space full of sounds that conveys a constant tension, a feeling of constant threat in the air.

We get the impression that the film ends precisely where another director could have started it: How one can go on living with feelings of shame or guilt? One can feel totally exonerated of any responsibility in a tragic event that he could have helped to avoid? How one can manage to get out of it despite everything? How one can continue to live when he has caused death or refuses to denounce its horror?... Did you want to leave an open end on these questions that your film can legitimately raise?

Shame is a very human feeling. Shame means accepting one's fragility. But Semetka is not yet there, he is in shock. He doesn't report the incident to anybody. He doesn't talk about it. He believes he didn't have any other choice. He still believes that he has the freedom to decide, to interpret, even though it is clearly too late.

I was interested in this moment. I didn't want to finish his story. The original novel of

course doesn't stop here. It deals with the subject of shame, and the processing of the past. In the novel, Semetka commits suicide a couple of years after the end of the war. He cannot get his life back on track. In the film I wanted to observe a man who is not fully aware of what choices he must face. What are the things that lead him to becoming part of a killing? What choices he didn't make on the way? This is interesting for me. And there is no clear answer to this.

I want to show a man who is late. Who starts to realize things only when it is too late. I think we can easily be in the same situation. I want to talk about how vulnerable we might be when facing the unknown.

What films or filmmakers may have influenced the project's final look and feel?

I would mention three films that influenced me a lot. I mention them mainly as a reference on how they portray their characters, the kind of restraint with which they observe them, and how they depict the relationship between their characters and their environment.

The first film is *ANDREI ROUBLEV* by Andrei Tarkovsky that I watched many times during the preparations of *NATURAL LIGHT*. While the two other films are *FLANDERS* by Bruno Dumont and *THREE DAYS* by Sharunas Bartas.

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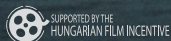
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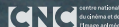
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