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# HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY

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## *Dog Tax*

A Narrative Film Short By László Sántha

Reviewed

by

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for the

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Writer Director László Sántha's 1992 narrative film short *Dog Tax* opens with a two minute plus dog's point of view tracking shot as the creature examines the back streets of his world, finds a proper post to relieve himself, faces off against a threatened fellow canine separated by a wire fence and finally comes upon our hero, a young chap named Geza. It's clear from this very first shot that Geza shares a special affinity with man's best friend. And the lighthearted piano music and cheery dog moans that accompany the opening are pitch perfect in setting us up for the lighthearted tone and dog's world point of view our main character comes to embrace. In the following scene we see Geza, hands grasping the ledge, head poking doglike through a small window at

the employment office, as he answers questions seeking work. It turns out to be his lucky day. The single, unemployed former soldier finds a new job and a new life as a Dog Tax collector - he collects taxes due from human owners of dogs in the Hungarian city where he lives.

Professional life brings Geza new pride in himself and in his sense of purpose. He dresses professionally, approaches his work professionally, and seeks new ways to improve on collecting the dog tax from less than forthcoming human members of the urban community he is assigned to canvas. He decides to use his unusual talent, the ability to bark like a dog, to speak, not to the errant human owners, but to the dogs themselves. In the process he discovers his joy in life and becomes the best Dog Tax Collector in the city. A series of comedic events ensue that at first seem variations on a theme, but perhaps on closer examination reveal more. Taken purely for its comedic intent, one might feel the work becomes repetitive after a bit, but what is it about Geza and the world he inhabits that intrigues us? The film is Hungarian, subtitled, seemingly set in the days before the end of Communist rule. The true story reveals itself I think in two separate layers, one human, one political.

While humorously told, the real story is a story of isolation and disconnection. It is the story of a man who, with a couple exceptions, keeps himself at arm's length from true human connection. It is the story of a man who needs to find control in his life. He uses his work as a shield to separate himself from people, truly becoming a tool of the state. One of the keys to Geza's character, we learn, lies in an incident from his past. As a

young soldier he had once been an unwilling tool of his commanding officer, ordered to use his ability to bark, calling dogs to their deaths as his commander shot them simply because they made too much noise at night. Now while it seems that his new work has brought him the control over people he once lacked, perhaps Geza has once again become an unwitting tool of his government, captured this time by his own zealotry for perfection. As Geza gains more “power” in his work, he retreats further and further into the world of dogs. He even urges his co-workers to adopt his “dog” strategies and become more doglike and therefore more successful. Trying to gain a deeper understanding concerning the nature of the dog, he tests and emulates more and more aspects of dog life. It seems his purpose is to use his new insights to improve his tax collection methods, but really what is he doing? Becoming more doglike. Less human. Retreating from humanity. One scene in particular stands out as both funny and sad, with a touch of Samuel Beckett<sup>1</sup> added in for good measure. Late in the film, Geza tries on dog collars and tests himself against the yoke of a chain, mulling the meaning of life for dogs. As on screen he gains direct experience of what it feels like to be chained, is he really speaking of his own life and his own chains? “A dog’s life is filled with waiting. They wait for their walks, for the dawn, for a sign from their masters to come into a nice warm room. Such patience, faith and sacrifice. Perhaps somewhere there is a reward, a heaven... for poor dogs, good dogs, muddy dogs, for strays,” he intones.

János Bán plays Geza or Mr. P as he is identified in the credits. Bán appears in nearly every scene of this fifty-five minute short, and he does a wonderful job of engaging the audience with the warmth of his explorations and the simple truth in his

performance. His humanity shines though, even in the wildest of the dog notions set before him. He and Sántha and the often intricate camera work of Peter Vékás do a wonderful dance in bringing both comedic and thoughtful moments to light. A great example of this is demonstrated in a scene where Geza creates a new dog tax, taxing a man, Emillio, merely because he can impersonate the barking of a dog well. While the scene makes both comedic and political points, I want to highlight the technique here. It's clear that Sántha has worked closely with both his actors and camera team to work out the details of the scene. For the camera is constantly on the move, following the actors, moving from a close up out to wider medium shot as the two cross each other, then around to a wider medium shot at the wall, showing only Emillio, revealing Geza's reactions in a mirror, then becoming a two shot and then readjusting once again into a slightly different two shot as they seat themselves at a table. A series of such shots are intercut with other static hand held close ups as well, yet the comedy and meaning of each part of the scene is never lost.

Though I have only viewed a lower resolution on-line version of the film, all around the production values seem well done. The often moving camera and lighting work well together. Night scenes are dark and dramatic as the scenes merit. The locations and set dressing look truthful, realistic and provide a brief look into the lives of various classes within the community. The film is well edited, the comedy plays. My one fault with the film lies in the structure of the story. It seems to present as a string of incidents in the life of our dear Geza. I might have enjoyed seeing Geza pressured into making a few clearer choices in regard to the path he winds up following, revealing other roads unchosen that may have led him to a different end.

Sántha does a wonderfully nuanced job with both his film crew and his actors. His actors balance the sometimes absurd silent film comedy moment with the more realistic comedic moment, played all from the heart truthfully and it works. The supporting roles in the film are well cast. The faces seem real. Whether members of his tax collection unit, the voluptuous “dog calling” woman, or Emillio the circus performer, all provide believable, lived in performances. Yet Geza’s interactions with most all these characters remain transactional events. Geza doesn’t let them in, even when he wishes for such as with the “dog calling” woman.

The only moments of true human connection Geza seems to experience take place in two scenes between he and his Aunt Margit, sublimely played by Temessey Hédi - and both involve the loss of her beloved dog Apple Pie. The first occurs after Geza has comedically crowned the dog’s funeral with his own howling dog elegy. The camera leads them along a rural path as the two reminisce about life and Apple Pie. Geza opines that “to be a dog is to love and obey unquestioningly.” The next we see the two together is later in the film at Aunt Margit’s home and by this point Geza is playing at being a dog, grabbing a dog toy, sniffing around in Apple Pie’s bed. When the uncertain Margit enters, she is at first unsure of what to think, but as Geza continues his “act,” she plays along with him, and with a sweet wistfulness allows Geza to play the dog, “loving and obeying unquestioningly.”

This leads me to the second layer of the film, what for me appears to be the political layer. While I am not a historian, I was still in film school when the Berlin Wall came down, I have a clear sense of the times. And at first glance *Dog Tax* might apply to many differing world situations and cultures. Bureaucracy grows everywhere. But since

this film comes from a particular country, Hungary and from a particular time, 1992, I suspect as for most filmmakers, it is about the particulars. So then, is Geza trying to make up for the horrific acts of his military days, the murder of dogs? Or is he trying to obtain the control over his life he did not have in that situation? Perhaps there is something larger still. "To be a dog is to love and obey unquestioningly," Geza tells his aunt. In his zeal to become the perfect bureaucrat, he has become the almost perfect dog. The question that arises in my mind is this last one. Is the story speaking culturally, and therefore across cultures about expectations within a communist run culture? Within any deeply bureaucratic culture? Hungarians rose up against Communism in 1956 and were crushed - What you want does not matter. Do as the master wishes and things will be okay – over time economic conditions did improve for Hungarians and in 1989 Communist rule ended. Is this then the life that Geza buys into? Be the best good dog you can be and everything will work out for you. When his supervisor, who clearly admires Geza's work and thinks he truly understands Geza, gives Geza an enormous pink plastic dog bone for his birthday, we know that the supervisor has understood nothing, but even more so, we see that Geza for the first time understands that no one understands him either. In misery, yet unchanging to the very end, Geza cannot give up on his fascination with dogs, his dedication to their taxing, even when the government decides to stop taxing dogs and will now tax cats. The last shot of the film reveals poor Geza walking down a narrow hall, hemmed in by his life and his choices. He stops, stares into a mirror, tries with great difficulty to make a cat sound, but can't bring himself to do it. He has been a good dog and it did not matter. Sántha may be on to something about our very human condition.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example read this seminal and originally controversial play about the meaning of life.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot. A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (1953).