

Inventing the Future

**Inventing the Future:
On 'My Twentieth Century' by Ildikó Enyedi**
Juliet Jacques

Ildikó Enyedi's *My Twentieth Century* (*Az én XX. századom*, 1989) starts in 1880, but most of its action launches on New Year's Eve, 1900. The opening scene in Menlo Park, New Jersey shows people chanting "Long live Edison!" as they celebrate his first demonstrations of electric light, before Enyedi shows us similar scenes at the Electrical Exhibition in Paris in 1881, and a colonialist in Burma telling a local about Edison's pioneering inventions. From there onwards, the film explores the establishment of the technological and philosophical innovations that would, for better or worse, shape the next hundred years, as seen through the eyes of Dóra and Lili, twin girls born to a single mother (all three played brilliantly by Dorota Segda, in her debut film) in Budapest and soon orphaned. Dóra becomes a drifter and ends up on the Orient Express on the first night of the new century, trying to scam two rich men out of their money. Lili becomes an anarchist revolutionary, reading Kropotkin before becoming part of a bomb plot to kill the Austro-Hungarian minister of the interior.

The anarchist plotline is a reminder that the twentieth century could have turned out differently: there was a wave of anarchist assassination attempts at the *fin de siècle*, including the killing of French President Sadi Carnot in 1894, Empress Elisabeth of Austria in 1898, Umberto I of Italy in 1900, and US President William McKinley in 1901. Over the next twenty years, more organised forms of socialism and communism supplanted anarchism as the dominant threat to capitalism, and supplied a resolution to the chaotic atmosphere so deftly captured in Enyedi's film. We see another path not taken when Lili attends a lecture by rising philosopher Otto Weininger, leaving in outrage as he moves from supporting women's suffrage to calling women 'a-logical and consistently immoral'. Weininger's book *Sex and Character* (1903) did not create the stir he anticipated and he committed suicide, aged 23; decontextualised parts of his writing were used in Nazi propaganda, as examples of a Jewish thinker endorsing antisemitism as well as conservative attitudes to gender roles. Whilst Enyedi suggests that the natures and courses of its competing ideologies may have turned out differently, had a figure such as Weininger lived longer or anarchism proved more sustainable, the twentieth century was always going to be distinguished by irreconcilable political clashes and unprecedented violence.

If that makes *My Twentieth Century* sound like an unbearably pessimistic film – it's not. As its opening suggests, it is full of wonder about modern technology, looping back around to Edison near its end as he tells an audience: "It's a wonderful world created by God, and also by man, who has to learn how to mould it." Although she leaves it to viewers to consider how cinema would intersect with political movements as the century wore on, Enyedi provides glimpses of how the medium will form part of that process – most memorably in a scene strangely reminiscent of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), in which a laboratory dog is shown footage of valleys, flowers and bees, modern industry and crowds, the insurgent potential of the latter being a cause of concern for politicians and intellectuals (notably Gustave Le Bon) at the time. The dog shakes off its headgear and runs into the street, escaping the control of the scientists who try to monitor its reactions, heightening the sense of chaos.

That pivotal figure of the twentieth century, Lenin, famously described cinema as the 'most important of all

the arts' even before the coming of sound heightened its effectiveness as a propaganda tool. Constructivist filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin ultimately lost the argument for a more avant-garde, 'contrapuntal' approach to film sound as a more naturalistic style was adopted internationally (and as Stalinist cultural policy). Enyedi uses lengthy periods of silence; despite being a sound film, *My Twentieth Century* feels like an evocation of a time before certain conventions were set, a love letter to silent cinema with its crisp, high-contrast black-and-white cinematography and its snippet of Charly Bowers' comedy short *Now You Tell One* (1926) in its opening sequence. As several critics have pointed out, the names Dóra and Lili recall the Gish sisters who starred in D. W. Griffiths' *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), which used a narrative about the French Revolution to warn of the dangers of Bolshevism and also centred upon two orphans separated by adoption.

More contemporaneously, Enyedi's style provides a fascinating contrast with one of Hungary's most celebrated male filmmakers, Béla Tarr. Whereas Tarr, who also shoots in black-and-white, is known for his very slow, long takes, *My Twentieth Century* constantly cuts from one short scene to another to capture the political and technological flux of the age. It does so with incredible style and verve, packing an extraordinary range of ideas and images into its one hundred minutes. In itself, Enyedi's film feels like an unrealised possibility, not as well known to audiences outside her native Hungary as it ought to be. Happily, there is time to change that.