

migrant women in dire straits.

Alpern Engel's book is a helpful tool for those interested in deciphering the history of Russian women in particular and of peasant women in general. Its value lies in its use of peasant women's own voices to tell the story of their lives. By using this method, Alpern Engel is able to avoid the essentialist trap and to convey the rich diversity of peasant women's experiences of migration and industrialization. She shows that while all members of the peasantry suffered from the upheavals caused by industrialization, women suffered more than men. Moreover, some women suffered more than others. Through it all, women were not completely powerless. Many managed to find ways to resist both the institutional and individual forms of oppressions arising out of socio-economic transformation. Finally, some women were able to navigate their way through the maze of change and to come out ahead of where they had been before the rise of industrialization.

### THE ANT HEAP

Margit Kaffka. Trans. Charlotte Franklin. London: Marion Boyers, 1995.

by J. Rochon

This novel, *Hangyaboly* (The Ant Heap) was written by Kaffka in 1917. It is her last novel and has just now been translated into English. Within these pages she relays six months of life in a convent in Hungary. Her work is somewhat autobiographical; her own schooling as a child took her into a convent and later as an adult she returned for a teaching diploma. This novel speaks more kindly and gently of her convent experiences than her earlier works such as, *Triumph*, and the short story, "Letters from a Convent." The tale she weaves is not, however, without its critical factors. She alludes to the hypocrisy of the priests and nuns and explores

earthly love through many of her characters who are expected to be above this human emotion. The Order of the Sisters of Mercy is portrayed in a convincingly realistic way; so faithful is her rendering that the Order would not forgive Kaffka for writing this novel.

Her prose is graceful yet strong, with description that is vivid and hypnotic. Kaffka's style of writing is most effective in setting scenes and creating events. The rhythms and rituals of convent life are conveyed in the style and flow of her writing; smooth, measured, and without waste. In her telling she clearly portrays the frustration of segregation from all worldly things through the characters of the young women. There is a desperate urge to feel grown up and experienced in the world, the very thing that convent life strictly prohibits. The events of the outside world, a supper engagement with a local

respected Catholic woman, a recital of religious poetry and hymns in town, are described in an enthusiastic way. Kaffka uses her craft most effectively in this way to present on the page the inner feelings of her characters.

The rigidly disciplined life of the convent is displayed most clearly in the nuns who are older and more traditional in their thinking. Their devotion is unalterable and unquestioned. Kaffka is careful however to not hold these women up as the true representation of the Sisters of Mercy. There is a diversity among the women of the Order which supercedes their commonalities and provides conflict within the novel. There is a great desire in the younger sisters for a liberalization within the walls of the convent, a relaxing of the rules for a more breathable space within their faith. When the Reverend Mother dies and a new head of the convent must be elected there is a



Toronto, Canada

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potential for change and it is felt by all of the characters; a mingling of hope and fear manifests itself in each character. Appropriately, this time of uncertainty brings chaos from the outside world. There are repeated scenes of indiscretion which disrupt the staid convent life.

From within *The Ant Heap* each of the women reacts differently to the shifting times. Virginia is a strong leader and futurist; she embodies the hope and the vision for the convent in a changing world. Her duties allow her to use her sharp mind for the good of the order, to ensure its future. Kunigunda is simple and devote, a woman a little out of time but strict in her faith and in her fashion. Discipline comes easily to her and off of her tongue; the scoldings she provides are based in the hope that the students around her will gain as much pure pleasure from faith if they practice it well. Helen is an outsider within. Her worldly knowledge and desire for the love of a man set her apart from the sisters, and the future they have in mind for her. Her fortune draws them to be kindly and interested in her as a future sister of the Order, but she escapes in a moment of confusion and gains her happiness through marriage. Erzsébet is the star of the convent; with her attractive clothes for home and graceful poise she is set apart from the other students and involved in activity outside the convent to the envy of the other women.

This novel provides a glimpse into convent life in the 1800s in Hungary. There is also reference to society outside the convent walls, the turmoil which prevails in the area, the impeding modernization of the western world, all of which is also played out within the Order. The frustrated feelings of these women are contrasted with the ordered, measured life of the convent to provide an illuminating and realistic account of the inner tensions life can provide despite the sheltering of convent walls.

## SCREEN MEMORIES: THE HUNGARIAN CINEMA OF MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS

Catherine Portuges. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

by Dina Iordanova

If you want to find out about East European women-filmmakers from reference books like the *Handbook of Soviet and East European Filmmakers*, you may as well forget it. Most reference books on the topic make almost no mention of any female presence in filmmaking. One is left with the impression that the field is entirely male-dominated, with the rare exception of a few actresses. *The Handbook* was published in 1992. As if to challenge its monumental disregard for East European women, a whole book devoted to a single woman-director appeared only a year later—Catherine Portuges' study of the Hungarian filmmaker Márta Mészáros.

Márta Mészáros is by no means the only significant female filmmaker from Eastern Europe. Notable figures include the Czech Vera Chytilová, the Bulgarian Binka Zhelyazkova, Poles Barbara Sass and Magdalena Lazarkiewicz, and Hungarians Judith Elek and Ildiko Eneydi. All of these women artists, who deserve more attention from North American scholars, would be well served by a study as insightful as Portuges' *Screen Memories*.

Hopefully the wide critical acclaim for Portuges' book will prompt American interest in Mészáros' films. Only a few of the movies are available in North American video distribution: *The Girl, Riddance*, and *Adoption* from Facets in Chicago; *Little Red Riding Hood* from Les productions la fête in Montréal; and several more in 16mm from New Yorker Films. Most of the films, like *Fetus* (1993), which Mészáros presented at the Berlin Film Festival last year, have never made it to North American theatres.

Portuges, originally a specialist in

French feminism, does a remarkably astute job in analyzing Mészáros' filmmaking. She applies theories from gender and psychoanalytical criticism to the personal and artistic dimensions of Mészáros' life. Her analysis of the filmmaker's career draws on numerous interviews, which provide a unique context for the study. The discussions of matters of personal creativity, such as Mészáros' marriage to the prominent director Miklos Jancsó, and her subsequent relationships with Polish actor Jan Nowicki, touch on issues sensitive to every woman-artist. Mészáros' relationships with these men were exceptional in that they managed to achieve balance between two dominant artists. Despite her marriage to Jancsó, for example, she never imitated the unmistakable visual idioms of his films. She does, however, admit to needing Nowicki's advice on issues of style and aesthetics.

Mészáros came to feature films in her 30s after a career in documentaries. Most of her narrative films reflect on personal experiences, although not always directly. Her lonely fragile heroines spend many rainy afternoons in utopian inquiries about severed family ties, often returning at night to cold rooms in orphanages and dormitories; they explore the painful vulnerabilities of human sensuality, frequently through stubborn introverted struggles from love. When Mészáros turned her attention to Stalinism with her "Diary" trilogy of the 1980s, the films retained the accent on interpersonal issues from her earlier work, depicting tensions between the imposed mechanical routine of communal space and the individual's pensive craving for privacy. As Portuges concludes, "Mészáros' representation of the female subject at odds with social convention illuminates the larger question of the constitution of the self in East-Central Europe which has favored group identity at the expense of the individual."

The valuable interviews illustrate a paradox common to many strong women from Eastern Europe: their resistance to being considered feminists even as they display thoroughly