



# People of the mountains

**Director:** István Szöts

**Country:** Hungary

**Date:** 1942

A review by Ben Nicholson for *CineVue*:

There are a number of reasons that István Szöts' *People of the Mountains* has a claim to historical importance. Despite being relatively unknown in much of the rest of Europe, it is often praised as being one of, if not the greatest, Hungarian film of all time. Moreover, its debut at the Venice Film Festival in 1942 (one of the wartime editions that was subsequently disregarded) is claimed by some film historians to have inspired the rise of Italian neo-realism. Perhaps more fascinating than both is its symbolic position in the tumultuous sovereignty of 20th century Transylvania.



The Carpathian Mountains provide the jaw-dropping backdrop to an otherwise simple, but deeply emotive tale of a tree-cutter and his family. Opening sequences dwell on stunning vistas and the apparently bucolic idyll of the plainspoken Hungarian-speaking Székely people. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of the First World War, this region had declared union with Romania. Just two years before *People of Mountains* was made, during World War Two, the area was returned to Hungarian rule. This portrayal of an admirable and longstanding Hungarian community in Transylvania wouldn't

have been possible before 1940 and its very existence was brimming with political statement and national identity.

That Transylvania would return to Romanian rule at the end of the war, as it has remained since, adds a certain piquancy to the ensuing narrative of Szöts' beloved drama. Despite its initial halcyon qualities, *People of the Mountains* takes a dark turn that spirals into tragedy. This could have been read as a commentary on having lost the area (and the wider Empire) the first time – a hopeful note in the concluding lament perhaps suggesting 1940's annex and a positive upturn – but with hindsight it can't help but be seen through the lens of World War Two's outcome and the pain still felt by those Hungarians that consider these mountains and valleys a heartland.

Those physical sights are a wonder to behold through Ferenc Fekete's luminous cinematography which is at its most spellbinding during a journey over the mountains taken by Gergö (János Görbe) and his wife Anna (Alice Szellay). The scenes have an almost biblical quality as Gergö leads his wife above cloud-filled valleys on a donkey and the land itself seems to take on the divinity, the woodland animals tame and curious in an almost Disney way. Such nirvana is not the order of the day for Szöts, though, and while the film is in no way intended to foreshadow the region's approaching fate, hindsight emphasises the tragedy from a Hungarian perspective.



The aforementioned trip across the mountains is to take Anna for medical help. After their simple life is uprooted by invading capitalism and a logging venture, the overseer takes an unwelcome interest in Anna who escapes into the woods with their young son (also named Gergö) but succumbs to hypothermia and

her husband is driven to vengeance. There are problematic elements with the narrative – anti-Semitic allusions seem fairly undeniable – but the craftsmanship largely renders those concerns moot. *People of the Mountains* manages to be a moving account of both its characters and, intentionally or not, its sublime location.

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