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 Politics of Montage  
*Neo-Avant-Garde Traits in Hungarian Experimental Films*

The Notions of Neo-Avant-Garde and Montage

Despite all the disapproval by theoreticians and artists, neo-avant-garde is an accepted and canonical trend in today's system of art institutions. As a matter of fact, it was this acceptance<sup>1</sup> that provoked the charges the trend was accused with when its products were first encountered: proneness to compromise, corruptibility, art for consumption or opportunism. Of course, the accusers were mainly researchers of classical avant-garde, who were liable to single out uncompromising radicalism from the movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, overlooking the (self-)canonization and the canonical "proximity" that prevailed *simultaneously* with the subversion.<sup>2</sup> Although advocates of the historical approach are aware that even classical avant-garde had become a market factor by the sixties, they argue that the *former* avant-garde's critique of art institutions had been consistent in its radicalism then and there, as opposed to neo-avant-garde, which restored the category of artwork (Peter Bürger).<sup>3</sup> The most referenced and criticized writing in Hungary is *Neo-avant-garde*, published in the *Isms*-series, which is exclusionist in other ways than Bürger's monograph. In his introductory essay, Miklós Szabolcsi mentions almost no Hungarian references,<sup>4</sup> nor are they present among the documents (breaking with the earlier tradition of *Isms*). In addition, even though he is not as clearly dismissive with regard to the neo-avant-garde's market presence as Bürger is, his attitude towards this phenomenon is by all means ambivalent. He acknowledges the neo-avant-garde tendencies' right to exist, their peculiar way of recycling avant-garde objectives and devices, and conditionally considers the possibility that avant-garde can have *perpetual* active influence on art.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he speaks about "false consciousness" and ideological blindness on the part of neo-avant-garde movements, interpreting it as an alienated reaction to its changed position in the society of artists.<sup>6</sup>

"False consciousness" and ideology play a central role in the discourse about our specific topic, namely (neo)-avant-garde film, but in other ways than Szabolcsi points out: from the standpoint of socialist art, it is the false consciousness of contemporary avant-garde art that deserves criticism, while the theories founded on the western critique of ideology emphasize precisely the medium-oriented critical force of avant-garde films. One more thing has to be pointed out regarding the aforementioned anthology of neo-avant-garde, namely that

<sup>1</sup> As for the artists, this was the acceptance of acceptance, or – as Tom Wolfe caustically remarks about the New York art scene of the sixties-seventies – the Consummation that followed the Boho Dance. Cf. Wolfe, Tom: *Painted Word*. Picador, 2008. p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfe discusses this "proximity" to the market and the canon already in connection with classical avant-garde (also caustically): "[...] For getting away from bourgeoisie there's nothing like packing up your paints and easel and heading for Tahiti, or even Brittany, which was Gauguin's first stop. But who else even got as far as Brittany? Nobody. The rest got no further than the heights of Montmartre and Montparnasse, which are what? – perhaps two miles from the Champs Elysées. [...] No, somehow the artist wanted to remain in walking distance ..." (Ibid, p.13.)

<sup>3</sup> "Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is accepted as art, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic. Having been shown to be irredeemable, the claim to be protest can no longer be maintained." (Bürger, Peter: *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. p. 53.)

<sup>4</sup> Szabolcsi, Miklós: A neoavantgarde. In: Krén, Katalin and Marx, József (eds.): *A neoavantgarde*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1981. Some of the rare exceptions are the anthology *Tűztánc* [Fire Dance], the poetry of Ferenc Juhász, and one or two journals publishing neo-avant-garde writings: *Új Szimposion*, *Mozgó Világ*, *Művészet*.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit. p. 113–114.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

perhaps its least extensive chapter is the one about film. In his introductory essay, Szabolcsi refers to the film *Last Year in Marienbad* upon discussing the “structuralist wave”;<sup>7</sup> with regard to symbol-forming historically oriented films, he mentions Fellini, Bergman, Jancsó and Pasolini;<sup>8</sup> and again Pasolini as an example of devoted neo-experimentalism.<sup>9</sup> With regard to documentaries, he cites a manifesto by Jonas Mekas and interviews with Warhol, Godard and Glauber Rocha – reasonably relating the latter with *cinema novo*, and the former with underground cinema. As regards the use of signs and symbols (or allegories) he perceives a similarity between the films mentioned above and the similar tendencies of Pop Art, but while the former appropriate these from history, Pop Art employs appropriation for creating the symbols of the present. This observation may prove exceptionally useful regarding BBS films of neo-avant-garde bearing, and we may even venture to say: the critical revision of Szabolcsi’s introductory essay might take this very observation as its point of departure before proceeding with its help to introduce those works into the discourse that were excluded by Szabolcsi to begin with.

The practice of appropriation is founded on repetition, more specifically, context-switching repetition. In the case of a fundamentally allegorical parable, the role of the “found object” to be appropriated is played by a historical event (with dresses, archaic speech, stage set, etc.), while the new context is simply the audience, who ideally get the figurative speech in the parable, and the institutional situation and historical (political) moment in which this audience included. This appropriation gives rise to tension between the “found object” and the new context, and this tension induces movement. The stronger the tension, the greater the coercive fluctuation – such description of this process is strongly reminiscent of the tension theory of metaphor. It is not a novelty to claim that in this respect, montage based on radical context switching is a relative of metaphor. Structural (visual-auditory), conventional (genre) or contextual (temporal-spatial) montage effects (or even a combination of these) can thus hopefully trigger the recipient’s trauma cumulatively, either by triggering cataleptic consciousness (haunting repetition in a completely odd environment), or by liberating energies. The ever-prevalent objective of avant-garde can be identified in both instances, depending on which imaginary social character has to be *provoked* and which *emancipated* (the two not necessarily being mutually exclusive). So, based on the (neo)-avant-garde conception, montage might prove useful in avoiding conservation and in promoting the mobilization of consciousness. The avant-garde artwork should have action value instead of object value, even if the artist uses objects in the process. This action value, to which they often attribute imperative function, guarantees a flow-like or (to evoke the name of a neo-avant-garde movement) *fluxus*-like existence, and can be identified as a characteristic of both the so-called classical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. The emphasis is therefore on its procedural form as opposed to the artwork, even of the latter is an essential part of the process. To theoretically buttress this idea, Hilde Hein introduces performance as the fourth aesthetic category along with the traditional Aristotelian categories of artist, artwork and recipient.<sup>10</sup> This allows for analysing from the same aspect such diverse genres of the neo-avant-garde fluxus movement as concept or happening. Additionally, artistic reflection can reckon with the montage-like character in both cases. According to the theory of Joseph Kosuth, a conceptual artwork is a non-formalist artwork; an artwork that is conceptual in nature and gives a self-reflexive Wittgensteinian-Duchampian definition of art concerning the *contextual* nature of artwork (and art). Moreover, in St.Auby’s definition, happening is

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 90–91, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Hein, Hilde: Performance as an Aesthetic Category. In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Spring, 1970.

“action montage”. In fact, both tendencies fit into the grand narrative that (slightly paradoxically) Lyotard himself constructed in relation to avant-garde. According to this, the avant-garde of all times is the historical process of backing away from depiction. This means renouncing the great make-believe devices, taking on a critique of institutions and tradition, as well as structural and conventional subversion. The concept of montage actually fits into the picture inasmuch as it is a structural feature that endeavours to eliminate the “distance” between things through its disillusioning and alienating nature. Montage as *cutting* means both the subversion of the old order of things (as things are removed from their usual place) and the creation of a new order (according to avant-garde ideology, montage calls for engagement in this). This explains the existence of revolutionary and utopian ideas traditionally related to montage: the montage work is a “place” for the creature yet to be created, says Erdély.<sup>11</sup> In avant-garde thought, montage is therefore a dialectical structure based on conflict, which can assert itself, or be asserted, on various levels; it can (or should, according to the idea) represent a mediatic self-reflection that presents its own illusion-based medium – in our case, the medium of film – as an ideological social practice.

### Neo-Avant-Garde and Film

Discussing the relation of neo-avant-garde trends and film, we have to reckon with certain difficulties. For instance, “neo-avant-garde” is not recognized as a cinematic genre; instead, the phrases ‘underground’, ‘avant-garde’ or ‘experimental’ are used when referring to films that diverge from the main trend. This raises the question: to what extent is it possible to apply this “ism”, which is predominantly referred to as a fine art category, in the field of film art, in relation to certain BBS films in particular? We therefore need to clarify the problem of neo-avant-garde (fine) art’s relation to avant-garde film, as this may help us answer the question of how we can, if at all, approach speaking about neo-avant-garde(istic) film (art). For starters, it is worthwhile to make a few remarks about the scope of the notion of neo-avant-garde, while touching on the anomalies perceivable in the use of terms, as well as the controversies surrounding neo-avant-garde. Ultimately: what is the relationship between avant-garde and neo-avant garde?

Following from the above, this is of no concern to film history. The label “avant-garde film” – unscathed by the controversies fuelled by neo-avant-garde, regarding various other subjects concerning the theory and history of (fine) art – is a respected term in the thesaurus of cinema (even if the following notions are not synonymous in the general sense: avant-garde film, experimental film, absolute film, poetic film, visionary film, abstract film, independent film, underground film, amateur film, alternative film, materialist film, structural film, counter-film, etc. Depending on the argument and context, some of them can be considered genres within, or synonyms of, avant-garde. The content of these terms is best revealed if considered together with their antonyms: together with the phenomena that they either endeavour to criticize and compensate, or being excluded, try to realize in their own ways. The amateur together with the professional; the independent with the commercial; the poetic with the epic; the abstract-absolute-structural-material film with cinematic “figurativeness”, that is, narrative (feature) film on the one hand, and documentary, or in a broader sense, non-reflexive cinematic representation on the other. Ultimately, these are relative opposites even if their existence is indispensable for creating and sustaining an avant-garde identity, and not unimportantly, for classificatory scientific identity.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Erdély, Miklós: { A tézisek mellé... } [A supplement to the theses...]. In: Erdély, Miklós: *Művészeti írások. Válogatott művészetelméleti tanulmányok I.*, [Writings on Art. Selected Studies in Art Theory I.] Ed. Peternák, Miklós. Budapest: Képzőművészeti, 1991, p. 132.

Three to four decades ago the contrast between avant-garde and neo-avant-garde seemed a lot less relative, at least for certain advocates of the Marxist theory of art. And this brings us back to our initial proposition. Peter Bürger argued in favour of this opposition on a critical-hierarchical basis in his famous and massively criticized book on the theory of avant-garde (mentioned above), primarily in relation to fine art. Among others, Bürger founds his theory on Adorno's critique of consumer society, and so neo-avant-garde movements (more by ideology than by necessity) are excluded on account of being epigonic in repeating historical avant-garde and domesticating its critique of institutions and opportunistically succumbing to the capitalist art market (to Bürger, the greatest opportunist is Warhol).

Bürger's theory of avant-garde has received its critical responses over the years.<sup>12</sup> One of the responses (perhaps the most exhaustive, but by all means the most extensive) was the project led by Dietrich Scheunemann with the aim of revising Bürger's theory, comprising three volumes so far.<sup>13</sup> A number of studies in those volumes put forth the cinematic aspect, perhaps precisely because Bürger does not devote special attention to film; in fact, he hastens to exclude it from the scope of his inquiry. "Film is the stringing together of photographic images that because of the speed with which they flow past the eye of the spectator, create the impression of movement. In the film, the montage of images is the basic technical procedure. It is not a specifically artistic technique, but one that lies in the medium."<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Valcke criticizes Bürger's conception of montage from a number of aspects, out of which the critique of Bürger's thesis depreciating cinematic montage is the one that concerns us. Valcke cites Hans Richter on the mutually constructive relationship of cinematic montage and painting and on montage as "the expression of a new total experience". This new experience was observable in almost all art forms; for instance theatre and literature had both become receptive of this technique. "Bürger's argument appears particularly short-sighted in the light of the practice and theories of avant-garde cinema from the works of Walter Ruttmann and Man Ray to the works of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, in which montage became the dominant technique of composition, or in Eisenstein's words "the axiom", of the culture of cinema." That is, montage, argues Valcke, is not merely an inherent technical method of filmmaking, but a creative principle and way of thinking: we *perceive* images by associating them with other images, that is, in the medium of other images. "This fragmentary dimension of film aesthetics is a feature that it shares with other contemporary art forms."<sup>15</sup> Montage is therefore a method characteristic of fine art and film alike (without insisting on clarifying questions of origin and primacy). Bürger, however, refuses the introduction of technical reproduction into the discourse on art, and this elusion comes from the cult of the creative hand. All this is still peculiar, we might add, as it was Bürger himself who deduced montage (more precisely, the traditional occurrence of montage in fine art) from Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory, which is in turn organically related to technical reproduction – also treated by Benjamin as a primary problem –, one might say, as its *historical model*. Before concluding her study, Valcke cites Benjamin Buchloh: "The procedure of montage is one in which all allegorical principles are executed: appropriation and depletion of meaning,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lüdke, W. M. (ed.): *Theorie der Avantgarde. Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976; Buchloh, Benjamin: *Theorizing the Avant-Garde. Art in America*, 72. (November, 1984.); Foster, Hal: *What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde? October*, 70. (The Duchamp Effect) (Autumn, 1994.), 5–32.; Pál Deréky – András Müllner (eds.): *Néma? Tanulmányok a magyar neoavantgárd köréből* [Mu/te? Studies in Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde]. Budapest: Ráció, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Scheunemann, Dietrich (ed.): *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*. Amsterdam – Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000; Scheunemann, Dietrich (ed.): *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2005; Graf, Alexander – Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.): *Avant-Garde Film*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Bürger, Peter: *Theory...* op. cit. p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> Valcke, Jennifer: *Montage in the Arts: A Reassessment*. In Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.): *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2005, p. 305.

fragmentation and dialectical juxtaposition of fragments, and separation of signifier and signified”<sup>16</sup>

The principle of separating signifier and signified correlates with the avant-garde cinematic trend described by Peter Wollen. Although not absolutely, as avant-garde film is also diversified, and in Wollen’s conception the structural-material trend of the sixties paradoxically returns precisely to André Bazin’s ontologism. Furthermore, it is not a substantial difference that the latter posits the ontological inherence of the *pro-filmic event* in the medium of film, while the former ambitions the self-reflexive, yet by circumventing the act of signification, direct display of the film’s *own material substrate*.<sup>17</sup> In another study, Wollen distinguishes two contemporary trends in avant-garde film (in the sixties), and ultimately considers Godardian avant-garde the successor of the subversive methods of classical avant-garde. He uses the term “historical avant-garde” here, but to him it means no more than the attribute suggests. To him, therefore, the distinction between earlier and later avant-garde is of merely historical, and hardly critical or value-based relevance. Wollen makes an organic connection between classical avant-garde *arts* and the avant-garde *film* of the sixties: he refers to Godard as avant-garde just like he does to Picasso and Braque. So, according to him, these temporally distant artists and artworks are connected by avant-garde radicalism, which focuses on *coupure*, in other words, the break. “The innovations of Picasso, and Braque, were seen as having an implication beyond the history of painting itself. They were intuitively felt, I think, very early on, to represent a critical semiotic shift, a changed concept and practice of sign and signification, which we can now see to have been the opening-up of a space, a disjunction between signifier and signified and a change of emphasis from the problem of signified and reference, the classic problem of realism, to that of signifier and signified within the sign itself.”<sup>18</sup> To Wollen, this *work* is of avant-garde nature, should it be performed before or after the Second World War (even if it does not preclude that certain avant-gardes might fall into the sin of substantiality in the cloak of materialism).<sup>19</sup> If, contrary to Bürger’s view, we acknowledge that this work can also be performed by neo-avant-garde artworks in their own way, the question is how they manage to do so, and (now approaching our topic) how the experimental film of BBS manages to do so.

With respect to our train of thought, it is not insignificant that emphasising the prominent role of montage does not mean that neo-avant-garde activity would be condensed into a single concept. The case is merely that allegorically based montage, which has already been touched on, plays a significant role in this activity on a theoretical as well as practical level. Just as montage is a substantial (even if not exclusive) component of neo-avant-garde on the one hand, it has to be emphasized on the other hand that experimental film evidently did not derive it from neo-avant-garde. As I have mentioned above, we may reckon with a number of (experimental) filmmakers for whom montage is a fundamental procedure not only in its so-called natural or simple dramaturgical form, but also in its “intellectual” function.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 306.

<sup>17</sup> Wollen, Peter: “Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film. In Wollen, Peter: *Readings and Writings. Semiotic Counter-Strategies*. London: Verso, 1982, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> Wollen, Peter: The Two Avant-Gardes. In Wollen, Peter: *Readings...* op. cit. p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> This continuity is also suggested by Miklós Peternák in the introduction to *F.I.L.M.*, a collection of studies edited by him: “The same up-to-date artistic avant-garde thinking and creative method, which had been present in the 20s-30s and in the short period between 1945-48, resurfaces in the mid-60s in Hungary – isolated and accessible to just a few, but all the more significant and its impact all the more substantial.” Peternák, Miklós: *A magyar avant-garde film [Hungarian Avant-Garde Film]*. In P., M. (ed.): *F.I.L.M. A magyar avant-garde film története és dokumentumai [The History and Documents of Hungarian Avant-Garde Film]*. Budapest: Képzőművészeti, 1991, p. 25. – Apparently (as opposed to Bürger mentioned above, and in accordance with Wollen) Peternák opts for the poetic unity of avant-garde, even though, as he underlines, the political conditions hindered the continuity of this unity time and again.

Being primarily filmmakers, for them, this intellectualism or dialectical character is a device of cinematic self-reflection.<sup>20</sup>

Miklós Erdély, to be discussed extensively on the following pages, began and pursued his career under the influence of, actively participating in, and even formulating the poetic of actionist (activist) neo-avant-garde. His films were shot at Béla Balázs Studio as a part of this activity, and as experimental filmmaker, montage became one of his central concepts and devices.<sup>21</sup> In art theory, he is consensually considered a neo-avant-garde artist who began not as a filmmaker (although he wanted to), and for whom filmmaking was only one of the various artistic activities he practiced.<sup>22</sup> His films were more or less closely related to the ongoing film language experiments at BBS. These films can be positioned somewhere midway between documentaries and structural material films focusing on the material substrate of film. They are not documentaries, and although they often operate with deceptively documentary effects, they only simulate the stylistic traits of documentary film. They are not feature films either, for they only simulate appropriating the codes of feature film, in a similar manner as with documentary codes. Neither are they abstract or “fine art” films, such as those of Dóra Maurer or Ákos Birkás, although they do employ such solutions; nor montage-based investigations into film language in a narrow sense, as practiced by Huszárík, Tóth, Tímár or Bódy, although classification is getting more difficult as we are heading towards the core of the problem, and certainly more relative. Still, his films bear some traits from almost all of these, owing their experimental nature to this complexity, multi-layeredness and syncretism of genres among others. The break in these films composed for montage takes place on various levels. We can speak of the break with (a) linguistic or mediatic convention, and closely related to this, the denouncement of tacit rules and conventions concerning artistic themes. Incidentally, the consequence of this break, which had taken place on various levels, was the banning of *Version* (1979), to be analyzed

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<sup>20</sup> István Bácskai Lauró's film *Enchantment* (1963) (with Miklós Mészöly as protagonist); Zoltán Huszárík's *Elegy* from 1965 (to Gábor Bódy this film was the first instance of using a conscious film language); János Tóth's *Arena* from 1970 (this film is a heavily loaded cultural archive, in which, owing to the montage sequences, the arena fulfils the role of starting point for a growing system of metaphors), his *Movie Image* (1976) or *Study I, II.* (1974 and 1975; this latter pair was made in the frame of the film language series, they are “exclusively workshop studies”, with such recurring motifs as candle and flame, flame distorted by lens, alchemy symbols, etc.); Gábor Bódy's *Four Bagatelles* (1972–1975); Péter Tímár's urban film *Visus* from his period as trick cinematographer (1976, reminiscent of Ruttmann's *Berlin...* and Vertov's *Man...*, with sections entitled “Anatomy of Vision”, “Light Perception”, “Contour”, “Refraction”, “Resonance”). The montages applied in the terrain of visuality are accompanied in the majority of these films by music from contemporary composers, many of whom contributed to shots recorded at the Studio. Some examples: in *Enchantment*, the footages of the Sepsey and Szécsi String Quartets along with the underscore of the Péter Eötvös piece performed by them comprise a counterpoint to the footages of labour at the foundry of Ózd; Péter Eötvös also composed music for *Arena*; *Visus* used parts of László Vidovszky's music.

<sup>21</sup> As one of the main sources for the *Film Language Series* within BBS, Gábor Bódy names “the efforts of the artistic avant-garde to draw cinematography into its domain of expression”. Gábor Bódy: Creative Thinking Device. “Experimental Film” in Hungary. In: László Beke – Miklós Peternák (eds.): *Gábor Bódy 1946–1985. A Presentation of His Work*. Budapest: Múcsarnok – Central Board of Hungarian Cinematography, Ministry of Culture, 1987, p. 267. This effort can be identified as not only the source of the mentioned series, but also as a tendency spanning the history of BBS from the late sixties.

<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, it is important to note that the films of other filmmakers also perform work similar to Erdély's films. Tamás St.Auby's *Centaur* (1975/1985) or Tibor Hajas' *Self Fashion Show* (1976) employ montage with similar radicalism. (In his study, published in the present volume, Sándor Hornyik examines these films, emphasizing the key role of montage in them.) These films clearly bear neo-avant-garde marks derived from the fine art or actionist activity of the filmmakers in question, and as adaptations, these marks play a role in constructing the reflexive structure of the cinematic medium. On the other hand, several films of Béla Balázs Studio are documentations of actions performed by neo-avant-garde artists. Such is László Beke and Dóra Maurer's *Views I.* (1985), incorporating, among others, an 8mm footage of the happening *The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)* performed in 1966 by Gábor Altörjay, Miklós Jankovics and Tamás St.Auby.

comprehensively below. Although scandal, to bring up such an old notion traditionally associated with avant-garde, is not a structural factor, nor is the notion of taboo, but ultimately the break mentioned by Wollen is not a structural feature either, as it only gains its substantive role in contrast with (the recipient's) convention. Each of the films to be discussed is characterized by "scandalous" break with convention, by conflict manifested in the form of breaking taboos. However, this break is achieved by highlighting the cinematic signifier, by bringing it to the forefront, or (to cite the Prague structuralists) by its *actualization*; one might say, via a conflict dramatized on the various levels of the signifier. The conflict brought about on the level of signifier reaches back to the very Eisensteinian tradition that serves as a primary source of inspiration for Hungarian (neo-)avant-garde,<sup>23</sup> in triggering consequences that are manifested in effects beyond the given structure. As we shall see, the avant-garde ideology expressed in studies, essays, application materials and short descriptions, expounding the effect of these films, very much reckoned with the effect resulting from the structure of montage. In fact, the effect of transforming consciousness was one of its express goals. Provocation, breaking taboos, scandal, censorship and banning are all related to this, the conflict taking place on the level of signifier, manifested in series of montages.

### Miklós Erdély's Concept of Montage and *Partita*

Miklós Erdély wrote several studies in film theory, the first and most important of which is the program setting *Montage-hunger* from 1966.<sup>24</sup> In this text, Erdély lists examples of the fine art and cinematic tradition of montage in classical avant-garde, referring to Eisenstein: "Poetry – as Eisenstein points out in his study *The Cinematographic and the Ideogram* (!) – has been operating with the montage technique since its beginnings. However, we must not overlook the profusion of images that have flooded poems in recent times to an extent of crowding out almost everything else. It is difficult not to interpret this phenomenon as a symptom of the montage-hunger that has arisen across the arts."<sup>25</sup>

This citation explains the title of the study, and by referring to poetry, it introduces an idea that Erdély can expound by reasoning in favour of the poetic essence of montage. "Displaced from its process into a possibly contrastive environment, a phenomenon-fragment receives symbolic meaning, and its suggestiveness increases by repetition." The expression "receives symbolic meaning" can be understood if contrasted with the phenomenon when the cinematic image "brings" rather than "receives" its conventional and symbolic meaning. Eisenstein is brought to the forefront of the study not only by being appointed as a precursor by way of allusion, but the rhetoric used here is also strongly evocative of the Russian director, his phrasing emphasizing the organic, vivid and cellular nature of montage (Even if

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<sup>23</sup> I am extending this beyond neo-avant-garde because Soviet film, operating on the basis of the montage principle, played a fundamental role in none other than the evolution of Lajos Vajda's and Dezső Korniss' avant-garde montage painting, a secret and disregarded historical antecedent of neo-avant-garde.

<sup>24</sup> This text is also mentioned by Bódy: "The prototype of experimental film was established by private film-making in the mid 60s, when some etudes and views of Miklós Erdély were made public (under the title "Montage-hunger", Valóság, 1966.)" Gábor Bódy: Introduction to the Work Schedule of Group K/3. In: László Beke – Miklós Peternák (eds.): *Gábor Bódy 1946–1985...*, op. cit. p. 253.

<sup>25</sup> Erdély, Miklós: *Montázs-éhség* [Montage-hunger]. In E., M.: *A filmről* [On Film]. Ed.: Peternák, Miklós, Budapest: Balassi – BAE Tartóshullám – Intermedia, 1995, p. 100. Erdély confuses the title of Eisenstein's study, which is correctly: "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" (trans.: Jay Leyda, in: *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Harcourt, 1969. pp. 28-44.). More importantly, according to his references, Erdély thoroughly studied Eisenstein's book, and he wanted to emphasize something important regarding the notion of "ideogram" with the exclamation mark. Hieroglyphs are mentioned several times in Erdély's study, not only in the Eisensteinian context, but also in his references to Artaud, continuing Eisenstein's tradition, as it was Eisenstein himself who analysed the mechanism of montage on the model of the ideogram.

Erdély argues with Eisenstein regarding Dovzhenko's *Earth*). This accordance then reaches climax in the revolutionary principle of montage, which is a direct consequence of the dialectic relationship, the "organic" evolution of montage-forming elements, and the true goal of which, taking effect beyond the structure of the work, is *mobilization* in the form of provoking scandal or suggestively causing enlightenment – that is, when the film "receives" meaning in the present of reception. This reasoning is present in almost every text Erdély wrote about montage, including *Montage Gesture and Effect*, indicating very well how in relation to the (in certain cases neo-avant-garde) moving image, *action*, which is of primary importance to classical avant-garde, can "come to life" through the mobilization brought about by movement. "With its scissors, montage cuts into the image of status quo consecrated by customs and social norms. And when reassembling it in other relations, it creates an anarchic hodgepodge that is outraging to the traditional approach."<sup>26</sup> This work on the structure means a break between the elements, or as it was expressed in the 1973 debate on montage, it means *stochastic* (random) cutting, which disrupts the unity of composition by juxtaposing disparate elements.<sup>27</sup> The suggestion that "in the same visual frame, heterogeneous elements of reality" (Lajos Végvári) become ideograms and so render the structure of signifiers pictographic is proposed several times in the debate mentioned above. Végvári points out in connection with Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Amorous Old Woman and Young Man*: "Cranach intensifies nature to a point where it almost becomes ideogrammatic."<sup>28</sup>

The argument is slightly elliptic, so I shall amend it: Cranach intensifies the features of juxtaposed figures by polarizing their contrasts to an almost ideogrammatic extent. Erdély's paragraphs emphasizing Eisensteinian and Artaudian hieroglyphic construction also suggest the same, with the difference that to him, extreme polarity entails an exhaustion of signs, and the process results in changing the recipient's condition. The act of making us conscious of the hieroglyphic-ideogrammatic nature of montage, which would result in inferring that montage is after all a puzzle or enigma to be deciphered and solved, is obscured in Erdély's writing by the introduction of "mobilization" or "affecting": "This other sphere can be considered as the emotional level, which can be expressed by saying that every irritation affecting the recipient via the series of segments represents a new quality, neutralizing the original meaning, and changing the recipient's condition by emotional accumulation. Again in other words: the meaning of the work is always asserted in its effect and never in its solution."<sup>29</sup> This is the moral also present in Erdély's discourse on happening, in the following form: "Happening does not want to be a new art, it wants to be the successor of arts. There is greater need for events than for artworks."<sup>30</sup> Happening and experimental film connect in their event-like nature, which is further catalyzed by structure. The event is based on its effect on the viewer, and not on deciphering the structure. This view places emphasis on immediacy based on congeniality instead of the ideogrammatic signifier, although it is important to add that the means is obviously indispensable for the goal. Indispensable, but

<sup>26</sup> Erdély, Miklós: Montázsgeisztus és effektus [Montage Gesture and Effect]. In E., M.: *A filmről* [On film]. Op. cit. p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> *Montázs* [Montage]. Ed.: Horányi, Özséb, foreword: Szépe, György, Budapest: Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont Edition, 1977, p.32. On the one hand, the apperception of cutting as random depends on convention; on the other hand, seemingly natural convention (such as language) still just conceals its montage-like structure.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 24. – Similar things are pointed out regarding Endre Bálint's *Montage*: the figures acquire ideogrammatic importance; the work reflects discrepancies between concepts instead of real relations.

<sup>29</sup> Erdély, Miklós: Montázsgeisztus és effektus [Montage Gesture and Effect]. Op. cit. p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> Erdély, Miklós: Istentisztelet a valósághoz. A happeningről [Homage to Reality. On Happening] , *Filmvilág*, 1999/3.



secondary: the work accomplished on the level of signifier (designated as *coupure*, or break, by Wollen) is done in favour of a greater goal – to bring about the event.

Erdély compares the emotional (poetic) power inherently attributed to the structure of montage to the effect of music.<sup>31</sup> He describes the holographic structure, defined in contrast with the linear structure, as well as the “Indian meditative method” as structures that operate analogously with music.<sup>32</sup> In *Partita* (1974) the recurring image of the Indian dancer is a sign, an ideogram, a model of the “total level of meaning”. The Indian dance is used as a model in *Partita*, explains Erdély in his text entitled *Specifications to Partita*, “and it is exploited like a graft”. Evoking the Eisensteinian rhetoric as mentioned earlier, the horticultural graft-metaphor continues: “Inserted into the film’s incised material, it can be gauged that film is capable of satisfying the tradition *without any translation or unified system of signs*. [...] As if everything had been asked from the dancer’s face and she flashed all the possible answers. And she even has the time and the strength to advise and suggest all this.”<sup>33</sup> If I understand correctly, the insertion or “grafting” of the images of the Indian dancer serve for us to gauge the directness of the film, that is, whether the film can realize the principle of totality, the communication of condition triggering mobilization, which has evolved in other ways in tradition/art (with dance or music, for instance). If the montage film built on stochastic incisions goes beyond the unified systems of signs and becomes direct, then that is expressed by the “traditional” images of the dancer, describable by the notion of “graft”, in a self-reflecting manner: while inherently contrastive, and dialectically reflecting the “whole”, her movements even provide some kind of guidance for viewing the montage film. In the present case, the graft is indeed a *foreign body*, since a traditional ethnographic sequence of images is inserted into a montage film, recurring time and again, *symbolizing* the basic nature of montage film by practically relating it. What Erdély does therefore, is that he grafts the montage with an orientaling *mise en abyme*, giving rise to double layering inasmuch as he inserts a symbolic meta-graft into the series of grafts. At the same time, he more or less contradicts the ideal of montage with this meta-graft, or more specifically, with the commentary accompanying it, since montage itself is practically made up of nothing but foreign bodies, grafts, among which there is in fact no original host body, and so no hierarchical distinction between the components can be posited. However, if we accept this to be possible, then we can assume practically every element to become “extraneous to montage”. As a result of the increasing antagonism between the elements of the montage, each of them become ideogrammatic and allegorical on the one hand, and even self-reflexive on the other, consequently bearing narrative potential. As I shall attempt to demonstrate below in relation to experimental films, I am by far not claiming that montage can be deciphered

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<sup>31</sup> In this, he also relates to Eisenstein, his precursor, and Tolstoy, cited by him: “Employing for source the structure of human emotion, it unmistakably appeals to emotion, unmistakably arouses the complex of those feelings that gave birth to the composition. In all the media of art – and in film art most of all, no matter how neglected by this medium – it is by such means, primarily, that is achieved what Lev Tolstoy said of music: »Music transports me immediately into the condition of soul in which he who wrote the music found himself at that time...«” Eisenstein, Sergei: *The Structure of the Film* (1933, 1939). Trans.: Jay Leyda. In: *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. p. 153. (The Tolstoy citation is from *Kreuzer Sonata*.) “But it is very difficult to represent a condition in film. Music helps a lot. Music is itself a condition diagram.” Beszélgetés Erdély Miklóssal [Conversation with Miklós Erdély] (10. 04. 1985.). In M., E.: *A filmről* [On Film], op. cit. p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Or as he writes in his study entitled *Mozgó jelentés (A zenei szervezés lehetősége a filmben)* [Shifting meaning (Possibilities of musical structuring in film)]: “The yogi analyses the world not step by step, but with absorption, endeavouring to understand the whole as *one* [...]” Erdély: *A filmről* [On Film], op. cit. p. 124. It is important to point out the fact (not to be elaborated due to lack of space) that Erdély, Bódy, Dobai and St.Auby were all aware of linguist János Zsilka’s theory exploring the *organic* system of language.

<sup>33</sup> Erdély, Miklós: Felsorolások [Specifications], in E. M.: *A filmről* [On Film], op. cit. p. 128. (Italics by me – M. A.)

without problems. On the contrary: the enigmatic inherent in its code-like nature turns into the critique of required directness. It is not so easy to leave the signifier behind.

### The enigmatic/parodic montages of *Version*

Self-reflection practiced with the help of montage is also present in Erdély's much analyzed film, *Version*, and in complex relationship with the film's narrative.<sup>34</sup> Erdély shot this film in black and white, rendering the represented events mythical (similarly to Bódy's *American Torso*) on the one hand, and using the two photographic "primeval colours" to polarize the opposition of the characters even more on the other hand. In an interview, he connected the basic idea of *Version* to the shooting of his film *Dream Reconstructions* (1977), as apparently someone had scratched his beard on set, evoking in Erdély the archetypal image of the enigmatic bearded Jew.<sup>35</sup>

This "black" image is integrated, in antagonism with the "white maid", into the adaptation of Krúdy's documentary novel entitled *Solymosi Eszter of Tiszaeszlár*, which discusses the famous blood libel.<sup>36</sup> Owing to the colour montage, these characters become ideograms, abstract carriers of values and features, concretizations of stereotypical thinking, and this schematic puppet-like or allegorical character is further enhanced by the actors' "play" (or non-play).<sup>37</sup> The work that the film is designed to carry out is related to this. "I wanted somehow to project the archetypal image of these bearded men and that virginal whiteness, so as to alleviate the soul and the heart."<sup>38</sup>

The trauma that Erdély wanted to "project" and deal with in this montage-like and profoundly stereotypical opposition is the trauma of terror and anti-semitism. The provocative challenge in all this is that after Krúdy, he adapted a topic that had already been a taboo of the age, apparently without guiding and "enlightening" commentary.<sup>39</sup> The method itself is

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<sup>34</sup> A large proportion of the films made at Béla Balázs Studio can be considered more or less neo-avant-garde. However, the present paper focuses on and thoroughly explores a single example. The reason of this is, on the one hand, that due to lack of space and capacity, I cannot include all the relevant BBS films in this paper. On the other hand, since as far as I know, the cinematic use of neo-avant-garde genres has not been discussed thoroughly, I consider argumentative explication and demonstration the most important functions of this study.

<sup>35</sup> Krónika. Erdély Miklós és Antal István beszélgetése a *Verzióról* [Chronicle. Miklós Erdély and István Antal discussing *Version*.], in Erdély: *A filmről* [On Film], op. cit. p. 249.

<sup>36</sup> Krúdy, Gyula: *A tiszaezslári Solymosi Eszter* [Solymosi Eszter of Tiszaeszlár], Magvető, Budapest, 1975. (As yet, the novel has not been translated to English. The page numbers indicate the loci of original citations in Hungarian. – the trans.)

<sup>37</sup> The narrator of the Krúdy-novel also refers to Eszter as a "dull doll" (p. 34). András Bálint Kovács characterizes László Vikár, who plays Móric Scharf, as a "perplexing puppet". Cf. Kovács, András Bálint: *Dilettantizmus és valóságteremtés* [Dilettantism and the Creation of Reality], in *Mozgó Film 1. A BBS Műhelykiadványa*, ed.: Forgács, Péter. Budapest: Béla Balázs Stúdió, 1984, p. 108.

<sup>38</sup> Krónika [Chronicle], op. cit. p. 249. (Italics by me – M. A.) Erdély alludes to this psychoanalytical or national-psychological intention several times throughout the interview in various metaphors. He speaks of stirring up the "residue", and that he "wanted to stir up and bring a murky layer to the surface". As a matter of fact, the regulation of the River Tisza can be perceived as a manifestation of the regulatory role of the superego, concealing the unregulated nature, the traumas of the Hungarian national psyche and of Eastern Europe in general. To use a Biblical reference, film can perform the task of clarification when it directs the trauma from darkness into light, allowing us to cope with it, says Erdély, and this simile recalls in its reader a conversation with Miklós Peternák and Ivan Ladislav Galeta, the part about slideshows, in fact: "If you project a lot of images on top of each other, it will become lighter and brighter ..."

<sup>39</sup> One of Krúdy's footnotes to the *Preface* to his novel makes it clear that "the blood libel was an unfounded, evil forgery", and the *Prologue* is similarly unequivocal (pp. 15, 23.). Beyond these commentaries, however, tension is maintained throughout the documentary novel, whose narrator speaks in the voice of a stereotypical anti-semite, or, more precisely, mockingly appropriates this voice: "He was seen in Tiszaeszlár."; "His caftan has two pockets, each of which could hide a child. He holds a long club, like a walking cane. God forbid that anyone

already confusing, as Erdély grafts three cinematic (sub)genres in a montage-like fashion: documentary, feature film, and behind-the-scenes shots; but these are not distinctly separated as real and fictive (true/false) genres.<sup>40</sup> The syncretism of genres gives rise to a situation where on account of discarding the true/false coordinates, the viewer will not find a foothold even regarding the images appearing before their eyes. All this is challenging and can pose an obstacle to say the least, because (in the part that we shall name feature film-like for the sake of simplicity) the Jews incise Esther Solymosi, and the beggar Jew played by Gyula Pauer rapes her. The radical explanation given by Erdély in the mentioned interview serves to further obstruct the viewer: “This film does not make a distinction between what someone thinks and what actually happens.”<sup>41</sup> But this doesn’t need to be taken at face value, for many reasons. On the one hand, with the techniques employed throughout the “interrogation”, Erdély gradually expresses the transformation of images in the “interrogated” consciousness, which is in fact trained, brought under proceedings. For instance, he replays the same scene several times: Esther is invited by the Rabbi into the room; she enters and puts the candle holder on top of the wardrobe. We see this three times in short succession, always different versions, in which the beggar Jew always comes closer, so that in the final sequence he embraces the girl and escorts her out. The sequence shows the slow, imaginary realization of the originally made-up (conceptual) charges, as an obvious reference to show trials (conceptual trials) and to the neo-avant-garde genre of conceptualism, which I shall discuss later.

The credibility of the images is similarly undermined by the rape scene, witnessed by Móric Scharf through the keyhole of the synagogue door. These sequences were created using the technique of the second look, meaning that the shots were re-filmed from the editing table, rendering their texture increasingly grainy, coarse, abstract and blurry, associating it with the Co-op avant-garde, which focused on the effects of the material. During the rape, the view through the keyhole shows a close-up of the ecstatic beggar Jew from an unrealistic angle, so close as only the victim of the rape could see him. This is one of the longest scenes in the film, with the camera fixed on a single ecstatic face. This fixation of damaged quality finds its match in the following close-up, which is not so damaged in terms of texture, but similarly alienating. Móric Scharf (in a manner absolutely forbidden in fiction film) looks into the camera, resting his void, melancholy gaze in it for a long while, but this gaze is not followed by engaging the viewer in the form of a counter-gaze – the figure clearly looks out into the audience.<sup>42</sup> These and other methods ensure that the credibility of the imaginary image formed through coercive training should remain relative despite the director’s radical intention.

The image of Móric Scharf shown here integrates all the features that, according to Parker Tyler, characterize underground film, and make it similar to happening and Pop Art. More specifically, *fragmentation* due to the lack of conventional reverse shot, the

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encounter him at night. His eyes are ablaze with a savage hunger for murder, like those of a wild beast. His voice is like the wail of a lynx, but his laughter is so cold as if a snake were shrieking in his throat.” (p. 27.); “The wandering Jew gave the impression of such a loitering rascal.” (p. 35.); “Tomorrow they will be electing the schochet [ritual slaughterer] in Tiszaeszlár. Jews from the Trans-Tisza region have gathered to demonstrate their skills before the community of Tiszaeszlár. Who will they slaughter? A calf or a child?” (p. 39.)

<sup>40</sup> This intertwining of genres and motifs has been pointed out in several relevant studies. Among others, cf. Kovács, András Bálint, op. cit.; Gelencsér, Gábor: *A Titanic zenekara. Stílusok és irányzatok a hetvenes évek magyar filmművészetében* [The Band of the Titanic: Styles and Tendencies in the Hungarian Film of the Seventies]. Budapest: Osiris, 2002, pp. 402–406.; Kérchy, Vera: A „midőn”-effektus mint a teatralitás jelenléte Erdély művészetében [The “Anon”-Effect as the Presence of Theatricality in Erdély’s Art]. *Metropolis*, 2007/4.

<sup>41</sup> Krónika, op. cit. p. 250.

<sup>42</sup> More on this in Tóth, Zoltán János: Montázsgeisztus és igazságeffektus. Erdély Miklós: *Verzió* [Montage Gesture and Truth Effect. Miklós Erdély: *Version*]. *Metropolis*, 2007/4.

experimental *mockery* of the actor's empathic close-up, and the spookishly *enigmatic* gaze out on the viewer.<sup>43</sup> Thus the alienating highlights reminiscent of the Brechtian method,<sup>44</sup> or the grafts and "actualizations", such as the grainy rape scene or the face of Móric Scharf gazing out of the screen become events of cinematic self-reflection. But Móric Scharf peeping through the keyhole embodies another kind of self-reflection as well, which, as opposed to the previous phenomena, does not counter the cinematic conventions in an alienating manner (texture of material, framing); instead, it holds up a double-sided parabolic mirror: to the viewer, through the metaphor of peeping, and to the film as manifested imagination.

With these "mirrors" we are again faced with an enigmatic parody of the functioning of cinematic representation. For the image of peeping Móric Scharf, in close unity with the sequences showing terroristically coercive training, practically crowning them, represents the transcendental position of the film's viewer as subject, as well as the ideological effects they are exposed to when the images of the film appear to them as real.<sup>45</sup> Using Parker Tyler's term – the taboo is the exploding peephole of the underground –, Móric Scharf becomes the subject of a peephole, and a few moments later the film puts the viewer into the very same position. The conceptuality of *Version* can also be interpreted from this aspect. "A work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art.", says Joseph Kosuth, arguing for the conceptual and self-defining nature of art.<sup>46</sup> This is valid for *Version* as well: Móric Scharf becomes the allegory, or the definition of the viewer inasmuch as his ideological training is correlated with the ever-current process of the reception of the film. If the autochthonous recalling of images in the subject is considered the ideal mental process, then Erdély's self-reflexive conceptual film shows how non-autochthonous or (a little wordplay) *experimental* images are formed in the subject. But this process does not only take place in *Version*. The point is precisely that from this film's perspective, the images of *film as such* are always inherently conceptual images that pretend to be real. Actually, they are experiments and reality-effects exercised on the mind – this is why they can be termed *experimental* images. *Version* makes it apparent how (political or visual) pressure creates images that imaginatively seem real, thereby demonstrating the adaptation of the terrorized consciousness via conceptual devices.<sup>47</sup> Insofar as we are discussing a conceptual film – as I have attempted to show –, doubts may arise concerning the congenial, immediate and mobilizing effect of the images. Enigmatic and parodic montage never guarantees

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<sup>43</sup> Parker Tyler refers to the underground films of the late fifties and early sixties as charade. Even if he makes no direct link, he perceives an analogy between their apparently improvisational nature and fetishism focusing on detail, in other words, between their fixated functioning and state of suspension (obstruction) on the one hand, and the similarly structured plastic forms of Pop Art on the other. Underground film, just like happening, is an *action* of enigmatic and generally mocking nature, a simple reassertion of anterior developments in painting and object-making: Dada and Surrealism – we should recall either René Clair and Francis Picabia's (*Entr'acte*), or Dalí – Buñuel's (*Un Chien Andalou*) collaboration. Cf. Tyler, Parker: *Underground Film. A Critical History*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1969, pp. 10–11. *Charade* has two components: puzzle and exaggerated mimetic acting. This might as well be termed "enigmatic mockery".

<sup>44</sup> Brecht, Bertolt: Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect. In Willett, John (ed. & trans.): *Brecht on Theatre*. Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 136-147..

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Baudry, Jean-Louis: Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2. Winter 1974-75. pp. 39-47. The above-mentioned motivic use of black and white in *Version* and its implication of stereotypical meanings also suggests an emphasized ideological symbolization. This is worthy of mention because *Version* can be seen as a critique of film as an ideological apparatus.

<sup>46</sup> Kosuth, Joseph: Art After Philosophy. In: Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter Howard (eds.): *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*. University of California Press, 1996, p. 844.

<sup>47</sup> This adaptation can be interpreted on various levels. Something we have not discussed, but what is important – to Erdély at least as much – with respect to the original story of the film, is the fear of effects, rooted in Móric Scharf's father complex, for the management of which assimilation appears to be the best practice. The first step in assimilation (in other words, adaptation) is false testimony against his own folk.

unconditional attunement, although it undoubtedly triggers the compulsive need of deciphering by suggesting the existence or the possibility of an ideogrammatic system that is not strictly conventional, but in some sense still grammatical.

Erdély's film is considered an example of new narrativity. If there is narrativity in the allegorical enhanced by enigmatic and parodistic montage, and there is, then I consider this claim acceptable. Nevertheless, I think it is referred to as such not primarily, or, *precisely not*, on account of its conceptual self-reflexivity, which develops through "incisions" and "grafts", but because apparently it narrates an identical story. It does indeed narrate a story, but in order to demonstrate the impossibility of visual representation. This could be refuted by the fact that in relation to *Spring Execution* (1985), another film that similarly seems narrative, and which also operates with the theme of terror, Erdély himself speaks of the "postmodern gesture after the conceptual". I suspect, however, that what he refers to is not some kind of new narrativity, much rather a montage-like compilation.<sup>48</sup> For at the same locus, he refers to the recorded footage as something they used for editing *Spring Execution* in a makeshift, sketchy, "not too realistic", "slightly botched" manner.<sup>49</sup> *Spring Execution* is a montage inasmuch as it is made up of found objects: it bears the mark of a neo-avant-garde filmmaker who relates to recorded images as if they were found objects, even showing the life of his film's protagonist as a found object in a Kafkaesque situation. Erdély tears him out of the relationships he has thought familiar, and returns him a stranger.

#### Other Critical Montages (*Self Fashion Show*, *Centaur*, *Archaic Torso*)

Due to the lack of space, I have not touched on some experimental films rooted in neo-avant-garde, which are relevant to our topic. The makers of these also arrived at Béla Balázs Studio from the art scene termed neo-avant-garde, and according to my opinion, a close connection can be traced between their literary, artistic, actionist activity and their films. As the structure of Erdély's films is comprised by originally avant-garde *enigmatic and parodic montage* applied to neo-avant-garde (referring to such neo-avant-garde genres, movements and tendencies that are already in close interaction, like Fluxus, conceptualism, the poetry of found objects, happening, concretism), Tibor Hajas created his *Self Fashion Show* (1976)<sup>50</sup> based on the divergent montage of sound and image by fusing the problems of performance and medium; Tamás St.Auby his *Centaur*,<sup>51</sup> based on the same principle, to be interpreted as provocative vertical montage; and Péter Dobai his *Archaic Torso*, which is also a montage in its own special way, even though it seemingly meets the requirements of a conventional portrait film. These are not feature films, they do not even have the fictional characteristics present to some extent in *Version* and *Spring Execution*, but they are still fictive in their own way, owing to the adapted montage. Nor are they documentaries, at least not in the classical sense. "A certain Kantian reservation in treating reality, a more direct form – these peculiarities characterize the other type of documentaries, which were presented even more

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<sup>48</sup> Beszélgetés Erdély Miklóssal [Interview with Miklós Erdély, 1985. 4. 10.], in E. M.: *A filmről* [On Film]. op. cit. p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> "I am not the cinematographer. I take the cinematographer's work as finished material. I don't really deal with the image. Just by and large. Because I don't have the capacity. If I'm looking through the camera, I can't do the rest, as simple as that. But this way, it is finished material. I almost conceive of it as found material." (Ibid.) The editor of the film was Mária Rigó, who said in an interview that Erdély considered music as the natural medium of the communication of condition, and he was even toying with the idea of recording images to music played on set, during the shooting, making the film practically without cutting, in the rhythm dictated by the music.

<sup>50</sup> Nándor Kovács's BBS film *Images and People* (1964) may be considered one of the predecessors of the film.

<sup>51</sup> Criticism testifies its provocative nature, cf. Hirsch, Tibor: Töretlen és megtört filmek. A Balázs Béla Stúdió tavalyi terméséről [Unbroken and Broken films. Last Year's Productions of Béla Balázs Studio], *Filmvilág*, 1986/6.

rarely and which had an individual nature [...] As the form of these films is closer to experimentalism than to the documentary, their subject cannot be connected to any circle of direct social problems. It would have been difficult to fit them into the picture of “film art” which developed in the sixties rather than the films of the newer type.”<sup>52</sup> Almost every one of Bódy’s words can be interpreted in terms of the above three films, although he only mentions one of them as an example. “Kantian reservation”: in other words, a disciplined employment of Kantian self-reflection, which in this case stands for the reflection of the approach, the communicational “category”, the cinematic medium, as well as a relative approach to the represented “reality”. “A more direct form”: this feature can be illuminated with a section of Péter Dobai’s essay in which he refers to Pasolini: “I conceive of making a frontal documentary film (a term used by Pasolini in connection with one of his new feature films) by picturing the filmmaker with the camera in his head, like the horn on a unicorn’s head, darting head-on in the face of reality.”<sup>53</sup> This seems to contradict the Kantian restraint insofar as it reflects a unicorn-like untameable naivety with regard to the cinematic recording of reality. However, in the course of shooting *Archaic Torso*, Dobai had to face “the bitter fact that the various material effects of representations only reveal a fragment of the human nature”.<sup>54</sup> With these films, directness is an illusory, although at some points exploited effect. “Expression in the immediate reality”, mentioned by Tamás St.Auby in relation to the first Hungarian happening, becomes an objective here as a *consequence* of the alienating critique (by montage) of intermediacy. “Individual nature”: this can be interpreted in terms of the subject of the films inasmuch as they focus on individuals, but also in terms of the unique style of the films. Indeed, although each in their own way, they all represent their characters in the scope of a medium-oriented anthropology of similar inclination as *cultural and political products created and presented by the medium*.

Finally, there is the question of “direct social problems”: Bódy denies that the films he mentions would directly evoke social issues, so in his reading, *Archaic Torso* does not do so either. Perhaps unjustifiably, I am appropriating his aspects for classification, applying them to films that he never discussed at the cited loci (and not incidentally). Nevertheless, I consider it important to test his observations on so-called critical montage films as well. To me, even the last approach seems to be justified: these films (*Self Fashion Show*, *Centaur*) are also not directly related to the sociological, at least if we understand that as conventional realism. However, they are very much “social” from the aspect that they focus on the critique of the mediatic possibilities of (self-)representation – although they are indeed not direct: that is not made possible by the politics of montage.

Translated by Dániel Sípos

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<sup>52</sup> Bódy, Gábor: Alternatives for the Young Hungarian Film. In: Beke, László – Peternák, Miklós (eds.): *Gábor Bódy*, op. cit., p. 259. The author mentions Dobai’s *Archaic Torso* (1971), Ferenc Grunwalsky’s *Motherhood* (1972) and his own *The Third* (1971) as examples of this type.

<sup>53</sup> Dobai, Péter: Angyalí agresszió. Írások Pier Paolo Pasoliniról és a filmről. [Angelic Agression. Writings on Pier Paolo Pasolini and Film], *Nagyvilág*, Budapest, 2002, p. 145.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142. We must add that the heroic unicorn-simile is useful, especially in terms of montage-likeness, which gives rise to fragmentariness: according to Pliny, the unicorn has the body of a horse, the head of a deer, the foot of an elephant and the tail of a lion, and a black horn of two arm’s lengths protrudes from its forehead.