Crisis, Sociology and Agency in 1970s Hungarian Documentary Cinema

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Abstract. This article explores synergies between Hungarian critical sociology in the 1960–70s and the documentary films made in Balázs Béla Stúdió in the same period. It treats the rationalization of social phenomena as a battle ground for meaning and claims that both representatives of the social sciences and filmmakers, on the one hand, called upon deficient social mechanisms and the inner contradictions of existing socialism and, on the other hand, pointed to the discrepancy between ideological and empirical perceptions of reality as the root cause of the crisis characterizing the consolidated Kádár regime. Adopting Clifford Geertz's conceptual matrix of the experience-near and the experience-distant production of social meaningfulness, the article explores how sociologists and makers of sociographic documentaries alike resisted the prevailing epistemic regime, more specifically how they punctured and undermined the ideological meanings of such concepts as maternity, the Romani, and cooperative democracy.[1]

Keywords: crisis, Kádár-regime, sociology, Hungarian sociological documentary cinema, episteme, agency.

Introduction

The etymology of the word "crisis" goes back to the Greek *krinein* which translates to English as "to separate, decide, judge" and came to be used in the 15th century to designate a "vitally important or decisive state of things," "a turning point in a disease" for example. Crisis was associated with uncertainty, the moment of silence, of being silenced by metaphysical and divine powers (if you believed in them) as these judged the worth of a human being. Crisis also refers to a juncture and the people at the juncture awaiting judgement. For long centuries,

crises were perceived as the silent drama of being overpowered, as a paralizing experience that forced the mind to its limits. In short, it was associated with the lack of agency. From the late 18th century, however, at around the time modern philosophy, politics and industry was born, crises was increasingly perceived as the hour of action, an opportunity to actively forge history. Crises came to mark decisive points where decisions were not beyond people's control, when forward-thinking was required.

The Greek *krinein* is also the origin of the Greek *kritikós* (capable of judgment), the Latin *criticus* (a judge, a censor, an estimator) and the French *critique* from which the English noun *critic* evolved. The modification of the meaning of the etymon urges us to think about the often torturous task of judgement as a human affair and no longer a divine examination. A critic not only judges his/her fellow men but also lays out facts and tests them against individual and social experience in hope of change, thus criticism is the precursor of action. Etymology teaches us that there is a critical dimension to any crisis that urges us to launch intellectual inquiry into what past actions have led to, the emergency at hand, and why.

This paper argues that the systemic crisis of the Kádár regime was suggested first not by a single film, but a manifesto, demanding the establishment of a Sociological Film Group in 1969. While films made earlier in the decade clearly illustrate that cinema reflected upon the underbelly of socialist modernization, these efforts were neither concerted, nor focused. Hoping to create a shared platform for dispersed documentary filmmaking, the manifesto for sociological cinema (hereafter Manifesto) urged filmmakers to carry out empirical research specific to the film medium, to translate sociological thinking into documentary filmmaking, to employ social scientific methods in collecting and processing visual data, to make these available for projects pursued by filmmakers affiliated with studios and to advance the analytical methods of documentary cinema. (Grunwalsky et al. 1969, 96.)

While the Manifesto does not offer an outspoken critique of the regime, I claim that its unprecedented appeal to social inquiry gave it a strongly critical edge. I make this claim in the face of scholarship according to which documentaries in the wake of the Manifesto never managed to live up to their own proposed standards and failed as an agency for systematic social inquiry. Voicing the sceptics, Ferenc Hammer regards the Manifesto as a self-consciously utopian program, which failed to deliver sociologically relevant representations (2009, 267). According to the author, it missed the target of producing visual facts devoid of stylization, dramatization and other forms of unscientific interference

(2009, 268–269); films lacked a shared methodology, therefore could not cover sociological problem areas in a structured manner, but remained isolated case studies (2009, 269), consequently were closer to social reportage than sociology (2009, 270). Disqualifying the sociological credibility of films on poetic grounds, Hammer expects more scientific rigour from a documentary deserving of the sociological label. Recognizing some of the shortcomings of the completed films, but lacking a normative definition of what sociological documentaries should look like, this article regards the relevant cinematic output in the wake of the Manifesto as a coherent addition to 1960's Hungarian sociological research.

I build make my case in three steps. First, I claim that, in the most general sense, thinking about social structures involves making known the tensions, contradictions, inequalities, the unbalanced distribution of resources and knowledge existing within the societal system, in short, recognizing the state of crisis. Social aware documentaries, just as much as the social sciences stem from this shared interest. In technocratic-authoritarian states, like Hungary during the Kádár regime, sociology was expected to rationalize symptoms of the crisis without questioning the ideological tenets of social policies. In order to understand crisis-oriented Hungarian documentary cinema of the 1960s and 70s, I contend, we need to comprehend the social awareness and the constraints of such awareness in research initiatives of sociology. Accordingly, the first part of this article explores the rise and official marginalization of critical sociology in Hungary as a means of building up the interdisciplinary historical framework within which the increasing interest towards sociographic documentaries in the period will be examined. As part of this, I differentiate between the social commentary and critique of mainstream feature and documentary films, arguing that the latter aspired to make the crisis known as part of lived reality.

The second part of the article discusses how anthropological models of understanding lived experience can help conceptualize the crisis which, I assert, took the form of a dual social consciousness, a symptom of the widening fissure between experience-distant and experience-near perceptions of the social field. The short excursion into relevant theories of Clifford Geertz and James C. Scott is necessary to explain why the factual portrayal of ordinary life and the subaltern voices captured by the documentary camera were sociologically relevant. In fact, anthropology helps us understand why documentaries could acquire a critical and political agency identical to the diagnoses of critical sociology and how both depleted official concepts designed to ensure ideological-hegemonic interpretations of social phenomena.

In the third section, the article offers what I call – quoting the title of a documentary by István Dárday and Györgyi Szalai – "anatomies of unique cases," films which stage the crisis of the epistemic regime of the consolidated Kádár-era by revealing how the experience-distant conceptual field systematically misrepresented and supressed experience-near epistemologies, social perceptions and self-awareness. My case studies cover different problem areas – ethnic minorities, the lack of autonomy, and rural poverty – state socialist governments claimed to have successfully identified and resolved, thus proving their commitment to humanizing the system. Pál Schiffer's *Cséplő Gyuri* (1978), Judit Ember and Gyula Gazdag's *The Resolution* (*A határozat*, 1972), and the Gulyás brother's *There are Changes* (*Vannak változások*, 1979) offers proof of the opposite. Calling for the social integration of Romani people, depicting cooperative democracy as an instable and politically corruptible form of group-autonomy, and, in the case of *There are Changes*, revealing the dehumanizing practices of forced modernization, these film, as I shall argue, punctured official discourses and evinced the blindness of ideological concepts towards social facts. My analysis of the films is by no means exhaustive and only aims to accentuate the critical horizon they share with the sociological research of the day and, more specifically, the mutual insight that to understand the crisis, understanding needs to steer clear of being simply a technology of (ideological, hegemonic) power and to begin the cartography of reality as a social, lived, and experience-near construct.

The Rise of Critical Sociology in Hungary

The eagerness of contributors to the Manifesto to engage with social structures in a critical-empirical manner was symptomatic of the late 1960s intellectual climate. Those willing to revise their support for dogmatic communism shared the urgency of András Hegedüs's claim from 1968: "in order to develop socialist society, it is not enough to raise the level of GDP, the permanent development of a social fabric is of equal importance […]. At this moment, everyday life, at least a longer period of it, is a more compelling "mentor" than the best teacher" (Hegedüs 1968, 497).[2] The scrutiny of the social fabric by both sociologists and filmmakers concentrated on signs of crisis, like the numbness and apathy of people and the deepening fissure between state and citizen especially after events of the Prague Spring.[3] Due to their shared interest in understanding social

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2   This and all the following quotes in Hungarian are my translation.
3   Hegedüs's own research called for the comprehensive humanization of social relations,

crisis, cinema – either consciously or unconsciously – came to translate the scope of inquiry specific to social sciences which, as Hegedüs contends, "have come, for the first time, to present problems in a sociologically valid manner, and, on the one hand, sought to confront numerous theoretical propositions with real conditions, while, on the other hand, allowed to draw up overarching patterns based on facts" (1968, 499). Satisfying these requirements, sociology would confirm that the ideological mind-set of political decision-makers led to incorrect conceptualizations of social phenomena.

To a large extent, social scientific research during the Kádár era was spearheaded by András Hegedüs, head of the Sociological Research Group. Hegedüs believed that "Marxist sociological knowledge has to have the vocation to critically intervene in order to adjust to each other the needs of socialist regime and society" and even after repeated warnings from ideological bodies, he was unwilling "to stop interpreting the economic and social effects of the reforms in proper sociological and political terms, nor did he ever seriously try readjusting his ideas to the required ideological standards deriving from the doctrine of the Party's supremacy" (Takács 2016, 255). Hegedüs and colleagues steadily argued for the correlation between social alienation and bureaucratic decision-making and pointed to the internal paradoxes of ideological Marxism, calling for pluralism within Marxism. For Party hardliners including János Kádár, such political arguments were undesirable and so was the return of social sciences to Marx's core arguments, a move that regarded state socialism as an illegitimate heir to the politico-philosophical foundations of Marxism. According to Ádám Takács, for Hegedüs it was essential that "the administration's bureaucratization tendencies [remained] subordinated to humanization," consequently "he reasserted the need for imposing "social supervision" on administration and management" (2016, 258). It is along these lines that we can grasp why sociology with an outspoken task to scrutinize social reality and as a scientific framework for the internal analysis of socialism was treated with suspicion by those party members who dreaded the sociological supervision of "the political." Hegedüs's strong faith in Marxism fed his conviction that critical social sciences would not only have to rationalize the crisis but resolve it by proposing solutions as to how socialism might exist for the benefit of society.

According to Iván Szelényi, "critical social sciences have two non-contradictory yet competing but also complementary branches: one offers the ideological

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the hierarchical ordering of which, he asserts, inevitably "hinders the development of the personality, the unfolding of individual abilities and capabilities in the various strata of society" (Hegedüs 2009, 102).

critique of socialist society, the other offers the (empirically founded) critique of the socialist ideology" (2015, 14). If Hegedüs was a key representative of the first branch, Szelényi belonged to the second and, as a value-neutral critical sociologist, "had no expectations for socialist society, only hoped to make sense of the system… to map out the inner ideological contradictions of society and critique the socialist ideology" (Szelényi 2015, 14). Making sense of the system involved the adoption of an empirical approach, but one not biased towards Marxist theories of social stratification and inequality. In his work with György Konrád, the Weberian framework of sociological inquiry proved useful to the study of Soviet-style society,[4] which – given its value-neutral stance – seemed to conform with the technocratic branch of the political elite. Before his fall from political grace, Szelényi could become an officially celebrated and supported young scholar because his novel framework of inquiry introduced fresh insights into technologies of social engineering, thus well suited forms of technocratic socialism.

Szelényi's distinction between the "immanent critique" of Soviet-style society, his own value neutral approach founded on empirical and statistical research, and its alternative version, Hegedüs's "transcendental critique" that found justification in critical Marxism and the social-democratic belief in humanizing the system, needs to be complemented with a third approach Takács explores though the sociological achievements of István Kemény. Adopting the sociological approach strongly reliant on statistical surveys, life interviews, extended field work and other empirical methods, Kemény's arguments were based on hard data. It was less the methods, than the researched phenomena – social stratification, poverty, the Roma minority group, state bureaucracy – that made Kemény politically unwelcome. This third path of critical sociology combined the scientific rigour of Szelényi's early research with Hegedüs's more confrontative approach. Kemény's heretic stand was already reflected in the research on working-class communities and his reluctance to talk about poverty as a real condition in existing socialism. Despite loud criticism from the Party, Kemény would use empirical scrutiny to expose the blindness of his critics towards as in the case of the research project focusing on executive level corporate decision making practices. Here, Kemény

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4   Szelényi fell from grace after de-emphasizing empirical research and applying a more politicized framework for the understanding of systemic inequalities. This is the case in *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (1979), where he and Konrád describe the rational–redistributive system "as a *dichotomous* class structure in which the classical antagonism of capitalist and proletarian is replaced by a new one between an intellectual class being formed around the position of the redistributors, and a working class *deprived of any right to participate in redistribution*" (italics in the original, Konrád–Szelényi 1979, 222).

called attention to the co-existent, yet contradictory nature of informal/personal goals and formal/authorized goals. Once again, the crude reality revealed via survey data undermined ideological narratives of how state socialist industrial units worked. Kemény's empirically founded sociology was no less heretical in his research project on the Roma population as he declined to regard them as a culturally backward developed ethnic community whose integration into majority society would resolve problems. As opposed to the official–culturalist perception, Kemény concentrated on social factors. Pointing to their underprivileged status as far as the labour market, living conditions, education, and access to quality housing was concerned, the research concluded that the "Roma-problem" would only by resolved by eliminating socialist poverty.

Beyond doubt, Takács is right to describe Kemény's position as unique. If Hegedüs rejected orthodox Marxism/ideological socialism on political grounds, while Szelényi did the same on theoretical grounds, Kemény's critique was primarily empirical. As Takács contends "[Kemény's] sociologically orchestrated disinterestedness was grounded in the very methodology he employed in most of his research. The combination of social-statistical quantification with deep interviewing offered empirical findings and a ground for social categorization which were substantial proof of the purely apologetic nature and scientific inadequacy of official Marxism-Leninism" (Takács 2017, 877). Questioning the legitimacy of social policies on grounds of objectivity was the hardest blow to ideological hardliners whose much-propagated successes in this field were revealed as a Pyrrhic victory.

Such a brief introduction cannot account for the state of social sciences as a whole, however, it draws up contours of both the framework of sociological interrogation of the time and the politics of such interrogation. Hegedüs's ideology-focused inquiries and Szelényi's and, to a greater degree, Kemény's empirically-grounded explorations depended on each other and secured a healthy dialogue between the study of social macro- and the microstructures. Ideally, these would have allowed social policies to be evaluated based on their actual social effect and would have likewise enabled local observations to modify procedures of global planning. The impossibility of this to happen made intellectuals, amongst them filmmakers, aware of the strategy to accurately capture the crisis of the consolidated Kádár-era. Sociographic documentary cinema dwelled upon this impossibility in the sense that filmmakers understood that the political elite, more precisely its technocratic branch, would only tolerate value free films serving the demands of ideological and not social policymakers. In light of

this, the Manifesto shared with critical sociology the impossibility of having its proposed program officially accepted or of making a widespread impact. What I call impossibility was, nevertheless, not a failure. On the contrary, it was a significant leap forward resulting in intellectual (self-)empowerment. The task was no longer to ensure the sociological control of the political but to undertake the sociological vivisection of the political which in the case of sociographic documentaries, as I shall discuss later, involved the visual documentation of social microstructures under the hegemony of ideological concepts.

Social Reflection in Narrative Cinema

Sociographic documentaries took advantage of cinema's natural ability to capture empirical reality and rationalized the crisis by documenting the fracturedness of the social body along the ideology vs. reality binary. To achieve this aim, they would not settle for a vantage point that transcended social reality, even if many regarded such a position as being uncinematic. While there is a strong normative element in the term "uncinematic," it is fair to state that as films came to master (technically, stylistically, and ethically) the first-person social experience, they drifted away from what was regarded as "cinema proper," mainstream and narrative cinema. Not that films had been blind to the social field before their first contact with social sciences. In fact, there is a social layer to any cinematic representation, especially in the case of narrative cinema, the creators of which – just as social scientists preparing new research projects – pick topics ridden with anomalies, tensions, and conflicts. This appeal for conflicts was especially strong in state-socialist Eastern Europe, where awareness towards crises became integral to the politics of cinematic authorship.

Niche audiences all over the region, but more specifically in Hungary, welcomed each new social drama release as a moment of truth and clarity in the face of state propagated falsities. Gábor Gelencsér regards these cynical and disillusioning social reflections about society, human relationships, and generational ideals the cinematic "mainstream" of the 1970s (Gelencsér 2002, 18). It is telling that Gelencsér himself puts the word mainstream into quotation marks, since political cinema was not especially popular in the period and there is little to prove that there was outstanding social demand for such films. Yet there they were, being dominant without being popular– a rather contradictory situation. Anyhow, the crisis of cinema was itself a symptom of a more global social crisis, the growing sense of apathy and disinterest in political activism. It is no wonder that

filmmakers with a sense of artistic purpose failed an audience lacking political purpose in their lives, and, consequently, started looking for meaning elsewhere, often turning away from public capacities and retreating into the private sphere. Even though, directors with the heritage of the previous decade's activist cinema might have justly felt that their integrity as political aware artists was proven by both their commitment to this sense of purpose and their defiance to make entertaining, popular films apathetic audience much demanded. Having to exist in a vacuum, however, was not a hindrance but the necessary precondition for films to acquire their voice as narratives of crisis. This also illuminates why these films could be dominant without being popular. What might seem as an economically irrational and contradictory position, made absolute sense in terms of *la politique des auteurs* and also explicates why the representation of crisis was regarded as the precondition of credible and legitimate social cinema.[5]

In light of the above correlation between credibility and social critique, there was a strong preference, or even compulsion, on the part of art cinema to use crisis narratives. Socio-dramas turned to literature for inspiration, but even in cases when they did not, films employed scripted dialogues, preconceived dramatic structures, formulaic situations, and skilled actors who often sounded as plain illustrations of social types. In response to the threat of credibility posed by repetitiveness and the proliferation of clichés, filmmakers adopted new aesthetic forms. In fact, Gelencsér's impressive taxonomy of 1970s "mainstream" cinema takes stock of the manifold strategies striving to reinvent conventional narrative devices and identifies the docu-dramas of the cinematic Budapest School (epitomized by directors such as István Dárday, Györgyi Szalai, Pál Schiffer, Judit Ember and Béla Tarr amongst others) as examples of non-abstract, "authentic" and "true-to-life" cinema (2002, 17). Putting these adjectives in quotation marks gives recognition to the ambiguities realistic representation in feature cinema, a narrative format that employed aesthetic ideologies (like realism) and translated social conflict into a poetic experience that appealed to sensitivities of art cinema

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5   Extensive research has been conducted on the "mainstream" cinema of this period. The aesthetic and stylistic approach, Gelencsér argues, "can be productively applied to those periods of Hungarian cinema when ideological and political control of the industry was less direct" (2002, 9) and his seminal volume *A Titanic zenekara* [The Band of the Titanic] illustrates how crisis narratives differed from each other not as much in content and social commentary but in their presentation of dramatic material. Another research at Eötvös Loránd University (OTKA 116708) explored the social history of Hungarian cinema while offering insight into the different layers, patterns and historical trajectories of the crisis narratives. A content-based approach takes into consideration individual features like age, gender, profession, education, social position and milieu, place of residence, cultural preference, etc. and also examines how narrative combinations of these render legible different types of crises.

audiences eager for symbols, allegories, parables, satire, grotesque, etc. While I believe no representation can fully free itself of such ambiguities, sociographic documentaries are closest to shaking off these quotation marks.

What Do Documentaries Do When They Claim to Offer Sociological Representations?

Discussing Hungarian sociographic documentaries, Andrea Pócsik makes reference to Clifford Geertz's distinction between experience-near and experience-distant concepts used in anthropological understanding. Geertz describes anthropological interpretation as a perpetual oscillation between the two sides, between the immediate experience embedded in the natives' perceptual, mental, and affective horizon and the general form/feature of their lives—between the point and the pattern: "hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another" (Geertz 1974, 43). The anthropologist needs to be present to record the informant's throwing oneself into the symbol system that will only disclose its patterns, as well as the modality of the native's self-expression, after having been brought into an "illuminating connection" (Geertz 1974, 29) with global patterns, with concepts of social life that make expression socially meaningful.

Can such a model of anthropological understanding be compared to sociological understanding? More precisely: how do cinematic sociographies incorporate elements of both anthropological and sociological interpretation? Visual anthropology teaches us that while choosing and directly approaching an informant might be the easiest way to study natives, mutual acceptance, fellow feeling, and communality between parties is essential. The human factor might be less important in sociological surveys, yet the right choice of informants, people willing to speak their minds, is not a marginal factor. Anthropological fieldwork, if impatient, may lead to nothing more than mechanical data recording, whereas sociological long interviews might create opportunities for communality to evolve. The first lesson for a visual anthropologist is to observe without rushing the native, yet to always be prepared for the moment when the native submerges into the symbol system and comes to articulate experience-near concepts. The case of sociological surveys is somewhat similar, as their credibility, to a large extent, depends upon the ability to ask questions relevant to the informants' reality. Existing power

hierarchies between the observer and the observed will commit the native to acting in front of the camera, to perform and enact the native as native, and express those elements and configurations of the symbol system, which she/he presumes will prove meaningful for the anthropologist. Respondents of sociological survey may experience a similar discrepancy between the reality they regard their own and the one referenced by questionnaires. In such cases, the survey will either paint an irrelevant, false, distorting picture or the respondents will give answers they believe would please the researcher, and make sense according to the interviewer's sense of reality.[6] In this latter case, and in much the same manner as in the previously outlined anthropological scenario, sociology becomes a technology of power, the agency of normative knowledge, of an oppressive "will to truth."

In a period guided by orthodox political ideologies, the above challenges become even more real. By realizing these challenges, however, both critical social sciences and documentaries inspired by them came to possess a vantage point onto the founding element of the crisis. Having understood that the symbol system exists as a dual sphere of experience-near concepts, they could present how at official rituals, state-organized events, and other instances of public-use, people wore, what James C Scott calls the "public mask of deference and compliance" (Scott 1985, 285). This performative mode of expression (the mimicry of the politically active proletariat) on the public stage and according to the rules of the public transcript, as Scott calls it, was supplemented by a hidden transcript: a form of resistance to hegemonic power relations that allowed for the "creation of autonomous social space for assertion of dignity" (Scott 1989, 56). The existence of a dual social consciousness was pronounced in the texture of everyday life, from cultural preferences and consumption through physical appearance and dressing to recreation activities to name just a few significant areas.[7] Should we regard the public transcript – the tactical deference on the part of subordinate groups in situations where a person feels "not being oneself," situations that require mandatory and not voluntary participation – to be a universal reaction

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6   The fear of dishonesty was already recognized by the sociologist of the Kádár period: "research experience of the past decades have proven that direct questions about emotions and the motives of action rarely result in answers we can take without reservation" (qtd. in Majtényi 2015, 104)

7   While there existed clear thresholds between the public and the hidden transcript these we permeable and, as time progressed, these would be guarded less strictly. I would argue that the survival of the Kádár regime (in specific) and Soviet-style societies (in general) depended on the increasingly negotiable nature of these thresholds. In view of Scott's claim that "hidden transcripts may be pictured as continually testing the line of what is permissible on-stage" (1989, 59) also explains why maintaining the line and with it, dual social consciousness was likewise essential for the survival of the system. Yet another paradox of state socialism: what was a great threat to the regime's credibility was also its greatest asset of survival.

to state socialist rituals,[8] it needs to be treated as a vital symptom of the general disinterest towards the official discourse. The public/hidden binary of transcripts punctured not only ideologically orchestrated (communal) events and the formal structures of daily practices, but also depleted the political meanings of concepts.

It is in this context that we need to return to the question what sociographies did when they rationalized the crisis and emphasized the empirical understanding of reality. In Zsolt K. Horváth's assertion "increasing interest in the documentary mode of address was fed by the erosion of confidence in the official, primary public sphere of socialism where information was lacking, making people mistrustful towards the outside world, its realness and credibility. Documentaries played an unquestionable ethical role in unravelling certain problems and claiming that a hidden reality existed" (2009, 282). In my understanding, the unravelling of a hidden reality meant capturing the dual expression of experience-near concepts. Such staging of the depletion of ideologically coded practices and concepts explains why sociological cinema was never without a poetic dimension.

Had these films been made in a manner to fully qualify as scientific research, they would probably have altogether eluded the audience. Documentaries that outlaw poetics run the risk of striping everything to the bare bone. In doing so, the filmmaker is degraded to the position of a data collector and the screen becomes a display of raw facts. Herein lies the danger of sociology-driven visual documentation becoming a statistical pool of data. Statistics in itself is essential to social sciences but only as a tool for drawing up patterns. Representation as data-generation not only dehumanizes the human sphere but sacrifices filmic-ness on the altar of fact-ness. Put differently, it avoids being ideological at the cost of partially compromising the social meaningfulness of cinema. While film as a purely scientific agency is certainly not without a politics, this aspect of it remains clandestine. Gusztáv Schubert emphasizes that the political aspiration of sociographic documentaries was proven not by facts but its insistence on factuality: "these directors accepted the trivial truth that the completed work is itself the message of the authors, thus it is not important to openly articulate one's opinion" (2005, 239).[9]

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8   Alexei Yurchak illuminates how playing along rituals was an essential way to be acknowledged as person capable of acting in a social meaningful manner. Participation in these rituals proved that one was "the kind of social actor who understands and acts according to the rules of the current ritual, with its connection to the larger system of power relations and previous contexts of this type" (Yurchak 2003, 486).

9   Horváth makes a similar assertion: "The language and methodology of unravelling reality insisted on the empirical in order to clearly differentiate reality from ideology and because it managed to stay clean of even the suspicion of being ideological, it was not seen as counter-ideology" (2009, 286).

The sociographic cinema proposed by the 1969 Manifesto wished to create an agency for this insistence on factuality, for socially meaningful yet non-ideological expression. Recognizing the political and ethical stakes of this agency, some commentators, including Vincze Zalán, urged directors to take a conspicuous position: "sociographic exploration, the visual presentation of factual reality has been a significant step forward for Hungarian cinema…In order to make further progress along this path, it cannot settle for simple documentation and the exploration of reality needs to encompass the viewpoint of the filmmaker in a more robust manner" (Zalán 1974, 19). On the one hand, if such a request urged filmmakers to find their own voice, it was certainly fulfilled in the more artistic minded socio-dramas of the Budapest School. Examples of distinctive authorial touch include the withdrawn, observant camerawork in the films of István Dárday, the dramatic silences in Judit Ember's work, and the heated, explosive quarrel-sequences in those of Béla Tarr. On the other hand, if Zalán is suggesting filmmakers to make their political critique more personal, I believe he is mistaken. The agency realized in sociographic documentaries was most unique and powerful when it did not pit the individual (the dissident artist and intellectual) against the system, but rendered legible the unavoidable depletion of the ideological regime.

Let me as proof a brief analysis of Ferenc Grunwalsky's *Maternity* (*Anyaság*, 1974), a documentary about an unnamed teenager mother in a poverty stricken gipsy colony. Only vague information is given about the protagonist, the setting, or the events surrounding the recent birth of his second child, not least because the filmmaker's questions about her childhood and her dreams are met mostly with silence. When reciting the events of giving birth and how she moved away from her husbands' family with the infant, she mainly uses single word sentences. Instead of a long interview, viewers get long silences as the camera zooms in and out of her perplexing, timid, and dreamy face and, on two occasions, cuts to a longer sequence showing a group of young children passing time in the company of pigs and dogs.

Given the teenager mother's reluctance to talk and the intimidating presence of the camera, *Maternity* might be regarded as a failed documentary, the documentation of failure. Even so, it is a sociologically credible documentation of failure, a factual encapsulation of the subaltern voicelessness and its helplessness against the camera. The adverse social conditions of the underprivileged come across in the sequence showing half-naked children, barefoot and filthy wandering near a pigsty, joylessly caressing and indifferently playing with puppies. The apathetic tone of these images, reminiscent of news reports from third world countries, frames the girl's unemotional words and the mechanical

recitation of her situation. The title of the film may have made a promise to talk about the solemn experience of giving birth and the hope the arrival of a new life symbolizes, yet the film fails to deliver heart-warming moments. On the contrary, it presents stray and self-abandoned souls. In fact, *Maternity* is a word for word portrayal of the social reproduction of poverty, what Kemény's early 1970s Roma research proved, beyond doubt, to be the chief challenge for rural gipsies.[10]

Undoubtedly, Grunwalsky's film lacks all the essential features of empirical social research: it could have been shot anywhere in the world. The only reference to its country of origin, apart for Hungarian being used in the minimalist conversations, is Sarolta Zalatnay's popular song *Trees, Flowers, Light* (Fák, virágok, fény), which children sing loudly out of frame in one scene. The contrast between the upbeat lyrics and the apathy of the protagonist, underpinned by the mobile frame (the zooming camera) as the stylistic marker of existential instability, eludes becoming the aestheticization of poverty by juxtaposing maternity with subaltern muteness. The agency of language is not only curtailed by the girl's reluctance to speak, but her possible dishonesty about being the victim of domestic violence: when asked about a scar above her lips, she claims it was an accident and not a result of disorderly family life. When she does speak, her words are purely descriptive and emotionally mute, with the act of giving birth receiving no prominence in the monotonous recital of events: "I went to bed in the evening… there wasn't anything…I went out…I sent him to call an ambulance…it happened …I felt OK…He came in…He looked at him." The cold and declarative verbal formula "it happened" as the experience-near concept of giving birth carries a negative accent, saturated not with joy but the shame of being stuck in intolerable conditions and perpetual disempowerment. A more precise title of the film would have been "Maternity in Poverty," where the second part would not only have located the protagonist in a destitute socioeconomic environment but punctured the normative meanings of the concept of motherhood. Zalán might have found such title useful in making the filmmaker's political stance more pronounced, yet it would not really change much. The grim images of child poverty and the linguistic poverty of the protagonist deplete the idealized concept of maternity through the empirical truth-seeking of sociological representation.

Using the explanatory power of a grim reality, sociological cinema achieved its critical and political agency to the fullest when it treated facts as crisis symptoms and pointed to the emptiness of experience-distant concepts that defined social meaningfulness in the official discourse. Uncovering such

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10   For details of the research see: Kemény (1979, 2002).

depleted concepts was made possible through insistence on factuality and the heightened perceptiveness towards the ritualized element of reality, including verbal statements, silences, gestures, unconditional body language, and any photographic and sound proof of interviewees feeling uncomfortable or secure during social interactions. As such, cinema did not as much objectify people but a deeply fractured public sphere and the efforts people made or did not make to live up to its ideological expectations.

Before exploring cinematic agency as realized in other sociographic documentaries, we need to recapitulate some general patters. Those films represented the crisis in the most comprehensive manner which pointed both to the fissure between social meaning and ideological meaning and the castigation of the former by the latter. Thus, the insistence on factuality served not only cognitive realism but an oppositional political agency.[11] Horváth defines cognitive realism as "the language of intellectuals used as an ethics-driven praxis of problematizing and counterbalancing the official ideology pursued by non-conformist people working in different genres and media" (2009, 285) and claims that it should be understood as a concept more embedded in the sociology of knowledge rather than in epistemology. Along these lines, I briefly examine other documentaries of Balázs Béla Studio from the 1970s and the manner in which these contested the ideological production of social meaningfulness and concepts.

State Socialist Episteme in Crisis

To understand the crisis one needs not only to understand reality but the conceptual logic governing reality, the dismantling of which was carried out, to a large extent, through a persistent visual documentation of real life incidents. *The Anatomy of a Unique Case*, the title of a film by István Dárday and Györgyi Szalai about the events inspiring their feature film titled *The Prize Trap*, is a lucid description of the task makers of socially-invested documentaries volunteered for. During the anatomy unique, specific, and actual events served as local cases of the prevailing epistemic regime, a set of symptoms available for study. What exactly were these unique cases?

The Long Distance Runner (*Hosszú futásodra mindig számíthatunk*, Gyula Gazdag, 1969) was inspired by an article in a local daily paper; *Selection* (*A*

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11   Zsolt Kapás Zsombor arrives to a similar conclusion with regard to the socio-dramas of the Budapest School, claiming that "being on the lookout for real events with reference to social problems by its very nature bears witness to the political attitude of filmmakers" (2013).

válogatás, 1970) also by Gazdag, was spurred by an announcement on national radio recruiting music performances; and *The Resolution* (*A határozat,* 1972), a collaborative work of Judit Ember and Gazdag, reconstructs the removal of an agricultural co-op director from his position by members of the local party bureau. The incentive of György Szomjas' *Honeymoon* (*Nászutak*, 1970) was news coverage of a traffic accident which cost the life of an Italian sex tourist. Gyula and János Gulyás's *Reality – With Whistle and Drums, Through Thick and Thin* (*Valóság – síppal, dobbal, avagy tűzön, vízen* át, 1968) originated from a sociography published by Antal Végh about Penészlek (a poverty-stricken village in eastern Hungary), and the filmmaker brothers would return to the same topic in *There are Changes* (*Vannak változások*, 1979). Sociological inquiries, this time the research of István Kemény, stimulated Pál Schiffer's short documentaries *Houses at the End of the Village* (*Faluszéli házak*, 1972), *What do Gipsy Children do?* (*Mit csinálnak a cigánygyerekek?*, 1973), and, most notably, the feature film *Cséplő Gyuri* (1978).[12]

Although the above list is by no means complete, it clarifies the intentions of filmmakers to engage themselves with real and actual social experience. The way documentaries covered unique incidents differed distinctively from news reportage, the ideological bias of which made news coverage an agency to maintain discursive hegemony in the public sphere. State-run newsrooms, editorial offices, record labels (and virtually every media outlet under the party's control) extended such control over the distribution of information. In its privilege for ideological concepts, news coverage covered up alternative conceptualizations of the social and political field, as opposed to which documentaries aimed to recover sanctioned layers of concepts and to salvage their empirically grounded meanings. The similarity of the unique cases explored in the above list of films was established by both the curiosity towards (immanent) social meanings hidden beneath (transcendental) prescriptive narratives and the shared objective to contest the ideological concepts these narrative rested upon.

In a convincing case study about the discursive production of Roma as a concept, Andrea Pócsik explores three films – the television adaptation of Máris

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12   The documentary features of the Budapest school would continue on this path and many film would dramatize real events in a self-reflective manner. István Dárday's feature film *The Prize Trap* (*Jutalomutazás*, 1974) was complemented by a documentary entitled *The Anatomy of a Unique Case* (*Egy egyedi eset természetrajza*, 1975). the documentary draws up the background of the story and contains interviews with the actual participants of the incidents depicted in the feature film. The same logic prevails in *Style of Fighting* (*Harcmodor*, 1980) based on incidents Dárday and Szalai first documented in *Részvénytársaság Külsővaton* (1973) and Judit Ember's *Mistletoes* (*Fagyöngyök*, 1978) with its documentary companion piece *Educational Story* (*Tantörténet* 1976).

Halasi's popular juvenile fiction *The Bench at the Back* (*Az utolsó padban*, dir. Márta Kende, 1975), Katalin Macskássy's short animation *I Like Life Very Much…* (*Nekem az* élet *teccik nagyon…*, 1974) and József Csőke's television reportage *Albeit…!* (*Pedig...!*, 1975) – as examples of how the official image of Roma people circulated between different (audio-visual) genres. While this image showed awareness towards social prejudices against and the underprivileged status of this ethnic group, it expressed untarnished optimism towards their acculturation, their ability to develop personal integrity and upward mobility through cultural assimilation. Portraying integration as the model of social survival, Pócsik argues, urged Roma populations to renounce, or at best, weaken ethnic elements of their self-image, that is, to repress the most familiar, experience-near concepts when identifying as Roma: "in Macskássy's animation, the visual placement of children – who talk about major social deprivation while narrating their drawings – in the neat school environment; the transformation of Kati [in *The Bench at the Back*], her being washed, hair neatly combed, and told to change her Roma attire for a dress more appropriate for the school celebration; and the filming of the doctor at Visznek in her white lab coat are all representations of the Hungarian Roma population's symbolic sanitization through strongly performative images, representations performing the correct ideological reading" (Pócsik 2017, 240).

According to Pócsik, Pál Schiffer rejects the official logic of representations and their erasure of the most immediate experiences that defines being a Romani. Relevant part of his oeuvre, most notably *Cséplő Gyuri*, presents upward mobility through integration as an unachievable quest. Portraying the odyssey of an agile and hard-working male arriving from an underdeveloped gipsy colony to the capital with a desire "to understand his destiny and even more so, that of his community" (Schiffer 1977, 86), the film calls attention to an impenetrable glass ceiling that repeatedly exhausts attempts of status advancement. *Cséplő Gyuri* proves that not even someone possessing all the necessary qualities prescribed by the official concept of "socially valued Roma" can prevail under state socialism. Nevertheless, this failure does not erase the protagonist's efforts to understand the "larger picture," in fact, it both helps to redefine the concept of Roma and lays forth a different path of empowerment. Having seen the film, Pócsik claims, "the useful Romani will not be someone who joins the ranks of Hungarian workers, but someone who thrives for emancipation as a Romani and uses available support to fight his own battles" (2013).

Pócsik's thorough research on the production history of *Cséplő Gyuri* highlights the annoyance it caused amongst authorities, especially the scene shot during

the visit of a local council official to the working quarters of the brick factory where Gyuri is employed. The scene features agitated tenants complaining about inhuman housing conditions, at the end of which the protagonist remarks quietly to the camera that he has only seen such deprivation in gypsy slums and has always believed that tenants here were not Hungarians but Roma people. Not only did this observation resonate with the "heretic" conclusion of István Kemény's Roma-research – identifying economic and not cultural factors behind the social marginalization of gipsies –, it made the equally heretic claim that poor Hungarian workers also lived under a glass ceiling. In short: the ideological construction of the proletariat was just as misguided as the official concept of the Roma.

Similarly to his sociographic documentaries, Schiffer did not simply recover socially meaningful layers repressed in official discursive practices but presented them as more meaningful than ideological representations. The discursive production of the Kádár era's epistemic regime demonstrated numerous similar contradictions and crisis symptoms which documentaries were well suited to debunk. A notable example was *The Resolution*, a documentary about the politically motivated removal of the director of a cooperative farm and, at the same time, a unique anatomy of administrative strategies aiming to construct the concept of the incompetent executive.

At the time the depicted incidents took place, Ernő Lupán published a conceptual overview of cooperative democracy describing it as a practical principle that should govern every aspect of operating a co-op (Lupán 1971, 1024), emphasizing the symptomatic connection between democratic practices of agricultural cooperatives and those of political democracy (1971, 1025), and calling attention to the necessary harmonization of national and group interest for the healthy operation of agricultural businesses as part of national economy (1971, 1026). Later in the essay, Lupán identifies self-management and autonomous decision-making as the cornerstones of but also the challenges to cooperative democracy. These include incompetent managers and disagreement between members, scenarios which can easily erode engagement in the life of the coop and undermine the idea of self-government. Yet, the most imminent threat the author mentions is the scenario when "the management of the cooperative and, even more so, the county cooperative association or the local branch of the administrative power ignores the economic-organizational autonomy of the agricultural cooperative, [in case of which] the scope of both managerial powers and cooperative democracy are narrowed" (Lupán 1971, 1026). *The Resolution* gives full credit to such fears by portraying members of the local branch of the

party as saboteurs of cooperative democracy not for lack of understanding its principles, but for the very opposite reason. Realizing that a well-functioning economic organization, the largest employer in the area, with a consensus-oriented, accountable, responsive, and effective leader (József Ferenczi) might weaken their influence on local matters,[13] they launch an ideological smear campaign, claiming that Ferenczi privileged cooperative interests over the economic interests of the state. As such, the film not only demonstrates how the concept of cooperative democracy becomes corrupted in practice, but that already the canonical form of this concept carries in itself, as an embedded element, the agency of ideological control. Similar to the notion of Roma that imposed self-limitation on the subjects it made meaningful, cooperative democracy comes through as a notion prescribing ideological conformity onto its referent.

Both *Cséplő Gyuri* and *The Resolution* identified concepts constructed in the ideologically controlled public sphere as agencies of disempowerment by proving their uselessness, their inability to benefit people in conditions of really existing socialism. Had these case studies failed to address the discrepancies between the (f)actual and the conceptual understanding of society, one could easily claim that they were isolated, atypical cases and, that, despite their upsetting assessments, the official narratives remained valid: the Roma would gain status through acculturation, and the public dishonouring of competent business managers by party functionaries could not happen in Hungary. However, as Hegedüs's own views on the power-obsessed local administration[14] and Kemény's Roma-research demonstrate, the anatomies rendered legible systemic pathologies instead of local deformities: they were not exceptions but the general rule. Furthermore, if the proposed diagnoses were proven false and

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13   The conflict between the progressive director of an agricultural cooperative and members of the local party organization is at the centre of László Vitézy's *Time of Peace* (*Békeidő*, 1980). This fictional documentary borrows a lot from Gazdag and Ember's anatomy of human relations, conflict types and argumentative logic, nevertheless, and as a result of its preference for a dramatic structure reminiscent of feature films, it presents its protagonist as an active and invincible hero. Some contemporary reviews questioned the optimistic tone of the film and suggested that it "attempts to transform the false, the deceptive and the hypocritical into reality, truth and authentic through stylisation" (Orosz 1981, 50). According to István Orosz, Vitézy's choice to feature of the active hero is deceptive since it ascribes the values of self-betterment, autonomy and responsibility in a single character leaving people dependent on paternalism, despite creating an illusion of empowerment.

14   From the mid-1960s Hegedüs was a supporter of economic pluralism and expansion of activities in the second-economy, especially the agriculture. In conversation with Zoltán Zsille, Hegedüs (1989, 376–377) described his chief professional interest between 1965–1975, the harmonisation of economic reform and political revisionism, and identified the unwillingness of party bureaucracy to acknowledge grassroot initiatives as the greatest obstacle.

the crisis of the system exposed in the documentaries discredited by everyday experience, why would Schiffer be forced to cut some scenes from *Cséplő Gyuri*? By the same token, why was *The Resolution* shelved for two decades? Not only were sociographic cinema's diagnoses valid, they confirmed what people could only articulate as hidden transcripts, as biting critiques of a political elite either blind to reality or feigning blindness.

Audiences were not blind and saw behind every local case the emergence of a general pattern. Péter Tóth Péter explains this in the context of the Gulyás brothers' *There are Changes*, "it was impossible not to realize the parallel between the fate of the village [Penészlek] and that of the country" (Tóth 2017, 99). He later elaborates on the sweeping consequences of such comparison: "the conditions documented and exposed in the film carried meanings applicable to the private life of every Hungarian citizen. Anyone who saw the film would realize his/her being an insignificant element of the same system that disallowed dignified human existence in Szabolcs-Szatmár county...This was settled and solidified communism unable to improve due to qualities which were inalienable part of its nature" (Tóth 2017, 101).

The Gulyás brothers' film was a "sequel" to their 1968 *Reality – With Whistle and Drums, Through Thick and Thin*, a short documentary that originated in a sociography published by Antal Végh. Although authorities tried to discredit the fulminatory claims of Végh, Penészlek became a national shame and even inspired a stage play by the title *Not on the Map* (*A térképen nem található*, József Darvas). According to János Berta, the publicity and transmedial reception history of the original Végh-article demonstrated the openness of intellectuals towards sincere representations of social conditions and realized the objective of the Manifesto to make films "not only to raise public attention, but to prompt positive changes in society" (Berta 2016, 102). Even so, *There are Changes* is not a self-congratulatory film, as the unveiled changes in the village leave little room for celebration. Interviewing inhabitants, including those who also spoke in the 1968 film, newcomers to the village, and the county party secretary who was removed from his position amidst the nationwide publicity Penészlek received, the film puts the whole community under scrutiny not in order to judge it, but to understand how it comprehended its negative image, how social dynamics were altered as a result of political pressure by state apparatuses, and how residents negotiated between hidden and public transcript when addressing the camera. Discussing the social microcosm explored in the film, Berta claims that "we are presented not only with lies, but the shame of those prejudiced

by the community, the manipulations of political leaders, the distortions of professionals who fall short of the responsibility invested on them, or the simple human desire to present facts in a brighter light" (2016, 104). In the cacophony of voices – each burdened with self-censorship, compromised personal integrity, the lack of agency and autonomy –, the film emphasized the collective nature of disempowerment that is not a result of a tyrannical and abnormal regime, but an "enlightened," technocratic system functioning normally.

In fact, the fate of Penészlek was sealed by the urban and territorial planning framework developed during the 1960s and accepted as a final concept in 1971. The plan aimed to decentralize and bureaucratize decision-making in the field of urban and rural development, but more importantly to optimize the redistributive system and ensure that scarce public finance are spent to achieve maximum economic and social benefits. Based on available demographic data, the engineers of the framework were convinced that depopulation in many villages was an irreversible process, thus the document introduced the concept of "settlement without prior function." Essentially, the regulation subordinated rural development to the economic priorities of industrialization and agricultural modernization that, as Pál Juhász succinctly argues, left traditional settlement structures not just obsolete but a hindrance: "losing traditional peasant culture is regrettable, but this is the cost of development, it supports cultural integration within the country and creates equal chances for every citizen" (1988, 5). Villages regarded non-viable by the framework were deprived of development funds and were burdened with diminishing educational, health, and social infrastructure, public services and a local council. Paradoxically, 1971 also saw the passing of the third council law in Hungary that set out to develop local democracy and advance the socialization of decision-making processes. According to Milián Pap, the obvious political rationale behind passing this piece of legislation "was to extend the process of normalization that took place from the late 1950s to early 1960s and successfully integrated and represented the societal will in the highest level of the political system, an extension which meant putting into motion similar mechanisms at the micro levels" (Pap 2018, 204). Still, the democratization of the countryside proved largely illusive as decentralization principally meant taking direct control over areas and mechanisms previously not consolidated. Juhász (1988, 4–5) lists the following reasons that support this claim: the competency of people who would represent local communities was decided at central offices, the administrative hierarchy was solidified through the process of reshuffling local bodies, and political agendas were camouflaged as policy areas. This was

certainly the case for villages deprived of self-representation, and being treated as nuisance (or even expendable) by county level bureaucrats.

With all these in mind, it may seem awkward why the Gulyás brothers chose to talk about changes in the title of the film instead of stating their absence. Well, because Penészlek manifested the self-defeating essence of the experience-distant notion of change in the state socialist episteme. The title succinctly captured contradictions between the power elite's cherished ideals of social progress and their use of administrative technologies of modernisation. *There are Changes* explored these as systemic contradictions and claimed that being subordinated to orthodox ideological principles, the conceptual framework designed to improve social lives was destined to achieve the opposite goal. It was not the lack of changes that forced the residents of Penészlek and the dwellers of hundreds of other Hungarian villages into precarious existence but their very success. Crisis was the only logical outcome of state socialist modernisation founded on the structurally coded alienation of politics from policies, of the urban from the rural, of the leaders of men from the people.

Conclusions

The consolidated Kádár regime was never fully consolidated but this cannot be the main explanation for its permanent crisis. After all, crisis served as an essential condition for its survival, it allowed the regime to exist in a constant ideological mode as it reluctantly identified new areas to be stabilized and created moments when people could be told promises and offered assurance that their troubles will be resolved. By maintaining a sense of urgency to handle crises, the power elite managed to evade a crisis more threatening and rooted deeper. This I described as the insurmountable fissure between abstract concepts and concrete facts, experience-distant and experience-near rationalizations of reality. Although both sociology and cinema were regarded as the elites' strong allies, as technologies of power to be exploited for the pseudo-consolidation of problem areas, from the late 1960s they spoke with increasing reluctance and sincerity about the fracture. The manifesto for sociographic cinema was one among many signs of the reluctance to address the crisis. This article identified the Manifesto not as a call for the design and elaborate construction of a documentary format with an infallible methodology to generate scientifically valid knowledge but the shared belief that non-hegemonic and non-ideological forms of understanding can be equally powerful. Or rather empowering, as it enriches our awareness of the crisis.

I described above how sociology offered inspiration for cinematic to represent social phenomena without validating the prevailing epistemic regime and, as such, to puncture official concepts in local and unique settings. Films either uncovered supressed, experience-near layers of social meaningfulness or performed the anatomy of concepts that ensured ideological control of social agents. While presenting such cases, I relied heavily on previous scholarship which offer clarity as to the dissident social diagnosis offered in specific films. I only wished to accentuate that the dissident status of documentaries with different stylistic and thematic priorities is captured in its full vigour when social micro-fractures – the individual experiences of being culturally rejected, publically ostracized, shamed for living in economic deprivation – are linked to the more severe "tectonic dislocations" of the state socialist episteme, when such instances of suppressed agency are revealed to be central to the survival of the system. Sociographic documentaries verified and elaborated on the diagnoses offered by critical sociology and, additionally, allowed intellectual circles beyond the borders of the academia to understand the comprehensiveness of the crisis. Focusing on the destabilisation of epistemic technologies of power should not be limited to the study of Soviet style "democracies" and may be usefully adapted to any political system anxious to stimulate public awareness and alertness towards crises of all kinds as a strategy to disown its own.

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