

Török Ervin

## Inventions of personalness in Hungarian documentary filmmaking

### Absztrakt

The study examines the “personalness” of Hungarian creative documentary films, and compares this new kind of personalness to the one characteristic of Hungarian documentaries from the 1970s. Three traditions of Hungarian documentaries are distinguished: vérité-films, avant-guard experimental films, and tabloid cinema, adapting the heritage of direct cinéma. The argument offers a discussion of diverse interpretive conditions of personalness for each of the three trends. Films in the tabloid cinema tradition make up the decisive trend of Hungarian documentaries, offering a specific attempt at “novelification”, the introduction of a sociological sensitivity, an attempt at representing social relationships in an objective way, as well as an ambiguous flirting with forms of fiction films. With the rhetorical structuring of the theme, the counterpunctal and dialogical representation and diverse stylization techniques, contemporary documentaries shift the sociological perspective of the documentaries from the 1970s, and point to its frequently limiting nature. They change the point of departure of films close to or continuing the tradition of vérité-films: the “singularity of the witness” in these films takes over the fiction of neutral/objective observation dominant in the films of the 1970s. As a result, the documentary nature of the film image is fundamentally rethought in these films.

### Szerző

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In my paper, I wish to examine a distinctive historical shift seen in Hungarian documentary filmmaking over the past decade and a half. Researchers studying the evolution of creative documentary filmmaking in Hungary customarily describe this shift <sup>[1]</sup> as a trend in which the “sociological gaze” of the 1970s has been gradually giving way to a “personal gaze” in contemporary Hungarian documentaries. While that is a plausible claim, I think the notion of “personalness” is no less in need of an explanation as what it is evoked to explain, since, as I will argue, it has been used in reference to distinct and widely different phenomena. The personalness of contemporary documentaries does not emerge from certain traits they have in common; rather, it is a spectrum, or, to use Wittgenstein’s concept, a family resemblance. Whenever the notion of “personalness” is used in the historical analysis of documentaries, it easily transforms into a narrative allegory, an oversimplified dichotomy of past and present: while the documentaries of the 1970s were not necessarily “personal”, contemporary films are. Granted, distinguishing oneself unambiguously from that which came before is a rhetorical need and is ever characteristic of the current situation at all times, <sup>[2]</sup> at least in one sense of the notion of modernity. <sup>[3]</sup> It is more probable, however, that the films of the 1970s are also personal, only in ways unlike contemporary films. Hence, my aim is to confront these different *inventions of personalness* with one another across various lines of tradition.

The question I would like to focus on is *how* and *in what sense* contemporary Hungarian documentary films are personal, and how their personalness, as a trait, relates to, and is distinct from, earlier forms of personalness. I will discuss a number of distinct kinds of “personalness” depending on what traditions the given films adhere to. This also implies that one can observe parallel trends (“languages”) within Hungarian documentary filmmaking, each creating different conditions for the emergence of personalness in the cinematic utterance.

Of course, the term “personalness” may be applied to a plethora of different aspects. In a purely formal approach, it may be applied to the practice of presentation (e.g. addressing the viewer directly; using a direct or ironic, etc. tone; having the filmmaker appear in the film as one of its protagonists; or applying practices borrowed from fiction film). Also, it may refer to style (e.g. playing with viewer expectations; employing specific image editing processes), camera use, or cuts (“drawing in” the viewer into the field of perception of the protagonist; employing devices borrowed from fiction films such as affection-images, perception-images, etc., to use terms proposed by Deleuze).

However, it can also refer to the instructions given to the protagonists (affective communication with the protagonists that is not edited out; signalling an emotional commitment, or the lack thereof, to the protagonists in an open or only thinly veiled manner; etc.), the choice of theme (a theme that is taken from the director’s personal life, or one that only touches on the life of a micro-community, or one that is private or intimate by nature), or character and plotting choices (such as choosing extreme or intimate situations or conspicuous, extraordinary characters).

That the issue of personalness has returned to the forefront of attention in the current discourse on documentary film is obviously informed by such factors as the dilemmas and concerns surrounding its marketing, and especially the process through which non-linear television increasingly colonises or at least reshuffles this segment (which, in the light of the Hungarian circumstances, seems to be as much of an opportunity as a cause for concern). Setting aside the discussion of “personalness” in this marketing-oriented context and expanding the inquiry into its historical aspects, it soon becomes obvious that personalness in documentary film emerges at the same time as does direct cinema, which in turn coincides with the emergence of the new technologies that actually facilitate the observation of domestic life.

Personalness, at least in a specific sense of the term, has always been considered an essential characteristic of the observational documentary film. *Direct cinema* completely rearranged the entire field of documentary filmmaking, whose objective had traditionally been the presentation of the social persona, that is, representing the individual in his or her social role.<sup>[4]</sup> *Direct cinema* was able to stage the individual in the context of his or her own individual living circumstance, engaged in his or her daily routine and interpersonal relations, and in doing so, it could infiltrate a sphere of life previously only accessible to fiction film. It was not until the late 1950s and the early 1960s that a tenacious focus on the personal, that is, the sphere of domestic life and the behaviour of the individual became a central problem in non-fiction film. 1970s Hungarian documentaries are indeed very personal, provided that the term is used specifically to how the individual’s behaviour, the individual’s reactions to his or her fellow humans and environment, and the signals that the individual’s bodily and mental behaviours send out in given circumstances are made *readable* to the viewer.

Extending the scope of our inquiry to the manner of representation, that is, taking “personalness” to mean the “personalisation” of the act of filmmaking itself, the term may apply to the

circumstances of how field work is done and actual shooting is prepared, including, first and foremost, the filmmaker's interactions with the protagonists. It may also apply to the manner in which the cinematic "material" is processed (composition, cutting, music and sound effects, post-processing, etc.), as well as, last but not least, the "tone" (the modality of the utterance, with its ever-present subject and theme related aspects on the one hand, and cinematic language related aspects on the other). Filmmaker-subject interaction, composition, and tone, when viewed as the "personalisation" of cinematic representation, are, in final analysis, a matter of the modal perspective of the cinematic utterance. Thus, staying within the bounds of the tradition of the observational documentary, any changes in personalness can be interpreted as the films relate to these two perspectives: the objective one (the representation of individual behaviour) and the modal one. It is an entirely different question that the notion of personalness in documentary film may also have additional aspects that go beyond the *representation* of the private vs. public dichotomy and of the person interpreted in terms of his or her emotional and affective behaviour (but this already transcends the bounds of the tradition of direct cinema).

To limit the topic of this paper, I will only discuss documentaries that are customarily referred to as "creative documentary films". I will not touch upon investigative films, which are, more often than not, also considered "documentary films"; for the sake of clarity, I propose to refer to these as "works of video journalism". Furthermore, I will also not discuss television programmes commissioned or produced by network television employing a predetermined editorial blueprint – in other words, documentary films produced in a fixed format that may otherwise bear some similarity to creative documentaries in terms of their topics, their sensitivity, and their devices. Beyond the obvious differences in terms of their platforms of availability and overall structure (syndicated television series vs. documentaries primarily meant for the wide screen of the movie theatre), fixed-format documentaries and creative documentaries differ from one another, on the one hand, in terms of how they relate to topicality and time (creative documentary films are typically based on longer-term observation and, one might say, their primary theme is the workings of time), and, on the other hand, in their more complex relation to their subject matter and to the cinematic utterance.

Of course, in a context that investigates the peculiarities of the East-European media landscape, it may be very interesting to uncover the relationships between, as well as the specific roles played by, the various versions of non-fiction that exist (creative documentaries, video journalism, fixed-format documentaries, as well as such hybrid practices as reality shows, trash reality series, background programmes, etc.). Considering the Hungarian media landscape, it may be especially striking that over the past nearly ten years the majority of video journalism pieces were produced by small independent workshops and independent online journals (such as, for example, 444 and Partisan). Similarly, fixed-format documentaries are mostly produced by RTL Klub, a commercial television channel pushed into opposition (*Házon kívül* or *Isten veled, Magyarország*, among others). However, in contrast to video journalism productions, creative documentaries almost exclusively choose topics that cannot, or cannot easily, be linked to the politically thematised issues of the

moment. Even when they tackle typically progressive or left-leaning social themes (poverty, the disadvantaged, immigration, exploitation), their approach does not hinge on issues of current legislation, property or production relations, structures of mentality, ideology, or the like. The overwhelming majority of contemporary Hungarian creative documentary films handle the social sphere quite separately from the political sphere (taking the phrase in its widest sense), and their focus is exclusively on the former. Funding considerations do certainly play a role here but, overall, this peculiar situation can hardly be explained merely by a fear of missing out on state funding. Certain endogenous, aesthetic factors – such as the fear of undermining the validity of the cinematic utterance – surely play an equally important role here. Some potential anecdotal evidence to this point was supplied by the following events: When Partizán shot a documentary, an example of what I called video journalism, on the wave of protests and the student resistance movement emerging in the wake of the government’s imposition of a board of trustees over the until then independent University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest (SZFE, Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem), the student body at SZFE – the alma mater of most Hungarian creative documentary filmmakers – initially blocked the publication of the film, claiming concerns about violations of privacy and rights relating to personality. They wrote about their confusion and discomfort in a Facebook post. The post suggests they were under the impression that documentary film was a “personal genre”. [5]

This detachment of the realm of the societal from the realm of the political in the practices of creative documentary filmmaking is not at all self-evident across the Central European region. Several Czech documentary films could be showcased as counterexamples par excellence. Viewing the Hungarian events from this horizon, there seems to be no irreconcilable conflict between the “personal” tone cited by the students of SZFE on the one hand, and, on the other hand, speaking as a public persona and addressing issues of public life – that is, when documentary filmmakers themselves act as public figures and raise their questions as such. As a fairly recent example, we could cite *The Limits of Work* (*Hranice práce*, Apolena Rychlíková, 2017), a Czech documentary that was actually reviewed in Hungarian journals. Similarly, contemporary Czech documentary film serves with countless examples of how the boundaries between the aesthetic tenets of the television-based reality show formats emerging from the observational documentary film of the 1960s [6] on the one hand and creative documentary film on the other are perceived differently across the region. To cite but one specific example, there is no Hungarian documentary film that comes even close to the Czech documentary *Caught in the Net* (*V síti*, Viřt Klusařk, Barbora Chalupová, 2020). Part of the reason for this might lie, once again, in the fact that because of the peculiarities of the Hungarian media landscape, the functions that the various non-fiction practices fulfil are distributed somewhat differently in Hungary than in Czechia, and Hungarians perceive the boundaries between those practices differently than do their Czech counterparts: the relationship between documentary film production and television film production is different, there has been a shift in the function of public service television, etc.

However, my inquiry in the following passages will not focus on this synchronous perspective (although I will still have to touch upon it occasionally) but on the diachronous perspective mentioned above. The films I have selected for review were made in the past five years. They include films that tackle the theme of the Holocaust such as *Granny Project* (Nagyi projekt. 2017) by Bálint Révész or *The Euphoria of Being* (A létezés eufóriája. 2019) by Réka Szabó, and films that analyse social themes: *Tititá* (2015) by Tamás Almási, *Not About Family* (Csak családról ne. 2019) by Anna Kis, *Easy Lessons* (Könnyű leckék. 2018) by Dorottya Zurbó, *A Woman Captured* (Egy nő fogságban. 2017) by Bernadett Tuza-Ritter, *Ghetto Balboa* (Gettó Balboa. 2018) by Árpád Bogdán, *Downstream* (Szél viszi. 2019) by Máté Bartha, *Tales from the Prison Cell* (Mesék a zárkából. 2020) by Ábel Visky, and *Angel Business* (Angyali üzlet. 2018) by Zsuzsa Gellér-Varga. [7] The selected documentaries have been shown to relatively wide audiences and have won awards at international film festivals. One (*Tales from the Prison Cell*) has just been released.

## From the “sociological” gaze to the “personal” gaze

The major variants of the Hungarian documentary film emerged during the early 1970s. [8] Three fundamental aesthetic practices came into use, each engendering their own distinct lines of tradition. The first was the adaptation of the filmmaking method of *cinéma vérité*; the second employed *neo avant-garde* forms of the documentary film; and the third and dominant trend was the adoption, albeit with peculiar overtones, of *direct cinema*.

Although the practices of *cinéma vérité* have not really resurfaced in Hungarian filmmaking until the very last decade, they did have a Hungarian pioneer in the person of Gyula Gazdag. In 1968, Gazdag shot *The Long Distance Runner* (Hosszú futásodra mindig számíthatunk), a rather cheerful short film that remained unparalleled in Hungarian film history (and, in fact, somewhat of an anacoluton, without a response). Gazdag’s documentary film is about an ultramarathoner who, having run the distance between Budapest and Moscow, is invited to participate in an inauguration ceremony in a Hungarian village known for being the place of birth of Miklós Horthy [9]. Gyula Gazdag relies on the filmmaking practice of *cinéma vérité* pioneered by Jean Rouch and Chris Marker. His film is overtly self-reflexive: the subject of the film is presented and invited to manifest himself *in* the event of making the film. Properly speaking, the theme of the film is the cooperation with the subject of the film in a given, singular situation. As a consequence, the film does not hide either the improvised nature or the paraphernalia of the shooting situation; instead, emphasizes them by making them quite spectacular. The moments captured by the film shine with the awkward charm of the Czechoslovak New Wave and are in fact quite memorable. They are “memorable” because they are atypical, while at the same time they reference different forms of national remembrance (the practices that the socialist party-state apparatus deployed to create its cults of choice versus the latent memory of the period between the two World Wars). To give an example: the sequence of the local party secretary reciting his panegyric to the runner as he enters the village strikes the viewer as comical (the Hungarian title is a quote from the party

secretary's poem). The film's image sequences are not dissolved in their narrative function; instead, they start functioning as (their own) memorial(s). The effect of the individual scenes is generated by a certain kind of "miscommunication". Gazdag's film is humorous because it relies on the latency structure of the cinematic image: there is a gaping disproportionality between the manner in which the film is shot on the one hand, and the nature of the film's subject on the other. The cinematic image itself becomes the archiving of this dialectic image-event. The film creates the impression of retelling a story, with or without changing it, even though the story is only known from these very cinematic images. The film is the archive of this latent shift. The event of retelling the story, or the retelling of the story as an event in its own right, can never be purely in the present tense; its event-like nature is manifested in this differential relationship, in this internal repetition that follows from the disproportionality of the image and from the way it consequently folds back into itself. It becomes a historical document of its own era by documenting a phenomenon that, in turn, is a response to "earlier" institutional practices and manners of remembering. As it were, by compressing them into a single sequence of images and a single temporal plane, the film presents how these manners and institutional practices of remembering relate to one another, belong together, and create tension.

This was the moment when the "performative" filmmaking practice (or, starting out from Thomas Waugh's distinction, "presentational" performance <sup>[10]</sup>) that has become so prevalent in contemporary films first appeared in Hungarian documentary filmmaking, creating a contrast with the filmmaking practice based on the principle of representation. Gazdag's improvisational practice, which exploits the intrinsic disproportionality of the cinematic image and the event-like nature of differentiation, resurfaces in contemporary Hungarian documentary film, albeit in a modified form that is somewhat less experimental and somewhat more in the vernacular of mainstream documentary film. Of all the films discussed in this paper, this improvisational technique and this concept of the cinematic image are certainly seen in both Holocaust films, *The Euphoria of Being* and *Granny Project*, as well as in *Tales from the Prison Cell*.

The second trend in Hungarian documentary film was created by the neo avant-garde experiments of the 1970s and found followers mostly in the 1990s. Winning international acclaim, the experimental documentary films of Péter Forgács, especially his *series Private Hungary* (*Privát Magyarország*), use footage shot by ordinary people for their own private purposes and manipulate their material to create a barely narrative stream of cinematic images. This archival gaze, which first of all focuses on the material rather than the meaningful aspects of the cinematic image and, on the other hand, on the role that the cinematic image plays not so much in "Big History" but rather in everyday life, has its antecedents in the experiments and aesthetic premises of especially Gábor Bódy and Miklós Erdély back in the 1970s (and reaching into the early 1980s). For an insight into how these works tried to detach the documentative effect and the communicative function of the cinematic image from its referential aspects, it serves us well to take a look at *Verzió* (*Version*), a 1981 film by Miklós Erdély about the events now known as "the blood libel of Tiszaeszlár". Erdély's film adapts a scandalous story: upon the disappearance and

death of a Christian maidservant, members of the local Jewish community were accused of having committed ritual murder. The film presents plausible “versions” of what may have transpired, each based on the testimony of Móricz Scharf. Acting out these testimony-based versions does not serve the purpose of dramatizing the facts; instead, it stages the various perspectives essentially as quotations, showcasing the inevitable fragmentation of those perspectives as one tries to reconstruct them based on the documents of the case. This is the avant-garde experiment that, instead of linking its quest for the truth with “catching events in the act” and with the technical recording of the image, considers the apparent deficiency of documentary film – namely, that filmmakers always lag behind the unfolding events and the changing conditions – not as a restraint on, or a limit of film’s documentary power but as an essential and positive precondition in that it is this ineliminable difference <sup>[11]</sup> between the act of technical recording and the intentionality of communication that actually opens up a space in which the cinematic image becomes readable to the viewer. Taken in itself, the cinematic image as the technical recording of a crop of real space and time is not yet an utterance, it is not yet the recording of a physical or mental state/fact. The cinematic utterance is an after-the-fact and supplementary testimony whose potential falseness is in fact a constitutive precondition. The film quotes; specifically, it recalls the witness statement of Móric Scharf; the act of quoting does not consider the recorded cinematic image as the auratic source, or an impression, of truth. To put it more precisely, it takes it for granted that truth is inherently contaminated by fiction. It does not dissolve the scandal of the blood libel in fiction, thereby expunging it; instead, it considers the reality of the myth lurking behind *the case as recounted* as a true part of the case as it happened, bearing witness to it, as it were. The myth of the blood libel manifests itself in a film-like manner and, actually, in the film itself – in the form of a version, a variation on the theme, a counterfeit copy, and an instance of repetition. As the case, the very court procedure, is itself a version of the myth, the film – grounded in its practice of presenting versions – retells the case as a mytheme in its repetition. The type of relationship we see emerging between repetition and singularity when reading this film regains relevance as a peculiar element of contemporary Holocaust films. This tradition of experimental filmmaking appears sporadically in contemporary documentary film. It makes its effect felt indirectly, not in its actual aesthetic realisation but as the first attempt at systematically conceptualising the testimonial logic of the cinematic image.

The third, most lasting and most dominant form of Hungarian documentary film also emerged in the 1970s. In line with the international trends, it was this form that became the koine of Hungarian documentary filmmaking, aside from the 1990s, a period of transition in the history of the Hungarian documentary. For ease of reference, I will call this peculiar version of the observational documentary film “tabloid cinema”. <sup>[12]</sup> There were also other initiatives to adopt the filmmaking practice of direct cinema, such as *A határozat* (The Resolution, 1972) directed by Gyula Gazdag and Judit Ember, a film blacklisted during the socialist era <sup>[13]</sup> and composed as a closed situational drama much like *12 Angry Men*.

Contrary to Gazdag’s documentary films, in which exploring a given situation served as the



dramaturgical guiding principle of the film, *tabloid cinema* centred around a peculiar experiment of novelification, a sociological need, a vague notion of objectivity, and an ambiguous play with the forms of fiction film. An outstanding film of the period, *Film Novel – Three Sisters* (Filmregény – Három nővér. István Dárday and Györgyi Szalai, 1978) may serve as an example for the *tabloid cinema*. The film is documentarist fiction, that is to say, a fiction film presented in a documentarist style that shows the typical traits of direct cinema films (featuring typical, that is, sociologically relevant, non-professional actors whose life circumstances are similar to those of the characters they impersonate; employing typical locations and situations; improvisation; etc.). The film follows the parallel stories of three sisters as they begin their careers, seek to find themselves, and go through crises. The sheer length of the film – over four hours of screen time – does indeed serve the purpose of novelification: from a position that itself goes unnoticed, the film keeps a watchful eye on the passing of uneventful time and on episodes, acts, and interpersonal relationships that are of little or no importance from the perspective of the dramaturgy,<sup>[14]</sup> which enables the viewer to perceive the subtle qualities of this world and the invisible workings of time. The motto of the film – a quote from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian poet Attila József – is from *A város peremén* (“The City Limits”). The poem sets up an analogy between the external productive forces and the instincts that work within<sup>[15]</sup>; the motto amplifies the film’s ambition to provide a general overview, while, on the other hand, its critical angle, its extensive screen time makes the complex interplay between social constraints and invisibly acting individual constraints readily perceivable, without ever going beyond the attitude of the observational documentary film, which demands keeping a distance and which abstains from offering direct explanations and value judgments.

Another outstanding film of the era, *Gyuri Cséplő* (Cséplő Gyuri. Pál Schiffer, 1978) might be an even more unambiguous example of the attempt to present a comprehensive evaluative overview of social structures, even though its focus is more on a single protagonist. *Gyuri Cséplő* accompanies a young man as he leaves the Roma colony he grew up in and heads to Budapest to find employment, hoping to break out of poverty. Prior to making the film, Schiffer put in an impressive amount of work cooperating with István Kemény, a prominent sociologist of the era. It is not unreasonable to say that the film carried on Kemény’s sociological work in Hungary after he was eventually forced into emigration.<sup>[16]</sup> Gyuri Cséplő, the protagonist of the film, is a young Roma man of exceptional talent<sup>[17]</sup> who must overcome a deep sociocultural rift to be able to break out of his personal circumstances. The film follows the typical stages of the protagonist’s life. The extraordinary character of Cséplő (he is the natural leader of his community and at the same time its only member representing the intelligentsia) only serves to highlight the suprapersonal contexts, the social driving forces, and the poverty-induced emotional and competence-related confidence issues that render social mobility volatile and, eventually, short-lived.

In short, in films of the *tabloid cinema* variety, the “fly on the wall” mode of observation (where the

protagonists act as though they were unaware of the presence of the recording apparatus, or, in final analysis, where documentary films yearn to achieve realism by applying methods of representation more typical of fiction film <sup>[18]</sup>) combines with an ambition to provide social analysis. Without exception, the first step of that analysis is to introduce a distance and to objectify, which, as these films intuit, enables the viewer to assume two different vantage points based on two parallel readings: one that is compassionate and walks in the shoes of the subject of the film, and one that views the same material from the perspective of the social circumstances; that is, a reading in the context of the rationality of the individual's actions on the one hand, and a reading in the context of the social conditions. In an overwhelming majority of the cases, the conflict between these two is not or only partially visible from the horizon of the protagonist. The analysis itself is born either out of the juxtaposition of life events recorded during long term observation (as if “the film were being written by life itself”) or out of an explanatory collage of the parallel acts of the various protagonists and/or actants, while the direct form of that analysis arises from the use of editorial codes typical of fiction film and from the fact that the protagonists ignore the shooting situation.

## **The rhetorical reframing of *tabloid cinema***

Overwhelmingly, contemporary Hungarian documentary film carries on the legacy of *tabloid cinema*, and should therefore be examined with a focus on how it departs from that legacy. If our interest revolves around the “personalness” of these documentaries, our inquiry should obviously focus on changes in the overall configuration of how films in the *tabloid cinema* tradition examine social conditions, endeavour to achieve “objectivity”, and identify and monitor the emotional and affective signals of the protagonists.

Before discussing this defining shift, it might be a good idea to highlight two traits that best characterise *tabloid cinema*. One has to do with a dramaturgical aspect of these films. The other is a wider consideration and is related to the nature of the gaze that manifests itself in these films – what I call the “sociological gaze”. The two are closely interrelated in these films. In terms of the dramaturgical aspect mentioned, what I mean is the anticlimactic structure or “slowness” of 1970s films; this is rooted in the fact that in presenting the web of interrelations in their focus, these films prefer to rely not on the plot twists of the unfolding storyline but, as it were, on accidental circumstances. Bringing the unremarkable into the focus is a dramaturgical invention: its tableau-like, descriptive modality expects the viewer to adopt a continual exploratory attitude and challenges her or him to make guesses at the plausible outcomes of the momentary situation. The “personalness” of these films is in part a consequence of their “non-dramatic” nature.

As far as the “sociological” gaze is concerned, in most cases it did not follow from any adherence to a specific school of sociological thought, but instead from the generalising practice of the cinematic utterance. Beyond these films' preference for typical characters and situations, another factor that guaranteed the “realism” of observation was the voluntary hiding of the source of

observation. It is not just that the shooting situation is hidden from view – that is, the documentary applies a code more appropriate for fiction films – as counterexamples to that rule do actually exist, but the impersonality, in a grammatical sense, of presentation and observation. The act of “registration” (more precisely: the metaphorical identification of the operation of the recording equipment on the one hand *and* the event of observation/presentation on the other) is itself fiction, and radically so – radically that goes beyond the protagonists acting as if they were unaware of the camera. It is the descriptive modality of this elusive “we” perspective that sets the stage for any analysis of the social conditions. The personalness and the novelistic nature of these films rest firmly on the foundation of the hermeneutical impossibility of “passive registration”.

The films I will discuss in the following passages carry on the tradition of *tabloid cinema*. My focus will be on how the above-mentioned shift manifests itself in these films when examined with a view to our two key criteria (the dramaturgical aspect and the “sociological gaze”). Each briefly discussed example seems to fall on a spectrum. I will use my first example (*Angel Business*) to showcase argumentative editing; my second set of examples (*Ghetto Balboa* and *Downstream*) exemplifies stylization; the third (*tittitá*) and the fourth (*Not About Family*) will tell us something about how the “we” perspective of observation becomes either contrapuntal or dialogic. My fifth set of examples (*A Woman Captured* and *Easy Lessons*) will serve to explicitly highlight the fundamental ethical relation that serves as the starting point of filmmaking. In a sense, the latter two films already represent a transitional form, to be discussed in the last part of this paper, between openly bringing the fundamental ethical relation of filmmaking into the forefront (the tradition of *cinéma vérité*) on the one hand and the tradition starting with *tabloid cinema*. Each of these variants (argumentation, stylization, dialogic structure, the overt problematisation of the fundamental ethical relation) are distinct proposals for altering the personalness (novelistic nature) of *tabloid cinema*, each with a slightly different angle.

The first case I will discuss is Zsuzsa Gellér-Varga’s self-financed documentary *Angel Business* (Angyali üzlet. 2018). Gellér-Varga’s choice of theme <sup>[19]</sup> is unusual for a documentary in Hungary: it focuses on the world of high-risk investments and start-ups. The film follows the life of a protagonist working in the bank sector, who, feeling burnt out, returns to Hungary from London along with his family and uses the family’s acquired capital to provide up-front financing for start-ups, hoping the family can make a living off of the profits his investments turn.

The film deviates from the conventions of traditional tabloid cinema in two ways. On the one hand, while Hungarian documentary films made in the 1970s in this tradition follow a linear timeline, *Angel Business* frames the events in a logical-argumentative structure. The film opens and closes with excerpts from a motivational talk the protagonist delivered long after the events of the film had taken place. Focusing on the logic of high-risk investments, the protagonist uses his own personal example. His talk proposes and lays down the foundations for a horizon of issues that offers clues for the interpretation of the events detailed in the film. On the other hand, while the

film's main conflict unfolds in the realm of business and economy (the inexperience of those involved in one of the start-ups brings the protagonist's family close to bankruptcy), a personal conflict also emerges over time (we learn that the protagonists returned to Hungary partly because of their daughter's special education needs, hoping she would acquire Hungarian sign language easier back home). The argumentative framework, the double structure of the plot, and the scenes that metaphorically intensify the relationship between the two conflicts (such as, for example, the skydiving scene at the end of the film) expose and explain the economic-market segment and the personal relationships between its actors – a world we have not really seen in Hungarian documentary films before – clearly, succinctly, and sensitively, without any ostentatious or sensationalist overtones. The film's elegant use of the rules of plotting as they apply in fiction drama creates a delicate balance between the two distinct realms in its focus: the societal-economic and the private. Its overt exposition, its framed structure, its subtle metaphorization, and its double plot structure make Gellér-Varga's documentary film a textbook example of an important international trend within the tradition of narrative documentaries. This is no longer *tabloid* cinema. Its marked rhetorical arrangement and double focus are strong indications that the film is abreast with the current trends in direct cinema filmmaking.

### **The stylization of *tabloid cinema***

The two films discussed in the forthcoming passages – *Ghetto Balboa* (Gettó Balboa. 2018) by Árpád Bogdán and *Downstream* (Szél viszi. 2019) by Máté Bartha – take different directions in how they stylize the practices of the *direct cinema* tradition. In these films, stylization does not merely create “stylistic features”; instead, it defines the films' subject. It is as though these films outlined their subjects in reported speech, where any signals given off by the form of expression have a decisive impact on how the subject itself is viewed.

The overall theme of Bogdán's film is very much akin to those typically tackled by the *tabloid cinema* films of the 1970s: a young, disadvantaged man from the outskirts of Budapest struggles to find his place in life, earn a living, and resolve his housing situation; as he is planning to start a family, he toils day and night taking on side jobs, etc. However, this similarity is purely superficial. For *Ghetto Balboa*, in actual fact, is a sports film whose style and visuals are more akin to those of *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) and the *Rocky* films (John G. Avildsen, 1976) than to those of the Hungarian sociological films of the 1970s. Unusually, the film was shot in black and white; this choice – and the strong formal impact that format delivers – was in itself a shift towards more marked stylization.



*Ghetto Balboa. László Bogdán, 2018.*

Going beyond observation by a first-hand viewer who himself goes unnoticed, the way the camera follows the events as they unfold is designed to draw in the movie-goer, by way of physical and perceptual clues, into the bodily and visceral experience of the protagonist's hard training, harder bouts, and movement in space. The shallow close-ups of the point-of-view shots direct focus not on the linear perspective of image perception with its mathematical notion of space; rather, they bring into the forefront how the viewer processes stimuli – and not only visual ones – in ways determined by his or her own bodily senses. These visuals strive to create the synesthetic experience that is so often spoken about by researchers of the phenomenology of film <sup>[20]</sup>: for the viewer, the cinematic image becomes easily translatable into experiences of movement, (body) heat, and balance. The two protagonists in the focus of the film – the ever-silent young boy and the gangster-turned-boxing coach who is ever-willing to relate colourful anecdotes about his own personal religious conversion experience, and indeed about anything else – is yet another styleme: as if the movie's central selection principle were to find those fortunate moments and situations that are the best visual match for the iconic plot twists of a classical poor boy's story adapted to the local conditions.

A review published online on the portal *Mérce* <sup>[21]</sup> claims that the film's myth-building practice, which, taking it as an example, chronicles the rise of a poor boy on the big screen, fails to take account of the current practices seen in Hungary's professionalizing boxing environment. In the overwhelming majority of the cases comparable to that of the protagonist (and this may be true of the boy featured in the film, the critic publishing his review on *Mérce* claims) professional boxing is hardly a lucrative career in Hungary: professional boxers can earn an average income at best. In other words, what the author of the review criticises the film for is exactly its *lack* of a sober sociological gaze: by highlighting the inspiring story, the film remains blind to the real situation, and, in final analysis, ends up selling false illusions. This criticism is justified in the sense that, at its inceptions, the tradition Árpád Bogdán follows <sup>[22]</sup> had programmatically turned against earlier practices of "dramatization" and aestheticizing presentation. The films of the *tabloid cinema* tradition were distinguished by their emphasis on the unremarkable quality of everyday existence, which rather restricted the extent to which the actual cinematic material could be elaborated in terms of its visual aesthetics. If *Ghetto Balboa* is judged against the norms of the 1970s,

it is bound to be condemned as a failure. However, if we consider its practices of stylization not merely as manipulations seeking an artistic effect devoid of any meaning but as an essential element of the valid gaze it casts at its subject and the realm it examines, then it could serve as a form of correction applied to the sociological gaze – a readjustment of our attention in a way that could prove conclusive for the subject at hand.

The protagonist of the film is not the boxing coach, but, instead, the coach and the boy in tandem. In visual terms, the film imitates the boy's field of perception. Despite the fact that the figure of the coach and the perspective of the cinematic utterance can be clearly separated from one another, the film's practice of stylization is still analogous with the coach's disposition, which is fundamentally of a verbal nature. This indirect relationship is in fact the very essence of the film's practice of stylization: namely, the somewhat abstract visual world of the film becomes a quotation of the protagonist's gaze without this being indicated by any formal device, and without the two coinciding *de facto*. The analogy between the film's gaze and the protagonist's disposition is only indicated indirectly, by means of compositional devices, and it manifests itself mainly in the fact that practically all the speaking is done by the coach – hence, he becomes a “focalizer” in the sense of the iconographic conventions of classical painting: while peripherally part of the picture, what he represents is the viewer's displaced gaze.

Surprising as it may be in the case of a sports movie, the secondary theme of *Ghetto Balboa* is the coach's testimony of his religious faith. The coach emphasizes the story of his own conversion. He does not merely testify in front of the congregation; he consistently links his conversion to his daily work: this is the reason he became a boxing coach; this is what motivates him to convince other members of his community of social outcasts to start training. His faith manifests itself in the asceticism of the sport; teaching is nothing else than sharing the way he relates to himself through his relationship between him as the master and the boy as his disciple.

This community of two – the coach and the boy – becomes a stage for a spirituality of hard training and morals that do not tolerate excesses, for the praise of God by means of work, and for bearing witness to the protagonists' loyalty to divine benevolence in bodily and practical terms. This protestant ethic is not merely a technique helping the individual as he seeks success and prosperity (even though its communal effectiveness is foreseeable) but instead an ethical attitude that manifests itself in the continuous confessing of that very attitude, and interpreting it as a bodily practice. The film routinely juxtaposes sequences of the coach's organisational work – candid moments showing an insight into the life of a religious community with all its characteristic formalities – and the immersive logic of sequences of the boy training and working out. By way of the film's stylization, this disposition (also as an attitude, body politics, ethics, mindset, ideology, etc.) becomes *analogous* with the gaze of the film, wherefore the entire space of cinematic presentation becomes a mental space, a vision.

Undoubtedly, the coda of the film – an enumeration of the boy's successes – justifies the concerns raised by the critic of *Mérce*. True, the ending of the film presents “success” from the perspective

of the compensatory logic of the archetypal poor boy's story known from run-of-the-mill boxing movies.

However, stylization makes this goal-oriented structure ambiguous for two reasons. One, because stylization (which makes the space of the film the mental space of one of the two protagonists) refers to the presented events mainly as objects of desire. These events, although fulfilled, reveal themselves as potential. Two, because stylization stresses the “spirituality” of boxing as a corporeal practice, rather than stressing its result or outcome – which becomes meaningful in the film's permanent focus on the future, as a “disposition”. Rather than giving account of it in a declarative mode, Bogdán's movie makes the viewers experience the practice of sport through a mental space evoked by indirect speech, something that the viewer has to “feel” or “imagine” rather than “view”. In case the film had merely “narrated” the events, the reality of the disposition would be lost. This way the presented events becomes necessarily ambiguous, conditional, future-oriented, or in touch with fiction.

In the narrative structure of the film, the two perspectives – the personal perspective and the social, sports professional perspective – are not presented as two different logics; the film simply assumes that the mentality – the disposition – and the social perspective are congruent. At the level of the narrative structure, *Ghetto Balboa* does not reconsider the sociological perspective but suppresses it. However, the stylization allows ambivalent and diverging readings as the amplified clichés of the genre lend validity to the disposition in its own right.

The stylization of the film does not lead to the rejection or revision of a specific narrative practice; instead, by amplifying certain “overtones”, it introduces uncertainty to make unambiguous readings impossible. In line with the fundamental ethical tenets of documentary filmmaking, it behoves the filmmakers to render a translation of “the profilmic” that is faithful in all respects. The “descriptive illusion” of direct cinema follows from the fact that in direct cinema this interpretive work remains invisible, which affords its “translatable” subject a sort of definitiveness that it had never had before (simply because it inevitably depends on being interpreted by the filmmakers). The generic stylization used by Bogdán in his film makes it clear – by negative means, one might argue – that documentary filmmaking is an in-between space. Similarly to what happens in the case of translation, filmmakers confirm and countersign their “original”, but at the same time the reconstructive operation that they perform also mobilizes that which depends on being translated by them, forcing it to shift into the uncertain, distant vistas of the paraphrase.

While *Ghetto Balboa* is an example for generic stylization, I would like to mention *Downstream* by Máté Bartha as an example for a different type of stylization within the contemporary practices of Hungarian direct cinema filmmaking. Bartha's film is closely related to his celebrated social commentary photo series entitled *Kontakt*. The photo series introduces the viewer to a historical reenactment camp organised in Eastern Hungary. The actual historical reenactment sequences featuring in the film – teenagers reliving the life of Hungarian soldiers during World War II – are merely episodic. In the Hungarian political scene, these movements, camps, memorials, and

cults are routinely linked to the Hungarian far right, yet it is important to underline that the entire scene is way too heterogenous and diverse to jump to the conclusion that these associations and practices serve purely as places of political indoctrination. During the Szeged round table discussions, the artist underscored that the school in the focus of the social commentary photo series had made every effort to distance itself from politics. The photo series steered clear of glorifying the simple fundamental values of military life (the PR of the reenactment camp), but it also avoided the contrary: it did not try to “expose” anything. Very much in the sense of what Barthes says about the issue of *punctum*, the author claimed that his aim was to make the viewer think. This halted generalisability is also characteristic of his film, which tells the story of a young woman, one of the camp participants, during an important stage of her life. Leaving state care, she successfully reunites with her family and works in the camp; she finds employment and tries to normalise her relationship with her alcoholic mother. After a quarrel with her mother, whom she accuses of stealing money from her wallet and spending it on alcohol, the protagonist permanently closes this chapter of her life and unexpectedly moves in with a friend in a small town in Transylvania, Romania, even though the two had only ever been in contact over the Internet before.



*Downstream. Bartha Máté, 2019.*

*Downstream* does not make any attempt to explain the protagonist’s peripheral existence – it simply acknowledges it. This is almost unheard of in the Hungarian documentary film tradition. The documentary follows the girl and finds her interesting – not *because of* her situation but along with it. The film explores the girl’s novel, as it were, through a series of highly photogenic and almost always discomfoting key scenes and partial observations, frequently composed as though they were *tableaux vivants* (such as walking a dog in the fields, marching with the historical reenactment crowd, or posing with her friend at the end of the film in Gheorgheni).

A distinctive characteristic of *Downstream* is how it plays with time in more than one sense of the word. On the one hand, asynchronous scene editing – when the time of storytelling does not coincide with the time of the story told *within* a scene, to take the word in its narratological sense – is rarely seen in the entire history of Hungarian documentary filmmaking. The film frequently condenses time by presenting abridged versions of the stories told; an example would be the quick montage interweaving footage of the winter march of the historical reenactment group with



scenes from the protagonist's journey to Transylvania at the end of the film. Another suggestive quick montage plays a partly different narrative function: the girl's everyday routine is presented by a short sequence of images where the protagonist is working, shopping, and unpacking presents. In addition to these stylized forms of narrative time condensation, the film also plays with time by applying asynchronous image editing in scenes where the time of storytelling is synchronous with the time of the story told, but the images we see are not. The footage shows the girl fidgeting with her smart phone in the room of an old village house while we hear the soundtrack of a Turkish soap opera from a television set blaring in the background; however, a visual representation of the chat conversation between the girl and her friend is superimposed over the footage. In effect, these interventions of visual manipulation and layering reconstruct the real time of the recorded events: the recorded image of the girl's spatial location is enriched by a visual representation of the messaging thread superimposed in post-production as a virtual image that records (actually, recounts) the real situation. (Another example for this type of editing in post-production is when the soundtrack of the radio show is added as a layer.) These asynchronous, layered images have a unique effect: they condense meaning. They make it impossible to not notice the heterogeneity of, and the tensions between, the various semantic fields, the hybrid nature of media consumption, and the noise of real and virtual spaces crashing into one another, especially since the conversation itself comments on what is going on in the physical space. It is as if we were viewing a mysterious social commentary photograph that unfolds in time in the tense contradiction between the recordability of the subject and the subject itself. As far as the dramaturgical climax of the film is concerned, we also have to peek "behind" the situation of recording in order to experience the contradictory nature of the situation itself. As the quarrel breaks out in the presence of the camera (in her indignation, the girl severs ties with her mother, who makes gestures of denial) the viewer may have the ambiguous impressions that the bickering is both spontaneous *and* a made-up excuse (namely, the mother's actions come in handy for the girl in her effort to shift the emotional burden of her own decision to her mother, even though it was premeditated and hardly a decision made in the heat of the quarrelling). The film does not explain the scene; it merely records it – yet at the same time, it is both a witness to, and one of the actants of, the unfolding events; the protagonist's plea for the camera's validation of her position – namely, that her decision is both justified and correct – is unstated but obvious.

The stylization toolbox applied by *Downstream* contains three primary devices: resourceful practices of image editing; highlighting details as details (which, according to Barthes, cannot be integrated dialectically into the whole of the image when it comes to the *punctum* of that image); and moulding scenes into a narrative form that is both novelistic and sustained in its unfamiliarity. Here, the stylization applied to the cinematic material causes the film – which otherwise narrates episodes from the girl's life – to depart from the conventional logic of grasping the subject in its generalizability. The protagonist of *Downstream* is not typical; she does not represent or exemplify a social problem. Neither is her story extraordinary, unusual, atypical, or sensational; as a story, it is a single occurrence brought to life by a type of cinematic stylization

that halts and derails generalisation. Máté Bartha's film is not trying to *supersede* but to *deconstruct* the cinematic language it speaks or the cinematic language of the tradition it otherwise adheres to.

## Contrapuntal and dialogic composition

While the films examined so far either rhetorically reframed and focused or stylized the narrative and visual practices of *tabloid cinema*, the two films I will take a look at in the following passages – *tititá* by Tamás Almási (2015) and *Not About Family* by Anna Kis (2019) – adopt a more traditional language of expression and, in terms of their *narrative technique*, both are closer to the filmmaking practices of the 1970s. In these films, it is the earlier monolithic “sociological gaze” cast at the subject that changes by becoming contrapuntal and/or “dialogic”; in other words, it is the “we/someone” perspective of observation that changes: it becomes plural.

This uncanny similarity to *tabloid cinema* is especially salient in the case of Tamás Almási's <sup>[23]</sup> film, to such an extent that when we compare it to Schiffer's *Gyuri Cséplő*, which we have already mentioned as one of the most important films of tabloid cinema, the former almost appears to be a loose paraphrase of the latter. While the parallels are not by design, <sup>[24]</sup> the two films are obviously akin to one another both in terms of their narrative frames and in the problems they choose to tackle. *Gyuri Cséplő* lives in the impoverished Roma colony on the outskirts of the village of Németsfalva, while *tititá* protagonist Antal Kuru lives in a decrepit house in Borsod county, a socioeconomically challenged region; both Cséplő and Kuru are engaging and likeable characters; both live in destitution and both stick out of their immediate environments like a sore thumb. Cséplő joins friends and travels to Budapest in hope of finding work, while Anti receives a grant from Snétberger Foundation, a charity organising summer camps for talented Roma children from a disadvantaged background, and, enticed by hopes of a better future, he decides to take the opportunity. Cséplő struggles to make it in the big city; Anti learns solfeggio, finger positions, music editing, and English, but he has a hard time keeping up the tempo and he struggles. Cséplő returns to his home village with plans to try his luck again in the capital sometime soon; Anti does not make the cut for the final gala concert, goes home to his village, and teaches solfeggio. He feels out of place in his former environment. The journeys taken by the two protagonists are similar, and both films conclude with an open ending.

However, despite the uncanny resemblance between the story lines of the two films, their directions of inquiry significantly diverge. Cséplő's journey is a common social mobility story from the 1970s. Responding to the pull of government-sponsored industrialisation, the protagonist finds employment in a factory as an unskilled labourer. Anti's journey may not be extraordinary but it is certainly not typical. In an era of televised talent shows, the film's theme is not in the least unusual, although Almási's film is not just another variation of the familiar theme of success or failure in a competitive setting. The emphasis is on Anti's encounter with a world unknown to him, a world in which he struggles to get up to speed, a world whose expectations he has a difficulty meeting because of a whole range of hurdles both objective, such as, for example,

his complete lack of any prior formal music education, and subjective: the emotional and mental support he yearns but cannot get from his peers or instructors.

What distinguishes the two films from one another is most readily identifiable by taking a glancing look at what is *missing* from Almási's film. In *Gyuri Cséplő*, the dramaturgical emphasis is on community spaces, the reflexes of the majority society (examples include the Németsfalú pub scene, Cséplő's and his fellow job seekers' encounter with the hiring officer, the scene of the police identity check, etc.), and the protagonists' encounters with fellow Gypsies who are representatives of different social classes and belong to the urban milieu. The rural and urban spaces (working in the fields; segregated localities; pubs; a Budapest train station; the workers' hostel; etc.) are all represented in a differentiated manner as different spaces of coexistence, behaviour, contact, and attention. In contrast, *tititá* is mainly shot in the buildings of Snétberger Foundation, and in the context of the film's structure, any fixed shots of the environment either function as landscapes of the heart or are used as cutaway inserts: they emphasize or counterpoint the protagonist's loss of balance and disorientation in line with an internal musical principle. Another example is the parallel montage we see at the end of the film, which cuts back and forth between the protagonist's peers preparing for their concert and the protagonist himself riding a train home. What is a succinct and, at the same time, sociologically valuable observation in Schiffer's film is a musical-rhythmic unit in Almási's.

When viewed side-by-side with – *and* from the vantage point of – its predecessor *Gyuri Cséplő*, Almási's contemporary *tititá* seems to retain the same overall story line, but the analytical, social focus is pushed into the background. *Tititá* does not really allow us to follow the story of Antal Kuru as an example of *social* mobility. The film presents episodes from the life of a fallible, likeable, and talented music student – but it does so without taking a detailed account of realistic opportunities, patterns of mobility, and social forces and constraints. (It is a telling sign of the film's transitional situation – namely, that it shuttles between two distinct paradigms and it is not at all unfamiliar with the sociological perspective mentioned above – that an insert at the end of the film gives a long list of Anti's peers and their future life paths.)

However, looking *back* from the vantage point of the contemporary film *tititá*, the limited nature of the sociological gaze of the predecessor becomes apparent: it views its subject from the perspective of the conceptualised *general*, wherefore the *specific* example it selects as its focus inevitably comes preloaded with the substance of the general. Applied to *Gyuri Cséplő*, this means that if we view the protagonist from the perspective of social mobility, we will inevitably view him as no more than a subject of social mobility, with the premonition that he is probably doomed to fail. The issue is not simply whether, driven by wishful thinking, it makes any sense to hold reality accountable for the fulfilment of our hopes, <sup>[25]</sup> but that in itself, the “sociological gaze” offers a perspective that is monolithic in nature. The matrix of the social conditions (forms of capital such as housing capital, financial capital, income capital, educational capital, social capital, etc.) promises a single standard, which, however, often proves unsuitable for judging the peculiarity, the singular nature, the sophistication and the unique structure of the specific example, or indeed

the hermeneutic that manifests itself in how the protagonist interprets the meaning of the general (in other words, how he understands the meaning of being a gipsy in relation to the majority's perspective). Sliding down or rising up the social ladder: György Cséplő and Antal Kuru either remain the poor bastards they have always been, or they climb the social ladder – Cséplő by rising to middle class status, and Kuru by becoming a famous musician or composer. Either – or. The “sociological gaze” deepens this algorithmization and offers a more complex explanation, one that goes beyond the individual variables, for why the first option is a far more probable outcome. At the same time, the sociological gaze, much like musical talent shows, views the events from the perspective of their finality, their eventual outcome, only in a more complex manner. This also means, however, that the sociological gaze flattens out the scale against which things and occurrences can be judged; it only retains whatever is part of the *external general* and applies to everyone (in actual fact, to the middle class) with its standards of success/prosperity washing out all other, occasionally fundamentally different views of what is considered valuable.

In the case of *tititá*, despite the restraint with which it handles its material (the social nature of the interactions becomes all blurred and hazy) one can easily pinpoint in what aspects and in what ways the film views, and speaks differently about, the protagonist's relations as compared to *Gyuri Cséplő*. In Schiffer's film, the protagonist works, but only *in abstracto* (in itself, the work he does is not at all interesting for the purposes of the film since the emphasis is on the circumstances under which he works). In contrast, in the film *tititá* there is a deep and complex relationship between the musicality of the film and the protagonist's musical studies. In the story Almási tells, the work of the protagonist – a musician – is not something abstract at all; rather, it is the object of internal reflection and an unavoidable question in the context of the unravelling plot. It is indispensable to keep track of the practical difficulties the protagonist faces in his musical development. Anti's primary challenge is not musical notation, reading sheet music, the staggering diversity of contemporary musical styles, correct posture, etc. Granted, each of these represents real difficulties for him, and he can hardly take great enough strides in all those areas within such an impossibly short span of time. However, his greatest obstacle is something that seems but a minute practical problem: metre, beat, and tempo. His poor beat keeping renders his improvisations and compositions incongruent, amorphous, disorganised, and inconclusive. The regular alternation of short and long musical notes, denoted by the rhythm syllables 'ti' and 'ta' (hence the title of the film) are the minimum units of musical composition, and in themselves constitute merely the mechanical, indifferent medium of music. The film's focus is on how the protagonist struggles to learn this fundamental aspect of music, and how his music becomes more and more plastic and mouldable. *Tititá* as a film also has its own complex musicality in the way the consecutive scenes and the alternating spaces are interwoven, an aspect I already mentioned in the initial discussion of this film. It is as though the *what* (the subject) and the *how* (the manner of presentation) engaged in a musical call-and-response arrangement following a system of subtle shifts of rhythm. As the credits roll at the end of the film, we learn that the soundtrack of the opening and closing sequences consists of compositions by Kuru. Thus, the musical soundtrack frames and gives closure to the story of Kuru's development. The story of Anti as an individual is

an open, creative process that, thanks to Snétberger Foundation, he had the chance to benefit from. Yet at the same time the artistic process has come to an end and became repeatable work of art. This sheds ample light on the double nature of the film: the film's subject manifests itself in the duality of the latent social gaze on the one hand, and the poetic gaze on the other. While one is driven by the principle of representation, the other is driven by the principle of presentation as mediated by the person: instead of representing the specific person, it develops a creative process in and through the medium of film, bringing the same forth upon itself (in the original sense of *poiesis*). The aim of the film is not only to recreate and imitate the course of a singular life but also to shape it into a repeatable artefact. During the Szeged round table discussions, Almási mentioned that this was his happiest sad film. For me, the only comprehensible reason for such a statement is that Almási speaks in the affirmative about a socially challenging life, because he can see the beauty and the significance of that life in the Nach-Leben (afterlife) of the work of art: in the protagonist's music and his own film. It is in the act of re-reading that the "music" of the film, as well as the music of the protagonist, become meaningful. Instead of merely identifying the event of understanding with the representational value of the subject, the film also allows that occurrence of understanding to manifest itself as an art event. Thus, the possibility for evaluating *the work of Kuru* is removed from the context of the protagonist's personal mobility and is redirected to the work of art itself, which happens in the now of listening to the music and watching the film. This is also the ultimate source of the film's affirmative happiness.

While Almási's film employs the poetic gaze to counterpoint how the protagonist is viewed from the perspective of social mobility, Anna Kis's film *Not About Family* offers a dialogic interpretability of its characters, in Bakhtin's sense of the concept. As far as its form is concerned, this film is also in close kinship with the dramaturgy seen in the films of the *tabloid cinema* tradition. For example, contrary to contemporary trends, it does not have a single lead protagonist. After a handful of scenes involving all the protagonists, the film develops mainly as a sequence of situational conversations, while the plot is kept loose and mostly formal. The film brings into focus occurrences that expose individual behaviours and interpersonal dynamics rather than events that are meaningful from the perspective of a certain narrative. Although plot dramaturgy is pushed into the background, the structure of the film is still quite tight in its own way, and its dynamic is tense, as reflected in the continuous reframing of how the protagonists and their situation are viewed.

Bakhtin underlines <sup>[26]</sup> that Dostoevsky's heroes emerge in crisis situations and therefore are not "fully-rounded", fully developed "characters" just yet, hence it is not possible to judge them descriptively from an external perspective. They are, nonetheless, fully aware of the external judgments of their fellow humans, and as they speak, they take those judgments into account, challenge them, and reframe them. The dialogic nature of their speech can prevail freely because in Dostoevsky's work the author's voice – which is necessarily an agent of character-building in any monological narration – no longer plays a prominent role and is on par with the voices of the protagonists. These novels do not offer the reader a comprehensive perspective from which the

reader could rate the protagonists' behaviour or ideologies. What the reader perceives is the dispute arising *within* the speech of the protagonists – in other words, how the utterances of the protagonist pre-empt the judgment they expect from the outside world and already contain the rebuttal of that external judgment. This is then yet another case when the horizon of the reader's judgment is not a (prior) given but an event, perpetual motion, transformation and coming into existence, something that can be interrupted but never brought to conclusion.

Interestingly, Anna Kis avoids jam-packing her film with the sort of affective signals (customarily, these are sustained close-ups and emotional non-diegetic music) designed to touch the viewer so that they can experience their own firmness of judgment through their own emotional response. At the same time, it also avoids objectifying its protagonists: it does not join together takes and scenes in tell-tale ways to create contextual clues that lead the viewer to recognise connections that remain invisible for the protagonists themselves. In other words, no superior perspective arises in the film from which to pass judgment on that which is seen; hence, the possibility to objectify the protagonists does not arise either.

The film stages a pedagogical experiment: as part of a national programme, teachers at a local second-chance school in the Southern Hungarian Great Plain region offer self-knowledge and motivational coaching to their students, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of them having been expelled from other schools. Admittedly, the students agree to participate in the programme to avoid class. The coaching process provides a loose narrative frame for the film. The documentary starts with the selection of the participating teachers and the training they receive, and goes on to present a sequence of playful activities involving the students, one-on-one conversations between teachers and students, conversations between students, an excursion, and, eventually, debriefing conversations. Initially, all participants are reluctant. The teachers are weary of experiencing yet another failure; the students signal their disinclination to cooperate. Yet over time, step by step, the students open up and start sharing their typically painful and difficult to handle problems – sometimes unwillingly, sometimes enthralled by new hope, and sometimes with gestures of rejection. The coda of the film does not detail the long-term effects of the training event, nor does it reflect on the future fate of the student (or teacher) protagonists. The problems of the two groups, the special circumstances under which the educational work is done, the lack of resources the teachers face, the lack of cooperation with other public or private institutions, the students' difficult environment and their adolescent *joie de vivre* – in short, the relationships that the film unravels – are always presented as filtered through the speech and the behaviour of the protagonists, always playing off of one another. As a result, the viewers of the film experience the protagonists in their conflicting and tension-generating hypostases. In this context, it may have some explanatory value that the adolescents call each other either “Gipsy” or “migrant”,<sup>[27]</sup> using those terms not as insults or slurs but as ambivalent labels they also apply to themselves. A similarly explanatory scene is when, talking with a teacher, a number of students discuss the pros and cons of doing sex work in Switzerland. The film does not attempt to serve justice; instead, it

contrasts perspectives without proposing any solution to the difficulties the protagonists experience; it does not even suggest in which direction the first steps could be possibly taken in order to resolve all the emotional and other conflicts. Neither does the film suggest that those conflicts are even resolvable if only the protagonists follow this or that protocol. One might say the film is not any smarter than its protagonists and has no sense of social mission; in other words, the film has no intention to point beyond its protagonists – instead, it allows them to present their respective truths, complete with their respective blind spots or even falsehoods, as they relate to one another. During my seminars, this has always been the documentary to generate the most heated debate, provoking clashes between the most extreme positions ranging from disapproval (of both the students and the teachers) to rejection, from opinions of sympathy and affirmation to social engineering attitudes. *Not About Family* has an interest in situations, wherefore it does not single out a main protagonist, and its narrative framework is formal at best. Hence, the “voices” of all the protagonists are equally relevant, and so are their respective, conflicting claims for justice, which are indeed presented in their tension, and which, instead of dissolving in a social general, are in perpetual motion and continuous change.

## Transitional forms; the singularity of the witness

Both of the remaining films I wish to analyse are pushing the limits of filmmaking practices typical of *direct cinema*, and occupy a transitional zone between *direct cinema* and *cinéma vérité*, another tradition I will be discussing in the following subchapter of this paper. Both follow the life paths of a single protagonist. *Easy Lessons* (Könnyű leckék. Dorottya Zurbó, 2018) accompanies a Somali refugee who, unlike her companions, does not think of her stay in Hungary as a merely transitional stage on her way to Western Europe, but instead settles in successfully. *A Woman Captured* (Egy nő fogságban. Bernadett Tuza-Ritter, 2017) follows the fate of a woman held in captivity who nonetheless manages to escape and start a new life. Formally – except for a single scene – both films are observational documentaries: the protagonists simply “live their lives”, and the camera merely happens to be present as events unfold. The transitional situation of these films is reflected not so much in their formal traits in the strict sense but in the fact that the instance of the cinematic utterance is not an unspecified “we/someone” who purely register(s) the events, but the singularity of the witness<sup>[28]</sup>. These films do not necessarily aim at personifying the camera (e.g. by using a handheld camera wobble effect); neither do they bring the shooting situation into centre stage. Yet it is true in both cases that the source of observation does not merely coincide with the camera recording the scene; instead, it is identical with the location of someone who themselves relate to what the cinematic image reveals, even though that relationship is not in the forefront, and even though that person may not ever say a word. At the same time, the position that the cinematic utterance is communicated from in these films is not the position of an interviewer making his or her subjects speak, prodding them along if needed, but that of the witness who countersigns the events, “gives his or her word” that they did indeed happen, and also promises to the hero of the film that he or she would testify in the hero’s favour.

In these films, the source of the cinematic utterance is not “we/someone” but instead *the witness* who is both impersonal and personal at the same time (and is thereby singular).

In this context, I would like to emphasize two points. On the one hand, in these two films “the singularity of the testimony” is not an epistemic constraint on the possibility of understanding the information communicated. Neither documentary signals, either openly or indirectly, a limited claim to telling the truth; neither makes any effort to emphasize the historical nature and the inevitable incompleteness of information and knowledge acquisition. The fact that both documentaries formulate their cinematic utterances from the perspective of an “I” that is clearly and unambiguously impersonal in his/her personalness – or is, in other words, a witness – does *not* also imply that these films acknowledge, overtly or covertly, the limited nature of cognition, or that they elevate the same to the status of a fundamental methodological principle, although limited cognition is often claimed to happen in the case of the so-called postmodern documentary. In fact, I believe that the explanation offered by Linda Williams in her piece – one of the most fundamental texts in the literature relevant to our inquiry – is also restricted in its applicability, considering that her definition of the essence of the postmodern documentary film is limited to epistemic criteria only, <sup>[29]</sup> inasmuch as she states that the postmodern documentary emerged as a response to issues such as the proneness of visual information to be forged or fabricated, or the tendency of metanarratives to become unsettled. For if we limit this entire set of issues to merely the question of the semanticizability of the cinematic image (*what* the footage means to *whom*), we lock ourselves into the space of declarative statements and constative descriptions, and fail to consider something that had emerged as an especially significant challenge “in the era of the witness”, <sup>[30]</sup> namely, that there is no witness to testify in favour of the witness; there is no “superwitness” who could confirm or validate any first-hand testimony, making it absolutely firm. It is an inevitable performative moment of *every* documentary film that, on the one hand, its nature as testimony cannot be derived from the semantic aspects of the cinematic footage itself, and that, on the other hand, its performative nature is inevitably open both in terms of time (many have underlined in many places how well documentary film footage tolerates being transposed into contexts other than the original) and in terms of it being a differential event in nature (such as, for example, how any “witnessing” of a recorded image necessarily raises the issue of its own falsehood). Both films, but especially *A Woman Captured*, lay out a social problem without much concern for whether the more generalised social problem becomes apparent and cognizable; their “personalness” does not arise from an acknowledgement of the limited or fragmented nature of their partial perspective.

Furthermore, I use the rather awkward phrase “the singularity of the witness” in order to distinguish it, already in the act of labelling, from the common interpretation of personalness as (self-) expression. The fact that in these films the cinematic utterance is tied to the singularity of the witness does not imply the dominance of the expressive function. In short, the fact that the (always fictitious) “we/someone” perspective of passive registration is replaced with an impersonally personal perspective in these films has nothing to do either with any scepticism



about the possibility of describing a given context fully and comprehensively, or with bringing the expressive function into the forefront. This perspective is personal because the foundation it rests on is an open ethical relation, namely, that the subject of the utterance is not substitutable, not general. At this point, the objective, physical existence of the image is admittedly interlinked with the performative act of bearing witness. And because a witness is always a specific person, the image itself functions as its maker's countersignature in that it does not "report on" or "represent" something but instead "makes a commitment", "makes a promise", "bears witness to" the image: the cinematic image is (in part) the result of this process of bearing witness. It is, at the same time, impersonal because its exceptional nature, <sup>[31]</sup> its "personalness" does not arise from the individualisation of the utterance but from the testimonial situation.

In the case of a documentary film, the fact that the image is countersigned necessarily certifies the credibility of the image itself. However, in the case of *direct cinema*, it also attests to the fact that whatever has been recorded has indeed happened (namely, that it transpired the way it was recorded, at the time of its recording, and involving those recorded, that is, that it happened as a singular event; "classical" documentary films do not make such promises). One might say, these two documentaries reveal the dormant performativity of direct cinema, which makes it possible for these films to also reflect upon the fundamental ethical relation of documentary filmmaking, and make that fundamental ethical relation their *theme*.

*A Woman Captured* is an inquiry into the issue of modern-day slavery through the observation of an extended period of time in the life of a woman. The case of Maris, the protagonist of the film, is a telling example how countless human beings end up in absolute dependence in Hungary (as well as in other countries) because of adverse changes in their living conditions, financial situation, or health or family status. Since in most cases no direct coercion is used (they are not denied their freedom of movement, they are not locked up, and they are not or rarely subjected to physical constraint; instead, their captors take out loans in their names, for example), the authorities are usually powerless and unable to prosecute those who take advantage of their victims by forcing them to work as domestic servants, *de facto* slaves. The protagonist is one of several servants working for a woman. She takes care of household chores while also holding down a day job; in return for her work in the household and the salary she earns and hands over to her captor, she is provided with accommodation and meals. The director of the film, camera in hand, follows Maris around relentlessly; the captor (in return for payment) allows her to shoot in the house as well, provided the footage does not show either the captor or her family members. (None of this information is disclosed in the film itself.) It is this situation that creates the film's unique visual world as recorded by a camera that moves around "with eyes cast down". The shooting process and the protagonist's conversations with the director of the film are presumably the reasons why Maris eventually makes up her mind and escapes. The film captures the very moment of her escape, which is when the film's most memorable sentence is uttered as Maris makes her plea to the director: "Just don't betray me!" Maris is not willing to live at a homeless shelter in Budapest; she quickly finds work, rents an apartment, and, eventually, her greatest desire is fulfilled: her

daughter moves back in with her. The story of the film comes to a reassuring conclusion; after many years of trials and tribulations, Maris, the exceptionally hardy protagonist of the film, regains her freedom and her life.



*A Woman Captured. Bernadett Tuza-Ritter, 2017*

The film does not *speak about* Maris; it *responds* to her. Actually, what happens is the opposite: it is the protagonist who speaks to the director, occasionally turning towards the camera; most of the time, the recording apparatus scans the peripherals of the environment in which the dialogue takes place. The wider social context of Maris's story is only referred to in inserts at the beginning and at the end of the film, as well as in the peritexts surrounding the film (film descriptions, interviews, promotional materials, etc.). Similarly, no investigation is launched into the specific case; at least, the film does not mention any. The emphasis is exclusively on the director's cooperation with the protagonist, primarily on building the trust-based relationship that the viewer only learns about *indirectly* from the gestures and postures of the protagonist, the gazes she casts at the camerawoman/director (at the lens of her camera), and other signals of inferable meaning. The protagonist is a very lively but all-too-timid woman; similarly, the camera, "with its head hung down", seems both restrained and eloquent, at least as far as the sequences shot in the captor's house are concerned. Interestingly, the viewer's latent knowledge of the physical, bodily, sensory-motoric aspects of filmmaking plays quite an increased role in the case of this film, and these aspects of reading the cinematic image readily mix and mingle with the sensual aspects of maintaining interpersonal contact as far as those can be deduced from the protagonist's posture. Up until almost the very end of the film, there is hardly any allusion to the unspoken alliance emerging between the protagonist and the director, despite the fact that this is one of the most important themes of the film. At the end of the documentary, Maris expresses her gratitude by offering a present; it is safe to assume that this scene made it to the final cut of the film in order to shine the light on the fact that, besides the social issue, trust is also one of the central themes of the film, and no less important. The process of building that trusting relationship is closely linked to the process and practices of shooting, wherefore it also becomes the self-reflexion of the cinematic image, of recording, and of reading the film. The very essence of that trust-based relationship, as well as all the subtle hints that evoke it throughout the film, can be interpreted in the context of the trust between the filmmaker and the film's subject, but also, at the very same

time, in the context of the trust Maris vests into the film being shot and portraying her, as well as in the context of the director's loyalty, not to mention the viewer's trust, who has no choice but to depend on the mediation the film offers.

There is little doubt that the short sentence uttered by Maris as she is making her escape – “Just don't betray me!” – is addressed to the director in reference to the unspoken alliance between the two, imploring the director to not denounce her escape to her captor. If we interpret Maris's utterance as a practical request, it becomes the audible amplification of her anxieties. The imperative mood of the sentence (addressed to the director/camerawoman) is striking, and so is its supplicant, prayer-like tone. In this case, the protagonist is not addressing the director; instead, she speaks to the camera as it is recording her, capturing her face and figure. Speaking to a camera is much like sending our future self a message in a bottle, as in formulating that message we necessarily assume the actual presence of our future self. Projecting ourselves into the future is putting our current situation into words; running ahead into the future is sketching up the present (a sketch of the present or the present as a sketch). In the case of Maris, this is brutally spectacular. She is jumping into nothingness, not having anything at all, drifting towards a future that threatens her with even greater exposure than servitude: homelessness. The plea of “Just don't betray me!” is nothing else but the protagonist addressing the camera as her own displaced virtual gaze into the future, begging it to not betray her, to not turn out to be a mirage, to not drag her into fooling herself, and to not turn into what it very much seems to be turning into at this point: a jump into nothing. The camera is the protagonist's (almost) own virtual gaze that urges and *encourages* her; something that gives her hope; something she turns to, asking it not to betray her and not to mislead her – it is time itself, facing the protagonist as a sketch, a promise, and a threat, all at the same time. Here, the protagonist's gesture – turning towards the camera – is in fact her experience of the divisive duality of time as a sketch of the future and time as the final limitation; and, typically, that experience of time comes with the performative moments of both encouragement and betrayal. The director does not – and cannot – have an answer to this; what she ends up responding (“I won't”) merely repeats and confirms the performative modality of the plea.

The director's response cannot be interpreted as an act of confirmation communicated in the indicative; it is more like a prayer. For one, the director cannot give Maris any guarantees, cannot act on behalf of her protagonist, and cannot live the life of her protagonist instead of her, because then the movie would no longer be about the protagonist but about the director as an actant (portraying her “humanism” and generosity). The director's options are either to record and accompany, or to facilitate the protagonist's successful escape. She cannot do both at the same time without running the risk of falsification. She cannot do much more for her because that would imply giving up her own role and falsifying whatever she could share as the story of Maris. During the Szeged round table discussions, the film's producer Julianna Ugró said that at one point they had to decide whether to act as social workers or as filmmakers, and to draw the line concerning the nature and extent of their involvement in this otherwise unfathomable social

problem. Yet again, we run into the usual paradox: recording implies a limited capacity to act. Maris asks the director not to betray her, yet it is simply not possible for her to not “betray” (abandon) the subject of the film; in fact, in a certain sense, “betraying” the film’s subject is the very precondition of making that subject visible. (There are perpetual concerns and eternal uncertainties around where to draw the line, for example, in the case of reporters: when facing difficult situations, when and to what extent can they carry on covering the story, and when does their decision to carry on reporting become a failure to meet their obligation to act and provide assistance?)

The way the protagonist, in final analysis, experiences and confirms her own temporal existence as exposure (a vague suspicion of which is bound to linger every time photographic *exposure* is involved) in making her “Just don’t betray me!” plea, the director for her own part makes an impossible promise as she responds, for all she can do is betray and abandon her protagonist as long as she consistently sticks to her role as the director. To be exact, she can make that promise because what she actually promises (namely, that Maris will succeed at her desperate attempt) is in fact not in her power. This, however, is only controversial if we happen to think that we can only promise what we *know* can safely be promised. What the director can promise *in her own name* is that she would be there to bear witness to whatever is to come: since bearing witness to her protagonist’s success is still ahead of the director – just like her uncertain future is still ahead of Maris – the director’s response, promise and plea (“I won’t.”) is in fact made in reference to time itself, as is Maris’s plea “Just don’t betray me!”; the former is merely a repetition of the latter. The alliance the two form in their anxiety over the passing of time manifests itself in the impossible promise the director makes in order to comfort Maris.

What the film records is not the gaze of someone, an “observer” that exists *outside* time and just casually happens to coincide with a spatial translation of time (as we peer *through* it), but *time itself*. In this film, the “observer” assumes the position of the witness, who, similarly to the film’s protagonist, is also subject to time and also experiences it with anxiety: it is exactly the fact that the future cannot be anticipated, combined with the witness’s own singularity, that enable the witness to make a promise and bear witness to the story of Maris.

In this film, the act of “recording” transforms into existential drama. This applies at the level of the story line, but also in terms of the relationship between the subject of the image and the act of recording – the relationship that the recorded material depends on for its visibility. Maris succeeds and breaks free from her captivity, and, eventually, everything changes for the better. However, the drama of the film is not only about this; it is about the double bind of bearing witness. The objectivity of the film does not imply “keeping a distance” or the impersonality of “representation”. Maris’s case manifests itself as a drama of trust that is played out partly silently, by means of physical contact and coordination (such as, for example, in the moving ceremonial gestures of the welcome scene), and partly in language-based interactions of the type we have just discussed. As all this builds upon the performative movements of interpersonal relations, the “personalness” of the film does not merely arise from recording and describing the image, the

movement, and the behaviour of the person, but from how the person is revealed, or how the person emerges or comes into the forefront in these performative acts. This “revelation” of the person is an event; in our specific case, it is a commitment, a promise, *and*, at the same time, the crisis of that commitment and promise, something that the viewer can experience in his or her own right from his or her own subjection and exposure to time.

I have read *A Woman Captured* as an existential drama of trust. The reason why I claim that this documentary is in a peripheral situation as compared to *tabloid cinema* is that because even though it formally uses the technique of following the subject around, this “drama” does not merely play out at the level of the events recorded and represented (that is, it is not merely the drama of the events observed) but in fact it is also the drama of observation. The question of the fundamental ethical relation of documentary filmmaking does not only arise indirectly; it becomes the direct subject of the cinematic image itself; this is the distinguishing feature of the film as compared to the *tabloid cinema* tradition in general.

The other film under discussion in this subchapter, *Easy Lessons*, takes one further step away from the practice of direct cinema. It follows the life of a Somali girl who is an extraordinary phenomenon: with her beauty and elegance, she stands out from her immediate environment, and whoever she interacts with, whether they are her peers or her counsellors, etc. (including the director herself) turn towards her with great respect, love, and admiration. The girl sets out to become a model, completes her high school finals, while going through a crisis that emerges from the emotional and cognitive tensions of leaving behind her original cultural environment and seeking integration into her new one.

The shooting of the film started before the migration crisis of 2015. During the Szeged round table discussions, the director emphasized this coincidence: by the time the film was released, the politically motivated hysterization of the migration crisis was in full swing in Hungary, even though the theme simply had not had any political overtones when the shooting commenced. The Hungarian reception of the film inevitably became part of this public discourse, although it may be worth mentioning that the reviews published about the film were fairly objective and nuanced.

Like the overwhelming majority of contemporary Hungarian documentaries, *Easy Lessons* concentrates not on exploring the social circumstances of the selected protagonist but also on the protagonist’s states of mind. The challenge of this approach is not how to represent the perceptions of the protagonist on the screen, since the perceptual aspects of the film’s primary theme, the loss of cultural ties, are impossible to imitate in a straightforward manner. What is perceivable to the eye is the determination with which the protagonist prepares for her future, and the harmonious relationship she maintains with her environment: she continues her studies, completes her high school finals, tries her luck at modelling, and maintains cordial friendships with her peers and counsellors. For the observer following her, only occasional subtle hints give away the enormous emotional and mental effort all this requires from Kafiya. The swimming pool scene is one of the telling sequences: while all the others take the swimming lesson for what it is,

the situation is anything but unambiguous for Kafiya: having to wear a swimsuit in public goes against the behavioural code of the environment she comes from, her religion, and how she was raised. While her body language shows how difficult she finds this situation to handle, her timid smile gives away the invisible exultation and pride she feels for having been able to overcome this tension in some shape or form.

While video chatting with her mother, she changes and puts on her headscarf so as not to offend her. She struggles because she is unable to have a meaningful discussion with her mother about, let alone make her understand and accept, the various dissonant emotional and mental challenges that are part and parcel of emigration. Namely, that while she would like to, and is also expected to, compare the different behavioural patterns and forms of experience at the level of her daily routine, she is also expected to habitually take into consideration both her cultural environments. The short segments of conversation she has with her mother are therefore highly emphatic references to the ever-increasing domain of the unspoken, or, upon closer consideration, the unspeakable (that which cannot be interpreted as a whole). The director, Dorottya Zurbó therefore suggests that Kafiya sit down in a studio setting and tell her mother all she needs to tell her, without the pressure of knowing for certain that her mother would actually receive her message. In other words, that she improvise a kind of monologue that is addressed to her mother, while the communicative “hijacking” of her speech functions both as a certain type of protection (protecting her from her mother’s disapproving looks and interruptions) and as a setting that encourages her to elaborate and explain her feelings at greater depth and to reveal herself emotionally.



*Easy Lessons. Dorottya Zurbó, 2018*

Clearly, this is the typical situation of fiction, and in more than one sense. On the one hand, it is an artificial situation that the filmmaker *brings about* rather than *records*; this is the classical response of the documentary films of the *cinéma vérité* tradition to the realisation that the situation of observation can hardly be detached from the observer, and that an artificial situation is as much of a valid way to explore the world as observation from a simulated bystander perspective. Here, the fictional situation emerges as a natural form of documentation. Furthermore, it is also fictional because it is a typical situation found in poetry, at least if we start out from one of the best known definitions of poetry as “soliloquy overheard”. The mother is the virtual addressee of the utterance, and because the audience, as if “by accident”, overhears that utterance, they can easily

transpose the structure of the virtual nature of the speech in a manner that best applies to their own positions. What the film brings to the screen is a spectacular visual representation of the very structure of the situation in which Kafiya speaks, namely, that the positions of the speaker and the listener can be virtually interchanged and are indeed interchanged: as Kafiya speak to herself in the sound recording studio, we may be seeing her from a distance but we hear her voice from intimate closeness (from a close sound perspective).

Finally, the situation is also fictional because while we can hardly avoid interpreting Kafiya's performance referentially (and "performance" is indeed the right theatrical term to describe the confession she makes to her mother in her beautiful and rhythmically complex language about her love, her commitment, and her memories) it might become just as compellingly obvious that it is by no means "clarification" (or, for that matter, the direct opposite thereof: finding excuses for her own situation and decisions, rationalising them after the fact, downplaying or falsifying them). Instead, it is "fiction" and invention, something that may prove relevant to the audience in explaining the situation exactly because it enables the audience to experience how, in her liminal situation, Kafiya cannot possibly find a way to describe her situation with even an approximate accuracy, similarly to how it is impossible to supplement and find closure for all that which remains necessarily unspoken in her conversations with her mother. The pathos of fiction is designed to supplement the unspeakable dimension of their conversation in the sense of the notion of supplementarity as used by deconstruction: creating a certain kind of overproduction and shift by means of supplementation. Kafiya demonstrates her belonging to her original culture by employing means of historical remembrance in her speech (as far as I understand, at one point in her speech she evokes the acoustic atmosphere of the Surahs), while at the same time the immediate reason behind her internal monologue – taking a form that can be overheard – is her desire to sound her closeness to the world she comes from, although she should also sound her distance from the same, in which she obviously cannot succeed, because no words exist to describe her transitional situation.

Kafiya completes her high school finals, and starts dating a young man whose family members belong to a charismatic Christian denomination; to an extent under their influence, Kafiya converts to Christianity. In portraying Kafiya's journey, the film does not underline the general characteristics of successful integration, or celebrate her story as an example; similarly, it makes no attempts to clarify what the prerequisites of successful integration are – instead, by drawing the viewer's attention to how great our hunger for speech has become and how speech is becoming increasingly virtual, it exposes the difficulties of understanding brought about by migration.

If you like, Kafiya's story is replete with uncertainties, and it cannot necessarily serve as a practical model for her peers, nor as a typical example for those interested in, but unfamiliar with, the situation. The girl chooses the route of complete integration – without, of course, turning her back on the personal dispositions she had developed in her original environment. This is extremely difficult and necessarily brings about emotional and cognitive dissonance.

The problem the film touches on is so complicated and so widespread that, in a sense, it has become one of the most important issues of our world. Others who walk in the same shoes choose other scenarios and have other experiences of drifting away from their original cultures. It is hardly improbable that a single film or even series would stand a chance of giving a comprehensive overview of the issue from any aspect. Instead of choosing the route of generalisation, the film concentrates on the singular. However, in this case the decisive criterion is not merely the improbability – the “extraordinary” nature – of the story told; instead, the focus shifts to a metacritical plane: if description becomes impossible because the cases to examine are not only too large in number but also extraordinarily diverse, the relevant response will be the detailed elaboration of an ethical attitude towards a singular case. In this context, I believe it is of key importance that the moment when the film employs fiction overtly is indeed a decisive moment. The uncertainty highlighted as well as introduced by fiction brings the viewer to the realisation that neither the protagonists, nor indeed the viewers of the film are granted, or can possibly attain, any objective certainty about whether and to what extent the behavioural pattern that the protagonist chooses and follows, her sense of identity, and her adjustment practices are “correct”, “successful”, or “fair”.

An ethical attitude can only emerge if fiction is also there to play a role. To put it somewhat bluntly, the latter is a precondition of the former. It is the fictional nature of the performance of the protagonist that allows us to experience our own ethical attitudes, which cannot coincide with the confirmation, endorsement, or execution of a pre-existing norm. One could say Kafiya’s face and character are a call to testify, although not in the sense that we are urged to either validate or refute whether Kafiya’s attitude towards her mother, her earlier environment, or herself are “justified” or “correct” and to what extent. While it is inevitable that we do indeed either validate or refute, the film compels us to experience the disproportionality or the uncertainty of making those calls. What we can bear witness to in the radical unfamiliarity of our insufficiency is the protagonist’s singularity (“face”). “Affirming” Kafiya herself, the viewer’s “affirmative” answer is a precondition for affirming her attitude, the rationality of her actions, and her self as a person even before we pass judgment on the situation whether this way or that, even before we approve of – or challenge, for that matter – the consistency of her statements and actions. <sup>[32]</sup>

The whole film is built upon this “affirmation”: there is hardly another film so permeated by a deep admiration for its protagonist as this one. However, this admiration has nothing to do with the celebrity cult of mass culture. *Easy Lessons* is no hagiography in disguise, and it does not fetishize the character. It is Kafiya’s singularity that calls upon the viewer’s own singularity to bear witness, and it is Kafiya’s singularity that we have to affirm without doing so for a reason or for a purpose (say, for example, because it happens to exemplify something we approve of). It is a moment of overt fiction in the film when the protagonist starts speaking in a language unknown to a European audience, and what that moment of overt fiction brings into the forefront is the protagonist’s unfamiliarity as it calls for the viewer’s affirmation.



*Easy Lessons* – just like *A Woman Captured* – formally carries on the legacy of *tabloid cinema* (discounting the “artificial moment” discussed above). However, as far as its speech situation is concerned, it is outside the realm of *tabloid cinema* because it does not speak from the perspective of “we/someone” but from the position of the witness’s singularity.

## A form inspired by *cinéma vérité* and the image of the documentary film

In this subchapter, my only example will be *The Euphoria of Being*, a film by Réka Szabó. Szabó’s film features a Holocaust survivor and fits into the trend of contemporary documentary films tackling the theme of the Holocaust (such as, for example, *Granny Project*, a 2017 film by Bálint Révész<sup>[33]</sup>). Ábel Visky’s *Tales from the Prison Cell* (2020) is another contemporary documentary film that is closely related to the tradition of *cinéma vérité*. Visky’s film is about inmates living in the Hungarian penitentiary system. While it reconnects with a prominent thematic trend in Hungarian documentary film – the prison film as exemplified by *The Fallen* (Bebukottak. András Mész, 1985) and *Cain’s Children* (Káin gyermekei. Marcell Gerő, 2014) – it brings about innovations in more than one way. What justifies my selection of *The Euphoria of Being* to analyse in some depth is that it clearly demonstrates the change in the use of the cinematic image in contemporary films carrying on the tradition of a *cinéma vérité*, but also taking it a step further.

*The Euphoria of Being* commemorates Éva Fahidi<sup>[34]</sup>, a Hungarian survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. This documentary belongs in the second generation of Holocaust films in which, because of the inevitable historical distance, the issues of discursive remembrance gain prominence.<sup>[35]</sup> Its choice of protagonist would allow the film to “reach directly back into the past”, that is, to use the person of the protagonist to lend credibility to the connections it claims to have exposed. Indeed, there are a number of such episodes in the film: for example, the scenes of laying *Stolpersteine*, or stumbling stones, in memory of Éva’s closest relatives in front of the houses they had lived in. However, viewed in the context of the overall structure of the film, these scenes are part of the secondary story line and serve as a prelude to the actual theme of the film.

Somewhat similarly to *Granny Project*, the film does not simply aim at discovering the events of the past; it too has a greater interest in probing the nature of the distance that such scenarios of remembrance attempt to bridge over. *Granny Project* tackles this distance by focusing primarily on generational differences and by raising questions about the differences in mentality and dispositions between the grandparents, parents, and children, and on whether it is at all possible to mediate between them. In contrast, in Réka Szabó’s film, that historical distance, taken as a hermeneutical problem, itself becomes a key problem in the context of the film’s cinematic language.

The director, who is the leader of dance theatre group Tünet Együttes<sup>[36]</sup>, approaches Éva and asks her to take part in a theatrical performance based on Éva’s memories. Despite her advanced age (she was over 90 years old at the time of the shooting), she accepts the invitation; she performs

the piece, which consists of monologues and choreographed dance inserts, with a talented young dancer, Emese Cuhorka, whose dance performances bring various characters to the stage, including Éva's young self. The film first reconstructs the overall framework of the story and then moves on to how the theatrical piece itself was created, how some of Éva's memories and life situations were chosen and translated into movement and dance. The film records conversations between Éva, the director, and the dancer, as well as stage rehearsals (in which Éva participates all the way through without a word of complaint, quite a heroic undertaking for her advanced age); at the very end of the film, we also see shorter cuts filmed backstage and during the premiere. In addition to recording the theatrical performance itself, the film also articulates the conceptual relationship forming the very foundation of the theatrical piece *directly* (that is, by using footage other than recordings of the theatrical performance) in the form of superimposed cinematic images.

Éva recounts several details about her youth: how she was preparing for a career as a dancer, how she would stand naked in front of the mirror, and how she still harbours a grudge against her father for not following suite when other members of the big bourgeoisie of the city of Debrecen tried their best to save the lives of their families, leaving everything behind if necessary. Emese is tasked with dancing two distinct roles: Éva's young self standing naked in front of the mirror, and the spirit of Éva's father, who Éva still blames and who she still has to forgive. The young woman and the elderly woman featuring in the play are two hypostases of Éva; the scene of the two dancing together around a chair represents on stage how the different time horizons belong together and how the I extends over time. The superimposed faces of Éva the Holocaust survivor and Emese the dancer are a theatrical representation of Éva's space of remembrance.

This sequence of superimposed images is an especially spectacular moment of key importance in the film. It also exemplifies the central problem of the film in terms of its "cinematic language": the film's unique theatrical nature. This does not merely follow from the theme of the film, namely, that it documents a theatrical performance; in a similar vein, the superimposed images also document the events in a very different sense than, for example, the footage recording the scene when Éva tells the others in a matter-of-fact manner that she cannot carry on with the rehearsal right now as she has just broken a rib. The theatrical nature of the *Euphoria of Being* does not follow from *how* it records the process of preparing the stage performance or certain details of the premiere. In this film, the documentary nature of the recorded image is closely linked to this theatrical aspect of the film itself. [Kép (5) *The Euphoria of Being*. Réka Szabó, 2019. – Győri Zsolt szövegéből, korábbi lapszám]

Most of the film's screen time is made up by traditional shots; these are mostly situational interviews with this admirable woman and interactions between Emese the dancer, the director of the film, and Éva. It is from these conversations and interactions that we learn certain details about Éva's earlier life as a young woman before the Holocaust as well as about her life after the Shoah. (It is quite notable that the events she lived through in the death camp are only represented by reference and take up much less screen time in proportion than the sequences

treating the periods either before or after the Holocaust.) The conversations themselves are already a preparatory stage; they generate the “material” to be used during the rehearsals, which, by acting out what Éva had shared verbally, “repeat” her story. The rehearsals afford this remembrance process with a well-practiced, repeatable form, and thereby become, in a sense, Éva’s “displaced” memory. The film, in turn, is also a repetition in its own right. The film recreates the rehearsal process (much the same way the rehearsals themselves recreate the story shared by Éva) and affords Éva’s displaced memory with a form different from the stage performance. What gains emphasis is how memory revisits the past, and how the consecutive stages of reworking build on one another and eventually create a process – which, at the same time, also implies the recontextualization of the very same memories. Just as an example: the film does not only portray the Holocaust survivor but also the director and the dancer; Éva’s memories have become part of their lives (in the practical sense of the word, such as, for example, by means of the stage performance). The cinematic image as a memory trace appears in this process of copying and recreation as reframing rather than identical repetition. The film’s theatrical nature arises from this differential experience of the present: the cinematic image bears witness to the ever-repeating metamorphosis of remembrance, and, indeed, that metamorphosis plays out in the act of bearing witness.

When discussing the superimposition of cinematic images, it is important to emphasize the trace-like nature of those cinematic images. For what we can see directly – a situation in which the faces and bodies of Éva and Emese embrace as in a rhyme pattern – is only readily understandable to us because it immediately becomes a memory also in our own minds; more precisely, we perceive the present time of the cinematic image already as something becoming the past, a transition and a transformation. This increased emphasis on the ephemeral and elusive nature of memories (in this case, specifically Éva’s memories and Éva’s remembrance) does not at all become nostalgic in any sense. The fundamental reason why the “subject” – in this case: the consecutive paraphrased reappearances of Éva’s (and Emese’s) space and time – can only return at all is that that which actually returns, the latent residue, “exists” not *in* the image but *in between* the images (and as such, it cannot be directly represented visually).

This realisation is shared by all documentary films adhering to the tradition of *cinéma vérité*: instead of trying to “capture” a situation, they try to *expose* it, an approach related to the activating, mnemonic energy of images: they make something conceivable or recognisable in something else, but as they become signals by doing so, the mental images of the memory themselves transform into a fickle, mutable virtual residue.

In one of the film’s memorable dialogues, Éva asks the director what she thinks Éva will leave behind when she passes on. The director kindly responds: “This film, just to name one thing, Éva; this film”. Éva is the active residue of this moving memory, and the way the faces fade into one another is the sensory image of this relationship. That is, what we have at hand is a metaphor of the film’s unique theatrical nature, for what is truly happening in the film is, by default, metaphorical in essence, wherefore the most direct possible way for the film to tackle its theme is

the metaphorical way. It is also the film's unique theatrical nature that creates the non-identical present of the testimonial difference.

In discussions about contemporary Hungarian creative documentary film, one of the buzzwords is the “personalness” of these films. In my paper, I have compared contemporary films to the documentary film traditions that had emerged in the 1970s – where, at least in Hungary, a sustained interest in the realm of private/personal life had first appeared – and attempted to explore various trends in how contemporary documentary films relate to those traditions and in what sense they formulate their messages in a different way. I definitely wanted to avoid the trap of linking the issue of personalness to the superficial traits of the narrative practices followed by contemporary films, even though those superficial traits are often concessions to a funding and distribution environment that prefers consumer friendly documentary films focusing on individual stories and action with a certain “calculated sensitivity” in their core. Undoubtedly, this effect-oriented concept of “personalness” has also played a significant role in contemporary Hungarian documentary film (we could list major examples). However, I believe it is an error to identify this effect as the single most normative force, mainly because by bringing such superficial shifts into the forefront, one becomes blind to the actual, much more significant, truly “epochal” transformation that Hungarian documentary film has gone through.

At the same time, I also wanted to avoid another trap: localizing the “personalness” of these films in how they – either openly or in an unspoken manner – shun social issues, or in how they convert social issues into private issues. On the one hand, this claim is not true. If it were true, that would mean the end of documentary film through a total loss of its relevance. What happens in these films is not the avoidance of social issues; rather, the horizon of asking those questions has changed. This paper argues that the personalness of contemporary Hungarian documentary films can be best described as a transformation of the dramaturgy and “sociological gaze” typical of the *tabloid cinema* tradition of the 1970s. I claim that one of the defining traits of the “sociological gaze” is the impersonalness, in the grammatical sense, of “observation” (both as technical recording *and* as cinematic utterance) on the one hand and its neutrality on the other (where the answer to the question “Who is the source of the utterance in the film?” is: “it/someone”). This is what makes observation “objective”; this is what allows observation to take place from a position outside society as a whole (and this is what allows the position of the “free-floating intelligentsia” to exist). Hence my proposal to identify the various forms of personalness encountered in contemporary films by means of mapping out the possible routes they take in deviation from that impersonalness and neutrality.

By now, neutral observation has lost its high ethical ground for good. The varieties I have classified (rhetorical, argumentative arrangement; various forms of stylization; contrapuntal composition; dialogic structure; the overt problematisation of the fundamental ethical relation of the cinematic utterance) probably share the feature that neither pay any extensive attention to the various versions of a given social problem, and this restriction always coincides with a suspension of the neutral perspective and “descriptive illusion” that *tabloid cinema* otherwise represents. In the

case of the films following the traditions of *cinéma vérité*, I have placed emphasis on the theatrical nature of these films, on their differentiated experience of the present, and, in final analysis, on the shift in the concept of the cinematic image in documentary film. While I do not wish to blur the boundaries between the individual traditions, it is remarkable that, in one way or another, every contemporary Hungarian documentary film runs into the problem of “the singularity of testimony”. The films invent forms or versions of personalness based on their answer to this problem.

Translated by Attila Török

[The Hungarian version of this article is published in this same thematic issue.]

## Jegyzetek

1. Stöhr, Lóránt: *Személyesség, jelenlét, narrativitás* [“Personalness, presence, narrativity”] (Budapest: Gondolat, 2019), 77 – 86.
2. Blumenberg, Hans, „Die Epochen des Epochenbegriffs,“ in Hans Blumenberg, *Aspekte der Epochenschwelle: Cusaner und Nolaner. Erweiterte und überarbeitete Neuausgabe von „Die Legitimität der Neuzeit“* (Suhrkamp, 1966), 7 –33.
3. Jauss stresses that one meaning of “modern” is “right now”; something that is different from what has passed. The use of “personalness” related to contemporary documentary film aligns with this distinction. Jauß, Hans Robert, “Die literarische Postmoderne,“ in H. R. Jauß, *Wege des Verstehens* (München: W. Fink Verlag, 1994), 324 –345.
4. Vaughan, Dai, “The Aesthetics of Ambiguity,“ in Dai Vaughan, *For Documentary. Twelve Essays* (University of California Press, 1999), 54-83. Furthermore, MacDougall, David, “When Less is Less: The Long Take in Documentary,“ *Film Quarterly*, vol. 46, no 2 (Winter 1992-1993): 36-46.
5. „Ezúton szeretnénk felhívni a készítőik figyelmét arra, ami összemósódn látszik: a dokumentumfilmkezés nem sajtómunka, hanem személyes, bizalmi műfaj.” [“May we take this opportunity to draw the attention of the filmmakers to a fact that seems to be surrounded by a degree of confusion: documentary filmmaking is not journalism but a personal genre based on trust.”] <https://www.facebook.com/freeszfe.hu/posts/121334726628667>
6. Bruzzi, Stella, *New documentary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York – London: Routledge, 2006), 120 – 135.
7. In the academic year 2020-2021, our Department of Visual Culture and Literary Criticism at the University of Szeged organised a series of workshops. Most of the directors whose films are discussed in this paper participated in round table discussions. In the rest of this paper, I will use the phrase “the Szeged round table discussions” in reference to insights shared during these events.
8. Examining the tradition of lyrical documentary from the 1960s (e.g. *Gipsies*. Sándor Sára, 1962) falls outside the scope of the present article. Documentary films in the 1970s turned away from earlier, lyrical documentaries. An example is the manifesto “We want a Sociological Film Group!” ( *Filmkultúra*, 45-46.)
9. Miklós Horthy was the regent of the Kingdom of Hungary between the two World Wars. The film makes no specific mention of either Horthy or his cultural legacy.
10. Waugh, Thomas, *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on documentary Film* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2011), 76.
11. “To construct an Image or release a percept is to produce a gap or dislocation in perception – an interstice or irrational connection – and in fact all the potential of the Image lies in the interstitial or the in-

- between: the disjunctive conjunction as an Idea, event, or incorporeal series. In other words, the Image in a Deleuzian sense cannot occupy space and therefore cannot become an object of vision or visibility.”
- Rodowick, David Norman: “Virtual Presence in Space,” in D. N. Rodowick, *What Philosophy Wants from Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017): 55.
12. Hungarian cinema history classifies these films under the term “the Budapest School”, a fundamentally generational term that tends to lead authors to group films together on quite an ad hoc basis.
  13. “*The Resolution* (1972) [was] named one of the best 100 documentaries of all time by the International Documentary Association.” <https://www.americanacademy.de/person/gyula-gazdag/>
  14. The Chekhov allusion in the title is a clear indication of the dramaturgical intention that is the driving engine of the film: using non-events to lend visibility to the practical relationships that usually remain under our threshold of perception and never manifest themselves in any concrete action or event. Cf. also Stóhr, Lóránt, “Idő lett. A Budapesti Iskola és az idő” [*Time has come. The Budapest School and Time*] *Apertúra* (2013 spring) <https://www.apertura.hu/2013/tavasz/stohr-ido-lett-a-budapesti-iskola-es-az-ido/>
  15. “*Up with the heart! [...] One day, and soon, it will illumine / our beautiful gift for order and the real / by which the mind will know / the finite frontiers of infinity— / the forces of production, without, they reveal / and the instincts, within, unseal.*” József, Attila, *A város peremén* [*The City Limits*], Transl. Anton N. Nyerges.
  16. Pócsik, Andrea, “Én, Cséplő György. Schiffer Pál dokumentumfilmjei és a Cséplő Gyuri,” [*I, György Cséplő. The documentaries of Pál Schiffer and his film Cséplő Gyuri*] *Apertúra* (2013. spring) <https://www.apertura.hu/2013/tavasz/pocsik-en-cseplo-gyorgy-schiffer-pal-dokumentumfilmjei-es-a-cseplo-gyuri/>
  17. Pócsik, “I, Cséplő”
  18. Waugh, *The Right to Play Oneself*, 75.
  19. For a review of Hungarian documentary films dealing with business life after the change of the political regime, see Stóhr, Lóránt, “Üzlet a kirakatban. Üzletemberek a rendszerváltás utáni magyar dokumentumfilmekben,” [*Business in the shop window. on Display. Entrepreneurs in post-communist Hungarian documentaries*] *Apertúra* (Fall 2015) <https://www.apertura.hu/2015/osz/stohr-uzlet-a-kirakatban-uzletemberek-a-rendszervaltas-utani-magyar-dokumentumfilmekben/>
  20. See, e.g., Jennifer M. Barker, “Haunted Phenomenology and Synesthetic Cinema” *Studia Phaenomenologica* XVI. 2016. 373 – 408; or “What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh,” in Sobchak, Vivian Carol, *Carnal thoughts: embodiment and moving image culture*. (London: U of California Press, 2004), 53–85.
  21. Hain, Ferenc – Nagy, Kristóf – Szarvas, Márton, “A Gettó Balboa nagy nyilvánosság előtt elkövetett hazugság és kizsákmányolás,” [*The Ghetto Balboa is a lie and exploitation committed in the public eye*] *Mérce*, Accessed September 25, 2021. <https://merce.hu/2020/07/23/a-getto-balboa-nagy-nyilvanossag-elott-elkovetett-hazugsag-es-kizsakmanyolas/>
  22. “Szociológiai filmsoportot!” [*We Want a Sociological Film Group!*] in *Filmkultúra, 1965-1973*, ed. Zalán Vince (Budapest: Századvég, 1991), 45-46.
  23. Tamás Almási himself also plays the role of a bridge in Hungarian documentary filmmaking. His career as a director had started before the 1990s. His film *Ítéletlenül* (Women condemned.1991) has become the most outstanding example of the historical documentaries that had dominated Hungarian filmmaking from the second half of the 1980s. Some of the pieces in his *Ózd* series (1987-2006) have gained him international acclaim. See Stóhr, *Personalness*, 95 – 107.
  24. During the Szeged round table discussions, Almási himself acknowledged, with an element of surprise, the similarity between the two films.

25. “Én, Cséplő György” [“I, György Cséplő”], a paper by Pócsik, Andrea (op. cit.) gives a long list of the circumstances that Schiffer presented in the film. For example, Cséplő organises a community school, and takes a long bus ride to see *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (Skupljači perja. 1967), a 1967 film by Serbian director Aleksandar Petrović. These circumstances would have emphasized Cséplő’s competence as a man exploiting his opportunities to the fullest, instead of reinforcing the vision of his vulnerability as a man who, as compared to the majority society, runs up against limitations.
26. Bakhtin, Mikhail, “Discourse in Dostoevsky,” in Bakhtin, Mihail, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, transl. Caryl Emerson (Minnesota, London: U of Minnesota Press, 1984), 181–204.
27. A reference to the saturation of the word “migrant” with negative connotations in the context of the political thematization of the migration crisis of 2015.
28. The term “singularity of witness” I borrowed from Lőrincz. For a detailed explanation of the term see: Lőrincz, Csongor, *Zeugnisgaben der Literatur. Zeugenschaft und Fiktion als sprachliche Ereignisse* (Transcript Verlag, 2016): 11–17.
29. Williams, Linda, “Mirrors without memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 9-21.
30. Wiewiorka, Annette, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2003). See also Gács, Anna: “A tanúság medialitása,” [The mediality of bearing witness] 2000 (2019/1) <http://ketezer.hu/2019/01/gacs-anna-tanusag-medialitasa/>
31. Lőrincz, Csongor, *Zeugnisgaben der Literatur*, 13–18.
32. While I am not aware of any such criticism having been actually put forward, it is not inconceivable that someone would *resent* Kafiya (as well as the director) for eventually choosing self-abnegation instead of the route of elaborating and adapting a form of minority existence.
33. For a detailed analysis of the film, see Stóhr, *Personalness*, 218 – 222.
34. For further information about the character see her website: <https://fahidieva.hu/fahidi-eva/>
35. Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (München: Beck, 2013)
36. Literally, the name of the group “Tünet Együttes” is an etymological pun on the Hungarian word “tünetegyüttes”, which means “syndrome” but literally translates into English as “a group of Symptoms” or “Symptom Ensemble”. – *The translator’s note*

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- *Downstream* (Szél viszi. Máté Bartha, 2019)
- *Easy Lessons* (Könnyű leckék. Dorottya Zurbó, 2018)
- *Film Novel – Three Sisters* (Három nővér – Filmregény. István Dárday; Györgyi Szalai, 1978)
- *Ghetto Balboa* (Gettó Balboa. Árpád Bogdán, 2018)
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- *The Fallen* (Bebukottak. András Mész, 1985)
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- *Tititá* (Tamás Almási, 2015)
- *Version* (Verzió. Miklós Erdély, 1981)
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