

Historical exercises

Hungarian sports films as political commentary and historical memory

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Hungarians like to label themselves as the great nation of sports. With a total of 491 medals won in the modern-day Summer Olympic Games, Hungary, a country of ten million people, is in tenth place on the all-time accumulated medal list. These numbers are indicators of the special role sport plays in Hungarian consciousness. According to qualitative research data collected in the 1990s, a lot of Hungarians compensate cognitively for the country's small size by internalizing the claim "small country – great achievements" (Csepeli quoted in Dóczy 2011: 169) and, in comparison with other Central-Eastern European countries, Hungarians are much more proud of their athletes (Smith and Jarkko quoted in Dóczy 2011: 169). But does sport have a special function in Hungarian cinema as well? Do sport victories inspire film-makers to tell the stories of the champions? What is the purpose of telling the stories of sporting heroes in Hungarian films?

It is common in the sociology and history of sport to treat it as a mirror of social reality, "a microcosm of society" (Pearson 148), or, as Séan Crosson observes, over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, "sport has evolved into a popular metaphor for life itself" (Crosson 2011: 1). This microcosm or metaphor is heavily charged by ideology and politics. One of the eminent examples of this phenomenon is the modern Olympic Games, which has become the universal metaphor of many things – from world peace and friendship of nations to a competition between political ideologies, especially during the Cold War – and sport very often seems to be the necessary vehicle for these global messages (Allison 1986). Scholars have also argued the importance of sport as a means of national representation and identity formation (Arnaud 1998, Crosson 2011: 126-127, Tomlinson–Young 2006). As a consequence, one of the reasons why film-makers (and political regimes) are often interested in sport is exactly the potential for symbolic cultural and political messages that this theme is able to evoke.

A glance at contemporary (post-1989) Hungarian cinema might suggest that this theme is not an important territory, since only four Hungarian sports films¹ have been produced in the last twenty-five years. Two of them are popular films using strong generic patterns (*6 : 3*, Péter Tímár, 1999; *Szabadság, szerelem / Children of Glory*, Krisztina Goda, 2006) and the other two are more strongly defined by the personal style of their directors, although they contain genre elements as well (*Taxidermia*, György Pálfi, 2006; *Fehér tenyér / White Palms*, Szabolcs Hajdu, 2006). The striking common feature connecting these films is that all of them deal with the past and use sport as a tool for remembering, with the object of memory in all four cases being their communist/socialist² past. Both *6 : 3* and *Szabadság, szerelem* feature the 1950s; *Taxidermia* is connected roughly to the 1950s-60s and *Fehér tenyér* looks back at the late-1970s and 1980s.

This common feature of these films directed my interest towards the connection between historical memory and sports films in Hungarian cinema. In order to explain the role sports films play in Hungarian cultural memory, in the present article I first give an overview of the strategies used by Hungarian cinema to represent sport as a tool for political commentary and historical memory in the socialist and post-socialist period. I then end by concentrating on *Taxidermia* and *Fehér tenyér*, which, while creating a strikingly new and especially grim vision of the socialist past, introduced strong artistic concepts concerning the cinematic depiction of sport as the vehicle of historical memory.

Propaganda, commentary, memory

The socialist era was an important phase in the history of competitive sports in Hungary. Out of the nine Summer Olympic Games in which Hungarian athletes participated during communist rule, on eight occasions the delegation ended up in the top six countries on the medal chart and, in 1952, at the Helsinki Olympics, Hungary ended in third place, behind the Soviet Union and the United States of America. All things considered, it is rather strange that during the four decades of communist/socialist film production in Hungary only six sports films were made.

Three of the six films (*Civil a pályán / Try and Win*, Márton Keleti, 1951; *A csodacsatár / The Football Star*, Márton Keleti, 1956; *Nehéz kesztyűk / Heavy Gloves*, Dezső Varasdy, 1957) were produced during the 1950s and served clear propagandist aims – the films directly reflected current social, political and ideological questions. The stories of the two films made in the 1960s and 1970s (*Két félidő a pokolban / Two Half-Times in Hell*, Zoltán Fábri, 1961; *Régi idők focija / Football of the Good Old Days*, Pál Sándor, 1973) take place in the past (during World War II and the 1920s respectively) and their social and political message is less direct. The last sports film of the socialist era (*K.O.*, Tamás Rényi, 1978) is a contemporary story and contains quite direct social and political criticism by painting a dark picture of the establishment of sport. The definitive presence of political connotations is neither unusual, nor an exclusive feature of sports films in Hungary. Direct political influence was present in Hungarian film production at least from the introduction of the Anti-Jewish Laws at the end of the 1930s³ until the weakening of the Kádár regime at the end of the 1970s.⁴ During this period the Hungarian film industry continually had to comply with more or less direct political expectations. Usually films were produced and perceived as political messages.

In the first period after World War II, films had to implement the orders of the communist party that were formulated in production plans for the film industry. *Civil a pályán* is a typical film of the communist dictatorship of the early 1950s. It promotes the idea of the so-called 'worker sport', which "was to provide a socialist alternative to bourgeois competitive sport, to commercialism, chauvinism, and the obsession with stars and records" (Riordan 1991: 35). The emblematic form of worker sport was gymnastics, which also played an important role in various political activities and at state celebrations in the form of mass artistic displays (Roubal 2008). As one of the characters in *Civil a pályán* notes at a sport event: "this is not a competition, it is a demonstration in support of peace" – referring to the notion that capitalist sport creates opponents by competition, while communist sport strengthens the comradeship between participants.

The film's plot is about solving the ideological and practical conflict between competitive sport and worker sport, and integrating competitive, top-level sportspeople into the workplace. The young Stakhanovist worker hero of the film despises sport at the beginning because he thinks that the footballers of the factory's team use sport as an excuse for not working. But soon he is convinced by his colleagues, among them a very attractive and sporty worker girl, that sport is important for becoming healthier, which means becoming a better worker, while it also helps to strengthen community. As a Soviet ideologist of sport stated:

Physical culture and sport in socialist society have a number of social functions: to contribute to the formation of a harmonious personality, to socialisation and integration, to political, moral, mental and aesthetic education, to health protection [...], to rational utilization of free time, [...] to the fight for peace and friendship among peoples (Ponomaryov quoted in Riordan 1991: 31).

The film's hero understands the message well, becomes the organizer of the workers' gymnastics club and makes peace with the competitive sportspeople of the factory.

This was a timely story not only because it promoted the communist idea of a mass sport movement, but because 1951 was the year when the Soviet Union finally decided to join the

Olympic movement and in 1952, at the Helsinki Olympics, the series of great sports achievements by the Socialist Bloc started. Hence it was the best time to explain to the audience in a popular film that the difference between competitive sport and mass sport movements is not antagonistic. An explanation was needed since, originally, communist philosophy was against the idea of competitive sports embodied by the Olympic Games. The ideology of the Coubertin Olympic Games was based on the Victorian world view that treated sport as the concern of the individual and, from a communist perspective, was the epitome of a bourgeois, individualist concept. Meanwhile, the Soviet model stressed the social function of sport, "the primacy of sport in affecting politics and the potential of sport as a medium of social change" (Riordan 1991: 10-11). During the 1920s and 1930s the worker sport movement had its own international sports gatherings (the Worker Olympiads) under the labels of internationalism, workers' solidarity and peace (Riordan 1991: 34-51).

The next film is a perfect example of how tightly films and potential stories were bound to actual political events in the 1950s. The production of the politically slippery story of *A csodacsatár* was made possible by the change in political climate when the Hungarian communist dictator, Mátyás Rákosi, was removed from power in the summer of 1956. It is a comedy about an imaginary country where people live under dictatorship and their leaders use football to entertain and control the masses. When the country's leaders decide to sign on the world-famous striker of the Hungarian national football team, thanks to some misunderstandings they end up with a swindler who has no idea how to play football. Hungarian footballers are played by the actual members of the famous Hungarian Golden Team of the 1950s, with Ferenc Puskás in the role of the magical striker. The outbreak of the Hungarian revolution in October 1956 prevented the premiere of the film and, after Ferenc Puskás emigrated the same year, the film had to be altered and the role of Puskás was re-recorded by another member of the Golden Team. The corrected version of the film premiered in the autumn of 1957. Although the depiction of a dictatorship and a corrupt system in the film could have been an undesirable topic for the new, non-democratic Hungarian establishment, the newly consolidated political regime decided not to block the premiere of the film, due to the high production costs and the entertainment value of the film.

The ideological value of sports films in the 1950s is also represented by *Nehéz kesztyűk*. Produced one year after the 1956 revolution, the film is a direct commentary on the political situation. The leading role is played by László Papp, three-times Olympic champion boxer (1948, 1952, 1956). The story is about a Hungarian boxer who, after a devastating defeat, is able to regain his strength and win a gold medal at the next Olympics by defeating the big and frightening enemy that knocked him out earlier. László Papp, who – unlike many Hungarian athletes of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics – did return home after the Russian tanks invaded Hungary in November 1956, could be presented as an eminent example of patriotism and was used as a poster boy for the new political regime.

After the politically turbulent years of the 1950s, following the repression of the 1956 revolution, the consolidation of the new, less dictatorial regime was under way. Political expectations were formulated less directly, and the overtly propagandistic tone of the films disappeared. Since film-makers had more chance to choose 'problematic' topics and experiment with form, the early 1960s become not only the consolidation period of the Kádár regime, but the beginning of the Hungarian cinematic New Wave. One of the important films of this new, politically moderate climate was a sport film that – in contrast to the earlier, propagandistic films – used sport as a mediator of collective memory and an allegory of social and historical trauma.

Két félidő a pokolban takes place during the spring of 1944 in a labour camp in Ukraine, where German military leaders organize a football match to celebrate the Führer's birthday. The game is supposed to be between teams of Hungarian prisoners and German soldiers. The film culminates in the match itself and, after the Hungarian team score a goal and take the lead in the game, the following conversation takes place between a Nazi general and his servant in

German: "– What is this? – This is a game, Herr General. – This is not a game. This is revolution!" The general then starts shooting the Hungarian players on the pitch. On the one hand the film is obviously about a very traumatic period of Hungarian history, World War II and the Holocaust, but on the other hand the highly symbolic closing sequence of the film can also be read as an allegory of the events of 1956, especially after the mention of revolution in the dialogue. The film closes after all of the Hungarian players have been shot and lie dead on the football field. The camera first moves slowly above the dead players in medium shot and, after a picture of the empty stands decorated with the Nazi flag, the football field is shown in extreme wide shot with a continuously receding camera. In this closing sequence the football field becomes the metaphor of the country, which is covered by the corpses of dead patriots who were killed by a foreign enemy. The use of parable – when a film tells a story about a historical event but it has to be understood as a reference to something else that is not openly discussable – had become a frequent feature in Hungarian films of this era. Many of Miklós Jancsó's films provide examples of this technique (Gelencsér 2001, Gelencsér 2002).

Régi idők focija is the only case among the sports films of the socialist period where contemporary politics is not the most important context for the interpretation of the film. The story takes place in the 1920s and is a portrait of a man who, out of pure love of the game and against all odds, organizes and keeps alive a football team. Social criticism, although present, is less important. As the English version of the title also suggests, the process of remembering that defines the film is heavily charged by nostalgia. To use Svetlana Boym's expression, the film could be analysed as an example of reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001), where reflectivity works through the alienating effect produced by the film form. The highly stylized, burlesque-like film celebrates the morale and spirit that is condensed into the slogan of the film: "Because you need a team!"

The last sports film of the socialist period is again a story of a boxer, entitled *K.O.*⁵ At the end of the 1970s the symptoms of decline had already been present in the "happiest barrack of the socialist camp".⁶ Social criticism was already an integral part of Hungarian cinema of the decade, exemplified by the films of the Budapest School (Gelencsér 2002: 199-276). *K.O.* is not part of this stylistically innovative documentary trend, but contains quite direct political criticism. The main character is a talented boxer, who has probably reached the peak of his career, and the coming battle against the present champion will decide whether he can compete at the next (and for him probably the last) Olympics. The film is a critique of the socialist top-level sports system and the corrupt establishment that has the power to decide the fate of athletes. Boxing, as a sport where the result is not measured by objective means but decided by judges, can serve as a parable of the corrupt political regime. The career of the 'official' champion – who has the support of the establishment, friends in high places and a modern flat and car – is a summary of the life of top-level athletes of the socialist period. Until the late-1970s, elite athletes were employed by factories or companies and received salaries at their workplaces, but were paid for their sport achievements and not for their work (Szabó Földesi 2004: 714). Although their salaries were lower than those of the top managers or professionals at the time, most of them earned more since they were rewarded in other (legal and illegal) ways. They received occasional performance bonuses and were given apartments and cars.

Under such circumstances, specific values were attached to top athletes, and as a consequence they achieved privileged positions. [...] They had a hand in setting imitable behavioral patterns, were in possession of plenty of symbolic capital and had a good share in social and economic capital, no matter how modest the latter was under socialism (Szabó Földesi 2004: 717).

The story of the film suggests that, for those who are not officially supported, playing fair and expecting fair treatment from those in higher positions are not enough to win. In boxing terms: one cannot trust the judges; the battle can only be won by a knockout. After the obviously unfair defeat of the hero by the officially backed champion, the film closes as the hero's trainer

summarizes the situation: "I have been mistaken, I did not know that the only way to win here is to slay your opponent." This statement could (unofficially) be interpreted in late-1970s Hungary to mean that, by playing according to the existing rules, no reparations could be made to the (political) system – only a complete and violent defeat could change the situation.

It can be said that sport as a topic had not played an important role in Hungarian cinema of the socialist period, while sport itself was an important political tool and an object of national pride. The many achievements reached and medals won at international sporting events by Hungarian teams and athletes were treated as proof of a functioning political regime, or "surrogates, a compensation for want of success in other areas of social, political or economic life" (Szabó Földesi 2004: 717). Yet at the same time it was difficult, for example, to tell politically non-compromised stories about actual athletes and teams: many of the stories were ideologically damaged. The most obvious example that could have been adapted into a Hungarian film is the success story of the world-famous Hungarian national football team of the 1950s. After the emigration of its leading hero, Ferenc Puskás, following the 1956 revolution, it was impossible for the story of the Golden Team to become an officially approved myth of Hungarian sport that could have been a basis for popular film(s), not to mention that, during socialism, popular film-making in general was not supported for political and ideological reasons (Pápai–Varga 2010: 16-20); hence, the climate was especially unfavourable for producing popular sports films.

Myth and nostalgia after 1989

Hungarian sport successes did not end in 1989; athletes still perform considerably well at international sport events.⁷ At the 2012 London Games the Hungarian delegation ended in ninth, and at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games in twelfth place on the medal chart. However, it is clear from the sports films made after 1989 that the production of such films is still more closely connected to the political and historical context than to the actual sport achievements by Hungarian athletes. The political and ideological constraints concerning preferred topics have disappeared and popular film production in Hungary has started to achieve more and more prominence since the 1990s.⁸

So far, two popular films have been made that use sports achievements as a trigger of historical memory. They evoke two memorable sport events from the 1950s.⁹ The first one is the so-called 'Match of the Century', the football victory of the Golden Team against England's national team in 1953. This is the topic of Péter Tímár's film *6 : 3* (1999). The story starts in the present, with the hero of the film, who was born on the day of the famous match, a devoted fan of the Golden Team. He finds a forgotten collection of the team's trivia, which magically sends him back to the past – he wakes up on the day of the famous match in 1950s Budapest. He gets into funny adventures because he already knows the result of the match and because his behaviour collides with the Stalinist environment. The game, which provides the backdrop for the story, can only be heard through radio broadcasts. Although the sport event is not depicted pictorially in the film, it fits into the pattern created by Hungarian sports films by using sport achievement to comment on the political situation of the 1950s and functions as a mediator of historical memory.

The other film, and the sport event it depicts, is connected to the ultimate object of Hungarian national pride: water polo. The Hungarian water polo team, four-time Olympic champions, are world leaders of this sport. *Szabadság, szerelem* was made to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1956 revolution and tells the story of the famous battle between the water polo teams of the Soviet Union and Hungary at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. The match took place in Melbourne while the tanks of the Soviet army invaded Hungary. The film draws a parallel between the events of the revolution and the Olympic battle in the swimming pool. This is again a sport story that could not have been the basis of popular films during state socialism since it was connected to the dubious legitimacy of the Kádár regime and to Soviet–

Hungarian relations. In the popular imagination, sport functioned as a symbolic form of national resistance in the Kádár era, especially at matches between Hungarian and Soviet national teams, but these sentiments could not be advertised in state-controlled film productions at the time.

Since the 1990s many Hungarian films have made a connection between the past and the present in order to recreate important historical moments that would be able to help reconstruct the nation's self-identity (Murai 2008: 123). Post-socialist Hungary is in need of mythical stories and heroes that could be remembered proudly. The above-mentioned two popular films use glorious sports events as part of history that could be proudly remembered. *6 : 3* combines nostalgia and comedy and its story about time travel that is triggered by fandom and magical objects fits the description of restorative nostalgia provided by Svetlana Boym:

Nostalgia is an ache of temporal distance and displacement. Restorative nostalgia takes care of both of the symptoms. Distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of a desired object. Displacement is cured by a return home, preferably a collective one (Boym 2001: 44).

Taking into consideration that "nostalgia is memory with the pain removed" (Lowenthal 1985: 8), *Szabadság, szerelem* is not a pure case of nostalgia since it evokes very dramatically the pain of the unsuccessful revolution, but at the same time the film closes with pictures of past glory. With the members of the Olympic champion water polo team singing the national anthem at the Melbourne Olympics' medal ceremony, the scene stresses the heroism of the time.

What is worthy of note is that both films treat the past in a panoptical way – no connection or consequence of the past to the present is detectable. The past events are glorified but seem to remain in the distance, behind the shop window of history. András Murai notes that, in most of the post-1989 films that deal with history, the past has no direct impact on the present and it has a connection with the nostalgic tone of remembering: nostalgia detaches past from present in these films (Murai 2008: 165). For example, it is interesting that, even in *6 : 3*, where it would be logical for the hero to return to the present after the magical time travel, the story stays in the past. Although the adult hero disappears from the past at the moment of his birth, the storyline stays in the past and the film closes with a picture of the hero as a child and his adoptive parents in the late 1950s.

Beyond nostalgia: Taxidermia, Fehér tenyér

The final two films are unique in contemporary Hungarian cinema since they draw an especially disillusioned picture of the Kádár era and represent the socialist past as the root of present problems. Interestingly, both films choose sport to symbolize the dark side of socialism. The directors of the films belong to the trend labelled by critics as the 'Young Hungarian Cinema'. This is a generation of directors who were in their thirties when they started to obtain international recognition at the beginning of the 2000s. Their work is heavily influenced by the artistic traditions of classic Hungarian cinema – they are first and foremost auteur directors. Yet they were becoming adults after the collapse of the socialist system in the 1990s, were surrounded by the free flow of Western cultural products and have undeniably been influenced by the genre-driven Hollywood cinema. The two films use sport as one of their main thematic motifs and connect it to the process of remembering the socialist past. They depict the competitive, high-level sports of socialist times – in the case of *Taxidermia* it is the 1950s and 1960s, in *Fehér tenyér* the 1970s and 1980s – and their story continues into the present.

Fehér tenyér is based loosely on the actual story of the main character (played by the real-life person himself, the older brother of the director) and consists of two parallel plot lines. In the present the Hungarian ex-gymnast, Dongó, has just arrived in Canada to work as a coach of young Canadian gymnasts. The other plot line takes place in Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s and tells the story of young Dongó and his formative years as a gymnast spent under the

draconian rule of a Hungarian coach. In Canada Dongó has to face the fact that his old reflexes of discipline acquired at home in the 1980s have to be changed in order for him to become successful in the new environment. The past and the gymnasium where he used to train become the symbol of the oppressive socialist system: behind closed doors and curtains the children are at the mercy of a cruel coach and regularly face physical punishment. Meanwhile, at home young Dongó is treated by his parents as a trophy that can be bragged about in front of friends and colleagues. The plotline of the past concludes with young Dongó running away from training and joining a travelling circus as a trapeze artist. His first, and almost tragic, performance on the trapeze is cross-cut with adult Dongó's performance at his last international competition, where he ends up coming third behind his Canadian student. The film ends as we see the adult Dongó again in a circus, at a rehearsal of the Cirque du Soleil company, where he works after his retirement from competition.

Taxidermia consists of three episodes, each symbolizing different periods of the recent Hungarian past. The first episode takes place during World War II; the second part is about the socialist period and the final part takes place in contemporary, post-socialist Hungary. It is a story of three men of three consecutive generations. Sport plays a central role in the middle episode, where the hero is a national champion of speed eating, a symbolic, imaginary Olympic sport. The final episode tells the story of the son of the speed eater, who is a taxidermist and takes care of his now gigantic and immobile father. After the horrific death of the two heroes of the final episode, the film concludes as the stuffed dead bodies of father and son are being exhibited in a modern art gallery.

Both films use competitive sport as a highly symbolic social structure that embodies many of the defining characteristics of the socialist political rule. Both films represent individual sport and through its heroes refer to the many functions that sport played during socialism: it was a mirror of the class system, the main tool for upward career mobility (Szabó Földesi 2004), the object of national pride and a vehicle for political propaganda.

It is significant that both films explicitly connect the past to the present. It differentiates them from the two other sports films discussed above and the majority of films dealing with the past in contemporary Hungarian cinema. Although this continuity is not depicted as progression, rather it is the negative effects of the past on the present that are stressed. For this generation of directors – who are increasingly the driving force of Hungarian cinema – the problem of historical continuity and discontinuity and remembering as an interpretative process seem to be important. These films participate in the collective process of remembering by connecting the events of the socialist past to post-socialist problems. The films directed by the members of this generation often stress the corrupt and negative features of the past. For example, in both *Taxidermia* and *Fehér tenyér* competitive sport is the metaphor of the corrupt, hypocritical and oppressive political system. Socialist sport is perfect for this since "the domination of sport by the state for political purposes also resulted in much hypocrisy and chicanery forced upon players and public" (Riordan 1991: 5). The socialist system of state amateurs ('shamateurism') meant that elite athletes had fake employment at state factories or were registered as military professionals in order to maintain their amateur status (Riordan 1991: 4-5, Szabó Földesi 2004: 713-714). It is also documented and has been revealed that, in many countries of the Socialist Bloc, athletes were subject to state-administered doping schemes, often since their childhood (Riordan 1991: 121-124).

In both *Taxidermia* and *Fehér tenyér*, the past is represented through the negative qualities and features of sport – in *Taxidermia* the sport is a disgusting, nauseating phenomenon; *Fehér tenyér* equates socialist sport with torture and pain. It is not surprising, then, that the present that is following from this past is not especially happy and promising. Both films have a more or less unhappy ending. The end of *Taxidermia* is more bitter: the family line reaches its ultimate end; the last man of the three generations dies without offspring; the stuffed bodies of father and son are exhibited as mementos of a futureless history.¹⁰ The end of *Fehér tenyér* leaves some room for a less bitter reading, although the final sequence does not necessarily

signal a happy end. After finishing in third place at his last major competition, Dongó is now working in Las Vegas as a member of the Cirque du Soleil. After pictures of a rehearsal, the closing montage sequence is about the emblematic capital of consumerism and gambling: Las Vegas. This closure thematically emphasizes the symbolic opposition between socialism and capitalism that is the central motif of the film, but the ending is not especially reassuring. Dongó's solitude at the end of the film creates the air of an indefinite sadness and scepticism towards capitalism.

The place of memory: body and space

Out of the ten sports films produced in Hungary after World War II, six are about team sports (five about football, one about water polo). The two films about individual sports produced during socialist times featured boxing, with these two contemporary films concentrating on individual athletes. Based on these films it seems that team sports are more suitable to represent positive feelings – longing for the good old days, national pride, collective happiness. The representation of bitter feelings and social criticism – at least in the history of Hungarian cinema – seems to fit better for individual sports.¹¹

In *Taxidermia* and *Fehér tenyér* there are further factors that explain the presence of individual sports. One is the symbolic use of individual bodies. During the past decade, directors of Young Hungarian Cinema have shown significant interest in the cinematic depiction of the body. Many of their films use the representation of the body as the main tool for dealing with such questions as historical and social trauma, memory and forgetting and socialist and post-socialist identity (Király 2015, Strausz 2011, Kalmár 2013). As scholars have already pointed out, there exists a "metagenre" of "corporeal cinema" in Europe and many of these films consist of grim allegories of recent Eastern European history (Imre 2009: 215). These two films fit perfectly into this trend.

Corporeality's connection to memory is expressed through bodies that are represented as embodiments and containers of history. In *Taxidermia* the imaginary sport of speed eating is basically a competition of the volumetric possibilities of the body. A voluminous and expandable body is the prerequisite of success in this sport. The stuffing of the body has multiple meanings in the film: the father as a speed eater stuffs all kinds of disgusting things into his body in order to be a successful sportsman. His son stuffs things into dead bodies for a living as a taxidermist. At the end, both father and son end up in a gallery as stuffed dead bodies. What is more, at the very end of the film, the slow camera movement of the last sequence leads the viewer into the inside of the torso of the taxidermist (through its navel), suggesting that the future of the surreal past cannot be better symbolized than by the darkness of the inside of a dead body. The surreal success in the past was symbolized by the unstoppably expanding body of the father and the hopelessness of the present and future is depicted through the skinny torso of the son and its darkness and emptiness inside. *Fehér tenyér* also uses the body as a membrane and container of history and memories. The bleeding scar on the palm of young Dongó, the consequence of the incredibly strict training regime he was subject to, pictorially reappears in the plot line of the present as not-healed but hardened skin on the palm of adult Dongó, a reminder of historical continuity.

Another factor that makes competitive sport a proper expression of historical memory in these films is its performance nature. The role of public performance in the creation of national identity is especially evident in mass demonstrations at public events that were (and are) very frequent in communist countries. The public rituals that celebrate the nation's past or the ideology of the present are performances that have common features with sport events and sport performances. The repetitive quality, the precisely coordinated and rehearsed movements in space and the aesthetic value that is part of their effectiveness make the collective rituals of remembering and sport performances kindred phenomena (Edensor 2002: 69–88).

Sport as public performance is represented in *Taxidermia* during the scenes when athletes in a theatre-like space are competing in front of military dignitaries, or when performing a celebratory eating in the presence of high-ranking Russian politicians: they eat red caviar from a five-pointed red star while dressed in Hungarian folk costume. In *Fehér tenyér* the performance qualities of sport are stressed by the systematic use of movement in space: the motif of ascending and descending bodies creates a pattern throughout the film. In the plot line of the past, downward movements and the fall of bodies and objects are used permanently and systematically. In the story line of the present, although upward movements during training and in competition are more strongly used, the motif of 'falling down' is still very much present. Furthermore, at the end of the film the metaphor of using upward and downward movement as a symbol of life, success and failure is used in the sequence when Dongó is seen during the Cirque du Soleil rehearsal. The acrobats move up and down on a huge vertical wall with the help of ropes and this scene becomes the visual metaphor of the hero's career and life. The representation of the circus as a parallel for sport in both plot lines further deepens the interpretation of sport as performance and spectacle. On the other hand, in both films sport (and life) is represented mainly by training and disciplinary acts that are clearly portrayed as oppressive and destructive, an abolishment of individuality. This is symbolized in both cases by the repeated visual depiction of the line-up of gymnasts for training.¹² Humans as objects sorted by their sizes become the pictorial equivalent of systematic oppression.

White Palms also uses space and spatial structures in meaningful ways. Murai notes that space differs significantly in the two story lines. The socialist past is represented by closed, often claustrophobic places (the gymnasium, the block of flats where Dongó's family lives). Although the Canadian/Western part of the story often leads into big, open spaces, the hero does not feel free in these spaces either since the walls of solitude¹³ still enclose him (Murai 2008: 174-175). Moreover, the visual structure of a tunnel, both vertical and horizontal, is a well-developed allegory in the film. In the plot line of the past, the vertical tunnel (a narrow inner court) in the middle of a tall block of flats (a building type that used to be the symbol of socialist progress and urbanization) represents hopelessness, the impossibility of escaping the authoritarian regime of training. In one scene, after Dongó runs away from the gymnasium in fear of physical punishment, his aimless wandering leads to the block of flats. First we see Dongó stand on the ground while looking up to the sky through the tunnel-like inner court, then he goes up to the roof and looks down into the abyss of the same tunnel. The moment is tainted by the sense of despair and the faint idea of suicide. Later the same space represents rebellion against the coach: Dongó imagines that the coach falls down into the tunnel. This tunnel-like image becomes a visual trope of the connection between past and present, between past traumas and the reflexes of the present. At the end of the earlier scene, when young Dongó looks down into the abyss, the screen turns black and we arrive (as if through the tunnel of time) into the present, where adult Dongó suddenly slaps one of his students to discipline him. In socialist Hungary physical punishment happened behind closed doors, but in Canada it happens in front of the parents and gets Dongó into trouble.

It is also a spatial allegory that concludes the film. At the end we see Dongó in Las Vegas at a rehearsal of Cirque du Soleil. In a long sequence we follow Dongó, who is on his way to the dressing room in order to prepare for the next rehearsal session. We see him in the horizontal, labyrinth-like tunnel of the building created by the line of offices, storage places and dressing rooms and we are reminded of the allegory of the tunnel we have seen earlier, and which connects past to present. At the end of this second tunnel we see Dongó at the rehearsal while moving up and down on a 'vertical stage', a huge wall. In this lengthy sequence, a path, or a horizontal tunnel, is again created visually and this tunnel leads into the present moment. The closing scenes of the film suggest that Dongó might have managed to escape the symbolic tunnel of his personal constraints, which were partly the result of conditioning from a cruel (sport) system, but when we see him moving up and constantly falling down on the wall – as a

part of the choreographed movement – we are also reminded that it is not that easy to escape the tunnel of the past.

The sports films of Hungarian cinema predominantly used sport as a motif that represents social structures, symbolizing history as a battle between nations, or a battle between the individual and the system. Traditionally the films used sport as a narrative possibility, a structure where competition, defeat and victory have deeper, more metaphoric meanings that could be used as an interpretation of history. Only three of the sports films combine the narrative possibilities of sport with strong style and stress artistic expression over the narrative possibilities catered for by the motif of sport. The first example, *Régi idők focija*, chose a very strong filmic abstraction by using some elements of silent films (stop motion, written inserts) in order to evoke through style the time of the story and create an abstract message about the importance of community and a passion for football.

Taxidermia and *Fehér tenyér* are also strongly style-driven and use formal elements in order to elaborate on historical continuity and memory. Above I have focused on two of the stylistic operations these two films use in order to connect the motif of sport to historical memory: the creation of significant bodies and spaces. Spatial and bodily symbols are features that animate the motif of sport in *Taxidermia* and *Fehér tenyér* and elevate the 'genre' of sports films onto a new artistic level in Hungarian film history.

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¹ I will use a very simple definition of sports film. It is a film that principally focuses on a sporting theme and uses it as one of the main conveyors of its message. The film either depicts the sporting activities and the sportspeople engaging in it, or uses a sport event as its main context (see the film *6 : 3*). I do not consider sports films those that, although they may have characters who are (or were) sportspeople, do not depict their sporting activity in the film and it does not play an important role in the story. There are a very few Hungarian films about which, based on this definition, a debate could be opened as to whether they are sports films or not, but I believe that this would not have any major effect on my arguments presented in this article.

² I use the expression communism in connection with Hungary's Stalinist period (1948-1953/1956) and socialism to denote the Kádár era (1957-1989), in accordance with the custom of Eastern European scholarship, whereby the use of the word 'socialism' instead of 'communism' signals the difference between the Soviet political model and other regimes in the Eastern Bloc (Vowinckel 2012: 32).

³ The Anti-Jewish Law of 1938 limited the number of Jewish persons in certain fields of culture and business, the film industry included. A maximum of 20% of the personnel in film production could be of Jewish origin. This law had an immense effect on Hungarian film production (Vajdovich 2013).

⁴ The late 1970s is considered to be the end of the mature period of the Kádár era and in the 1980s the integrity of the regime started to weaken. For more on the periodization of the Kádár era and Hungarian history in the twentieth century, see Romsics 1999.

⁵ Because of the low number of Hungarian sports films it is not possible to make strong quantitative assumptions about the represented sport types, but it is worthy of note that boxing is the cinematically most represented sport (Pearson et al. 2003, Babington 2014: 41-48) and, out of the ten Hungarian sports films produced since World War II, two are about boxing.

⁶ After the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of fellow 'friendly' socialist countries, the Western media started to use the expression "Hungary is the happiest barrack in the Eastern European concentration camp" (Czigány 1999).

⁷ However, it can be said that, in terms of international presence, Hungarian football, the traditional object of national pride, actually collapsed in 1986 at the World Cup in Mexico with the devastating 6:0 defeat by the Soviet Union. The Hungarian national team has never managed to qualify for the World Cup since then.

⁸ This trend has been discussed in special issues of Hungarian film journals devoted to the topic: Hungarian Genre Cinema, *Prizma*, 2009, no. 2; Hungarian Genre Cinema, *Metropolis*, 2010, no. 1.

⁹ András Murai in his book analyses Hungarian cinema's obsession with the 1950s (Murai 2008). Between 1957 and 2007 more than fifty Hungarian films have been made that tell a story about the 1950s. It is also the most frequently represented historical period in film production of the post-socialist period – around thirty films have been made after 1989 that take place in the 1950s. For the list of Hungarian films that take place in the 1950s, see Murai 2004: 225-228.

¹⁰ The status of history as compromised and problematic is further stressed in the film by the motif of illegitimate offspring. It is suggested that both the second and third generations' heroes are fruits of adulterous relationships.

¹¹ It is disputable whether the recent Hungarian comedy *Brazilok* (*The Brazilian*, Gábor Rohonyi – Csaba M. Kiss, 2016) should have been included into this article as a sports film. In some respect it is similar to *Két félidő a pokolban*, as it depicts non-competitive sport, a non-professional football game, and uses it as a social parable. If included, it would also support the argument that team sports are more suitable for representing positive messages – *Brazilok* takes a positive, anti-racist stance on issues related to the Romani community.

¹² This motif, as a symbol of disappearing individuality, is also used by the contemporary Hungarian art group Kis Varsó/Little Warsaw in their life-sized sculpture *Tulajdonság/Tornasor / Attribute/Line Up* (2001). This sculpture was also the inspiration for the short film *A sor / The Queue* (Bence Fliegauf, 2003, 9 min.)

¹³ The loneliness of Dongó in most of the scenes of the present and especially in the final Cirque du Soleil scene, when he prepares for the rehearsal, is a factor in creating the feeling of the unhappy end that I mentioned earlier.